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BY LEO E. MILLER

THE BLACK PHANTOM
THE HIDDEN PEOPLE
IN THE TIGER'S LAIR

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

THE BLACK PHANTOM

INTRODUCTION

The dried or mounted skins of animals from out-of-the-way places are familiar to every one who has visited museums and other similar institutions. But, no matter how cleverly arranged, they suggest comparatively little of the creatures' real appearance in their native environment.

The comedies, the tragedies, and the life stories of the untrammelled wild creatures are infinitely more fascinating than a survey of their lifeless and often faded forms, only too frequently collected by the hundreds with little other thought than that of classification or the possession first of rare or undescribed species.

It was with the view of bringing to light the home life of some of the jungle's inhabitants that "The Black Phantom" was written.

LEO E. MILLER

FLORAL PARK,
STRATFORD, CONN.
August 1, 1922.

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THE BLACK PHANTOM

CHAPTER I

When the Deluge Came

With the coming of night, *Siluk*, the Storm-God, laid a heavy hand upon the cowering jungle. Now, the coming of night in the Upper Amazon is in itself an awe-inspiring event; but coupled with the furious onslaught of *Siluk*, the Storm-God, it is terrible.

In the tropics there is not the lengthy twilight of a temperate clime; nor the fearsome splendor of the Aurora Borealis with its million streamers of ghastly light shooting into the heavens in a fan-shaped flare of quivering color to lend mystery and enchantment to the long months of the frigid, scintillating polar night.

One moment, the sun like a brassy ball of fire hangs low upon the threatening horizon; the next, it has dropped into the belt of grayish mist that marks the earth's end and darkness has spread its silent, ominous mantle over the forest. Almost, as a room is plunged into blackness upon the snuffing out of a candle at midnight, so the jungle is flooded with gloom at the snap of the solar

switch.

Uru, the great howling monkey, eyed with suspicion the bank of angry clouds descending from the slopes of the dark mountain masses to the west. Then he turned to his party, five in number, and from his throat there emanated a few gruff barks followed by a long-drawn, rumbling roar. The females hugged close the branches, gave one furtive look at the threatening sky, and joined their voices in the deafening chorus that shook the wide-spreading canopy of the tall ceiba tree and penetrated into the innermost recesses of the jungle a distance measured in miles. Then the troop clumsily made its way over the swaying branches and sought a friendly shelter in the crown of a chonta palm.

The wild things of the forest heard the warning and understood its meaning. From the snug security of the cavernous greenheart, the little, woolly *douroucoulis* or night monkeys roused themselves from their daylight slumbers, peered out into the fading light with round, blinking eyes, and then curled up again for another nap. 3

Sama, the tapir, one massive forefoot raised in midair, stopped soothing with his tongue the ugly gash inflicted by *Ueshe*, leader of the peccary herd when he had incautiously stumbled into its midst, and listened. His mind had been made up that to-night he should feast on the luscious grass growing so abundantly in the bed of the broad, nearly dry river. But the swelling chorus from the treetops caused *Sama* hastily to reach another decision. He would remain where he was, in the dense brake of *chuchilla* canes and satisfy his hunger on their coarser leaves. The river bed was too exposed to danger. In the all but impenetrable cane thicket lay at least a measure of safety.

Even *Picici*, the bushmaster, largest and deadliest of all the poisonous snakes heard—and heeded. Not one muscle in all his nine feet of tightly coiled, scale-covered body quivered. Ordinarily, *Picici* feared not one living thing. In the jungle he was supposed to reign supreme, save only for *Muzurama*, the black snake who could successfully engage him in combat if he chose; but this enemy was so rare as to be almost negligible. The other animals instinctively knew and feared his lightning thrust and death-dealing fangs. But *Siluk*, the Storm-God was different—an intangible, elusive something he did not understand, could not subdue. And the terror that *Siluk* brought was even worse, for it stalked boldly in the night and slew without warning or mercy. And so the mighty serpent was contented merely to remain in the damp, evil-smelling burrow under the decaying vegetation to wait and to watch. 4

About the only creatures to remain unaffected by the approach of the storm were the birds in the treetops; to them the thing it heralded meant a superabundance of food and a denser, more protective growth of vegetation. And the stupid *Agoutis*, overgrown guinea-pigs they were, who could never profit by past experiences anyway, either squatted comfortably in their burrows or stole out noiselessly to nibble the tender shoots, as suited their fancy. 5

The hush that fell upon the jungle was appalling. It was the great, breathless silence of fear and apprehension. But the suspense was of short duration.

A sighing breeze sifted its way through the whimpering leaves; again the deadly calm; then a dull roar, distant at first, but gaining in volume with each passing heartbeat. With a crash that rent the tallest ceiba from the topmost branches to the buttressed roots, *Siluk* arrived. The trees bent and groaned before the furious onslaught of the wind that enfiladed their ranks and tore off branches a foot through and hurled them to the ground; a deluge of water beat down upon them from above; and in the glare of the brilliant, blue-green lightning flashes, the startled eyes of trembling wild things saw the weaker and more venerable monarchs of the forest succumb to the unequal struggle and fall with a roar that made itself heard above the drumfire peals of thunder. 6

But, terrible as the Storm-God was in all the majesty of his unleashed fury, it was not he alone that the trembling denizens of the wilderness feared. Rather, it was the thing he portended, the message he brought. For, with this coming of *Siluk*, began the dismal season of seemingly unending rains when the waters of the lowlands reached their flood stage and drove into the higher, forested country that crafty, merciless terror from which few were safe and which was held in awe and dreaded by even the strongest among them.

Suma, the Jaguar, basking in the glaring sunlight, awoke with a start, stretched her massive forelegs, yawned, then snapped halfheartedly at the annoying insects that buzzed about her ears and stung her lips; and lowered her head for another nap. But, sleep came slowly and then it was for short periods of time only. Something stirred within her and warned her of a coming danger—not from the other inhabitants of the wilderness for among them there was none to dispute her sovereignty; rather, she looked upon the wild folk as creatures that had been provided to satisfy her hunger, gratify her whims when in a playful mood, or upon which to vent her rage. Besides, the flat-topped rock she had chosen for her daily resting place was well out from the banks where unknown peril might lurk and high enough above the sluggish, yellow river to discourage the designing crocodiles that swarmed below. In the open, and in a fair fight these repulsive reptiles were easy victims of her power and cunning; but, taken unawares, she would find them formidable adversaries. For this reason she drank only of the shallowest pools, and refrained from swimming, reaching her abiding place over a series of conveniently-placed boulders that served as stepping stones. 7

All through the torrid day the disquieting impulse warned her to be up and on her way—just as the birds feel the urge of an irresistible voice to desert the land of their birth and to seek a foreign clime as the change of the season draws near, and, heeding it, run the gauntlet of long 8

migrations through uncharted space.

But, Suma was loath to give up the life of ease and plenty on the sandbanks for the sterner existence in the forested country. Not until she was driven from them would she undertake the long, fatiguing journey to the more elevated regions.

The river was at its lowest stage. Vast islands and low, flat bars dotted its winding course. The latter extended far as the eye could see on both sides of the now narrow channel. Young turtles in legion were emerging from the hot, sun-baked sand and making for the water the instant they breathed the outer air as if their very lives depended on it, and they did—for during the hours of daylight there were herons, an ever-present host of hawks, and other predaceous birds waiting for the eggs to hatch and eager to feast on the defenseless horde the instant the little creatures pushed their heads through the crumbling sand and while they scrambled frantically toward the water and safety. At night the four-footed animals from miles around gathered on the bars to growl and to snarl at one another and to feast on the manna so bountifully spread by heaven for the delectation of all. Fights were almost unknown for full stomachs were not conducive to quarrelsomeness. Nor must it be thought that Nature was cruel to the turtles only to be generous to the other creatures. This very emergency had been amply provided for by the fact that each adult turtle during her annual visit to land deposited as many as one hundred eggs in the hole she carefully scooped in the sand, and had all her offspring survived the rivers would soon be overstocked, constituting a real menace to the perpetuation of the race. So long as the others took their toll, that generation was safe.

Crocodiles too were bursting through their tough, leathery egg-shells, but in smaller numbers. They were vicious little creatures right from the start, snapping quickly and savagely at everything that interfered with their rapid march to the muddy stream. But they too had their enemies and numbers did not live to reach the water's edge, in spite of the fact that the mother caiman had the unpleasant habit of keeping a watchful eye on her nest and escorting her brood to safety if she chanced to be present when it came into the world. If an overzealous jabirou stork or a gluttonous opossum ventured near she charged with a hoarse bellow that put the intruder to flight; and while she was thus engaged, some other keen-visaged marauder would be sure to take advantage of the opening created by her absence to satisfy his rapacious cravings.

But the turtles and the crocodiles were not the only delicacies the sandbars provided. There were iguanas two yards long, and on the knolls where the wind had blown the sand into heaps fat young skimmers and terns were testing their wings for the new life that lay before them in the air.

The shallow inlets were full of fish. They came out of the deeper water at night to spawn, and could be dragged ashore with little effort.

From such a well-stocked hunting ground Suma was not eager to depart. Day after day the journey was postponed, and the procrastination, as usual, brought evil consequences.

It was night, but a full moon, and the myriads of stars, beaming and twinkling in the glorious tropical sky, shed a mellow light on the sandbar where the last of the turtles were escaping from their prison shells. Suma feasted leisurely, then drank from the lazy stream, and sat straight upright like a huge cat and began unconcernedly to tidy up by licking her huge paws with her pink tongue and then applying them to her face.

A dull roar pierced the silence with a suddenness that was ominous. The Jaguar sprang to her feet and uneasily tested the air, first in one direction, then another. There was not a stir of wind. The sky was cloudless—the growing rumble was not thunder.

Onward came the mysterious sound with a terrifying swiftness, and Suma knew it must be the river. The abrupt bank was fully half a mile distant but toward it the startled creature bounded in gigantic leaps that took her over the sand with the speed of the wind. The goal had all but been attained when the cataclysm struck. A wall of water, four feet high and crested with foam came rushing down the river bed with incredible swiftness, engulfing everything within its reach. The sandbar with its varied population was submerged in a flash and as the air imprisoned in the wide cracks and crevices of the sun-baked surface rushed up toward freedom, the water seethed and boiled like the contents of a gigantic cauldron.

Completely overwhelmed by the first wave, Suma struggled frantically to regain her foothold and finding this impossible followed the path of least resistance and struck out boldly with the current until the water drained from her eyes and she could discern the bank which had been her objective. By varying her course slightly toward that side nearest the land she made fair progress and soon reached a point where the water was shallow and wearily dragged herself ashore. Pausing only long enough to shake the glistening drops from her shivering body she began the long journey westward for at last Suma was forced, reluctantly, to admit the truth. Days before, she had sensed the coming of the melancholy weeks of endless downpours with the attendant saturated earth; but the warning had gone unheeded. Now, when it was all but too late it served as a stimulus to redoubled effort; for the rains had started in the foothills and would soon extend their sway to the lower country.

Daylight found the journey well under way, with vast stretches of swamp and forest and plain to be traversed. Before her lay the wild pantenales, vast wastes of land and water. The inhabitants of these dismal places too felt the coming of the change for, between the sky, now overcast and angry for the first time in days, and the earth, seemingly waiting in sullen acquiescence to the dictates of a higher power, flecks of black soared in stately circles, or whirled in erratic courses, that were either manifestations of abject surrender to the inevitable, or else a show of frenzied

despair, one could not tell which. The soaring flecks of black were flocks of graceful ibises sailing hour after hour on tireless wings and indistinguishable from vultures save for the long, outstretched necks and legs; for, outlined against the grayish heavens all the winged creatures appeared dark, no matter what their color. The whirling swarms were hordes of cormorants, herons, terns and skimmers defying every known law of gravity in their mad evolutions.

The chorus of screams and squawks from overhead could be heard for miles and chief among the offenders in this respect were the terns whose shrill voices and incessant clatter were like the cries of woe of demented souls. Below, the occasional bellow of a crocodile hidden in the reedy bed of a marsh or the high-pitched wail of the great brown wolf added its note to the clamor of the multitude.

Suma spent the nights only in travel. When the approach of day was heralded by the crimson glare in the eastern sky she sought shelter in one of the dark forest islands so liberally sprinkled over the pantanal country. To the Jaguar these were places of delight, free from disturbance and well suited for repose. To man, these same places would have been an inferno.

The tall trees, mostly of a wood known as *quebracho*, eagerly sought in other regions on account of its qualities of yielding tannin, rich dyes and compounds of medicinal worth, grew in dense clumps, the straight trunks packed close together and the spreading, leafy branches almost completely shutting out the daylight. More often than not reeking pools of black water formed the floor of these desolate places. Mosquitoes in clouds rose from the stagnant mire; their buzzing wings made an ever-present music for, the insects being of various kinds and sizes, the note contributed by each species was of a different pitch. Near the ground the din was maddening, and the bites of the ravenous creatures were sufficient to cause death.

The wily Jaguar avoided the intolerable annoyance and danger by seeking a partly-fallen, leaning tree-trunk, or a thick branch, fifteen or twenty feet above the ground. This was well above the zone of perpetual torment, for the obnoxious insects formed a stratum that hugged the earth. Among the branches the squirrels frolicked, whisking their plume-like tails and keeping at a respectable distance from every other animal that was not of their own family. Some of them were of extraordinary size, with red backs and white under parts; others belonged to the extreme lower end of the scale and were scarcely larger than good-sized mice; but they all seemed a good-natured, fun-loving lot that enjoyed life to the fullest extent.

The Cebus monkeys were of a very different nature. They always wore tragic expressions on their faces and their lives were full of suffering and woe for they had enemies without numbers. If they showed themselves on the sunlit dome of the treetops, an eagle was always ready to pounce down upon them and carry away one of their number, screaming piteously, in its talons. When they descended to drink caimans were lurking near at hand to drag them into the dark depths below. Snakes of the constrictor family were not wanting among the branches; despite their huge size they had a habit of lying patiently in wait where the cover was thickest, or of appearing in the most unexpected places and after each of their swift lunges the monkey population was reduced by one. Then too, there was Suma, never averse to striking with murderous intent at anything that came within reach. The damp chill of the nights penetrated the bodies of the closely huddled groups, and caused them to shiver; and during the hottest hours of the day they trembled with the ague. So their existence, taken as a whole was a most unfortunate and melancholy one.

There were also other denizens of the dismal places. At noon the marsh deer with wide-spreading antlers sought them out as the only available protection from the blistering sunlight. But they were wary creatures, ever on the alert, sensing danger and fleeing from it before their position was really imperilled. The tapirs too were shy but not so apprehensive of their welfare, for they were powerful animals and well versed in jungle strategy. Once Suma had essayed to try her prowess on one of the big ungulates by springing from a lower branch and burying her claws and fangs in its shoulder. But the hide was so tough, particularly along the ridge that ran down from the neck that she gained little more than a secure hold and this the tapir broke by promptly bolting through the densest brush where the stout overhanging branches brushed the Jaguar off as if she had been a fly and left her lying bruised and stunned on the soggy ground. Herds of peccaries roamed the forest islands at will. Their safety lay principally in numbers, but more of them anon.

Keeping just ahead of the encroaching water that daily added broad miles to the inundated areas, Suma was finally driven to the heavy forest that spread its mantle over the rough, low ridges forming the Andean foothills. And the long journey finally over the great cat felt a thrill of delight at again seeing the old, familiar haunts in the rain-drenched thickets.

With a caution akin to awe she approached the windfall where a cyclone years before had levelled a wide swath through the heavy growth. Giant trunks and branches, resisting decay, littered the floor of the lane and formed a barrier impenetrable to those inhabitants of the jungle confined to a life on the ground. Second growth sprouts had pushed their way through the tangled, twisted debris and waved their plumed heads above the mass of wreckage. Creepers and trumpet vines covered it with a green cloak so that an endless mound of verdure dotted with clusters of scarlet flowers greeted the eye in two directions. Gorgeous humming birds, aflame with ruby and emerald light, flitted from one patch of color to another, sipping the nectar from deep-throated corollas and picking out the ants and other minute insects that too had been attracted by the delicacies stored in the brilliant blossoms.

Suma knew the country well. Thrice before had she taken up her abode there while the rains were falling. And now, springing nimbly from one prostrate tree-trunk to another, threading her

way through verdure-covered tunnels, and pushing aside the sprouts that impeded her progress she made her way to the old lair—a great cavity in the heart of an uprooted cottonwood.

At the entrance she stopped short and sniffed the air enquiringly. Her nose told her that the spiny rats had been there, probably that very night, but they were beneath her serious attention and now that she had arrived they would lose no time in seeking other quarters; so she dismissed them from her mind without another thought. A stronger and more disagreeable odor proclaimed the presence of an opossum; in fact, its beady eyes could be seen dully glowing in the farthest corner of the cavity. How dared the impudent creature appropriate for its own use and defile the place that Suma held sacred? Ordinarily she would pass it in contempt, but such impertinence must not remain unpunished. With a snarl of rage she dashed through the entrance and struck the wretched creature a terrible blow with one claw-armed paw that tore it into shreds and turning, with a second quick thrust tossed it out where it fell among the trumpet-vines, a limp and lifeless mass.

21

After a thorough inspection of her old quarters the Jaguar was apparently satisfied that they would serve their purpose another season, and set about renovating them. This consisted of carefully digging up and turning over the decayed bark and leaves that had sifted in through the opening. Nor was this labor without its reward, for numbers of fat grubs and the helpless larvæ of rhinoceros beetles were unearthed, providing dainty morsels for the big cat. This accomplished, Suma inquisitively sniffed at each nook and crevice, then turning around a number of times in search of the most comfortable spot, settled down for a long nap—her nostrils toward the entrance beyond which the rain roared and the thunder crashed. The air was fragrant with the smell of growing things for the rainy season was not yet far enough advanced to induce decomposition of the wilted and dead vegetation; and Suma, glad to be back in her home again, speedily sank into a peaceful and refreshing sleep.

22

From the cautious hunter moving shadow-like over the dreary expanse of the pantanales or stealing like a spirit through the forest islands and killing for food only, Suma suddenly changed to a bloodthirsty terror that slew whatever came within her reach. Back and forth she patrolled along the edges of the windfall. No creature was too small, none too large to merit the fury of her onslaught.

23

Numbers of the more careless or stupid animals, panic-stricken at last when it was too late, fell ready victims. Instead of seeking safety at the first menacing roar they foolishly succumbed to their curiosity or stopped only long enough to listen and to wonder, then went about their own affairs as was their custom. This seldom failed to bring dire consequences, for when the sudden rush came it confused them and they dashed blindly into the very jaws of their destroyer. Such particularly was the fate of the agoutis, which had either forgotten the experience of past seasons or had failed to inherit the cunning of the other wild folk. When the Jaguar approached, noisily announcing her coming with voice and footfall, they sat stock still and waited. Only their noses twitched and their large, black eyes stared dumbly in the direction from whence the sounds came. They never had long to wait. With a growl, Suma pounced upon them, mauled them into bits and left them as a warning the meaning of which could not be misunderstood.

24

The lot of the armadillos was not vastly different. Digging for grubs in the wet mould, they were oblivious to their surroundings for with their heads hidden from view they felt a fanciful security from outward aggression. The rings of bony armor that covered their bodies was strong enough, it is true, to protect them from the talons of the harpy eagle and claws of the tiger cats; but when Suma dealt her crushing blow it proved at once the fallacy of taking too many things for granted. So the shattered casques and broken bones of many a luckless armadillo were strewn along the way, mute evidences of Suma's insatiable savagery.

In contrast to the actions of the agoutis and armadillos was the behavior of the ocelots. At the first intimation of danger they disappeared to their hiding places or climbed the nearest tree from the branches of which they watched with the eyes of hatred as their larger relative passed below. However, in the event that they were trapped in the middle of a stalk they spat and hissed and offered the strongest resistance of which they were capable, or at least so it seemed. In reality they were merely bluffing, knowing all the while, with sinking hearts, that their position was hopeless, and that their strategy had no effect whatever on the actions of their persecutor.

25

The more knowing animals heeded the warning so plainly written in the mutilated bodies of their brethren; in the snarls of rage and in the screams of terror of the doomed victims; and in the roars of triumph that followed each notable kill. To them, all these signs were superfluous, for had they not witnessed the coming of Siluk, the Storm-God, and had they not known of the thing that portended? But such is the nature of the wild things that they are loath to change the established order of their lives until forced to do so. So, not until death walked boldly in their midst, and struck—no one could tell when and where—did they profit by their superior intelligence. Then the more timid ones among their number moved to safe quarters far from the windfall, while the others redoubled their vigilance and dared not venture many paces from the protection of their burrows and shelters.

26

So far, the inhabitants of the treetops had not been molested. Largest among them were the howling monkeys. Secretly, they feared Suma and hated her with all the vehemence of their intractable natures. In secret also, they followed her movements whenever possible, dogging her steps and gazing with furtive eyes upon her acts of violence. But they were careful to keep to the higher branches and to view the jungle tragedies from the safety of their lofty perches. So long as the Jaguar hunted openly and made no efforts to conceal her movements, they had

nothing to fear. It was later, when the great cat called into play all the resources and artifices at her command that their hour would strike. But like the other foolish wild folk, they looked upon that time as something belonging to the indistinct future and not until the lesson should be brought home to them, swiftly and terribly, would they profit by it.

27

In her turn, Suma hated the monkey tribe. She had frequent glimpses of the dark forms slinking through the branches high above her head, but gave no indication of the fact. At the present time she could not hope successfully to wage war upon them in their arboreal fastness. But it would not always be so. Other days were coming and then the monkey band would be given their lesson and punished for their presumption.

The bird flocks swept through the forest in quest of their livelihood with as much clamor as ever. To them Suma meant nothing; the majority of them had never seen her—did not even know that such a creature existed. The jays, quarrelsome and noisy as are their relatives of the temperate zone, occasionally saw the spotted hunter as she passed where the undergrowth was more open, and sent up a loud chatter that apprised all the other wild things of her whereabouts. And while realizing her impotence to deal with them, Suma could never quite check the growl that swelled in her throat nor stay the lips that drew back until the gleaming, white fangs were exposed to view. Then, with a sheepish look as if heartily ashamed of having noticed the pests at all, she hastened to thicker cover and quickly lost herself to her tormentors.

28

And so the days, and the nights too, passed swiftly, each with its complement of thunder and of rain, and of intimidation and destruction; but at last Suma was satisfied. The region had been cleared of everything that might disturb the tranquillity of the weeks to come. That had been her first care, her first duty prompted by an instinct that made her merciless in its execution. Her abode was safe from disturbance. She could come and go as she chose, serene in the knowledge that not a living thing remained in the vicinity to trouble her, or, if any remained they were cowed to the point where they dared not make their presence known. Then she retired to the cavity in the great cottonwood and for three days and three nights the jungle saw her not.

29

The deluge thundered and beat upon the drooping vegetation with a sound so monotonous that Suma grew accustomed to it and did not notice its existence. But the chamber in the giant tree trunk remained dry and comfortable, a little world apart from its mournful surroundings. And scarcely had she entered upon her voluntary retirement when a swarm of craneflies took up its station at the entrance. These latter were slender, almost wasplike insects with lacy wings and long, thread-like legs, that whirled and danced with the mad joyousness of life, the mass of swirling creatures seemingly spinning a net of sheerest gossamer that curtained the interior from the prying eyes of the wrens and ant birds hopping inquisitively through the crevices of the windfall.

30

CHAPTER II

Oomah, the Story-Teller

The approach of Siluk, the Storm-God, brought terror not only to the animals of the boundless wilderness. Besides the creatures that lived in the treetops, in the air, on the floor of the forest and under the rubbish that littered the ground were other living beings, no less wild, no less savage than the ones that shared their jungle homes.

They were the Indians, living in scattered tribes, some numerous, others so few in numbers that they verged on extinction. They roamed the vast hinterland in bands, subsisting on the bounty of the land when food was plentiful, suffering hunger in less propitious seasons, and sleeping on the ground where night overtook them.

The dry season was their time of harvest, of care-free existence and of abundance. No sooner had the heavens ceased to drench the long-enduring earth with its tears than they followed the receding floods to the lower regions where the forest ended.

31

Then came long days of brilliant sunshine, of balmy breezes, and of feasting beside the great rivers that were the very arteries of life of the great Amazon country.

Well-filled stomachs were conducive to friendlier dispositions. Old enmities were forgotten or at least held in abeyance. Each tribe was too busily engaged in the enjoyment of life to spend precious days in warfare on its neighbors with all the attendant hardships and suffering.

It was only after the skies had been leaden for days at a time; when rain in torrents beat unceasingly upon the hastily erected shelters and found its way in rivulets through the palm-leaf roofs so that the earthen floors were converted into basins of mud; when game retreated to unknown or inaccessible places so that the procuring of food became an increasingly difficult problem; it was then, after the weeks of brooding and confinement that nerves snapped and the picture of war formed itself as a saving diversion before the blood-shot eyes of the savages.

32

At this stage no one was safe. The war party might at any moment find itself ambushed by the

very ones it hoped to surprise. The snap of a twig; the dropping of a fruit from some tall tree; each sudden sound was interpreted as the twang of a hostile bow. Overwrought nerves peopled the jungle with spectral enemies; they found relief in combat and destruction.

And, above all the scenes of desolation, above the turmoil and the strife, the grim storm god ruled supreme, heartlessly sending new deluges and crashing bolts in answer to the prayers for deliverance.

The Cantanas had ventured farther down the river than was their wont. The season had been a remarkable one. Never had there been such abundance along the stream that for many years had served as their annual camping-ground. They revelled in the luxury of a care-free existence. Fish teemed in the water; turtles came in hordes to visit the sandbank; and birds in countless numbers filled the air with twinkling wings and harsh screams. They had only to take, to eat, and to make merry for it was not their nature to look too seriously upon the morrow.

33

And then, like a fateful omen of troubled times on the horizon came the first sign, the first warning of the impending change.

The tribe was small, reduced in numbers by the periodical inroads made upon it by some of its neighbors. Also, led by an aged man who relied more on charms and incantations than upon valor, it stood in a fair way of utter extermination.

Among the men was a youth of promise, Oomah by name. He was a general favorite, praised by the men for his deeds of courage and daring, admired by the women and beloved by the children.

Oomah was only seventeen. Still, at that early age he stood half a head above any other member of the tribe and was built in proportion. It had been hinted on more than one occasion that he was to be their next leader. But, if he knew of it, he gave not the slightest evidence of the fact. He went about his affairs as stolidly as ever, indifferent to all but the urge of the water, the lure of the forest and those other things that rounded out the well-filled days of the annual period of recreation.

34

And now the time had arrived when that period must soon come to a close. But the sun was shining still, the wind blew and the birds shrieked in their revels overhead.

The men were dozing in their hammocks; the women had built fires over which to roast the turtle meat for the evening meal. And the children played in the sand.

A shout went up suddenly from one of the group.

"Here comes Oomah now."

"Yes! We will run to meet Oomah," another said. "See, he brings birds from the forest."

They raced toward the oncoming figure still a few hundred yards away on the edge of the sandbank. Each wanted to be the first to reach his side and to hear from his lips the story of the afternoon's hunt.

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"Oh, look," the leader said in wide-eyed wonder when they all came to a stop in front of the mighty hunter. "A *gura* and a *chapla*. Tell us, Oomah, how did you get them?"

"In the forest, high up in the trees," the youth replied with a smile. "Now look at the birds and tell me what you see."

A chorus of answers came instantly, for close observation of all things is part of the life training of the wild people.

"One has a short tail," said one.

"The big one has a long tail," said another.

"The feathers on its head are all curled and twisted," added a third. "And they both have long necks and long legs."

"Listen," said Oomah, "and I will tell you why these things are true."

He sat down in the sand and crossed his legs and the group of eager urchins dropped down in a semi-circle before him.

"In the very beginning of things, many, many changes of the season ago, the *gura* and the *Chapla* were just alike," Oomah said impressively, holding up one hand for further emphasis. "They were married one day just as the rains were about to stop for good and the floods were going back into the rivers where they belonged. But, they were not happy. Before long they quarrelled. The *gura*," holding up the trumpeter, which was like a turkey without a tail, for such it was, "was forever cackling and scolding and the *chapla*" pointing to the curassow, which resembled a turkey with a long tail, "resented this and answered in loud squawks. Then they began to fight. The *chapla* pushed the *gura* into the fire over which she was cooking and burned off her tail. In rage, the *gura* pushed her husband into the fire, scorching the feathers on his head so that they curled up. Now, Wallaha, god of the forest saw the fight and it made him angry. 'For shame,' he said, 'fighting like that when you should be peaceful and happy. I will punish you. You will bear the marks of your disgrace with you forever.' And that is why the *gura* has a short tail and the feathers on the head of the *chapla* are singed even to this day."

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A chorus of "Oh's" escaped the cluster of eager listeners. "Tell us another story."

"What do you want me to tell about?" Oomah asked indulgently.

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"Tell us about the rivers."

The youth was silent for a moment, as if lost in thought. Then he began.

"The little streams that come from the mountains so far away and rush through the forest are always talking, always babbling. They are never silent. Have you not noticed that?"

"Yes, and they are always in a hurry," came the prompt reply. "What are they saying?"

"They are *praying*, 'Father of Waters,' they are pleading, 'wait for us and take us into your arms and carry us away with you to the great sea where the land ends. We are small and cannot travel the distance alone; the hungry ground would drink us up or the wind would dry us up. But in your embrace we will safely reach our home.'"

"Tell us, Oomah," one of the boys said in an awestruck tone, "are there still greater rivers than the Father of Waters we know?"

"The Father of Waters is but as a drop compared to the great sea into which it empties," Oomah said wistfully. "It is so large that there is no other side. The fish in it are bigger than the tallest tree and when the wind blows the waves are high as mountains."

"Oh, did you see these things Oomah," the eager listeners asked.

"No," came the reply, regretfully.

"Then, who did see them? Who told you of them?"

"Long, long ago the Cantanas were a powerful people. They built the largest canoes and travelled to the river's end. They saw them. The story of their wandering came to me from my mother."

"When we are men," one of the boys said, "we will make a great canoe. Then you will take us to see the water that is so broad it has no other side."

"No," Oomah said sadly. "It is impossible, for since that day white men have come in countless numbers and settled along the borders of the Father of Waters. Little by little they are pushing up the river. Some day they will be even here."

"Not so long as there is a Cantana alive," the oldest of the youths replied. "We will fight them and drive them back."

"I am glad to hear you say that and I would that I could be the leader against them. But, that too is not possible," regretfully. "The white men are numerous as the stars in the heavens. They fight with sticks that roar like thunder and throw the lightning that kills instantly. Their boats vomit fire and smoke and are longer than from here to the water's edge."

"What terrible savages they must be," one of the boys said breathlessly.

"Some day," Oomah continued, a strange light brightening his face, "I will take you down the river to the border of the region where the white men live. We will travel at night and hide by day. From our places of concealment we will watch them but they shall not see us."

"What would Choflo say?" one of the more timid ones asked.

"We will not ask Choflo," another promptly replied. "He says too many things and always makes us do the things we hate to do."

"You forget," Oomah advised them, "that Choflo is leader of the tribe. So long as he lives he must be obeyed."

This calmed the threatened insurrection. Oomah's words had been calculated to uphold their respect for the one who was their leader and they had accomplished their purpose, so the subject was dismissed.

"Would you hear more?" the youth asked.

"Yes, yes," came the response in a chorus of eager voices. "Tell us another story."

"This, also have I not seen," the storyteller continued, "nor do I hope ever to see it. But it has been known that at certain intervals of time a mysterious spirit appears in the forest—a huge black being, so powerful and so ferocious that every living thing shrinks from it in terror. Our sharpest arrows, shot from the most powerful bows do not harm it. It roars at night so that the sound of its voice may be heard a distance of a full day's travel and it slays on sight but does not devour the men it kills."

The hearers drew closer together. They were too interested for speech.

"It is said that the terrible monster is a phantom, sent by Tumwah, God of Drought to punish us for our evil deeds. It takes the form of the tiger but of a *black* color. May none of you ever come under the spell of this vile spirit."

The tale was interrupted at this time. A shadow flashed past them on the sand.

"See, see," Oomah shouted, jumping to his feet. He pointed to a black bird, a vulture, that was circling over their heads.

"The omen never fails. Siluk is coming; he is upon us. Look! look!"

He was now pointing to the fleeting shadow on the sand. Some of the bird's primary feathers were gone so that the wings cast a barred shadow.

"When the vulture sheds his wing-feathers the rains have started to fall in the mountains. Run,

all of you, to the high banks and remain there. I will go to warn the others. Soon the flood will be upon us."

The urchins fled without further urging. And Oomah started on a run toward the cluster of hovels on the margin of the water.

His cries brought out the men and women before he reached their midst, and it required but a moment to deliver his message.

"Impossible," Choflo replied with a malicious gleam in his eyes. "The sign did not appear to *me*."

"But, I saw it. The children saw it. Gather up what you can and run for your lives."

"No!" The leader raised his hands. "The flood will not reach us. I will stop it."

He raised his voice in a low, droning chant but before he had uttered a dozen words there came a distant roar, dull but unmistakable, that drowned the sound of his incantation.

The Indians needed no further evidence of the truth of Oomah's warning. Abandoning everything, they rushed in a body toward the distant bank that meant safety; and Choflo, despite his years, well held his place among them.

They were just in time. Scarcely had the last man gained the higher ground than the wall of water thundered down the riverbed, engulfing everything in its path. Their weapons were lost; the turtles in the corrals were swept away; their cooking utensils had vanished. Had they heeded Oomah without delay it would have been different.

They had escaped with nothing but their lives; but, even for this they were grateful even though it meant days of suffering in the rain-drenched forest before they could again replace their loss.

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CHAPTER III

The Terror of Claws and Fangs.

When Suma, the Jaguar, driven from the dismal wastes of the pantenal country by the encroaching floods of the rainy season reached the higher, forested region skirting the Andean foothills, she entered upon a wild orgy of terrorism and slaughter.

Her instinct gratified, Suma retired to the cavity in the cottonwood while the torrential rains fell with a monotonous roar, and the crane-flies with their lacy, whirring wings formed a curtain in the entrance to lend sanctity to the inner chamber.

Ordinarily, Suma did not destroy wantonly; she killed for food only or in self-defense; or, in resentment of the too familiar advances or the indifference of some one of the less intelligent creatures that had not yet learned to respect her power and acknowledge her sovereignty in the jungle. But, the present was not an ordinary occasion, for soon Warruk, as the Indians on the Ichilo River called the Jaguar cub, was to make his appearance in the big world; and it was but for his comfort and safety that Suma provided.

After a three days' retirement the great cat emerged from the seclusion of her dark retreat, hungry and ferocious but with a stealth and caution well calculated to evade any prying eyes that might attempt to observe her actions from the treetops and surmise their meaning.

A puff, like smoke, from the entrance to the cavity announced her coming; but it was only the madly dancing cloud of crane-flies clearing the passage at her approach.

The rain was falling with a steady drone from a sky of unbroken, cheerless gray, and rivulets of water trickled from the drooping vegetation. Mosses and ferns, revived by the superabundance of moisture had sprung up on the decaying trunks and branches of the uprooted trees, pushing their feathery leaflets through the blanket of creepers and forming a dense, soggy layer cold and clammy to the touch and treacherous underfoot. But Suma knew her domicile well and passed rapidly and surefootedly over the interlocking tree skeletons and soon reached the level forest floor.

Straight as an arrow she headed to the north on some mission well-known to herself, moving like a shadow and at a rapid pace. Before long the windfall with the giant cottonwood containing the precious little Warruk had been left far behind. Suma knew where the round, red chonta nuts grew and that they ripened during the season of rains; and that even now the ground was covered with the tasty morsels. But this knowledge was of a vague nature only and interested her but indirectly. What was far more important was that the peccary herds fed on the chonta nuts and were sure to be in the neighborhood of their favorite feeding-grounds.

To stalk and kill one of the ferocious little animals entailed a great deal of danger—to the inexperienced hunter, but Suma feared them not. Never, since the time she had miscalculated the distance of the spring and had succeeded only in slightly wounding her quarry—with the resultant squeal of terror and the onrush of fully a hundred of the stricken one's fellows—and the night of uncertainty spent in the treetop, had they given her any trouble. But all that is another story as likely as not to repeat itself in the life of Warruk for it seemed that trouble with

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a peccary herd fell to the lot of every Jaguar and was part of his education.

The clump of chonta trees grew a good five miles from the windfall. Suma had covered half the distance when a sharp odor in the air caused her to stop and, standing like an exquisitely chiselled statue, with tensed muscles and alert poise, to drink deeply the scent-laden air. The vision of a peccary dinner left her instantly and her pink tongue stole out gently until it touched her moist, black nose in anticipation of a far more satisfying gorge on venison.

A moment later the Jaguar resumed her journey, but in a different direction. She had swerved at right angles to her former course and was hot on the trail of the deer. 48

Like a shadow Suma seemed to flow over the ground, looking neither to right nor left, the massive paws falling with the lightness of leaves dropping from the trees. A frightened agouti scampered across her path and stopped, frozen with fear, and a green ribbon-like snake drooping in festoons from a low-growing branch hastily drew up its coils as the big cat passed below.

Again Suma paused to sniff the air, then advanced; but this time in a careless, leisurely manner. In a moment she came upon the deer standing in an open little glade among the dark tree trunks. If the creature was startled by the appearance of the Jaguar, it gave no indication of the fact. It snorted and stamped its forefeet while Suma sat down on the wet leaves and surveyed her intended victim in the most unconcerned manner. For a moment the two stared at one another. Then, without warning, the brocket turned and darted away. 49

Suma did not follow. Instead she arose and began to search the neighborhood, for the other creature's actions plainly betrayed the fact that she had a fawn hidden nearby. Why exhaust herself in a fruitless chase after the fleeting mother whose speed was so much greater than her own and who had dashed away simply to deceive her foe and in the hope of drawing her from the spot where her offspring was concealed? The fawn, far more desirable than its elder, could be had for the mere finding.

But the fawn had already learned one of the most important lessons of life and this bit of knowledge had saved him from an untimely end no fewer than seven times during his ten days on earth.

Now, the fawn was prettily spotted, and most persons who delve into such matters and try to reconcile cause and effect, particularly from a distant point of view, would have said that this coloration was the means of rendering it, crouching among the ferns with head and neck flattened to the ground, invisible to its enemies. But the truth of the matter was that its color had nothing to do with its security. During the hours of dusk and darkness when the predaceous animals came out to hunt, the fawn might have been red or blue or green so far as its color was concerned with its safety, for in the gloom of the jungle all objects not snowy white appeared black if they could be distinguished at all. The important thing was that it lay motionless—had been in this identical position for some time, and so long as it did not move it gave off no scent. It was for this same reason that the tinamou and quail and other ground-nesting birds escaped the keen noses of the foxes, otherwise they would have been exterminated long ago. The preying animals hunted by scent, not by sight. 50

If the brocket mother, after her wild dash in the hope of luring Suma from the spot had only stayed away both she and her offspring would have been safe. But, finding that her ruse had been unsuccessful she anxiously returned. The Jaguar sensed her coming and waited; the snort and impatient stamp that announced her arrival was superfluous for Suma had seen her approach. 51

Again the deer tried to lead her enemy away, trotting off a few paces and turning to look back with large, questioning eyes. The big cat merely sat upright and yawned as if bored by the proceedings. The brocket retraced her steps, but the Jaguar seemed not to notice and began to wash one of her massive paws. By this time the deer was thoroughly aroused; she grunted and stamped her feet and pivoted this way and that. Suma, while feigning indifference, eagerly watched each movement and when the brocket, finally, frantic with apprehension made one of her quick turns the Jaguar glided forward a few steps and sprang. Like a flash she catapulted through the air; there was the gleam of white fangs and when the jaws crunched together they closed upon the neck of the unfortunate deer, crushing the vertebra. A second swift lunge below the shoulder and the long teeth had penetrated the heart. The deer, with a startled gasp staggered forward a step and dropped. Suma eagerly lapped up the red pool forming on the wet leaves, purring with satisfaction and then fell upon her victim with a savage relish, for not in days had she eaten. 52

Long before the gory feast was completed the fawn, becoming impatient at its mother's non-return, left the clump of arums, green leaves, wide as an elephant's ear, not ten yards away and ambled up unsuspectingly to within a few feet of the great cat where it stood and gazed with wide, innocent eyes upon the fearful scene before it. Suma paid no attention to the little creature, even when it came a step nearer and bleated plaintively, for she had enough before her to satisfy her hunger. And when the Jaguar had eaten her fill she carefully cleansed her face and paws and started toward the river to drink before returning to the windfall. The fawn followed, so she increased her pace, hopelessly outdistancing the little creature and leaving it to the mercy of the next marauder that chanced to pass that way. Without the guidance of its mother it was a forlorn and pathetic little object left to drift aimlessly through the rain-soaked forest with its numerous watchful eyes and alert ears. Somehow, the other creatures sensed the fawn's helplessness and the news soon spread among them. Shadowy forms appeared where 53

there should have been none. And the awe-inspiring Suma had scarcely succeeded in shaking the dainty little sprite off her trail when it met an untimely end from an unexpected quarter.

A family of great owls had been following the jungle tragedy from the black trees, with large, glowing eyes. And when the proper moment arrived they swooped down with noiseless wings like spirits from a shadow world. Monsters of fury they were, stabbing and rending with needle-sharp claws and hooked beaks that clattered; tearing at eye and throat and flank until the poor fawn succumbed to the terrific attack. Then they fretted and quarrelled among themselves, grunting and bowing, and striking at one another with arched wings as they hopped around their victim. The commotion attracted a pack of five short-tailed, dog-like creatures which rushed upon the scene and drove the owls back to their sphere in the tree tops, while they cleaned up the remains.

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When Suma again emerged from her lair, two nights later, she started in a different direction. Never did she return to a kill the second time or hunt on two successive occasions in the same region.

Unless she remained to ward off the hungry advances of a host of other creatures there would never be enough of her victims left to come back for; and even if there had been, one short day's time in the hot, steaming jungle atmosphere sufficed to cause the flesh to decay. Suma had ideas of her own about spending the days away from her proper rendezvous; and as for carrion, she never failed to give it a wide berth.

As to her hunting instincts, there were several reasons why a region should be shunned after one of its denizens had been slain. A nightly raid in the same place might cause the creatures living in it either to become so wary that soon it would be impossible to secure any of them at all; or, they would be exterminated which was even worse. No! Suma obeyed well the impulse that guided her actions. By visiting a new district on each quest of food the game was not too greatly disturbed and its numbers or existence was not imperilled.

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Nor was this instinct confined to the Jaguar alone. The other flesh-eating animals also heeded it. And the wild tribes that inhabited the wilderness knew from bitter experience that it was best to conserve their food supply and that to waste today was to want tomorrow. It was only when men who professed some degree of civilization appeared on the scene that the wild things found existence impossible; and the more advanced the men the greater the slaughter. They showed an insatiable lust for killing—under one pretext or another; but always they killed, with guns and rifles and—from a safe distance.

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On her second food-hunt since the arrival of Warruk, the cub, Suma essayed to visit the margin of the swollen, raging river where the fat capybaras lived in the dense cane brakes. The great creatures, like hundred-pound guinea pigs, were rancid eating, it is true, but this was in a measure counterbalanced by the fact that to capture them required no excessive effort. Both by day and by night they were very much in evidence gnawing tirelessly at the tough canes and when the stems were finally severed they squatted complacently and munched the broad, ribbon-like leaves. One wondered when, if ever, they slept; and why, in the midst of such an abundance of food their appetites seemed never satisfied. Upon the first sign of danger they stopped eating only long enough to give vent to their resentment of the disturbance in a few guttural grunts; but once the spectre of disaster was swooping down upon them they made hurriedly for the water and dived with a loud splash. They were good swimmers, with only the head showing above the surface sending out a trail of V-shaped ripples that shimmered and sparkled if the sun shone, and on moonlit nights. Often, however, they swam under water to some nearby island reed-bed or to the security of a burrow beneath the overhanging bank.

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The rain had stopped for one of those rare and all too brief intervals that broke the monotony of the sullen roar and the misery caused by a perpetually drenched skin when the Jaguar approached the fringe of tall, waving canes. Broad runways opened into the maze of stalks where the capybaras had gnawed their way through the dense growth and then hastily had turned back to start a new one—just as a woodpecker chiseling a hole through a wall and dismayed at seeing daylight ahead, leaves the laboriously excavated tunnel and quickly starts another.

The forest beyond the canes was an unknown world of lurking dangers. But the capybaras simply found it impossible to loose themselves from it. Always, at the most unexpected moment they came suddenly upon it looming before them like a sinister, black monster.

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Suma boldly entered one of the numerous openings for she knew it was not there she would come upon her intended victims. She was only taking an easy route to the main path that ran parallel to the river but upon nearing this she immediately left the beaten trail and glided into the growth at one side. There she lay in wait fully concealed by the darkness, and the stems and leaves.

In addition to the wide runway trodden by the feet of countless generations of the great rodents there were other evidences of their recent presence and the atmosphere was laden with their scent. Suma sniffed the heavy air greedily and her eyes glowed as she shifted her gaze up and down the thoroughfare for a first glimpse of an unsuspecting victim to come her way. There was but a minute to wait. A black, rounded hulk appeared, moving with the silence of a shadow; on the near side were two smaller forms, young, moving along stealthily at the side of their mother. The Jaguar's mind was made up instantly; when the trio came within range she would pounce upon the cubs, for they were tender and without the layers of rancid fat of the older animal. But while her eyes shone with the fire of anticipation and her tail lashed ever so slightly an

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unforeseen thing happened. Evidently a difference of opinion over some matter or other arose between the two smaller creatures, for they stopped suddenly and began fighting, rolling over and over amidst squeals and groans, feet waving in the air, and teeth champing, more in bluff than in menace. Their elder, impatient at the disgraceful conduct of her offspring turned and chided them with a stamp of her forefoot and a low grunt.

The commotion startled a cane rat which was stealing down the path so that it bolted for the nearest cover with a loud patter of feet, heading straight for the Jaguar, of whose presence it was unaware. Suma saw it just in time to raise a massive paw in order to avoid contact with the lowly creature, but when she lowered the great foot it was directly upon the rodent's tail for it had stopped as soon as it had reached the protection of the canes. Of course this calamity was infinitely worse than the noise that had first frightened it and the rat promptly began to squeak with a lustiness that was surprising, the shrill voice carrying a distance of many yards. The capybaras immediately stopped fighting and all three wheeled to see the cause of the disturbance. Their eyes caught the glint of Suma's burning orbs and with a cry of alarm they dashed into the brakes. The Jaguar followed like a streak but their lead had been too great and in a moment three distinct splashes in quick succession announced the fact that they had dived to safety in the river. From up and down the line of riverbank came the resounding *plump, plump* of other heavy bodies. The danger signal had not gone unheeded and with a growl of rage and disgust Suma turned to slink away from the scene of her disappointment. Further hunting in that region was useless. Not for days would the capybaras trust themselves more than a few steps from the security of the waterside. So, with a second deep rumble of chagrin the mighty cat skirted the outside of the cane-brake and was compelled to satisfy her hunger on a couple of agoutis.

Sometimes the Jaguar hunted each night; more often it was every second night. It depended entirely upon the size of her kill. And all the time not required in procuring food was spent within the cavity in the cottonwood fondling and guarding the precious Warruk.

Three weeks had passed. The cub had grown at a surprising rate and was beginning to observe his immediate surroundings, though still unsteady and exceedingly awkward. The first thing he saw was his mother and he was sure she was the most beautiful thing in the world—which was exactly the way he should have felt. He snuggled close to her warm body, looked adoringly into her face, and purred, while she, proud and happy in his possession, smoothed his soft, velvety fur with her tongue while a deep rumble of satisfaction came from her throat.

It was shortly after this that the thing happened that caused Suma to reverse her course of procedure so far as hunting was concerned, and came near bringing dire consequences.

She was returning to her abode rather earlier than usual, having succeeded in cutting off a straggler from the peccary herd and killing it before its cries could bring the other numerous members of the band to its rescue. Spurred on by some subtle sense of intuition she had eaten hurriedly and then made for her home where the cub had been left curled upon the rotting chips and leaves, sound asleep.

As she bounded lightly over the first prostrate tree-trunks of the windfall, an infrequent but not unfamiliar odor assailed her nostrils. It was a disagreeable smell, not unlike that of cabbage or potatoes in the first stages of decay. The first tinge of it lashed her into frenzy so that she sprang forward in great leaps risking the breaking of her legs in the jam of branches and tangled creepers. Her only thought was of her little one. Had she arrived in time to save him from a horrible fate, or should she find the lair empty?

Near the entrance to the cavity she stopped with a terrible growl. The sinewy body of a great snake—a bushmaster,—was gliding rapidly into the opening; in fact, half its scale-covered length had already disappeared from view. This was an advantage to the Jaguar for the head with its death-dealing fangs, being in the cavity, was rendered harmless unless the serpent had heard her coming and had doubled back with the lightning speed of which it was capable. But, so fixed was its attention upon the still sleeping cub that it had heard nothing until the growl apprised it of the presence of danger; and then it was too late. The great paw fell upon the back of the reptile with a crash, shattering the bones and crushing the flesh into a pulp. Out of the cavity darted the arrow-shaped head, hissing and lunging frantically and blindly in all directions, while the latter half of the body writhed impotently and twisted itself into knots; but the snake could not move from the spot.

Suma drew back to a safe distance and waited, and before long the contortions of the great serpent became less violent; then they stopped altogether, but the triangular head raised above the mass of coils was turned toward the crouching Jaguar while the greenish eyes glared at her with a demoniacal hate. Suma knew her enemy well; to move suddenly was to invite the deadly stroke. So she began creeping, so slowly and so evenly that it was impossible to detect the slightest motion. Inch by inch she advanced but not for an instant did her eyes leave those of the snake. The latter took no note of this strategy or else seemed spell-bound by the blazing eyes of its adversary. Nearer and nearer she came, even more slowly than before, with tense muscles ready to carry her far to one side should the snake suddenly awake to its peril and strike. At last but a scant yard separated them.

The reptile's black, thread-like tongue began to play in and out of its mouth with great rapidity. Apparently it was so confused or dazed that it could not see clearly and was feeling for the antagonist that was so near. The decisive moment had arrived. A massive forefoot bristling with claws an inch long streaked through the air and fell on the serpent's head with a thud, followed by another, equally crushing; long, white teeth set in wide-open jaws flashed for an instant ere

they met to sever the mutilated head from the quivering body. In a moment the snake had been clawed and mauled into a mass of pulp, and leaving it where it lay Suma hastened to the side of the now wide awake Warruk. She pushed him over gently with her nose, licked his face and sides, grunted with satisfaction and then curled up beside him.

When daylight came there was the swish of wings through the air followed by the sound of heavy bodies alighting. A trio of vultures had appeared on the scene, guided unfailingly by some mysterious sense known only to themselves. They hopped and flapped awkwardly over the rough surface of the windfall to where the dead snake lay and began to tear at the flesh. As they ate they quarrelled noisily among themselves croaking and sighing with hoarse voices and striking at one another with wings and beaks.

The Jaguar watched their antics with little interest and made no attempt to disturb them. When they had gorged themselves on the loathsome repast they tore off long strips of flesh and carrying them in their hooked beaks flew to the lower branches of the nearest trees.

After her encounter with the bushmaster, Suma spent as little time as possible away from her abode. Knowing that the deadly snake hunted by night only, the Jaguar changed her former habit and went in search of food during the daylight hours, spending the hours of darkness at home, on guard against any similar intruder.

Warruk grew at a surprising rate; for, being alone the nourishment ordinarily sufficient for two, occasionally even three, was all diverted to his use. Before many weeks had passed he began to show interest in various things that attracted his attention. After spending many hours in admiration of his mother's beautiful coat, tawny with rosettes of black dots and with longer and softer white fur underneath, he wondered at the length of her claws, the whiteness of her fangs and the great size of her—it tired him to walk completely around her as she lay sprawled out on the floor.

There was also the tender care she gave him and her solicitude for his welfare to be taken into consideration. She was forever caressing him with her nose and washing his face with her tongue. The picture within the cavity in the great cottonwood was a pleasant one to contemplate. Suma the mother was a creature different from Suma the hunter moving shadow-like through the forest intent on slaughter.

The hunting instinct asserted itself early in Warruk's life, and quite unexpectedly. On one of his excursions around the outstretched form of his mother he suddenly became conscious of a black fluff of something that was jumping nervously from side to side. Crouching low, he watched intently, prompted at first by curiosity. Back and forth the object moved, lightly and without sound. An irresistible impulse came over the cub; he ran forward a few steps, stopped, then sprang and the mysterious thing was pinned firmly to the ground by his paws while his sharp little teeth dug into it furiously.

Suma jumped to her feet with a grunt of surprise, quickly turned and gave him a gentle cuff that however bowled him over, and when he regained his feet, very much perturbed and startled, he arched up his back and hissed, not knowing what else to do. It was the first time he had noticed Suma's long, graceful tail, which was never quiet except when she slept; but after that he had many a happy game of tag with the tip of it even if there was the certainty of punishment ahead in the event that his play became too strenuous. While his mother was a firm believer in discipline she was never too severe; and often, after the chastisement she hastened to caress him so that he quickly forgot the occurrence.

Warruk's real education began when his mother started to bring some of her victims to the lair. For this purpose she always chose the smaller animals which she ordinarily should not have bothered to kill for her own use. Mice, spiny rats, forest quail and an occasional squirrel were taken to the cavity at various times and carelessly deposited by the side of the cub. Cautious at first of making too intimate advances toward these unfamiliar objects he began soon to look forward to the return of his mother, knowing well that she would not come empty-handed. He pounced upon the lifeless forms clawing, biting and shaking them until the fur or feathers flew, amid growls and snarls that were but the forerunners of the ferocious nature which would assert itself when latent character was fully developed. Suma always watched the proceedings with a complacent expression, fully satisfied with the progress of her offspring.

Although using every strategy to conceal her secret from the other inhabitants of the forest, particularly while in the vicinity of the windfall, the actions of the Jaguar had not escaped the sharp eyes of a band of female howling monkeys that frequented the wall of trees on one side. They were alone, that is, the males had been driven to distant parts until the mothers could bring forth their young and rear them to the point where they were no longer in danger of death at the hands and teeth of their jealous fathers.

Among the members of the troop, numbering four, was Myla, sad and forlorn of face and housing a broken heart within her bosom, for she had lost her baby. It happened early one afternoon when the four had ascended to the top of a tall tree to dry their bedraggled fur during one of those rare intervals when the clouds broke and the sun showed his brassy face for a brief time. Such an opportunity was not to be neglected. Happy and grateful they were, the four monkey mothers, sitting on the dome of green leaves, each with her little one in her lap while her long fingers delved among its rather sparse fur. Then, like a bolt out of a blue sky it fell. A shadow plunged down from the heavens with a rush that was almost a roar; wide-spreading feet with long, curved talons shot out of the hurtling black mass, and Myla's lap was empty. She leaped high into the air after the marauder with a frantic scream of anguish only to fall back

heavily upon the boughs clutching a black feather in her hand. The eagle had made good its escape and flapped away above the green sea of treetops with a cry of triumph.

Myla was mad with grief for hours after that and the other three joined their voices to her barks and wails of sorrow as they moved restlessly among the branches in constant dread of another visit from their aerial foe. But when at last this external show of emotion had subsided the bereaved mother looked with envious eyes at the offspring of her more fortunate sisters. The latter, however, were not slow to divine the thoughts that filled her mind. When she approached them, apparently with the most innocent of motives they charged savagely and drove her off. All her plotting availed her nothing.

And now, Myla had observed the big, spotted cat stealthily making her way over the windfall with food in her mouth. Not once, but many times had she clandestinely peered from her concealed position among the dense foliage; and each time the Jaguar had entered the same cavity in the great tree-trunk. That could mean but one thing; she too had a baby.

A fierce hope sprang up in Myla's empty heart and rapidly grew into an obsession; but soon she realized with a sinking sensation how futile were her desires. She was no match for the Jaguar; indeed, the mere sight of the fearsome beast made her tremble. Never could she muster the courage to descend from her lofty perch while such a creature roamed the earth below.

In spite of these sound conclusions, an indescribable fascination held her prisoner in its grasp. So day after day she spied longingly and furtively upon the comings and goings of the big cat.

As for Suma, unsuspecting of the existence of the pair of burning eyes that followed her movements, the days were brimming over with contentment.

Warruk was growing by the hour, or at least so it seemed, and increasing in sprightliness each day. He even insisted on following her to the entrance of the cavity when she departed and met her there when she returned. The fear that he might some day disobey her injunction and sally forth alone in her absence did not once occur to her. She trusted him to obey, even if he was different in one respect from her other children, and for this difference he was doubly precious to her. For, the first beams of daylight falling upon his glossy fur revealed the fact that he was *black*. Instead of being a miniature replica of his mother with her lovely markings he shone with a satiny lustre the tone of jet. A rarity indeed was Warruk, and because of his color, destined to grow into the largest and most ferocious of his species. Had the Indians on the Ichilo River known of the birth of the black cub they would have beaten their breasts and wailed, "*Simla Wallah-Caru*," meaning "a Black Phantom has come to haunt us;" and they would have placed offerings of roots and nuts, and calabashes of milk from the milk-palm in the forest to soothe and placate the temper of the shadowy one.

Warruk, all oblivious of the fact that he was in any way different from the usual, spent his waking hours in play. Many were the victims Suma brought him on which to exercise his developing powers, but so far they were of scant interest to him as food.

As the days passed the cub's curiosity concerning the opening that led into the world increased and as he looked in wonder at the splash of light coming through the doorway he determined to learn more about it. He started toward the enchanting radiance with cautious steps, but ere he had gone far his mother halted him with deep rumblings in her throat, well calculated to inspire him with awe. Never must he venture to the border of that outer world without her guidance, she repeated. Death, or a thousand mishaps almost as bad awaited him there from the trees, the earth and even from subterranean places of concealment.

Warruk took the warning seriously and retreated with high-arched back, but he liked to sit upright and watch the mysterious shaft of light and to wonder.

Suma had gone for more playthings for her little one, as was her custom. And, as she disappeared through the opening the cub sat for a long time pondering and fighting to keep back the curiosity that was consuming him. As he looked a dark rounded form like a ball of some fluffy material blown by the wind rolled across the patch of light near the doorway. He glided toward it noiselessly, filled with the spirit of adventure. Then he stopped, crouching with tense muscles while his little eyes shone with a new light. Again the strange object came into view on the return trip, and with an agile leap Warruk had pounced on top of it. It wriggled under his feet, and squeaked dolefully and for a moment he was at a loss as to what to do next. Then he cautiously raised one forefoot, bent his head and sniffed at the soft, warm thing and remembered that it was exactly like the rats his mother had brought him, only smaller; but they were always limp and silent while this one struggled and made queer little noises! He raised his other paw for a good look at the creature, his heart pounding wildly with excitement. And the mouse, feeling the pressure relaxing gave one quick wrench and was free. Warruk bounded after it but it slipped nimbly into a crevice in the rotten wood and was gone. Exasperated at being outwitted he clawed and bit furiously at the minute opening into which his captive had escaped, spitting and growling the while. His exertions only tired him so at last he was compelled to stop to rest.

It seemed however, that this was destined to be Warruk's unlucky day. Scarcely had he thrown himself down upon the litter of soft chips than another black, rounded form hove into view, precisely where the first had been; but it was of larger size. This time there would be no mincing of matters. He was determined that the new prize should not escape him. With a savage little snarl he rushed at the newcomer and struck it with all the might at his command.

A howl of pain escaped him as he tried to lift his paw quite as quickly as it had descended but the awful thing clung to it and it was only after a number of vigorous shakes that he succeeded

in dislodging it. In his lack of experience he had planted his paw directly upon a giant rhinoceros beetle with bristling, thorn-like “antlers” one of which had penetrated the skin between the pads. The pain was intense so he held up the injured member and wailed for his mother; he was in trouble and wanted her badly. 78

Fortunately, Suma at that very moment was stealing across the windfall and at the sound of her offspring’s cries of distress she darted forward with frantic speed and rushed into the cavity so hurriedly she upset him. Warruk scrambled to his feet and followed her to the farther end of the hollow where she licked his foot until the pain left. At the same time she chided him for his disobedience and again tried to impress upon him the peril of venturing too near the outer world while she was away. And childlike, Warruk remembered the lesson for a period of exactly one day.

Again Suma was away, working havoc among the smaller wildfolk. Time hung heavy and the light of the world beyond his horizon exerted a stronger fascination than ever. It attracted the cub like a magnet and before he knew it he was standing before the opening. His eyes opened wide at the strange scene in front of him. Inside the cavity there was only darkness, or gloom at best. Outside were light and heaps and walls of green things that moved as if alive. Everything was dazzling and brilliant; even the sun had burst through the angry clouds to bid him welcome. 79

Warruk wanted to go out among the waving, dripping leaves that sparkled as the sunlight caught the drops of crystal water hanging in fringes from their edges, and to drink in the fresh, moist air; but he dared not venture out. All he had the courage to do was to stare in awe and wonder.

Something moved at his feet, startling him so that he withdrew quickly into the shelter of his safe retreat; but upon observing it for a while he concluded that it must be nothing more than some new kind of mouse or similar creature. It was dark and danced back and forth in a dainty manner as if inviting pursuit. The cub retraced his steps and reached for it gingerly with one paw but it evaded him and fled lightly to one side. Again he reached and again there was nothing in which to fasten his sharp, little claws. Then he became more eager than ever to capture the elusive something. He struck at it, ran after it and jumped on top of it but it always escaped him; for the puzzling thing was only the shadow cast by a bunch of trumpet-flower dangling high overhead. 80

The antics of Warruk had not escaped the watchful eye of Myla, the bereft monkey. And in her eagerness to see the better she descended to the lower branches and leaned far out over the ridge of the windfall. How the actions of the cub reminded her of those of her own little one! And how she longed to clasp the small form in her arms! To feel it near her breast and to stroke its silky fur. The mother-love was strong in Myla and her loss still caused her untold agony.

As she watched, with yearning heart, she suddenly became aware of the appearance of Suma on the far edge of the upheaved barrier and with a sob she realized that in a moment her joy would be ended. The little creature would disappear into the dark cavity with its mother; perhaps she should never see it again. 81

An impulse that smothered all fear, all caution swept over her with an urge that defied resistance; and dropping to the tangle of forest wreckage she bounded to the cub’s side, seized him and clasping him in one arm sped back to the trees.

Suma had seen it all; but in spite of every effort had been unable to reach the thief before she swung gracefully into the branches and made for the denser growth of the interior. Mad with hate and fury she raced along the ground roaring and whining in turn while Myla bounded through the leafy canopy high overhead; and in chorus with the cries of anguish from below, and the triumphant chatter of the monkey, came the screams of Warruk terror-stricken and helpless, rushing headlong to certain doom.

CHAPTER IV

As it Was in the Beginning

In stealing Warruk, the Jaguar cub, the howling monkey acted on the spur of the moment. She had been disconsolate since the loss of her own baby, stolen from her lap by a pitiless eagle and borne away in the sharp talons as the marauder skimmed the level expanse of treetops to its nest on the bleak mountainside.

But not until she was leaping through the tops of the tall trees did she regain her normal senses and feel reasonably safe; she even stopped occasionally to look in triumph at the outraged mother fuming and threatening so far below. When she reached the heavier growth covering the foothills she stopped to examine the little creature in her arms.

Myla’s heart beat with ecstasy as she surveyed her small captive. She held him at arm’s length, turned him around slowly and felt of his ears and feet, for by this time Warruk had stopped struggling but continued his plaintive whining. Then she drew closer and peered into his face; 82

but the moment she did this the cub's forepaws shot out, inflicting parallel rows of deep, painful scratches in her cheeks. The monkey bounded upward and nearly lost her footing as she screeched in surprise and resentment; then she drew back her free hand as if to give him a cuff but instead, quickly stooped and gave him a sharp nip in the back of the neck. But remorse overcame her immediately so she placed the little form across her lap and gently stroked his fur. This was soothing indeed to the terrified and exhausted Warruk and soon he stopped whining and lay helplessly gazing at his unfamiliar surroundings.

It did not take Myla long to discover that the possession of her foster-child did not bring her the joy she had anticipated for he was most unlike her own unfortunate offspring. He ignored the choice fruits and buds she picked for him, repaid her caresses with scratches, screams and snarls or received them in the most indifferent manner in those rare intervals when he did not violently resent them. Myla was in a quandary. Should she restore him to his mother by taking him back to the windfall? Should she desert him in the treetops, or should she cast him to the ground and thus be rid of him quickly and without trouble? No! She had longed for him, had risked her life to gain possession of him, and she would keep him against all odds. He did not fill the void left in her heart by the inroad of the ruthless eagle; he did drive her to the point of distraction; but he was new and interesting just as a doll or a mirror or a rubber ball would have been.

As for Warruk, he was far from having an enjoyable time. At first he was terrified at the great creature that clutched him so closely he could scarcely breathe. He struggled, bluffed, clawed and bit his captor but she was tolerant and agile and usually forgave him or managed to hold him in such a way that his outbursts were futile.

The cub was frightened at being so high above the ground; at the prodigious leaps taken by his abductor; at the strange calls of the birds and at the wind screeching through the branches; and at the hundred other new and terrifying things. When night came he was more frightened than ever. He wanted his mother. Why did she not come with the customary dainty for him? It was dry and cozy in the hollow in the giant cottonwood and he missed the daily game of rough and tumble. In the treetops it was cold and damp.

The monkey seemed to divine his thoughts but in reality was thinking only of her own comfort and safety. She chose a tall palm with spine-covered trunk and broad leaves for her sleeping place. And when she was snugly ensconced under the umbrella-like top which the rain could not penetrate Warruk was truly grateful for the warmth and shelter and promptly fell asleep. Once during the hours of darkness he awoke with a start; from below had come the sound of a familiar voice, faint but unmistakable. Myla too had been awakened and stirred uneasily. But as the sound was not repeated the monkey again slept while the cub felt a first, faint ray of hope and happiness, for he knew that his mother had not deserted him; in fact, was even then close at hand and would come to his assistance at the proper time.

All through the hours of night Myla hugged the little form close to her body. When he whimpered or struggled she quieted him by stroking his head and back, making soft, cooing sounds the while.

When daylight came the monkey again examined and admired her newly adopted little one. It was raining, as usual, and not until the day was well advanced did she venture from the protection afforded by the roof-like palm-leaves overhead. Even then she did not leave from choice. Grim necessity drove her from her snug retreat—the necessity of procuring food. And as for Warruk, he was so hungry he could think of nothing else. He forgot his great fear, his resentment toward his captor, even his longing for his mother; what he wanted more than anything else in the world was something to eat. Never had he been so famished.

Myla knew where a clump of wild figs were bending under their burden of ripe fruit and she hastened to the spot. The wild fig was a terrible thing. It started as a slender creeper feeling its way toward the light above the vast expanse of forest roof, clinging lightly to the trunk of some tall, sturdy tree. As it climbed, stealthily, like a viper stealing upon its victim, it sent out slender tendrils that completely encircled its support; and when its crown reached the bright sunlight high above the ground the slender stem quickly thickened to massive proportions and the tendrils widened into bands like steel that tightened and strangled the life out of the helpless tree. Then the fig blossomed and brought forth its small, red fruit.

Myla was fond of the juicy berries; so were the other members of her tribe and the bird hosts including even some of the flycatchers. Reaching the feeding place, the monkey climbed nimbly into the branches, venturing as far as she dared; then she reached out with one hand and drew the springy tips of the limbs toward her, picking the luscious morsels with her mouth.

Warruk watched her eat and knew what she was doing. When he whimpered suggestively she pulled down a branch very low and waited for him to eat. But the food was unknown to him so he ignored it. Myla seemed offended at his refusal and proceeded to devour the berries without ceremony.

An hour later the monkey's sharp eyes detected the nest of a toucan made in the hollow of a thick branch. An opening much like the doorway to a woodpecker's abode led into a spacious cavity on the bottom of which reposed two fat, ugly fledgelings. As yet their bodies were naked excepting only for dark rows of pin feathers bursting through their sheathes; and their bills were very short instead of long and thick like those of their elders.

When the monkey, after peering intently into the opening for some time finally reached into it and drew out one of the struggling young birds, Warruk's interest was aroused at once. He

made a lunge for it and seizing it in his mouth growled so menacingly while his claws dug deeply in Myla's side that she hastened to put him down on the branch while she withdrew a short distance to watch the proceedings. Free of his captor the cub crouched low and greedily devoured the prize while Myla hopped up and down excitedly and screeched and chattered her opinion of the unexpected sight. The parent birds, feeding in a nearby tree, heard the commotion and surmised that it spelled disaster for their brood. They stopped plucking fruits with their long beaks and tossing them into their throats and flew heavily to their nesting tree. The spectacle that greeted their eyes filled them with consternation. They rattled and clattered their horny mandibles and yelped dog-like while they swung about the branches like the accomplished acrobats they were. Their cries of distress brought others of their tribe from a distance who lent their voices to the din until the treetops were filled with a screeching, whirling mob.

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This demonstration unnerved the monkey. She snatched up the cub still clinging to his unfinished meal, and darted away at breakneck speed. Her show of fright gave courage to the toucans. They immediately took up the pursuit, their white throats flashing a sharp contrast to their black bodies as they hurtled after the fleeing monkey, easily keeping pace with her and nipping her ears and back and tail. At each pinch Myla emitted a scream and increased her speed until she seemed to fly through the branches handicapped though she was by the cub securely tucked under one arm. And Warruk, unable to fathom the new calamity that had befallen him, clung to the half-devoured bird with his teeth and to the monkey with his claws as they skimmed through space until their tormentors gave up the chase and returned to their own affairs.

The hours that followed the loss of her offspring were filled with anguish for Suma. All night long she had lurked in the vicinity of the palm tree; but the frightful spines bristling from the trunk a distance of six inches effectively discouraged her from climbing to the rescue. Her loud demonstrations of rage and grief had given way to a strategy of watchfulness for the opportunity for revenge that must at some time, somehow, present itself, and then, woe to the audacious monkey that had dared incur her wrath. Her punishment should fit the crime.

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When the storm that had uprooted the trees forming the windfall cut its wide swath through the forest the ridge of interlocking trunks and branches formed a barrier that most of the ground-inhabiting animals could not cross; also, the broad, open space between the wall of trees on each side was impassable to those dwellers of the treetops lacking wings or too timid to descend from the security of their aerial homes. The monkeys belonged to the latter class.

Here and there, however, where the cut narrowed somewhat the spreading branches of the great trees met overhead forming bridges that were utilized on occasions by the kinkajous, monkeys and other animals in crossing from one section of the jungle to the other.

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The supply of fruits on the hill side of the windfall was becoming exhausted. There was no denying that fact, for the depredations of the toucans, trogons, tanagers and hosts of other birds that swarmed through the dripping branches were enough to strip even the most prolific of the fruit-bearers. Most destructive of all were the flocks of parrots; they wasted more than they ate. They plucked the choicest morsels, took one bite and dropped them or, snipping the stems with their shear-like mandibles permitted the nuts or berries to rattle down to the ground. Later, when there were no more to eat, let alone destroy, they complained with raucous screams as they were compelled to satisfy their hunger on leaves and buds.

Myla noted the coming shortage but remembered that lower down, near the river, the food supply always held out weeks after it had been exhausted in the foothills. And, all unconscious of the fact that the wrathful Suma was shadowing her every move, unconcernedly she made her way to the nearest bridge, a mile distant, and crossed to the land of plenty.

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All that afternoon she feasted, Warruk spurning the delicacies she offered him but growling savagely as she drew the young of a trogon out of its nest in the cavity of a termites' domicile which was plastered, like a huge knob, on one of the high branches. And, when night came, tired and drowsy from overeating she forgot her usual caution and made herself comfortable on the nearest thick limb that offered her sleeping quarters, and which was close to the juicy figs so that she could resume her gorge early the next morning.

Suma observed the foolish creature's action and unable to restrain her impatience started stealthily to climb up the tree. Inch by inch she clambered up the columnar trunk. Warruk whimpered and Myla cooed low and stroked his back to quiet him; then she peered up and down and to both sides before again settling herself for sleep while Suma's claws dug deeply into the bark as she clung in dread suspense lest the monkey should discover her.

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When all was quiet the Jaguar again resumed her upward journey while Myla slumbered on in blissful ignorance of the proximity of her deadly enemy.

As the gloom deepened numbers of the nocturnal feeders began to arrive. First of all came the kinkajous, beautiful creatures of the weasel family, with glossy brown fur and long, prehensile tails. In some respects they resembled monkeys. They were alert and active but silent as the very shadows.

The gray night monkeys put in their appearance soon after in a twittering, nervous band, snatched their food furtively, and departed without loss of time.

When the great curassows reached the spot it was with a rush of wings that startled all the other creatures to the point of panic. They were elegant birds, almost the size of turkeys, of a glossy, jet black color and having beautiful crests of curled feathers. As they ate, they flapped

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heavily from branch to branch and emitted low, groaning calls. Myla heard their coming and trembled as with an ague. It was not her first experience with the curassows but previously she had paid scant attention to them from the security of her perch in the spiny palm tree. Now it was a different matter. She was alone in a strange country and the uncanny noises all around her terrified her and made her flesh creep, and finally the nerve-racking commotion became unbearable. She arose and silently started back toward the bridge across the windfall.

Suma could not suppress a cough of disappointment and rage as the monkey slipped out of her reach. The one opportunity she had watched and waited for was gone. And, Warruk, hearing his mother's voice, replied with a wail of despair. As for Myla, the realization of her narrow escape had the same effect upon her that an exploding fire cracker would have produced. She cast caution to the winds and dashed away with a burst of speed that made the branches shake as if agitated by a heavy wind.

The Jaguar quickly slid to the ground and raced along underneath the fleeing monkey. As the latter neared the windfall Suma suddenly seemed to divine her intentions and sped on ahead, crossed the creeper-covered barrier and started up the tree the branches of which formed the far side of the aerial bridge. She had just time enough to crouch on the thick butt of a limb that overhung the passageway when the rustling of the leaves announced the arrival of Myla. A dark form emerged from the wall of trees opposite her and ran nimbly onto the swaying bridge. Suma waited with bated breath and blazing eyes as her claws crept out of their sheathes. Onward came the shadow-like figure, all unsuspecting of the vengeful fury that lay in wait; and when the monkey reached the border of her own country and, as she thought, safety, a lightning blow from a monstrous, claw-armed paw smote her from above and sent her hurtling to the cushion of creepers below.



Suma waited with bated breath and blazing eyes

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Suma followed her in a prodigious leap, unmindful of her own safety. And scarcely had Myla landed with a thud when the Jaguar was upon her—not to continue the assault but to rescue the whining Warruk who lay on the bed of leaves several feet away. She seized her cub by the nape of the neck, as a cat carries her kitten and without a moment's pause dashed away into the forest.

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As for Myla, the blow had stunned her; and when her senses slowly returned she wondered where she was and how she happened to be there. It came to her in a flash. A moment later she was painfully dragging herself up into the branches after which she slowly made her way back toward the foothills, glad to be rid of the surly Warruk and firmly resolved thereafter to pursue her own life in the treetops and to let the denizens of the lower world pursue theirs without interference from her.

Suma crossed the windfall a short distance from the scene of the encounter and headed toward the east. Throughout the greater part of that night she travelled, impelled by a mad desire to put as much distance as possible between herself and the region infested with the meddlesome monkeys. Also, a mysterious something in the air told her that the time for her journey to the lowlands had arrived. And, when at last the shrieking parrot flocks overhead and the dull, gray light in front of her, bravely struggling through the mist, foretold the coming of day she stopped and carefully deposited her burden on the leaves. There followed a minute inspection, much fondling and purring and other evidences of glad rejoicing over the reunion.

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Warruk was none the worse for his experience except that he had lost some of his plumpness; and he had developed such a strong dislike of monkeys that it boded ill for the members of that tribe in the future.

At last there came the day when the rising sun vanquished the sullen mists that had so persistently hugged the earth and all the world breathed in the glad fragrance of the morning and revelled in the light and warmth; and gave thanks for its deliverance from the clutches of Siluk, the Storm-God. For, the months of rain had been full of gloom; the days dark and cheerless, the nights chill and dreary beyond measure. The pulse of life ran high in anticipation

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of the joyous days to follow.

The birds, bubbling over with the sheer joy of living raised their voices in a swelling chorus and flashed their gorgeous colors as they hopped and flitted through the thick foliage bedecked with myriads of drops of water that scintillated like the rarest of gems. Their ranks had been augmented during the period of enforced seclusion and numbers of their young lacking the grace and brilliant hues of their elders viewed the new world with bright eyes as they learned the manifold lessons of life upon which their existence depended.

Monkeys howled with a tinge of cheerfulness in their hoarse voices; squirrels whisked their plume-like tails and barked at the swaying, sparkling leaves; tapirs wandered out into the open places; and the sinuous, scale-covered bodies of snakes glided from their hiding-places under the rotting leaves and prostrate tree-trunks and sought the splashes of sunlight for a reviving bask in the warm rays.

Amidst such scenes Suma led her cub through the region of forest growth, keeping with a fixed purpose to the direction that would take them to the vast open country where life and living were more worth while. They travelled in a leisurely manner either by day or by night, as suited their fancy and rested on a slanting tree-trunk if one was conveniently available and if not, at the foot of some giant of the jungle, or in the seclusion of a bamboo thicket.

Food was abundant although it required almost constant effort to secure enough to supply the two for the reason that only the smaller animals were stalked—for Warruk's benefit—so that he might become a successful hunter, learning his lessons step by step. But, when at last they reached the forest's end and the boundless reaches of papyrus marshes, pampas and tree islands lay before them Suma did not hesitate to slay whatever came within her reach. Warruk was always an interested spectator from some nearby point of concealment.

It was at the edge of one of the marshes that the cub saw his first deer. Suma had sensed his presence and stood tense and alert while the cub, a few feet in her wake, gazed at the fringe of swaying reeds in the tops of which black birds with red heads sat and trilled a cheery warble. Suddenly the stems parted and the head of a deer, crowned with wide-spreading antlers appeared framed in the mass of green. Warruk was fascinated by the sight of the magnificent animal which seemed to challenge them and expected his mother to hurl herself upon it and bring it down so that he could feel the joy of possessing it and of examining it at closer range. But Suma did nothing of the kind; she stood like an inanimate thing as the moments passed, knowing well that the deer's curiosity would cause it to draw nearer; that would be the time for the spring. But Warruk did not know this. He waited as long as he could and then bounded to his mother's side with an inquisitive whine. The spell was broken. The deer turned and vanished with a crackling of reeds and the splash of water; in a moment it was safe in the depths of the marsh. Suma knew better than to follow; she merely bestowed a look of disgust upon her young and moved away.

That very afternoon Warruk's very existence was threatened. His mother had penetrated into the papyrus a short distance the more fully to investigate a promising scent while he waited without. A spotted form, very like his mother but of much smaller size, darted from the reeds not ten yards away and stood eyeing him. Warruk did not like the other creature's looks and said so in a low growl, but instead of moving away it advanced a few steps and made an ugly grimace. How dared the impudent thing affect such boldness! The cub was accustomed to seeing much larger animals beat a hasty retreat upon the approach of himself and his mother and somehow he had gained the impression that he might be at least partly the cause of their temerity. But this stranger actually threatened him. In resentment he rushed blindly forward until the ocelot, for such it was, also charged and bowled him over with a swift stroke of its paw. He regained his feet with difficulty and screaming with pain and fright darted back towards the reeds. Suma heard the cry of distress and charged out of the dense cover with a snarl, but the ocelot had anticipated her coming and in a graceful leap to one side disappeared in the papyrus.

After that Warruk was content to leave the larger creatures to his mother; but the smaller ones such as the cavies and opossums he dealt with mercilessly and swiftly; in fact, Suma urged him to such a course and often watched from some nearby point of vantage while he conducted the stalk and launched the attack. Then she walked up to him and rewarded dexterity with deep purrs and penalized failure with cutting indifference or unmistakable chidings.

Life in the low country for the two wanderers was simply a succession of pleasant days and nights with just enough adventure to make it interesting. They never lingered long in one place and by gradual stages their journeying took them further and further away from the forested foothills and nearer to the great arteries that poured their waters into the system of the mighty Amazon.

Food became more abundant as the days passed and Warruk learned the lessons of life with Suma, his mother, and instinct, as instructors. As often as not, however, some particular bit of knowledge was acquired at personal risk; and this latter was accentuated by the fact that the cub showed a headstrong disposition to do things his own way, often impatient of his mother's more cautious maneuvering.

The great grass-covered areas were delightful places. In some of them the grass was ten feet tall and topped with white plumes that swayed and quivered in the wind. Here the bobolinks were sojourning—visitors from a far-off land who, after the wearying flight of thousands of miles over sea and land were spending the balmy days chattering and feeding on the abundant supply of seeds or, rising in swarms of thousands took short flights so that their wings might remain fit

for the long journey northward when the call should come to return. With them, the red-breasted meadowlarks of the pampas sang and frolicked as if constituting themselves a welcoming committee to the strangers during their annual visit. Their gaudy plumage contrasted strongly with the sombre, spotted attire of the bobolinks.

Suma paid no attention to the birds but Warruk, trailing her like a shadow, often paused to cast longing glances in their direction or to strike one down if it fluttered within reach.

A perfect network of trails and runways covered the grasslands, made by the cavies and other of the smaller animals that kept to the dense cover and used also by the predatory animals that preyed on them. There were large birds also among the denizens of this underworld; one, somewhat resembling a turkey in size and shape but of gray color with bright red legs, was encountered frequently. But it always disappeared so silently that it seemed more like a shadow until its clear gobbling call rang out a moment later from some distant spot to which it had fled. It was usually found where grasshoppers were abundant and the two hunters not infrequently followed its movements for the purpose of locating more easily the swarms of insects. Suma was not overfond of this small fry but Warruk caught and ate of them until his stomach refused to accept another mouthful.

One afternoon they made a discovery of more than ordinary moment. Flocks of rheas—ostrichlike birds—were common in the open country. They were so wary that the two had only infrequent glimpses of the long-legged, long-necked birds as they dashed away and faded into the horizon. To pursue them was out of the question and Suma knew it for they ran with the speed of the wind. But this afternoon they came upon one of the great creatures squatting on the ground, head and neck straight down, outstretched in a serpentine attitude; nor did it attempt to move until the hunters had approached to within a few yards. Then it ruffled up its feathers, raised its head and hissed and bellowed in a threatening manner; but Suma was not dismayed. She crouched, gave vent to one hoarse roar and then began to advance. The bird held her ground until the Jaguar was less than six feet away, then rose suddenly and charged. Suma well knew what to expect, nimbly stepped aside to avoid the kick that was aimed at her and struck a swift blow in return that sent a fluff of feathers into the air. That was enough for the bird; she kept on going without even turning to see if the big cat was in pursuit and soon disappeared in the tall grass.

Before them lay a heap of smooth, white objects, larger than Warruk's head and as he looked on enquiringly his mother planted one massive paw directly in the midst of the pile with a crash that sent up a shower of white and yellow spray. The cub eagerly lapped up the contents of the broken eggs each of which held in volume as much as a dozen of the hen.

As the weeks rolled on Warruk grew rapidly in size and strength and the restless disposition that went with his black color began to make itself felt. He became impatient of his mother's caution and strategy. Something within him urged him even at his tender age to assert himself, to proclaim his superiority and to strike out alone.

At first he was content merely to stray from Suma's side only to return at her summons or when the odds were against him. Self-reliance came to him bit by bit. He learned that mastery in the wilderness depended largely upon a game of bluff—especially when cornered, and on one occasion when a fox, far larger than he, advanced menacingly he charged straight at it with a deep snarl; the fox turned and ran away. So, emboldened by this encounter Warruk was not slow to make use of the new knowledge gained from experience and encouraged by instinct. He strayed further and further from Suma's protection and at last came the day when the two drifted so far apart that the beginning of a permanent separation had most assuredly arrived.

The cub was startled, at first, when his mother failed to respond promptly to his call. He realized all of a sudden that he was alone.

As for Suma, she too had foreseen the coming event but when it actually occurred she promptly went in search of her wayward offspring which she had no difficulty in finding. But the meeting was not as joyous as either had anticipated. They heard the call of personal interests urging them to go their own ways and to follow their own desires.

The separations became of longer duration—the pleasure of the reunions less and less. And, presently Suma lost all thought of Warruk as the time for choosing a mate drew near.

As for the cub—he was free; free as the wind that swept the wild wastes of land and water comprising the desolate pantanal country. And he reveled in his new liberty. The whole world lay before him and he was its ruler by right of heritage but—there were many among the wildfolk who were not willing to acknowledge his supremacy or to render him the respect he considered his due until he had proven his prowess. This fact was driven home the very first night after the parting of the ways had been reached.

Warruk was hungry. He hunted on the border of one of the forest islands that were so numerous. Not a sound escaped him as he trod on velvety feet, eyes, ears and nose on the alert for the faintest indication of anything that might satisfy his craving stomach. A full moon shone upon him but so stealthily did he move that keener eyes than those of man would have been required to detect his presence. Still, at least some one of the creatures concealed in the clump of trees had observed his approach and had given the alarm. For here was the fresh scent of a deer leading into the thick growth; also that of a drove of pigs; of agoutis singly and in pairs, and even of an armadillo, but the animals themselves remained hidden in the dense cover.

He circled the thick mass that loomed black against the star-flecked sky but saw not a living thing. This was trying for well he knew of the abundance so near, still out of reach. Furtive eyes,

no doubt, were following his every movement, their owners eager to pursue their own affairs the moment danger had passed.

Discouraged, Warruk sat down to rest. His eyes were turned toward the black wall of trees. A rustle, ever so faint, reached his ears and he crouched instantly.

Out of the darkness appeared a strange little creature, tripping along so daintily, so ethereally that the cub looked at it more in astonishment than with savage design. Onward it came across the moonlit strip of grassy plain and the soft light falling upon it revealed a plump body clothed in a coat of black fur with white stripes while above, like a silvery halo, waved a bushy, plume-like tail.

The stranger tripped merrily toward him, apparently unaware of his presence; then the cub's eyes began to glow in anticipation of capturing the prize. He crouched lower and drew back for the spring. Then a curious thing happened. The dainty little creature whisked around and puffed up to twice its former size. At the same time Warruk felt a fiery sting in his eyes; and, the odor of carrion was like a soothing incense compared to the stench that assailed his nostrils. He recoiled as if he had been struck a heavy blow. His eyes burned; his breath came in gasps; for a moment he was stunned. The first thing he thought of was his mother; but his call sounded hollow and unnatural and there was no response. He had been out-generaled, vanquished and insulted by a skunk, a creature but a fraction his size, and the realization of it hurt. His good opinion of himself fell, and he needed sympathy and encouragement as he had never needed them before. But they were not forthcoming. He was alone in the world and must fight his way or perish. In sheer distress he sat upright like the cat he was and proclaimed his woes to the moon in a series of lusty wails.

CHAPTER V

The Struggle for Existence

Warruk, the black cub was alone in the world, and a strange world it was, stretching on mile after mile into the hazy distance; seemingly there was no end.

The encounter with the skunk which had resulted in his ignominious rout brought home to him the fact that as yet he was not master of the wilderness. Far from it. He was but one of the hordes of creatures struggling for existence and the sooner he learned that caution and stealth led to success while bravado led to failure, the greater were his chances of survival and growth to the stage where he could fearlessly proclaim his mastery.

The struggle for existence was very real and very intense but not in the generally accepted sense of the word. It was not a competitive struggle between individuals of the same species, or even between members of different species. It was a fight to overcome obstacles; a battle against circumstances. There was food enough for all with sufficient to spare to supply the wants of untold numbers that did not exist; but, one of the problems was how to get it and the black cub was compelled to admit to himself that he was not an adept in reaching the solution.

Suma, his mother had taught him many things both practicable and useful. Others he knew from instinct, an inheritance from countless generations of his forebears. But as the days passed he more fully appreciated all that the knowledge of his mother had meant to him, especially when the voice in his stomach insistently demanded food that he was all but incapable of procuring. As a last resort, at such times, there were always the grasshoppers to fall back on even if he had lost his earlier liking for these insects. He had only to listen for the calling of the great, turkey-like *Chunha*, follow the gobble to its source and then gather up the winged but sluggish quarry until his hunger was satisfied, hoping, all the while that something better would turn up for the next meal.

There came the day, however, when the hosts of grasshoppers disappeared. They had lived their allotted span and had passed on. The cub was reduced to sore straits. The "crumbs" remaining from the feasts of foxes and wolves, heretofore passed in disdain were now eagerly pounced upon although they consisted mostly of bits of fur or feathers and fragments of bones.

Not once did his courage desert him in the face of adversity. This was demonstrated the day he first met the great ant-eater—a curious animal, black, with white stripes on its shoulders, and fully as large as Suma, his mother. The strange creature had a long, slender nose and a flat, bushy tail while its feet were armed with dagger-like claws six inches long. As it lumbered heavily over the ground it presented an interesting spectacle to Warruk, but not one to invite familiarity. At the same time he was not dismayed. He had not eaten for two days and here was the possibility of a feast.

The ant-eater and the cub discovered one another at about the same instant; but the former ignored the latter without a second thought feeling subconsciously that such an antagonist was not worthy of serious consideration. Warruk, however, felt differently about it. It was not necessary for him to attempt a surprise attack for the big, black bulk was waddling and swaying

right towards him. He had only to stand his ground and this he did. The realization that the stranger was indifferent to his presence added rage and a desire for revenge to his longing for food and he flew at him with a swiftness that took the larger creature completely unawares. Before the latter knew that anything out of the ordinary had happened the cub was on his back and with claws and teeth was digging frantically at neck and shoulders.

Warruk might as well have spared himself the exertion for the ant-eater's hide was as effective as armor-plate against such an assault. The great, shaggy animal shook himself vigorously in an attempt to dislodge the small assailant, but the cub clung tenaciously, growling, clawing and biting the while. Then the ant-eater reared himself straight upright and fanned the air with his murderously armed forefeet; his long, round tongue played out of his minute, toothless mouth like a snake's. Still the Jaguar retained his footing. The ant-eater then dropped on all fours, leisurely ambled to the nearest tree and, scraping his back on the low branches soon brushed the cub off when he started unconcernedly away. No sooner did Warruk regain his feet than he again sprang at his quarry, only to be again dislodged as before. A third time the performance was repeated but now the ant-eater lost his temper. When his tormentor struck the ground he charged him savagely, striking with wicked design and galloping back and forth after his nimble assailant until at last the cub was forced to take refuge in the tree where his pursuer did not bother to follow. Instead, the queer creature shuffled to a nearby ants' nest—one of a group of slender, brown monoliths fifteen feet high that dotted the grassy plain—and broke away a part of the base of the structure with his great claws. When the break in the wall of the insects' domicile admitted a flood of daylight into the heretofore darkened interior, the ants rushed out in a solid stream to investigate the cause of the disturbance; and the ant-eater's whip-like tongue promptly gathered them up by the thousands.

Warruk watched the proceedings from his perch in the tree. He could tell by the actions of the large creature that it was eating and at the reminder of food he became frantic. He scrambled hastily to the ground just as the big beast ambled away and lost no time in poking his head into the cavity in the ants' nest in the hope of finding some remnant of the other's meal. But, if he thrust his head into the opening hurriedly he withdrew it in still greater haste. He had indeed found remnants of the feast, just as he had hoped. A carpet of ants covered his nose and face, clinging with a vise-like grip, their poisonous mandibles buried deep in his tender skin. The pain they inflicted was so intense that he screamed, rolled over and over, and rubbed his face in the soft grass; then, in a fit of rage he raced after the ant-eater which had been responsible for this new calamity, had deliberately tricked him no doubt in return for the annoyance he had caused him.

He caught up with the shaggy brute just as it was climbing, clumsily, a thick tree on the outskirts of one of the forest islands. In a crotch of the tree was a mass of sticks several feet across, and numbers of small, green parrots were clambering nervously over its rough exterior while others fluttered about in excitement screeching at the top of their voices. The birds sensed the danger to their nest and were vainly trying to avert the inevitable.

The ant-eater paid no attention to their clamor; he calmly established himself comfortably on a nearby branch and tore away at the nest, sending a shower of sticks and rubbish rattling to the ground. Inside the structure were little hollows, each containing three or four round, white eggs. The latter were the treasures the ruthless creature sought and after crushing the shells it lapped up their contents with audible gusto.

Warruk could endure the scene no longer. His enemy, busily engaged in the pleasurable task of eating, might be easier to handle; or, at least he could inflict painful injury to his lower extremities. While up in the tree he might also be able to catch one of the panic-stricken parrots which were climbing and fluttering around the destroyer of their abode with frantic shrieks. He dashed up the trunk wildly bent on securing both food and revenge at the same time. Suddenly he stopped. A fiery sting pierced his back; another bored into his side; a third smote him on his tender nose; and then it felt as if red hot needles were being thrust into every square inch of his body. Dark specks flashed past his eyes and a vicious buzzing sound filled his ears. His claws relaxed their hold on the rough bark and he fell to the ground.

Luckily the hornets did not pursue or the episode might have had a fatal ending for the cub. However, such experiences were to be expected. They were a part of the education that fitted him for the battle of life. He had at last learned that, at least for the present, he was no match for the ant-eater. He possessed cunning, stealth, agility and intelligence. The other creature could boast of none of these things; but in their stead it had formidable as well as useful claws, and was covered with a leathery hide that rendered it immune to assaults that he could not hope to withstand. It was evident that their paths in life lay in diverse directions.

That very night, as he lay moaning in the grass, a foolish agouti hopped up to him inquisitively and paid with its life for the indiscretion. And after bolting the tender flesh of the victim the cub again viewed the world in a friendlier light. What if he was alone, surrounded by lurking dangers. Others had braved the pitfalls that awaited the weak and unfit and had conquered them; he should do likewise. Then, eventually, the day would come when he could assume his proper role, schooled by bitter experience to hold the all important position of master. But, that time was still some distance off. Until then he must tread with discretion; must use that stealth and caution that was his by heritage. Of what value were the instincts accumulated by his kind through the ages if he continued to ignore them? He *would* heed them in the future; and to reassure himself on that point he lay still as death when a spiteful ocelot came into view not a dozen paces away. So soon as this prowler on mischief bent, oblivious of his presence, had passed on, he sought the densest cover in the forest island and curled up for a much-needed

rest.

The first season of drought in the life of Warruk, the black cub, was drawing to a close. He felt the coming change just as surely as had Suma, his mother, one short year before while sunning herself on the rock in the river. The urge came from within and past experiences had taught the cub that not to heed the voice of his ancestors was to court trouble. 124

His wanderings had not taken him far into the low country; consequently he had not far to return to the forested region skirting the foothills. This was fortunate, for the rains swooped down upon the yearning world with a suddenness that was appalling.

Instead of the usual warning showers, water gushed in torrents from the sodden skies; and, during the brief intervals between the deluges the thunder of the flooded river replaced the steady, monotonous drone of the rain with its terrifying warning.

At nightfall, when the tropical day drew to its abrupt close, there was usually a lull in the tempest, as if the elements had hushed their ragings so that the cowering earth might view without distraction the terrible spectacle that unfolded itself.

An ominous calm made itself felt by its very intensity. The low, dark clouds in rafts scurried past at frantic speed; through rifts in the fleeing masses the higher layers were visible, hurrying in a different direction. The whole scene was a picture of wild confusion, and then—far on the horizon the cloud curtains were thrust aside for one brief moment. The sun, like a splash of blood, hovered waveringly over the rim of the black abyss and with a sudden plunge passed into oblivion. But, that short glimpse was enough. Siluk, the Storm-God, had plunged a knife into the heart of the heavens; no wonder the skies wept for months and months while the earth, wrapped in a dark pall of clinging mists also mourned, with streams and rivulets, like gushing tears, cutting deep furrows into its face. 125

Warruk knew nothing of all this. He simply felt the urge to leave the low country and by dint of hard travel managed to keep ahead of the encroaching water until he reached safety in the forested country.

The sight of the great trees, the chatter of the monkeys, and the smell of the rotting vegetation recalled a thousand memories. He was home again—home in the land of Suma and of plenty. And as the early mental pictures crowded into his brain he whined joyously and turned unerringly in the direction of the windfall. It was there the real home had been, in the cavity in the great cottonwood; he would seek its warmth and protection while the rain roared and the storm raged outside. 126

There it was at last, the high ridge of interlocking tree trunks and branches just as the storm had uprooted the forest giants years before. As time passed and the lower layers of the debris succumbed to the influences of decomposition, the mass settled, making the barrier more impassable than ever. The mantle of creepers covering it grew thicker and more even, smoothing the rough outlines and concealing the treacherous nature of the matter underneath.

Warruk hailed the familiar landmarks with delight. He raced along the edge of the windfall, his excitement growing as he neared his goal. Suddenly he stopped; almost directly overhead was the monkey-bridge where Myla, the monkey mother had crossed from and back to the hill country and at the far end of which Suma, his own mother had rescued him. He hastened past. And not long after he felt that he could not be far from the place of his birth. 127

Locating the exact spot presented some difficulties for he had never gone from the place in the normal way; the monkey was to blame for that. But before long his nose caught the scent of Suma and following it he warily picked his way over the tangled ridge straight to the entrance to the cavity in the cottonwood.

He stood in awe at the portal, undecided as to just what to do, for, in the opening hung the gauze-like curtain that obstructed his view of the interior. As he gazed at the veil he detected motion; then it dissolved itself into sections that moved independently of one another. Finally he could make out individual specks that whirled and danced with faintly buzzing wings and long, thread-like, dangling legs. The craneflies were keeping their yearly vigil, veiling the inner chamber from the profane glances of the outer world. 128

An instant later a monstrous form charged out of the darkened interior scattering the madly gyrating insects like chaff before a wind. It was Suma, the Jaguar, but she acknowledged no relationship between herself and Warruk, her cub of last year. In him she saw only an intruder in her abode and a possible source of danger to her new little one reposing in the seclusion of the cavity.

Warruk evaded the charge in a nimble spring to one side and, surprised and bewildered by the reception accorded him, dashed away—not in the direction whence he had come but straight over the top of the windfall. Ignorant of the pitfalls concealed by the mantel of creepers he hurried on his course, only to break through the thin veneer and plunge headlong into a black abyss; then he realized the treacherous nature of his footing.

Catlike, he landed on his feet five yards below in the center of a great, hollow stub; and, cat-like, he almost immediately began to climb the circular wall that surrounded the damp, evil-smelling hole into which he had fallen. But the wood was decayed; it was so soft and spongy it would not support his weight. As fast as his claws dug into the sides of the stub flakes broke off so that he could not draw his body off the ground. He tried again and again; but always the result was the same. Warruk was a prisoner in a gloomy cavity and while his prison walls were decayed and crumbling they prevented him from climbing to safety as effectively as if they had been made of 129

the hardest of steel.

After numerous futile attempts the cub lay down panting, to rest. Suddenly he became aware of the fact that he was not the only occupant of the trap-like enclosure. A pair of beady eyes were silently regarding him from a crevice between two great roots. The eyes were sinister eyes, set too closely together to belong to an animal of any size unless— With a shudder of terror the cub leapt to the farthest side of the prison, for the eyes were stealthily advancing, followed by a thick, sinuous body that seemed to flow from its hiding place. The newcomer was a great serpent.

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Warruk felt an instinctive dread of the terrible creature that was so silently approaching. The unblinking eyes transfixed him—held him spell-bound. He had experienced nothing like it during the short year of his life. Trembling, he drew himself back against the wall of rotten wood as far as possible. The snake stopped and from its mouth came a hiss that sounded like a jet of escaping steam and lasted fully half a minute. Still the eyes came no nearer but motion was discernible in the darkened corner from which the reptile had appeared. The boa constrictor, for such it was, was noiselessly drawing foot after foot of its thick body into the chamber in preparation for a quick lunge at its victim. In a flash the scale-covered coils would be thrown about the cub, crushing him into pulp.

Warruk shot forward as if hurled from a catapult—not at the snake, but over its head, soaring above it a distance of fully two feet. He struck the side of the circular prison with a thud, rebounded instantly and landed on the neck of the great serpent before it could turn to follow his movements. The strategy had been successful. Writhe and shake itself as it would, the reptile could not dislodge the jaguar; nor was it possible to entwine him with the coils that groped and threshed about in vain for an effective hold, so closely did he cling. His claws were buried deep in the snake's flesh while his teeth had closed like the jaws of a trap upon the slender neck just below the head.

131

Seconds passed slowly and minutes, seeming more like hours, dragged by while the death struggle continued. Warruk knew that to lose his foothold meant a speedy end for him; his claws dug deeper through the tough hide and his jaws drew together with the slow, irresistible force of a vise. At last it came, a dull, faint report. The great reptile's head fell forward and the body lashed frantically; the spinal column had been severed and that marked the beginning of the end.

132

A half hour later the long black and yellow body had writhed its last and lay in a limp, knotted heap in one side of the prison. The cub was crouched as far away as possible from the mound of shimmering flesh and not for an instant did he remove his eyes from it. It was as if he half expected the snake to come back to life to renew the combat.

When night came Warruk resumed his restless pacing around the wall of his confining cell. The dead serpent did not trouble him now but he was careful not to tread upon it as he made his rounds.

The air in the hollow stub was anything but invigorating. It was heavy with the stench of decaying vegetation, and damp. It was not unnatural, therefore, that the cub should stop to sniff enquiringly at a thin stream of fresh air that gushed from somewhere near the floor and rushed up the chimney-like stub. That phenomenon was worth investigating for the air must enter through a passage communicating with the outer world; and the cub was not long in finding it.

133

An opening near the base of the stub, caused by the rending of the side when one of the giant trees crashed against it during the storm that razed the windfall through the jungle and piled up the wreckage to form the ridge, was located at last. It was through this that the snake had entered and the latter part of its body still clogged, at least partially, the passage.

Warruk dragged in the remainder of the snake and breathed deeply the fresh air and thrust first one forepaw and then the other into the crevice which was too narrow to permit the passage of his bulky head and body. His sharp claws caught in the edges of the break; the decayed wood crumbled away. Encouraged, he began to claw at the sides of the aperture, his excitement increasing until he was tearing at it frantically with no other thought than to escape from the trap into which he had fallen.

134

Daylight had come, however, before the opening had been increased to twice its original size and turning his head sideways the prisoner forced it through. His shoulders followed easily but when he attempted to draw the remainder of his body through, the hole seemed too narrow, holding him fast. After one or two tugs forward he tried to back out but going in that direction too was impossible. This indeed was an unusual and unenviable predicament, his forward half in the outer world which meant freedom, the other in the dark hollow of the stub where the serpent lay.

Just then a flock of wood-hewers, large, brown birds with strong, curved beaks, that hopped up and around the stems and branches like woodpeckers saw the young jaguar. They had been rummaging among the tangle of decaying wood, feasting on the superabundant grubs and larvæ. But no sooner did they notice the prisoner than all thought of food vanished. Like the jays, they never failed to take advantage of an opportunity to tantalize some other creature, especially if they found the latter under distressing circumstances.

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They darted at Warruk, flitted back and forth, hopped nimbly along the branches and raised their voices in low *churrs* or louder agonized wails. The cub was nonplussed and stared at the birds, at first blankly, then angrily; but they grew constantly more impertinent, even making daring sallies at his face as if to peck out his eyes.

One of the tormenters, unobserved by the captive, stole over the rim of the stub to investigate things in the gloomy interior and, while its brethren were busy outside found an undisputed field for activity in the cavity. Swooping low it dug its sharp, strong beak into Warruk's back just above the root of the tail.

The effect on the prisoner was magical. For all he knew the great snake had come to life again and was attacking him from the rear. With a mighty wrench he turned on his side and slipped through the opening to freedom.

136

All through the weeks of rain that followed Warruk hunted along the border of the windfall; but he did not again venture near the region where Suma, his mother held sway. He saw nothing of her. It was not until long, long after that their lives again intertwined when Suma unwittingly assumed the role of avenger and thus fulfilled an old belief of the wild men of the forest. So far Warruk knew nothing of man—did not even suspect the existence of such a creature. Blessed ignorance! for with the coming of that knowledge the lives of all the inhabitants of the wilderness undergo a change.

Food was so plentiful that on no occasion did the cub go hungry. And nurtured by the great abundance he grew in size and fearlessness even as the vegetation overhead and underfoot thrived in the soggy earth and moisture-laden air.

When the rains stopped, as they finally did, Warruk instinctively headed back toward the low country. After the long weeks in the rain-drenched forest the prospect of the pampas flooded with golden sunlight, of reedy marshes where the birds twittered and animals worthy of his prowess moved shadow-like in and out of the fringe of papyrus, and of tree islands with their ever-present air of mystery and adventure, was a joyous one to contemplate.

137

On the last day but one before the jungle's end was reached Warruk came upon the vanguard of the peccary herd. There were several hundreds of the ferocious little beasts scattered over a wide area uprooting the succulent sprouts that grew luxuriantly among the undergrowth.

The cub did not suspect that the band was so large, for there was no indication of its great number. The individuals ate quietly and moved stealthily. There was but an occasional low, moaning grunt given as a signal to keep the herd headed in the right direction, and the champing of the murderous tusks of the leaders.

Selecting the straggler nearest him the jaguar rushed upon it and in a short leap landed upon his victim's back. The peccary was doomed, but before the end came it had ample time to voice its terror in shrill screams that penetrated through the forest with an appalling clearness. Instantly the place was in an uproar. A hundred throats took up the cry and dark forms dashed into view from all directions surging in a solid mass to the assistance of their stricken fellow.

138

Warruk saw the avalanche of infuriated creatures sweeping toward him. In a moment he would be buried in the deluge of cloven hoofs and flashing tusks and torn to shreds. There was only one thing to do, so he leapt lightly to the trunk of the nearest tree and drew himself into the lower branches.

Before long the tree was surrounded by the enraged mob, rearing and plunging and vainly trying to climb in pursuit of its assailant. At the same time the animals squealed and grunted their hatred and threatened with gnashing teeth.

The siege lasted throughout the day; nor was it raised at nightfall. So far as Warruk was concerned, he crouched comfortably on the thick limb and interestedly observed the proceedings below, rather enjoying the impotent manifestations of the peccary herd; that is, he felt no misgivings so long as daylight lasted for the sun shone brightly and it was warm. But with darkness came a brisk wind that lashed the treetops into a madly waving, groaning tangle of spectral branches and brought a cold shudder to the besieged. There was no rain but the air was heavy with moisture from the saturated mould underneath and the chill penetrated to the very bones.

139

Warruk shivered. The cat tribe may endure neither excessive cold nor moisture and here was a combination of the two. The cub was rapidly growing numb and it was not long before that fact made itself felt. Should his strength fail him he would be unable to retain his hold on the elevated perch and would plunge down into the midst of the merciless horde that awaited him.

He arose, stretched his limbs and peered down; the frantic host was still there in full number. Then he began pacing back and forth on the branch. The exercise restored the sluggish circulation of his blood and he felt he had a new lease on life. Ten feet above his head was a thicker though shorter limb; he clambered up the trunk to it but the moment one paw touched the new footing it gave way, struck other branches in its downward course and fell to the ground a good fifty feet from the base of the tree. When it landed with a crash, stunning several of the peccaries and injuring others which immediately announced the fact in loud screams, the remainder of the herd rushed to the spot and in a moment was converted into a struggling, frantic mass. The animals were crazed with excitement and bent on but one thing—the destruction of their enemy which supposedly had fallen into their clutches.

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That was Warruk's one chance, provided by his timely though unintentional loosening of the decayed branch. He slid quickly down the side of the trunk opposite the struggling mass of animals and darted away.

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The ensuing months of sunshine and balmy weather were passing all too quickly in a succession of glorious days and starlit nights. Everywhere, in grassy pampa, forest island, reedy marsh and

in the streams and lagoons, life teemed and the creatures were filled with the joyousness of living. Everyone was happy. What did it matter if myriads were doomed to die in the course of each twenty-four hours to provide food for the others? Was not it the plan of Nature that it should be so, from the very beginning? When an individual of any species lost its life there were others left to carry on the purpose of the kind and the survivors took no note of the fact that one of their number had vanished. There was no trace of dread or tragedy in the demeanor of any creature. Each unconsciously took his chance in the game of life just as civilized man takes his in multitudinous ways. If a bird narrowly escaped the talons of a hawk, even losing a fluff of feathers in the encounter, it did not remain indefinitely in dense cover, in fear and trembling; it soon forgot the experience and went about its affairs in the usual way, just as a man who barely escapes being struck by an automobile while crossing the street will not hesitate to again run the same risk at the very next corner. That is exactly as Nature intended it should be for, if either man or beast spent the time brooding over the many things that *could* happen, life would be a perpetual torment and probably of short duration.

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Warruk, the black Jaguar, lived with a measure of joyousness that was brimming over. He was thrilled with the vastness of his world and with the possibilities that arose each day. There were adventures and misadventures and he relished both, for each added to the sum total of the things he should know.

As the dry season advanced the water in the lagoons fell rapidly and some of the smaller ones dried up completely. Those of larger size shrank to narrow proportions, the water receding gradually under the onslaughts of the sunshine and drying wind.

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The pools that lay in the center of the wide, sun-baked mudflats were the mecca of a host of things. They teemed with imprisoned fish. Ducks and other waterfowl swarmed to them. Jacanas, birds with wide-spreading toes, ran nimbly over the lily pads on the surface, seemingly skating across the water itself. And, crocodiles migrated from a distance to these havens of security and plenty.

There was no choice. The animals of the plains and forests that required water to sustain life were compelled to seek out the remaining pools to quench their thirst. Some of them came only at lengthy intervals. Others came not at all, for apparently they could subsist through the entire period of drouth without drinking. But the vast majority were forced to visit the lagoons frequently or perish.

And as it was, not a few of them lost their lives in the midst of plenty. The sun, however, shone just as brightly as if there were no note of tragedy; parrots screamed as usual; blackbirds trilled, frogs croaked and bellowed, and the turtles laid their eggs in the hot sand. In other words, the procession of life moved on without taking note of those that dropped out along the way. It was neither more nor less than the enactment of an old, old drama.

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Warruk drank after each kill. Sometimes that was daily; more often two or three days elapsed between gorges. But, the feast completed, he was always seized with a burning thirst and to quench it he was forced to visit the lagoons as occasion required.

By this time his mastery of the pantenal country was pretty well established. And when his supremacy was disputed it was invariably by some inhabitant of the denser growth where the advantage lay with the other creature. In the open country there was no need for apprehension. So far as the water was concerned he did not even surmise that possible danger might lurk in the stagnant depths.

The cub had eaten heavily of venison, having surprised a fawn in the tall grass while its mother had gone to the nearest water-hole, a full two miles away, to drink. And later, to quench his own thirst, he leisurely made his way to the margin of the river, further on, for the murky water of the lagoon was not to his liking.

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A wide trail led to the edge of the stream, cut deep by the hoofs of tapirs, peccaries and other animals. Below, the water eddied lazily, as in a deep pool, before swirling away hurriedly further down.

After a casual survey of his surroundings the Jaguar stooped and began lapping up the warm but satisfying liquid. Something flashed dark beneath his nose and he drew back with a start; the action, sudden and violent, mired his forefeet deeply in the soft mud. Before he could recover his balance the long snout of a crocodile was thrust above the surface; the jaws opened, revealing rows of gleaming, peg-like teeth, and they closed again almost instantly with Warruk's left paw in their clasp.

The cub was no match for the great, powerful reptile, and before he could even attempt to offer resistance he had been dragged beneath the surface. The sudden plunge bewildered him, but only for an instant. Then he began struggling, frantically, the three free feet, with claws unsheathed groping blindly for a foothold. At first they encountered nothing but the unresisting water; and then one hindfoot grazed the crocodile's back, but the tough hide turned the sharp claws aside. The fact that there *was* a footing somewhere within reach changed despair to hope. If he could but obtain a firm hold to brace his body there might be the possibility of resisting his assailant which was rapidly backing further and further from the bank. Again his feet groped blindly in the darkness; again they encountered something besides the swirling water but this time the claws held fast then sank deeper as he pushed with all his might, slid slowly downward and once more were free.

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Warruk had not the strength left to make another effort. There was no need for it for his claws had rent into ribbons the less tough hide of the crocodile's throat.

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Painful though this injury must have been it was not enough to deter the villainous reptile from its purpose. On the contrary, it seemed to increase its speed. Other marauders, however, had been attracted to the scene of the combat, first by the struggle that they sensed from a distance and now by the blood that flowed freely from the lacerated throat of the crocodile. They were no other than the *piranhas* or cannibal fish. In legion they came until the water seemed packed with a solid mass of the ravenous creatures, crazed by the taste of blood and struggling so frantically to reach the source from which it came that they forced one another above the surface of the water.

Those nearest the crocodile ripped and cut at the wound with their triangular, razor-sharp teeth. And the great saurian soon understood that it was doomed unless it immediately sought refuge on the land where the fish could not follow. It rose to the surface and with powerful strokes of its feet and tail made for the bank.

But the frenzied horde was all about it, enveloping it as in a heavy cloak that dragged steadily downward. And all of the time there was the merciless tearing and slashing of keen-edged teeth attacking from all sides and in unbroken files. It was over in an incredibly short time—a few minutes at most. With its head nearly severed from its body the crocodile rolled on its side and sank slowly to the bottom.

As for Warruk, the vise-like jaws had opened at the first onslaught of the *piranhas* to snap at its assailants in frantic efforts at defense and retaliation; and thus freed, he rose to the surface and succeeded in swimming to the land with scarcely enough strength remaining to draw himself up. Luckily the fish did not attack him; they centered all their energy on the crocodile because the great gashes inflicted by his sharp claws rendered the heretofore invulnerable reptile an easy victim; for, once the tough hide had been penetrated the opening could be enlarged without trouble.

For a long time the cub lay as in a stupor. In fact, not until darkness fell did he arouse himself sufficiently to rise unsteadily to his feet and to limp away from the bank of the treacherous river.

CHAPTER VI

The Cruelty of Tumwah.

It was the seventh year since the great drought. Choflo, headman, sorcerer and oracle of the Cantanas, scanned the brassy sky and smote his breast with clenched fists.

"Tumwah is angry," he muttered to the members of the tribe who were huddled in a cowering group several paces to his rear. "The heavens tell me so; the curling leaves whisper the sickening message. Yesterday I saw the nest of a partridge; where there should have been four eggs there were six, for in this manner the knowing bird provides against the coming destruction, hoping that of the larger brood some one will survive. Five of her young may die but one will remain to carry on her species."

"And today," Oomah, youngest but most fearless of the hunters panted, "I pursued a she-pig in the forest. Three young were running at her heels instead of two."

"The signs do not lie," Choflo returned. "Look! See how the sand in the islands and on the riverbank is cracking! Tumwah is angry. Soon his fiery breath will sweep the green earth, parching the vegetation, searing our flesh and leaving death and destruction in its wake. Long days of suffering are coming."

No one spoke. But the Indians looked heavenward with terror in their eyes and trembled more violently than before.

"We must try to ward off the catastrophe; and failing in that, we must prepare for the worst. Let the corrals be well stocked with turtles and fill the calabashes with the oil of their eggs. A sacrifice must be made to Tumwah. Tonight, a crocodile shall be killed and eaten in his honor. Everyone must partake of it. And if the God of Drought be pleased with the offering a sign from heaven will show itself. If it displeases him—woe to all living things that walk the earth."

The group dissolved itself. The people silently went to their shelters of palm-leaves dotting the sandbar that extended far out into the river.

Warruk, the Jaguar, was no longer a cub. Four seasons of rain had come and gone since his advent into the world in the hollow cottonwood in the windfall. The erstwhile kitten, playing in the entrance to the cavity that had proved an irresistible attraction to Myla, the monkey, and to her sorrow, had grown into a creature of great size and powerful build, capable of more than holding his own with any other denizen of the jungle. Seen from a distance his coat was of a glossy, jet black color; but a close inspection would have revealed a regular pattern of rosettes similar to that marking the coats of his tawny brethren. The spots were very faint, however, like the watermarks on paper.

In the forest he reigned supreme, fearing nothing but feared by all; the same was true in the pantenales. Where the interlocking branches of the trees formed a canopy that shut out the moonlight he moved like a specter in the blackness. In the open country his shadowy form was equally inconspicuous. Quick and terrible were his attacks. Like an avalanche he descended upon his victims, seemingly from nowhere, but with a violence and ferocity that bore down and crushed and rent all at the same time, and with a suddenness that prevented escape or resistance.

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So far Warruk had not ventured into the lower regions of the pantenal country—that vast world of marshlands, swampy forest islands and pampas bordering the great river compared to which the streams he had been accustomed to frequent in the upper reaches were but rippling brooks.

Suma, his mother, had warned him against the region below her own well-defined hunting grounds. Once, exactly seven years before, while the world writhed and baked in the throes of the last great drought she had been compelled to venture into the unknown land. The streams and lagoons had dried; those of the animals that did not perish outright migrated, and Suma had followed the living stream as a matter of self-preservation for, without food and water, life could not be sustained. But the venture had proved painful in at least one respect for men dwelt along the border of the master river, and in the very first encounter with them Suma had suffered the loss of one ear—neatly shorn from her head by the broad, bamboo blade of a Cantana arrow. She was glad to escape even with such sacrifice; but she never forgot the injury. The haunts of the man-creatures were avoided thereafter, as well as their trails and everything else that savored of them. This dread she had tried to impart to her offspring.

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In the height of his powers, Warruk was ready to ignore the warning. Then, too, the sun now shone with an unusual brilliancy; fiery tongues from the sky seemed to lap up the water in the lakes and marshes, leaving nothing but vast areas of cracked and peeling mudflats sprinkled with brown, withered reeds that were a pitiful reminder of the waving expanses of green where the red-headed blackbirds had trilled their cheery song.

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The drying-up process was gradual, yet swift. The crocodiles sensed its coming and buried themselves deep in the mud to aestivate until the coming of the rainy season; also the lung-fishes, queer little creatures resembling tadpoles, which could live week after week under the hard crust with only a pinhole in the surface through which to breathe.

As the water receded, the finny tribe proper imprisoned in the landlocked bodies became more and more crowded. They struggled in frantic masses, churning up the mud from the bottom so that the liquid in which they swam was thick and black. The smaller ones attacked one another savagely tearing at fin and tail; and the larger devoured their mutilated remains in the mad struggle to prolong life. But there came the day of complete annihilation when there was not water enough left to support the survivors; they slid feebly through the mire, threw themselves clear of it onto the sun-baked mudflats surrounding it, and then died.

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The hordes that perished were numberless. And the stench of the decaying masses that dotted the country for hundreds upon hundreds of miles hung over the pantenales like a pall.

Tumwah was indeed angry! His fiery breath had indeed swept the green earth, parching and devastating it. And Warruk, even if the urge to explore and to conquer new fields were not impelling him, fled the scenes of desolation and guided by instinct made for the broad river where food and water must be abundant.

Both by day and by night he travelled, stopping for a short rest only during the early morning hours. Nor was he alone. Others of the larger creatures, terrified, hungry and thirsty were heading in the same direction, and of them he took a heavy toll.

The first sight of green trees fringing the horizon beyond the seemingly endless expanse of brown came as a blessed relief. Upon reaching it, Warruk found it a veritable oasis in the desert. The vanguard of the unusual migration had already reached the spot and it teemed with life.

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The forest island covered many acres. There were deep, black pools in the unbroken shade; stealthy deer, tapirs, peccaries, and agoutis moved like shadows among the columnar trunks. A stream led from it into the distance that appeared greener and still more cheerful. Overhead, in the gnarled branches and leafy boughs were scores of snowy birds, egrets that had chosen the place for a nesting site. Some of them squatted on frail stick platforms; others sat motionless on the tips of the branches. Steady streams were coming and going constantly, resembling giant snowflakes that glistened and twinkled as the white wings fanned the air.

Warruk looked at them longingly for, to him a bird was a bird, and he remembered the tender partridges of more bountiful days. However, there were other creatures to supply his fare and for a week he revelled in the abundance.

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Then the desire to push further and further into the unknown again came with an overwhelming insistency and he turned his face eastward where the grass was greener and low clouds hung like garlands of red and gold upon the horizon.

The stream of birds from the rookery was flying in the same direction. Soon he discovered its goal—a marsh of considerable extent which was the feeding-ground. Numbers of the long-legged egrets were wading in the shallow water, stopping now and then to dart their long, sharp bills into the throngs of fish dashing about their feet. Others stood motionless on the margin, like statuettes hewn out of purest marble; though seemingly dozing, they were very much on the alert as Warruk discovered when he tried to stalk one of them. He could never approach closer

than a dozen good paces before the bird flapped away to the other side of the marsh, so after repeated trials he gave up the attempt and continued his journey.

The country beyond the marsh grew constantly greener and of a more cheerful character and the air of mystery surrounding the unknown deepened as he ventured further from the oasis. But life was not so abundant and the animals living under conditions varying little from the normal were more wary. So, after a few days of wandering and exploration Warruk returned to the spot so densely populated by the creatures that had fled before the drought. They were there still; in fact, many newcomers had been added to their number. As before, they moved noiselessly in the deep shadows and drank of the black water in the silent pools. But something about the place had changed. It differed in some respect from the haven of a few days before. Warruk sensed the change but at first could not discover what it was further than to note an offensive odor that penetrated into even the most hidden recesses. He sniffed the air in all directions; the stench came from overhead.

It was then he noted that the white birds that had made the treetops their home were no more. Also the lines of twinkling wings linking the nesting site with the marsh in which they fed were lacking. The place seemed strangely deserted and unnatural without their hoarse croaks and flashing bodies among the green leaves.

However, newcomers to the locality had taken their place. Huge, black birds circled over the forest island. Gaunt, dusky forms sat ghoulish on the stick platforms that had been nests filled with impatient, squealing young birds, or flapped heavily and clumsily through the branches.

The oasis, now reeking of desolation far more than did the upper country when Tumwah descended upon it, had been deprived of its attractiveness and Warruk lost no time in leaving it. He followed the little watercourse straight to the marsh. And there new experiences awaited him.

The borders of the reed-dotted water were flecked with white. That much he saw from a distance. Of course it was the egrets and their presence here explained their absence in the treetops. But, why were they all so motionless? Before, he had been unable to approach to within a dozen paces of them! Now, not one stirred although he was less than half that distance away and the slight wind that blew ruffled their feathers in a most peculiar manner. He drew still nearer. Then it dawned upon him that they were dead. Rafts of fish, also dead, floating on the surface of the water dotted the edges of the marsh. And, strangest of all, queer footprints were visible in the mud. They were unlike any Warruk had ever seen—long, broad, and giving off a strange scent. He sniffed the tracks and followed them entirely around the marsh to the river. There they disappeared at the water's edge.

For once the Jaguar broke his rule not to eat anything he had not killed. The birds for which he had longed were irresistible so, cat-like, he picked one up in his mouth, carried it away a short distance, and then, finding it not too rank, ate it. After that he started to get another one. Like the one he had just eaten, the bird had been mutilated by some ruthless hand; a part of its back had been torn away. Warruk started off with the prize in his mouth but before he had taken many steps a strange feeling came over him. A shudder passed over his powerful frame and he became violently ill. He dropped the bird he was carrying and rushing to the stream drank greedily, for a burning thirst had now taken possession of him; and then followed nausea so violent that it left him all but lifeless.

How many hours he lay on the bank of the stream, too sick to move, none can tell; but it was many. Again and again he regained his senses long enough to lap up water in great gulps and that always seemed, at least partially, to quench the fire that was consuming him within. When a measure of relief finally came he crawled weakly from the neighborhood, determined never to visit it again.

In some manner Warruk connected his predicament with the new tracks in the mud and the strange scent they conveyed. And he was right, for the first time in his life he had come upon the trail of man, and upon man's handiwork in all its most pitiless destructiveness.

What had happened was this: A party of plume hunters had discovered the feeding-ground of the egrets; had gathered up great quantities of the imprisoned fish and after poisoning them had redistributed them over the surface of the water. The birds ate and died. Then the men returned, stripped the plumes from their luckless victims and departed in their canoes. The young in the platform nests in the forest island called in vain for their elders and for the food they brought, at first lustily, then feebly until they starved to death. Then the vultures came, making a loathsome feast on the bodies of the little creatures that had perished so miserably. The work of extermination was complete.

Warruk advanced slowly and cautiously for now he knew that in the strange country danger lurked—danger of a kind unknown to him and of a subtle quality. If the creatures whose footprints he had seen and with whose scent the border of the marsh was redolent could outwit the wary birds that had always eluded him, what surprise might not they hold in store for him?

But, there was that insistent urge that bade him advance. And, too, Tumwah was stretching his devastating hand toward the lower country. The animals that had found a temporary refuge in the oasis were moving onward also, for the water in the pools was vanishing and the vegetation began to droop. Day by day the sun's rays grew more intense until it seemed they must set the world afire.

Two weeks later Warruk reached the margin of the great river that wound its sluggish way through a strip of forested country hugging its banks. But, mighty stream though it was, it had

not been spared the wrath of Tumwah's onslaught. Where ordinarily a wide expanse of water greeted the eye, stretching in a ruffled, brown sheet to the dimly outlined fringe of palms on the distant bank, there was now a series of sun-baked sandbars several miles wide and many, many miles long. The river, still of imposing width, flowed through a channel in the center of the sandy wastes but bore little resemblance to its former awe-inspiring grandeur.

Flocks of gulls and skimmers flew shrieking and wheeling in masses overhead or ran excitedly over the sand. Crocodiles, too, were in evidence, for here there were water and food so there was not the need to bury themselves in the mud and in a semi-conscious condition await the coming of a friendlier season, as did their fellows in the inland country.

It was indeed a new and strange world veiled with an impenetrable air of mystery and romance.

At night the stars glimmered with an uncanny brightness. The vast sandbanks, heretofore peopled only by the shrieking birds and rows of crocodiles, assumed a different and even more animated appearance. For, with nightfall turtles in legion forsook their abode on the muddy river-bottom and sought the hot sand to lay their eggs. The shuffle of their feet and the scraping of their heavy shells was audible some distance away in a muffled conglomeration of sounds. They moved rather rapidly for such cumbersome creatures and made quickly for the highest points in the sandy wastes where with much effort a hole was scooped and the eggs deposited; then the excavation was neatly filled. The turtles hurried back to the water to remain in the depths of the muddy river until the following year.

Warruk looked in amazement at the seething mass of life.

"*Ca-urgh, ca-urgh, ca-urgh, urgh, urgh, urgh,*" a gruff, coughing roar pierced the still night air from near the deep channel and Warruk's muscles tensed as he listened to the sound. It was the voice of one of his kind. An instant later his own voice rang loud and sharp in answer to the challenge and he started across the crumbling sand toward the water. In the distance a dark form loomed up, motionless as a statue and Warruk too stopped the moment he beheld the stranger. Then the latter raised his head skyward and again the roar, savage, spiteful and bespeaking rage shattered the air. What right had this newcomer to intrude on his hunting-ground?

Warruk noted the smaller size of the resentful one; also that his coat was, of course, spotted. He listened patiently until the roar had ended. Then, with a mighty bellow he strode slowly toward his challenger.

The latter stood his ground for a moment. But suddenly he perceived the color of the intruder and that one look was all that was required. Without taking a second he dashed to the river, plunged into the water and swam for the other side. Members of his tribe, of his own spotted color he feared not and was ready to battle with at any time. But, when the apparition of a *black* individual appeared he retreated frantically, relinquishing his choice feeding-ground without a show of resentment or any desire to question the newcomer's status.

So it had been always. The other jaguars shunned Warruk because they feared him. And being thus made an outcast intensified the black one's naturally savage and truculent disposition.

Warruk hurled a bellow of ridicule after the fugitive and then turned his attention to the food bedecking the sand.

One blow on the head was sufficient to end the earthly career of the largest turtle but the bony armor encasing the body was not so easy to dispose of; it required a number of powerful strokes of the great, armed paws to crush the plates or break them apart and thus make accessible the flesh within.

Those nights on the sandflats flanking the great silent river were full of alluring enchantments. Never had the moon shed such velvety, silvery light; never had the stars flashed with such supernatural brightness; nor had meteorites drawn such lines of fiery brilliance across the heavens.

The days were hot. In fact, the sun seemed to dart out tongues of fire that threatened to lap up all the water in the mighty river. But, throughout the night a gentle breeze stirred near the border of the stream reviving the life that gathered at the haven of refuge and plenty.

Warruk was now master of all. He strode across the sandy wastes with majestic steps and swaying head. None questioned his position or disputed his way. And when, as sometimes happened, a challenging cry rang out across the water from some distant inlet and his own hoarse voice was raised in answer to the roar, it was never repeated. News travels fast in the wilderness, and in a mysterious way. And his presence was known far and wide and he was avoided accordingly. So he went his way, feasting on the turtles and their eggs which he soon learned to dig out of their hiding places, and on the fish that came up into the shallow water to spawn and which were so easy to catch.

Then, one night the great thrill of his life came. Far, far down the river Warruk saw a light. Was it possible that one of the stars had fallen from overhead to take up its abode on the earth? Had one of the streamers of fire that criss-crossed the sky landed on the sand to flicker out its life?

No! The stars above flashed as insolently as ever and their piercing shafts of light were of a steel-blue color; the meteorites still streaked their orange-red trails across the curtain of black. But this light in the distance, growing constantly brighter, was a deep red. It was different from anything he had ever seen. It seemed to beckon to him and for many minutes he stood gazing at it, trying to fathom its meaning.

If Warruk had only known! The bright light might be said to represent his own star at its zenith. He had reached the parting of the ways. In the height of his development and powers he could either maintain his supremacy of the wilderness for years to come or risk everything in battle with creatures of superior intelligence who possessed a high degree of cunning, who fought unfairly and of whom he knew nothing. What hope of survival had he, or any of the inhabitants of the wilderness in such unequal combat?

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Warruk looked steadfastly at the light flickering on the riverbank, far, far away. He turned his gaze in the other direction where lay the untold miles of untrodden wastes that were his kingdom, to have and to hold so long as he chose. He faced the river; the turtle battalions were emerging from the water as before, causing scarcely a ripple. Again he looked at the fire, took a few steps toward it, halted, sniffed the air, and checked a roar that welled up in his throat. He had reached a decision.

If there were new worlds to conquer he would invade them, fearless, determined and confident. He reckoned not on man, the unknown, and had he known it is not improbable but that he should have acted exactly as he did. For, what is all life but a game of chance? And what is chance but a disguise for opportunity?

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The first steps toward the fire had been taken. The die had been cast. Fate had stepped into Warruk's life and while luring him onward, baited with the promise of adventure the hard path that lay ahead.

Daylight was just breaking when the black Jaguar reached the vicinity of the blaze. The fire, replenished throughout the hours of darkness, had guided him unerringly on his way; but with the coming of dawn it had been allowed to dwindle down until nothing remained but a bed of embers and even these died when the sun shot over the horizon.

The place reeked of an uncommon though not unknown odor and the sand was trodden into paths by long, broad feet. Once before he had come upon the same tracks and scent; and it came to him in a flash that it had been along the border of the marsh and near the stream flowing out of it where the dead egrets lay in heaps and rows, their feathers ruffled by the wind. And the recollection also came of the illness he had suffered as the result of eating of the birds. The creatures that could work such havoc among the shy egrets and the after-effects of whose presence was violent sickness, were not to be taken too lightly and Warruk felt a distrust of the insidious power they must possess.

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He circled the place, once, twice, in search of further clues to the strange inhabitants. They were not lacking in the form of heaps of turtle shells, bones, feathers, fish scales and numerous other objects. But, of the creatures themselves he saw nothing. His keen ears, however caught the sound of deep breathing that came from a group of leaf-thatched shelters dotting the sand.

Warruk lingered about the encampment until the sun was well above the treetops. Then he entered the edge of the thick cover bordering the flat stretch where the strange creatures dwelt and which was the beginning of the forest. The wind, blowing the sand before it in rippling waves, soon filled the imprints of his massive feet and obliterated all trace of his visit. And this was on the very night following the gathering of the Indians when Choflo, headman, had announced that the wrath of Tumwah, God of Drought, was about to descend upon the land.

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The crocodile had been slain by the hunters and its skin removed with much ceremony. The head, with its leering expression and long rows of peg-like teeth was raised on a pole in the center of the encampment. The flesh of the reptile was roasted at night. A great fire was kindled and as the flames mounted skyward they threw a red glow upon the dusky faces of the Indians. Not in seven years had such a huge fire been made and its glare could be seen many miles up and down the river, in regions never penetrated by the watch or cooking fires. It was this light that Warruk had seen as he patrolled his beat and that had lured him from the country he knew to the region inhabited by ruthless man.

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After the thick sections of white flesh had been roasted until they resembled charcoal they were raked out with long poles. Everyone partook in silence—grim silence that was ominous. And after a while Choflo danced a sacred dance around the fire. He wore an anklet of dried seeds that rattled above his right foot; as he stepped over the sand in rhythm with the music of a wind instrument made of a long-necked calabash, and the thrumming of a snake-skin drum played by two assistants, he called upon Tumwah to look down upon them and to pity their unhappy plight. Then both dancer and feasters went quietly to their shelters and the fire was allowed to die down.

Daylight, as always, came with an appalling suddenness and soon the sun was high in the heavens with searing rays that transfixed the earth as relentlessly as before. Tumwah had not taken note of the sacrifice. He was more than angry; he was enraged, for his onslaught was more terrible than ever. Even at this early hour the heat-waves danced and quivered in the still air in a blinding, confusing manner.

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The men departed from the camping site while the day was young. They pushed their long, narrow, dugout canoes into the water, clambered aboard, took up the short paddles and pushed to the other side which had not, as yet, been despoiled of its buried treasures. There they fell to work probing the sand with sharpened sticks and when it yielded easily to the thrust they dug with their hands until the pocket containing the oblong, tough-skinned eggs had been uncovered. These they gathered into baskets to be emptied into the canoes so fast as they were filled. All day long they toiled giving not a thought to the women and children who had been left

behind.

Warruk, from his place of concealment in the border of the thick jungle had not for a moment taken his eyes from the human habitations. He had seen the men emerge from the shelters and paddle away. And he marvelled at the strange creatures that were taller than any of the animals of the forest or plain and that walked on two feet. He felt no antagonism toward them, no desire to attack or slay. He was overawed, for he could not comprehend them and that filled him with a burning curiosity to know more about them, to see them at closer range. 177

So long as the queer creatures were present in numbers he dared not show himself for he well remembered his experience with the peccary herd whose strength lay in numbers.

The long awaited opportunity came toward mid-afternoon. From the collection of huts, crackling and warping in the heat came a solitary form. It was not unlike the others that had appeared earlier in the day except that it was very much smaller and seemed to walk with uncertain steps.

The little man-creature faltered to the shady side of one of the shelters and sat down. Then it began to dig in the sand and toss handfuls of it up into the air.

Warruk watched with glowing eyes. Here was his opportunity. Almost before he knew it he had slipped out of the thick cover and was gliding shadow-like across the sandbar. So silent and so stealthy were his movements that the child was not aware of his approach, and even when he halted and crouched low not more than ten paces away his presence still was unsuspected. 178

In his turn, the Jaguar was so interested, so fascinated by the child that he was oblivious to all else. Had he been suffering from hunger his intentions might have been different. But with food so plentiful, the thought of attack had not even occurred to him.

Mata, mother of the child soon missed her offspring and went in search of it. She suppressed a scream of terror as she took in the scene of the great, black beast apparently about to spring and dashed back into the shelter for the long, keen-bladed knife that was always kept handy for any emergency. Without thought of danger to herself she flew at Warruk as only a mother can in defense of her young. The *machete* was upraised and flashed in the sunlight. It was not until this occurred that the mighty cat became conscious of her presence, so absorbed had he been. At the same time a streak of fire shot through his shoulder where the point of the knife slashed its way through skin and muscle. He gave one cry of pain and surprise, leaped to one side, and turning bounded away to the forest. The Indian gathered up her little one and fled into the hut. Her screams now brought out the others who had remained at home, among them Choflo, and as they rushed from the low doorways they had just time enough to see the black form disappear into the thicket. 179

That night pandemonium reigned in camp. The men built another great fire and chanted prayers for deliverance while the women squatted in the outer circle with swaying bodies and raised their voices in loud lamentations mingled with praises for the valiant Mata who had dared attack and repel the savage animal.

As for Choflo, he sat silently on one side throughout the demonstration and consulted the contents of his charm-bag. There were the teeth of crocodiles, pebbles worn round and smooth in the riverbed and a tuft of snowy feathers taken from the shoulders of a luckless egret. Finally he arose and raising his hands commanded all to be silent. 180

"Tumwah has not been pleased with our offering. He is more angry than before," he announced in a sepulchral voice. "My magic tells me so. The terrible god has sent a Black Phantom from the lower world to haunt us and to render our lives more miserable. Dark and filled with forebodings is the season that has descended upon us."

His hearers rocked to and fro and smote their breasts in unison with the sorcerer.

"We must bring a greater sacrifice. Twenty turtles must be offered to Tumwah. Then, and only then will he recall the evil spirit that lurks in our midst. Otherwise we shall perish."

Without a word of complaint or remonstrance the men boarded their canoes and pushed out into the river, for the turtles were kept in corrals on the other side. When they returned, long after, the creatures, their feet bound together, were heaped on the fire to which the women had added bundles of driftwood. And as the struggling turtles slowly expired the men danced about the fire to the sounds of hissing flesh and crackling embers. 181

"Now go!" Choflo commanded after the flames had spent their fury. "Go to your shelters. I alone will remain to study the heavens and read the pleasure of the god."

But no sooner had the dancers departed than Choflo too entered his hut to sleep.

The path was now open to Warruk. He had watched the fire and the dancing but there was no longer awe in his heart for the man-creatures. A savage rage and the desire for revenge had taken its place. His shoulder pained him frightfully from the cut inflicted by Mata. Why had he been attacked when his intentions had been of the friendliest? All the other creatures of the wilderness respected his position and these too should have their lesson. He would show them the savagery of which he was capable. Never again would he trust man; he was cruel and unfair. Two experiences had taught him that—first the poisoned bird and now the unprovoked attack. Hereafter he would match his cunning with the man-creatures and if necessary, it would be a battle to the bitter end. Vast as the wilderness was, it was too small to harbor both the man-creatures and himself. 182

Warruk glided out upon the sand so silently and stealthily that he was like a shadow flowing

over the ground. Straight as an arrow he went, retracing his steps of the previous afternoon and in a few minutes he stood before the entrance of Mata's shelter. None stirred inside but his ears caught the sound of deep breathing. There was no hesitation, no indecision. One quick bound and he had entered. His nose guided him to the guilty one; a step in the right direction and his long, white fangs had closed on Mata's shoulder and he began dragging her to the doorway.

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Loud shrieks came from the terrified woman. She clutched wildly at her assailant and at the poles of the hut but her strength was as nothing compared to the power that held her in its grip. And the Jaguar, forgetful of all else in this moment of triumph felt a savage exultation in the anticipation of devouring his victim and thus proving that after all he was master of all that walked the earth.

The encampment had been aroused by the cries and was in a turmoil. Men rushed to the heap of smouldering embers, seized thick branches still glowing at one end and waved them aloft until they burst into flame. Others held spears and arrows in their hands, and came running to the rescue of the woman.

At first Warruk paid no heed to the mob but when a flaming brand was flung into his face, burning him painfully, he was compelled to relinquish his victim. But he did not retreat; instead, he drew himself up to his full height and faced his attackers.

A second blazing torch was hurled in his direction and he dashed it aside with a blow of his massive paw. Then came a spear, the point barely penetrating the skin of his flank. Warruk turned with a snarl and crunched the shaft between his teeth. Blazing clubs and spears were now falling in a shower; with a terrible roar he charged through the barrage of missiles into the midst of the yelling group, striking to right and to left. The men, panic-stricken, dropped their weapons and fled to their shelters. When none was in sight the great cat voiced his victory in a series of cries and grunts that made the very ground tremble. He *was* lord of the wilderness; even the man-creatures with all their wiles and cunning had acknowledged his supremacy and had departed precipitously, leaving him in possession of the field. Another savage roar of triumph and he strode majestically to the forest.

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It was several hours before the terrified Indians dared leave the security of their shelters and then only at the imperious summons of Choflo's voice. Three fires were hastily kindled and between them the council sat feeling sure that neither beast nor demon would dare brave the blazing barrier.

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"Again our offering has been spurned by Tumwah," Choflo moaned, "and now I know the reason why. A spirit of evil has escaped from the place of darkness and is ravaging the earth; it has entered the body of a monstrous tiger and has changed it into a black demon, a Black Phantom whose very appearance is enough to strike terror to the bravest heart. Twice has he made onslaughts on us. Who can tell what may next occur!"

"It is indeed a spirit from the world of darkness," Sagguk panted, his superstitious fancy encouraged by Choflo's words. Sagguk had thrown the spear that grazed Warruk's flank. "For, did I not thrust my spear full into his heart so that the blood gushed out in a crimson torrent? Yet the demon turned, grasped the shaft in his teeth and drew it out without sign of pain."

"And my arrows bounded off his neck and shoulders as from the horny back of a turtle," another added. "The phantom bears a charmed life. Our weapons cannot harm this monster from the other world that has come to destroy us."

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"Listen!" Choflo commanded. "Thus have I solved the mystery. Tumwah is not angry with us. He is angry with this evil spirit which is usurping his power on earth. Therefore, by drying up the land and the water Tumwah hopes to destroy the great tiger so that the demon must leave the dead body and return to the place of blackness from which it escaped, even if in so doing all others that live must perish in the battle. To save ourselves we must kill the Black Phantom."

"But, have we not seen how useless our weapons are against this monster?" Sagguk interposed.

"True. But I will prepare a charmed arrow with a poisoned point. Someone must go to seek out the lair of the great tiger that harbors the evil spirit and slay it."

"Is it not true, all-knowing one," Yaro, who was of great age ventured to inquire, "that he who slays a tiger, possessed of an evil spirit though it be, shall come under a spell? And that the spell shall not be broken until his nearest of kin shall have forfeited his life in atonement for the deed?"

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"It is true. But what is one life compared to the lives of all of us? Better that one die than all. But the honor that shall fall upon the slayer will be great for, even as he sends the charmed arrow crashing on its mission of beneficent destruction knowing that in so doing he is sacrificing the life of his most beloved, he shall also know that he is the savior of the race."

Choflo paused so that his words might have their full effect. Then he continued. "Now go!" he commanded, rising. "And let no man look toward the entrance of his shelter, for before the sun rises the Great Spirit will decide. A white feather resting in the sand before the doorway will announce the selection of the honored one, who must pursue and slay the Black Phantom. The responsibility will be great, for upon the success or failure of the chosen one will depend not only the survival of the race but of all life on earth."

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Once again the group dissolved itself. And as the frightened people huddled in their huts the voice of Choflo, raised in incantations and accompanied by the rattle of charms floated out over the still night air. After a time the sounds were hushed.

The silence was ominous. The suspense was awful. Now as never before did terror enter the hearts of the Indians cowering and trembling in their dark hovels. The white feather was on its way to announce the fateful selection of the Great Spirit as interpreted by Choflo, headman, sorcerer and oracle of the simple-minded Cantanas.

CHAPTER VII

The White Feather

Scarcely had the sun risen on the morning following the appearance of the Black Phantom when the encampment was astir, for each was eager to discover whether or not he had been selected for the perilous task of slaying the mysterious visitor. The men stole out of their shelters just as the rays of the brilliant orb bathed the level sea of green treetops of the Amazonian jungle with a flood of roseate light, and scanned the sand in front of their doorways.

Oomah found the symbol, a tuft of snowy, drooping aigrettes that quivered and glistened at the slightest touch. And he stood reverently gazing at the sacred object until Choflo's drum, followed by the sound of his voice bade the men gather in solemn conclave.

"Upon Oomah has fallen the mission of saving the earth from a terrible end," the sorcerer said gravely, "and the selection of the Great Spirit has been a wise one."

"But, am I worthy to be entrusted with such a holy undertaking?" Oomah asked incredulously, holding the plumes in his hand.

"The decision of the Great Spirit has answered that. You must prove yourself worthy or pay the penalty. Either you will slay the Black Phantom and bring back evidence of the deed, or you will not return at all."

"I question not the wisdom of Choflo who understands the mystic things that are withheld from the rest of us," old Yaro meekly protested, "but, had it not been decided that Oomah was next to be leader of the tribe? As the coming headman, should not his life be guarded? Should not he be shielded from peril? If he perish in the attempt to slay the Black Phantom; or, if he should fail and thus become an exile, we should lose him forever."

"If Oomah be lost another will be found to take his place. Wana, son of my sister, is a promising youth. And besides, there is another reason why Oomah has been chosen."

"What is that reason?" Yaro persisted.

"Do you not recall your own words, Yaro, uttered during the last hours of darkness? 'He who slays a tiger, possessed of an evil spirit though it be, shall lose his next of kin by another tiger appearing suddenly in the role of avenger?'"

"Yes, it is true."

"Oomah has no next of kin. He is alone in the world. He has neither father, mother, sister, brother, wife nor child. Therefore the spirit of vengeance will be cheated for there is no one to slay. There is no other man in the tribe without family upon which revenge could fall."

"As I said before," Yaro admitted, "Choflo knows all things. He speaks truly and wisely." Then turning, he muttered to himself, "But he is determined to be rid of Oomah so that Wana, son of his sister may become leader of the people."

"The magic arrow shall be prepared at once, for only by it can the Black Phantom be slain; heed well my words, Oomah, and use no other. You will depart at nightfall. A long trail and a hard one lies before you with death waiting at the end for the loser."

All through the day Oomah moved as in a trance. The enormity of the undertaking dazed him. Not that he feared the jungle or the hardships of long wandering, for to pursue and to slay the beasts of the wilderness was a part of his life. But, this was a mission of a different character. The very existence of the whole tribe depended on him; and more than that. If he failed, the whole earth, as he knew it, would be laid waste; Tumwah would never stop his fiery onslaught until the Black Phantom had been slain. Had not Choflo, who knew all things, said so? Still, he could not but feel that the sorcerer had been at least to some extent influenced by personal motives in interpreting the wishes of the Great Spirit. Did Choflo hope that the quarry would kill him, or at least elude him? In either event he would be out of the way. The whole thing seemed very mysterious but he had no alternative but to obey.

Oomah was young, tall and strong. As he walked there was the rippling play of well-formed muscle under his brown skin. His black eyes, set at a slight angle somewhat like an Oriental's, glowed with the fire of determination from under the heavy shock of hair that covered his head.

The women peeped out of the doorways as he passed, with looks akin to veneration. Liked by all, the sacred mission on which he was about to depart enhanced the esteem in which he had been held. And while their eyes were filled with admiration, their hearts were full of pity and sadness. For, with the coming of night Oomah would pass from among them like the fading of a

shadow when the sun sets.

Preparations were at once started for the parting feast. Hunters had gone in quest of game. The women ground yuca roots for fresh cassava bread. And the children, with tear-stained faces, gathered wood that had been stranded along the edge of the sandbar. But the youth wandered about listlessly, barely conscious of the activities that were going on all around him. 194

Choflo had gone to the forest early in the forenoon. At mid-day he returned, carrying a bundle of slender stems in his hand. Looking neither to right nor to left, he entered his hut and drew a curtain woven of rushes across the doorway so that none might behold him plying his sacred calling.

Safe in the seclusion of his abode, he dug a hole in the sandy floor and buried the stems he had brought so ostentatiously from the forest; then he took down a bundle of arrows from under the thatched roof and selected one after a good deal of scrutiny of the lot. It was long—six feet or more, with a slender, reed shaft and a needle-like point of tough palmwood fitted and glued into the stem. A short thorn, fastened to the point with fine twine, formed a barb so that the arrow could not be withdrawn once it had entered the flesh. On each side of the base was a split eagle's feather attached with colored thread. The feathers were not fastened in a line parallel with the shaft, but curved slightly; this gave the arrow a rotary motion in flight like that imparted to the bullet by a rifled gun barrel and made for accuracy in shooting. He now took a lump of resinous gum from his charm-bag and rubbed it on the point of the arrow until the latter was covered with a thick, black coat, resembling old beeswax. A cap of a joint of slender bamboo was fitted over the end of the missile to prevent the rain from washing away the supposed poison, and it was ready to be delivered to Oomah. 195

Choflo had been guilty of treachery of the vilest kind. Instead of the deadly *pua* poison contained in the stems of the creepers he had brought from the forest he had used the harmless gum which so closely resembled it that the eye could not distinguish between them.

Oomah started on his perilous mission that night, after the feast had been eaten and all the members of the tribe had bade him a solemn farewell.

It was a silent group that watched him depart, for they felt that he would not return; and in their grief they entirely forgot Choflo's dire predictions for themselves in the event that Oomah was unsuccessful in his quest. In their hearts they rebelled at the dictum of their leader but the long habit of obedience caused them to suppress their resentment. So they merely looked sad and said nothing. 196

"Now go," Choflo said, ceremoniously presenting the magic arrow, "and return when you have slain the Black Phantom. Bring back the ears, the claws and the tail so that we may have the proof. And do not return until your mission has been fulfilled."

Oomah gathered up his bow, a pack of arrows of various types to use in procuring game, and a small bag of food, and without a word vanished into the night. The last thing the watchers saw was the tuft of white feathers which had been inserted in his head-band.

The youth did not go far. Entering the edge of the forest flanking the sandbar, country of which he knew each square foot, he went straight to a giant ceiba tree and took up his station between two of the buttressed roots to await the coming of daylight. And while the long hours of darkness dragged their way into eternity Oomah laid his plan of action. 197

The first thing he did after the sun appeared was to examine minutely the arrow prepared by Choflo. Certain words whispered into his ear by old Yaro had had the effect of making him cautious. Besides, there were his own suspicions to verify or to disprove.

The subject for a test was not hard to find in the form of a spiny rat that he dug out of a decayed stump and holding the rodent in one hand he pricked the tender skin with the point of the arrow. The rat struggled and squeaked, but when he released it a few minutes later it scurried to cover. Choflo's treachery had been proven.

Oomah replaced the missile in his pack and started up the river. Two hours later he halted, started a fire by rubbing together two dry sticks and placed a forest partridge which he had shot on the way, to roast. While the meat sputtered on the spit he collected the slender stems of the same species of creeper that Choflo had gathered and buried in the floor of his shelter, and prepared the poison of whose deadliness there was no question. 198

The process was a simple one. First the stems were crushed to a pulp between stones and the juice pressed out into a small bowl taken from his food-bag. The container was placed over the fire; when it had boiled half an hour its contents had been reduced to a thick, black liquid which was ready for use. The point of the arrow was dipped into the concoction and revolved until it was covered with a uniform, heavy coating. There was now no doubt as to the efficacy of the missile.

Day after day Oomah roamed the forest and the sandbars for some sign of his quarry, but there was not the slightest trace to be found. Either the Black Phantom had departed to some distant place or had vanished from the earth. At night he squatted with his back to some giant tree-trunk and a blazing fire before him; and between naps he listened for the roars that never came. 199

Food had been plentiful but was constantly becoming more difficult to procure. The turtles had finished their laying and had returned to the water; their eggs, buried in the hot sand, were now unfit to eat. However, there was still an occasional partridge, a monkey or a turkey-like curassow and when one of them was secured Oomah ate sparingly so that the meat lasted

several days.

After a while the long and fruitless tramps and the nightly vigils began to show their effects on the youth. His stolid nature gave way to a restlessness that caused him to start in his slumber, and to stop suddenly in his tracks to listen for sounds that never came. At first he could not understand the new feeling. And then the truth came upon him in a flash. Unheard feet were treading in his own footsteps; unseen eyes were watching his every movement. He was being followed and observed by an invisible enemy.

Oomah was sure of it, so sure that he swerved out of the forest and walked along the edge of the bar where the sand was softest and after he had gone a distance of fifty paces returned to the forest. He continued along in the deep shadows apparently without concern for the greater part of an hour. Then he turned and retraced his steps. On the sandbar he found the confirming evidence. Huge feet had left their imprints besides those of his own. Some monstrous creature had dogged his every step, was doubtless even now watching him from a place of concealment in the dense cover. And of the identity of that creature there was little question. It could be none other than the Black Phantom.

A thrill came over Oomah—not of fear but of the anticipation of success. He had at last found his quarry and would lay a neat trap that the shadowy one would all unsuspectingly enter. His victory was assured.

The youth entered the forest and continued on his way. He walked mile after mile without turning to look back and then gradually altered his course so that it took him to the river. Emerging from the wall of trees he made a wide semi-circle in the sand and returned to the heavy growth. But now he did not continue his journey; instead, he hurried back, keeping just inside the fringe of trees until he reached a point halfway between the tips of the semi-circle. He now crept to the very border of the jungle where, though hidden from view he could nevertheless have a clear sweep of his trail across the sand.

Oomah carefully removed the protecting cap from the poisoned arrow and grasped the missile in his right hand while in his left he held the bow, ready for instant use, and awaited the appearance of the Black Phantom. He was trembling with emotion, for the great moment had arrived.

But the black form that he so confidently expected did not appear. The hours slipped by and just as darkness spread its pall over river and jungle alike a thunderous roar burst upon the still air from nearby. The hunter turned quickly in the direction from which the sound came and his eyes sought to penetrate the undergrowth; but while he gazed at the mass of stems and leaves the roar was repeated in back of him, exactly opposite to the direction from which it had come at first.

Oomah, reared in the wilderness though he had been and knowing the traits of most wild things, for once knew not what to do; it was clear that the pursued had divined his plan, had sensed his trap, and was openly defying him. Would he charge next in an overwhelming rush too swift to be stopped by the arrow's venomous thrust? Or wait until the darkest hour of night for a silent stalk and lightning spring! The latter seemed more probable so Oomah lost no time in seeking the protection of a great tree-trunk to forestall attack from the rear, and in building a fire to ward off the onslaught from in front. Between the two, he felt reasonably secure.

After that it was impossible to tell which was pursuer and which was pursued. If the man turned back on his trail he always found evidences that the crafty foe had been shadowing his every move. And the roars that reverberated through the forest both by day and by night reminded him of the proximity of the elusive one. When the rumbling voice was hushed for any length of time Oomah knew that the Black Phantom was on the hunt for food, or was out to slay, and redoubled his vigilance. Like his brethren of the more earthy, spotted color, the black monster never roared while in quest of victims. To do so would be extremely foolish for it would apprise the prey of his whereabouts and would give them time to escape to the security of their hiding-places. So the youth was on his guard during the periods of silence and slept when the roars were most frequent, for then the danger was least.

With the passing days the drought grew more terrible. If Choflo's words were true, and Oomah was to save the earth by slaying the Black Phantom, he must act soon or Tumwah's work would be too far advanced for remedy. He could do no more than he was doing. Yaro had even hinted, in furtive whispers, that the combat between the Phantom and the God of Drought was a fabrication of Choflo's mind, simply another explanation of something the sorcerer did not understand added to the several he had already given. Still, he did not know whose words were to be heeded; and added to his doubt was the lack of understanding of why the Black Phantom did not attack him. It seemed always to be following him in accordance with some mysterious design, or to be luring him onward like a will-o'-the-wisp, further and further into a strange and more hostile wilderness.

The youth's disturbed state of mind, coupled with the meager amount of food now obtainable and the fatigue of the long tramps so undermined his strength that he fell an easy victim to the dread fever to which, in his normal, robust condition he was immune.

With throbbing head and blurred eyes he moved painfully through the forest and over the sandy riverbank. On those rare occasions when he saw game his arms trembled so violently as he drew the bow that the arrow went wide and fell far short of the mark.

Choflo had guessed well. He was sure that the Black Phantom would prove too elusive or too savage for any human pursuer, and that he should never see Oomah again. In both things he

was right. Oomah was destined to be robbed of his prize and the sorcerer had beheld the youth for the last time. But despite these facts, the designing purveyor of magic had been also totally mistaken in his calculations. For, while both of his hopes were realized they, at the same time, strange as it may seem, were doomed to failure.

The terrible fever fast gained on the unfortunate hunter, racking his body and adding physical torture to his mental anguish. Still he struggled to overcome the insurmountable obstacles in his way. But, while a firm resolve may do many things there is also a limit to all things, and there came a day when Oomah could go no further. He had already wandered far from the country so well known to him. Around him grew *castanha* trees with nuts in shells like cannon-balls that hung high over his head; palms with leaves so enormous that one could shelter an entire encampment; and birds of species he had never seen before fluttered among the branches. The air was saturated with the heavy though not unpleasant odor of vanilla beans. It was indeed a strange land but Oomah was too ill to take much heed of his surroundings.

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At noon he could go no further. The ground seemed to rise toward his flushed face and then smote him such a blow that all grew black before his eyes.

When he awoke the screeching of the cicadas warned him that the day's end was at hand. The fever had relented and he felt somewhat refreshed. His first thought was of fire. Dry wood was not hard to find in the crackling forest and a few deft twirls of the fire-sticks produced the spark needed to set a handful of dry leaves aflame. Food there was none so, with his back to the thick butt of a castanha tree and the blaze in front Oomah silently and gravely awaited the coming of night.

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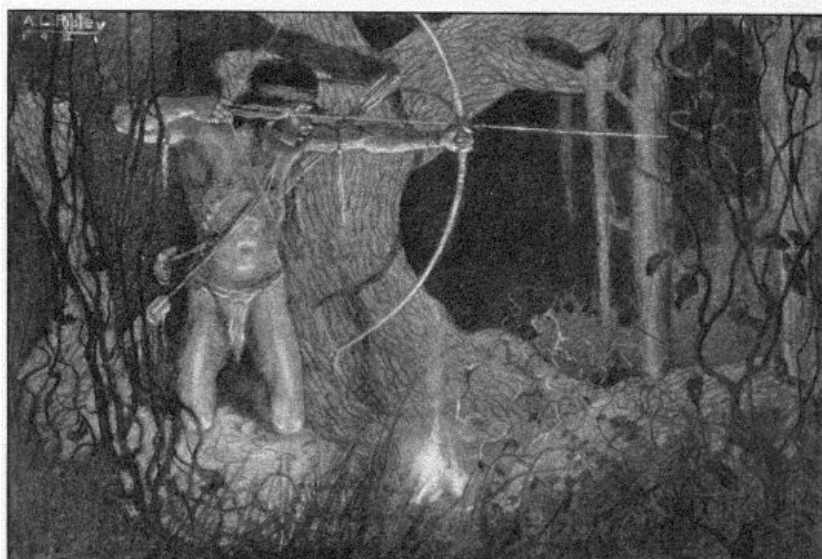
Hours passed. The moon had disappeared and the glimmer of the stars did not penetrate the canopy of foliage overhead. Even the goatsuckers, queer birds that looked like giant whip-poor-wills, had ceased their wails and in the jungle reigned the darkest hours of night.

Oomah awoke with a start, as if in response to the prod of a rude hand, and shivered. The blaze had died to a mere flickering tongue of flame that leapt now and then from the bed of coals. Over the youth came that nameless feeling that bespoke the proximity of some living thing; seeing nothing, he nevertheless felt that hidden eyes were boring him through. Minutes dragged by; the suspense was frightful but his knowledge of the wilderness bade him feign sleep and he moved not a muscle. Then, with a suddenness that was appalling, the insane cackle of a woodrail shattered the silence with its demoniacal cries. The sound, enough to drive the uninitiated into a frenzy caused even Oomah to turn his head toward the direction from which it had come, and what he saw were two points of greenish fire glaring at him out of the blackness not ten paces away.

Terror lent strength to the faltering arms. The protecting cap was dashed from the poisoned arrow and the notched base of the shaft flew to its position in the string. There was the twang of the bow and the deadly missile whined through the air. A hoarse scream rang out; the points of greenish fire were gone; a heavy body tore its way through the undergrowth. Then all was still again.

That effort had cost Oomah his last particle of strength. He shuddered, swayed, and clapping his hands over his eyes as if to shut out a frightful dream, sank to the ground.

Nechi, on her way to the fish-traps in the river found the unconscious youth when the sun was two hours high in the heavens and claimed him for her own by right of discovery. In other words, to the captor belonged the choicer tidbits when the captive should be restored to fit condition for eating.



There was the twang of the bow and the deadly missile whined through the air

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As she exultantly viewed the prostrate form a pang of fear shot through her heart. What if he should be dead? She would be cheated out of the delicacies and also the laurels to which the victor was always entitled. In haste she knelt by his side and placed one hand over his heart; it was fluttering weakly. She rushed to the river and brought water in a folded plantain leaf and

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dashed it into his face. After that she pried open his eyelids with her fingers.

Oomah regained his senses with a start and his eyes met the grimaces of the delighted Nechi.

"*Sabana* is not dead!" she exclaimed.

"No, the stranger is not dead—not quite dead."

"You are mine. I will take you to the village; it is less than half a rest away. I will feed you and cure you of the fever. You are mine."

Oomah looked again at his discoverer, and closed his eyes.

"I know you," he said feebly. "You are of the Patocos who have eaten many of my people." 210

"Yes, I am of the Patocos and we have eaten many of the Cantanas. When you are well and fat again we will eat you too."

The youth showed no emotion. What mattered it if the girl should make good her threat, now that his mission had failed?

"I will take you to the village," Nechi repeated. She left the baskets she had been carrying on the ground and picking up the youth threw him over her back. Accustomed as she was to carrying heavy burdens, the weight was not too great for her strength. A half hour later she reached the village, a collection of dilapidated shelters nestling under the protection of the giant palm trees.

The arrival of the girl with her find created great excitement. The men rushed up with spears and clubs ready to deliver the deathblow but the girl was not inclined to give up her prisoner so easily.

"He is mine," she protested; "I found him. You shall not take him from me. I will feed him and give him *chinca* bark to cure his fever and when he is well again and fat—" 211

"No! No! We must not wait. The prisoner might die and then we should be cheated out of our feast."

Nechi had not thought of that.

"Tomorrow," she relented. "If he shows no signs of improvement by tomorrow you can prepare for the feast."

Oomah opened his eyes.

"I came on a sacred mission," he faltered. "Get me the white feather so that I may die like a hunter who has not given up the chase. With the white feather in my hair I can take up the trail of the Black Phantom in the other world."

The group that surrounded him hushed their chatter.

"Where is the white feather?" asked one of the older men who seemed to be in authority.

"There where the woman found me. It must be there for I had it when sleep overcame me." 212

One of the young men was sent immediately to fetch the emblem while the girl prepared food which Oomah ate with ravenous appetite. Presently the runner returned; in his hand was the tuft of plumes, now soiled and frayed from hard usage.

The sight of the sacred object had a telling effect, for among the savages of the Upper Amazon it was the one inter-tribal flag of truce likely to be respected, provided the bearer of it could prove his right to its possession. They stared in silence at the feverish youth as, with great effort he told them the story of the Black Phantom and of the heartbreaking weeks he had spent in pursuit of the elusive quarry.

"I shot the magic arrow into the night where the points of green fire burned, and I know no more. Perhaps it was only a dream or a vision, for my head was throbbing with fever; I do not know! I do not know!" he ended wearily and sadly. "Therefore I am an outcast among my people; I cannot return to them. I have no proof that the Black Phantom is dead or that I did not fire the arrow at some picture of my reeling brain." 213

The leader of the Patocos turned to some of his young hunters.

"Go! Search the forest and the riverbank," he commanded. "Let nothing escape your eyes. The words of this youth are queer. How do we know that he speaks the truth? If there was a phantom the magic arrow could not fail to strike it dead. And when you find it bring back the evidence of your eyes so that the name of this man may be honored; but if you find nothing we shall know that he lied and he shall pay the penalty without delay."

Not long after, the hunters filed into the forest and Oomah watched them go with yearning eyes. A whole week passed before the hunting party returned. But their hands were empty; they bore no evidence that their mission had been successful.

As for Warruk, the Jaguar, he had considered his score with Mata settled. She had been punished for the injury she had inflicted on him. But the others; they had hurled flaming brands at him and had wounded him with spears. The day would surely come when they too should pay. 214

As he lingered in the heavy growth bordering the riverbank he became aware of the fact that one of the man-creatures was roving in the forest, detached from the group on the sandbar, and he straightway began to follow and to watch his actions, being careful, however, always to remain in the dense cover where he could not be seen. By following and by watching he could

learn many things that would be of value in dealing with these new enemies when the proper time arrived.

The game continued day after day. It was only when the man laid a trap for him by making a wide detour on the sandbar that Warruk discovered that it was he who was being sought by the lone wanderer. After that he was more cautious than before. He followed the scent only when it was several hours old. But at night, when his pursuer was asleep, he stole up noiselessly to look upon him and to ponder, for the blazing fire prevented an attack; he had not forgotten the stinging brands with which he had been showered not so long before.

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There came the night, however, when the fire died down. The opportunity had arrived and he crept up for the fatal spring.

It was then that Oomah, awakened by the hideous cackle of the woodrail, saw the blazing eyes. And before the Jaguar had time to realize that the man-creature had been aroused from his slumber, he heard a sharp twang and a fiery pain darted through his shoulder taking him so completely by surprise that he turned and fled with a scream of terror. Truly, this new enemy was beyond all understanding. His deadly sting reached out far, even into the blackness of night. Against it he, the king of the untrodden wilderness, could not hope to contend.

As he rushed madly through the undergrowth the pain in his shoulder spread rapidly and a heaviness made itself felt in his limbs. What if the creature hurling shafts of fire that could wound him so sorely should pursue? With the intense agony of his hurt, and the first signs of a coming numbness, he could not hope to give battle or even to escape further injury. No! At least not until he had had time to recover from the surprise and the confusion of the onslaught; until he had quenched his burning thirst, and until the pain had subsided. Then he would even up the score. No more watching, no more stalking! Hereafter, the mere sight of man would be the signal for his own destruction.

216

Warruk reached the river's edge near the rapids where the water rushed with a seething fury through a narrow channel between the sandy banks. In the center of the roaring flood was a rock, his rock, where many an hour had been spent basking in the hot sunshine. It was his only abode, his one place of safety and to it he would go.

Without hesitation he plunged into the maelstrom. The rushing water swept him back, again and again, but each time the struggle was renewed with increased determination; and each effort carried him a few yards nearer the goal. Just as it seemed the coveted spot had been attained, the breakers sought with increased fury to drag him down; but he fought back, inch by inch, and at last one massive foot touched the rough surface of the stronghold.

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With a frantic tenacity that sapped the last vestige of his fast vanishing strength he dragged his weary body onto the rock and lay down, cushioning his great head upon his forepaws. Tremor after tremor passed over him, but they were not from the chill of the night nor from the drenching of the water. The pain had gone and a drowsiness had taken its place. Here, where he had rested before, he would sleep again. The bright stars shimmered overhead; a gentle, lulling breeze fanned his face; below, the water roared and hissed in impotent rage for he had conquered it and was out of its reach.

It all spoke of the freedom of the wilderness, and of the joyousness of life. Not knowing death, Warruk did not fear it. But, knowing sleep as a reviver of spent energy, he welcomed its coming to relieve the heavy numbness that was penetrating to his very bones. It came, swiftly; the deadly poison prepared by Oomah was completing its ghastly work, was inducing the sleep; but not the normal, restful slumber that comes between sunset and sunrise but the sleep that is everlasting and without awakening.

218

Agoo reached the village of the Patocos after a week's rapid journey through the forest. He had been sent by the Cantanas to look for Oomah. The twigs snapped from the undergrowth by the hunter as he walked along guided him unfailingly to the last camping site and from there a beaten trail led to the village.

And Agoo was promptly made prisoner by the fierce enemies of the Cantanas. There would be a feast indeed, with two captives instead of one.

The newcomer also carried the flag of truce—the tuft of white feathers; but the emblem would be of no avail if the report of the hunters would be unfavorable.

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"I would speak to my tribesman," he said, "here, where all may hear."

They brought Oomah and formed a circle around the two.

"I am the bearer of a message," the newcomer greeted the emaciated youth, "from the fathers of the tribe."

Oomah grunted. "Why have you come to add to my suffering? I know that I am an outcast, and I am ready to die."

"No! You must come back with me. Your work is finished. Your reward will be great. Choflo's place shall be yours. That is the message I bear."

Oomah stared blankly at the speaker.

"How can I return without the evidence? I do not even know that the Black Phantom is dead. And besides, we are both captives," he replied.

"We have proof that the sacred mission has been fulfilled. By signs that cannot be doubted has it

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been shown that the spectre that brought desolation to the earth was slain by the magic arrow just seven settings of the sun past."

"Seven settings of the sun ago the arrow was sent on its flight into the darkness; but where it struck I cannot tell."

"On that night Choflo, who sent you, was slain by a great, spotted she-tiger which burst into his shelter and fought savagely to retain her prize even when assailed with spears and firebrands in the hands of those who would have rescued him. The monster had battled with men before, and knew their ways, for one ear was lacking, lost in a previous encounter. The law has been fulfilled. You have no next of kin upon which vengeance could fall for your deed in slaying the Black Phantom; therefore, Choflo, who sent you, paid the penalty."

Agoo did not know it but it was Suma who had avenged her Warruk.

"Speak, Agoo, are these tidings true?" Oomah asked.

"There is even more. Scarcely had Choflo died than a blanket of dark clouds rolled across the heavens and rain fell throughout the night. Tumwah had been appeased. We are saved. The earth is saved. And you, Oomah, shall be rewarded and honored above all men."

The Patocos stood about in a spell-bound group.

"If this youth speaks truly, why has not the rain fallen here?" one asked. "Our yuca fields are parched and the animals of the forest are disappearing. Soon we will die of starvation."

"I have spoken the truth," Agoo persisted. Then, pointing to the sky with both hands, he begged "Tumwah, send the rain-clouds here too. They do not believe that the Black Phantom has been slain. Why, see," he exclaimed suddenly, pointing to the East "even now the sky is overcast where the sun rises and soon the rain will fall upon you. Look, Oomah! They can ask for no other proof. Tumwah has come to save you."

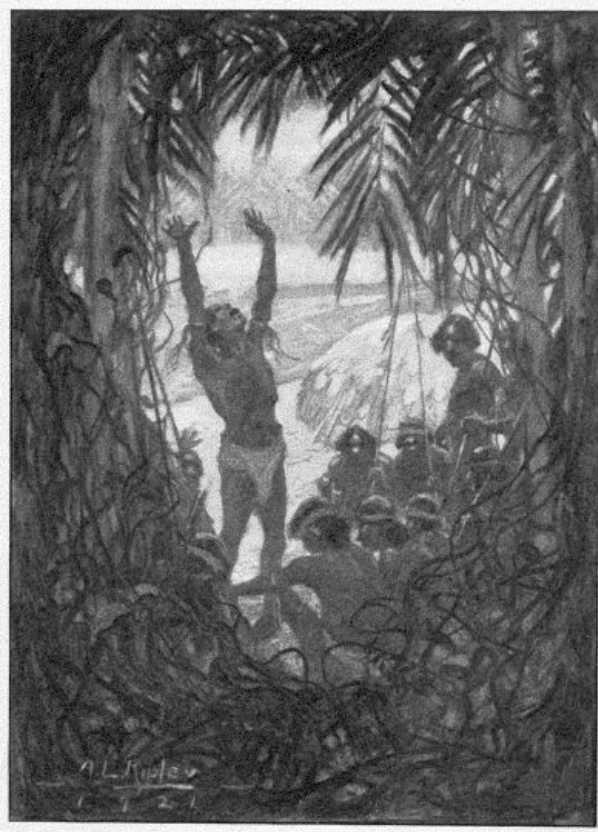
Just then shouts from the forest announced the coming of the hunters and before long the excited youths had filed into the village and joined the circle.

"Now tell us what you found," the headman demanded. "Let your voice be clear and loud so that all may hear and understand. Did you find evidence that the first captive spoke the truth? His companion too says strange things. Either the one is a great hunter who has fulfilled a sacred mission, or both are spies and shall be dealt with before the setting of another sun."

One of the youths who had just returned stepped into the circle.

"These many days we searched the forest and the sandbars, but found nothing," he said impressively. "So we returned."

A hush had fallen upon all. Even the women and children peeping out of the palm-leaf hovels stopped their chatter and looked with wide-open eyes.



"Tumwah, send the rain-clouds here"

"Build the fires!" the headman ordered. "I suspected treachery from the very beginning."

"Wait!" the hunter, continued. "This morning as we rounded the bend in the river where the banks are set close together and where the water roars and boils in its haste to pass the terrible place so it may join the peaceful stretches below, Tupi's sharp eyes saw the form of a vulture in

the sky. We watched the evil bird and soon discovered other black specks circling above the gorge. It was there we found the proof, on a rock in the midst of the raging water; a black tiger of such great size that it could be none other than the Black Phantom. The broken shaft of an arrow was still in its shoulder. We could not swim to the rock; no creature of earth could conquer that angry flood. But there it is so that all may see yet none may reach except only the loathsome vultures.”

That night there was a feast in the Patocos’ village. Turtles had been brought from the corrals and the women made fresh cassava bread. And long into the night the sound of the celebration rang through the black forest as war drums boomed and the voices of singers chanted the praises of the mighty hunter who was among them.

Not until the sharp report of thunder followed by a drenching rain drove the revellers to shelter did the festivities end.

“Nechi shall go with me,” Oomah said the next morning as he prepared to depart. “Nechi, who found me dying and whose medicine drove away the fever. And send one of your hunters also to select a wife from among the Cantanas. It is my wish that there be blood relationship between us. Then there will be peace between the Patocos and Cantanas. No more fighting, no more killing. I speak as headman of my people.”

The older men drew together for a serious discussion that ended in granting Oomah’s request, and Tupi was selected to go back to the encampment on the sandbar to be an honored guest and to select a wife.

After that came the leave taking; then the party started on its journey. The three men, carrying only their bows and arrows, filed into the forest and Nechi, carrying a heavy basket of food trotted happily after them.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BLACK PHANTOM ***

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