JUNGLE IN THE CLOUDS

By the same author

ECUADOR THE UNKNOWN
QUETZAL QUEST

Juveniles

MISKITO BOY
TREASURE OF THE TORTOISE ISLANDS

A pair of Quetzals in their native habitat

From a Drawing by Franklin Bennett

JUNGLE IN THE CLOUDS

Victor W. von Hagen, F.Z.S.

ILLUSTRATED

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TO

RAYMOND STADELMAN

Who first suggested the
Quetzal Expedition

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IT ALL BEGAN IN A NIGHT CLUB

THE air in that Quito night club was poisonous with smoke. The orchestra, hidden by a gaudy impressionistic screen, moaned a sour *triste* while dancers heedless of the nine-thousand-foot altitude of the Ecuadorian capital churned gaily in the befouled air. I watched these gay Latins for a moment, then turned back to the conversation with my wife, Christine, and Stadelman. For the three of us were busy with the wake of our expeditions to Ecuador which was ending and the begetting of another that was to come.

" . . . Now about the quetzal birds," said Stadelman, stopping for the moment to take off his glasses and rub his smoke-filled eyes. " If you want to study these birds after you finish your work here in Ecuador, I happen to know just the place. Now these quetzals . . . "

At the second mention of this word my pulse beat a double quick, my head filled with visions of a golden-green trogon, with tail plumes a yard long, undulating across a tropical sky. The quetzal, sacred bird of the Aztecs, never photographed, never captured alive. But what was Stadelman saying?

" Now these quetzals are not plentiful in Guatemala, as you know, but there's a spot in Honduras—— " He interrupted himself. " May I have that menu? There's a place in Honduras where I got my skins of the quetzals for the museum at Harvard."

Stadelman slumped over the table, his slender frame resting on his elbows as he drew a map. I pushed aside the highball glasses for him, those with which we had just toasted the second anniversary of our expedition to Ecuador and the beginning of another year of travel

for our friend Stadelman, who was collecting tobacco seeds for the Department of Agriculture. Next day he would be heading south for Peru and we would be on our way down through the jungle towards home.

Stadelman roughed out the irregular quadrilateral of Honduras on the back of the bill of fare. The right-angled Caribbean coastline on the north, the south-westerly Guatemalan border on the left, the line along Salvador running south-east down to the Pacific, the north-east Nicaraguan boundary stretching back to the Caribbean on the right.

"It's not much of a drawing," he admitted, "but you'll recognize everything in a minute. Look, here are the banana ports." He speckled them along the line of the Caribbean. "Now look, in the interior a range of cloud forests runs along vaguely parallel to the sea; of these Sierra de Pijol is the largest. Now just over the brow of the range—they call it the *ceja de la montaña*—there's a little settlement called Portillo Grande," and he made a large dot with his pencil. "I lived there for two years when things were bad back in '31. There I hunted quetzals. Just behind the village is a large *aguacatillo* tree"—and he quickly inserted a flamboyant sketch—"and in that tree I once saw as many as seventeen quetzals!"

"Seventeen quetzals," gasped Christine, "at one time?"

"I thought they were rare," I put in.

"So they are," confirmed Stadelman, leaning back and easing his long legs up until the knees rested above the table. "So they are, if you are the type of naturalist who shies from the discomfort of climbing into the rain forests and spending days on end in search of their habitat. Now I have never tried to rear quetzals; I know nothing about their nesting habits and, as far as I know, neither does anyone else. So, von Hagen, you are on

new ground if you want to try to bring them out to civilization."

A white-jacketed figure loomed up in the smoke-pall.

"Oigo, *mozo*," called out Stadelman, "more highballs."

The beaming Cholo waiter came over, rearranged the tablecloth and carried off the empty glasses.

Leaning back, my eyes half-closed, the drifting smoke of countless cigarettes recalled to me the opaque fog of the high rain forests. In some such environment lived the quetzal, the most beautiful bird in the world. Not much larger than a pigeon, clothed in iridescent plumes quivering from gold to copper to deep jade, with a breast as red as blood from a deep wound, this bird had given its name to the sweet-tempered god of the Aztecs and its three-foot plumes to the knights of the Plumed Serpent.

"Of course," I said out loud, "to me—to us!" I corrected myself, including Christine in the sweep of my arm—"there is more to the quetzal legend than the breaking of a four-hundred-year-old legend that it won't live in captivity. There is its fascinating biology, of which so little is known. I've studied other members of the tribe, the trogons of Mexico and South America, and I've always thought of the quetzal as a sort of pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It's the King of the Trogons."

I leaned back as the Cholo waiter barged up to the table with amber-coloured drinks.

"To say nothing of what your research might do for the archæologists and ethnologists," put in Stadelman. "The relation of this quetzal to the Aztec myths has yet to be traced. I think that something of these ancient quetzal myths might be found among the Indians of the cloud forest. After all, the territory of the Mayan Old Empire was located just north of the Honduras tribes."

pair of birds. The final link was forged. In a sense the undertaking would be guaranteed—provided we got the birds. So, as thrilled as if it was our first expedition, Christine and I boarded one of the white ships of the United Fruit Company and sailed for Honduras in June, 1937.

Soon our eyes were gladdened with the sight of flying fish racing the sun-glitter over the waves. Our vessel had entered tropical waters. Schools of dolphins appeared, cutting high *tours en l'air* and giving us a gala escort over the deep channels where the peninsula of Yucatan juts out into the Caribbean. Farther south we came to the banana ports, the ancient Spanish Main that Columbus had sighted on his fourth voyage. Along this four-hundred-mile coast had sailed Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico whom Montezuma so tragically mistook for the returning god, Quetzalcoatl. Standing on deck in the sun and watching that coast slip by, one could envisage the conqueror marching up and down his poop deck with his handful of tough Spanish bravos to assault a whole continent.

The Republic of Honduras occupies that part of Central America where the isthmus swells out like a gangrenous leg. It is three-quarters mountainous and its remote capital, Tegucigalpa, lies in the cool interior hills to the south, nearer the Pacific than the Caribbean, and unconnected with either by any railroad or modern motor highway. South-west of Tegucigalpa the lonely port of Amapala squats apologetically in the middle of the Gulf of Fonseca, a harbour to shame the Golden Gate, and northward the sierras slope gently to the flat shore we were coasting, a plain drained (and sometimes flooded) by a score of rivers that corkscrew their way to the sea, irrigating the finest banana plantations in the world. Honduras has gold and silver too, but these have not been intensively exploited in recent years, largely because of transportation difficulties. The fruit company

was given its land in lots of six to twelve hundred acres for every kilometre of railroad it would build. But since the fertile valleys were all the land the planters wanted, the roads never reached the hills, and Honduras has never got around to amplifying its system of communications.

Hence the country, breath-takingly beautiful as it is in places, is about as unknown to North Americans as El Dorado.

Only four days out of New York we dropped anchor at the ancient port of Truxillo, perched on its bluff over a moon-shaped harbour. More exactly, we anchored at Puerto Castilla, the fruit company's modern port below the old town where Columbus had landed in 1502 and where Cortés founded a settlement a few years later. We docked beside another white ship loading bananas from a revolving belt. We landed in a throng of chocolate-coloured longshoremen, toting the green fruit clusters to the conveyor. The town of Puerto Castilla was built by bananas, and bananas rule it. Hence prices are prohibitive for tourists, and we made our purchases at the company commissary as quickly as we could and set out for the interior on the morning of our third day.

II

LAND OF WAVES AND DEPTHS

THE Truxillo-Olancho narrow-gauge grunted and jerked forward. The peddlers running along beside the windows joined the clatter of the slow-moving train, hawking their wares:

"Tortillas, Señores, tortillas! Your last chance to eat till Olanchito. Tortillas! Tortillas!"

"Last chance my eye," growled the gaunt Amercan conductor. "They'll be shouting at every siding we come to." He banged down the window and turned his attention towards the back platform to shoo off the small boys who clung defiantly to the couplings till the last minute. "*Vaya, muchachos.* Get off there."

"Well, so it begins," I said superfluously. "Let's have a look at that map." I followed the line of the Augian River with my finger. Four hours to Olanchito. So in four hours we'd be in the foothills. The train clattered along noisily and chugged to a jabbing halt at a way station. Barefoot women besieged us again, copper women with wooden trays of thick tortillas, dripping vermilion grease. Then others with pineapples, oranges, mangoes, bananas—and tortillas. "*Empanadas*, tortillas, *empanadas.*" No amount of indifference could discourage them; one optimist stood under our window as long as the coach stopped there with her "*Empanadas*, tortillas, *empanadas.*" And the rich odours of corn and grease and garlic and sweat assailed us.

Clustered around the little whitewashed station and the pink and blue shop fronts lounged the townsmen, watching with a kind of sullenness. Most wore fedora hats and shoes, but "spiritual growth" and "civilization" were most succinctly evidenced by their pistols.

High cheekbones and a mongoloid tilt to the eyes marked them for Ladinos, who make up the largest part of Honduras's population. The Ladinos are a caste created by the conquistadores, who bestowed their blood as well as their name on them. For in ancient Spain a "ladino" was one who spoke another language in addition to his own and the term was applied to the Indians of the New World who acquired the language and the customs of the conquerors.

The conductor draped himself unceremoniously over the seat ahead and asked in a conversational way for our tickets. "Have to go slow through the towns," he apologized. "Can't tell what we'll hit. If this narrow-gauge runs over so much as a pig, the fault, of course, is the railroad's. Scarcely a day goes by that we don't have to shove off the body of a dead man they've draped across the track. Favourite trick of these Ladinos, you know." He shifted his plug to the other cheek and spat accurately past the pained look on Christine's face. He dabbed his trickling mouth and perspiring bald spot with a red bandana and continued:

"Yeah, a favourite stunt. A man's killed and they drag him to the train track. If we hit the corpse they arrest the whole train crew—even if the body's got ten pounds of slugs in it. And the train's got to stop where it is till a United Fruit lawyer comes to bail us out.

"If you're going to stay in this country you better remember never to touch any one who's been shot. Honduras law has it that the last man seen with the body is the guilty party. Or so they say. Why, I had a friend at Truxil-low, nice sort of fellow. He runs a drugstore. One day a Ladino tries to jump off a moving train, falls under the wheels, which lopped off both legs—clean as a machete. So my friend runs out of his store, puts a tourniquet on the stumps. But the man dies. And my friend gets arrested for murder. Course they got him out, but it cost money.

"Now he jes' lets 'em lay. Besides that, anybody who moves a body before the police get there gets fined five hundred lemps. That's *lempiras*, national money here. . . . Well, here comes the inspector to ask you questions." And he ambled down the car to finish collecting tickets.

The police inspector was not oppressively military in his white pants and loose shirt. He wore a broad-brimmed fedora and a Colt .45 with an iridescent handle. He examined our passports and dictated over his shoulder to a copper-coloured secretary the answers to his detailed questions about our business in Honduras. The politics of the country are fairly typical of Central America. At the time of our visit the Conservatives, popularly called the Colorados, were in the saddle, and that year the president's constitutional term of four years was extended to ten years by the Conservative Congress. We gathered that members of the Opposition (the Blancos) were not very welcome.

When the inspection was over, Christine propped her legs on the seat ahead, rolled her sweater into a pillow, and dozed off. I watched the interminable banana trees go by until their ubiquitous green awoke a line I had run across somewhere: "Already has the earth changed to quetzal feathers, already has it become green. Already the rainy season is here." I was bitten by the old obsession. I not only dreamt about the quetzal; I saw it when I shut my eyes, and heard *Quetzalcoatl, Quetzalcoatl, Quetzalcoatl* in the clatter of the train over the sleepers. "The earth has changed to quetzal feathers. . . ."

Suddenly I saw the connection. The green foliage of the tropical spring and the green feathers of the quetzal made a pattern. In the dim antiquity of the Toltecan past, when Teotihuacan was a rude settlement and men created gods, the brilliant, unchanging green of the quetzal became symbolic of creation, and since primi-

tive peoples have invariably made gods out of unusual animals it was only natural to take the quetzal as the embodiment of spring, fertility, and creation.[1] The concept of the god grew from this, and Quetzalcoatl became to these primitives—the Toltecs themselves being so ancient as to be almost mythical—the god who created the world. They early associated the bird with the snake —how early it isn't possible to guess, but the snake was almost a symbol of primitive godhead, being a natural cryptograph for inscrutable death. A symbol of new life and ancient death, combined in one figure, was tantamount to divinity.

(I mused further as the train jogged on towards Olanchito.) Quetzalcoatl became the god of the winds, the air, medicine, healing, fertility, planters; he became the god of artisans, gamblers, thieves, and fishermen; he discovered learning and the practical arts, writing and astronomy, stone engraving, gymnastics, the calendar; he was the fire-bringer and the messenger, the protector of travellers and madmen, the god of wealth and buried treasure. Obviously, I thought, he was not merely two gods, as the scholars say. He was all things to all men. He began as a bird (god of the winds), and as a spectacular green bird at that (god of fertility and creation), and gradually became anthropomorphic, as all gods do. But in a region where there are more than thirty languages and where there were innumerable cultural collisions—meetings of savage tribes with civilized nations—it was only natural that he should have become anthropomorphic in a special way. Each nation worshipped him in its own image. The Pipils sacrificed their young bastard sons to him, while among the gentle, highly civilized Mayas such a bloodthirtsy god could not exist. To them Quetzalcoatl (whom they called Kukulkan) began as a divinity and became something more of a prophet. This mythical being, Quetzal-

[1] The word, in Nahautl, means "precious green."

coatl, might have remained largely unknown to the world, had it not been for one thing. He, and the myths which surrounded him, assisted—more, they were intimately responsible for—the defeat of the Aztecs by Cortés and his Spanish legions. Why? And here was the curious tradition.

The Plumed Serpent was supposed to have had a white skin and, even more unusual for Indians, a long black beard. He was, so tradition has it, a portly personage with eyes that some insist were blue, and although his tunic was simple his head-dress was an elaborately carved, brilliantly jewelled affair, simulating the jaws of the snake, and from the top of this head-gear flowed numerous long tail feathers of the quetzal. Aztecan mythology has it that Quetzalcoatl fell afoul of another god Tezcatlipoca, who drove him from the sacred city of Tollan, and burnt the buildings he had erected and destroyed his temples. Thereafter Quetzalcoatl made his way to the Atlantic, stopping for some time at the city of Cholula (located in the environs of Puebla, Mexico), where he remained for twenty years, and where the people erected a sumptuous temple to his honour—a temple still extant, with the plumed serpent motif carved about the whole façade of the building. Now we know that the Plumed Serpent's expulsion from the city of Tollan, while given in myth, is merely the parallel of a historical fact. For Quetzalcoatl is nothing more than the personification of the Toltec tribes, while Tezcatlipoca is the symbol of the Aztecs, who as rude nomadic tribes overran the higher civilizations as the Romans did the Greeks, as the Goths the Romans. Moving down into the Mexican valley, these Aztecs eventually overran the entire southern country, causing a complete disruption of tribal economy. The Toltecs, who were primarily a peaceful people, excellent craftsmen and builders, found their lack of belligerence their ruin. So complete was the eventual conquest of the

Toltec culture by the Aztecs and its absorption by the conquerors that for centuries archæologists did not believe in the actual existence of the Toltecs.

But what happened to Quetzalcoatl? There was the rub. Legend has it that he went to a part of Mexico then called Coatzacoalcos (now identified as Puerto Mexico in Vera Cruz), and on those shores he built a raft of serpent skins. There, bidding farewell to some of his compatriots who had followed him, and promising to return again and reinstitute an epoch of peace and plenty, he sailed away on his raft (*coatla-pechtli* they called it) to the mythical realm of Tlapallan, the Valhalla of the Indians.

Somewhere ahead a whistle shrieked. The train jerked and then slowed down. My thoughts interrupted, I arose, walked to the end of the platform, and watched the train shifted to a siding. Then again came the shriek of an impatient, raucous whistle—and the fruit express laboured by. Everything must stop in this banana land for the fruit. Car after car passed by, laden with green bananas being carried rapidly to port, there to be loaded aboard the refrigerated ships. Our train moved back to the main narrow-gauge tracks, and once again we were rumbling along. Back in the seat Christine still dozed and, copying her, I put my coat under my head, leaned back—and before long I was again musing on the Plumed Serpent myth.

After Quetzalcoatl's dramatic disappearance, throughout Mexico the tribes remembered his promise and confidently awaited his return. And as the Aztecs imposed their sovereignty on the land they, like the Romans, began to adopt the tribal gods of the people they had conquered, and Quetzalcoatl soon occupied an important niche in their hierarchy of gods also. By 1502 the Aztec nation reached its apogee with the election of Montezuma II as emperor of the Mexican confederation, and with him came a pomp unknown to his predeces-

sors. The dress of the nobles became more flamboyant. The use of quetzal plumes was general among the higher ranks and the demand for these plumes so great that a law was promulgated decreeing death to any one who killed a quetzal and to any commoner who had quetzal plumes in his possession, much less wore them.

Meanwhile Quetzalcoatl's fame grew, and the legends concerning his return were seized on by the priestly caste to assuage the dissatisfaction of the rabble. In 1507 numerous phenomena occurred in Mexico which seemed to Montezuma ominous portents of a catastrophe. Temple turrets took fire, three-headed comets were seen in the skies above the Mexican capital, Lake Tezcuco overflowed its banks. The necromancers foresaw in all this a promise of the imminent return of Quetzalcoatl. In 1519 runners brought the intelligence that four strange sailing vessels had been sighted off the coast of what is now Vera Cruz, and when the people in them landed, the Indians saw that they had white skins and black beards and rode on curious animals as if they were one with the beast. At this point Quetzalcoatl is said to have shown himself to the people and told them, "Quetzalcoatl has returned."

To his couriers, Montezuma hastily entrusted gifts that were to be brought to these "sons of Quetzalcoatl." When Hernando Cortés and his men (for they were the white-skinned gods) saw these gifts of excellent craftsmanship they realized they were on the fringe of a rich empire. The heretofore luckless Cortés had reached El Dorado. He must have puzzled over the gifts, for among them was a carved head-dress, a crown of gold and turquoise, shaped like an open-mouthed snake, festooned with quetzal plumes, and other priestly apparel. Nor had Montezuma neglected other things. Remembering that Quetzalcoatl's face had been deformed by his enemies, the emperor sent a beautiful turquoise-inlaid mask.

Cortés soon disabused Montezuma; yet these white-skinned, black-bearded strangers, even while they slaughtered the inhabitants, were still regarded as harbingers of Quetzalcoatl. Cortés demanded an interview with the emperor. Montezuma vacillated and tried by guile to keep him from coming to the interior of Mexico. Cortés burned his ships, took his small party of four hundred and fifty men with their retinue of natives, and marched on the capital. Still believing that they might be messengers of Quetzalcoatl, the Mexican chieftain did not give battle, but allowed the Spaniards slowly, relentlessly, to break down the barriers of small Indian tribes who opposed him. Tribes like the Tlaxcala, who had been at war with the Aztecs for centuries, enlisted in the forces of the Spaniards.

It did not take Cortés long to appreciate that his successes were due in part to the myth of Quetzalcoatl, and everywhere he did his best to kindle awe of his person. And so sacred had the plumes of the quetzal become that when Cortés placed the shimmering feathers in his own helmet, the wavering Indians became convinced of his divinity. The conquest of Mexico was assured, for realization and opposition came far, far too late.

III

THE VALLEY OF YORO

"OLANCHITO! Olanchito!"

Our friend the conductor swung down the aisle, thumping the sleeping passengers.

"Well, here you are," he shouted to us. "Olanchito, right on time. From now on you'll be living on tortillas and frijoles—and God help you." And he went on conscientiously to the end of the car, bawling, "Olanchito, Olanchito, *la ultima estación.*"

As we shook ourselves and stepped down the platform to claim our gear at the baggage car, a little truck pulled up and a slender young man in a vast Stetson jumped out and strode across the platform to us.

"Von Hagen?" he queried. "I'm Abner Beasely. Stadelman wrote me you were coming, so I dashed down as soon as I could get away from the farm. I'm paymaster and to-day is pay-day." That explained the Colt automatic stuck in his belt.

He looked distinctly puzzled as I presented Christine. "I knew you were travelling with your wife," he explained, "but I didn't know naturalists looked like this. Thought at least from your name that you'd be all stooped over and whiskery." He helped load our baggage into his truck. We scrambled in beside him and were off with a honk that sent the dogs and pigs of Olanchito flying in all directions.

We stopped for a few minutes to have a look at Olanchito's sixteenth-century church. It was hard to believe that San Jorge de Olanchito had been a city a century before the first English colonists settled at Plymouth. At the time of its founding the Medici were being driven from Florence, Cardinal Wolsey was being

deprived of his offices by Henry VIII, Pope Clement was crowning Charles V as Holy Roman Emperor, and Pizarro was subjugating the Incas in Peru. It had been a wealthy place, for gold was abundant in the surrounding streams, but this too was hard to believe as you went through the unprepossessing streets. There were rows and rows of decrepit adobe houses painted white and blue, with red-tiled roofs, and there was a stillness about the place as if time rested here without changing anything. Yet the hotel where Beasely dropped us boasted a shower bath, and the beds were clean. The food was better than the usual tortillas, beans, fried bananas, chilli peppers, and the coffee was strong enough to wake a corpse. Though we had only been in Honduras four days, our eight months in New York and London were sloughed off as if they had never been. We had settled back into Latin-American life as you fall back to sleep after quelling the alarm clock.

Beasely returned from his duties as paymaster to find us bathed and rested, sitting comfortably on our balcony regarding the immobile city. He sat down and we started to discuss our plans.

"Now you can get to Yoro, your jumping-off place, in two ways—either by mule or by 'plane. Oh, yes, by aeroplane. Didn't you know that Honduras has one of the finest aeroplane systems in the Americas? A fleet of about forty tri-motor Fords. All the pilots are Americans, but the amazing thing about it is, it's cheaper to go by air than by mule."

He looked over our baggage—stacks of boxes and bags and fibre cases. "You'd need about eight mules for this stuff—average of a hundred and fifty pounds to a mule. At the present rate that would cost you—let me see—about twenty-five bucks as far as Yoro, and another ten to Portillo Grande, which is back in the mountains a day or two from Yoro. Riding mules for the two of you and your guide, and of course an inn for two nights—

again before we reached the valley of Yoro, for we had to clear a ridge of four-thousand-foot mountains before we settled into the valley and sighted the capital of the department.

From the air the little town of Yoro is as romantic as a travel poster with its red-tiled roofs and fertile surrounding valley. But we guessed, and experience later checked it, that this was the capital's only flattering aspect. Even so it appeared inadequate for the chief city of a province that occupies eight thousand square miles, the whole north-west corner of the country. The handy statistics I had picked up while plotting the trip informed me that the population totals nine thousand persons. Now that we had arrived it was hard to see how even that many people could be supported by the stretch of uncultivated forests we had passed on our way in. I find myself wondering in all parts of Central America just what the people eat, for the cornfields usually look too small even for those who sow them.

We circled the air-field, reconnoitring for cattle, and came down before a fancier station than the one we had left at Olanchito. This one had a tiled roof, the other only thatch. As we taxied to a stop an ox-cart came out to unload our cargo.

Beasely had arranged for everything. Pack mules and riding mules awaited us, attended by two hard-looking muleteers and their *patrón*, who was introduced to us as Don José Ramirez. While the animals were being loaded and the drivers went through the conventional hocus-pocus incidental to the process—the weighing and lifting and wrangling for lighter loads for their particular mules—Christine pulled a chair out of the trimotor and sat down to marvel at the splendid connections we had made. New York to Yoro in eight days, and mules on hand to carry us instantly to the haunts of a bird so mysteriously shrouded in legend that scholars considered it mythical for four centuries. It

was all too orderly, too simple. Of course it had been Stadelman's foresight and Beasely's careful efficiency that had done it, but for us who had spent some years in this part of the world, it seemed a miracle. Alone and unaided we should have taken at least two weeks—barring accidents.

We chatted inconsequentially with Don José. Looking about, I was struck by the change in the people. There were few negroes, mostly Ladinos, and many pure Indians. Their full, smiling faces and robust bodies were in high contrast to the sallow, overworked breeds of the malarial banana lowlands. Even the guns were less prominent. Don José carried one, but he was a well-to-do merchant in Yoro, and one guessed his was largely a mark of prestige, proving him rich enough to afford a fine revolver from the United States. None of the Ladinos, dressed in their high-crowned sombreros, white cotton trousers, and leather sandals, was armed—unless you count the machetes, those indispensable jungle knives used to pare the toenails, cut the corn, castrate the pig, and occasionally to menace a fellow-citizen when sorely tried.

Mounting our mules and thanking Don José for his help, we left the air-field behind—and our muleteers too, still unable to settle among themselves the distribution of our heterogeneous cargo. They knew where we were bound and would catch up before the end of the day.

Beasely, riding ahead of us on Don José's white horse, his ten-gallon Stetson tilted back vertically against the setting sun, looked the perfect picture of a cowboy. And indeed the landscape co-operated in the illusion that this was Texas. Cactus was plentiful, and the sharp-pronged mesquite. Acacia in bloom gave off a sweet, heavy odour, permeating the evening air. Christine declared the whole place idyllic and turned off the road to botanize in the saddle. Her wavy blonde hair caught

up some of the rays of the sun, lending it a cast which she would have paid dear to have been able to retain—but such an illusion is not found in any hairdresser's formula.

As befitting the heaviest member of the party, the *dueño* of the beasts had given me a strong and, I soon learned, a high-spirited mule. For a moment after mounting, I thought he was being transformed into a Pegasus as he whirled about, leaving the earth in curvetting that a thoroughbred might envy. There was a moment of slight discomfiture during our struggle for mastery which was climaxed by the mule's breaking out in a bottom-breaking trot the moment I touched him with my spurs. So we compromised—that is, *el macho* won out and set his own pace.

We proceeded across the valley of Yoro, which is twenty-five hundred feet above sea-level, my mule cavorting and prancing like a stallion. Ahead of us could be seen the ranges of the Sierra de Sulaco, whither we were bound. For the first hour I kept twisting nervously in my saddle to see how far behind were the pack mules and our delicate cargo. My various instruments wouldn't stand the kind of jouncing I was getting. Eventually, though, my fears were deadened by shock, and the effect of this halcyon landscape made me indifferent even to the idiosyncrasies of my beast.

And just as the lazy dusk began to settle into night, we turned into a little ravine and rode up to our immediate objective, an adobe house where Beasely had told us we should find a *posada* (lodging) for the night. As we dismounted and entered the tiny corral we were set upon by a pack of hungry curs, barking hysterically till Beasely picked up a stick and cursed them, whereupon they drew in their tails and skulked off. Their barking brought out the *dueña* of the house. She held a pine torch high and peered into the shadows. Then she saw Beasely.

"My son, my son," she called him. "Abnercito—at last you have come, after all these years." And her wrinkled brown arm embraced him. She was a neat, barefooted little lady in a gingham gown and (I thought I recognized Stadelman's touch) an apron. When Beasely introduced us as friends of Stadelman's, she took us all under her benevolent motherly wing and led us into the house.

Her grandchildren brought more torches to light the whitened mud walls and clean mudpack floor of the little house. One end of the room was filled by a vast four-poster, obviously home-made, with its clean woven straw *petate* over a spring of rawhide thongs, and over all a richly embroidered counterpane. In the opposite corner stood a Singer sewing machine.

When *la patrona*, as she was very properly called, discovered that we had not yet eaten, she briskly marshalled her grandchildren and sent them scurrying off after milk and coffee and fuel for the *cumal* on which tortillas are made. Then she came back to envelop Beasely again and to explain that he and Stadelman had been like sons to her for the two years they lived up on the mountain at Portillo Grande. I don't imagine her whole wealth could have been pawned for ten dollars, sewing machine included. Yet she was as gracious as the mountain air and treated us like gods come to call. Soon we were munching fried black beans, thick, hot tortillas, and crunchy pork *chichirones*, washed down with rich black coffee sweetened by native brown sugar. We listened to *la patrona's* account of the preparations she had made since getting Abner Beasely's letter. She wasn't quite ready for us, she explained, since the padre hadn't got around to read the letter about our coming till the other day. Her nephew was still busy thatching the roof of the old kitchen up at Portillo Grande, and she had arranged for his wife to come and be our cook —or as she said, make our tortillas. She had spoken

to others who lived up there, and recommended them as guides for our hunting. And she rambled on reminiscently about the times when Beasely and Stadelman were living where we should live after tomorrow.

We slept heavily in spite of the coffee, and in the morning we breakfasted on the same fare that had been our supper. Then with a sincere *mil gracias* we rode off, passing our muleteers as they struggled with their laden animals up the narrow ascending road. In the early afternoon, after a hard continuous climb that brought us to four thousand feet, we came to the place that would be our base camp for the next months.

Portillo Grande, so called because the pass is a breach leading from one profound valley into an even deeper one on the other side, commands the road for miles. Looking back, we could see its winding shape cicatrizing the pine woods—and far in the distance the south end of the valley of Yoro. Portillo Grande is an eagle's nest, a ledge no more than forty feet wide, falling away into the gullies that drop a thousand feet to either side. Its tiled wooden buildings were crippled with years of desuetude. *La patrona*'s nephew was busy thatching the kitchen lean-to as we came up. The mud floor of the hut was eloquent of spiders and scorpions and we decided to live in our tent for the time being, until we had had a better look at its unfenestrated interior.

We had no sooner dismounted than Abner Beasely told us he must start back to meet the 'plane for Olanchito. We had hoped for a couple of days of his invaluable company, but there was no dissuading him from getting back to work, so we opened a bottle of cognac and drank a toast to the expedition. With that he mounted and rode off. Beasely had put himself out for us in the most elaborate way; several days away from his

job was the least of it. And he had done it all as casually as you would pick up a handkerchief. We watched him down the long road till he was only a black-and-white speck. Then we turned to our own affairs and the quest we had before us.

IV

INTO THE CLOUD FOREST

FROM our narrow jutting spur on the Sierra de Sulaco we could see up and down, east and west, but the Sierra de Pijol opposite us to the north was hidden by ranges of hills, and the mountain behind us to the south was concealed by the great pines that creaked and moaned in heavy northers. To the west, about three miles away, we could see the little village of Santa Marta clinging to a shoulder about our own level. But it was behind our camp that my interest centred. There on the steep mountain lay the cloud forest, and I wanted to muster my guides and start off for it without stopping to unpack.

But Christine's reasoning prevailed, and I had to agree that it might be wiser to wait until we could organize our staff and buy additional food, so as not to dig too deeply into our stores. We had travelled comparatively light—at least so far as rations were concerned. Before starting into the country we had got up a list of the native food that would be available and based our commissariat on that. We carried scarcely any canned foods. In the States we had bought a large supply of dehydrated vegetables, spices, yeast, and flaked dried fruits. Flour and sugar we had got in Truxillo. This was our basic food supply, and we hoped to supplement it with native provender wherever possible.

La patrona's barefoot niece, Juana, watched us unload, and her black eyes shone as we hauled out box after box of what to her were exotic foodstuffs. While her husband repaired the roof of the tumble-down adobe kitchen building with a thatch of palm leaves, she made us a clay stove and painted it gleaming white

with the milk of ashes. In two days the kitchen was ready and we switched to the food of the country. Juana made our tortillas the way we liked them—little and delicate, specially salted and served hot from the *cumal*. I showed her how we liked our *frijoles asados*. Literally that means nothing more than roast beans, but if you mash the boiled beans with fried onion and chilli powder, and fry the mixture a crusty brown, and serve it with thick sour cream—it means something very special even if you have it day after day for lunch and dinner. Once this was established we could turn to more important things.

The fourth day after our arrival I left Christine to the elaborating of her kitchen and went down to the village that huddles beside the path on the other side of the Portillo. It consists of about a dozen windowless palm-thatched huts made of plaster and reed wattles, clustered on the only horizontal acre on that flank of the Sierra. The Ladino villagers had been friends of Stadelman's. He had written to them that we were coming, and his letter passed from hand to hand and from village to village, through half the vicissitudes listed on the façade of the New York Post Office. Finally arrived at its address, it had lain unread for weeks, since the people (and this goes for eighty per cent of the Hondureños) are blank illiterates. When the Padre made his semi-annual round he passed through Portillo Grande and stopped to make good the unchurched weddings, legitimize or baptize the children born since his last visit, and recite a De Profundis for those who had died. Having attended to God's business, the Padre read Stadelman's letter and told them that friends of his were coming, and for his sake they should be helpful in every way possible.

So when I came down the hill I was recognized at once, and an elderly man in a sombrero came out to meet me. I recognized Juan Castro, the head man of the

community, from Stadelman's description; he had a thin bristling moustache that stuck out like cat's whiskers, high cheekbones, and brown, porcine eyes. We shook hands, traded *tanto gusto's*, and I sat down in the chair he offered me. We spoke in circumlocutions, about the weather and the corn and politics, coming obliquely towards what we both knew my visit concerned. First I asked whether I could buy coffee from him. That is the main product of the mountain agriculture. Then I bought lard and corn and beans. Having disposed of business and the customary amenities, I got down to the point.

"Señor, Don Raimundo"—that was Stadelman—"has written to you of the object of my visit, that I have come to catch the quetzal bird alive. Since you and your sons know the mountain so well, I have hopes that you will perhaps see fit to let me have two of your sons as guides."

The old man shifted, tugged at his whiskers, and examined me contemplatively. Then, "Señor," he said, "we seldom have occasion to go to the mountain now. Formerly we went there often for palm leaves to thatch our roofs, but now we get thatch from the valley. The people of Portillo Grande do not wish to go to La Peña any more." He pointed an accusing finger towards the mountain top. Of La Peña he explained that "It is that white cliff you see sticking out on the mountain, above the pine trees, below the cloud forest."

I followed the outstretched forefinger with an eager eye. Tall moss-draped pines dominated the lower slopes, but above the jutting white mass of rock, which was a landmark across the whole valley, the pine forest ended abruptly. Above La Peña the ghostly white stems of the Cecropia trees stood out like immense candelabra and their pale leaves fingered the darker verdure of the jungle. Higher still the autumnal colour of the Liquidambar tree (much like the maple) marked the still

darker foliage of the cloud forest—the area locally referred to as Eyebrow of the Mountain.

"But surely," I objected, "there are quetzals up there."

"*Si*, Señor, there are. And my sons helped Don Raimundo Stadelman kill many of them for his museum. But after he left, the demon of the mountain—which every one knows about—came down to Portillo Grande. Some say it was angry because we helped kill the quetzal. . . ."

So that was what Beasely meant.

I didn't take this weird superstition lightly. It might very well mean disaster for our expedition. I pressed the old man for a more concrete explanation. Just what was it he feared? But I could get nowhere. Nothing but vague answers and side-glances. If it had been a dangerous animal that lived there old Juan would have been specific, but his insistence that the Thing was something terrible and evil indicated that this was a rooted superstition, and Stadelman had said nothing more definite than that.

When Juan accidently named it La Niña, the little girl, I couldn't help thinking of *Green Mansions* and Rima in Hudson's curious romance. If such a creature "haunted" the cloud forest, it only added spice to the quest. But I changed the subject to something more concrete. Did Juan know when the quetzals have their mating season and when they lay their eggs?

"Señor, I do not know. Don Raimundo, when he was here, would shoot the quetzals and prepare their skins. He never searched out their nests. But perhaps my sons would know."

The old man called and his four sons came out of the house. They were an uncouth-looking lot, erratic tufts of hair sprouting on their unshaven bony faces. But their black eyes bespoke, somehow, the hunter. They offered their flaccid hands for me to shake and we joked for a moment, not coming too directly to the subject.

When I finally asked them if they knew about the nesting habits of the quetzal, they shrugged with outturned palms, like quizzical ghetto tailors, and uttered a unanimous "*Quien sabe?*"

The nineteenth-century English naturalist, Sir Richard Owen, had seen the eggs of the quetzal in June, and this, supporting my own deductions, had decided me to arrange my trip so that we should arrive at that season. I had found that the other members of the trogon family lay in April, May, and June. It was reasonable to suppose that the quetzal would nest at about the same time of year. As I had designs on the nestlings and little hope of taming the adult birds, I was anxious to get this point straight, and as quickly as possible. Further questioning brought out the reassurance that quetzals *had* been seen since Stadelman did his collecting. How common they were I should have to determine for myself.

I returned to the problem of finding a guide. I should need two men, one to guide me, the other to help Christine with her plant collecting. Nobody volunteered. They just exchanged swift glances as if to say, "The man's mad. What does he take us for?" I tried kidding them, charged cowardice, summoned the ghosts of their ancestors. "I shouldn't have believed that the descendants of the Spanish conquerors"—here there was a stir and a swelling of chests—"would be afraid of something called *la niña.*"

That got me a convert. The son called Chon spoke up—a bright lad with piercing eyes. We fixed his wages at one *lempira* a day, with food. At that, two more volunteered with a certain eagerness. I picked a round-faced youngster with an easy smile, for Christine's helper, and we agreed that the work should start next day.

. . . . .

Next morning, Chon called for me and we set out on our first survey of the jungle in which I hoped to find the quetzal's habitat. It had rained the night before, and as we began our climb at six in the morning heavy mists still hung over the valley, and there was no sun. We expected to be back by evening, so I took only a day's supply of food along with photographic equipment, including telephoto lenses and film I had supersensitized myself the night before.

I found directly how much I had softened in the States. I hadn't noticed the pine and oak give way to cedar and Liquidambar; I had struggled for breath and tried to keep my feet under me. Now, at five thousand feet, we stopped for a breather. The pine and oak were now heavily festooned with a mosslike Tillandsia hanging down as much as ten feet, like a grey-green veil, swaying in the breeze and giving the trees a strange and venerable aspect. While I rested—for my heart was knocking like a trip-hammer—the clouds broke, uncurtaining the valley below. For a moment the distant landscape stood out in the sunlight, then a heavy mist swept by, shutting us in more closely than before.

I followed Chon up the steep track, my hobnailed boots no match for the prehensile toes he sank in the mud. I slipped back at every step. We were following a near-vertical ribbon of yellow clay, which Chon averred was our path, though it belonged by rights to a trickling stream. And still the way lay upward and my breath came hard through the mouth. We reached a level shelf and another excuse to pause.

From there the path continued broader, but no more distinct, and Chon explained that this had been the way into the cloud forest that the Ladinos had used when they came to gather palm thatch. Beyond, the pines had ceased. It was the entrance to that mysterious rain-soaked jungle I was seeking.

The forests we entered now were buried in constant

gloom. It was a matted wilderness. Immense cedars, great smooth trunks that eight men could not surround, rose upward out of sight, encumbered by entwining wild fig trees, themselves burdened with masses of air plants that dripped incessantly. And all the trees were knotted together by liana cables that were like the serpents that entwined Laocoön.

Honduras has no single central range of mountains. It is a complex of deep undulating rolls, generally rising no higher than seventy-five hundred feet, yet crowned perpetually with clouds and such jungles as this one atop the Sierra de Sulaco. Some of these cloud-forest ranges run uninterrupted for twenty-five miles. To naturalists they are one of the most interesting regions for research in the tropics, a living text-book on the titanic contention of the species. Big trees crowd out the little ones and parasitic vines wind up their trunks smothering them in their tentacles. It is a struggle, but not necessarily cruel, since whether the strong devour the weak or the weak the strong, there is no compensation save in our human illusion. As one writer put it: "Nature is neither egoist nor altruist. She is an ensemble of forces wherein none cedes save under superior pressure."

As we penetrated deeper, blankets of white, heavy cloud mass drifted by, shedding a misty, penetrating rain. Throughout the forests, as we sloshed up the muddy trail, water tinkled and plopped and splattered from the parasites on the trees. Everything oozed. The ground is never dry in these jungles and the drippings grow into trickling rills that gush into streams cascading down the mountains.

As we stumbled through this labyrinth there rang out a tinkling like the notes of a mandoline carelessly caressed as prelude to a song. As we came nearer the sound stopped brokenly, but it resumed and we tracked it to a tiny green tree frog. Deeper in the forest a bull-

frog took up the tune in low gutturals that vibrated on the damp air like the drumming of a bass viol. Above in the eaves of the tree ceiling the snake hawk cried his raucous *waca-waca*, then broke off suddenly as the shadow of a harpy eagle scudded over the thin clouds. As soon as the apparition passed, the cries began again. Spider monkeys scrambled over a near-by sapote tree, screeching over the unripe fruit that hung down like clusters of melons. The vibrant cicada began its morning shrill, tentative at first, but soon taken up by friends and relatives till the volume from all parts of the forest ricochetted and you fancied the place a factory full of buzz-saws and steel files.

Birds were everywhere. Toucans, with their ridiculous overgrown beaks, bent down to peer at us, then flew noisily away. Woodpeckers sank their pneumatic drills into the dead trees. Motmots chased each other's racquet-shaped tails through the trees, playing the perennial game of you-chase-me, I-chase-you; it was their mating season.

One had to stop (as I did frequently) to catch the sweet melodies of the miniscule hilgero, whose singing voice was much admired by the Aztecs. And if I stood very still, trogons would fly swiftly down to perch a moment and be off again into the dense dripping verdure. Once, when I stopped by a rill to wash my streaming face, a humming-bird came to bathe beside me. It hung glistening in mid-air, thrusting its purple head into a spouting feathery frond, a picture of joy. I could hear the thrum of its wing-beat as it darted in and out of the trickle. But a pertinacious mosquito was after my neck, and my smack broke the trance. The bird skyrocketed off in a burst of greens and purples, so fast it seemed to disappear in the middle distance.

I suddenly realized the sun had broken through the mist. Now butterflies shimmered along the path. Yellow-and-white flecked Callidryas clung to the muddy

trail encircling bouquets of yellow-and-black Papilios, and as we walked they would rise up like a fountain of flowers that drifted into confetti behind us. On a branch beside the path an out-size Papilio was just loosening the last threads of its cocoon, undoing its wings, and acclimatizing itself to the bright air-swept world it would ornament for its few days. It had left the earth. It would no longer need to eat. The rest of its life would be pure luxury.

I thought of Anatole France saying that if he had created man he would have used the metamorphosis of the butterfly for his model. In his scheme men would accomplish in youth all the disgusting functions necessary to nutrition. Hunger should not defile love. Then in maturity men and women would enjoy a triumphant metamorphosis, unfurl shining wings, and live for a moment in the dewy grass, tasting the nectar of flowers and dying at last in a rapturous embrace. . . . All very well for a delightful French sybarite, I reminded myself, but it wasn't helping me find my birds. I was about to nudge my dreamy guide when the sounds of the jungle were suddenly pierced through by a lovely, clear, high, long-drawn note. It was repeated a moment later, this time a tone higher. Then again, higher still.

Chon rose silently and whispered for my shotgun. I threw off the safety and handed it to him. He edged noiselessly down the path, following the song. He had gone no more than ten yards when the song broke, and there was a noise like the crash of a cow stampeding through underbrush. A beat of wings. Then silence.

I knew the call. It was the Tinamou's. The Tinamou is about the size of a partridge, and resembles it superficially. It lives on the jungle floor and is polygamous. Its mating season lasts all year, or very nearly, and it is the male which hatches the eggs, taking care of as many nests as its philandering will permit. The doleful note we had heard was the mating cry of the female Tinamou.

The rain forests of Honduras: jungles reaching up toward the clouds.

In the interior of the cloud forest, 6,000 feet above sea level, the tree ferns grow luxuriantly

It is a very stupid bird. It spends most of its time on the ground, but when you disturb it, makes no attempt to hop away in silence. It flushes suddenly and crashes through the brush with the noise of a whole covey. This Tinamou hen had the impudence to break into flutelike song again, near enough the path for Chon to to get a sight on her. But he didn't get his shot. Suddenly he shrieked and dropped the gun.

"*Cuidado! Cuidado*, Señor! Look out for the ants." In his eagerness to bag the Tinamou, Chon had walked right into a column of Army Ants—the terrible Ecitons, each an inch in length, which move in compact thousands. They are dark and rapacious, with long sickle mandibles, and these were storming the insect countryside carrying away every living thing they could lift. Cockroaches were bring dragged off by scores, white and succulent in their last moult, and the smaller ants would pounce on the prey, biting and tearing as the bigger ones carried it, stealing a free ride. Seeing the advance of these insect Huns, spiders swung themselves in mid-air. I saw a grasshopper fall into the middle of the moving column. A gang of Ecitons caught its legs, but the hopper made one more spring, misjudged, and fell into a wasp nest over which other Ecitons were swarming. It was a fatal landing. In a moment the unfortunate hopper was cut up before my eyes and carried away in fragments.

These Eciton ants have no permanent nest. They move into a new area, full of insensate hunger, and devour everything in their path. Then they pick up their brood, in its various stages of growth, and find another temporary camp site, while their army moves out to harry the neighbourhood. The soldier ants are twice as large as the workers, and if you tap the ground or walk into a column, as Chon had, the soldiers rush forward to attack. Yet the whole tribe is blind. Some of them do have rudimentary ocelli on the tops of their

heads—minute, simple eyes capable of distinguishing light. The rest are stone-blind and follow each other over the trail by smell. Each gives off a characteristic odour which his fellows pick up on those curious organs of taste, smell, and touch, the antennæ. Blindness is an advantage in their particular kind of annihilating warfare. It keeps them together; it prevents any individual side excursions that might weaken the column and diminish the ferocity of the fighting forces. But whether the ants are rapacious because they are blind or blind because they are rapacious is a moot question. This combination of predatory fury and blindness should not be, metaphorically, entirely lost on our own mundane problems.

"Are we going to look for the quetzals, Señor?"

I jumped up. "*Caramba*, Chon! I'm sorry. I completely forgot, watching those ants."

"Those devils can be found everywhere," Chon muttered, rubbing his bitten feet. "But the quetzals are more difficult." Yet Chon's dubious enthusiasm was not enough to persuade him to cut off from the beaten track and head into the deeper jungle. It took all my cajolery and a ruthless attack on his Spanish pride to shame him into following me into the tangle of virgin wilderness. He was not happy when we penetrated there, and kept glancing over his shoulder and gaping into the shadows, as if he expected every minute to confront a ghost. Gradually, however, the spell of the peaceful forest eased his fears and we circled in and out, crisscrossing the path at wide angles, tensely alert for some sound or trace of our game.

In the afternoon the sun appeared again—this time for a longer spell—and the forests shook off their cloud pall. From the lushness of the vegetation one would have judged this to be a torpid jungle at sea-level. The ground was overgrown with elegant Heliconia, tough

Melastomas, and succulent lopsided begonias. An unknown giant tree covered the ground with flowers that would have delighted Christine, and delicate maiden-hair ferns fringed the rocks. But all this I saw only intermittently. My eyes were focused on the treetops.

As we struggled back to the path we made out the solitary figure of a man with a pole in his hand. Chon hastened after him, and shouted a name. The other turned and waited. As we came up Chon explained this was Maxmil, a Jicaque Indian who lived at Gurrapára, above Santa Marta, the village we saw from our camp. He wore ragged cotton shirt and pants such as the Ladinos wore, but one look at him convinced me he was pure Indian. The pinched stare, the uncertain bearing, the vaguely pained look of him—all this gave me the feeling that he was undecided whether to be civilized altogether or to maintain the untrammelled traditions of his ancestry. The Jicaques had once ruled all of Yoro. I quizzed him and he seemed to resent me, grunting monosyllables in answer, shifting his tobacco wad rudely from side to side, and ruminating with all the majestic aplomb of an ox. A silver *lempira* changed that. He fairly snatched the coin and, pocketing it furtively, began to answer questions.

Yes, he knew the quetzal, he'd shot them with the blowpipe that leant riflewise on his shoulder. He had even seen their nests.

And where were they to be found?

He eyed me a moment. Then, cautiously: "The quetzal makes nest in a dead tree." Feeling he must do something more concrete for his *lempira*, he raised his blowgun and ticked a clay pellet against a dead tree standing off the path—"Like that one. The nest is like the house of the carpenter bird"—the woodpecker.

Now we were getting somewhere.

"Tell me, Maxmil," I said, copying his pidgin

Spanish, "what time—winter-time, summer-time—does quetzal put her eggs?"

He thought hard, stared at the road, squished his toes in the yellow mud like an embarrassed schoolboy. "I can't remember."

I prodded him, implored him to cogitate. But he gave up.

"Don't know any more," he said sadly. "My father knows more about quetzals." And there my informant bogged down abjectly.

Maxmil continued with us a little way up the mountain, and I signed him on to help us in our search. He told me there were other members of his tribe living beyond Santa Marta and that he would tell them what I wanted. I promised money or trade goods in exchange for their help, and gave him a couple more *lempiras* on account.

It was getting late and Chon suggested turning back. Wet to the skin, weary, and a little disgruntled, I splashed along in his wake and Maxmil's. The Jicaque walked with his eyes fixed on the trees, and Chon carried my gun point-blank in my face. We hadn't gone far when Maxmil stopped short and listened intently to something I couldn't hear. He went on a pace, then turned off into the forest. After a moment's concentration he whispered, "Quetzal."

The word revived me. We followed Maxmil, tensely, in single file to a narrow glade, and stopped under a big *aguacatillo* tree. Maxmil scrutinized the branches a moment, leaning this way and that, then pointed.

"See," he whispered, "the quetzal. . . . No, no, this way——"

I stared, straining towards the tree he indicated. I saw nothing. Chon dropped to his knee beside me and pointed. He saw it.

I was frantic with exasperation. Good Lord! To be so

close and not to see! Its colour mimicry must be perfect. I might as well have been blind.

Maxmil lifted his blowgun and shot into the branches. There was a slight flutter. A second later we saw the lordly spectacle of a full-grown male quetzal sailing off in unhurried, undulating flight. He was no bigger than a pigeon, but his two magnificent tail plumes streamed behind him, a yard long. He settled on the limb of a dead tree, utterly lovely and regal from the tip of his pouting beak to the end of the streaming plumes. I could see why he had been deified. I could well understand the ornithological ecstasies of John Gould when he wrote: "It is scarcely possible for the imagination to conceive anything more rich and gorgeous than the . . . plumage of this splendid bird; or more elegant and graceful than the flowing plumes which sweep pendent from the lower part of the back, forming a long train of metallic brilliancy."

If that could creep into a dry scientific monograph, try to conceive my joy as I made out the golden-green crest, the iridescent coverts on the black and white wings, and the crimson breast.

He sat there and I was content with the incarnation of my dream. Like Faust, I wanted to clutch the passing instant with a "*Verweile doch, du bist so schön!*" But instead I reached for my camera and snapped a photograph as the bird sat infatuated with his own song, flicking that rapier-like viridian tail. I crept closer for a better view, a dead branch exploded underfoot, and the quetzal took off without haste and swept away into the jungle.

I stood there a moment enchanted, staring into the lengthening shadows. Suddenly Chon, who had been squatting carelessly on his haunches, jerked to his feet. His hand gripped my arm in a spasm. I started to ask what it was. He silenced me with a dictatorial gesture. He listened with his mouth hanging open, then with a

quick move of alarm turned and stared at a thick bush behind him. His eyes were wide with fright, but when I demanded the cause he shook his head and said nothing. I was reassured to see Maxmil leaning stolidly on his blowgun, chewing. He certainly wasn't bothered by whatever terrified Chon.

At last, taking a grip on himself, Chon announced that it was growing late and that it was high time to be getting home. We followed him to the trail. Already the sky was darkening. Heavy vapours rolled across the trail to cover the cloud forest for the night. I splashed along behind Chon's fear-sped back, scarcely aware of the return trek. I was too entranced by the vision I had seen to mind being chilled with damp. I forgot even my eagerness to reach the fireside at Portillo Grande and to hear Christine's excited congratulations on my luck.

V

WHEREIN THERE IS A TAIL

Now that we knew for certain that the bird was here our quest entered another phase. We had two things to do next: organize, then observe one of the birds throughout an entire day to determine its complete habit pattern. In order to do this it would be necessary to go to the cloud forest for a sojourn of several days.

"And this time," Christine put in firmly, "you don't go off without *me*."

So we packed our little balloon-silk tent, assembled all the equipment our mules and later our Indian friends would be able to haul, and set out for the cloud forest.

Past the little village of Santa Marta we rode, mounted on our slow mules. Frightened, half-naked children scampered into the huts as we came in sight and peeped after us as we started up the heavily wooded slopes of the Sierra de Sulaco. Up and up we rode, till we emerged in the little draw, the valley of Gurrapára where the huts of the Jicaques lie scattered and their cornfields hang perilously on the sides of the mountains that lead up to the cloud forests. Here we met Chon and Maxmil. They had preceded us to this cloud-dank hamlet to recruit additional carriers from among the villagers.

We left our mules here and continued up and still up, struggling along behind our pack-laden porters, the whole procession slipping and sliding in the yellow mud, till the village of Gurrapára was far below us and we had entered the fastness of the cloud forest itself. Arrived at a break in the forest, the men threw down

their packs and began building a lean-to under Christine's direction, while I set off with Maxmil, hoping for another glimpse of a quetzal.

Not far up the thin path, a bat-shaped shadow fluttering from a tree trunk brushed past my cheek and swept erratically down the narrow aisle of trees.

Maxmil shook his head to my question: "No, not bat," he corrected me. "Butterfly."

In all my collecting I'd never seen one that size! I quickly assembled my net and started in pursuit. The creature (whatever it was) had attached itself to a mottled grey tree trunk and flattened down against it in excellent imitation of the bark. Once having spotted it, I felt certain I could catch it there. I came within six feet of it, my net poised, and was even more astonished by its size. It was not a butterfly, but a moth. There are few like it and I was sure this was a *Thysania agrippina*, one of the largest moths in the world—about eleven inches from wing-tip to wing-tip.

I clapped the net over it, but the moth was too fast for me. It slipped out from under the swift net and fluttered off, to alight deliberately on another trunk with the same mottling, only a few yards away. I ran up, swung my net again, and missed. This time it fluttered off in alarm, but it moved so slowly, once launched, that I was able to keep it in view. I panted up a steep hill and found my quarry resting again, aping the fungus-splashed bark of a tree growing on top of the knob I had scrambled up. This time I got the moth into my net, but it was so huge that before I could flip the net over and imprison it, it was free again, hovering just out of reach teasingly in the air.

I cursed bitterly, made a vain wild swipe at it—and dropped my net, indifferent now. For there, waving casually from a hole twenty feet up the same tree, hung the two unmistakable metallic green tail feathers of a quetzal.

Maxmil came up quietly and I called ecstatically for him to see. "The quetzal's nest! Look!"

The plumes swayed slightly in the afternoon breeze, glowing like ancient gold leaf over ancient copper in the sun. My camera was unsheathed in an instant and I had my first scientific record to confute another tale that skirted between fancy and superstition down the centuries. I circled the tree and photographed the other side to disprove one of the most persistent legends about the quetzal: that he nests in a tree with two holes, one to look out of, the other to hang his tail out of, for it was contended that the quetzal would not turn in his nest for fear of damaging his tail. This nest at any rate (and all the others I was able to find afterwards) had only one entrance. And how could it be otherwise, when the nest was obviously the abandoned nest of a woodpecker? The quetzal's obtuse bill was no tool for cutting a second hole in the deadest tree.

Coming back to the tree, eyes riveted, I stumbled on a dead branch again, making a terrific racket in the sleepy silence of the afternoon jungle. The tail disappeared and next instant the bird's head appeared, the crest high with haughty anger. It sat there half a minute, jerking its head this way and that, inquisitive now. Perhaps it would have returned to the business of setting if Maxmil hadn't come up that moment, dragging a bundle of cut saplings and lianas behind him to make a ladder. At that the bird took off, but his flight was graceful and easy and he perched on a limb across the glade, quietly watching us on his knoll.

We strung the saplings together with a set of shaky steps, stayed the ladder against a neighbouring tree with lianas, and I climbed up the shaky structure, quivering with anxiety—more afraid of what would happen to the eggs if the rotten tree trunk should give way than of what would happen to me. The hole was twenty feet up. I reached it safely. I reached into my knapsack and got

out my flashlight; then, getting a scissors hold on the shaky ladder, I peered inside. I could see nothing. The nest was too deep, and the light that had seemed so providentially come to hand was useless. So I reached in, down and down, up to my elbow, felt the reassuring roundness of a smooth egg, and tenderly drew it out. It was about the size of a pigeon's egg and pale blue.

I was gratefully aware that my deductions had been correct. This was July 7 and the nesting season was in progress.

I dashed back to camp to tell Christine my exciting news, but I was too breathless to get it out, and stood for a moment, stammering helplessly. Then I told her how I had found the nest and we exulted over the new hope of conquest. I had Maxmil take two of his men to the nest and build a more solid platform from which I might observe the bird's behaviour. For an hour the jungle was full of the ring of the axe and the whir of the machete. At last a more dependable platform, bound together with lianas as thick as a ship's cable, was finished. I waited for a while till the echo of their labours had died away. Gradually the forest became normal again. The Cicada took up his monotonous stridence and under its cover I set out for the nest.

Climbing the ladder, I seated myself on top of the watchtower they had built for me, directly opposite the hole in the tree. A few yards off was a big *aguacatillo* tree, covered with fruit the colour of a ripe olive, cupped in a bright red acorn shell. This was evidently the quetzal's favourite fruit, and before long I was rejoiced by the sight of two fine male birds that swooped down to feed.

It was marvellous to see them. They took their meal on the wing, sweeping down at it, with spreading wings, to catch a cluster on the up-glide. They picked the fruit in the same way they caught flying insects, never coming to rest on a bough, but making a kind of sublime dinner

dance of their meal. Often they would hover there, taking a couple of swift pecks, then throw back their heads to gulp the *aguacatillo* whole—all at high speed. After consuming a few, one of the quetzals flew to a dead branch, perching there strangely motionless. After a moment his body was contorted with retching and he threw up the seeds.

From where I sat I could see the odd yoked toes which are the distinctive characteristic of the trogon family. There are ten genera of trogons, about fifty species. All of them have the first and second toes facing back, the third and fourth forward. Hence they are unable to use their feet for climbing and walk on flat ground with difficulty. Other yoke-toed birds (i.e., those having two toes backward, two forward, such as the woodpeckers) have the outside toes facing back.

Having dined well and digested, the quetzal I was watching raised itself to its full height and burst into song. It seemed to have chosen the open glade for this performance on purpose; the camouflage of heavy thickets would have defeated its aim—to attract the female. If only the quetzal's song were up to the consummate beauty of his plumage, no bird in the world would have won such poetic distinction. Unfortunately as with most of the trogons, his voice was unmusical—nothing more than a cacophonous, metronomic *cuk-cuk-cuk.*

The song would open low and throbbing, like the preamble of the Cicada, which promises mystery and passion. But on gaining volume it began to sound like more than one bird, and in full swing there was at least one note per second. With each note the long tail twitched like a pump handle, the sun caught the plumes, and with it went a shimmer of golden sparks.

This performer was not long in finding his audience. I soon heard an answering call in the distance, and after a protracted long-range duet a female appeared, very

demure, at the edge of the glade. She is less spectacular. She lacks the full golden-green covert on the coal-black wings and has no long tail feathers. Her breast, instead of the male's blood-red, is a Whistlerian study in grey and pale green. Yet taken by herself she is a remarkably handsome bird, with her olive, grey, and carmine colour scheme.

Turning his head quickly, the male bird spotted the female, and with that his song swelled to a raucous climax. Then he flung himself into the air to show off his fantastic plumage. He dived and looped, the outspread black-and-white tail firing the brilliant green plumes with contrast. The wings quivered in the sunlight—all in all, a stirring, magnificent show. But the lady was not impressed. She sat on her perch and pretended to look the other way, or watched no more than politely. The cavalier cock seemed to sense her indifference and was baffled. He returned crestfallen to his perch and sat there, stealing an occasional glance. Then suddenly, as if resolved on a more dynamic course, he made a dash for her, madly determined to sweep his inamorata off her feet. And she, not coy now, but looking genuinely frightened, uttered a scared cluck and fled into the foliage.

I waited long and patiently for their return. The other male had long since disappeared. Nothing happened. Then, remembering that the nest had been deserted all this while and fearful lest my presence deter the male from returning to his duty, I scrambled down from my tower and went off in the direction that Christine and her helpers had taken for their plant collecting.

I came up to them after a while in the centre of a forest of tree ferns. Christine was dwarfed by the great feathery fronds, and I found her in the midst of a hot argument with Chon, who couldn't get the idea of this botanizing.

"I can't seem to make him understand that without fruit or blossoms a botanical collection means nothing. . . ." And poor Chon, who'd never heard of botany, but had evidently grown bored by this criticism surlily remarked that he was no monkey. Besides, these trees were full of stinging ants.

I looked up the stem of the Heliocarpus in question—a giant tree with motley bark and vast leaves. The silky buff pods indicated it was a relative of the balsa, whose wood is lighter than cork and used for aeroplanes and life rafts. I grabbed hold of a dependent liana, tested its strength, and shinned up to the first branches. Some of the blossoms, faded and brown, still hung there. When fresh they are vase-like ivory flowers, favourites of the bees, the monkeys, and the butterflies. The flower is followed by a furry pompon, fit for a drum-major, formed of fine grey silk. I dropped Christine a fair eight-inch pod, but she was still not satisfied. She insisted that I try for a bunch of pods out near the tip of a branch. I edged out fearfully, reached for the biggest pod, and was astonished to see it turn into an animal.

"It's a balsa flower," Chon shouted. "A *flor de balsa.*" And so it was, a little silky Anteater. This was more of a rarity than the pods Christine was collecting, and I was delighted. It straightened up, less pleased with me and not impressed with my rarity. Its furry prehensile tail wound around the branch and it rose to its full ten inches, shutting its slitty eyes tight like a novice boxer, and raising its paws (each armed with a pair of hook-like nails) protectively before the sharp little snout. The grizzled fur had a uniform silver-gilt silkiness, exactly like the balsa pods. When it no longer felt the branch sway, it sank down, curled into a silvery ball without opening its eyes, and seemed ready to go to sleep. But a twitch of the bough started it up. It sprang into motion, spiked arms raised and swaying slightly, for all the world like a shadow-boxing leprechaun.

When I reached out to seize it, the sharp-pronged arms swished by my hand. The nails were rapier fast, moving back *en garde* instantly. So this little fellow could fight, as well as look like a fighter. I had Maxmil climb up and hand me his machete, lopped off the whole branch, and handed it down. Before I could warn her, Christine had come up to scratch the little creature's silky head. I expected her to lose some skin, at least, but the Anteater seemed to enjoy it. The head-scratching soothed it, and we went off to spend the rest of the afternoon playing with it in camp. When it grew bored with us, it began to stalk up and down the branch like a caged bear.

Most illustrations show the silky Anteater hanging upside down like a sloth, but I didn't find this pose typical. Our specimen moved along a branch in the usual way, except that its tail hung down behind, curling around the branch. The four toes of the hind feet grasped the branch on one side, the muscular heel clasping the other, so that I had the devil of a time pulling it off the bough. Obviously the tail and hind feet are its chief support.

Why the scientists have given this honey-coloured silk beastie such a name as *Cyclopes didactylus*—the two-toed cyclops—I couldn't imagine. The Anteater is neither one-eyed nor gigantic; it does have two toes, which the mythical beings who threatened Odysseus never had. Since it lives exclusively on termites and ants and we had no means of providing enough of these to keep it, towards evening we let the Anteater go. It was a shame we couldn't take it along, since no zoo in the United States has ever exhibited a specimen.

Soon afterwards the female quetzal returned to her nest. It was the first time I had seen her do so, and I was interested to observe how much more cautious she was than her mate. First we heard her call in the distance. Later we saw only her shadow as she came to perch on a

near-by branch. She sat there hiding for a while, then entered the nest with one swift swoop to take up the night watch.

Soon the sun set and the great banks of mist drifted in. The porters had all gone back to their village, promising to return in three days. We lighted our lamps, had supper, and crawled into our little pup tent to read awhile before dropping off to sleep.

At dawn when I put my head out it was damp and chilly. I examined the thermometers and jotted down my readings: It was July 30, altitude 5,200, temperature 59° F., humidity 58. . . . I had scarcely figured out in a sleepy way that this meant "saturation point" when it began to pour. I had got down to the nest by this time, and the shower was just beginning as the female quetzal popped up in the entrance of her nest and flew off.

I went back to dry off and have breakfast and was sitting in camp writing up my notes on the events of the crowded day before when it occurred to me that the male bird hadn't yet come back to the nest. That had me worried. I figured out that the temperature had averaged sixty degrees that morning and the nest had been untended for more than two hours. I walked down to my tower, as bothered as an expectant father. Just then the male quetzal appeared—casual as always, moving from branch to branch, either to examine the lie of the land or because he was loath to go indoors and begin the day's work. Finally, he flew into his hole, leaving his tail plumes hanging outside, as he had before. The cycle was complete.

We spent almost three days making observations of life in the cloud forest. But each day the birds grew more timid. Every time they left the nest they would stay away longer, and each time they returned more cautiously. I didn't want to upset their routine, so we

decided to return to Portillo Grande that afternoon. We had seen about as much as we could hope to see till the eggs were hatched. At noon on the third day the porters and guides returned as prearranged.

Chon scanned the surrounding ground as if looking for footprints. It obviously surprised him, indeed he looked disappointed, to find us still there and in good health. He had expected us to be carried off in the night by the Sisimici—as he called his evil genius of the cloud forest. The others said nothing, but when we got down to the village of Gurrapára the inhabitants gathered around us to marvel—as if we had returned from the dead. I could hear Chon whispering his amazement. Not only had he found us untroubled, but there hadn't even been any footprints on the ground. Perhaps it wasn't altogether true what they said about the Sisimici. At least it did not carry off gringos. But *quien sabe?*—who knows what to believe in this world?

Beside our mules a group of men with high-crowned straw hats sat round a covered basket. A cock fight, I supposed, but I had learned by now to ask no questions unbidden. I walked over to my mule and started to tighten the cinch. One of the men slouched over to me and asked absently whether it was true that I would pay as much as five *lempiras* for a fledgling quetzal.

Yes, I told him, it was true.

"Well, Señor, I have a live quetzalito in that basket."

"You have?" I tried to appear casual. I walked over to the basket as calmly as I could, threw back the flap, and saw inside a bird about the size of a two-weeks-old chick. Its plumage was grey and black and there was dainty brown down on its belly. I threw down the cloth in disgust. Was this a joke? Were they imposing on my gringo credulity?

"But it *is* a quetzalito," the man insisted. He took off the cloth and turned the basket around. As he did so I made out a V-shaped splotch of green on the fledgling's

Nestling : a young Quetzal perched on the edge of the gourd in which it was placed when captured

Nestling in the entrance to its nest in the cloud forest. Usually there are two offspring to a nest, and they take turns at the entrance to the woodpecker's hole where the nest is located, awaiting their parent's return with food

The first photo ever taken of a fully developed Quetzal

First flights : young Quetzals in an aguacatillo tree just after leaving their nest

back. I was convinced. No other bird had that royal green.

The men waited to see if I would really pay five *lempiras* for the bird or whether that was merely a bargaining price. Ceremoniously—for this was a matter of grave importance—I counted out the five *lempiras* into the finder's hand. If they saw I was in earnest, the rest of them would join the hunt. But I told them I was only buying this bird so that it would not die. I wanted none of them to remove birds from the nest unless I was around. If they would lead me to the nests I promised to pay them just the same.

And we rode back to Portillo Grande, proud as Cortés.

VI

SEARCH IN THE NIGHT

THOSE were the crucial days. Our fledgling got as much attention as a new-born child. We fixed it a nest in a gourd, simulating the hollow tree trunk where it was hatched. We fed it. We fussed over it till it must have longed for the placid indifference of its own parents. Food, in a way, was a problem. But in these first days our fledgling wasn't difficult to feed. I would simply snap a cloth in front of its gourd, to imitate the flapping of its mother's wings, and the bill would fly open greedily, gurgling, begging to be fed.

A gruel of cornmeal mixed with a few drops of mineral oil to offset the constant starch, this was its baby diet. A few days later we mixed crushed avocado with this, and thereafter a few drops of cod-liver oil. This last is an important ingredient of bird nurture under artificial conditions. It is successful as a preventive for vitamin deficiency diseases of the bones.

The bird grew quickly and seemed in excellent health. With this first success we grew increasingly confident. Only one point we never could understand: If it had been this easy for us, why had no one ever reported a similar success in the past? Why had this myth that the quetzal could not live in captivity taken such a firm hold on the minds of collectors?

Now the natives began coming to camp daily with reports of new nests. Each day I would return to the forest with the men to direct the building of platforms under the nests. But this daily intimacy with the quetzal's haunts inspired a bolder ambition. I wanted to see if I could capture a grown bird alive. As I foresaw it, the main difficulty would be to overcome the bird's initial

terror. A fine male might dash himself to pieces on the way down the mountain, and I wanted a healthy bird or none at all.

This problem had occurred to me before I started on the expedition and I now wanted to experiment with the expedient I had devised. I proposed to inject the bird with a mild sedative—a solution of nembutal. This barbital is extensively used as a sedative and anæsthetic for animals. Wild animals and birds are nervous and fiercely irritable when just captured. So I had got a laboratory to make up for me a special weak preparation of nembutal that would be suitable for my purpose. I planned to seize the bird in its nest at night, give it a quick injection under the wing. In ten minutes I hoped the bird would be completely anæsthetized and unable to do itself any harm. But an overdose would be fatal, and I had had no opportunity to experiment and determine the proper dosage.

Now I had my native helpers (who clearly thought I had been bewitched by the mountain demon, the Sisimici) bring me some young chickens. Not to eat, I explained. When they brought them they would see soon enough what I wanted them for.

When the chickens arrived, Christine weighed them carefully. The row of bottles and the hypodermic syringe fascinated my native laboratory assistants, and they gathered around me three deep. I estimated the dosage on the basis of one half a cubic centimetre to four ounces. Holding the first chicken firmly, I washed an area under the wing with alcohol and shot the needle home. My audience gasped. The chicken plunged. I held firm.

After ten minutes had gone by I released the chicken, setting it quietly on the ground. It lay perfectly still, inert, but very much alive. I went through the same procedure with each of my subjects, till they all squatted there, perfectly anæsthetized. We gave over the rest of

the afternoon to watching and noting down their reactions. After four hours the first came to. The others followed in order. They would open their eyes, blink dully, first move their wings, then their legs, and rise unsteadily. Within half an hour they were completely normal. The experiment had worked. I knew the approximate weight of the adult quetzals, and if I was careful in making the injection, there was no reason why it wouldn't work as well with them as with the chickens.

By now word of my quest had penetrated the remote villages across the Sierra de Sulaco and my helpers had become so assiduous that my supply of *lempiras* was almost exhausted. I had to take a few days off and ride into Yoro to cash a cheque. I also had to buy more corn and beans, for the consumption of our servants and guides was enormous. Besides, I was anxious to pick up a six weeks' accumulation of mail.

Among the letters was one from Dr Julian Huxley. At a recent meeting of the Council of the Zoological Society of London, some of its members had expressed a wish—since I seemed to be getting along so swimmingly—to have quetzals for their own aviaries. Would I please be so kind, then, as to secure—not alone the two birds originally ordered—but three more males and another female? Six quetzals! With two wanted by the Bronx Zoo in New York, that would mean that I would have to break the quetzal myth, not once, but eight times.

It was an unsettling thought to carry back to Portillo Grande. At that time I was worried enough about my one fledgling and the problem of getting it through the tropical lowlands alive. To transport eight birds of notorious delicacy across miles of hot jungle would require more luck than I dared hope for.

I hadn't been back in camp for more than a couple of hours when a crowd of men came up from Santa Marta

village, carrying pine torches. Maxmil was among them. He had been waiting to report two new nests. That brought the total number of nests to five—all containing fledglings ready to fly off any day now. We should take them at once. I was too exhausted after my ride from Yoro to make the climb that night, but I urged Maxmil to go back up the mountain early the next morning and blaze trails to all the nests, so there would be no difficulty finding them at night. If possible he was also to clear the trails of creepers and lianas and line up as many men as we'd need for the expedition.

Next morning the camp was in a furore of activity. We had to collect additional baskets and make light cages of mosquito netting. These were for the grown birds I hoped to catch on their nests.

At eight o'clock of a night so balefully dark it almost hurt the eyes we started up towards the cloud forest. No sound save the melancholy trill of small night-singing Cicadas disturbed the silence, and that faint call rose and fell, seeming lost in the loneliness of outer space, while the whole earth listened. Maxmil came with two of his cronies and Chon joined us later with two more recruits. Their pitch-pine torches carved us an ambient cave in the blackness.

Chon explained he had had a hard time getting his friends to come. If the men feared these jungles by day, at night they were positively paralysed with fear. He had only been able to talk them into coming by persuading them that with me along they were certainly safe. That put the responsibility on my shoulders, but I was glad the Ladino was convinced of my being impervious to the terrible Sisimici.

It was an eerie procession. The pine torches transformed the jungle wall into something monstrous and alive—a kind of Mayan intaglio come to haunt us with grasping hands and menacing limbs. I had lost weight and had become more sure-footed after considerable

practice in climbing up that treacherous path, but I still lacked the quick-stepping skill of the Indians. They seemed to sense the trail they could not see, and avoided the roots and lianas that tripped me. The silence of our progress was broken when I contrived to fall down an embankment. The men pulled me merrily out of the slough, only to have me slip helplessly down the muddy path on my buttocks. That set them guffawing aloud and, discomfited as I was, I was glad to have found a way to put them in good spirits. The humour of the natives is ribald. They laugh most uproariosuly when a man is kicked by a mule or trampled by a steer or booted in his unthinkingly upraised posterior. My white man's burden was somewhat at a discount as we reached the first blazed tree, but the men were still chuckling.

We followed Maxmil's trail to the quetzal's tree. A crude ladder hung close by, as I had ordered. I flashed the beam of my light directly on the hole, hoping that if the female inside were aroused, she would be too blinded to fly off. The nest was thirty feet up.

One of the lighter men fastened a cord about his belt and tied it to the basket which was to hold the birds. He swarmed up the ladder. The dead tree cracked. It was the only sound in the whole jungle. Quick as he was, the man moved too slowly for me. But the bird inside had not yet been roused. Carefully, the man put his hand in the nest. I breathed again. He stretched his arm down suddenly. There was one muffled wretched chirp and he pulled her out, wings thrashing. Miraculously he closed the basket and lowered her by the cord. The beating of wings inside was alarming. I hastily prepared to give her the injection. I found the spot under her wing, plunged the needle home fearfully, and waited holding her fast. In eight minutes she settled down, completely under.

Meanwhile the men had made sure of the two fledglings and lowered them in the basket. They were plump, clean little birds, each with the copper-green V on its back, still fuzzy with down.

We went on to the next nest marked for plunder. It was a quarter of a mile off. But when we arrived my clumsiness deprived us of a second grown female. I tripped over a liana swinging in mid-air, knocked a heavy branch against the trunk, and flashed my beam upwards just in time to see the bird take off. The two quetzalitos inside the nest hardly consoled me for my blunder. The other nests were too far off for that night and we set out for home.

After the nerve-strain of this trek I could begin to see why the natives fear the nocturnal jungle. The torches threw weird shadows. Trees came alive. Fantastic animals followed us, and the lianas became grotesque huge snakes. I felt as if I were indeed escaping with booty precious to the gods of that place, and however reasonably I bade my nerves be still, I couldn't quite shake the grip of naïve fears, not alone communicated by the natives. The jungle was strangely silent that night. The moon peeped out for a moment, then slipped back into the clouds. Mist fell heavily, and out of the depths there came the poignant cry of the Nighthawk. *Caballero, caballero*, she called, and waited for an answer. Then from across the valley came the limpid cry of another night bird, subdued and dulcet.

A moment later the night rang out with a shriek so vast and malevolent it seemed not to come from this world.

Chon clung to me. I felt him shudder as the piercing yell cracked the night again. It was a demon crescendo, and familiarity made it no more musical. "The Sisimici," Chon gasped.

The cry was unearthly, with the acoustics so devious in that mist that I couldn't make out whence it came

or what uttered it. My scalp tingled and my blood seemed to chill my breast.

Then a chorus of the same cries broke out all around us. It was as if some concealed organist had pulled out all the stops of his instrument. And still the sound took on weight and pitch, pulsating till the earth seemed to shake. Then it stopped as it began and the silence was like a bereavement.

There was a rustling in the trees above me and I flashed my light upward, knifing the dark. There sat more than twenty fascinated red-bearded black howling monkeys. Just as the beam struck him, one of them pursed his lips, opened his mouth, and rolled off an agonizing shriek that culminated in a pulsating howl. His vast beard trembled, and his chest swelled and shook. The others joined in and again the night was rent with that anguished shrieking. In the distance another colony took up the cry, responding antiphonally to their simian Te Deum. Again it stopped, and the night Cicada took up its chirruping and the giant bullfrogs strummed their deep *zum-zu-zums*.

During this performance we had all stood motionless, listening. When the concert was over the Jicaques shouldered their baskets and moved off. I started to follow, disgusted with myself for having been taken in by this contagious fear. But Chon stood there, still paralysed.

"And that, Chon, is your Sisimici."

It was a long hike down—some three hours—but easier for me than the climb. The Jicaques communicated in guarded whispers, mostly, I suspected, about the hardships of the trek and their chances of being paid. As for me, exhausted by the climb and the tension, my mind grew as numb as if I too had been drugged. Covered with more mud than glory, I lapsed into dull insensibility, and that mood carried me stumbling into camp.

A three-weeks-old Quetzalito, calm in the hands of its captor

Christine feeding newly arrived nestlings

Christine, who had watched the glow of the torches descending the mountain, awaited us and ran out to greet the returning heroes.

"Did you make it? Did you get the birds?" she asked. "And what in heaven's name happened to your face? You look like a blues singer." And with that she burst out laughing. "To look at you anybody would suppose the quetzal was a kind of mole." And she laughed harder, motioning us all into the house.

Juana dashed about excitedly, pouring coffee and passing us tortillas, while Christine, her responsibilities beginning to weigh on her, put the fledglings into their new nests for the night.

VII

WE CULTIVATE OUR GARDEN

THE arrival of the new quetzals turned our camp into an ornithological madhouse. The fledglings demanded constant attention from morning to night. At six-thirty, as soon as I removed the basket nest from the tent where they slept with us, a flock of hungry birds, hissing like steaming radiators, would present their gaping mouths for food. I would stir up the tortilla gruel with warm water and shove it down their throats. No sooner had they gulped it down than their necks would stretch and the hissing begin again. I worked frantically, stuffing the mash into their bottomless stomachs. One neck—for they seemed just necks to me—would reach over and grab the portion assigned to another. And it was a wild half-hour till they were all satisfied.

The adult bird pecked her feed from a stick—or even from our fingers, so her feeding was comparatively simple. But, as if we hadn't enough on our hands already, Maxmil broke the rules and came into camp a few days later with a basket of fledglings taken from the nests within a few days of being hatched. They were quite naked, save for a brush of stumpy tail feathers. I was very doubtful about the chances for tearing these successfully, and though my pique was rempered by a grudging sympathy for the Indian's newfound ornithological fanaticism, I told him severely that if he couldn't restrain himself he might at least have the patience to wait till his specimens were dry and decent.

Meanwhile our first quetzalito had grown fat with

constant attention. During its first week in camp it had been content to sit in its big gourd and wait for feeding time to come round. After that it hopped to the edge of the nest hole to gaze at the world outside. Except for feeding its only exercise was an energetic wing-stretching. First one wing and one leg, then the others. Finally both wings would rise up and the neck would go out as a condor's does in flight. After the setting-up exercises it would go to work preening under lifted wings, scratching away the scruff from growing quills. But there was nothing to warn us of the imminence of the next episode.

Christine had set the day aside for baking. Juana, the servant girl, was hauling wood for her stove. Suddenly, without prelude, the quetzalito took off. It started out of the little adobe compound and made for the open country, we after it.

"It's heading for the *quebrada*! It's flying towards the valley!" Christine shouted—and that was the first I knew of the catastrophe.

Beating its wings hard and working excitedly, the little quetzal headed bravely for the deep canyon the other side of camp. This was a blow. It was our first-born. If it landed badly it would be hurt, but whether it was or not, we should never be able to find it in the tangle of brush and matted undergrowth down there. But just as we had given him up for lost, the little bird seemed to tire or to realize the distance it still had to cover. It veered round and flopped back to land by the tent. I ran to pick it up. Happily, it had suffered far less than we from the excursion. But we decided to clip a wing and discourage further adventures of the sort.

There was no leisure for other work now. Christine's botany and my investigations of insect life had to stop. Everything began and ended with the birds. Fortunately, the days were calm and full of sunshine. Masses of

clouds marched in stately processions down the heavens and the day ended in bursts of purple and scarlet. Two big red-and-green parrots which had joined the aviary gave us all our amusement. Each evening the other parrots would go klaxoning down the sky above our camp, proclaiming that they feared no bird nor beast, that their curved beaks were equal to any enemy that might be within hearing. Our parrots would answer them in kind and the gentle evening became an auditorium for raucous counterpoint

While Christine tended the nestlings in camp I completed my notes on the life cycle of the quetzal in his own habitat. I judged that the bird takes from fifteen to twenty-three days to incubate its eggs. All the nests are made in decayed trees, from twenty to forty feet above ground. All are located near the five-thousand-foot contour line. The entrance to the nest is invariably a little over four inches in diameter. I doubt if the quetzal is capable of enlarging its hole. I am willing to accept the suggestion of the natives that the quetzal takes over woodpeckers' nests. In this it would be following in a sense the happy-go-lucky nesting habits of most of the other trogons. This family seldom build their own nests. They lay their eggs in any uniform hollow, often in abandoned termites' nests. I have even found some species of trogon laying in hollow trees no more than four feet above ground, so that the eggs are exposed to all who may pass in the daytime and have no covering at night save the setting hen.

The fledglings develop very quickly. Within fifteen days after hatching, their wings are well developed and their first nest-down has been replaced by heavier, darker, grey and black feathers. The metallic golden-green feathers, soon to cover the whole of their bodies save for the lower wings and the under parts, appear as a V-shaped cape. In an emergency they are already able to take to the air at this stage, but generally a little

more than three weeks elapses before they are beginning to hop to the entrance and take turns sitting in the hole to examine the world outside. Now the wings are stretched and exercised, while their keen dark brown eyes begin to take in all that passes. A fledgling will sit in the hole, very grown up and self-confident, till its mother returns with food. Then it flutters to the bottom of the nest and hisses eagerly for nourishment.

Such details as I was unable to observe for myself in the birds' habitat, I was able to fill in with Christine's help from observation of our captive fledglings. Almost daily I was able to photograph them in various stages of development.

We were continually occupied with these birds, and there was scarcely a moment from sunrise to sunset when they didn't require some attention. After supper we would sometimes wander down to gossip with the villagers whose huts perched on the ledge across the pass from ours. Then one day Christine decided it was time to plant a garden.

Why not have lettuce, carrots, cauliflower—everything and anything but the monotony of tortillas and frijoles? Anticipating boredom with the fare, she had brought along seeds. I could see no reason for not trying to grow them.

So I went down to the village below Portillo Grande and hired old Juan's sons. He came up with them a day or so later, all of them shouldering their spade-like metal *pujantes*. Christine had already laid out a plot of rich humus and they set to work. All except old Juan.

"And what," asked he, his pockmarked face stretching into an impish toothless grin, "what, Señores, are you going to do here?" But he pronounced it as if to say—what are you going to do next?

"Plant vegetables—carrots and things," Christine answered blithely.

He shook his head. Did we think they would grow?

And why should they not grow? Christine was paying little attention.

"Well," he said slowly, as if he were humouring an inquisitive child, "there are the *zanpopos*, Señores. Don Raimundo Stadelman tried, and it was no use. The insects came and destroyed his garden. It will be no use for you to try." And he went into a long dissertation, till his sons were infected with the same scepticism and the work lagged as they rested on their iron tools and listened.

"This is all very well," said I, in pathetic memory of Candide, "but let us cultivate our garden."

The seeds were duly planted. It rained lightly for a few days, and within a fortnight they had sprouted, bursting the loamy crust overnight. Carrots unfurled their delicate fronds, cabbages pushed through, and lettuce and beans—string beans, these were, not frijoles. Standing beside the plot, we watched with admiration and our mouths watered as we regarded the luscious pictures on the seed packages we had staked out. Even old Juan came up to grin and nod in mock surrender.

"Aye," quote he, "the gringo is a very clever man. He has even overcome the lethargy of the Hondureño. . . ."

Next day the catastrophe befell us. We arose to find our garden had disappeared as suddenly as it sprang up. Every cabbage leaf was stripped. Their naked stems were all that remained above ground. And in the centre of the plot lay the explanation. It was a conical heap of fine earth, a foot high and freshly excavated. Into the hole moved a long column of quick, business-like ants, some of them carrying the last vestiges of our precious carrot-tops. I could visualize Juan's grin when he saw the havoc. The *zanpopos* had come indeed. The rainy season was near, and it was too late to begin another garden.

I made no attempt to get rid of the ants. We reconciled ourselves as best we could to tortillas and dried

vegetables and fruit. And since we had Umbrella Ants in our front yard and since I had planned some day in the future to get a nest of them for the vivarium of the London Zoological Garden, I thought I might as well make some use of these. To prepare such a colony for transportation is not so simple as digging them up and placing them in a box—and that isn't as simple as it sounds. For the Umbrella Ant is a vegetarian, a fungologist—a grower of mushrooms, in short. More intimate details about his habits had to be known before it would be any use trying to transport a whole formicary.

Umbrella Ants are the least difficult of their kind to observe. Night and day they can be seen moving from their nest along a single main highway, a hardened path three inches wide and trampled bare by the constant traffic of myriads of ants. Moving along this path they had cleared, I followed them to a humid area in the lower cloud forest. The broad-headed workers are maroon and half an inch long. They are accompanied by other workers, smaller and variously shaped. It is an industrious breed, as in the proverb. At the nest the incoming ants with their waving leaf banners sometimes collide with the legions on their way out. Then there is a brief pause for apologies, but in general there are few diversions and no intersections.

The highway loses itself in the forest. From that point the ants take to the vegetation, and what they take to they cut to pieces. I followed one unit to a broad-leafed Heliconia and watched them mount the stems to the leaves. Some of these were already stripped bare. The tender leaves that were freshly uncurled were covered by frenzied multitudes, rushing about, colliding, hurrying on to the juicy edges. I bent down with a magnifying glass and watched the cutting at close range. The heavily dentated mandibles function like shears and the cutting is always moon-shaped. When the ant has an arc somewhat larger than himself hanging by a

fibre, he hoists it above his head, breaks it off, and starts for the ground. At this stage another is likely to come along and try to take it away from him, but the one who has cut the fragment usually keeps it.

Back on the highway the worker with his leaf umbrella joins the parade moving towards the formicary. The stream is endless, and from a few yards' distance one would suppose that the breeze was ruffling the undergrowth, for the ants are almost hidden by their umbrellas. Generally a tiny worker, half the usual size, will mount the back of the leaf cutter and hold down the leaf to keep it from fluttering out of the mandibles. At the entrance to the nest the big workers descend with no more than a brief pause for an exchange of amenities with the outgoing antennæ.

And what happens to the leaves? That question was answered for the first time by Thomas Belt, an English engineer and an observant naturalist, who was living in Nicaragua about the middle of the last century. He was the first man to excavate the formicaries of the Umbrella Ants systematically. He found that the leaves are used as fertilizer for great fungus gardens occupying deep subterranean chambers. He reported that the ants live exclusively on this fungus. Belt's account was of so much interest to Alfred Moeller in Brazil that he began a long, concentrated study and communicated his findings to Darwin. Moeller found that the fungus is an artificial culture and consists of spores which would normally grow to be large mushrooms, but are prevented from doing so by an inhibiting agent which the ants introduce on the head of each mycelium.

I was anxious to find out whether I could provide them with leaves sufficient for a trip to London in a box. So I decided to open the formicary. Now this is no easy job. The Umbrella Ant occupies an immense nest. Some of them have been estimated to permeate a hundred cubic yards of earth. The mounds tower as much as

Quetzal fledglings removed from their nests for exercise

Umbrella ants: A worker carrying a piece of leaf, carefully sawed off with its mandibles, back to the subterranean fungus gardens

The soldier umbrella ant, which is over an inch in length

five feet above the surface, and the subterranean tunnels go as deep as nine feet.

We began our excavation fifteen feet from the central cone. This actually proved to be the outside edge of the formicary. From there we started a broad trench to the centre of the mound. By keeping my helpers working in relays, I had the trench well into the centre of the mound within an hour. At this point we ran into trouble. Our digging had disturbed another type of Umbrella Ant. Like the Eciton, this species has a soldier caste. The nearer we dug to the centre, the more spirited became their defence. We had just reached the middle of the cone when Chon gave a blood-curdling shriek and dashed down the trench and away. A moment later the other men started to shout and beat about them with their spades. The soldiers had called out reserves. And they came in hordes, crawling, biting, drawing blood. These soldiers were twice the size of the workers —at least an inch long, with great heart-shaped heads and serrated mandibles. Once they sank these into you they held on so tight that the only way to get rid of them was to pulverize the head. Merely killing them wasn't enough.

The Indians make use of this tenacity. When one has cut himself badly, the wound is drawn together, and a live ant is held by the back and allowed to sink his mandibles into the skin on either side. The mandibles go deep and form a suture that would be perfect if it were aseptic. A row of ants can suture the ugliest machete cut, and after the bodies have been snapped off, the clamps stay in place.

In the present emergency we had no need of surgical clamps. I ran for the Flit gun. It proved a useful weapon. We were able to keep the legions at bay, clear them out of our clothes, and proceed with the digging. Eventually the ants found us so saturated with insecticide that they kept their distance.

In the centre of the formicary we uncovered the spongy masses of grey fungus. They were as big as cauliflower heads, of a greyish colour, and so flocculent they collapsed like soap bubbles when we touched them. The fungus colonies grew from the bottom of the rounded cells, and housed within the fungus heads were eggs, nymphs, soldiers of various sizes, and the golden-winged alates—the male and female ants. As soon as we broke into the fungus cells these last made for the dark recesses of the fungus, while the soldiers came at us, making a curious rustling sound as they advanced to face the Flit gun and die for their formicary.

At one side was an entrance from the top of the cone above, and the workers continued pouring in through it and departing by it. The Umbrella Ant is ultra-methodical. Only repeated catastrophe will disturb the workers. Despite the hurried antennæ-waving of the ants in full flight before our spades, the big workers continued to come with their leaves and go off to fetch more. As things quieted down inside the opened nest, smaller workers, the dwarfs of the tribe who live entirely underground in the fungus crypts, swarmed over the freshly gathered leaves. Under the magnifying glass I could see their tiny mandibles crushing the fragments into tiny pellets which they deposited carefully in the crannies. So that was what had happened at last to my vegetable garden.

In this formicary we counted forty distinct cells of irregular shapes, rounded or spheroid, covering an immense area. Each cell is a microcosm. It receives its quota of eggs from the central reproductive chamber, or maternity ward, which is larger than the other cells and usually located below them. The thousands of workers belonging to this colony had been produced from eggs laid by a very few gravid females. Most good-sized ant colonies contain more than a single queen, but the num-

ber is never large. As soon as the eggs are laid, workers carry them off to the warm fungus cells. The eggs hatch and the larvæ are tended by the cell workers. Each cell is complete in itself; yet all are held together by those obese matriarchs below, the busy creators of new life for the colony.

The Umbrella Ant also has a common dumping ground where the used, dried leaf mould is disposed of along with the bodies of the dead ants. Tunnels from all the fungus chambers lead to this dump, where workers are ceaselessly dropping refuse. Raking among the debris I uncovered numerous large Staphylinid Beetles feeding on the exoskeletons of the dead. These live in the formicary by symbiotic right. Oddly shaped and generally wingless, the Staphylinids are even permitted to wander among the galleries with impunity and into the fungus gardens. The beetles have the same nest odour as the ants, and as they exude a liquor which the ants seem to find delectable, they are cherished. Yet these scavengers have bad manners and however satisfactory they may be in other respects, they are not good house guests. Now and then they invade the nursery and eat the babies—the larvæ. This has the effect of birth control, and there's no telling to what extent the Umbrella Ants would grow and multiply if it were not for their uncouth symbiotes.

With the beginning of the rainy season the winged ants (alates) take to the air and mate. For some days before the nuptial flight there is an animated tension within the formicary. Then one day when the rain is torrential, the alates emerge into the open. They are twice as large as the soldiers, with great membranous gold wings, and the males are easily distinguishable, being smaller and having bigger eyes.

The female alates are tremendous, with well-developed thorax, enormous wings, and pouches in their cheeks,

which are stuffed with fungus rations. The alates stop only a moment outside the tunnel, then soar into the rain to join in mid-air in one great procreative orgy. The females are scarce, and competition among the males is intense. The winners mate in the air, generally, and then fall to earth in golden clouds. But all the males, victorious or frustrate, are dead when the orgiastic dance ends.

Having shaken off the corpse of her lover or, mayhap, lovers, the fertilized female digs herself a nest in the earth, breaks off her wings, and for once performs all the menial duties that will be allotted to her worker offspring. And here is an amazing example of the directive instinct. Just before leaving the nest (according to Dr Carlos Bruch) the queen gorges herself on fungus. The threadlike hæphæ knit the mass into a tight pellet which gets packed away in pockets in the cheeks. Once she is safe in her single cell, the female regurgitates this pellet and fertilizes the fungus with her fæces. The fungus sprouts, and the queen lays her first eggs. As soon as the first workers mature they take up their duties. The queen becomes less active; that is to say, from now on she concentrates on egg laying to the exclusion of all else. But she remains fertile indefinitely, and her various-shaped offspring build up the same kind of immense formicary from which she originated.

The Umbrella Ants are a potential antagonist to man and his agricultural civilization. Were it not for the fact that the swarming alates are set upon by reptiles, birds, and men, and their larvæ fall prey to the Staphylinids, their numbers would overwhelm the vegetation. In the Amazon region the Indians make dirigible-shaped baskets to hold over the formicaries at swarming time. Birds (among them the quetzal) perch in near-by trees to dive down and eat them as they emerge. And immense frogs sit comfortably beside the

holes, and lap them up with their flypaper tongues and swallow them as fast as they appear.

In spite of which the Umbrella Ant survives—a very model of efficiency in survival. I don't believe that these ants will ever succeed in starving mankind into extinction. Man seems better equipped by mentality and habit to do that for himself. But certain it seems that when the sun cools and earth's remaining inhabitants wander over a cold unlovely world, as feeble and dull-witted as the first, the leaf-cutters will still be toiling over their trails, destroying the moribund vegetation and cultivating their fungus beds, just as they have done for a million years, with not an atom more cosmic consciousness than they have to-day.

VIII

TRAGEDY ON THE WINDS OF THE CHUBASCO

TOWARD the end of August we began to discuss the problem of moving our camp. The quetzals had to be acclimatized to a lower altitude and to higher temperatures. We had decided tentatively to go down to the valley of Subirana before long, but at the time there seemed to be no hurry. Since the birds were still very young and undeveloped, we felt we should remain at Portillo Grande as long as possible. We didn't realize how short that longness would be. One night our hesitation was obliterated in a near catastrophe.

That night the sky had a new look and the valley took on an unfamiliar colour. The clouds were spotty yellow sheets, significant of wind. Usually at dusk the heavens were piled high with galleon cumuli and splashed with feathery cirrus clouds. But that night the red disk of the sun sank into purple and saffron vapours that looked hellish and terrible in the west, while thunderheads mounted in the north. Towards dusk the wind rose. The Zopilotes, great black vultures that were seen gliding without effort over the canyon every evening, were gone, and the red-and-green parrots had flown by earlier not screeching to our parrots as usual, but silently and in haste.

After supper we rested in our canvas chairs and read awhile. When the mosquitoes got bad we retreated inside with our lamp. I had no more than let down the tent flaps when the *chubasco*, a regular tropical hurricane, closed on us with venomous fury. A fierce wind swept our exposed pass, and the first gust brought with it a downpour that had the pressure and inten-

sity of fire hoses. I raised a corner of the flap and peered out.

The hard earth had become a yellow puddle. The tent creaked and strained and above us I heard the fearful crash of timber and the shouts of our native helpers. The rain had beaten in part of their roof. All night the storm crashed and thundered. Morning came and found our camp a shambles. The kitchen had caved in. The birds were soaked. And I found Chon, his usual dispirited self, moaning that the road was gone entirely.

He pointed down the clay ribbon that wound into the valley. "That part near the boulder is completely washed out. If you should want to go to Yoro, you would have to go around by the next valley."

"You mean the valley of the Rio Chancaya? But that would take three days."

"*Si*, Señor."

"Well, how long would it take to mend the road?" I was irritable and talked as if it were Chon who had been responsible.

He splashed his toes in a puddle and pondered uncertainly. "That depends on the Comandante of Santa Marta village. He will come down one day and collect the men. But the road, it is very bad now." And he shook his head.

Christine came out into the dull cheerless morning looking like Medusa. Her wavy hair curled now in kinky snakes. "Have you seen the rain gauge?" She held it up. "It passed the hundred-unit mark at one o'clock. More than eight inches must have fallen last night. And listen to that river. . . ."

It was echoing between the hills like surf; our gentle brook had turned into a miniature Niagara.

"Well, that decides it," I said to Christine. "If we don't want to be marooned here we must get down to the valley of Subirana at once. We'll just have to take a chance with the fledglings."

"You mean, take those small birds on an eight-hour ride? You must be insane!"

It was mad indeed. I had been hoping to take the birds to Yoro, hire a 'plane there, and fly them to British Honduras, where we could make contact with a Pan-American 'plane. Now we couldn't reach Yoro and had no idea that aeroplane traffic would be moving if we could.Old Juan came up from the village to make matters worse by remarking that the *chubasco* was early this year, which was a sure sign it would come again. These Caribbean windstorms aren't generally expected till October.

Unprepared as we were, and disorganized by the storm, there was nothing for it but to get out while we could. I hired men to pack our mules and we broke camp that day and set out for the valley of Subirana with our precious birds. More fledglings had arrived the night before, making a grand total of sixteen. We let the full-grown birds go, certain they would be dashed to pieces on the journey, put the fledglings into baskets we would not trust to our porters, and set out, each of us with a wicker handful we tried to protect from the jolting of the mules.

The storm had played havoc with the roads. Nothing more than a caved-in rut remained. We waded swollen streams, dismounted often, and manœuvred painfully through tumbled masses of earth and roots. Slabs of mountain-side had avalanched across the path, and it was a desperate interminable ordeal guiding a mule with one hand, with an eye on the perilous overhung road-side, imminent with landslide, holding our tender burden with aching wrists and cramped fingers. It was lucky we had set the adult birds free, for we never could have managed with them.

When the valley of Subirana finally came into view it was as if a swelling pain had eased. Even the contortions of the path that fell away a thousand feet into

the valley seemed innocent and safe now. The ranch we were headed for was a friendly outpost, an old stud farm belonging to the Standard Fruit Company, now no longer used, but still kept in perfect order. We had been invited to stop there earlier in the summer by the elderly Danish caretaker. He was now away on vacation, but Clarita, the wizened toothless housekeeper, was expecting us and welcomed us with kindness and black coffee. She was only too happy to have company. The big, clean, airy room she showed us to comforted us. It hardly reconciled us to the blow we received when we opened our bird baskets.

All the quetzal fledglings we had received within the past few days were obviously dying of the bruises and the shaking-up they had got on the trip. We put them into clean baskets and fed them. They ate eagerly enough, but we knew there was nothing more we could do. Next morning two had died, and that afternoon I chloroformed all but five of the rest.

It meant months of lost work. It was the beginning of September now. I had dismissed my Indians and told them to bring no more quetzals. I assumed the nesting season was over, in any case. We might succeed in bringing out the five birds we had left—though at the moment even this seemed unlikely. At all events, they hardly justified the trouble we had taken.

Christine walked out with me into the smooth pleasant valley. I was discouraged. The sun was sinking behind the great mountain peak of Pijol and for a moment its cloud forests made a fringe so vivid and so near you could almost touch them.

A man came out of the ranch house and walked out to meet us. It was Valentín Palma, a swarthy friend from the village of Santa Marta. He had been a great help to us earlier in the summer when we were rounding up the reluctant hunters for our quest. He was a friend of Beasely's and had been recommended to us

for his friendliness and keen intelligence. Actually, Palma's genius for organizing the reticent Jicaques accounted for most of our earlier success—if that is what we could call it now.

"Why don't you have a talk with Valentín Palma?" Christine suggested. "Remember how helpful he was before."

Palma had worked for the fruit people on the coast, so he affected a Colt .45, so enormous it made him walk with a funny shuffling limp. That he had no cartridges for it was a matter of no moment. The fact that he owned a gun, and such a one as that, added enormously to his prestige in the community. And for him the community was half of Honduras.

Now he listened to our dejected tale with sang-froid. It didn't disturb him.

"Since the birds died, we'll have to get others, that's all."

But had it perhaps occurred to him that the nesting season was over? After all, it was September now, and the nesting began in June.

He stood there, legs apart, thumbs in his empty cartridge belt, sombrero far back, and said it.

"*Quien sabe*, Señor?" In other words, who knows?

We promptly put Valentín on the pay-roll again, and the quetzal hunt was on—this time in another part of the Sierra de Sulaco. We rode back to the Jicaque colony, rehired our hunters, and went back to the cloud forest. I left Christine in the pleasant ranch house of Subirana and resumed the routine that had become almost instinctive by now: climbing the muddy trails, cutting through brush, stalking nests—wet days and weary nights. The quetzal, dilatory as usual, still nested, and for that I was heartily grateful. It turned out not to be too difficult to replenish our colony. We took four

more fledglings and two adult females. That made eleven birds, nine of them youngsters.

These fledglings were bigger than those we had captured before, and they proved to be plump, greedy, and strong. Our experience had made us efficient. There were no more clumsy errors. And now we had an almost luxurious house to return to.

There the routine continued. At six or six-thirty in the morning I would take the birds out of the narrow box cages in which we kept them in our room at night. I had trained them to perch on my finger like tame parakeets. In the mornings I would carry them out to the veranda, where long perches were set up, surrounded by mosquito netting. Sitting there or fluttering about with a clipped wing to keep them from flying off, they were free and chipper. They would hop from perch to perch, sporting their brilliant half-developed plumes, and though there were nine of them and some fresh from the forest, there was no bickering.

After our breakfast the cage on the veranda was cleaned and I would make pellets of corn dough and roll them down the tiled floor for the birds to chase. I wanted them to get exercise and grow accustomed to being handled. Above all, I wanted them to adapt themselves to the unnatural environment they would have to master in order to survive. The clumsiness of their first attempts to walk was remarkable, especially in the new arrivals. These would take two steps and tip over on their beaks. But fifteen-minute training periods three times a day gave them confidence, and they grew used to having people coming and going around them. They seemed to be without instinctive fear.

Some of our fledglings were now entering their third month of captivity, and while it was still problematic whether they could survive the trip north, the old myth had certainly been exploded. The birds were

thriving—both fledglings and adults. One of the females arrived in a basket to which she was at first confined with her young. Left in our half-darkened room, she pushed aside the loose cloth that covered the basket, and when we came in we found her perched on the edge. She regarded us with studied dignity and made no motion to fly. She even allowed us to approach and scratch her head. Then she took umbrage and pecked at my hand. But when we offered her avocado, she gulped it greedily, and when I put a finger under her breast (as I did with the fledglings) she hopped on it and sat there. Christine joined me in a stare of blank surprise.

Nor was this one bird unique. A male quetzal that the Jicaques had brought me and several other females showed the same dignity and fearlessness. It was remarkable in a creature famed for its refusal to submit to men in any way. These birds had great poise, and their manner was as noble as their lineage. But it soon became obvious that we couldn't think of shipping them to New York. They were far more difficult to handle than the fledglings, and a few weeks in captivity showed in their plumage. So we set all of them free.

One of the last to be released, a splendid male with fully developed tail plumes, actually seemed reluctant to leave. He flew around the house, lighted on a branch, then took to the air again. It was a rare show, for we had seldom seen the quetzal fly in the open. Now, with the sun glittering in every plume, he resumed his wavy flight, tail feathers streaming, enlivening the whole morning with his sheen. Watching him was almost as thrilling as it had been to see my first quetzal that day in the cloud forest.

IX

DISCOVERY OF THE ABORIGINES

For the first time in three months we began to relax our vigilance. With the fledglings growing fast and taking well to captivity, the constant pressure diminished. Although the birds could never be left alone for more than four hours, they were considerably less demanding than at first, and each of us was able to go farther afield. Our collecting was extensive. Now I could spend as much as two days away from the ranch, at the risk of Christine's annoyance, for on such occasions she had to stay at home. But I wanted to know much more about the surrounding country and to plan the next phase of our expedition.

This plan was inspired by a rumour Stadelman had picked up. He was in Guatemala now, and wrote reminding me of the chance remark he had dropped that night in Quito. While in this region he had frequently heard of a tribe of primitive Jicaques living somewhere on the road from Yoro to the capital, Tegucigalpa. He, himself, hadn't been able to investigate, but since I was by way of becoming a professional iconoclast, I might find time to put the quietus on this legend also. I knew, of course, that some of the upland Indians were extremely backward. That wasn't the point. The tale of a tribe of primitives, living in accordance with carefully preserved aboriginal customs, was exactly what the Museum of the American Indian wanted to have investigated, and moreover it intrigued me. If I could locate such a tribe it would be an excellent chance to fill in one of the biggest gaps in the whole gaping structure of Central American ethnology. Perhaps it should be explained here that knowledge

about the history of this area is confused by the expunging of numerous records and by the dispersal and Hispaniolizing of the various complex cultures that once flourished in Central America. The several tribes, nations, and empires that occupied this narrow area at various times merged, interacted, and reacted; finally, each in turn and all eventually, under the influence of Spanish Christianity, gave up everything that remained of pure cultural individuality.

The tribe I was after was supposed to live in a palisaded village, jealous of its fetishes and ancient customs. I began an inquiry around Subirana and rode into the adjoining country. But the more I heard the less I knew. One informant said the mountain where such a tribe could be found was in Olancho, another said it was in the Mosquito Coast vicinity. In other words—as far away as possible. That is the way with rumours. Still others told yarns palpably concocted for the occasion. But my curiosity was insatiable, and I arranged with Christine to take a leave of absence and ride off in the general direction to which the more plausible rumours seemed to point. Meanwhile I hoped to locate other breeding grounds of the quetzal. That kept the expedition from being too will-o'-the-wisp.

I rode off in the direction of Yorito, through high stands of pine and oak, passing familiar valleys and rivers. On the third day, some miles south-west of the village of Orica, I came to an isolated farm. I saluted the proprietor of the place and asked him to guide me to the top of the mountain that rose behind his house, where the verdure was so heavy that it seemed a fitting place for quetzals to nest.

We rode off together, a veritable Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, for my guide was mounted on a burro so tiny his feet almost touched the ground. When the going got too precipitous we tethered our mounts and climbed to the cloud forest on foot. At noon we

lunched, sitting on a fallen log. I was just on the point of engulfing a large tough chunk of tortilla; otherwise my mouth would have dropped open at the sight of the man who appeared at that moment out of the forest. He was one of the oddest, wildest-looking men I have ever seen—almost certainly a member of some unfamiliar race. A mat of black bowl-shaped thatch overlapped his walnut features, which struck me as more characteristically Semitic than American. I was astounded to see him here and only a little reassured by his carrying the same kind of blowgun used by the Jicaques of Yoro.

He didn't notice us sitting there at first. He raised his blowgun, aiming intently at something in a tree-top. His quarry must have skipped, for he lowered the tube again, and in doing so spied us. He was as startled as I had been. He stared for an instant, then turned and fled in rapid silence into the brush. My companion, Don Jesús, jumped up.

"*Compadre, compadre,*" he shouted. "Wait a minute." But the Indian had vanished.

"You know him?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, he is one of the wild Jicaques who live on the Montaña de la Flor," López answered.

"And you know where his village is?"

"*Sí*, Señor. It is only the other side of this mountain."

"Then let's go. *Vamonos.*"

A short walk brought us to the brim of the ridge, some four thousand feet up. And there stood the village I was looking for—a score of scattered huts surrounded by a seven-foot palisade. There was no one in sight, and though Don Jesús told me there must be over a hundred villagers there, his shouts couldn't raise one. He called. We waited. It was beginning to grow dark by the time we turned around and went back to our beasts, tied far down the mountain.

On the way I explained my interest to Don Jesús,

and he caught the idea at once. Although he had lived all his life within a few miles of this tribe and naturally had no clear notion of the meaning of scientific investigation, he could see the reason for my curiosity and promised to help us try to win the confidence of the Indians so we might study them.

When I told him that these Jicaques belonged to a culture that was supposed to be extinct, he offered to let us have a camp site near by so we should have an opportunity to get to know them at leisure. He said he knew just the place for us to camp. I explained that I now had other matters to attend to, but we fixed on a date and I told him I would return. I hoped to be back on the Montaña de la Flor on November 15.

A week after my setting out, I arrived back in Surbirana in the middle of the weekly rainstorm, dripping mud and wet through, but exultant with the news that I had discovered the "lost tribe." Christine helped me off with my encrusted boots, and we agreed, on the spot, to return to Montaña de la Flor as soon as we had shipped off the quetzals. We laid our plans full of enthusiasm and impatience.

Meanwhile, there was little to do as we waited for the quetzals to grow strong and tough enough for the journey. I made some haphazard excavations of a group of ancient mounds in the valley of Subirana, and that occupied two weeks, without adding much to pre-Columbian archæology. Dr W. Duncan Strong of Columbia University later identified the handful of potsherds I unearthed there as belonging to the mysterious Chorotegan culture, which represents an unidentified peope who migrated into the area south of Guatemala and outside the Maya territory. The name is Aztec and means, simply, Driven-out People. Apart from this virtually nothing is known about them—not even what language they spoke.

Montaña de la Flor

Christine watches over the fledglings exercising in the screened-in porch at Subirana

As we excavated, I had my helpers take the earth which we removed from the mounds and with it fill in holes in the flat valley floor. I hoped to persuade Taca, the airline company, to send a 'plane to pick us up there in Subirana so that we should avoid the long trek by mules with the quetzals. So I did a thorough job of clearing a landing field, removing stones, filling in holes, even hanging a wind-sock at one end of the field. Unfortunately, I didn't receive an answer from the company till after I had nearly finished the job. The reply I got was disappointing. The company said they did not even know where the valley of Subirana was, and were sorry, but they couldn't promise to send a 'plane.

That settled that.

As we expected the trip by mules and porters to be extremely hazardous for the quetzals and particularly ticklish in point of timing, I now decided to make the trip to the Ulua valley, the centre for banana planting, in advance, in order to reconnoitre the route and get an estimate of the precise time it would take to traverse each part of it, also in order to make all necessary arrangements for transportation by ship, and by auto to the ship.

I got Valentín Palma to accompany me, and together we left the ranch early one morning. We rode out of the pine forests of Subirana, past glades of live oak and through gullies, into a belt of acacia. I made notes as we rode, keeping an exact record of temperature and altitude as well as time. Since no one knew what were the maxima and minima at which the quetzals could survive, it was important to plan the trip in such a way that they would be exposed to as few extremes as possible, and as few violent changes. When, about four hours after starting, we came to a section of road where the altitude dropped suddenly from about three thousand to eight hundred feet, into the valley of the Rio

Chancaya, I knew that this stretch would have to be covered at night. At ten in the morning the temperature here was seventy-nine degrees, and while we were comfortable enough in the shade of the trees, the sun's heat was intense.

The river, moreover, was rising, and the fords were difficult in places. This promised to be our most serious problem. Where the river was deepest, I stopped at houses along the bank to ask the natives how high it came during floods. I found the people always helpful and pleasant. Of course, they knew of me and knew that Christine and I were staying in Subirana. News travels fast by grapevine in that vicinity. I spoke to a bucolic Ladino, busy pinching ticks off his legs.

"*Compadre*, how much would you charge to build me a raft of balsa logs so I can cross the stream with my baggage?"

"I am very busy, Señor," he answered, examining a tick with grave intentness. "The corn has to be harvested. My niece is expecting a baby, I am occupied with many tasks. I should like very much to be of service. . . . However——" And so on interminably. Then: "What will you pay? . . .

"Five *lempiras*? That is not very much. Make it ten, and I'll have the raft ready. When do you wish it?"

I explained that I would be back that way on the night of the full moon in the month of October. That would be October 25. He sucked his lower lip, bit it gently with a brown tusk. Then:

"Very well, Señor. The balsa raft will be ready on the night of the full moon and you will pay me ten *lempiras*."

"Who said anything about ten *lempiras*? I'll not give you a *centavo* more than seven."

"All right, Señor. Seven *lempiras*." He held out his hand. "I shall need it in advance."

Valentín Palma joined in at this point. "*Hombre*,

this man is an Americano. If he says he will pay, he will. How does he know that you will build the raft after you have the money?"

The fellow drew himself up stiffly, pulled his soiled and tattered white jacket around him. Eyes flashing, he answered back: "Señor, no one doubts the word of a Spanish *caballero*. Royal blood flows in the veins of Don Felicidad Calixto y Pérez."

At this Valentín and I both bowed, assuring him we would never doubt the word of such an honoured gentleman. We were returning to this place in three days. If by that time he had cut the balsa logs at the spot where we wanted the raft tied, then we should consider paying in advance.

At two that afternoon we jogged into the little *pueblo* of Morazón. A tumbledown church, split through the centre by an earthquake, set the tone of the place. The village had some five hundred inhabitants. The thermometer registered eighty-five and the altitude here was only five hundred feet. Such a combination would be too much for the quetzals. We must reach here, then, before ten in the morning, rest during the day, and continue at nightfall. Looking for a place where we might put up for that day, we spotted a shop facing the plaza. It was kept by a tidy little woman who sold cigars and lard. Her house was well ordered and boasted a tiled floor. The kitchen was dark and cool. She herself turned out to be an old friend of our cook at the ranch, Clarita. When we told her we should be glad to pay her for her trouble, she begged us not to think of it. She would feel herself honoured to have us as guests even for a single day.

After a welcome meal of beans and tortillas and hard white cheese, I rested in the little old lady's hammock and our mules were turned out to graze. The fifteen miles from Subirana to Morazón had taken about six

hours, not counting the time we spent talking by the roadside. With the birds, we should have to allow at least ten hours for the same trip.

By four o'clock we were on our way to the next village, Negrito. As we approached it, towards dusk, we became conscious of a high menacing whine like a strident fiddle being tuned in the sky. The landscape was darkened by a cloud so black and fearsome that we spurred on our mules, hoping to escape the oncoming *chubasco*. But that turned out not to be the character of that cloud. As it blew over us we realized that it was a swarm of locusts. In a moment, the fields and forests were blotted out and within a few minutes the foliage had been denuded and devastated by a legion of voracious three-inch insects. Millions of them alighted and branches of trees bent and broke under their weight.

Arrived at Negrito, we recognized the proximity of banana plantations. The men went armed. The houses were tin-roofed. There was an abundance of *cantinas* where the townsmen were hastening to drown their anguish at the surrounding desolation in *aguardiente*, the favourite cheap liquor.

We dismounted in front of a house belonging to one of Valentín's relatives. He boasted at least one in every town and village in the State of Yoro. This one, a tall man with a droopy, handlebar moustache, lay in his hammock outside the door, strumming a guitar and moaning amorous ballads in lugubrious falsetto. His guitar was strung with shoelaces and his massive sombrero was decorated with a ship and a butterfly in rich polychrome. He greeted us without rising, screwed his mouth to one side rather than turn his whole head, and shouted to his woman to bring us chairs. When we were seated and he had asked and we had answered the customary questions, our host stopped his strumming long enough to sweep the wasted land with a tired gesture.

"Such," he informed us, "is life. Señores, we are all ruined. Corn gone. Fruit people buying no more coffee. Blight killing the bananas. Business ruined." And he leaned down to lift a bottle of *aguardiente* to his lips. We watched his monstrous Adam's apple bob up three times like a cork on a fishline. When he handed the bottle to Valentín, his breath annihilated the aroma of the pines. Valentín gulped and choked. Tearfully he handed me the bottle. Raw *aguardiente* tastes to me like a mixture of embalming fluid and witch-hazel, but I made a pretence of drinking and handed the bottle back.

Twilight settled slowly over the Sierra de Pijol and the tropic night fell suddenly. Our host surrendered his hammock to Valentín for the night and staggered indoors. His wife came in from the kitchen, set her candle on a rawhide chair, fixed her bed for me, and withdrew. With a muttered *gracias* I lay down, half undressed, and fell asleep. I dreamt of the pictures of President Carias and of Hollywood starlets in jaunty undress that were torn from Spanish-language newspapers and were plastered over the mud wall of the room.

I woke abruptly to the crow of the cock that had spent the night under my bed. A dog fight was going on in the living room and a burro was eating the flowers off a purple bougainvillea outside my window. Faithful Valentín had brought our mules in from the pasture and fed them their corn. The morning was fresh and dewy, smelling of grass and pines. The locusts had disappeared during the night.

We didn't wait for the Señora to make us tortillas, but drank down her inky coffee, paid her the fifty cents due for our keep, and started up the road that leads across the Sierra de Mico Quemado.

Mico mountain it's colloquially called, but the full name stands for Mount of the Burned Monkey. It runs north-east towards the Caribbean coastline and forms

the western wall of the Ulua valley, whither we were bound. The well-paved road from Morazón that runs directly through Negrito gives out five hundred feet up the mountain, and the antique mule path resumes its tortuous switchbacks. In five hours we reached the hostel that caps the summit of the road, thirty-five hundred feet up. Impermanent in appearance, filled with muleteers riotous from *aguardiente*, the inn spelled food and received us hospitably.

Our little brown-eyed hostess brought out a beautifully embroidered clean tablecloth to do us honour, and spread it neatly on a table she improvised from a stack of stinking saddle blankets. But her fresh milk, cheese, and beans would have been a luxurious repast in any setting, and Valentín and I gave them our grateful compliments before mounting to ride on.

The trail across the Sierra of the Burned Monkey dipped and rose over five miles of highlands, shut in right and left by immense trees. Then we came to a clearing where the road falls away to the Ulua valley. Far below we could see sixty miles of bananas. Millions of bananas as far as the eye could see. Away off on the other side we could just make out in the morning haze the outline of San Pedro Sula, the second largest city in the Republic. The Ulua River, which drains nearly a quarter of Honduras, unwound itself, brown and serpentine, carrying the silt of the cloud forests to enrich the plain. This was the wealth of the country —half the world's supply of bananas, the finest, the most extensively cultivated banana region in the world.

By noon we had descended into the valley, put up our mules at an outlying *hacienda*, and driven into the town of Progreso in an automobile. This was the domain of the United Fruit Company. The houses were screened and neat, roofed with bright red sheet metal. Narrow-gauge railroads cut across the gravel

roads. On one side of the town was a large golf course and beside it were tennis courts. Automobiles were everywhere. Stores lined the streets. Men carried guns. Blue-eyed blond Americans passed us in the street, their faces deeply bronzed. White-shirted clerks stood beside an icebox drinking "Coca-Cola." I was back in the United States and felt out of place in my mud-stained clothes. Even after I had changed into a less dirty shirt, I was thankful that letters of introduction from Boston had prepared my compatriots of the fruit company for my coming. I had written ahead to the company officials at Progreso telling them of my plans to arrange for transportation of the quetzals. So, uncouth as I was, I was shown into the office of the local manager, who graciously put aside more urgent matters to take on my problem.

A fruit company boat, the S.S. *Plátano*, would arrive at Puerto Cortés, at the mouth of the Ulua, on the evening of October 25, I was told, and would sail for New York on the twenty-sixth, arriving four days later. If we could get to Progreso by the twenty-fourth, the fruit company would have a special railway automobile ready to drive us to Puerto Cortés. It was only a matter of forty miles.

This was great luck, for the sailing date jibed perfectly with our tentative schedule. If we made it on time, then our quetzals need spend only half a day in the hot valley. It was an excellent plan. But could we make it? I thought of the muddy road, the flooded rivers, the strict schedule called for by the variations of altitude and temperature. Perhaps it could be done —yet. . . .

The manager was even more thoughtful. He called into his office a taxi driver and told him to be at the foot of the Mico trail on the morning of the twenty-fourth. We should be able to change quickly from mules of car and save another hour or two on the road to

town. Trebly thoughtful, he had his secretary make a note to remind the taxi driver the day before.

That night we were royally entertained, tasted real food again, and heard the news. I hadn't seen a paper for months. We spent the night at Progreso and at dawn next day started back for the valley of Subirana. Our experiment was nearly over, but the most crucial and ticklish phase was still ahead.

The view into the Ulua valley from Mount Mico Quemado. In the centre can be seen the town of Progreso

The author prepares to inject a young Quetzal with a mild sedative to prevent excessive nervousness on the journey to the coast

X

THE LEGEND HANGS IN THE BALANCE

AT one o'clock on the morning of October 23 the household of Subirana ranch rose to the clank of spurs and the muttering of the natives. The critical moment was at hand, and four months' work, four centuries of legend, hung in the balance. A dull cramp sat in the pit of my stomach—that cold tension that waits with you during a crisis. The full moon rode high and bathed the valley in dead light. As Valentín woke the men who were to carry the bird crates and Clarita made coffee in the kitchen, I inspected the birds again. They were all sound asleep in the carrying crates. They'd been a little excited the night before when they were put into unfamiliar cages, but they adjusted easily to the unusual.

Everything was ready, bird feed, the big mosquito net, and the movable perches. (They must have relaxation on the trip.) Christine came out and peered up at the sky with heavy somnambulous eyes. Weather had been on our minds for weeks, for after my trip it had rained steadily almost every day. The brooks that flowed by the ranch had washed over the veranda in their turbulence.

We broke fast to Clarita's singsong prattle. She had prayed the Virgin to help us with the quetzalitos. Surely everything would go all right now. But the *rancho* would be sad without us. And we mustn't forget to send back the pictures I had made of her son. Would I promise?

I came out of my broody ante-caffeine silence. "Of course, Clarita, I promise. I'll have the prints made and get Valentín Palma to bring them back to

you. You have been very kind to us. . . . We shan't forget it."

"*Dios le page*"—May God reward you—she chanted, and bustled out after more coffee for the boys.

Affectionate good-byes to all, and we mounted. The men carefully adjusted the bird crates on their backs—open, they were, like cages—and we started silently across the moon-drenched valley. There was nothing to say, nothing to hear save the clink of bridles and the crunch of hooves in the gravel. Heart and nerve we concentrated on the one effort—to keep perfect timing and make the boat. If we missed it we'd have to wait seven days in the hot valley of the Ulua or climb to the top of Mico mountain and camp there; even that might not save the birds.

We came to the end of the valley and followed the grey figures of our porters with the bird cages into a swamp that the rains had turned into a lake—twice as deep as normal. I stopped the safari and played my light across the water. Marsh grass that was usually two feet above the surface was now almost covered.

"Valentín, have the men carry the cages on their heads and use poles so as not to slip." Quickly he cut some saplings with his machete and passed them to the two porters.

We started across. The water rose to the men's thighs, their bellies, their chests. Then it receded. We reached the other side and my breath came easy again. Once more we entered the pine woods. The moss swung gravely in the moonlight and the shadows made a *danse macabre* on the tunnelling road. I listened to the water squishing in Valentín's shoes. Every few minutes I would throw my light on the cages where the birds sat, awake now and perfectly calm. I thought of the waters ahead, the flooded rivers, the rough trails, and the heat.

"*Oiga*," I sang out—and my voice echoed harsh

and lonesome in the night. "Valentín, tell the men to step lively. We're getting behind schedule."

Just as the dawn began to light the sky we paused, where the pine forest sprang up between round boulders big as two-story houses, and fed the quetzals. We were almost two hours behind the schedule I had made. I cut the recess short. Once again the procession hurried onward. Instead of descending at once to the flooded valley of the Chancaya, we followed the sharp edge of a mountain spur down to the plain. When the river came into view we saw the swirling black water pitching there in the dawn and took up a few notches in our courage. We gathered along the bank of the swift-running swollen Rio Chancaya. Three weeks ago it had not been much above the fetlocks of my mule. Now it was over our heads. And the balsa raft I had ordered was not there. Valentín had the men put down their cages and join the search. We all hunted. Our proud *caballero* had not let us down. Only a few yards off, but already straining at its inadequate painter (a twisted liana), floated a raft six feet square, made of the buoyant wood we needed to move our bags. Valentín unsaddled my mule, tied his lariat round his waist, threw me the rope, and together they plunged into the stream. A few minutes later they climbed out on the other shore, a good many yards below us.

"Ready, Don Victor," he shouted. "Send over the raft. And don't forget to tie another lariat to it."

We followed his instructions. I waved, to show we were almost ready, and turned to Christine: "First or last?"

It was no easy decision, and I shouldn't ever have put it up to her. The Chancaya rushed madly down at the rocks jutting out where it joined the Rio Cuyamapa. Before she could make up her mind Valentín called again: "Have the boys put the cargo on the first raft,

holding on to the sides. Let the Señora come afterwards with the birds."

But the boys had had ample time to study the look of the river, and now they sat down and balked.

"*Carajo!*" I cursed, and shook my quirt at them. "Get on that raft."

They looked from me to the river and chose the lesser evil. Their clothes came off and they stood in their cotton shorts. Piling the baggage on the raft, they waded out with it. Valentín and I snubbed our lariats loosely around two trees and I let out my end as he took up on his. The light raft bobbed across without mishap, though in midstream the waves lapped dangerously over the edges. On the other side the boys threw off the baggage and I pulled the raft back. Christine made the next trip with the birds, the men swimming beside her to steady the raft. And Valentín, pulling hard, got them all over safely.

I tied the end of Valentín's lariat, that had been attached to the raft, around the second mule's neck and rode her into the stream. Christine had carried my Leica, so the wetting did me no harm.

"Well, Victor," she exulted, as I rode up the other bank, "aren't you glad now that I insisted on sending the cargo on a week ahead? What would you have done with it here? Your films and my plants?" I could only nod in acknowledgment of such feminine sagacity.

We were still about two hours behind schedule. It was only nine in the morning when we were reloaded and under way, but already the sun was hot. The path now mounted the bluffs, but we still had three crossings of the Rio Cuyamapa ahead. The river was wide but shallow and we were able to ford it without difficulty. Hours passed and we came into the long plain that slopes down to Morazón. It was one o'clock and we

had planned to be there by ten at the latest. Ninety-three degrees! We sweated in the saddle and the men were tired. I covered the bird cages with banana leaves, knowing all the time they could make little difference in this sun. Poor quetzalitos; they were huddled now in corners of their crates, no longer strong enough to perch. The men's feet had blistered and their staggering jogged the birds at every step, so that it seemed no advantage at all to have had them carried on foot rather than by mounted men. We seemed no nearer that village. Tired and hot and hungry—worn to an edgy mood, Christine and I bickered without shame.

Blast it! Where the hell was that town?

Morazón came into view at two o'clock, but I was certain it was too late to make any difference. The birds were obviously deathly sick. We staggered up to the house of Clarita's friend. The men sat down their cages on the dirt floor behind the living room. Christine fell exhausted into a hammock, while the men went out to pasture the mules. I opened the cages.

There they lay. Nine birds. Four months' work—a slice of our past and our future—huddled together as before. Their eyes were closed. All of them looked sick as death. One, only one of them, opened his eyes, tried to get up, tottered, and rolled over on its side. Christine raised herself on an elbow to ask whether they were all dead. I shook my head. None seemed entirely hopeless, but they were all pretty badly off. I raised them and laid my ear against the breast of each. Pulse weak—but there was a chance.

"Quick, Christine, get the woman to bring me the strongest coffee she has."

We put cold coffee in a spoon, opened the birds' beaks, and poured it in. They looked about wearily, shook their heads, and relapsed again into their lethargy. I sprinkled them with cold water and let them lie there on the floor. After a while they stirred

a little. I leaned against my propped-up saddle. An hour passed. Two. Three. Now the birds were coming to. I made corn pellets and rolled them across the floor, one after another. The birds gave one look, and the whole nine of them set off in dizzy pursuit. At that I was certain they would recover.

We prepared more feed and all but one of them gulped it down, greedy as ever. That one was our finest male. He had broken off every tail feather he possessed, and now he seemed delirious. He made hysterical efforts to fly, whirled, bumped into everything in the room. I gave him an injection of nembutal, and that quieted him. Finally, he dozed off.

At six that evening, after we had rested, I looked at the birds again. Then I saw why they hadn't been able to stand. Small wonder, with their legs completely bruised. What a beating they must have taken. As we studied them, though, we became confident. Having got through this part of the journey alive, they stood a fair chance of surviving the rest. We touched up their bruises with a disinfectant, fed them, and put them back into the travelling cages. They fell asleep on their perches. It was now seven.

I went out to see the men. They were all fast asleep, still exhausted by the thirteen-hour trek. I told Valentín to wake them not later than ten that night, for I wanted to be on top of Mico mountain by dawn. In the house, Christine lay in the hammock and I sat down at her feet. It was too late to sleep now. Christine murmured between yawns:

"Those poor birds. . . . Do you think it was our training that helped them hold up so well? Did you notice our beauty, the male? And to think he was our best. . . . Now what are your plans?"

I shifted around, trying to relax. "Negrito is four hours from here. If we get away by ten or so, we'll be there by two in the morning. Four hours beyond

Negrito and we'll be at the top of the mountain—Mico. From there on it's mostly downhill to the Ulua valley. . . ."

So we got up and rode on through the long night. The hazy, moon-splashed country-side was lost on us. We moved machine-like, wooden. Often Christine and I would get down and walk, letting Valentín ride. We passed through Negrito with a pack of village curs at our heels, our minds numb. We knew only that we must go on. At the foot of Mico, I passed around a ration of whisky. This time when the sun rose behind the familiar Sierra de Pijol we were on top of the mountain, standing in front of the muleteers' inn.

Christine dismounted stiffly. I threw my blanket on the ground and she lay down, barely alive enough to whisper that she'd like some coffee. Coffee! The word was a song. I roused out the innkeeper woman. We couldn't wait too long. It was still three hours down to the other side, and the men weren't too steady on their feet. When the coffee was ready I walked out fuzzily and waked Christine. We each took a great hopeful swallow. My God! What was it?

"*Caramba*, Señora, what have you given us? This isn't coffee."

"We have no coffee, Señor. This is sweet pepper. It's a substitute we use."

"*Madre de Dios!*" At such a time she serves sweet pepper!

The men wearily shouldered the cages. We rode to the edge of Ulua valley. There the cool air and four-thousand-foot altitude revived us a little. We stopped for a moment at the spectacular rim of the Sierra to feed the birds. Christine undid the flaps of the cages, then suddenly shouted to me.

"Look, Victor. *Look* at the birds."

I put down the camera I was loading and jumped up. What was it? Had they died in spite of us?

"Dead?" Christine answered. "Of course not. Just look at them, silly. They're as lively as they were at Subirana. Look at the way they go after it." And truly they were scrapping and tumbling all over each other. They were at their proper altitude.

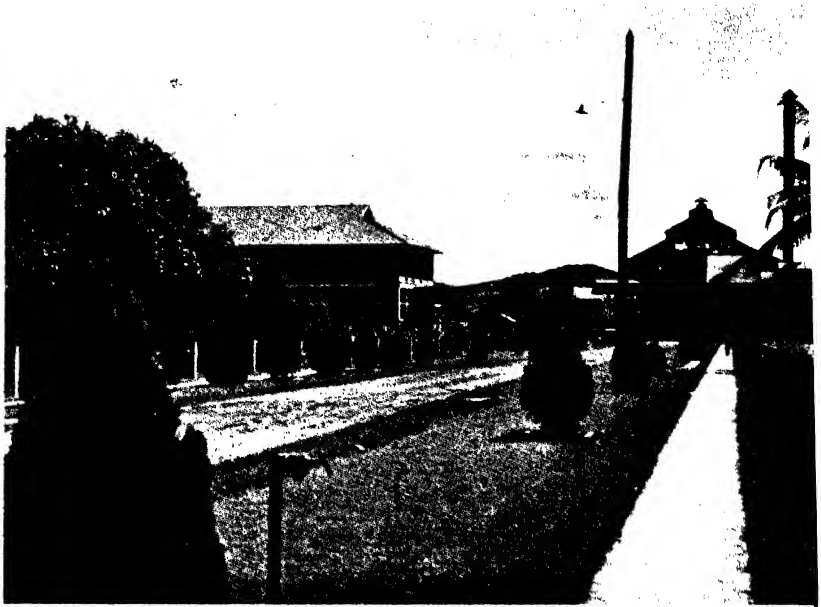
The automobile was waiting below, as our friend, the manager at Progreso, had said it would be. I turned the mules over to Valentín and gave him some money for a celebration with the boys. And we were whisked away to a screened house the excellent manager had fixed up for us. Christine flopped on a bed, too tired to undress, mumbled something about the birds, and was asleep. It was her first sleep in forty-eight hours. I took out the three perches we had used for exercising the birds and let them out of the cages. A servant brought large chunks of ice and an electric fan to play on them. I fed the birds and was suddenly too tired to stand up. I fell asleep where I was.

It was late afternoon when we awoke. The birds were pecking at an avocado I had forgotten on the floor. Their recovery was amazing. Overjoyed, we knelt among them, lifted them on our fingers, stroked their heads.

Now that we had passed the point where rain meant floods and impassable fords, I fervently longed for a deluge—anything that would bring the temperature down and raise the humidity for the birds' sake. Next morning it was pouring. Sleep had not refreshed us, we were that tired. We got up benumbed, trying to hurry to get the birds ready for the trip to the coast. Outside waited an automobile mounted on railroad car wheels, a negro chauffeur in the driver's seat. He helped us in and snapped the rain curtains, and soon we were speeding down the narrow-gauge tracks at a

The Sierra de Pijol as it rises out of the valley of Subirana

Struggling across the last river



La Lima, at the mouth of the Ulua, Honduras Headquarters of the United Fruit Company

Workers' quarters in La Lima : Bananas have brought sanitation, hospitals and amenities to primitive Central America

rapid *click-click-click*. We had no sense of time; the contrast with our mule travel was too marked to have meaning. But shortly we were pulling up at the wharf that led down to the sea.

A Honduras banana port is not a thing of beauty. Puerto Cortés is as ugly as they come. The town is built on a narrow peninsula that runs out to Bahia de Cortés. There's just one street, the Calle de Linea, and that is the railroad line. The tracks continue to the end of the banana wharf at the tip of the peninsula. On one side are the offices of the company. On the other is the red light district.

When word somehow got round that we had brought live quetzals to Puerto Cortés, the men stopped working and trooped over to crowd around the cages.

"*Que hermoso!* How lovely!" exclaimed a Gargantuan black stevedore. And the others fought for a glimpse till we made a flying wedge and beat our way across to the office of the port superintendent.

Mr Edwin Frasier is the kind of American you like to point out to foreigners as in some way a typical representative. He is firm, soft-spoken, humorous; and he handled the port of Cortés, with ships unloading freight and quickly reloading fruit three times a week, with less fuss than most executives in the States make over their morning egg. Although the banana loading that day had gone askew, he managed to take care of that and of us at the same time.

When I explained that we should need a new cage to house the birds on the trip to New York, he called in the company's carpenter and the cage was begun then and there in the stevedores' mess hall, right on the dock. Did we expect to go back with the birds ourselves?

"No, we can't; we've other work to do in Honduras."

"Well, what are your plans for the quetzals?"

I said I thought—I hoped—that if we could get an

intelligent deck steward or cabin boy aboard the *Plátano*, he might take over for us. I had made out three lists of instructions. I could post one on the cage and give one to the mate and the third to the boy. He agreed that it would be reasonable for me to hand the boy ten dollars here and arrange for him to get another fifteen if he brought the birds to New York alive—four days' work for him. I had the cage made large enough for the birds to get their usual exercise. The weather reports from New York showed it had not gone below fifty-five degrees for the past many days. If this weather should hold, the birds might be set up on deck in their cage, near the wheelhouse, so one of the officers could keep an eye on them.

Mr Frasier listened patiently to all these involved details and reflections. He pondered. Then he phoned the ship and talked for a moment. He turned to me, putting the phone down with a wide grin.

"We've got just the boy. He used to take care of pets and animals for the manager at La Lima."

So that night we talked to the lad and made our arrangements. The S.S. *Plátano* was to sail at dawn. We saw the cage stowed on deck, gave final instructions.

When the time for departure came we watched from the wharf as the white hull swung around and headed out to sea. For some minutes the cage could be made out on deck, and we watched anxiously as it disappeared into the Caribbean. We were left with that anæsthetic emptiness you have only when you watch a boat disappearing, tearing away something that has become ingrown in you, something or somebody unbearably precious. When the ship was no more than a flake on the water we turned away—not saying anything. Each was too full of a very poignant question that only four days would answer. Would they live?

As we walked back I thought of the legend of Quetzalcoatl, god of the plumed serpent motif, and how he

had set out to sea in a vessel of serpent skins. Set out to return broken and disheartened to his native land, Tlapallan, in the East. This was the first time in all the long history of America that the quetzal, sacred and symbolic of the fair god, had ever sailed out over the sea, leaving his home in the cloud forests for ever.

We spent our next four days at La Lima, the United Fruit Company's headquarters in Honduras. The town is like some suburb of a big city in Georgia, say, or Alabama. Frame houses with fine front lawns faced each other across paved streets lined with palm trees. We lived at the company's guest house.

It was difficult to accustom ourselves to the good food. We dined at a large hotel across the way, where bachelor employees and others take their meals. The cooking was so very North American, the tables so clean, the ice water so much in evidence, that we could hardly beieve we were still in Honduras. Our companions at table seemed to be from every part of the United States—young men just out of college—botanists, engineers, draughtsmen, mechanics, electricians. . . . We were plied with interested questions and friendly curiosity. And the first question was always, "How are the quetzals?" We'd have given a lot to know the answer ourselves.

I had made arrangements to talk to the radio operator of the *Plátano*, but thus far no message had come through. Meanwhile we were laying our plans for the trip to the camp site at Montaña de la Flor and the Jicaques. With that in prospect we overhauled our gear.

At the end of the second day there was a message to call at the radio office. The operator had got in contact with the *Plátano*. As soon as he had disposed of routine messages he would ask about the birds. We hung over the railing, tense with excitement, in a state of suspended animation. The receiver key began to sing

our message. The operator stared into space a moment, then took off his earphones.

"The operator on the *Plátano* said the birds were getting along all right this morning. He just ran out on deck to have another look. He'll be back in a minute."

Then——

The key sang to life again. It ran on for a few minutes. Then the operator turned back to us. "He says the birds are doing fine. They're eating the poor cook out of all his avocados. I asked about the temperature in New York and he says it's holding at about fifty degrees."

The next days were bright with restrained exultation. We worked at packing. Christine went off to the immense commissary to replenish the larder for the next trek. We tried to relax, tried to interest ourselves in our plans. It was impossible to relax.

The afternoon of the fourth day the boyfrom the Tropical Radio office delivered our message I ripped it open and Christine hung over my shoulder. It was from Lee Crandall, curator of birds at Bronx Park:

NINE QUETZAL BIRDS HAVE ARRIVED ALIVE

We had conquered four centuries of legend.

XI

"CAMINO REAL"

ONCE the quetzals were safely off our hands we started towards the Jicaque country. There were two possible routes—by air and by road. Unfortunately, we decided on the latter.

A few minutes on the automobile road to Tegucigalpa showed us why the Hondureño is so addicted to flying. The road was hard-surface, all right, but on the surface were rocks as big as one's fist, scattered so close that a trick cyclist couldn't have ridden between them. Our native driver had no intention of trying to. There were twenty of us in that open bus, sitting on springless seats. The truck, its hood half falling off, was badly overheated. The gears sounded like the crack of doom. There certainly must have been sand in the transmission. The radiator spouted. That truck was more a percussion instrument than a vehicle.

We were doing just eight miles an hour and Christine, who is slender and could feel every bump, complained that the chauffeur must be trying to hit each rock on purpose. At every stream we would stop and a ragamuffin who was working his way across the country would run and soothe the steaming radiator.

Then we began to climb, and the country became more lush and interesting. The roads seemed to get worse, but that was obviously an illusion. At three in the afternoon, only fifty miles along our dusty way, the welcome waters of Lago Yojoa lay before us. From its marshy banks we transferred to a ferry. What a joy to sit effortlessly on a boat dreaming across the surface of a fifteen-mile stretch of inland lake.

Not a house in sight. Just space—and the landscape pretty much as it must have looked to the natives travelling those shores ten centuries ago.

On the other side of the lake we were met by another auto and scrambled for seats with the rest of them. Then we rumbled off into the twilight, round hairpin turns, higher and higher into the mountains. At nine o'clock we roared through the cobbled streets of a mountain village called Siguatepeque and brought up at a small hotel facing the plaza.

Our hearing had been so dulled by the rattling and banging of the bus that it wasn't till we were almost ready for bed that we became aware of screaming loudspeakers. I threw open the shutters. There was a drill sergeant. In the plaza barefooted young men were marching up and down with wooden guns. On the other side of the plaza two radios gave forth fiery speeches from the capital, Tegucigalpa. War with Nicaragua was imminent, apparently over the issue of a postage stamp. As far as I could make out the stamp showed a strip of allegedly Honduranean territory within the Nicaraguan border. Speeches, music, drilling, went on far into that night.

Sleep was impossible, but this was owing as much to fleas as to the racket outside. I got up and appealed to the proprietor, who was sitting right outside our door. In rapid Andalusian Spanish he assured us that a shot of Flit (he pronounced it Fleet) between the sheets would keep the fleas at bay. He usually sent a sheep into the room a few minutes before guests arrived; fleas obviously enjoy sheep more than they do men or women, he explained, but he had been afraid we'd be upset by this unorthodoxy. Now if we'd be so good as to spray the sheets, he was sure we should sleep comfortably, and might he, before taking the liberty of wishing us a profound slumber, have the honour to be of any further service?

"Why, yes, Señor." Christine had a wish. "Perhaps you could arbitrate the little difference of opinion that seems to have arisen between Honduras and Nicaragua."

"But, Señora, in what way could . . ."

"Then," she went on, "there would be no need for the young men to drill, to make noise, and we could go to sleep."

In the morning, back in the bus, we started the day in a burst of speed that sent pigs, chickens, dogs, and children scooting for safety. Then we began to corkscrew down to the valley of Comayagua, a quasi-desert thirty miles long. Stopping for water half-way down, the driver pointed out the rock where Lempira, the national hero who first resisted the myrmidons of the king of Spain in 1536, was treacherously slain after holding off a six-month siege. That was two centuries before the Hondureños won their independence, and it was in his honour that the national currency was named.

In a village between Comayagua, the colonial capital, which is now become a ghost town, and Tegucigalpa, we stopped for petrol and to give the gendarmes another chance to check our papers and destinations. Sitting there, I noticed a Ford touring car also getting petrol. Suddenly it occured to me that we might leave the main road here and, instead of going into Tegucigalpa, make a short cut for our destination. Now if this car were for hire . . . I jumped down from the bus and asked for the owner of the car. He was a young man who stood by, watching another pour the petrol from a can.

"*Buenas tardes.*"

The young man looked up. "*Buenas tardes*, Señor."

"Would you like to make thirty *lempiras* by taking my wife and my luggage and me to San Diego de Talanga?"

The bright young man adjusted his peaked chauffeur's cap. "Did I understand the Señor to say fifty *lempiras*?"

"No, you misunderstood. I said forty *lempiras*."

"Forty *lempiras*—well——" He grinned broadly. "Then what are we waiting for?"

Over mountains, through passes, past yawning *quebradas*, across tablelands, down into lush tropical valleys our chauffeur took us, throwing his energy into the rattling Ford, climbing as it climbed and relaxing as it coasted. As we travelled away from the capital the roads became narrower, the mud ruts deeper, and the shaking and bumping and clattering increased. There are, I think, differing figures about the highways of Honduras, though all Hondureños agree that the lack of them is a main problem, perhaps the most serious in the country. In 1925 it was reported that the nation had a hundred and thirteen kilometres (about eighty-five miles) of all-weather roads. Perhaps the figures now could be raised to two hundred kilometres. Certainly the Tegucigalpa-Talanga road was not included in any of these statistics.

Bouncing like a pogo stick, the Ford came into the long stretch into San Diego de Talanga.

The good connections we had been making had spoiled us. I had imagined that if I sent a telegram to an acquaintance in the little town of Orica, two days' ride from Talanga, mules would be waiting there on our arrival. I was mistaken. This was the heart of a leisurely country, far removed from outside commerce, removed in fact from anybody who was likely to be in a hurry. And our short cut had got us there a little early anyway. But Talanga was a poor place to stop, being a hamlet of five hundred people, with nothing in the way of an inn or a hostel. Strangers were rare. Even salesmen seldom came here. Where to sleep?

Deserted village : Comayagua was once the capital of all Honduras. This picture, made as we passed through on our way to the Jicaque country, shows vividly the desolate atmosphere that prevails there now. Curtailment of the mining industry was responsible for its decline

The Camino Reál, main highway of Honduras. The traffic consists mostly of oxcarts such as this, and our bus trip was anything but comfortable

We might have pitched our tent, but we could not have pitched it in the plaza, as that was the *circus maximus* for the village pigs. We searched the miserable windowless hovels for some sort of place to unroll our beds. It was already night. Our cargo was still in the car. I went from door to door, seeking sanctuary, and was directed to one house that looked more prosperous than the rest. I knocked.

"*Pase usted.*" A deep voice bade me enter.

I went in. It was dark. My flashlight picked out several naked, blinking, children huddled together on a bed which consisted of a cowhide stretched on a frame. The lady of the house sat up from amongst them, scantily dressed. Her black hair hung over her coarse wrapper. There was a wild unnatural look to her swarthy face. The general crowding didn't augur well for us.

I turned my light to the floor, begged her pardon, and asked if she could rent us a room in which to lay our beds.

"*No hay*, Señor. . . ."

"How many are there of you?" asked the voice that had told me to come in. I looked for the voice. Swinging in the hammock under his poncho, Don Vicente had the look of a treed bear. He was dark and shaggy.

"We are two, Señor."

"You may use the corn bin if you wish." And he half raised himself in his hammock. "Segundo! Segundo, get up and give these people the key to where we keep the corn."

From the floor, where he had been curled up on a pile of mule blankets, rose a ragged, coarse figure of a man, bleary-eyed and surly, who shuffled outdoors, seized the keys, and banged open another door. Inside was the place where Don Vicente stored his maize.

There we opened our beds, ate the food we had luckily brought along, and prepared for the night. But we were not prepared for such a night. What with the rats that shared Don Vicente's corn and the fleas that shared his guests, we spent the most miserable night we ever had in Honduras.

It was an unspeakable joy to look upon the morning and find that our mules had arrived. We could hardly wait until the cargo animals were packed and we were off again.

Whoever named the land over which we rode was a genius at description. *Hondura* means depth; the plural, waves or undulations. It is indeed a land of depths and of waves. As we gained the top of one peak we could see in the distance mountains of equal height, rolling monotonously and endlessly like the ground-swell of a bottomless sea.

There was really no need for a road. The trees grow yards apart, and the underbrush, when there is any at all, amounts to nothing more than short tough grass, leathery ferns, and squat sparse shrubs. The fine, deep penetrating odour of resin fills the air, the grey moss swings placid in a gentle wind from the north that hums to itself in the treetops. It was hard to believe we were in a tropical country. It was too parklike, too much like the gentle glades you see in the north-west at home. We let the reins dangle and the mules kept their own pace.

Two or three times a day we would pass lonely dwellings at the bottom of some wide ravine, where the owner eked out a meagre living with small patches of sugar cane and a *milpa* of corn and beans. At first glimpse one might assume these people had a miserable life. Actually, they are the most contented part of the population. Almost from birth the children are obliged to take care of themselves. Their development depends

entirely upon themselves, for they are exposed to every inclemency of weather, every disease except smallpox, vaccination being compulsory. The weak die young; only the strong remain.

They are poor, yet they are seldom in want. Since food is so easy to obtain with an absolute minimum of exertion, it is understandable that they are conditioned to move slowly or not at all. The untutored appetite is satisfied with little, and it would be a great exertion of the native imagination to conceive how, in the United States where every one is rich, men can die of starvation. Things need not even be cultivated in this country; everything just grows. If a native wishes to fence his land, he does not go through the laborious task of cutting and splitting a tree. He plants his posts and the branches of the *madre de cacao* tree grow into large trunks in the course of a year. Corn and beans are easy to raise. Sugar they make into hard solid cakes called *raspadura.* They raise their own coffee, tan their own skins, and make their own saddles. Hammocks are woven from the fibres of the century plant. Drinking cups and dishes can be made from gourds that grow on the calabash tree. Cooking utensils are made from clay. What else does the Hondureño actually need? Two things: a machete and a sewing machine. When one understands this, one realizes what a miracle will be necessary to cultivate the tastes of these people to a point where they will want to belong to a world economy where men starve although there is too much to eat. And this type of native forms the bulk of the population not only of Honduras, but of most Central American countries.

At small adobe dwellings we would buy a cup of black coffee to wash down the food we had brought along. Always the natives gathered about us, full of curiosity to learn why North Americans should leave their rich land to wander among the *pobres* of Honduras.

Their simple spontaneous kindness was a constant surprise to us. The natural grace and dignity of the women amazed us especially. For in the lowest Ladina we found the manners that one expects only in women of tutored breeding in our own country.

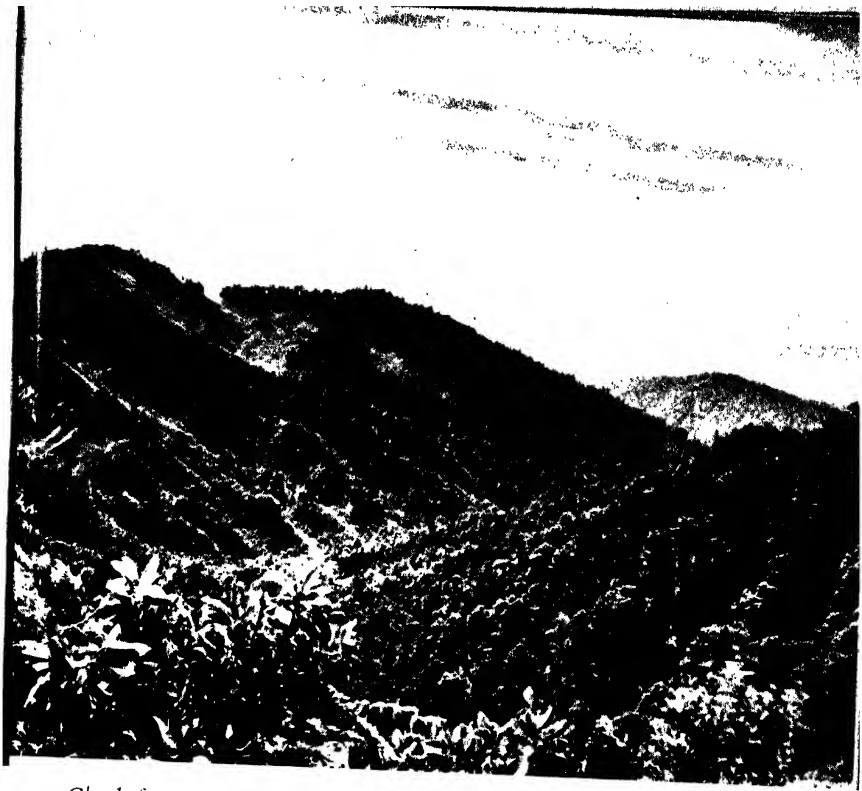
On and on we rode, the journey through the pine forests punctuated every ten miles or so by such isolated houses. On the third day the smell of the pine was replaced by the odour of human excretions, a sign that we were approaching a town. The contrast between the natural beauty of the forests and the obscene degradation of the *pueblos* was deeply disturbing. Presently we came to the little town of Orica, the last of the villages that we had to pass to get to the Montaña de la Flor.

Orica was an exact counterpart of all the others, grim, squalid, three dusty streets making six unbroken rows of windowless houses. Unfed dogs wandered about scavenging. Pigs, legions of pigs, grunted among the houses, nuzzling offal. Every vista bespoke chronic hunger.

We completed our business in Orica as quickly as possible and went on again. The village disintegrated into straggling groups of houses. Five miles distant from the town the houses were all behind us, and once more we savoured the uncontaminated smell of the pines.

A five-hour ride, and we approached the Montaña de la Flor. We climbed, following a rushing river, the Rio Guarabuqui, which was confined to its course in the low foothills by the solid stone canyon it had carved. I glanced at my aneroid: three thousand feet. There were swift rapids and occasional waterfalls. Then we came again into fairly open country and I recognized the neighbourhood close to the ranch of Jesús Lopez.

He had promised to receive me here on November 15,



Cloud forests: a landscape that gives evidence of the scenic beauty of inland Honduras. Its never ending hills show why the country is called "land of waves"

Señora and Señor López

and he had not forgotten me and my anxiety to meet the primitive tribesmen who lived on the mountain above his house. As soon as we rode into sight, the family—and it was a large one—came tumbling out to greet us.

XII

CONTACT

THE condition of Jesús López's house revealed the man. It was a solitary house atop a flat, cleared hill which overlooked the rushing Rio Guarabuqui. True, it was made of mud, but it was clean and neat. Over slender river rushes woven into uprights, they had plastered adobe, leaving the marks of their hands in it. The thatch of the house was made of overlapping palm leaves. In the corral were numerous flocks of turkeys and chickens. A small boy ran out to the corral, slid back the gates, and doffed his hat, wishing us a *buenas tardes* as we rode in.

López's welcome was exuberant. Christine and I felt instantly as if we belonged to the family. He shook hands and gave me the familiar *abrazo* with an affectionate tap. He doffed his fine sombrero to Christine and made her a pretty speech.

Indoors we met the family. The Señora was a small woman with tender eyes and dainty feet and hands, neatly dressed in home-made clothes. Don Jesús was wealthy. He had eight sons and a daughter, between eight and thirty years old. They stood bareheaded and slightly embarrassed as he ran off their names: "My eldest son, Primero. Next, Segundo. Jorge. Ramón. Anastasio. Felicidad. . . ." And so on down the line, repeating names that sounded like the music of the Rio Guarabuqui tinkling over the stones—for that is the cadence of Spanish. The daughter, Concepción, was already a large woman—more Indian-looking than the rest, with thick pouting lips—not too bright, but pleasant and considerate withal, as all the others were.

When night came on, López brought in and lighted split pine torches, which flared up suddenly, for the heavy resin burns like the wick of a lamp. The mother brought in a table, dug into a leather-covered wooden chest, and dragged out a beautiful tablecloth. Then came the usual repast of tortillas, beans, coffee, cheese, and a bit of *raspadura* for dessert. Afterwards the family sat around a long room, resting on their beds—there must have been at least eight—against the wall. Don Jesús leaned back in his small chair, smoking a long black cheroot.

"So," he said, as we drank our black coffee. "You will stay here, then, at least six weeks. I found a place for your house just two hundred yards from here, right next to the river. You don't have to be afraid of the river flooding now and you will have a good supply of water. I have already cut the poles for the house. To-morrow we shall put it up. Fortunately I have all my sons here, and in two days the house will be finished —just as you want it."

And the shelter which was to be our home during the time we were studying the Jicaques went up like magic. It was all so simple: a wall-less structure forty feet long and ten feet wide, consisting merely of oak uprights to support a sloping roof. At one end we pitched our tent. The other end we had enclosed for a kitchen. A stove had to be made. Don Jesús found the right kind of clay, wet it, allowed it to set for a day, and then began to shape it.

Honduranean stoves are among the finest in Latin America. They are the pride of a house. A waist high box is made of stout oak poles driven into the floor. The sides are reed wattles. This is filled with stones and mud. On top of the platform is built the stove proper. There is room for four pots and a space for the flat clay plate, the *cumal*, on which tortillas are made. White

clay is plastered over the whole and renewed day after day until the stove shines in the dark kitchen.

Leaving Christine to finish arranging the camp, López and I mounted and rode off to visit the Jicaques. We had a good pretext. We wanted to hire them to thatch our house. It was only a half-hour's ride from our camp to the Indian village, the path still following the course of the Guarabuqui, which now at four thousand feet fell noisily down the hill.

We clambered up a perilous footpath and came to a long stockade. As far as you could see ran the line of seven-foot posts weaving in and out of the open pines. Back of the stockade was a square dwelling of split oak uprights, windowless and thatched with palm leaves. The stockade had one gate that was heavily bolted. Don Jesús put his hands to his mouth and shouted:

"*Oo-hoo, Beltrán! Ooh, compadre!*"

No answer. He called again. We waited. Minutes—half an hour. Then at last from around the corner of the house, like a sheepish child, came an Indian. It was Beltrán, the chief of this tribe. He made no attempt to come near us, but sat some five yards distant behind the stockade. Beltrán was very old. He wore the Jicaque's traditional dress, a sort of poncho or tunic of bark cloth, thirty inches wide, slit at the neck, passed over the head, and belted in front with a cincture of bark cloth. He wore also an old tattered coat. In his wrinkled hands he held a pipe.

He and López conversed in pidgin Spanish which I could scarcely follow, but I entered the conversation by parading a few phrases I'd picked up from the Jicaques near Portillo Grande in Yoro, our guides and hunters in the quetzal expedition. That started his curiosity, but still he would come no nearer. I offered him a present. Slowly, suspiciously, he walked over, broke off a large papaya leaf, and held it up to receive

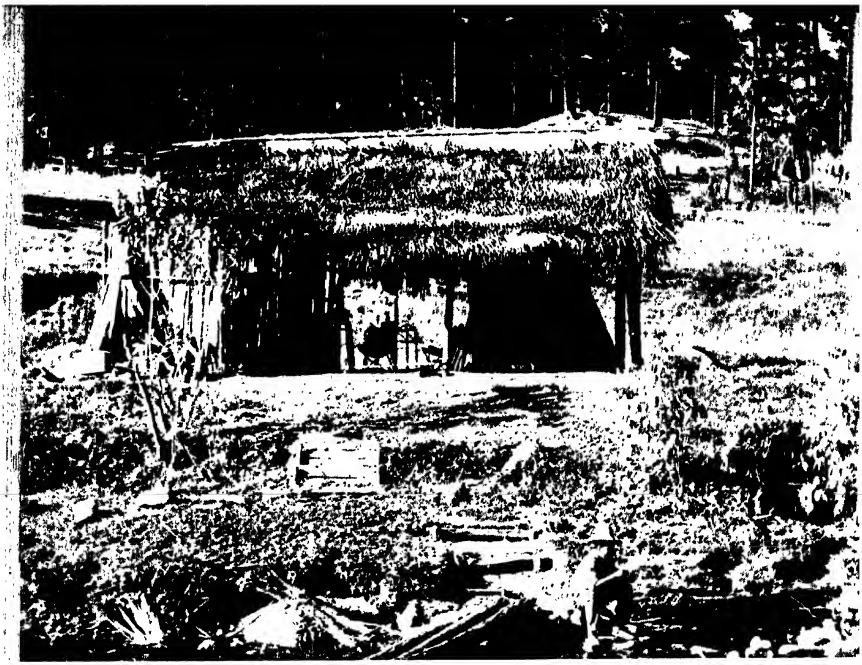
Building a lean-to in the cloud forest

Building our house : Ramón Lopóz and his father lashing the cross-poles to the roof frame

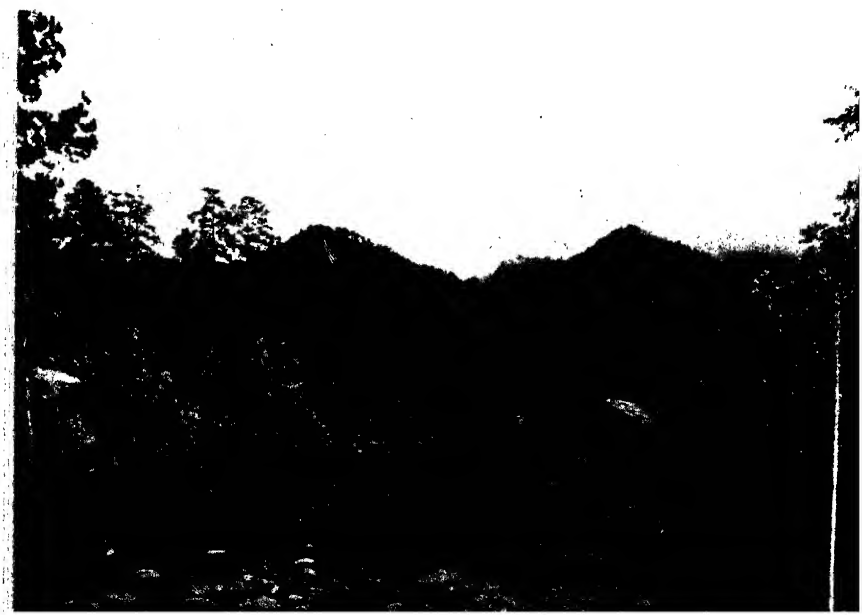
The Jicaques thatching the roof afterwards with palm leaves

The Jicaques' palisaded village on the Montaña de la Flor

Beltrán, the chieftain, remains suspicious behind the palisade



Our camp on the Guarabuqui



the shotgun cartridges which I held out to him. Then he turned and walked back into the house without a word. I turned askance to López.

"These Indians are very shy," he admitted. "They are afraid of everything. He will put those cartridges in the smoke. They do that with everything. They once had some trade with the Ladinos in the valley. They grow corn and tobacco, and the Ladinos used to come up to trade cloth and machetes for them. They seldom leave the stockade, so the Ladinos would stop at the little hut we saw below. Five years ago some of the Indians caught cold from a Ladino. And when they catch cold they die like flies. There can't be more than one hundred Indians left now. Since then they have been more timid than ever.

"Come, let's go on over to the other side of the canyon and visit the other tribe—Fidelio's."

We crossed the Guarabuqui and went up another hill to another fence, this one encircled by banana plants. Don Jesús yelled again, and after a short time down came a procession of Jicaques.

They came to a stop some yards in front of us and answered López's greetings. This was my first good look at the tribesmen. They were the most primitive-looking aborigines I had ever seen in Central or South America. All were below middle height and one was a pigmy. Their costume was uniform. They had broad shoulders, short heavy necks, and thick lips. Their eyes were sharp and mongoloid, their heads brachycephalic, but the most striking feature was a large nose, so Semitic that, seeing them, one understood the origin of the far-fetched theory that the ten Lost Tribes wound up in Central America.

The coiffure was equally unique. With scant hair on their bodies, very little on chin or lip (though some wore untrimmed beards and moustaches), they made up for this by mops of hair so thick that at first glance

I took them for wigs or low shakos. But it was their natural hair, cut in a long bob, uncombed, heavy, and matted. Yet, fierce as they looked at first, their demeanour was shy and embarrassed. They answered only with non-committal grunts when we asked if some of them would come down and thatch our new house. We assured them that there would be no other people there except the López family and we ourselves.

Had any of us any sickness like *catarro*, one asked. No, all of us were well. The Indians went into a huddle. Then the one called Fidelio, acting as spokesman, said they would come down to-morrow. Again I tried out a few words that I had picked up from the Jicaques at Portillo Grande. They found this very amusing. López called out "*Adios!*" I said "*Miskats!*"

"*Miskats, yom mahk!*" they answered with a chorus of hearty laughter. ("Good-bye, white man.")

At six the next morning three Jicaques, including Fidelio, came cautiously through the high grass that surrounded the flat one-acre clearing where we had our camp. Christine could hardly contain her curiosity during the long pause while we waited for them to come into full view. Silently they watched us for some time. Then, seeing that we were alone with López, they came out into the clearing. We started to walk over to meet them, but as they seemed ready to fly at any moment, we stopped. López went forward to shake hands with Fidelio, and I remarked again how very short they were. They scarcely came to his shoulder. Actually they ranged from four feet nine to five feet three. We pointed to our house, the tent at one end under the skeleton structure, the kitchen still in process of being enclosed by split pine uprights, and told them we wanted it thatched.

Again the three went into a huddle, talking in undertones, then set off into the woods at a dogtrot to gather the leaves of the suyate, which, if not the best palm

for thatch, is the easiest to gather. Growing among the pines, it is found only in the interior regions, its smooth trunk growing to a height of seventy-five feet. It is very important, obviously, in the economy of the Jicaques.

The Indians soon returned, buried in the large leaves. There was another pow-wow. Then they rolled up their bark-cloth tunics, pulling them through their legs so the skirt would not be in the way, and perhaps—since they are very modest—so that they would not be ex-exposed when on the roof. Then they went to work. Two of them thatched, and the third, the smallest, handed up the leaves from below.

Silently, quickly they worked, only stopping occasionally to light their pipes, which they filled from small skin pouches slung across their shoulders. Flint and steel and large tubular cotton wicks were used to kindle a spark from which all ignited their pipes. The small Jicaque who worked below had a pinched face and high prominent frontal bones. Whenever we came near he broke out into a smile, his small pipe clenched in his yellow teeth.

In two days the roof was thatched. We paid the Indians well and added presents. I tried with López's help to pierce the suspicion with which they walled out the world beyond their stockade. I emphasized in jumbled Jicaque combined with the terse present-tense pidgin Spanish that we came for no other reason than to see how they lived and to know more about them. Fidelio as spokesman answered:

"Why does the white man want to know about Jicaques?"

That gave me an opening. I told them how we had een their own people living in the mountains at Gurrapára in the Department of Yoro. At the mention of that name Fidelio listened intently. The others showed no such inclination. They stood behind, slapping at the bloody *jején* gnats gathered on their naked

limbs. We wanted to visit their houses and see how they lived, I continued.

Fidelio's face froze. He stopped smiling. I knew that I had said the wrong thing. I caught López's eye and he signalled caution. Then suddenly Fidelio turned to the two others:

"*N'turrupan miskats*," he grunted. "Let's go." They left at a dogtrot.

Don Jesús warned me against pushing matters too fast. The Indians were not only suspicious, but afraid of any stranger. We had obviously impressed them, or they would not have come down to thatch our house. But no one, so far as he knew, had ever got behind their stockade. The only hope I had of penetrating there lay in taking my time, appearing at longish intervals, and giving them an opportunity to become curious about us. Our camp was near enough to their village so that they could approach us if they were sufficiently inquisitive, yet far enough away so as not to be intrusive.

For the time being we could only wait and let the natural interest of man ferment. And then—

XIII

LIFE AND DEATH OF A SLOTH

We followed Don Jesús's advice. In the days that followed, Christine concentrated on her plant collecting and with the aid of López's sons collected the blossoms of the trees, learned the native names for the plants, and made a general study of the mountain. We had only six weeks to spend on the Montaña de la Flor and wanted to make the most of it.

The youngest of Don Jesús's sons, Ramón, would come down with the daily bottle of milk, light the fire in the kitchen, and put the water on for coffee. We would make a quick breakfast. Concepción would come in later to wash our metal dishes. And Christine and I would go to work on our respective collections. While I awaited a propitious time to make friends with the Jicaques, I made a study of the lower cloud forests as well as the so-called *ocotalrobledal*, the pine and oak forests.

In one of these exploratory walks through the mountains I came across a singular creature hanging motionless from a low branch festooned with moss and parasites. Animals are difficult to detect in the jungle and unless one is attuned to the peculiar sound and movement there, one gets the impression that such regions are uninhabited. The lurking snake, the jaguar poised for a leap into Chapter Thirteen of the explorer's journal (where the action begins to flag), are rare enough. Rarer still, since he leaves no footprints, utters no sound, and moves through the trees only under cover of darkness, is that caricature beast, the Three-toed Sloth.

I spent many years in the tropics before I could see

a Sloth without the help of a keen Indian guide. But with practice my eyes had become sharp, and this time I was the first to spot the Sloth hanging from a low branch. One of my native helpers quickly put a rope into my hand. I slipped a noose over the creature's head. The Sloth put up a fight. His hind feet gripped the branch fast, and his hooked arms flayed the air. But after a struggle we got him into a gunny sack and carried him back to the camp. Christine was standing there talking to Don Jesús's wife. I set the sack down, making her a mock present of it. After a few minutes three sickle-shaped claws reached out. If the animal moved slowly in the trees, his motion on leaving the sack was glacial. He crawled forward ever so slowly—mechanically, like a toy that is all but run down. Then his head turned in our direction and he fastened his eyes, yellow, vacant, perpetually astonished, full on Jesús Lopez's little wife. His head, about the size of a large orange, had the weird half-human look of a defective infant. After gazing coldly at us for a moment, his gaze focused on a tree. He moved precisely towards it.

Directly in his path stood Señora López, frantically mumbling an *Ave Maria* under her breath. As the animal came nearer, she stopped praying and screamed, "*Es malo—muy malo! Es un Diablo.* It's a devil."

"It is nothing, Mamacita," her son murmured soothingly, "only a Sloth."

At this I thought the little woman would have hysterics. She threw her apron over her head. "*Jesús! Maria, madre de Dios!* It is the Sisimici!"

And she ran off, while we, feeling helpless, stared after her.

We turned back to the Sloth, which, having reached a hole in the ground, lay on its belly, one hind foot hooked to a large root, unable to make up his mind to leave that security and continue towards the tree.

What a throwback this nine-pound nightmare was! Sloths really have only the most tenuous right to be living in the twentieth century. If they had been profoundly affected at all by evolution, they would have perished discreetly æons ago when their progenitor, the Ground Sloth, was overwhelmed by the earth's progress. Yet the Three-toed Sloth has never got round to joining the Dodo, living on, indifferent to the roar of aeroplanes, clinging to a tree as long as there remains a leaf or a bud to eat.

Our Sloth's movements even over the unfamiliar earth were purposeful. His long arms moved out, seeking anything branchlike. The three-toed claws closed tight as his other arm advanced. Once he had reached the tree he was on home territory. He moved no faster, but his claws gripped the base of the trunk and he went straight up to an overhanging branch. When he came to the light again we saw that his coarse fur was a dull green. Christine wondered about this. I went up to the Sloth and yanked a few hairs, which he begrudged too late, rolling under the limb and threatening me with his hooks.

Under the microscope we could see tiny plants clinging to each hair; they accounted for this unusual colouration. The Sloth's hair is a mass of algæ and lichens, which, particularly when wet, turn the animal bright green. It's a nice exchange of facilities. The Sloth provides transportation for the lichens and spreads their spores through the trees, while the plants repay in a camouflage so successful that it has reduced the Sloth's enemies to a few rapacious birds having remarkable eyesight. Once on a limb, our Sloth put his head between his paws and immediately went to sleep—as if being kidnapped were a normal exigency of a hard, but unexcitingly safe, life.

It is not true that the Sloth hangs perpetually upside down. It does make a habit of this—particularly in zoos.

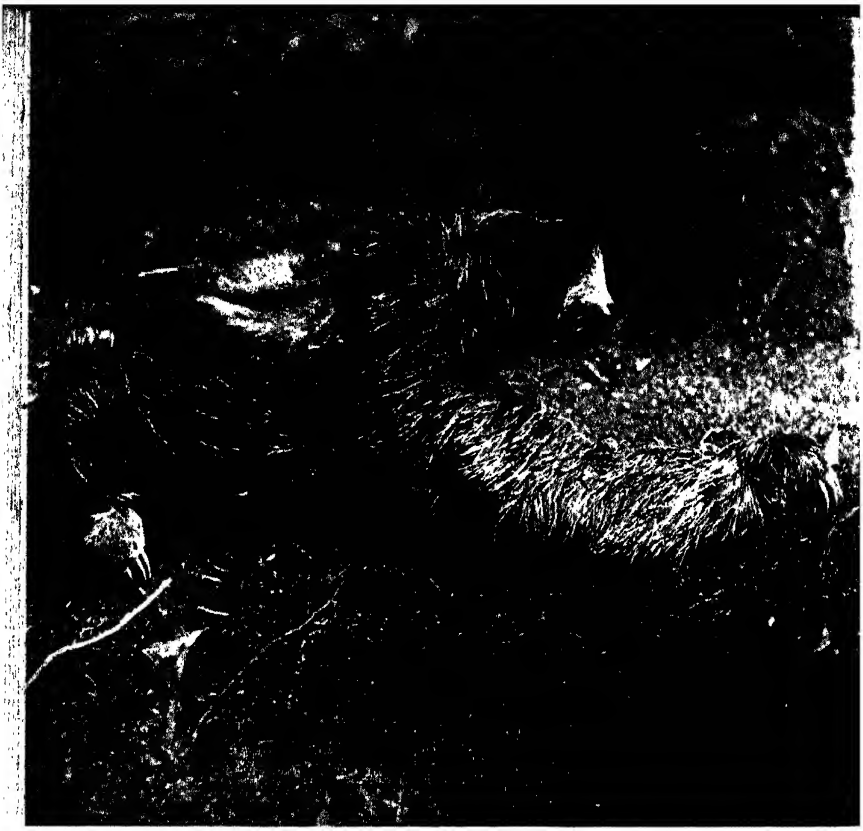
But in motion it is usually upright and it often sleeps in a half-sitting position. When the sexual impulse breaks into his normal routine, the Sloth may get down from his tree and stay out all day. He will even swim across rivers. I once saw one swimming a small river with the same ennui and disdain for speed or any sudden movement that he displays towards everything else in life.

In order to observe the Sloth's habits at my convenience I had a pit dug around the base of an isolated tree and then set him in the branches. Every night as it got dark he awoke and began to move unhurriedly over the tree. He would crawl from branch to branch to the very topmost, and then down again, oblivious to the fact that he had covered all the same territory countless times before. Nothing was simpler than to feed him from the Cecropia shoots my helpers would bring me every evening. He would raise himself up when I approached, drop his mouth open stupidly, and I would push the leaves in. He would munch the leaves unresentfully, then fall suddenly asleep, as if exhausted by the effort of one mouthful.

I thought the Sloth was as voiceless as the giraffe until one evening when I grasped the back of his neck to force him to eat. The mouth opened menacingly and emitted a plaintive whistle. The sound came through his nose—a prolonged squeak, like the whine of a collapsing toy balloon.

The harmlessness of the Sloth has not protected him from the prejudices of the Indians. In the upper Amazon the head-hunting Jivaros told me that they regarded the Sloth as a Jivaro Indian gone berserk. And whenever they met with it they cut off and shrank its head. When white men first saw the Sloth they were as puzzled as were the Indians. Some claimed that it would stay in the treetops for years without moving.

The three-toed sloth moves with maddening precision and absence of energy from branch to branch



Our captive sloth was helpless on the ground, being fitted only for life in the trees

The Spanish settlers ironically dubbed it the "swift little dog."

Father Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit missionary who introtroduced Christianity and some conception of the Occident to China in the sixteenth century, showed in one of his maps of South America the Sloth in the Amazon region. The picture on his map is captioned in Chinese as follows: "In this country there is an animal named Hai,[1] which has never been seen to eat or drink as some write; therefore some think that she lives only on air."

Watching the helpless movements of the Sloth, I pondered again the mystery of its survival. I could see that it escapes the cats of the jungle by keeping to the treetops, the snakes by being just a little too big for them to swallow, and other beasts of prey by virtue of a tough lattice of costal bones. Seventeen pairs of close-set ribs make it almost indigestible and its claws are so tenacious that their death-grip is almost impossible to break. Being almost invisible because of its lichen camouflage is a further defence—but not sufficient, as I soon learned in the most dramatic way.

A vine had fallen across the isolated tree where my Sloth was imprisoned, and after ruminating a couple of days, the Sloth decided one night to escape, and followed the liana to the top of a hundred-foot tree.

I missed him next morning and searched the neighbourhood with my binoculars. They picked out the fugitive without difficulty. My Sloth had been too lazy to leave the vine by which he had escaped. But mine were not the only eyes that had spotted him. Far up the mountain a Harpy Eagle was waiting patiently. It may have been waiting for days, unwilling to come too close to camp. Now it left its high perch and power-dived for the liana, crest bristling, talons unsheathed for the kill.

[1] *Hai* is the Guiana Indians' name for the Sloth.

Instinctively the Sloth seemed to sense the presence of his supreme enemy, foe to all tree-sitters or tree-hangers of the jungle. Blindly, he grasped the liana with his hind feet, opened his eyes, raised his claws, and awaited the attack. As the black apparition shot by, the dull-witted Sloth would strike out after its shadow. Slow as these hooks were, the Harpy Eagle kept a respectful distance. But the Sloth had a vulnerable spot and the bird knew it. Like a combat 'plane it manœuvred for the Sloth's blind spot, the fawn-coloured patch on his back, swept up from below, and plunged its great talons home.

As the Harpy's talons sank into his back the Sloth let out that plaintive nasal whistle, while his arms flailed helplessly, like a drowning man's. Yet even in his death throes, as I could see through my binoculars, the languid expression never left the Sloth's face. With that perpetual look of surprise he watched his murderer bring down its beak and strike the final blow. It was all over in a few moments, but in death as in life, the Sloth held to his branch with a grip of iron and after futile attempts to dislodge him, the Harpy Eagle had to content itself with eating what it could on the spot. The carcass still hung upside down from the liana.

As long as the Sloth had lived with us, neither of the women from the López house had come near us. In answer to our inquiries the boys would shrug and explain that their mother was very timid. The day after the Sloth was gone, however, López's little wife came down to camp carrying a dish of hot tortillas. She hesitated at the edge of the clearing, then, reassured, she made her way slowly to the kitchen. We bade her good morning unconcernedly. She put down the tortillas, but did not leave the kitchen. Her eyes were more hollow than usual, and her long slim hands nervously fussed with her dark mantilla.

"Get her a chair," Christine whispered. I brought out one of our folding camp chairs and put it inside the kitchen. She picked up her ample skirts and sat down with a gracious "Thank you," while Christine went on kneading her dough. I passed her some peanuts which I had just finished roasting for peanut butter.

She was silent for a moment, then: "I am very glad that you do not have that horrible beast here any more. We here in La Flor know what it is. It is not a *perico legiro*—a quick little dog, as they say. It is a monster. It is the Sisimici."

My quizzical look encouraged her to continue.

"We are very simple people," she went on, "and do not know the things you know. But then there are things we know that you do not. There is in La Flor a horrible beast, which some call La Niña, others the Sisimici. Most of us do not speak about it here, and keep it from our thoughts. But if you will follow the advice of an old woman, you will please not go to the top of La Flor again, and if you must, I pray in the name of all the saints that you do not take my sons. . . .

"Why, Señor?" she asked softly. "Why? Because they will be enchanted by the Sisimici. I know, for it was my own brother who was mixed up with Her.

"He had brought back a wife from a distant place and we soon found her doing strange things, so that many of us believed that she was a *bruja*—a witch. But Jesús, my husband, told me she was perhaps only a little touched. . . ." And the little woman raised a delicate finger to her temple.

"Anyway, they went to live together in a little house that my brother built in the cloud forests of La Flor. One night she felt the pains of childbirth. It was the night of the full moon. She rose and went into the forest, and she did not return. My brother, frantic with anxiety, came down and gathered the men together, and they set out to search for her. On the third day

they found her wandering through the pine forests. Her clothing was torn, her body dirty, her mind unseated.

"There was only one word she said, and this over and over: 'The Sisimici, the Sisimici. . . .'

"The men brought her home. We put her to bed, and that night she gave birth to her child. But, *madre de Dios!*—such a child. Instead of one head it had two. But stranger yet," and the little lady lowered her voice to a hoarse whisper, "it had the perfect teeth of a young animal. Just like those of that horrible animal you had here a few days ago. The mother looked at it, and she died."

At this the Señora made the sign of the cross. Christine had stopped kneading her bread and I had forgotten my unmade peanut butter. It was fantastic —but the woman told her story well. Now she smoothed out her skirts thoughtfully, gave a deep sigh, and went on.

"No woman could be found that would nurse such a monster, so we put it out with our big sow, which was suckling a litter. How long this creature would have been nourished by the sow's milk I do not know. But one morning we came out to find one of the little pigs lying cold and stiff. On its throat were the marks of small teeth. We thought it the work of some little animal. Then the next morning another shoat was dead. Then another—and each day another. Until there was only one more pig.

"My brother decided to sit up that night and find out what this animal was that cut the throats of his small pigs and sucked their blood. At midnight he heard a slight noise. He lit a piece of pine wood and went out to where we kept our pigs. *Hai virgen!* Do you know what he saw?—His own monstrous offspring sucking the blood from the neck of the little pig she had just killed. My brother was stricken deep in his heart. This

creature was his. He raised a rock over his head to kill her, but he could not bring himself to do it. The next day he said that the animal that killed the pigs must have carried off the little monster.

"Oh, Señor, on that day we all heaved a sigh of relief that this little creature was gone. But soon—" and her voice sank so low we hardly heard her—"soon we learned it was not dead. No, it was very much alive. Every once in a while when my sons went into the mountains to get some roots or to plant some *milpa*, they would see the footprints—like that of a small child. And if they followed these, they came to the body of a small animal lying dead with the mark of those teeth on its neck. Once a neighbour saw it on La Flor and that same night he was bitten by a *barba amarilla* snake, and died. Another saw La Niña and he was so bewitched that he killed his wife with his machete, then ran it through his own stomach. You know now why I do not want my sons to go with you again to La Flor, and why that Sloth looks like this Sisimici. For undoubtedly it too is enchanted, or why would it *look* so human?"

There was not much to say after this recital. It was the same fantasy that I had heard while hunting the quetzal in the Sierra de Sulaco. Each one that tells the story makes it more real—more personal—by explaining and perhaps believing that it happened to one of his own family. So we humoured the little old lady, and I told her that I should not expose her sons to the danger again. Yet, she told me, it was not only about them but about us she worried. For this story had a sequel.

"A young man came to us some years ago, a blue-eyed stranger from Tegucigalpa, with colour of hair like your Señora here. He was looking for the orchids which bloom at this time in the cloud forest. I told him what I have told you, begged him not to go up alone, but he laughed at my story just as you smile now. Time and again he went up. I asked him each day if he saw the

footprints. Yes, he would say, he saw the footprints. But they were not those of La Niña, only those of a small animal, the pizote.

"Then one day he found a cave; for the top of this hill is full of limestone caves. He went in with his flashlight and saw that the bottom of the cave was filled with the same footprints that he had seen in the forest. He was a brave young man, this foreigner. He went deeper into the cave, attracted by the mystery. It was dank, cool, and stinking there. Bats were disturbed and swarmed about him. Still he went on.

"Then he discovered the bones of the big animal. It was not such an animal as we saw here, and not altogether human. It looked like an immense Howling Monkey. This, he thought, would certainly interest the scientists in his country. So he picked up the skull of this thing. . . .

"Suddenly he saw in the dark corner two blinking yellow eyes. He took out his pistol, thinking that it was a Jaguar. But when it came out into the shaft of his flashlight he saw it, and—he was actually looking at the Sisimici.

"He said that it was about the size of a little six-year-old girl, with a muscular body—all covered with hair. But it had two heads, which rolled from side to side each time it moved. Its black wrinkled lips curled, and it had yellow fangs. Its faces were matted with its own hair, from the two heads. It was unafraid of the young man and kept coming towards him.

"He dropped his light and shrieked in horror, ran to the opening of the cave, the Sisimici following him. He turned and fired his pistol at the monster again and again, until there were no shells left. Then the Sisimici ran to him and sank the teeth of one of its mouths into his arm. He seized hold of the monster—which was not much larger than a big Howling Monkey, pulled it from

his arm, and threw the writhing body to the floor. He rushed out into the open, bathed his arm, and tied it up with his shirt, and ame back to the house.

"When I saw him enter the corral I knew something had happened.

"'*Jesu Cristo!*' I exclaimed. 'What has happened? Your face is scratched. Your clothes are in rags.'

"Before he could utter a word his dog, which had been lying by my warm stove, raised its muzzle; quivering, it sniffed in the direction of its master, then threw back its head and howled. Just like the night my father died from snakebite. Then I knew what had happened. I said one word, 'La Niña.' And he, too weak to answer, nodded his head.

"Two nights later we were all awakened by a scratching at the door of our house. We have no windows in our adobe house, as you know, and fearing that La Niña might come down, I had bolted the front and the back doors. I heard it first. The sound went on and on. Our dog got up, sniffed at the threshold, and then ran back to hide in terror under the bed. All of us were too frightened to move, and the young man couldn't move at all, by then.

"At last my man, Don Jesús, got up with the foreigner's shotgun and opened the door. The form was just retreating. He fired at it, but that was not the last of La Niña.

"The next morning we were awakened early by the cries of a neighbour who lived some distance from us. The father rushed up in a frenzy. Their little girl had been carried off that night. The men searched high in the cloud forest. Just as I had predicted, they found the body of the little girl, dead, with those same marks of La Niña on her throat.

"The whole country-side was now alarmed and the men set out for the mountain to kill the horrible monster. . . ."

Here I interrupted the story. "Very well, Señora López. I am convinced. I shall take your sons no more to the top of the mountain."

"But, Señor, I am not finished. There is a sequel. . . ."

I searched for an excuse. "You see," and I took the little woman by the arm and led her out of our kitchen. "I am afraid that my Señora might be frightened by those stories. You must tell me the rest some other time."

Now I knew the vivid reason why the Ladinos at Portillo Grande had been afraid to go up to the woods alone in search of the quetzal. I had never had the legend told me in such detail before. Yet it is one of the most common superstitions of Latin America. Indians, half-breeds, and white settlers alike say that on unexplored mountain-tops there *is* a tailless anthropoid, smaller than the gorilla or the chimpanzee, but built on similar lines. It is, so the legend runs, about five feet in height and covered with black hair, and it carries off people, the invader choosing always a victim of the opposite sex.

I would have thought that this superstition was brought over with the negro slaves, and the names Ulak and Yoho, by which this monster is also known in Honduras, seem to confirm this. Yet the other terms used by the Hondureño of the interior, Sisimici or Chimite, seem to be in fact a corruption of the Aztec Tzitzimimi, female souls who were supposed to be sent to the earth at certain times to inflict unspeakable maladies on the Indians. They were particularly to be feared once every fifty-two years on the night of the Aztecan half-century festival, when it was believed that the sun might fail to rise and the demons would be sent to destroy mankind and bring about the end of the world.

Such legends have survived Catholicism, and there is scarcely an explorer of the Central American coun-

tries who will not have heard about this creature. And many a zoologist, believing there may be a basis underlying these legends, has set off to look for an unknown mammal that conforms to the description of the legendary monster and might give some further clue to the origin of man in America.

XIV

SUCCESS!

We were making slow progress getting acquainted with the Indians. Christine and I often walked up to the stockaded village, where we had met Fidelio, and talked to them. Not once, however, did we pass the gate. How long it would have taken us by this means to gain their confidence and be invited into their homes I do not know. Years probably, at this rate. But we had a stroke of fortune in the shape of a very amusing Jicaque who bore the Spanish name of Felipe.

Felipe, like a number of his fellow tribesmen, had his house outside the stockade, nearer to the cornfields—and fortunately for us he was infinitely inquisitive. Dressed like the others in a bark-cloth poncho he would at first wander down, stand a little away from our camp, and regard us quizzically—then turn and go away. One day he grew bolder and walked into camp. He was looking for medicine. The lower parts of his legs were covered with boils, or epidermal ulcers, so that he walked with what must have been excruciating pain.

He knew little Spanish, but those words that he knew he used over and over. *Muy malo*—very bad, was his most coherent expression. The Che-ey, one of the Jicaquean devils, was *muy malo*; and there was no doubt that the boils that festered on his legs were truly *muy malo*. These were caused by the bite of flies called the Tabanidal. They are frightfully irritating. The insect leaves a minute blood blister which causes the victim to scratch and spread the infection. And like any staphylococcus infection in the humid regions, the ulcers heal very slowly.

Felipe gave us a unique opportunity. For while we were endeavouring to cure his infections, I could begin the compilation of a vocabulary, at the same time ingratiating myself with him and perhaps with his tribe as well. I knew that we should have to cure the Jicaque at one sitting, cures with the Indians being magical and immediate, for he would scarcely stand for a second treatment. We decided to try soaking his leg in a hot solution of potassium permanganate for some four hours, afterwards treating the open wounds with butesin picrate ointment, which would prevent the recurrence of pain while the ulcers healed. While Felipe's leg soaked in a large petrol tin, I sat down beside him with a note-book to make a vocabulary.

My acquaintance with the Jicaques of Yoro gave me a start. I had a few elementary phrases like "What is this called?" So I began with Felipe's head, limbs, eyes, and so on, and went on to relationships in the family. That afternoon I collected two hundred and fifty words, the basis of a working vocabulary. I worked with phonetic symbols and Felipe grew to like the game. But Christine, who had to keep bringing the hot water, demurred after a while.

"Look here, Master," she said. "Hasn't this gone on long enough? I'd rather cut off the leg than keep this up. Let's look at the ulcers now."

He pulled out his leg. We applied an antiseptic and the analgesic and bandaged him up. The magical cure was effected; he went without a limp.

Next day we received a large suyate leaf full of *camotes*, potato-like tubers, as a present from our grateful patient. Three days later he reappeared, healed. Our fame spread. Soon we had additional patients, so it came about that in our third week at La Flor we were invited to come behind the stockade into the village.

While waiting to enter the single gate that led

through the palisade into the village, I wondered what there was in these people that kept them isolated from their kind. Not more than fifty miles away was Tegucigalpa, where there were movies, automobiles. . . . And yet these tribes were as far from our civilization, and it touched them as little, as if they lived in Tibet. Who were they? How had they come here?

The known history of the Jicaques[1] begins with Columbus's arrival on the shores of Honduras in 1502. It was his fourth and last voyage to the Americas, and after stopping at the Bay Islands, his crew landed at a cape which he called Punta Caxinas (later Truxillo), the port where we ourselves had landed. There for the first time Columbus saw the people of the mainland. Heretofore he had only seen the natives of the West Indian islands. And I thoroughly believe that the ones he found at Truxillo were the Jicaques. At this time the tribe occupied about one-fourth of the present Republic, from Truxillo to the present Guatemala border and from the sea inland to Lake Yojoa, which we had crossed on our trip into the Jicaque country. But Columbus had little interest in them, since his desires were concentrated on finding a strait that would lead him to Asia. And since the natives did not attack him, he has left us nothing about them or their customs.

Twenty years later Hernando Cortés came to the port of Truxillo after a long and difficult overland trip from Mexico City. The bloody reputation of the conqueror had preceded him, and when he arrived at Truxillo, where he intended to found a city, the chiefs came to do him honour and to offer their fealty to his emperor—or god.

At that time the tribal organization of the Jicaques

[1] Readers who are interested in a more detailed study of the Jicaques might care to peruse my ethnological monograph, *The Ethnology of the Jicaque Indians*, published by the Heye Foundation, Museum of the American Indian, "Indian Notes and Monograph Series."

was very loose. They were spread out over the mountains and the plains and gathered at the heads of rivers in scattered groups of dwellings. Each group was controlled by an elected elder, and there seems to have been no one chief, except for those elected in the event of a general conflict with some neighbouring tribe.

Cortés, however little a humanitarian, recognized the expediency of treating them with justice—that is, Spanish justice, as it was then understood. This soil and its fruits, the peoples who had dwelt on it for centuries, all belonged to the Spanish emperor by right of conquest. In order to have a supply of labourers he forced the Indians to build their dwellings closer to the Spanish colony on the towering bluff of Truxillo. He had them assist in building a small fortress and in laying out the city, then had them bring food to the colony. Some of their women were taken from them. Indians who refused to carry cargo were killed. There were insurrections.

Cortés, singling out one of the more powerful chieftains, called Mazatl, had him garrotted for the crime of sedition—sedition against a handful of men who controlled a few acres of the vast area that is Central America. Although the Indians knew nothing of sedition, the execution of Mazatl was enough to subdue for a while their reactions against oppression. For in garrotting, an iron collar is placed about the neck, a screw is turned behind to tighten it, and while the victim strangles the eyes almost pop out of his head. It was a method new to the Indians, themselves past-masters of torture.

After two years' residence among them, Cortés returned to Mexico, where the fruits of his earlier conquest awaited him. His leaving set off a civil war throughout all Honduras. In battles with rival forces coming up from Nicaragua and in strife among themselves, the Jicaques were always the losers. They were excellent

canoemen, fine hunters and fishermen, but they were not good fighters and they were not good farmers. They knew nothing of corn and lived on a tuber called manioc. They practised polygamy and inbreeding. And that is about all that is definitely known about them.

The Jicaques, at the arrival of the Spaniards, were themselves being forced to flee their land, just as they had forced another civilization four hundred years before to give ground at their own expansion. But the Jicaques did not emigrate. They retired farther and farther into the mountains where they gave their conquerors little trouble, being docile and harmless once they had settled down. Later they carried on sporadic trading with the Spaniards, bringing rubber, skins, and sarsaparilla to exchange for knives and axes. Yet as the centuries passed, the diseases the white man had spread—smallpox, syphilis, measles, yellow fever—decimated the Indians.

Time passed and the world changed. The Spanish administration was overthrown by revolution and replaced by an independent government in 1820. The Jicaques were little affected. Most of them had escaped prolonged contact with the Spaniards. They still wore their bark clothes and hunted with lance, bow and arrow, and that remarkable instrument, the blowgun. The Jicaque remained polygamous. He tended his fields of manioc, peanuts, *camotes*, and tobacco, and for his only amusement hunted in the high cloud forests.

In 1860 this isolation came to an end. A Spanish missionary, Padre Manuel Jesús de Subirana, who had worked first among the Mosquito Indians, then later among the Payas, neighbours of the Jicaques, made his way into Yoro to begin the spiritual education of the aborigines. From all reports he was a practical man as well as a spiritual leader, and he was able within a few years to win the Jicaques' confidence. He gave them tools, introduced new crops, taught them the value of

corn. He introduced the tortilla. The women, whom he found in bark cloth, he clothed in blouse and skirt after the fashion of his day. And then, like God, Subirana saw that all was good, and rested.

But not for long. Commerce had invaded the Jicaque settlement. They had forfeited their freedom and were now called on to make themselves useful in the world. Señor Quiróz, then governor of the Department of Yoro, ordered that these Indians be made to go into the mountains and gather the sharp-pronged vine known as the sarsaparilla and bring it down to Truxillo. In the outside world sarsaparilla was having its day as a panacea. Governor Quiróz had no intention of allowing the progress of his country to be delayed by the missionary Subirana, who begged him not to disturb the Indians. Force was used. The Jicaque villages melted away. Those Indians who carried the sarsaparilla to the coast brought back measles, smallpox, malaria.... The others with whom they came in contact were wiped out. Padre Subirana protested, and Governor Quiróz was temporarily squelched by the federal government.

Once more Subirana got his primitive charges together, calmed them, and persuaded them to return to their settlements. Then in 1866 the good Padre died in the beautiful valley named after him below Mount Pijol. One Jicaque called Pedro (for Subirana had, of course, baptized them all and given them Christian names) took the body of the missionary on his back and carried it all the way from the valley to Yoro, the capital, where it was interred in the cathedral.

Now, with no opposition, Governor Quiróz sent his soldiers to the Jicaques. He forced them to carry on the sarsaparilla trade. They traced Pedro to the cloud forest hamlet of Gurrapára, just beyond Santa Marta. There Pedro is supposed to have resisted the soldiers and killed two of them. He realized immediately what the consequences were likely to be. He got his family to-

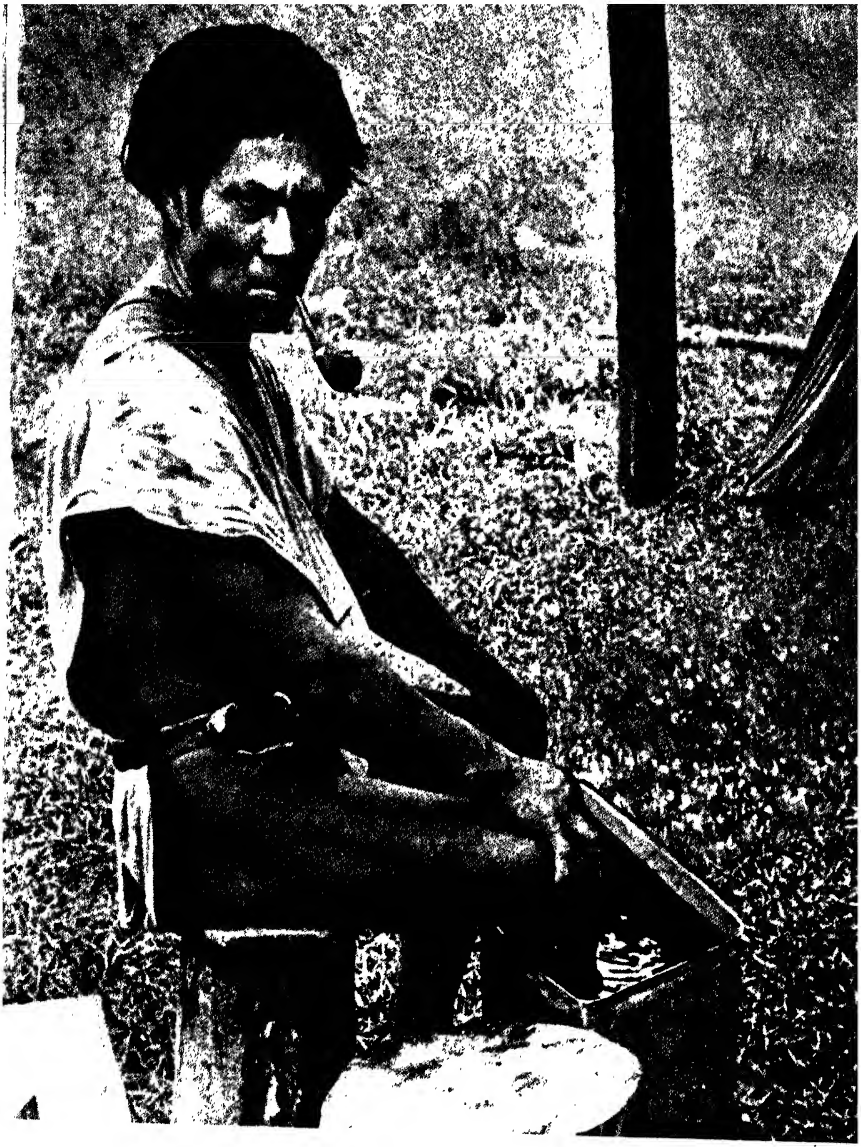
gether, his two wives, his five-year-old son, and a daughter, gathered those things that he most needed, and persuaded another Indian, Juan, to take his own wife and come with him.

Remembering a part of the interior where they had once hunted, these two families migrated to the Montaña de la Flor and set up their houses, later surrounding them with stockades. As there were no other Indians there, they interbred, and from the original seven people there grew our Jicaque colony. They retained all of the ancient customs that they were able to remember. They refused to have anything to do with the Ladinos. They refused, and still do, to allow priests to come within their stockades.

Meanwhile in Yoro, whence they had fled in 1866, the Jicaques who were left behind came under the dominance of the Hondureños and the Spanish language. They were absorbed into the village economy of Honduras. They forgot all their old customs; becoming—like Maxmil, the Indian who helped me catch the quetzals—at once dispossessed of their own culture and unable to accept that of the Ladino, they hung helpless and undecided between.

When ethnologists came from other parts of the country and from outside to investigate the history and customs of the people of Honduras, they found the Department of Yoro one great blank. Where were the indigenes? They found only the Hispaniolized Jicaques—and a lacuna that separated the Maya country of Guatemala and Copán from the area to the south and west. It was one piece in the cultural mosaic of Central America which was completely missing.

We followed Felipe into the house inside the stockade. That door led us away from everything that was familiar in our time and our civilization into an atmosphere mummified in the womb of antiquity.



First conquest : Felipe

The chief: Fidelio

A young Jicaque with the characteristic matted hair and bark-cloth smock

The Jicaques pay a formal visit to the author's camp

Blow-gun ammunition : baked clay marbles

The author shows some Jicaques a magazine and the first photographs they have ever seen

There was a three-log fire burning in the middle of the floor. Aside from this the only light seeped in between the split-pine uprights that made the walls. Over the fire hung a large pot; a delicate baby-white hand stuck out above the bubbling surface of the water in it. It was the body of a skinned Howling Monkey that was cooking there, but Christine gave one horrified look and turned away. Three Jicaque women, wild and unkempt, sat on their haunches back from the fire, jet-black hair streaming over their shoulders. Dull eyes were fixed on us, without any light of recognition or welcome. A pot-bellied naked child stared a moment, screamed in holy terror, and ran to bury his head in his mother's lap. The oldest of the women, an ancient crone, got up, spat on the floor, stirred the simian stew with a stick, spat again, and sat down.

The house was filled with the emetic stench of decay. My nose located it in a dark corner where four dogs—lean ribby brutes—were ravenously, noiselessly munching the skin and entrails of the monkey.

It was an unforgettable macabre scene, ghoulish for all its tranquillity.

The Jicaques sleep on boards raised off the ground and covered by the skin of a deer or a tapir. I didn't learn whether they covered themselves at night, but there was no sign of a blanket; it is definitely cold at night at an altitude of four thousand feet, the temperature falling as low as forty-five degrees early in the morning.

In the lightest part of this room was a tall pole with trimmed branches sticking out at an angle, looking like a coat-hanger, except that instead of being hung with hats it was festooned with skulls. I recognized them as belonging to monkeys, deer, tapirs, and so on, but these were not trophies of the chase. They were talismans representative of the souls of the animals from which they had been taken. Sometimes the Indians put

these skulls in their bags when they go out to hunt, to display to their quarry that they have retained the skull, to them a symbol of the animal itself. If the animal is destroyed entirely—so goes their primitive reasoning—the other animals will not allow themselves to be killed.

I could not make any photographs inside the hut, for a flashlight bulb would have frightened the Indians to death. So I sketched the interior as quickly as I could and went out into the fresh air. There were several houses inside the stockade, all built according to the same pattern. Against the walls of several leaned hollow oak logs containing bees. Fidelio offered us some honey, sticking his hand into such a log and bringing forth a handful of wax, honey, and bees. These bees belong to a stingless variety called Melipona, and their honey is the Jicaque's only sweetening.

These people were distinct from their neolithic ancestors only in the few knives and machetes they possessed. If they should lose contact with the Ladinos entirely their lives would be very little altered and they would slip back in a few years to the level of life they had attained when Christopher Columbus found them four hundred years ago.

Before the coming of the whites all their clothes were of bark cloth. Most of them still are. We came to one house where an Indian was pounding a piece of cloth out of the fibre. Christine asked what tree the bark came from, and we were led to a wild Ficus species. Fidelio explained that the rarity of this tree made it necessary for the tribe to depend more and more on the cotton cloth they could buy from the Ladinos. We watched the Indian strip the bark from the tree and rip out the inner layer. This, he explained, is ordinarily left to soak in water for several days, so that the milky sap may become coagulated and scraped off. The bark is then beaten with a heavily grooved mallet.

Fidelio showed us how this is done. He hammered until a thin fibrous cloth was all that remained of the bark. It was exactly like the tapa of the Polynesians. The same fabric is made in Borneo, India, and South America by races culturally far removed and unknown to one another, all of them using about the same type of mallet. Such mallets have been found in Mexican mounds where the stratification of the earth indicated a prehistoric origin of great antiquity.

In one of the houses I found a fine blowgun leaning against the side of the door. I was making a collection for the Museum of the American Indian and wanted to include this specimen. I was able to buy it, but when the transaction was completed, I found I had no ammunition for it. Fidelio sent his son into the house, and the boy brought out a skin bag full of clay pellets about the size of large peas. I was sceptical whether any good-sized bird or mammal could be killed with such ammunition. Christine suggested that Fidelio prove it by killing a white chicken she pointed out.

He accepted the challenge with a grin, put a pellet in his mouth, aimed the tube, and waited till the chicken raised its head. The moment the head perked up he shot and dropped the bird as neatly as he could have done it with a .22 rifle. I counted my paces as I went to retrieve the chicken. He had hit the back of its head at forty-five feet.

I was so impressed with the accuracy of the weapon that I examined the bore intently, and Fidelio, taking the hint, led us off to a house where a blowgun was in process of manufacture. They begin with a long branch which Christine recognized as belonging to a peculiar kind of Saurauia tree. One of the Jicaques sat down and showed us how the soft pith is removed by means of a spiny vine colloquially called *rabo de iguana*—iguana tail. The sharp spines cut the pith as an auger drills into harder wood. It didn't take long to turn out a

complete blowgun by inserting vines of various sizes, till all of the pith was smoothly rasped out. I still wanted to see how the pellets are made uniform. This is ingeniously done by using snail shells in which holes precisely the size of the bore are cut. Such shells are used as master dies. At night the tribesmen sit around rolling the pellets and passing them repeatedly through their shells till all superfluous clay has been scraped off. When the balls have precisely the same calibre as that of the blowgun, they are laid on a palm leaf in the centre of the fire and baked.

The blowgun dart or arrow is unknown in all Central America, so far as I can discover. For his purpose the Jicaque finds the pellet perfectly satisfactory.

The Jicaque has lost—or perhaps he never had—much of the knowledge possessed by the South American tribes. In a sense he is culturally degenerate, for almost certainly he has lost a good deal of what few arts he possessed before the conquest. The cultural level of the tribe I studied was that of a semi-nomadic people. By renouncing for generations all but the most essential contacts with others, this tribe had deprived itself of all growth. Finding it here behind its palisades, dressed in bark cloth, using blowguns and flint and steel, was like finding a fossil fish swimming in a millpond.

It had taken us four weeks to gain the confidence of the Jicaques, but we no longer regarded them as laboratory specimens after our first visit to their village. Soon they became, in fact, our friends. If I gave them presents of matches, a new pipe, other souvenirs, they immediately responded with gifts of delicacies: *camotes* or peanuts or a chicken. They were generous, and once we had convinced them that we had no wish to harm them and were respectful of their fears and superstitions, they responded with a shower of presents, many

of which we regarded as valuable modern data for archæological and ethnological research.

My vocabulary grew quickly. My collection of photographs of the tribe became comprehensive. And since they did not know what the camera was and were not self-conscious, I was able to obtain fine natural studies. As our confidence grew and their suspicions decreased, we decided to try something more ambitious. We wanted to make masks of the Indians for anthropological purposes. Christine had been experimenting with little Ramón López and had developed a technique. We held a conference with Don Jesús, who had warned me to move cautiously in the beginning. Now he felt it would be safe to have a try, and we decided to give the "treatment" to the first Jicaque who showed up.

So one morning when Christine saw Ricardo, an Indian friend, moving through the tall river grass near our camp, she dashed into the kitchen and mixed some material. We were not using plaster of Paris, but a comparatively new rubber-like preparation called Negacoll. This could be painted on the face at body heat and later used again and again.

Our Jicaque friend approached, not imagining what designs we had on him, and looked in at the kitchen door to see what was going on. He said good-morning and followed me into the yard. I offered Ricardo a camp chair and some tobacco and began to go over the vocabulary again with him. He would wait curiously until I pronounced a word, and when I succeeded in getting it out with the correct inflection he would grin broadly in congratulation.

From the kitchen Christine called out to say that the mixture was ready. She brought it out to cool, setting it just behind my table. Then I got to work.

I told Ricardo that I wanted to have a picture of the face of my friend and showed him photographs of other masks. When I went away to my country I wanted

to be able to remember the faces of the Jicaques, I told him. Would he allow us to make such a mask? If he did, I would give him a new pipe and a new knife. . . . But further sales talk was unnecessary. He assented amiably and with interest.

As soon as the material was cool enough I fastened a cloth around the Indian's throat, pushed him back in the chair, and Christine began to apply the stuff to his face. It went on like a thick orange cream, first around the edge of his face, then worked up around eyes and nose. Once Christine had made the base, I put my brush into the preparation and began to daub it on too. We had to work quickly, for we didn't know when the Jicaque might decide he had had enough and dash off into the woods. I whispered into his ear that he should not move, not even twitch a muscle of his face. I wonder what went on in his mind. To have this stuff put over the face, covering eyes, ears, nose, everything except the nostrils, is a very curious sensation. Yet here was a "wild" Indian who had had no contact with white people before—suspicious, timid, fearful—allowing us to do this.

Christine called for metal clamps to hold the base firmer. These were slender, pliable metal bars, ten inches long, which you were supposed to bend to follow the general curvature of the face. We pushed them into the rapidly hardening base and then daubed on a few more layers. While Christine worked I snapped a photograph of the process. In ten minutes we had the whole face covered an inch thick. It was a gruesome sight. If ever a Jicaque looked as if he had been bewitched by the devil, this one surely did.

Christine had just put cold towels on the negative to cool it more quickly when Ricardo's brother appeared on the scene. He stopped a few yards away and looked at us with unspeakable horror. Soon, however, he found his voice and let out a stream of Jicaquean

invective I could not understand—though I did get its general drift. We could do nothing but keep on soaking the negative mask with cold water while our victim lay there inert, obedient to my command that he must not move a muscle—to all appearances dead. The fear his brother voiced seemed well justified.

We began to prise off the mask now. It was a delicate operation to lift it without breaking something or throwing it out of kilter. It had to be exact.

I kept watching the other Indian out of the corner of my eye while we both worked intently at loosening the negative around Ricardo's ears and the forehead. I shouldn't have been so casual about my victim's brother, for suddenly the old fear of persecution and injustice became more than a race memory; he drew his machete and rushed at me, waving it as he ran. Christine had just got off the negative plaster without damage. I told her to get into the kitchen and looked around frantically for something with which I might try to defend myself if I could not pacify him.

He was only a few yards off when his raised machete dropped out of his hand and he gave a cry of pain and grabbed his wrist. Through all this, Ricardo, whose mask we had been making, had sat quietly unconcerned. But when he heard his brother's shout of pain, he jumped up and ran to him. I couldn't guess what had happened. I had heard nothing, seen nothing that could have caused my would-be assailant to drop his machete. He still held his left hand over his wrist, but quieted down when he saw that Ricardo had returned to the living. As they talked I took the opportunity of paying the victim for his pains, and I was enough of an ethnological politician to pay him a good deal more than I had promised.

Meanwhile Christine had begun to make the positive of the mask in the kitchen. This was done by melting the positive material to the consistency of paint and

applying it to the inside with a brush. Cheesecloth had to be worked in to reinforce the mask, and additional layers were then painted over that. In a matter of five minutes Christine took from the negative mould a replica of the Jicaque's face so exact that every pore, even every line of dirt, was plainly visible.

She came out triumphantly where we were standing. It was really remarkable. So quickly done, so exact. Even the Jicaque seemed to recognize his features. He passed his hand over his own prominent nose, then over the model, peered in the back of it, then looked once more at the face. He knew it was his face, yet he couldn't believe it. I've seldom seen anybody so impressed, never an Indian who was willing to admit it.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"It's you," we told him. "And," I added, "I want to do other men—other Jicaques—too."

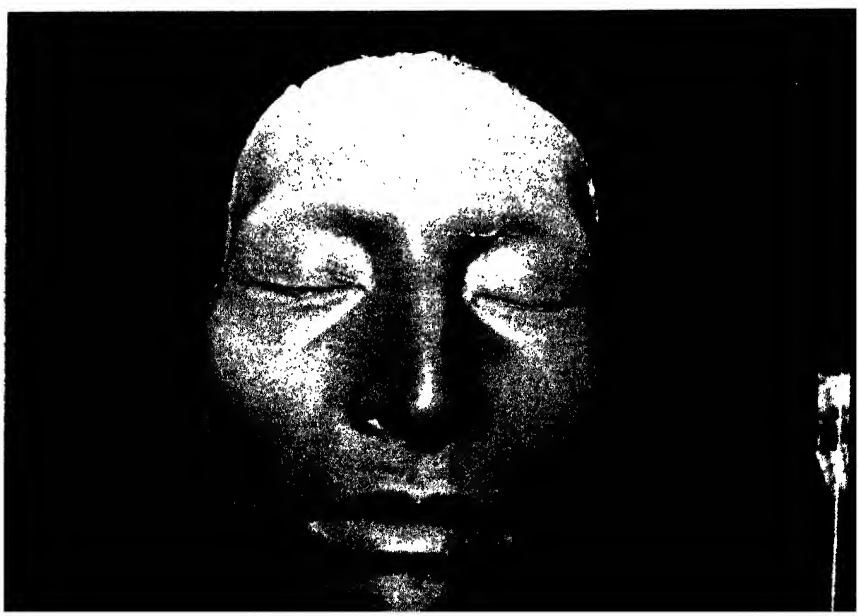
We stood watching him.

"And what," asked Christine, as puzzled as I was, "what happened to the second Jicaque? You say he raised his machete and came at you? Didn't you see anything, anybody?"

No, I hadn't. Ricardo's brother wouldn't let me see his arm, but I felt certain he hadn't been shot. . . . Well, anyway, we did get the mask, and a fine job it was. I put it on the table in the glare of the afternoon sun, laid a piece of dark cloth behind, and prepared to photograph it. As I worked and Christine began to break down the negative to save the material for our next mask, Felipe came out of the tall grass and walked into camp. He was carrying his blowgun over his shoulder and on his face was a faint and enigmatic smile. At first I paid no particular attention to this expression he wore, nor was I surprised to see him. Since we cured his boils he had been one of our most attentive callers. He came up behind me and looked long and earnestly at the mask.

Mask-making : the final touch, covering the metal clamps. The negative is completed in fifteen seconds

Two photos of the finished mask, showing the fidelity with which the features are reproduced



Then: "Man want mine?" he asked.

Certainly, Christine told him. "Sit right down on the chair." Then aside to me: "Now don't let him get away. The negative will be ready in another minute."

So a few minutes later Felipe too had lent his features to posterity. I paid him generously as I had Ricardo and asked him to recommend us to other customers. He agreed to give us a testimonial.

Then, obliquely, he explained to us that most Jicaques are calm and even-tempered. Sometimes, though, one of them gets out of hand, loses all dignity. It is only when one is very young, he added. "Young men must be taught."

Then I saw the light. This wasn't irrelevant chatter that Felipe was giving us, this philosophizing about temper and youthful fire. When I asked how long he had been in the grass watching us, he just grinned—and said good-bye and sauntered off.

XV

CHRISTMAS AT LA FLOR

ONLY two more undertakings remained before we must quit Montaña de la Flor: Christmas and a primitive fish hunt. The weeks had passed rapidly. We had been so preoccupied with all the details of the ethnology, the plant collecting, and the entomology I was interested in, that we almost forgot it was Christmas time. Our first notice came from Concepción, the López girl, who helped Christine around the camp. She announced she could not come to us for a week, as she must prepare *dulces* for Christmas. Then we realized that we would have to outdo ourselves to try to repay Don Jesús and his family for the kindness and help they had lavished on us.

Heretofore we had never had an opportunity of living on such close terms with a Latin American family. We had never seen their problems and their daily life at such close range. Don Jesús, I must admit, was extraordinary. He had immense natural dignity. He was genuinely thoughtful. And he was never tempted to overcharge us for the help he found for us. He might well have done so, for workers were scarce, and his sons were well employed elsewhere.

Don Jesús, like most Hondureños, was illiterate. His sons were no better off, though two of them had been to school for a little while. But schools in Honduras, outside of the capital and the larger towns, are apparently not entirely adequate. Children can attend only as their duties permit, and usually they are wanted around the house or the farm. Yet such people as the López family have a manner that is impressive and enviable.

Each morning on first seeing their parents, the sons

bowed respectfully, and the mother or father laid a hand lightly on the lowered heads in blessing. There was no caress, but there was grave respect in the gesture. The father's word was unquestioned. We had never known six such weeks of positive peace nor found so much dignity in human labour and the relationships in a family as we saw here.

Honduras is known in the annals of Central America as a *país de macheteros*—a country where men are quick to resent and quicker to draw. It has been said that it is not entirely safe for a foreigner to travel in the interior. Yet we carried no weapons, we rode for days through villages of all kinds, we slept alone and unprotected in outlying houses, and only once—and that a case of misunderstanding—had our lives been in the slightest jeopardy.

We had found it a land of peace and kindliness, and in such a mood we prepared for Christmas with the López family. Don Jesús had invited us to his house for their celebration, and we invited them and another neighbouring family to come to us. We found a small pine that would do for a Christmas tree, and trimmed it with tinfoil from films and with decorations cut out of coloured paper. We bought an eighteen-pound turkey (for fifty cents), and it was was so big that we had to borrow the López stove to roast it. We had a curious and admiring audience at this performance, for in Latin America no one ever bakes a fowl or roasts it in the oven. We were busy making cranberry sauce and peanut butter and Christine was baking a cake when two Jicaques appeared and asked to have their masks made. Christmas had to wait on ethnology.

In the evening we went to Don Jesús's *fiesta*. The López Christmas was a family affair. Relatives came from miles around and spent four days in its celebration. Fresh pine needles were strewn over the packed mud floor. Pine branches and garlands were strung

across the rafters. Concepción had prepared a crèche, and at one end of the room there was an altar. The *décor* was all Concepción's work, and where she had learned it we couldn't guess.

People sat around quietly. One dark-hued son, dressed in a blue shirt, strummed a guitar. We must have met thirty people or more crowded into that house, and each gave us a warm welcome as though we were old friends who had returned from some far place.

Later in the evening Señora López came into the room carrying a large plate of candies and sweet brown-sugared corn cakes. The family had been busy with these for days. Trailing his mother, Ramón came bearing a large *olla* of fermented sugar water. We were treated as the guests of honour, and Señora López came to us first with her cakes and her gracious compliments.

"Perhaps you will not like our cakes—we call them *dulces del nochebuena*. They are not very rich like the things you get at home. . . ." And when we took only one each, she was unsatisfied. "Help yourselves. Help yourselves," she insisted. "Take more."

And when we were handed gourds of the sugar liquor and thoughtlessly raised them to our lips without making the conventional toast, the whole company saved us embarrassment by shouting a toast to us. "*Salud, salud!*" rang down the room like a chant.

The evening passed pleasantly and we left, inviting them all to visit us the following night.

Latin Americans do not, of course, have a Santa Claus. His place is taken by the Three Kings, and gifts are not always customary. But we decided to give them a Christmas after our own fashion and as they gathered around our crude Christmas tree, lighted with candles, we handed a present to each of them: handkerchiefs, buttons, tin flutes, home-made candies. . . .

That night I took López aside and gave him his present separately. I told him that I would take his fifth son, who was seventeen and a quasi-invalid, to Tegucigalpa for an operation. It was the only favour he had ever asked me, but I had hesitated to do it for him. We planned to remain in the capital only a few days, and I had felt at first that I could not undertake the responsibility of finding a competent surgeon. But Christine had insisted, and I think I got more pleasure than Don Jesús himself out of the present.

With suppressed emotion he wrung our hands in both of his and said simply but earnestly, "*Mil gracias, mis amigos!*"—A thousand thanks.

Next day began the preparation for the Jicaques' fishing expedition. Primitive tribes cannot afford the luxury of sport, even if they do enjoy their hunting and fishing. This was not an affair of hooks and lines, nor of nets. The fish were to be taken by means of a poison. This is a method common in South America, and I was particularly anxious to see how it would be done here.

To begin with, the fishermen build a trap. For this purpose the Jicaques had chosen a cascade in the Rio Guarabuqui. Just above the cascade they built a weir of pinewood and reeds. Fidelio, who was in charge of operations, did most of the reed weaving for this himself. The others he sent off to the forest to gather masses of suyate leaves.

Then they gathered stones and built a V-shaped sluice that would lead into the weir. The rocks were reinforced with leaves matted so thickly that they dammed the river and caused the water to rise some six inches above its normal level and flow through the weir. This last was so constructed that the water could flow through, but the fish would be caught as in a seine.

When the trap was ready we went off to collect the

poison. I had been invited to come along, and Christine came with me, curious to see what kind of plants were used to compound the poison. When they noticed her the Jicaques stopped and consulted. Then Felipe came back to us and informed us that Christine might not come along. No women were permitted to take part in the fishing.

Felipe shook his head when he saw her disappointment, picked some moss out of his hair. "Women unclean," he explained.

I knew that women were ordinarily taboo in such ritualistic fishing or hunting expeditions, but I had hoped that Christine would be permitted to come, as an outsider and no responsibility of theirs.

At first Christine was inclined to stand on her feminist rights. "You mean," she said with a laugh, "that just because I'm a woman I can't come? What nonsense!"

"The point is," I tried to explain, "that all primitives regard women with fear. They fear the evil influence of a woman—merely her presence. They are more intelligent than you realize."

Overwhelmed by this logic, Christine had to give in and return to camp.

We went to the forests to collect the poison, and when we arrived, Felipe and I, the others were already at work, some with stones, others with blunt axes, smashing off the fibrous bark of a medium large tree called the tunkuye, rolling the chunks into suyate leaves to make bundles about twenty-five pounds each. This tree yields an alkaloid known as rotenone and is sometimes used by the Indians of Central America as a delousing agent. The root is now imported into the United States in large quantities. It is used here for cattle dips and insecticides.

I had never seen so many of the Jicaques together at one time. There were more than thirty. There was a

good deal of laughing and Rabelaisian jesting as they pounded the bark and peeled it off the trees. As soon as a bundle had been assembled, one of them would shoulder it and set off for a spot two miles up the river from the fish trap. When all of them were collected at this place, they squatted there and lit their pipes contentedly. Meanwhile Fidelio was going down the line putting a question to each in turn. I discovered that he was asking each of them if his wife were pregnant or menstruating. Each answered in the negative. Had any done otherwise he would have been sent back to the village, for here was another taboo of the hunt. Nor are the Jicaques peculiar in this custom. Almost every primitive community has taboos against women during their periods and in pregnancy. And it is common to bar the husband from the chase and from tribal fishing at such times. Neither may a tribesman have had sexual relations with his wife the night before such an expedition, as this also might bring bad luck.

When the questioning was over, Fidelio picked up a bundle of the tunkuye bark and waded into the river. The others followed suit, each holding a bundle in one hand, a mallet in the other. They laid the bundles on rocks in the stream and began to beat them till the water was milky with the white sap. Bundle after bundle was carried out to the rocks, beaten, and thrown into the stream.

They were just finishing the last of the bundles when Don Jesús rode up with Christine.

As soon as the Jicaques noticed her they stopped pounding the bark. Some left the river. Others, urged on by Fidelio, continued to work. But the enthusiasm had gone out of them. When I walked over and protested to Christine that she was spoiling the fishing, she laughed.

"Goodness, are you getting it too? If the poison works, they'll get their fish, won't they? What does

having a woman around have to do with it? I just wanted to have a look at the fun."

Now the Jicaques divided into two groups, one walking down each side of the river. Nothing stirred in the water. I had expected to see fish leaping up and floating half-dead on the surface, as I had in the Amazon. Occasionally one of the men would see a fish swimming drunkenly to the surface in the eddies where the milky poison was concentrated. I saw one plunge into the stream and emerge with an eel in his mouth and a fish in one hand. But the fish were small on the whole, and the results were very disappointing.

When the party finally assembled at the weir, only eight fish had been caught. Don Jesús came up and looked the catch over. He took off his hat and scratched his head. This was curious, he said. He had seen the Indians catch hundreds of fish by the same method in former years.

The Jicaques sat disconsolately on the banks. They had taken several days to prepare for this fishing and they had nothing to show for it. To them the reason for the failure was obvious, and the way they looked at Christine showed what was going on in their heads.

I didn't want the expedition to end thus sourly, so I promised that presents would be distributed back at our camp and invited them all to come with us. It was our last day in La Flor and I had a good many trade goods left over. So I gave each of the Jicaques a pipe, then knives, fishhooks—anything else that would not be worth the trouble of transporting to Tegucigalpa. They chattered vociferously among themselves and it was clear that they were pleased, even if the fishing had been a dismal failure. Then Fidelio came up to me shyly and offered his hand. He said good-bye gravely. The others followed and we shook hands all round, as if we were

Jicaques preparing for the fishing expedition : gathering Suyalé palm leaves for damming the river

The reed weir constructed as a fish trap

Fish poisoning : the Jicaques' method of fishing. A poisonous bark is gathered in bundles and beaten on the rocks two miles up-river from the reed traps

An elderly Jicaque shows his profile. Members of this secluded tribe have inbred for centuries and there is a remarkable uniformity in their features

XVI

A ROOM WITH BATH

ONCE more we were on the move, this time with a couple of the López boys in tow. Now that we had successfully concluded our observations of the Jicaques, there remained only the final phase of our work in Honduras. We wanted to go to Copán, southernmost city of the ancient Mayan empire. In these archæological remains we hoped to see the beginning of the quetzal fetish, to ravel out the decoration of the quetzal plumes on the carved lintels and façades of the ruins, and answer, if we could, the riddle of the ancient god, Quetzalcoatl.

Our plan was to go on to Tegucigalpa and charter a 'plane that would carry us north to Copán in a little over an hour. This route would save us ten days of riding. The two-day mule ride from La Flor to Talanga, that kitchen midden of a town, was accomplished in holiday mood. Miraculously our Ford truck as ordered was waiting in the plaza at Talanga when we arrived. Our cargo was transferred from the mules to the truck—tents, boxes, and bales of ethnological artifacts from the Jicaques were tied on the back and, when the truck could contain no more, were distributed on the fenders and tied on the bumper. Once more we joggled over the road until we began to near Tegucigalpa. Here the road improved and our chauffeur took full advantage of this, whirling around the inside curves with only a *pro forma* bleat of the horn. It is one of the unexplained statistical mysteries of life that in all our travels by car in Latin America, where roads habitually follow the edges of precipices, we never met another car on a curve.

While the improved roads were pleasant enough to us, to the López boys they were more disturbing than they had imagined them. Not ever having seen an automobile, let alone ridden in one, this kind of driving made them car-sick. I didn't realize how ill they were until we stopped at a little inn for lunch and to water the steaming radiator. When a Latin American will not eat, there is something wrong with him. The steaming beans, fried with onions and dripping in chilli grease, did not interest them; the hot tortillas and freshly killed pig meat, fried to a nice brown in deep bowls of its own fat, could not rouse them from their nauseated stupor. They sat outside of the clean adobe *posada*, heads in hands, dreading the next few miles to Tegucigalpa.

Judging by the excellent food it offered, this inn must be well patronized. The only dwelling within miles, it was located at a strategic spot, where buses either from Talanga or from Tegucigalpa would arrive always just in time for lunch. After eating what for Honduras was a sumptuous feast we filed out into the open. While we leaned against the adobe wall of the house, smoking, the owner of the little restaurant came out of her kitchen and stood in the doorway to watch. In her hands she held the flabby white tortilla she was shaping. As she prattled she kept time with the slap, slap, slap that forms the ball of dough into a pancake.

Tortilla-making is a technique acquired with years of practice. Three times a day, all their lives from childhood on, the women fashion the mashed kernels into those corncakes. With each slap of the hand the tortilla is turned as regularly as if by a machine. Each tortilla to them is a work of art—it must be just so thick, the edges must be smoothly perfect. From every dwelling the length and breadth of Central America and Mexico, one can hear the slap, slap, slap of the tortilla maker. No traveller in those countries can forget the

generous, soft-spoken, patient women whose time is constantly taken up with the children that are coming, the children that are dying, and the preparation of food for their numerous broods. Unable by custom to take part in even the mild debauches of the husband, constant companions of their spouses through privation, misery, and death, the whole life of one of these women might be summed up in a single epitaph: "She gave birth, made tortillas, and died."

We drove off down the white dusty road. It was lined with convicts busy extending and repairing it. It corkscrewed. It was like the caracole of a snail shell, spreading out into the valley that surrounds the capital. The sun emerged from the dark rain clouds as we neared the city, and the shining belfries glistened in the afternoon sky. Above the rasping screams of the brakes as we coasted down the last hill, the faint resonance of ancient Spanish bells floated up to us, summoning the devout to prayer. But it was only the enchantment of distance that made Tegucigalpa seem romantic. No sooner had we rolled into the narrow streets than the spell was broken. The smell of the city assailed our noses and we were distastefully aware of littered streets. Policemen in smart tan uniforms with brown sun helmets directed the traffic of burros bearing silver from the mines of Rosario, of ponderous clattering ox-carts and modern cars.

We passed long rows of one-story buildings flush with the pavement, painted red or yellow or blue—any colour you might name.

We were searching for one thing—"a good hotel where," as Christine wistfully put it, "you can get a room with a bath." There is only one "good" hotel in Tegucigalpa. Its appointments far outstripped what we had been led to anticipate. The rooms—large, dark, and spacious—give on a quiet little patio filled with tropical plants; on the other side they look out over the cobble-

stone street that echoes with the rumble of carts and the cacophony of motor horns. We were shown to our rooms. As a matter of fact there was no bath, for there was no water. Owing to some difficulty of a week's standing, we were told, the water was turned on only between four and six in the afternoons.

"And until then?" Christine asked the manager bleakly.

"Until that time," he replied politely, "you will find the calm and peace that is Tegucigalpa awaiting your pleasure. Our bar has everything cold that you might wish, and the American Legation is only a step around the corner."

The American Legation meant only one thing to us now—mail. Two months' accumulation of it. I hurried up the street, followed by curious stares at my full beard and dusty riding clothes, and came back with my arms full of papers, letters, and packages. Christine was in the bar, reconciling herself to her disappointment about the bath.

Our first concern was about the quetzals. The report was good; they had arrived safely in New York, were doing well. And there was a substantial cheque to back it up. A letter from London was equally satisfactory. The quetzals there were in excellent shape. Another cheque. Reports from the Museum acknowledged letters. First copies of my book about the head-hunters. This was our news from the outside world, and it was all good.

Within the next few hours I was able to arrange for the López boy's operation. A kind American dentist recommended a surgeon and a hospital, and it was all settled in less than no time. (We later heard that the operation had been successful.) This matter disposed of, I wanted nothing more than a cold drink—and all was right with the world.

. . . . . .

Late in the afternoon the hotel was shaken by detonations. I went to the window and looked out. No one seemed particularly disturbed; yet the explosions grew louder and more frequent. It was as if a battery of heavy artillery were going into action. Across the way a bricklayer continued to pile up sun-baked adobe bricks. A girl walked by hawking, "*Dulcitos—dulcitos*—papayas," apparently undisturbed. The explosions became ever more menacing. When I opened the long shutters that led from our rooms into the patio, people in bathrobes were rushing by.

"Is it a revolution?" I called to the white-jacketed bellboy.

His brown cherub's face broke into a grin. "Revolution?" he repeated. "No, Señor. That is only the evening water coming on. They say it is the air in the pipes. . . ."

"But the people . . .?" I pointed.

"Oh, they're running to the shower bath. The water will remain on only for one hour—for to-day is Thursday."

We joined the scramble and soon got our baths. In a few minutes we were feeling clean and civilized.

In the morning we sent our baggage out to the airport. We had engaged a private 'plane from Taca to fly us to Copán and were sending our heavy luggage directly to New York, since we expected to have no further need of it. A drive of ten miles over a dusty alkaline road bordered with century plants brought us to Toncontin, the flying field. At one end of it stood a spacious well-appointed station, the waiting-room decorated by a large mural map showing the system's airports. Smartly uniformed men conducted the passengers to their 'planes. A radio sang out instructions to pilots and reports to the distant airfields. It was hard to bring all this into focus with the world we had left only a couple of days before—a world that was at one with the cen-

turies before and uncomplicated by all we understand by the word American.

While we waited for them to bring out our 'plane, a Ford all-metal tri-motor taxiedout in front of the station. An announcer seized his megaphone and rolled off the names of the way stations. In front of us sat a Honduranean family—fat papa, fat mamma, four children dressed in the style that was fashionable for mid-Victorian picnics. Lying about them in a semi-circle were bags and cases, pineapples and mangoes, and—as usual—a couple of live chickens. When the announcer called out the name of Olanchito, the man grabbed his wife and his big sombrero, stopped to button his jacket, then started to pull his wife to the door after him, urging, "*Vamanos, Mamacita, vamanos!*" And she grabbed the biggest child by the hand and it grabbed the next—till they made a chain six people long and scurried towards the 'plane. After them came their baggage and then travelling salesmen, army officers, miners. The freight loading had been completed earlier, and since freight rates are low, everybody had brought along as much as he would have packed on a burro. The door was closed. Contact. Signals—and away soared the strangest assortment of passengers I have ever seen a 'plane carry off.

The pilot who was to fly us to Copán came over to have a look at our baggage. We were travelling light, so there was nothing much to weigh and stow into the 'plane. We went over our plans with the pilot and he agreed to circle the ruins a few times before landing us, so that we could get an archæological mosaic of Copán in photographs. Then our Bellanca was headed down the runway, and we settled into our chairs and roared away back into the prehistory of the Mayas.

XVII

THE PLUMED SERPENT LEADS US TO COPÁN.

FOR the first hour of our flight to Copán heavy fog banks had obscured the land below. The altimeter read 8,000 feet. The aviator, wishing to avoid any uncharted peaks, rose even higher. Then for a moment the clouds broke and we could see a river through the wisps of clouds. The aviator consulted his chart, nosed the aeroplane down and in a few minutes we burst through the cloud bank and came into sight of a beautiful valley. The aviator throttled the engine down and indicated that we were now over the Valley of Copán. Tobacco fields and milpas chequered the narrow valley below us. I searched in vain for the Maya ruins, but at this altitude we could see nothing of them. The aeroplane banked sharply, the world seemed to change so that which we thought below was now on top. Then the aviator levelled off the 'plane and the altimeter read 3,000 feet. I quickly brought out my Leica (for I wanted to make an aerial mosaic of this historic valley) and began exposing pictures as the 'plane followed the ten-mile long valley to its northern end. Through the centre flowed the Rio Copán and cleft the whole valley down its entire length. When we had reached its centre, I suddenly sighted the main Acropolis of the ruins of Copán, sections of the white buildings well visible beside the Rio Copán. Ecstatically I motioned to the aviator to drop lower. I fitted on the telescopic lens on my Leica, made a guess at the light values below, and began to expose roll after roll of film. Parts of the main temple were visible in dazzling whiteness set off in relief from the heavy verdure that ensconced the whole

The ruins of Copán from the air: showing the jungle-covered Acropolis, and the way the river has eaten away the side of the hill on which the city was built

Time and style has changed in Copán: the ornamental temple doorway of yesterday, compared with the typical wattled hut of the modern village nearby

of the acropolis. So at last I was obtaining a zolopite's eye view of the mysterious Maya ruins that had been constructed by the Mayas early in the Christian millenium and deserted in the seventh century. No one knew what the city was called by the people who built it nor why the city-state in apparent prosperity was deserted at the height of its prosperity.

The Bellaca tipped its rudder and up we soared to have a better view of the long narrow valley of Copán.

The Rio Copán which cut into the Maya ruins, flowed the entire length of the valley and then turned east into Guatemala where it had its confluence with the larger more turbulent Rio Motagua in Guatemala, which reversed the trend and flowed north along the Honduras-Guatemala border and debouched into the Caribbean. It is believed that the Mayas, migrating into new lands, followed the Rio Copán from Guatemala into Honduras, following along the banks of the Rio Copán snaking its way through the desert-like brush and dry fallow-land whence it leads into the long, narrow, fertile valley of Copán. From the perspective at such heights at which we were flying, the forces of nature, the quality of the new land and the curiosity of following the river to whence it leads, must have been a very deciding factor to the Indians called the Mayas, who, in the first century of the Christian era migrated into the Valley of Copán. For everything desired by a people in the neolithic stage of culture was here: healthful conditions at 2,000 feet altitude, fertile soil which would allow an adequate return in their staple food, maize. The symmetrical peaks near to the valley, suggested former volcanic activity and offered an additional factor in the selection of the site. Some primitive real estate operator could have pointed out with sufficient force that if there were volcanoes here, the immigrants would find obsidian glass, which could be

split for knives, tools, tips for their arrows. Here, too, they could find the coarse basalt which could be chipped and made into mealing stones—metates to grind corn to make their tortillas. But better still (so might have run on our Mayan salesman) since the Mayas were so addicted to the cutting of stone and fashioning of monuments, they would find in the north cliff—towering one hundred feet above the Valley proper—a whole cliff of adesite volcanic tuffs, soft enough to be carved with stone instruments (since they had no metal) yet hard enough when exposed to air to be permanent.

We circled, banked, flew up and down the valley until I had exposed enough film to complete an aerial mosaic, then the aviator nosed the Bellanca down. We skimmed past one of the temples of the Mayas and came down on the flat valley floor on a runway prepared for aeroplanes.

At the end of the field was a small building which acted at once as a local museum, housing the small, unusual pieces that the archæologists uncovered, as well as the section which served as offices for the Carnegie Institute archæologists when they were working on the ruins. We were met by a square-set, copper-visaged minor official, armed with a heavy pistol, but exceedingly affable. Doubly so, since he held in his hand a telegram from the Minister of Education under whose jurisdiction were the national monuments of Honduras, who had instructed him to place all the facilities of his office at our disposal.

By terms of a contract existing between the Carnegie Institute of Washington and the Republic of Honduras, who jointly were restoring the ruins of Copán, none but the employees of the Copán project were to be permitted to photograph the recently uncovered or restored material, or to carry on extensive researches. Such a provision was undoubtedly necessary, since,

after years of restoration, what would prevent other archæologists who had not expended time, money, or effort from coming upon and studying the Herculean efforts of another?

We pulled out our meagre equipment—a few suitcases, blankets, cameras and placed them next to an ox-cart drawn by two immense emasculated bullocks. Heads bowed because of the heavy yoke that lay across their necks, their ribs and pelvis bones protruded from beneath the thick hide as conspicuously as if a mounted skeleton had been covered with a sheet; they could well have used to good purpose a few months' pasture on the succulent grass that covered the valley floor.

While Señor Gárcia tried to cajole the Taca aviator into doing some favour or other for him in Tegucigalpa, we tried to bargain with a Copaneco, who stood at the head of his oxen. His short white pants came just below the knee while a shirt of the same white sheeting, which seemed to have suffered too much shrinking, covered his brown body that with the decrepit straw hat that topped his unruly mop of hair made him look all the more like an animated scarecrow. He moved his jaws in exact rhythm with the bullocks', and when answering a question, had the curious habit of having to shift his tobacco from one side to the other before he could answer. We tried to penetrate the dull capacity of his bovine brain but soon gave it up. All we really wanted was to hire him to put our suitcases on this ox-cart and bring it into town, and to show him that I really meant to pay him I took a *lempira* from my pocket and attempted to put it in his hand to conclude the deal. But he was adamant. He folded his hands behind his back and refused to accept the money. His face became as impassive as an adobe wall. I could not seem to impress upon him that I was willing to pay for an hour's work that which takes him at least a day to earn. The

comandante walked back from the 'plane to where we stood in our impasse with the driver of the ox-cart. We inquired about the best place to stay in the modern village of Copán, and he suggested the house of General Juan de Campo, for that was where the Carnegie archæologists lived when they were working on the restoration of the ruins.

"You arrange your Señora and yourself," he went on, "and when you are ready I will have a guide to take you to the ruins, which lie, as you see, just a few hundred yards from here."

He turned to the ox-cart driver. "Anicéto. Take these people to the house of General Juan de Campo. Here, pile these things on the carreta. Will you wish to ride, Señores?" he asked, turning to us. "You'll find it none too comfortable, but as it is a half-mile into town, perhaps the Señora will find——"

A half-mile's walk into town, after all the climbing and walking we did in the interior of Honduras!

"Come on, Christine, up you go," and I lifted her on to the flat bottom of the carreta. "We approach civilization and we must enter like gentle people." Anicéto mounted in front, struck the oxen with his spiked shaft and off we rumbled.

The carreta is a survival of colonial days and is an extraordinary conveyance. It stands high, four feet from the ground on its two wooden wheels made from two half-moon sections of wood, rounded and nailed together. The weight of the cart, the wheels and the yoke for the oxen must be almost a ton, but it does not matter. All the oxen have to do is lean their weight on the contraption and it goes along breaking the calm day with the squeaking din of the turning greaseless axle. Anicéto sat high on his seat like a Roman charioteer, while we hung on for dear life as the cart rumbled along the cobblestoned road that led to the village.

It was one of those indescribably lovely Central American days, full billowy clouds drifted across the deep turquoise-blue sky, broken only by the dark shapes of the zopolites circling about looking for carnage on which to feed. Near to a small stone bridge that led up to an incline to the village, women of Copán were gathering water. They filled the large black earthen *ollas*, made rounded saucers out of their head-cloths, and put the immense jugs on their heads and started off for their homes. Over one thousand years had passed since their ancestors built the magnificent stone cities, yet the pattern of this phase of their lives was still the same. We followed behind them to the small grass-covered plaza and there jumped off the end of the carreta to bump directly into a one-legged gentleman who proved to be General Juan de Campo. He was to be our host while we remained in Copán. Tall and gaunt, and with grandiloquent courtesy, he hobbled in after us into a small courtyard and there introduced us to our quarters.

"These rooms, Señores, are at your service. When Meester Stronsvik, who has charge of archæological operations, is here, he stays with us also. You ask about meals? Simple. You may have them here," and he waved his arm towards the long corridor, where at one end, dominated by Japanese calendars, was a long table. He left us to arrange the camp-cots in a bare white-walled room with tiled floor. Our window opened onto the Plaza and immediately light was shut off by the curious children crowding about the grilled window to inspect the strangers.

The general, now shaven and adorned with an obvious rarity, a tie, walked out with us to the open Plaza. As in the other smaller villages, the city formed itself about a large plaza, which here had a bandstand. The general indicated to us, however, that Sunday concerts which were sometimes played, now no longer

functioned, since three members of the village orchestra had unfortunately joined the latest uprising and were most regrettably liquidated.

At one end of the plaza was, of course, the church, now closed since the earthquake had split it in half, rendering it unsafe to enter. God in Copán was on a vacation.

In the plaza we saw our prelude to the Mayas. An enormous slab of rock lay in the centre of the plaza carved on one side with allegorical figures in deep bas-relief. Maya chieftains with curious headgear sat in conference with figures of men masked in weird animal masks. On the other sides of the ceremonial slab were long rows of hieroglyphics as unintelligible to us as a Chinese laundry ticket. General de Campo, who had known every visiting archæologist to come to Copán since 1890, explained to us that this modern village of Copán was once, centuries ago, the beginning of the Maya empire in Copán; that the dates on these monuments occupying the plaza were earlier than anything they had yet found at the Acropolis of Copán. But that we would see on the morrow.

Off the plaza, a large artificial mound rose from one of the narrow cobblestone streets and still following our gallant hobbling general, we climbed to the top of it. From the summit one hundred and fifty feet above the level of the valley floor, we could easily follow the diagram of the various ruins as drawn by the general with one end of his crutch.

"Now," he went on, "if you let your eyes follow the river, you can see, about a quarter-mile distant, a large clump of trees. Do you see that wall of trees? *Bueno*! Now allow your eyes to move to the left . . . do you see some of the carvings? Well, those are what you'll see to-morrow. Perfectly marvellous carvings . . ." and the general dwelt on the word "marvellous" as if he were enticing us into a side-show.

There is something fascinating about the unknown; to decipher a cryptic message, to put together an obscure puzzle, to guess, to ravel out, are symptoms of man's curiosity. That is why archæology is so fascinating, and especially so the archæology of the Mayas, who have left so much and say so little. And it is particularly true of these ruins.

Copán the mysterious, the magnificent, is an impenetrable enigma. Why was a superb city erected, and after four centuries of labour, abandoned? What happened to the thousands of Maya Indians who patiently blocked out, and rolled down immense boulders of stone, laboriously carved them, erected them in a magnificent architectural setting, and then abandoned their work? What explanation would one give about a city of Europe that for centuries had reared its towers, its theatres, its plazas, and was then deserted without apparent reason? War? No! The Mayas were a peaceful people; no martial motifs appeared on any of their decorations at Copán.

Astronomy developed here as in no other part of the Empire. So authoritatively did the Copán astronomers read the heavens that when the other astronomer-priests descried something wrong with their observations, they hurried to the city of Copán, and, if we can trust the analysis of one of America's formost archæologists, even gathered here for the first astronomical congress in history.

Then, too, Copán had an additional historical significance, for it was here, right at this very spot, where not only the renaissance of the Mayas took place, but from whence the whole interest of American archæology has its origin. For at Copán exactly one hundred years ago (1838), John Lloyd Stephens discovered Copán and for the first time the world at large saw that the civilization, of which the Spanish conquistadores spoke with such fervent eloquence, did once exist.

The researches of Stephens, embodied in a remarkable book called *Incidents of Travel in Central America*, began the archæological fever. American archæology was, in fact, born in 1838 at Copán.

Now Stephens was not an archæologist; he was, in fact, a writer of travel books and well might have been the Richard Halliburton of his day, except that his "tales" did not demand the credulity of our own poor Richard's. Death made Stephens a diplomat and diplomacy made him an archæologist—a roundabout way to discover the Mayas for on the eve of his sailing, the Minister-designate to the Republic of Central America (a very nebulous republic at this time) made his demise. Our hero, Stephens, who had some political connections among the true and deserving democrats of this time, sought and received the office of Minister to Central America. Under that august mantle —and with the companionship of Frederick Catherwood, an English artist, Stephens set sail for middle America.

His mission was nebulous enough. He was to proceed to middle America, locate a central government, wherever and whenever it might be found, and negotiate a commercial treaty. As five previous consuls and ministers had died in this office during a similar negotiation, Mr Stephens did not inherit a particularly attractive political plum, but if it lent dignity to his person while in search of archæological curiosities, it might be well worth the candle.

When Stephens and Catherwood arrived in British Honduras in their quest for a central government, they were told by the English that Central America had been rocked for two years by a revolution and the foreigners who penetrated the interior would do so at the risk of their lives. Stephens thought, however, that the office of Minister to Central America and his passport with its fiery red seals would sufficiently protect him,

and so with utter sang-froid he and Catherwood plunged into the morass that was Guatemala, to find the road that led to the rumoured ancient Maya city of Copán.

Days later he had been arrested. His captor was a mulatto, dressed as an officer with glazed hat and sword, but whose ragged coat and bare feet fitted him more for a part in an *opéra bouffe*. For a few brief days Stephens's fate hung in the balance. The "officer" who had never seen a passport refused to recognize the sealed document as a legitimate *laissez-passer* into the republic. Finally, however, a militant harangue by our Minister on the sacred rights of an Ambassador, the laws of nations, and the danger this mulatto upstart ran in bringing down the mighty vengeance of the Government of the United States, caused the bewildered fellow's capitulation. Free once again, Stephens's party was allowed to take its way to the then tiny settlement of the village of Copán. There he was shown the ruins of the Mayas.

Centuries did not hide from Stephens the great value of his discovery. Trees grew out of the centre of the pyramids, vegetation ensconced some of the beautiful temples, but enough was visible to impress him with the fact that they contained "more of the character of structure than any we have ever seen ascribed to the aborigines of America."

While Stephens mapped the ruins, Catherwood put up his drawing-board and began the first scientific delineation of the indigenous creations of the American Indian. Scarcely had they begun when Don Gregorio appeared.

Don Gregorio (there is one in every native village), lean, dyspetic, and authoritative, insisted that they leave these ruins; he had heard about their being incarcerated at Comátan and since they were foreigners, and therefore suspects—they would be so good as not to

sully these ruins. To be thus interrupted in his work, at so early a date, to desert that which he had wandered so far to find, found no favour with Stephens. Did this Don Gregorio, who raised such a fuss, own the ruins? No, he did not.

"On what ground then did Don Gregorio assume to——?"

"On the interests of the state and the preservation of its pristine ruins."

The devil take him, thought Stephens. He would search out the owner of the ruins, undertake to buy the land and go on unhampered. In this resolve he left Catherwood to draw some of the figures on the weird monuments and set off to find the dwelling of Don José Maria, the owner of Copán.

He came upon José Maria later in the day, with his soiled cotton clothing, his feet shod only with sandals and wallowing under a palm-thatched wall-less dwelling. The landlord of the ghosts of the Mayas was not very impressive. Stephens offered to buy the land on which the ruins stood. The not-too-bright Hondureño tergiversated on the grounds that he must consult his neighbours. That night, Stephens, while he awaited Don José's decision, lay in his hammock, smoking a long black cheroot (to keep away the mosquitoes) and brooded over the title deeds of José Maria and the ownership of the most magnificent ancient city of America. The more he thought about their purchase, the more romantic it seemed:

"Hide your heads, ye speculators in building lots," he rhapsodized: "I am about to buy an entire city."

Then another thought came to him. Why not "remove the monuments of a bygone people from these desolate regions in which they were buried, set them up in the great commercial emporium (in New York City) and found an institution to be the

nucleus of a great national Museum of American antiquities . . ."

But there were difficulties. Don José Maria had grown recalcitrant. Urged on by the sinister Don Gregorio, who impressed upon the owner of the ruins that he risked the Supreme Government's displeasure, as well as his own head, by selling ruins to foreigners, known to have been committed to jail in Comáyan, he hesitated. Sad-faced, Don José Maria, with the abject behaviour of a mangy burro, admitted to Stephens that, though he would like to turn an unfortunate investment into ready money, yet the thought of an avenging government stilled his sense of business.

But Stephens had one last trump to play. Recollecting that above all he was the Minister Plenipotentiary, Envoy Extraordinary from the United States of America to the Central Government of Central America—wherever that was—he dug into his bags and pulled out his red diplomatic coat, emblazoned with rich braid and golden buttons. He did not change his chequered shirt, nor the white pants—soiled to the knees with the filth of Copán, nor his large Panama hat, but donned the coat over his soiled person, making him look, as he remarked, "as *outré* as the negro king who received the British officers on the African coast with cocked hat and sword and nothing to hide his inexpressibles. . . ." It was a master-stroke. Don José Maria felt of the cloth, inspected the rich braid. These he had seen before on the person of General Morazon when he rode out to battle, but the gold buttons—he had never seen such things, and could not resist them. Convinced that he had in his dwelling the person of an "illustrious incognito" Don José capitulated and—agreed to the sale of Copán.

Now just how much do ancient cities sell for in America? Prices, naturally, are regulated by supply and demand. Copán had no other buyers, so Stephens

offered Don José Maria fifty dollars for the entire ruins. For once, Don José Maria, who had spent his whole life haggling over centavos, was too amazed even to raise the price. Fifty dollars for a ruin! This *illustré* must be a madman, but he, Don José Maria, would not challenge the sagacity of a fool. The title deeds were made out and John Lloyd Stephens became the owner of the ruins of Copán for fifty dollars. (To-day a small polychromic bowl from there would bring more than that sum; could the ruins be purchased and transported to America, it would run into millions.)

Now Stephens ruled the roost. He sent his servants to chop down some of the trees and clear out the overhanging eaves of branches and vines while overhead, the real guardians of the ruins, the little ring-tailed monkeys, challenged this entry into their home. With light now shed upon the great monoliths, Catherwood sat down to complete the first records of the architecture and sculpture of the Mayas. The work—which finally appeared in large lithographs as well as in several editions of Stephens's books—so excited the interest of the scholars and the archæologists that it supplied the impetus to dig into American archæology.

John Stephens gauged the importance of what he saw; he thought that some Champollion (*en passant*, the discoverer of the Rosetta stone) would one day decipher the hieroglyphics on the monuments and reveal the history of the people who built them.

Thus at Copán it all began. Not content, however, Stephens went farther: he visited Uxmal, Tulum, Labna, Chichen Itza, Palenque and other important Maya cities that were not even names in his generation, and so single-handed won succeeding generations over to the worthy notion of excavating, deciphering, and restoring these monumental antiquities. And, although he found the cities desolate, lost, covered with heavy

verdure, his was a sensitive, knowing eye. One hundred years ago he wrote:

"My first view of Copán convinced me that American antiquities were important, not only as the remains of an unknown people, but as works of art."

XVIII

THE ACROPOLIS

With the first flush of dawn we rose, quickly dressed, drank our cups of black coffee, and made off through the town towards the ruins. The little village was gradually coming to life. Smoke poured from the kitchens of the houses. We could hear the slap, slap of the tortilla makers as we followed the narrow cobblestone street over which we had jounced the day before. Heavy dew covered the grass, a few butterflies lazily fluttered about; parrots, making their way to some distant feeding grounds, flew low over the road, screaming defiance to the world. But for the rest, the small path that led to the huge tree-covered Acropolis of Copán was in almost death-like repose. Coming to some of the stones which marked the environs, in a few minutes we were at the base of the ancient city of Copán.

We crawled up the jumbled staircase that led up to the Acropolis, crawling over the stone treads time and earthquakes had dislodged, and came out from behind the vast trees into the first courtyard. Its magnificence burst on us dramatically. The plaza was as long as a city block. It is called the Western Court around which are grouped, or rather were grouped, the tallest of the Copán structures. To the left as we entered the court (and now under reconstruction) is the so-called "Reviewing Stand." In what may aptly be termed a miracle of restoration are a series of six stone steps, each a hundred feet long, composed of large blocks of cut stone. Originally restored by the British archæologist Maudslay in 1885, the sixth step has a long series of hieroglyphics, well carved and in good state of preserva-

tion. In the centre of the "Reviewing Stand" are the remains of two seated figures. The heads and shoulders are lost; only the fragments of the bodies remain. To either side of this central piece are two allegorical figures bearing torches. The left figure has been dealt with kindly by time, and the head, which Dr Morley[1] could not find in 1915, and mourned for lost, has been found in superb condition. Kneeling, resting on knee and toe, the figures each hold a torch from which flames of a sort issue. Protruding from the posteriors of the figures is a feline tail which evolves into a snake's head with an extended tongue, the bi-fanged type representing the fer-de-lance snake of Central America. The head, grotesque and heroic in size, is quite reminiscent of certain Ming figurines. Issuing from the tightly clenched mouth is a serpent with head clearly raised and outlined on the figure's cheek. The body of the figure seems once to have been covered with the same serpent motif but erosion has left only the faintest outlines of the decoration.

Directly behind the "Reviewing Stand" and forming an integral part of it rises Pyramid 11, fifty feet above the floor of the court. To reach its summit one is forced to made a detour around the side. The restorers, feeling their way carefully in the structure, seem to be repairing the obvious portions from which their extensive knowledge of Maya architecture will allow them to divine the external portions.

On top of this pyramid there is a central chamber and long corridor, at one end of which there are hieroglyphics. One portion of it is still in ruins with the original walls twisted and turned by the effects of time. On the floor of the corridor is an entrance to a tunnel which leads straight down into the bowels of the pyramid. With my electric torch I let myself down some ten feet into the chambers below the floor. Once used

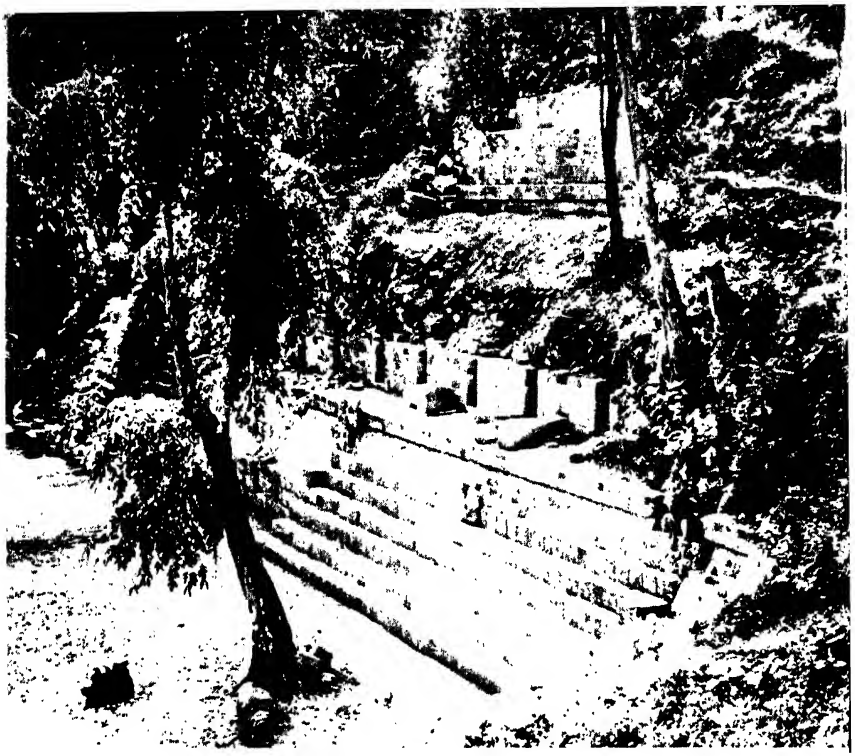
[1] Morley, S. G., *The Inscriptions at Copán*, Washington 1920.

for a secret passage by the Maya priests, the archæologists have only restored that part which could be followed at the moment; yet like so many niches in Maya architectural works, the passages never seem to go anywhere.

The main structure of Copán is composed of five distinct plazas surrounded by pyramids, temples and what was, perhaps, the dwelling of the Theocracy that ruled the Maya cities. The complete main structure covers about fifteen acres. Superficially one would believe the city to have been planned and built in its entirety, but archæological investigation has shown that Copán was not *planned* at once. The whole of the Acropolis evolved from lesser pyramids, less sumptuous temples. This is disclosed by the cross-section of the city cut by the Copán river in a change of its course which has left in clear relief the architectonic history of the great Maya city.

Passing to the right of the immense Pyramid 16 that faces the Eastern Court the road leads along its base to a passage between the pyramid's east face and the low steps of another ruin. Directly through the foliage of the trees one can see the restored temple number 22 which is the apex of what is hypothesized to have been the most sacred part of the whole religious centre of Copán. The narrow walk leads to the Eastern Court which is half the size of the Western Court. Tiers of seats hewn from Herculean stones rise on either side of the court in the form of the ancient Roman coliseums to which it has been likened again and again, much to the chagrin of the archæologists who insist on a wholly "American" interpretation of the Maya archæology. The solid tiers of stone steps that rise on the eastern side of the court weigh hundreds of pounds per unit, precluding even the destructive element of time from putting them from their original position, and although some of them have moved slightly out of line, their

One of the best preserved figures in the Western Court—reminiscent of Ming sculpture



The restored Western Court

bulk has preserved the form of the eastern side of the Eastern Court.

Under the tiers in this court are two passages. One leads down a flight of stairs into a narrow tunnel through which I passed, having to stoop in order to enter a stone-walled room high enough in which to stand. The room was eight feet square, vacant and unadorned, save for three niches set into the walls which often appear in Maya architecture.

The other passage begins at the base of the tier and continues under the stadium to the river wall where there is a sheer drop of eighty feet to the right wing of the Copán river. Locally this passage is known as "La Ventana," the window, although its purpose is not altogether clear. It is so narrow that one must crawl through and certainly was not intended as a convenient tunnel. It is curious that the mason-work is as well preserved at the river end where the flow of the river has cut into the Acropolis as in the Eastern Court where it begins. It is noteworthy that so much of the ruins have been carried away by the river but that this stone passage, facing the river, has been left in such condition. I crawled through on numerous occasions to study the distinct layers of rubble that display the architectural history of the great mound, and not wholly satisfied with the view, I descended to the river itself, leaving my servant to crawl through and stand up in the stone window while we sought to discover its purpose in the ruins. The best suggestion is that it might have been constructed to drain the Eastern Court when flooded by the deluges which occur in the rainy season.

On the opposite side of the court is another set of stairs similar to the "Reviewing Stand" containing seven steps, fifty feet or more in length. It has no hieroglyphics such as the other one; only two badly aged ones at the corners. These steps lead to another court, twenty feet

above the floor of the Eastern Court which is unusual in that it is paved with square flat stones.

The most interesting features of this stairway are two figures of jaguars, amusingly carved; hence it is called the "Jaguar Stairway."

Nowhere was the naturalistic style of carving so developed among the Mayas as here at Copán. For us it was important since we were attempting to trace out the animals which the Mayas thought sufficiently important to raise to the rank of demigods. Of all, none played a larger part than the jaguar. Throughout its range, the jaguar has always been in the Americas the most dreaded of the mammalia. The short ears, the strong body, the squat legs and long tail along with the rosette-like spots, lent themselves easily to a conventional representation. In many of the more important Mayan ruins the jaguar has full place as a decorative element.

Although generally a peaceful animal in his relation to man, he will, like any other large cat when growing old and unable to obtain other food, try first man's dog and then man himself for a titbit. The Mayas must have had sufficient contact with it to develop it into not only a motif for architecture, but a powerful demiurge which had to be propitiated. Primarily a mammal-feeding species, it is not remiss in stalking birds and like the Alaskan bear will often fish, for it regards this with gastronomic delight. It fishes, however, only in great hunger, when patience is sharpened by leanness, or in moments when, with belly full, it seeks a delicately spined morsel. I would doubt, and this is well substantiated by the records (or better, by the lack of them), that the American jaguar attacks man. Of course, with modern weapons, I might boast a certain fearlessness, yet, one must remember that the Maya Indian, with obsidian tipped spear, was not too even a match with a jaguar who, well camouflaged in the chiaroscuro of the jungle, could leap out on the

unwary with breakneck speed. Experience has taught me, however, that behind every Indian superstition there is a foundation of fact and the jaguar's presence and perhaps depredations were sufficient to include him in the host of powerful demons to which to pay homage. So in the Eastern Court there is a series of stone steps called the "Jaguar Stairway." Foreshortened and squat, they are in a fanciful mood. One paw rests on its hip, the other outstretched with extended claws. The tail, which drags to the ground, is disproportionately long and heavy with a curiously foliated tip. Such a thing as a tail could never be left *au naturel*; for the Mayan sculptor it must always be extended, flowing, flowering. Yet this figure of the jaguar is the most realistic of any of the zoö sculptures, at either Copán or Quirigua. The most curious convention has been the sculptor's intent to create the illusion of the jaguar's spots. The illusion is limited to nine circular holes, looking for all the world like the workings of some mischievous boy who stuck a rounded object in wet cement. Instead of being in relief, the spots are indented, and a hole appearing on either side of the jaw would give the idea of a skeleton of the feline if the well-fed body did not belie it. Nine seemed a good number of spots and if the visitor did not thus recognize the animal portrayed, then the fault remained with the viewer, not the sculptor.

At the base of a flight of immense stairs, Christine came upon four sections of stone and, amused at her discovery, we sat down to try to piece together this archæological crossword puzzle. Since the units weighed twenty pounds apiece, I did all the moving while Christine sat on the stairs and directed it like some Maya priestess.

Putting the things to the side and that which was the body into the centre, another fragment emerged; it was a bat! The wings outstretched, the ribbing of its elon-

gated fingers, covered with thick integument and used as wings, the Mayan sculptors revealed themselves as good naturalists; so much so that I felt myself quite able even to place the genus of animal from which the Indian sculptor got his model, for he had represented the prominent nose-leaf feature of a species of Phyllostominæ and it aroused in them the same feeling of revulsion that it does in us. We associate it with darkness, dankness and something diabolic. Living in caves and tunnels where for the primitive the genii of everything lived, it is quite understandable why it should have been sublimated into an important demon for the Maya. It had even a place in the Maya pantheon. Even one of the Maya months is named after it—*Zotz*—and in each case that the practised eye can search out there is that prominent nose-leaf appendage by which the Maya sought a convenient handle of conventionalization. Of course, not all bats are bloodsucking; that species, a thirty-inch specimen known from the Amazon which carried the horrible name of *Vampyrus spectrum*, is no vampire at all, but merely a fruit bat. On the chest of the bat with outstretched wings the Mayan sculptor observed a flat open space, so he set in to decorate this too and made a loose-hanging ornament to come around the chest of the bat. The Mayan sculptor never seemed to be able to let a little space go along by itself; something must be carved on it. Their abhorrence of any vacant space forced them to embellish everything.

We then turned to climb the steps situated at the end of the North Court, which part one first sees when entering, for it is fully restored. This part, called Temple 22, dominates the whole court.

It is a well-preserved structure that rises from a series of cyclopean steps. To reach this building, which Dr Morley regards as the most elaborate of its type in the whole panorama of Mayan architecture, we climbed

painfully up the stone steps of treads sixteen inches deep. The building externally is quite reminiscent of the Mayan architecture of the New Empire and what one generally remembers of the later types of structure at Chichen Itza. In front, after one completes the scaling of the stairway, is a very elaborately carved doorway emblazoned with an overhead decoration of hieroglyphics and figures. On either side of the doorway are two well-proportioned figures forming a caryatid to the ornamental doorway. The figures are squatting, one knee to the ground, the other bent so that it reaches the chin. One hand rests on the ground and the other, Ajax-like, is bent over the head, supporting a great wealth of allegory. A cacoplastic of arms, feather decorations, dragon heads, and other decorative leitmotifs ends as it begins at the top, still moving into space. Without form, while form-filling, yet withal a pleasant surrealistic design.

Below these figures is a carved tread composed of hieroglyphics with large realistic death's heads decorated with macabre tassels under the supporting Maya caryatides. The skulls are festooned with designs of waving ornaments hanging from the ears. What purpose the entire decoration has is still denied us, for the archæologists have succeeded only in deciphering the portion relating to dates.

On either side of this allegorical doorway are halls which balance one the other in finely chiselled stone work and beautifully restored. The halls lead to stone rooms, without roof, but with windows, and because of its sacrosanct nature, this temple might have been the living quarters of members of the higher Theocracy. The only breaks in the monotony of walls are small holes that have been made in the stone work perhaps to hold torches to light the chambers during some sacred ceremony.

On passing through the allegorical doorway we noted

that the restorers have left a part of the structure open which forms a great stone porch from which we could see the rest of the ruins through all their venerable aspect of age, and look down upon the descendants of the Mayas planting their corn just as their ancestors did in ancient times.

We went back to sit on the massive steps overlooking the north courtyard. Everything was in death-like repose. Save for ourselves, there seemed to be no other living thing within these ruins. It was as if we had discovered the ruins ourselves. We had no cicerone to explain this detail or that, or to build up or change our own interpretation of it. Since I had had many years' experience in the Americas with ruins and Indians, I had come, as one must, to have some sort of individual evaluation of it all. It seemed at the moment a sacrilege to break the silence; we both just sat, our heads in our hands and gazed upon this sacred courtyard. I should not have been surprised at that moment to have seen a Maya priest walk straight down the enclosure clad in rich robes and tall quetzal feathered head-dresses, leading a splendid procession. Up these very steps they had walked 1,500 years ago and at the very spot where we were sitting, to proclaim some month of calendaric significance. But if we were thrilled now at something not new, explored by countless archæologists—what must have been the feelings of John Lloyd Stephens who discovered it?

For it was, I suddenly realized, exactly a hundred years ago that Mr Stephens cut his way into the ruins of Copán. He found not only this beautiful Mayan acropolis, but when he published the illustrations of his companion, Catherwood, in the book of naïve title, *Incidents of Travel in Central America*, he began the cycle of archæology in America. Before his coming the Maya civilization had been relegated by the eminent eighteenth-century historians to the limbo of fable. The ruins of

Aztecs and Mayas, of the beautiful civilization as described by the Spanish conquerors, were nothing to them except the vapouring from the braggadocio of the Spanish conquistadores. For although the Spanish spoke of the superb manner in which the Indians were governed, the magnificent structures which they built, there were no illustrations of them and since foreigners were not permitted into the Americas for fear they would undermine the Spanish holdings, no one could confirm the stories of the conquistadores about the indigenous civilization.

Historians knew that only four decades after the conquest of Guatemala the rumours began to trickle into the Audiencia of Guatemala that there existed a great city beyond the border of Honduras. So persistent grew these rumours that the Viceroy dispatched one Lic. don Diego Gárcia de Palacio with a sufficiently large retinue in 1576, to search the valley and see if this city could be found. He picked his way across the ancient road that led from Chiquimula, where only a few years before the Spaniards had put down a great Indian rebellion. The Spaniards followed the road, the river, and came into the Valley of Copán, there to find the ruins of the city of which they had heard. It was utterly deserted, as grown over with vegetation as when it was visited three hundred years later by John Lloyd Stephens. In his formal report to the dyspeptic Philip I, Palacio wrote "on the road to the city of San Pedro (Sula) of Honduras, in the first town within the province of Honduras called Copán are certain ruins and vestiges of a great population and of superb edifices, of such skill and splendour that it appears that they could never have been built by the natives of that province. They are found on the banks of a beautiful river in that extensive and well-chosen plain, which is temperate in climate, fertile and abounding in fish and game.

"I endeavoured with all possible care to ascertain

from the Indians, through the traditions derived from the ancients, what people lived there or what they knew or heard from their ancestors concerning them. They say in ancient times there came from Yucatan a great Lord who built these edifices, but at the end of some years he returned to his native country, leaving them (the ruins) entirely deserted."

Describing the ruins of Copán with fair accuracy, the Licencionada's report was placed in the archives only to be brought forth a century later as source of material from which another historian, one Captain Francisco Antonio Fuentes y Guzman, drew his inspiration and inaugurated two centuries of misinformation in respect of the ruins of Copán.

XIX

THE MAYAN PLAZA

THE next morning at the first flush of the sun over the valley of Copán we went again to the ruins, passing over what we had seen before to enter into those sections still unexplored by us. We passed over and beyond the now familiar Western Court into the North Court and by the jaguar stairway; there to one side was another tier of cyclopean stone steps which we followed to the top. From that height we looked down into another court which led down one hundred and twenty-five immense steps to the Court of the Hieroglyphic Stairway, the largest of the three courts of the Acropolis of Copán.

On the east end dominating the court is the famed stairway after which the enclosure is named, which was constructed, according to Dr Morley, in A.D. 710. Still spectacular despite centuries of neglect, it must then have been the most magnificent undertaking of its time and can justly be considered to be an "epitome of the principal events which befell one of the greatest Maya cities during the greatest period of Mayan civilization."

This great stairway is composed of a flight of forty-two stairs that incline at a sixty-five degree angle towards the pinnacle of the pyramid at its apex. The steps will, when restored, go to the top of the pyramid of which it is a part. The treads of the stairway which are wholly covered with hieroglyphics have already been restored in part: in the destruction that followed the iconoclastic hand of time the whole stairway collapsed, leaving only a part *in situ*. Obviously destroyed before the advent of Lic. Gárcia de Palacio in the sixteenth century, who does not mention it, and completely covered during the

visit of Stephens, the stairway was first discovered and partially excavated by the British archæologist Maudslay, who undertook the first investigation at Copán.

At intervals in the flight of the Hieroglyphic Stairway are figures sitting in a stiff attitude within the open mouth of a great serpent's head, which is a typical treatment in indigenous American sculpture. The stairway itself is twenty feet broad and has no less than a thousand distinct glyphs, framed between carved balustrades.

In the courtyard below, the archæologists have placed the stones still to be set in a series showing what they consider the correct continuity of the hieroglyphic steps. Intertwined with these hieroglyphics and piled all about are stone heads, rosettes of stone, some in life-size and in low relief. I am assured that no Maya site within the whole range of that culture presents such a problem as the re-setting of this great stairway.

Also in this court are two well preserved stelæ; one of these is erected in front of the stairway and is placed behind a zoömorph containing a very fantastic figure decorated in the usual Mayan manner so that the animal represented is lost in design that envelops it. On the north side of the pyramid is the other stela known as "N." The construction of the figure is heroic and the decorative style intricate and swirling. Our eyes particularly notice, since we are searching for it, the use of the quetzal plumes in the carving motifs.

Copán, situated at 2,000 feet altitude, has towering about it numerous rain forests that reach an altitude of 6,000 feet, which is the habitat of the quetzal bird. It was most natural, as the bird was occasionally seen by the Indians, that its beautiful plumes became a source of inspiration. It seems quite incredible that the fine structure of the quetzal feather and the delicate way in which the feather curves when held in the hand could be so well produced in stone with only stone instruments. The quetzal's place in the Aztec and Maya

mythology was so important that its influence was felt as far as the plains of North America, as well as the lesser civilizations to the south. The motif itself, and the symbol for which it stood, became almost a fetish in later Aztec life when, taking from the Toltec culture that which it had not nurtured in its own, the Aztec placed the symbol of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent, everywhere. The plumed serpent is in fact a highly conventionalized snake, either the rattlesnake (*Crotalus terrificus*) or the fer-de-lance (*Bothrops atros*) conjoined with the thick lengthy body of the common *Mazacohuatl* (*Boa imperator*), with the scales of the reptilian *moulange*, elongated and realistically copied from the long tail plumes of the quetzal.

From the earliest times the quetzal bird appeared in Mayan sculpture and principally on their polychromic vases. Once distributed throughout Central America from Chiapas to Panama, the quetzal appeared ubiquitously in these rain forests of Central America. While the Mayan did not often see the bird because of its high range, its golden-green feathers became, through trade, an article well calculated to arouse their admiration. So in Copán the motif of the bird appears on the monoliths, the stelæ, and the zoömorphs. The quetzal must have been occasionally seen, for the natives were compelled to scale the heights to obtain different hardwoods in order to roll down their pieces of stone. The artist, in fashioning the quetzal plumes, has taken particular care to follow the graceful curve of the long caudal plumes. If one holds, as I have so often done, the moulted tail of the male quetzal, it curves in a graceful arc and in this form the feathers are usually represented. Once seen, once held, the curved plumes are recognized at once.

As to the immense monoliths they are carved from a single piece of stone and have been deciphered by archæologists as calendaric dates to which they were

erected as often as every five years. A large portion of the hieroglyphics which are assumed to have other significance than calendaric are not fully understood and many are at the moment indecipherable, these may refer to some outstanding cataclysms or events that took place before the erection of the monoliths on which they appear. It is fully agreed apparently among the scholars that the cyclopean figure on the stelæ is a portrait of the theocratic ruler of Copán at the time of each particular monument's erection. As for the use of the word stelæ, perhaps one will recall that this is a Roman word which archæologists of the Maya area use which pertains to a stone (or wooden) monolith, over seventy-two inches in height, inscribed with glyphs, usually with allegorical or fantastic figures on one or both sides—thus the term differs materially from that given the Roman stelæ which marked graves or were used as inscribed stones in public markets.

When John Stephens looked first upon these "idols" as the natives called them, in the depths of the tropical forest, silent, solemn, strange and curious in design, he was deeply moved by their solemnity. He conjectured that doubtless the history of the people who placed them there would be known as soon as the hierglyphics were understood.

"No Champollion," he grimly remarked, "has yet brought to them the energies of his inquiring mind."

Walking north from the Court of the Hieroglyphic Stairway to the Great Plaza we passed between two small oblong mounds with a paved floor between them. Seventy-five feet in length and thirty-five feet in width, this is, I understand, the restored portion of the Maya Ball Court. The Mayas played a game not dissimilar to the North American sport of basket-ball, the object being to put a solid rubber ball into a "basket" in the form of a conventionalized figure placed on either side of the court. Four other figures, seemingly denoting

large parrot's heads, decorate the four corners of the surmounting pyramids on each side of the court.

From the Ball Court we moved into the Great Plaza which Fuentes y Guzman, a seventeenth-century historian living in Guatemala, likened to the *Circus Maximus*. Eight hundred and fifty feet long by three hundred and twenty-five feet wide, this great field is monumental in its structure and setting. It graphically explains that parallelism of the human mind, that irrespective of environment follows much the same pattern. There was good reason why the earlier travellers, perforce not armed with the vast statistics we now possess on the migrations and originality of the indigenous American culture, should have compared the great Copáń Plaza to those of ancient Greece and Rome.

On its three sides there are tiers of seats that rise in stone treads twenty feet above the level of the Plaza floor. Within the great area, now cleared of all vegetation are more than a score of superbly carved monoliths, stelæ, and curiously carved rock forms called zoömorphs. To the north of the Plaza about a mile distant, one can plainly see the andesite hills of volcanic tuff from whence the sculptors brought the massive monoliths on which they carved their hieroglyphics. Rising high behind it are the mountains that made the small valley a veritable fortress, and to the north-east the valley floor stretches until it reaches a tall mountain that separates the Copán Valley from the Chamelicon. By mounting the stone tiers of the Plaza we could look out over the Copán river flowing by and cutting into the far side of the ruins. It is a superb setting, but Copán, like all the other Mayan ruins, was not a city as we understand it; less was it the abode of the higher reigning officials and their attendants. One might liken Copán to a great collection of public buildings whose primary function was that of a religious centre. The houses of the common folk were made of perishable

materials and have disappeared without a trace. It may be conjectured that the dwellings of the Indians who lived in and about the valley of Copán differed little from those erected to-day by their descendants; adobe with grass thatched roof, or split uprights with palm thatch. And too, since the basis of the Maya civilization was agriculture and of the most primitive sort, the members of the tribe were spread out as they are to-day in small *milpas*.

It is not until one has occasion to systematically examine all the great dated monoliths of stone, twenty feet in height and three feet in thickness, weighing close to thirty tons, that one begins to admire and grasp the astonishing significance of the advancement of the primitive Mayan mind, that, without leaving the neolithic horizon, could have produced such superb sculptures. One does not know at first on which to place the emphasis of natural astonishment; on primitive man that he should have evolved such complicated ideographs to convey calendaric and historic reminders to his descendants, or on our modern archæologists, whose curiosity led them to decipher most of the dates.

Within the great Plaza are thirteen such stelæ, all bearing hieroglyphics on one or more of their sides. All of these stelæ have been deciphered as to their date of erection, yet I am given to understand not all of the glyphs on the stelæ have been fully understood. As the ancient Mayas were primarily farmers, dependent wholly upon agriculture for their living (they could not have had leisure to work at their architecture without the security of well-stored granaries) the changing seasons were then, as they are now, of the utmost importance.

Fifteen hundred years before the erection of the Acropolis at Copán, the Mayas, somewhere in Vera Cruz or Yucatan, had observed the movements of the sun, the moon, and the stars, and had developed the

empirical knowledge of the time to plant and the time for harvest. Recorded first on bark-cloth paper which was ephemeral, the priests resorted to painted wooden stelæ, but soon found that the voracious appetites of the termites made these as impermanent as the bark-cloth paper records. Eventually the priests perfected a calendaric system on stone somewhere between the fifth and third centuries B.C., and as Dr Morley wrote:

"Here were embodied in a magnificent chronological system one of the most brilliant achievements of the human mind."

When the Mayas moved into the Valley of Copán during the first decades after Christ, they already possessed a well-developed technique in sculpture on stone; their calendar had already been perfected so that when the first carved time-marker was erected in A.D. 436, the technique of its execution was not archaic.

The Mayas used the day as the unit for their calendar, and they recorded only past time. The Mayan chronology, according to Dr Spinden, started from a certain day 4 *Ahua* 8 *Cumbu*; the beginning of a *baktum* (144,000-day period) falling in correlation with the Julian calendar as 3113 B.C. Upon this first calendaric deduction the Mayas in different epochs erected stelæ in twenty, ten, and five year periods. On some of the monoliths are sculptured hieroglyphics which archæologists know have little claim to calendaric significance and they have come to feel that these ideographs refer to the outstanding events or cataclysms which occurred in the time between the erection of the stelæ.

Copán is, of all the Mayan remains, especially noted for its exquisite stelæ that show from *Katun* to *Katun*[1] the gradual evolvement of a perfected technique in sculpture.

It is to be doubted, since knowledge was esoteric among the Mayas if, the ability to decipher these

[1] 7,200-day periods, i.e., approximately 20 years.

monoliths was the province of all. Doubtless the average Maya Indian gazed upon the tangle of design and curious glyphs with as much awe and perplexity as do we ourselves. Yet this complex calendar existed to inform the succeeding generations of the favourable moment to sow, to reap, of the gods who would best be propitiated for the good of the crops. As such, the stelæ became the *alpha* and *omega* of the Maya religion.

We sat down on the stone carapace of an immense tortoise-formed sculpture and faced a very massive monolith indicated as Stela B among the archæologists. More wreathed than many of the monoliths, the massive central figure was embellished with spirals, rosettes, and garlands of figures and fantastically carved animals. At the top of the monument balancing each other in equipoise were two curious designs. I asked Christine if she knew what animal it represented. She got up, walked around it and stared up at it.

"Why, it looks like an elephant's trunk; but that, of course, is silly since there were no elephants in America at the time the Mayas were building these ruins."

I reminded her that that was a good guess since it is known among every highly specialized group of cultural diffusionists as the "Elephant Stela."

"On that, Christine," I explained, "hinges a very nebulous hypothesis—the diffusion of culture from Indo-China to America. To a certain school of archæological romanticists there remains no doubt of the reality of the diffusion across the Pacific of the essential elements out of which evolved the pre-Columbian civilization of America."

"But that," insisted Christine, who still strained her neck to see the elephants, "is precisely what well-grounded American ethnologists think; that man came to America from Asia. You said the same yourself as regards man."

The Hieroglyphic Stairway—still not fully deciphered

The Court of the Hieroglyphic Stairway, with its dated monolith

A great Mayan stela, showing Quetzal feather decorations around the date hieroglyphs

John Catherwood's drawing of the same stela a century ago

This I had to agree was true. Yet there was an essential difference between the two schools of thought. One upheld by American archæologists, ethnologists, and anthropologists is that man as animal came to the Americas by way of a land-bridge in the vicinity of the meeting of the Eurasian and American continents in Bering Strait, where, after all, land is in sight of each continent. No one has tried to place this incursion accurately in actual time. Somewhere between 10,000 and 25,000 years ago is the accepted theory. Nor do any of the archæologists believe there was only one incursion; rather it is felt the entrance into the Americas was casual, extending over a long period of time. From these migratory groups evolved an autochthonous culture, wholly independent from Mongolia or from whence these people came. From them came the Inca, the Maya, the Aztec, the Toltec; from them evolved the plain Indians, the mound-builders, the head-hunters of the Amazon and the myriad tribes and federations of Indians that filled the mountains, the jungle, and the plains at the coming of the white man. Such a hypothesis insists that the American Indians took nothing from Egypt, nothing from Angkor Vat, nothing from the Polynesians; they hammered out their destiny in their own environment.

It is different with the romantic school of antiquities. When Prof. G. Elliott Smith studied the drawings that Maudslay made from Stela B at Copán he saw at once the heads of elephants, he made out the turbaned figures of Indian mahouts. Everything he saw after that (although he did no archæological digging in America) seemed composed of elephants. The Aztec rain god Tlaloc which is obvious to any naturalist as turkey cock becomes to Mr Smith a "highly conventionalized drawing of an elephant transmuted into a turkey cock." The long wattle on the turkey is not, of course, this buccal appendage at all, but is an elephant's trunk. Even our

quetzal bird (in which we felt a certain proprietary interest) which is quintessence of all symbols of the Aztec and Maya becomes for Mr Smith a highly specialized type of elephant. What strong archæological hashish has this gentlemen taken to see elephants everywhere? What is the basis of the argument? Mr Smith feels he strikes a blow at the upholders of our "ethnological Monroe doctrine." For if the elephant appears everywhere it will destroy the whole foundation of independent evolution of American civilization. He and this school of thought state that this culture is not American but Cambodian, that it came by way of Micronesia across the Pacific to establish itself in the Americas as late as the eleventh century. There was little evolution in the arts—they came inspired from direct Indo-Chinese models. Naturally, Prof. Smith does not suggest that they brought their elephants with them, but insists they brought model drawings of the elephant so that the Mayan sculptor who carved the elephants' trunks, the priests who designed the glyphics on bark-cloth were working from models that they had never seen. It is eminently curious that these immigrants from Micronesia or Cambodia did not think to take in their long voyage in open boats across the Pacific some Old-world food stuffs, for there is *no food plant common* to the two hemispheres. They completely forgot to bring the banana, sugarcane, wheat, or barley. These they never possessed until the Spaniards brought them centuries later. As for Prof. Smith's elephant head—it is nothing but the upper beak of the Blue Macaw which Dr Spinden pointed out years ago; and which, as a naturalist, I am only too happy to confirm. That which Prof. Smith takes for the "eye" of the elephant is in reality the very prominent nostril of the Blue Macaw, who was, after all, a very prominent bird in Copán and raised to demigod rank by the Mayas, who used its plumage. There is not a detail, no matter how

involved, in the structure of this macaw detail on Stela B which cannot be found in a physiological parallel on the actual head of a living bird. The Mayas have only enhanced it; since too, they had this habit of filling every vacant space with variations, the zoology of the Maya sculpture is not a safe ground on which to build a nebulous hypothesis linking two widely separated and distant civilizations.

And there is small reason to play off the Maya as unique against the other civilizations that were contemporaneous, since the Maya is distinctly related either as parent stock or branch to other civilizations in Mexico. The Mayan, Nahuatla Zaopectcan, and Toltec cultures show a relationship in common arts, ritual and myth, and above all, in the similarity of mathematical and calendaric systems, sufficient to allow one to see that all sprang from a common source.

The American Indian civilization resting as it did upon a neolithic platform "extending across Asia, Africa and Europe, as a kind of cultural and chronological peneplane—it is only necessary," writes Dr Herbert Spinden, "to regard any parallelism of the subsequent achievements of the sundered hemispheres as due to approximately uniform operation of human judgements in social, emotional, and intellectual matters."

When Copán was first discovered in 1576 Don Diego Gárcia de Palacio saw these sculptures dressed in the "Roman style," one of these stelæ was a bishop "who appears to hold in his hand a box or small coffer." One hundred years later another Spaniard looked upon the same "idols" and states that this great Plaza was formed like the *Circus Maximus* in Rome and the figures in the centre were dressed in military garments *wholly Spanish.* He could even see the "clasps on the girdles and the sword belts of the cavaliers. Their military apparel consists of short breeches, frilled collars, breast-plates, shoulder-pieces, bracelets, helmets adorned with plumes

and *even short swords in the belt.*" This naïve gentleman from Guatemala denied that the Spanish conquistadores built these ruins. "No matter what they say," he goes on seriously, "neither Pedro de Alvardo, who passed through this way one hundred years ago (1565) built them, nor did Hernando Cortés, for they were too occupied in their various expeditions to build these idols." So one man sees a bishop, another a Spanish soldier with spurs, breast-plate and sword, and another sees elephants.

XX

THE PLUMED SERPENT COMES TO LIFE

THE days at Copán went skimming by and so fascinated were we by the ruins that we hardly realized —until a telegram arrived—that our boat was due to sail from Guatemala in a few days. We could remain only two more days at Copán, and we hoped to make the most of them. It had now become almost a ritual for us to rise early, drink down a cup of black coffee, and make off to the ruins. At the house of the comandante, we would stop and chat idly for a while. On this day he asked us if we did not need a guide, as he had seen us going alone to the ruins every day.

"Oh, no, Señor," Christine answered for both of us. "We can find our way quite well. We are going this morning to the Court of the Hieroglyphic Stairway and then to-morrow to the Great Plaza. We have saved that for the last, but I don't think we need a guide for this."

"As you wish, Señora," gravely remarked the comandante, "but my assistant, Ricardo here . . ." and he indicated a young man in riding breeches loaded down with revolver and ammunition, "knows everything about the ruins."

Since the comandante was insistent (he might believe that we wished to carry off the ruins) there was nothing else for it but to take the "boy who knew everything about the ruins" along.

"Alright then, Ricardo. *Vamonos*—let's go," and we set off towards the Maya Acropolis.

We climbed over the pyramids, the courtyards, the ornamental stairways which we had passed and then came to a place where we had not yet been. At the end

of the sacred temple (the steps on which we sat spellbound some days previously) the ruins seem to fall away —but that was only seemingly, for down below the main level of the Acropolis was another long series of steps that led down to another courtyard. Down, down, we climbed measuring each step carefully as if we were children descending our first steps; we did not know, in the first place, how secure were these large stones and secondly, the height of each unit was so great that one could not descend them as one would ordinary successions of steps. Our nimble guide plunged down the massive stairway like Peter Pan and would turn and urge us down with:

"Do not be afraid, Señores. You see it is quite safe," and he ran on in such condescending tones that I felt like throwing a monumental Maya calendar stone at him (if I could have lifted one).

We wandered into the Greater Courtyard where the stones that were eventually to form part of the Hieroglyphic Stairway lay in neat rows across the entire Plaza. In addition to calendar glyphs, there were other carvings—exquisite heads in profile, and fantastic animals carved in low relief that were perfect in their essential simplicity, so gracious, so fluent, so completely achieved. In among the myriad carvings we came at last upon what was one of the prime objects of our study—an example of the use of the quetzal plumes as sculptural motif. A colossal head, with much of the magnificent quetzal head-dress intact, lay propped up in the courtyard among the bewildering mass of stones. The quetzal plumes stemmed from a mask, behind which was a human face (itself carved very naturalistically) and the mask, I soon noted, simulated the open jaws of the snake. Here, then, was one of the first connections between serpent and quetzal. Then immediately by the side of this head I found an almost literal representation of the boa constrictor and close beside

that, the open jaws (with fangs extended for biting) of a Maya representation of the terrible fer-de-lance snake. Here, then, since Copán was one of the oldest of the cities, were the first beginnings of that terrible apparition of Maya and Aztec art, the Plumed Serpent. The snake, of course, was deified because it was feared. And being feared, it was placed on most of their monuments in one form or another—and that is why it was an intrinsic part of priestly hocus-pocus. It was a demon to be feared and they thought that these sculptural representations would propitiate it.

The serpent motif not only controlled the character of Maya art, but was the most important motif in all the arts of the people of Central America and Mexico. Once the snake developed into the Plumed Serpent motif, it overran all the later art-forms of the Mayas. With the Aztecs, it became later, as the architecture of these people reveals, a virtual fetish.

The Mayas never seemed to deal realistically with the snake, for the serpents that they carved on their buildings were usually a synthesis of the thick-bodied, harmless boa constrictor with the rattles of the rattlesnake and the head and fangs of the fer-de-lance. Here at Copán, the snake is usually carved realistically. It had not yet developed into the Plumed Serpent stage. Later, when the idea of this synthetic monster took hold, the design became highly stylized. Then the brain of some Mayan sculptor developed an eccentric creation which nature itself had entirely overlooked in all its involved animal forms: the fantastic combination of the body of an awe-inspiring serpent covered with the plumes of the quetzal. Had our Mayan sculptor lived in these times and found that his monster was a fact in evolution, he could not have portrayed a more perfect symbol—for the bird did evolve from the snake; the scales of the snake did eventually become, in æons of time, the plumes of birds. So, more than a design, the Plumed

Serpent is, no matter how remote the analogy, an amazing epitomization of a long course of evolution.

But this was not the intention of the Mayan craftsmen. The symbol of the snake and the bird came to be used as an architectural device, and at the restored ruins of Chichen Itza on the Peninsula of Yucatan, one can see an immense brace of these serpents, half-natural, half-mystical, used as architectural motif. The mouth of the serpent is opened, showing its fangs; the inside of the mouth is painted red, for the lips of the snake are yellow (after the actual colour of the fer-de-lance or *Barba armarilla*—translated as "Yellowbeads"). The scales of the snake's body are elongated in the green feathers of the quetzal bird.

Later in Yucatan the Plumed Serpent motif was painted on the interior walls of the Maya structures, and so advanced became the snake-bird motif that in a monument in Cholula, Mexico, that was raised to honour Quetzalcoatl, the whole frieze running around the stone building portrays a writhing motif of the feathered serpent.

"Señor!"

I rose stiffly from my haunches to face my guide.

"Señor, would you like to see a deep tunnel?"

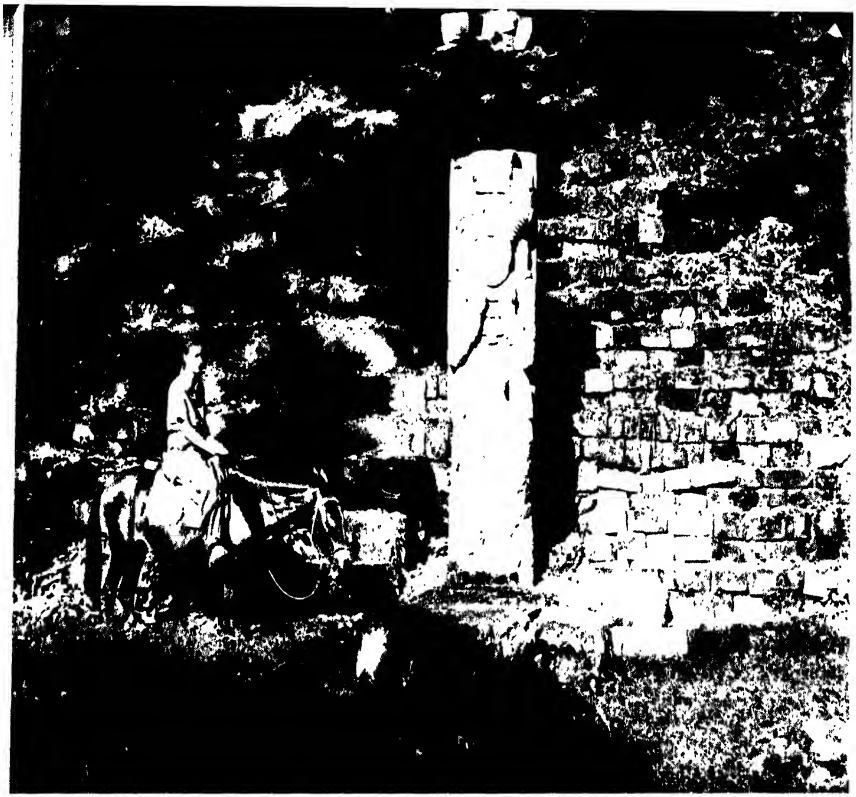
"Where?"

"Over there, back of that 'Idol'."

I followed Ricardo to where Christine was standing admiring an immense colossus—an "idol." The hands of the figure met in front of its chest, the fingers were held delicately together, while the arms supported a ceremonial bar in the form of a two-headed serpent, carrying in its extended jaws the head of one of the more important Maya gods. The head-dress of the figure was high and fantastic, carved with such ritualistic fervour that not an inch of the whole monolith was void of decoration. On both the narrow sides of the

Christine sketching in the Great Plaza

Southward view of the Copán valley from the porch of the temple in the Eastern Court



One of the oldest monoliths at Copán, dating back to the fourth century

monolithic stela were the usual hieroglyphics pertaining to the date on which this particular monument was set up. Our guide, sitting on a large stone altar in front of the "idol" said he had heard some tourist remark that these figures were brought over from China.

"They were carved in China?" asked Christine, highly amused. The young man nodded.

"And how did they bring them over, and when?"

"That, Señora, no one knows, but the Chinese are wonderful people. The scientists once brought here a Chinese cook. He followed the men out to these ruins when they were trying to read the signs on the side of the 'idols'. This *Chino*, whose name I can't remember, just stepped up to them and recited exactly what the writing was."

"*Maravilla*, Ricardo," I said over my shoulder, as I walked to the first steps of the large pyramid. "Your Chinese friend certainly was learned to have read the Maya language when Chinese to-day have difficulty understanding their own fellow-men that live in a different province. Hello—is this it?"

I had come to an entrance that went into the base of the pyramid.

"That, Señor," replied Ricardo, "is the tunnel. This is just the other side of the large pyramid of the Western Court which you climbed on your first day at Copán."

I bent over, since the entrance was small, and started to go in. "*Cuidado*, Señor," warned Ricardo. "There might be animals in there."

"Well, then, Ricardo, you come in here and kill them for me." He gripped his machete tightly.

"No, *Señor*, I am, with the god's permission, not going in those places."

I pulled my flashlight from my back pocket and threw the beam into the passage-way. The crypt seemed to go far into the pyramid—then there was a flight of stairs leading upward. I took a few steps forward and suddenly

I was almost overwhelmed by the bats that had been disturbed by the light. They rose up and flew by me in bewildering numbers. Outside I heard Christine scream as they came into the open. I followed the path back to the flight of steps. The smell inside was dank, the air heavy and foul, doubtless from the hundreds of bats.

I walked up the stairs. Abruptly after the tenth step, I came to a blank wall. I played my light over the side. There did not seem to be any stones that prevented the steps from going up farther, just a cave-in packed by the centuries into a hard, impassable wall. I retraced my steps and found that at the base of the steps, another passage shot off to the left. I followed that. Again I came to a flight of steps, almost paralleling the others. I mounted these—there were only six—and these, too, came to an abrupt end. This now became quite a puzzle. I had entered quite a few of these passage-ways, but none ever seemed to get anywhere. There was nothing to do except return to the open, an idea not induced by failure alone, for the bats were so thoroughly aroused by now that they filled the cave with the noise of their screeching and fluttering wings. I returned to the long aisle that led to the outside.

I don't know precisely what made me throw my flashlight beam to the floor, but when I saw what lay before me, I recoiled as if I had stepped on a live wire. A six-foot *Barba amarilla* was stretched full length in the centre of the passage. I had a few bad moments. There was no retreat behind me. All I had in my hand was a flashlight. I had had experiences before with the *Barba amarilla*, which, with the cobra, is one of the most poisonous snakes in the world. Its bite is followed by excruciating pains, hæmmorhage, and oozing of blood through the pores and the intestinal tract. Death from the bite of the *Barba amarilla* is horrible. We carried serum, but it was at the village.

As long as I stood still, the snake lay sluggishly

watching me. Its tongue played out of its mouth trying to pick up the vibrations of movement. Doubtlessly it was as frightened of me as I was of it. I moved to one side of the wall, thinking that I might be able to edge up, make a jump and clear it. The snake seemed to interpret my move, curling back slightly to prepare itself for a spring. For a moment panic took me; I was trapped.

I shouted to Ricardo. The resounding echo of my voice vibrated through the whole passage. The air filled again with flying bats brushing past my head; the snake moved slightly. Ricardo heard me, stuck his head into the entrance of the passage.

"*Que pasa*, Señor."

"Look, Ricardo, cut me a forked stick, quickly. Make the handle about six feet long and the prong of the two forks about two inches long. Hurry, hurry! There's a snake in here."

"*Caramba*, Señor, I'll get the stick right away."

Christine came up to the entrance. There was no use at the moment in frightening her and I told her that it was only a boa constrictor, and that when Ricardo returned with the forked stick, I meant to throw the snake clear of the passage out into the open.

Ricardo appeared again. "I am afraid to bring it to you, Señor."

"You don't have to," I gauged the distance; it was fifteen feet to the entrance. "Hold it at one end and throw it to me the way you would a spear."

Ricardo dropped back, grasped the bar at one end and in the centre, and heaved. The stick whirled by the snake, striking it a glancing blow, and landed four feet beyond its head. At that moment the snake doubled back, ready to strike; and waited. I reached for the stick and tried to pull it slowly towards me. The *Barba amarilla* suddenly struck out at the stick. On my hand a spray of the poison splashed. I quickly picked up the stick, manœuvred in front of the snake, pinned its head

under the forked stick and with a sudden forward lunge, dashed it along the passage-way. Before the stunned creature could get into action, I pinned its head again. Ricardo and Christine disappeared from the entrance of the passage.

"Ricardo," I called. "When I throw the snake out into the clearing, strike at its head with your machete."

I heard a tremulous and very weak, "Sí, Señor."

Once more I pressed the fork over the snake's head and this time threw it clear into the open. It landed heavily, but now aroused, made for Ricardo. He jumped aside and brought his machete down, missed the head, but struck it on the back, breaking the backbone. Although severely crippled, the snake still dragged itself forward. This time, Ricardo took more resolute aim. Down went the machete and the snake lay decapitated. Freed from the body, the jaws of the animal continued to open and close, revealing the inch-long death-dealing fangs.

"Now," Christine admonished me, "will you listen to me and not go into all these holes and caves?"

To this I nodded my head in affirmation. But more than the fright that I experienced was the feeling that I had actually lived the myth of the Plumed Serpent. To one who had caught the quetzal bird and experienced the nearness of the snake from which the basis of this motif derived, this profound symbolism of the snake was not a thing of long-dead ages; for me the Plumed Serpent was a living thing.

XXI

THE MYSTERY OF COPÁN

In the Great Plaza, the tiers of seats were filled with the simple rabble of the Empire. The Maya priests were there to carry out the functions of their religious order. A new monument to be dedicated, a new proclamation for the planting of corn, new decrees to be issued for the worship of the ever-increasing pantheon of gods, necessitated gatherings at stated intervals of the year. The high priest, his head correctly flattened from birth as prescribed by custom, his carefully prepared black coïffure surmounted by a carved wooden head of a serpent from the nostrils of which waved the sacred plumes of the quetzal bird, entered the Plaza first. His heavy red-cotton robes weighted with polished green jade, acted as a superb background to the brilliantly coloured polychromic bowl in which he carried the burning copal-incense. After him came the nobles of royal blood, each carefully dressed in graceful mimicry of the god to be propitiated; captains of war dressed for their martial trade entered, carrying obsidian-tipped spears; the assorted grandees of the great city-empire.

But there was nothing spectacular about the common people in white loin-clothes, as they sat, awed to silence by the fantastic richness of the retinue. They differed little from the common Indian of to-day, and the descendants of the Mayas now living in Yucatan perform tasks much the same as when their own rulers decided their destinies. They lived then in the same kind of adobe grass-thatched houses as they do now. They knew very little of the complicated abracadabra with which their priests obscured their observations of the heavens. Knowledge belonged to the very few, and when that

class was wiped out by the Spaniards, the common folk perforce followed their old patterns of behaviour. Corn was their main food, forming four-fifths of their diet, as it still does to-day. The whole of the valley of Copán was covered with *milpas*; the lower bastions of the valley were terraced to provide additional ground in which to cultivate their staple crop of maize. Whether there was a special group of artisans who did nothing but carve stone, a caste of masons and artists whose only duty was to execute the superb ornaments for the Mayan pageantry, leaving agricultural work to others, is not known. It is believed, however, that even though some were specialized workers, they also had their own individual cornfields.

There is no record of the former population of Copán. But when that city was in its apogee it must have ministered to the needs of not less than fifty thousand people, for only a large population could have afforded the time to erect, year after year, century after century, the towering temples and the monstrous carved, dated monoliths. The great expenditure of time in the development of Copán points not only to a vast society, but, in addition, to a well organized one.

Time was a fetish to the Mayas, astronomical events an obsession. Both of these primitive psychoses were blended in the production of these gigantic carved time-markers that dotted the Great Plaza. They are, by far, the most notable feature of the plaza and their erection at twenty-year periods provided the most important festivals of the city. Think with what emotional stimuli these overpowering grandiose figures must have provided the simple Indian who came to gaze at them. The style of the carvings is not simple like those heads of the jaguars that we saw in the heart of the Acropolis. There seems to have been a studied attempt on the part of the sculptors to achieve awesome grandeur in the imposing size of the figures. By the very wealth of detail on the

statues an unwonted flamboyancy creeps into the virile, naturalistic carving of the early Maya, all indicative of a wealthy, ease-loving, materialistic, aristocratic-priestly caste. Some of the most delicate and intricate designs are carved in the full round showing with what ease the later Mayas carved stone with stone. In these stelæ the Maya showed all too plainly that great art is the product of the struggle for the mastery of materials and that the decline of that art comes when the mastery is won.

At the end of every *Katun*, a period of 7,200 days (19·7 years) the Mayas dedicated one of these stelæ, and in anticipation of the event (to be followed with long ritualistic pageantry) sculptors worked ceaselessly. The sculptors obviously were not content alone with having carved a bold solemn portrait of their contemporary ruler on one of its sides and having followed out the long intricate series of calendar glyphs on the other sides, but allowed their imaginations to run riot in the superficial decorations on the monolith.

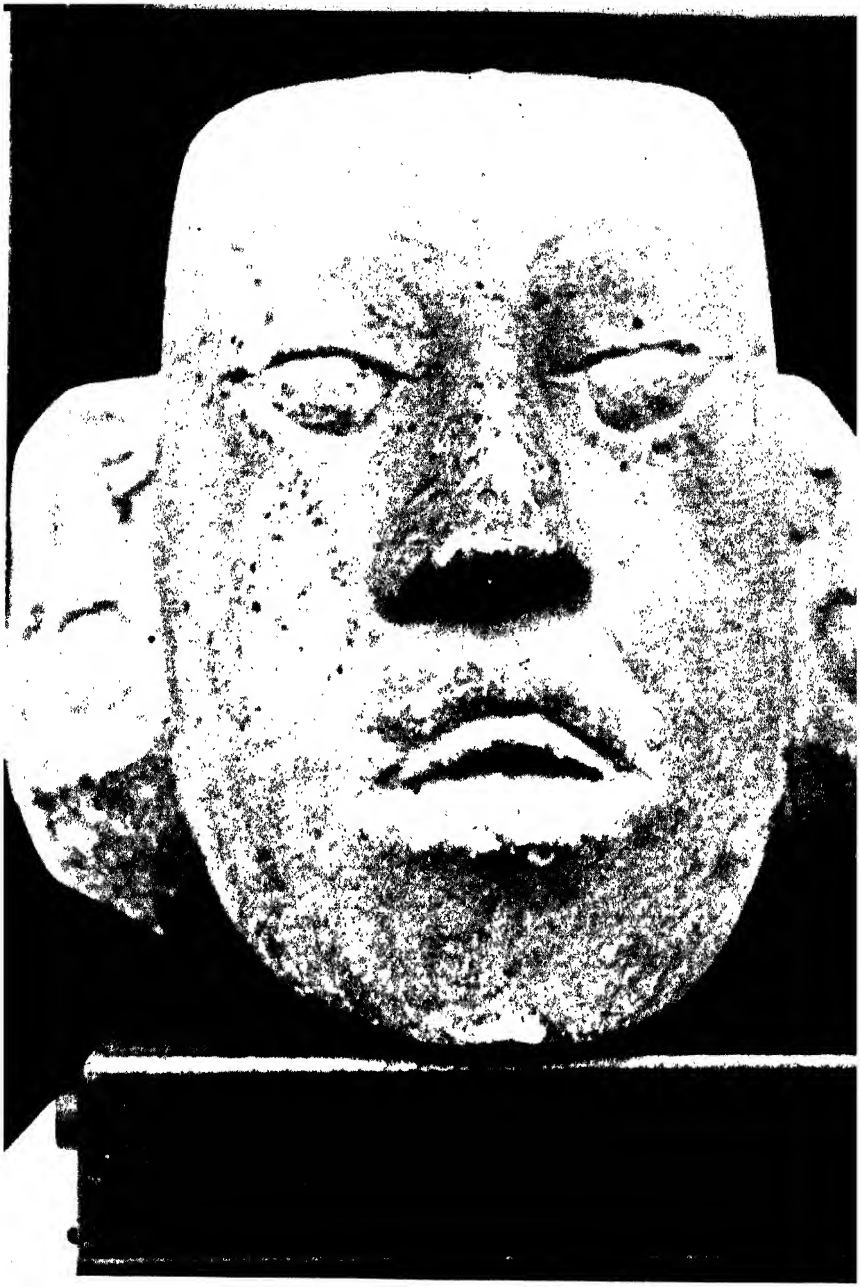
Most of these carved stelæ have an incredible profusion of fantastic floral, animal, and religious motifs, as intensely alive as the jungle itself. These are carved in exquisite detail with bewildering elaboration of swirling rosettes, feathers, spritely gnomes, and all manner of figures and animals of the Maya world.

For three hundred and forty years architectural activity at Copán continued; the great Acropolis was raised higher each century, the temples were improved; the influence of the city spread. No one knows just how much territory it actually ruled, whether, for example, it was the capital of lesser centres of culture; or whether it, like all the other Maya cities in Mexico, Guatemala, and British Honduras, was an independent self-governing city, or comparable to some in ancient Greece with cultural autonomy, or loosely linked with other cities like the members of the Hanseatic League. It is assumed, however, that a city such as Copán must have

ruled, or at least exercised control over an extensive part for surrounding territory. Whatever the system, Copán went on, century to century.

As the organization of the city-empire improved, the cycles for erecting these time-markers were shortened to ten years, then five years. Then abruptly, without any explanation, the custom ended in A.D. 734. After that, no dated monolith, no large piece of sculpture was erected; all activity at Copán ceased. There was no slowing down; the builder-priests did not, under the stress of whatever disorganization was coming over the empire, drop and slide back to the twenty-year time-markers. The whole production simply ended. The cause is a profound mystery and one that does not alone affect Copán, but all the other cities of the Mayas as well, during that period. One by one, in Guatemala, in British Honduras, in Yucatan, the city-states erected their last temples, their last time-markers, and, so far as their architecture was concerned, disappeared into unrecorded time.

Copán, some decades before the close of its dated history, gave some slight evidence of impending change. Prior to A.D. 734, the city-empire began to create additional colonies beyond the valley. The most notable, according to Dr S. G. Morley, was Quírigua, thirty miles to the north in Guatemala. Something occurred in the year A.D. 734 that was of such importance that both Copán and its satellite, Quírigua, sought to commemorate it in a time-marker. At both of these sites, the date A.D. 734 appears of great significance. Had a great social disorganization already appeared? Had an intellectual and æsthetic exhaustion followed this period of great productivity in the arts? What was the cause of the fall of the old empire? Once more we were back to the mystery that confronted us when we first came upon the ruins of Copán. What cause or causes brought one of the most remarkable civilizations of the world to an



Classic head: a fragment found among the Copán ruins

cultural heights; corn brought its downfall. It is a lesson that we, in the Central United States, learned only too well when the ripping up of the grasses and the planting of wheat turned our wind-swept plains into a dust bowl. Something of the same sort must have happened to the Maya farmer. Each successive year of planting, the corn in the *milpa* would yield less, until after the third planting, the *milpa* would have to be abandoned, and a new field cleared.

Gradually colonies migrated into the other virgin valleys, miles distant from Copán, in search of new corn land. The more far-flung the empire, the more difficult it was to exercise control over the masses of people. Hence the conclusion that, since the basis of Maya civilization was agriculture, the desertion of Copán, like all the other cities of the old Mayan empire, was caused by the exhaustion of the soil. Nor is this conclusion necessarily fanciful, for as we sat on the top of one of the great carvings in the Plaza we could see the *milpas* of the present inhabitants far up on the hills of the valley, utilizing every square yard of earth in which to plant their corn.

In mid-afternoon, several of the *Copanécos* came through the plaza from one of their fields on the other side of the ruins of Copán. They wore the usual loose-fitting cotton white pants and shirt, sandals and tall conical straw hats, and all of them carried metal *pujantes*—a sort of shovel—over their shoulders, like a rifle. Following the age-old patterns of husbandmen everywhere, they were trudging home in the eventide. We suddenly remembered that we would have to go back to the village, pack and prepare to-morrow for our ride to Comatán. We got down, paid Ricardo generously for his services, and struck off after the farmers. When we were in earshot of them, it became apparent to us that the crisis which had caused the downfall of the Maya empire was just as imminent now as it was thou-

sands of years ago. Ahead of us, one old man shifted his *pujante* from one side to another and observed:

"*Pues amigos*—well, my friends—"this is the last year in which I can plant my *milpa* in this valley. Most of the soil is old, it will no longer yield enough corn. Perhaps I shall have to move into the next valley of Chamleicon and there plant a new field of maize."

"Perhaps you shall," said the other in chorus, "*Quien sabe?*"—Who knows? Perhaps you will.

XXII

DENOUEMENT

GENERAL Juan del Campo himself saddled our beasts. He placed his crutch against the wall of the stable while he hopped about on his one good leg to adjust the straps. I made a gesture of protest, but he would not allow me to concern myself with the beasts.

"It is an honour," he repeated, "an honour. Had I had any idea that you were the gringos . . ." he caught himself (since the use of the word gringo is not very complimentary), "had I any idea that you were the Señores that caught alive the quetzal bird, I should never have thought to have accepted you so casually. That was a great feat; the very first time; and to think that you who did it slept in my house."

Christine laughed as she caught the ironical banter in his voice. "Ah, Señor General, you sound as if you thought my husband was Quetzalcoatl himself. . . ."

"Almost, Señora," he laughingly said as he tightened the last straps on my mount. "Almost. I tell you that it did the old heart of Juan del Campo good when I heard that you were successful. You know there are quetzals here in the hills about Copán. Once when I was a boy I caught a small quetzal and brought it home to raise. Some American scientists who were here studying the ruins of Copán laughed at me when I said I would keep it alive. 'Never been done,' said one pompous old archæologist, 'in three hundred and fifty years, never been done.' So I gave up trying.

"Well, here we are and all ready to go," he gave the mule a resounding smack on the hindquarters and it obediently turned around to where Christine, rigged out in riding-breeches and spurs, waited to mount.

"I have sent Emilio, my boy, ahead with all your luggage," the general went on, "and I have telegraphed for an automobile to meet you at Comatán, just over the Guatemala border. You have a nice day, Señores, and in eight hours you will be in Comatán. From then on you are in civilization."

Christine threw her leg lightly over her mount, and then held out her hand to the general.

"*Adios*, Señor General . . . and many thanks for your many kindnesses." He bowed very gallantly, balancing himself deftly on his one leg. "I kiss your hands and feet," he replied in grandiloquent Spanish.

We touched the spurs to our horses and the small courtyard resounded with the noise of the horseshoes striking the stone flooring of the patio. We crossed it, waved *adios* to the general, and passed under the wide door of the house and out into the Plaza.

The village of Copán was not yet in motion; smoke poured out between some of the plaited palm roofs, a few dogs felt it their canine duty to leave the warmth of the kitchen and come out to bark at us as we rode by, but otherwise the activity of the village was held in abeyance for a moment, as if man and beast waited the arrival of the torrid sun over the rim of the valley. Even the zopilotes, which we passed sitting like incipient black clouds on a fence near the road, awaited the warmth of the sun before falling to on the carcass of a dead horse that lay just beyond the road.

Once out of shouting distance from their owner, the mules shifted into their traditional slow steady step, and we let the reins hang loosely on their necks as they fallowed the hairpin turns that took us from the valley ooor to the higher bastions of the valley. At a point on iop of the valley, just before the road dropped away to another smaller valley, we took our last glimpse of Copán. The little village just below us was now awake and the sky was filled with the blue haze of the smoke

that poured up from the wood fires that we knew were heating the flat *cumals*, preparatory to baking the tortillas. Far in the distance, we could make out the solid dark green patch of verdure near the slender ribbon of the Rio Copán, which marked the Mayan Acropolis.

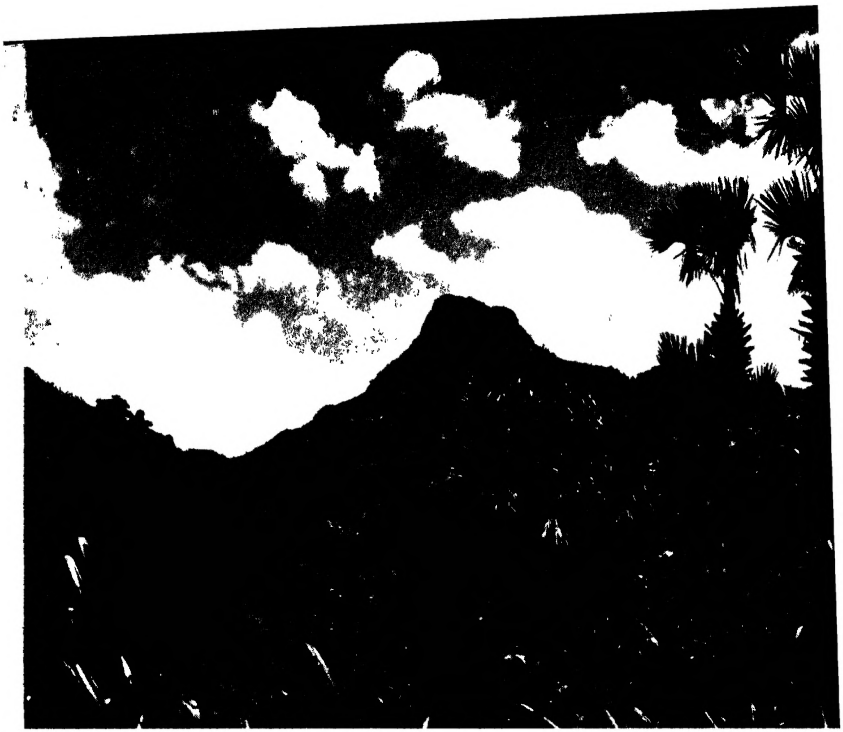
Christine's mount edged to the top of the hill at the very moment that the sun appeared over the rim of the valley's walls, and lighted up the white monuments in the Great Plaza. Even at this distance we could see, in dim outline, the brilliant white of those tall, mysterious obelisks of an extinct people. As we saw it now, so must it have appeared to the simple Indians who came by devious routes to visit this sacred city and had their first glimpse from these same heights, of the symbols of their people's greatness.

Our mules, accustomed to the path, lumbered down the hill that led to the banks of the river which, having now cut through the valley, turned to flow into Guatemala. This we had been told to follow, for it would lead us right into Comatán, the first city on the Guatemala-Honduras border. As yet the sun had not dissipated the darkness of the valley; shafts of light filtered through here and there, enlivening the faint blue-black shadows that obscured the path.

Over this same road, a century ago, John Lloyd Stephens had come on his way to Copán, still chafing over his forced imprisonment at Comatán; over the same road, centuries before him, had come the first Maya immigrants who were moving into the rich valley, there to forge their destiny. Through this same narrow valley, its sides clustered with cactus, Izotl trees and sharp-pronged brush had come—with all the clanking accoutrements of knight-errants—the myrmidons of the King of Spain to put the final *coup de grâce* to the Maya civilization.

And we, who now felt so close to all of this after our

The church at Comatán, Guatemala, where John Stevens was held captive, and where the explorers were met by car at the end of the Honduras expedition



On the road to Guatemala : the end of a journey

intimate association with the quetzal bird, the friendly Jicaque Indians, and closer still to the spirit of the peoples who had built the magnificent City of Copán, now spurred our mounts along the path that would lead us to the Republic of Guatemala, and the end of our Honduras venture.