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A pair of Quetzals, shown in their native habitat.

(Drawing by Franklin Bennett)



*JUNGLE
IN THE CLOUDS*

Victor Wolfgang v. Hagen, F.Z.S.

DUELL, SLOAN AND PEARCE
NEW YORK

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TO RAYMOND STADELMAN
*Who First Suggested the
Quetzal Expedition*

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*JUNGLE
IN THE CLOUDS*

I. It All Began in a Night Club

THE AIR in that Quito night club was craterous 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 expedition 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 toward 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 southwesterly Guatemala border on the left, the line along Salvador running southeast down to the Pacific, the northeast 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 hemorrhaging 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-colored drinks.

"To say nothing of what your research might do for the archaeologists 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."

If this was true, I mused, I would run into some interesting superstitions if I tried to bring the Quetzal alive out of the forest. There were rumors—and Stadelman partially confirmed them—that a group of very primitive Jicaque Indians, long thought by scientists to be extinct, lived in these same rain forests, and as they, in the time of the Aztecs, carried on a desultory commerce with these people of Mexico, perhaps they had hunted the Quetzal for its plumes, as an article of trade or tribute to the Aztecs. All these ancient tribes believed that the Quetzal would not live in captivity; yet the high priests used their plumes, and to kill the bird was a capital offense. Could these primitive Indians, the Jicaques, have traded Quetzal feathers to the Aztecs? Perhaps if I could find these Indians, too, in my Quetzal quest there would be some tribal remembrance of the part the Quetzal played.

To the Aztecs, at least, Quetzal plumes were sacrosanct treasures to be worn only by their chiefs and high priests. In Mexico City, before the conquest, they had erected a colossal aviary, tended by three hundred keepers, in which all the birds of their

kingdom were housed. Every colorful or rapacious bird of Mexico was in that gigantic cage—except the Quetzal, which they were never able to rear. The use of the Quetzal feathers became almost a fetish. Moctezuma's crown, as well as those of his high priests, was a golden circlet mounting the green-gold Quetzal plumes. And like the Mayas whom they had conquered and whose culture they partially absorbed, they treated the Quetzals as if they were the property of a god.

An unusually loud blast from the orchestra brought me back to the actual, just in time to hear Stadelman say:

“And, Christine, there should be some interesting plants in Honduras for you to collect.”

“Then it's settled,” I interrupted.

“What's settled?” both Christine and Stadelman chorused.

“Why, the expedition to Honduras, of course!”

“All right,” said Stadelman, rising and pulling back Christine's chair, “it's settled. We'll meet in New York in the early part of 1937, and in the meanwhile I'll get some letters off to Honduras to see if I can smooth the way for you. I must be getting on now; I've got to catch the six o'clock train for the coast in the morning.”

And his tall frame was swallowed up in the fog-like aura of the Quito night.

As planned, we met in New York the following January. I was able to report considerable progress. Dr. Heye of the Museum of the American Indian was anxious and willing to sponsor the ethnological part of the expedition, and we had made arrangements with the New York Botanical Garden for the handling of the plant material. There still remained the Quetzals—no zoological garden had yet committed itself to that undertaking.

With Stadelman we discussed the Quetzal quest and amplified the plans we had made in Quito, but meanwhile Stadelman had to be off for Guatemala to carry on some research for the Carnegie Institute, and I had some lectures to deliver in London.

In England, the expedition suddenly became most definite. It was after a lecture that I had given at the Zoological Society that Julian Huxley, its secretary, suddenly interested himself in my plans to catch the Quetzal alive. He seemed to feel my enthusiasm. If I decided to undertake the expedition I must secure, he said, a pair of these Quetzals for the Zoological Garden at Regent's Park.

That alone was sufficient for me to start arranging schedules, studying maps, and arranging for permits and equipment. Back in New York, Lee Crandall of the Bronx Zoo capitulated to my insistence and ordered a 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 Moctezuma so tragically mistook for the returning god, Quetzalcoatl. Standing on deck in the sun and watching that coast slip by, one could envision 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. Southwest of Tegucigalpa the lonely port of Amapala squats apologetically in the middle of the Gulf of Fonseca,

a harbor 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 kilometer 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 harbor. 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-colored 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 American conductor. “They’ll be shouting at every siding we come to.” He banged down the window and turned his attention toward 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 Aguan 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 odors 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’ 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. Favorite 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 favorite 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 anyone 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 Truxillo, nice sort of fellow. He runs a drugstore. One day a Ladino tries to jump off a moving train, falls under the wheels, and gets both legs lopped off—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-colored 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, Quet-*

zalcoatl in the clatter of the train over the ties. "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 primitive 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.* 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 toward 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

* The word, in Nahautl, means "precious green."

messenger, the protector of travelers 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 worshiped him in its own image. The Pipils sacrificed their young bastard sons to him, while among the gentle, highly civilized Mayas such a bloodthirsty god could not exist. To them Quetzalcoatl (whom they called Kukulcan) began as a divinity and became something more of a prophet. This mythical being, Quetzalcoatl, 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 headdress was an elaborately carved, brilliantly jeweled affair, simulating the jaws of the snake, and from the top of this headgear flowed numerous long tail feathers of the Quetzal. Aztec 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 honor—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 cul-

ture by the Aztecs and its absorption by the conquerors that for centuries archaeologists 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 labored 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 Moctezuma II as emperor of the Mexican confederation, and with him came a pomp unknown to his predecessors. 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 anyone 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 Moctezuma 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, Moctezuma 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 headdress, a crown of gold and turquoise shaped like an open-mouthed snake, festooned with Quetzal plumes, and other priestly apparel. Nor had Moctezuma 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 Moctezuma; 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. Moctezuma 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 Beasley. Stadelman wrote me you were coming, so I dashed down as soon as I could get away from the farm. I'm paymaster and today is payday." That explained the Colt automatic stuck in his belt.

He looked distinctly puzzled as I presented Christine. "I knew you were traveling 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 Beasley dropped us boasted a shower bath, and the beds were clean. The food was better than the usual tortillas, beans, fried bananas, chili 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.

Beasley 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 airplane. Didn’t you know that Honduras has one of the finest airplane systems in the Americas? A fleet of about forty trimotor 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 fiber 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—that would run you about five dollars more. To say nothing of five days’ riding. The plane will cost twenty-five dollars for the two of you and only about twelve for your lug-

gage. What's more, you'll be in Yoro in forty minutes and save three days."

Then he admitted that he'd like to go along. "You know, Stadelman and I spent two years together up at Portillo Grande, and he's told me about your plans to catch live Quetzals. Naturally I'd like to help. I'd do anything I can for Stadelman—and—well, it would be nice to go along if I didn't have such a lot to do around here. . . ."

It wasn't hard to persuade him. He thought of the natives, "a suspicious lot if you don't know them," and foresaw all sorts of difficulties. The people of Portillo Grande, he told us, were a little superstitious anyway, and it might help if we were introduced by one whom they knew for a friend.

Next day he picked us up at the hotel and drove us out to the air field. You might not have known it was an air field, but the Taca agent (Transportes Aéreos Centro-Americanos) assured us the plane would be in any minute, and five minutes before it was due he jumped into a dilapidated Ford and careened down the meadow to wrangle a herd of grazing cows off the landing area. No sooner was he back than the plane droned into view. And at that very moment an insurgent cow detached herself from the herd and strolled back into the center of the field. The agent was beside himself, but apparently the pilot knew what to expect. While the agent rushed down the side of the runway, waving

his arms wildly and screaming Spanish at the animal, the huge trimotor banked. The pilot obviously saw the cow, for he dipped close to her and she tossed up her heels and fairly flew off the runway. Then the plane circled the field, slid into a three-point landing, and rolled up to the shack where we were watching. Out of the cabin stepped two pilots, obviously North Americans, their caps tilted jauntily. The Ladino agent mustered his little English and explained about our luggage. Apparently this was old stuff to them, for they yanked out the seats in an instant and stowed in our heavy crates and boxes. We afterwards learned that they called this route from Olanchito to Yoro the "meat run"; they were likelier to pick up a live pig, a flock of chickens, or a pregnant woman here than any of the prosaic freight more generally associated with air traffic.

The plane was on strict schedule, so our baggage was tied down in short order, the seats were replaced, and we were off with a dispatch phenomenal in that part of the world. I had the only clear window, hoping to get some snapshots with my Leica on the way. Christine and Beasely were almost buried in bundles and bags.

There is a certain fatalism needed for traveling in strange airplanes, particularly when you discover that a forced landing is likely to involve being guillotined by a gleaming new plowshare propped up beside the pilot's seat. But this was forgotten as the

plane took on altitude and the land spread out below us, a bright green crossword puzzle. Beasely pointed with urgent pride to his new banana plantation, flung out over four thousand acres of the Aguan river bank, and it was an impressive sight till the banana trees shrank to the size of tobacco plants and the valley narrowed below us. As we flew farther into the Department of Yoro the scene changed suddenly and we were flying over pine forests. But forests doesn't describe that country very accurately, for the trees were spaced out in parklike stands on the slopes. It is a gentle landscape and might well have been carefully tended forest land or a deer park in any other country. Houses were rare. Christine reported that she had only seen four (from behind her sack) in the whole fifty miles we covered. The character of the land changed 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 northwest 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 forest 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, reconnoitering for cattle, and came down before a fancier station than the one we had left at Olanchito. This one had a tile 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 odor, permeating the evening air. Christine declared the whole place idyllic and turned off the road to botanize in the saddle. Her wavy blond 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 be-

hind 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 marshaled 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 Beasley 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 Beasley'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 centered. 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 deep into our stores. We had traveled 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 commissary 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 chili 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 semiannual 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 mustache 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 toward 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 toward 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 color of the Liquidambar tree (much like the maple) marked the still darker foliage of the cloud forest—the area natively referred to as Eyebrow of the Mountain.

“But surely,” I objected, “there are Quetzals up there.”

“*Sí*, 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 everyone 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 accidentally 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



Cloud forests: This landscape gives eloquent evidence of the scenic beauty of inland Honduras. The cloud forests are jungles at an altitude of about five thousand feet. The flora is luxuriant because they are bathed at least once a day by heavy clouds. One sees here why the country is called "land of waves."



Orchids and giant parasitical plants suck life out of the clouds and the dripping trees of the cloud forest. The jungle is a dramatic representation of the struggle for survival. Big trees are the lifeblood of the forest.

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.

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.

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 textbook 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 mandolin 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 bullfrog took up the tune in low gutturals that vibrated on the damp air like the brumming 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 ricocheted and you fancied the place a factory full of buzzsaws 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 Hummingbird 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 acclimating 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.

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 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 being dragged off by scores, white and succulent in their last molt, 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 neighborhood. 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



The author.



Nestlings: Two photographs showing young Quetzals, one in the doorway of its nest in the cloud forest, a second perched on the edge of the gourd in which it was placed after being captured. Ordinarily there are two offspring and as these mature they take turns hopping to the edge of the woodpecker's hole where they were hatched. When the parent birds return with food the youngsters hop down, content to resume baby ways and be fed.

stone-blind and follow each other over the trail by smell. Each gives off a characteristic odor which his fellows pick up on those curious organs of taste, smell, and touch, the antennae. 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 gaint tree covered the ground with flowers that would have delighted Christine, and delicate maidenhair 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 raggedly the same cotton shirt and pants 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—wintertime, summertime—does Quetzal put her eggs?"

He thought hard, stared at the road, squished his toes in the yellow mud like an embarrassed school-boy. "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 toward 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 color 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 rapierlike 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 vapors rolled across the trail to cover the cloud forest for the night. I splashed along behind Chon's fear-spiced 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 peeked 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 proceeded 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 gray 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 neighboring

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 solider platform from which I might observe the birds' behavior. For an hour the jungle was full of the ring of the ax 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 labors 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 me, directly opposite the hole in the tree. A few yards off was a big *aguacatillo* tree, covered with fruit the color of a ripe olive, cupped in a bright red acorn shell. This was evidently the Quetzal's favorite fruit, and before long I was rejoiced by the sight of two fine male birds that swooped down to feed.

It was marvelous 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 gray and pale green. Yet taken by herself she is a remarkably handsome bird, with her olive, gray, and carmine color 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 enamorata 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 center 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 and 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 airplanes and life rafts. I grabbed hold of a dependent liana, tested its strength, and shinnied up to the first branches. Some of the blossoms, faded and brown, still hung there. When fresh they are vasselike ivory flowers, favorites of the bees, the monkeys, and the butterflies. The flower is followed by a furry pompon, fit for a drum major, formed of fine gray 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 hooklike 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-colored 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, toward 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 5200, 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 Gurapára 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.”

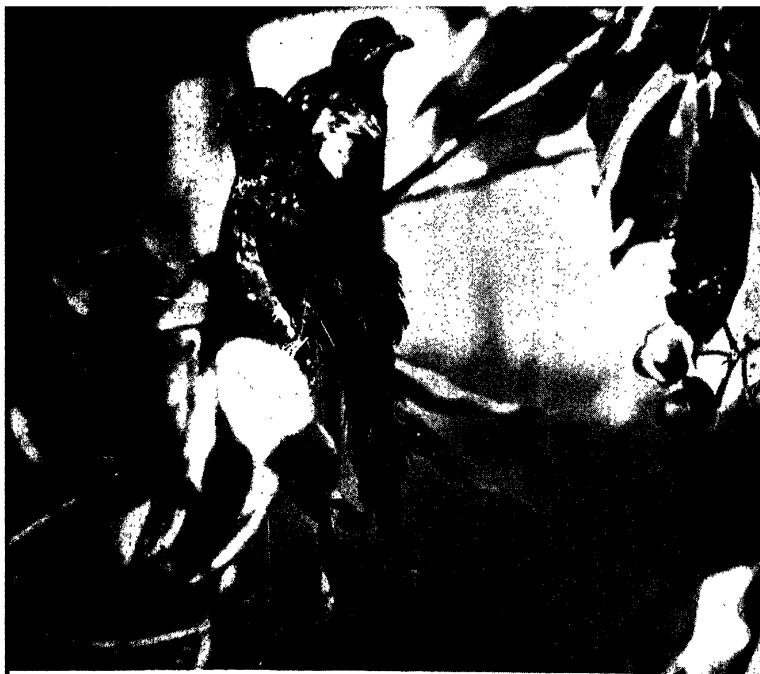
“You have?” I tried to appear casual. I walked over to the basket as calmly as I could, threw back the flap, and saw inside a bird about the size of a two weeks old chick. Its plumage was gray and black and there was dainty brown down on its belly. I threw down the cloth in disgust. Was this a joke?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



... .. female. Overall, Despite their rent



First flight: Young Quetzals in an aguacatillo tree on the first day after leaving their nest. The fledglings are generally ready to fly within two weeks of being hatched. In this photo the remarkable tail plumes are already beginning to show but it is a matter of years before these feathers are replaced by the three-footed plumes for which the bird is famous.



Close-up: The loveliness of the male Quetzal cannot be conveyed in a black-and-white photograph, though this shot gives some idea of the majestic green

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 newborn 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 suc-

cessful 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 anesthetic 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 applicable to 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 anesthetized 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 centimeter 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 anesthetized. 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 check. 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 furor 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 toward 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. Maximil 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 paralyzed 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 backside. 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 humor of the natives is ribald. They laugh most uproariously 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 naive 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 paralyzed.

“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.

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 compara-

tively 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 rearing these successfully, and though my pique was tempered by a grudging sympathy for the Indian's new-found 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 toward 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, proclaim-

ing 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.

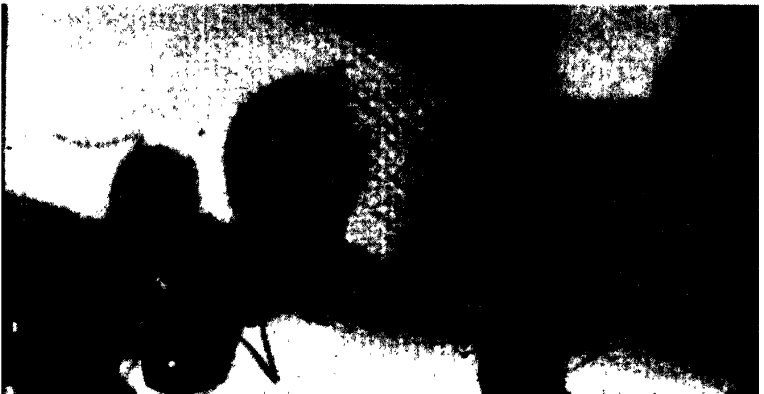
While Christine tended the nestlings in camp I completed my notes on the life cycle of the Quetzal in his own habitat. I judged that the bird takes from fifteen to twenty-three days to incubate its eggs. All the nests are made in decayed trees, from twenty to forty feet above ground. All are located 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



Umbrella Ant: One of the workers carrying a bit of leaf which it has carefully sawed out with its mandibles. The leaves are used to fertilize the subterranean fungus gardens from which this type of ant lives.

The death grip of the Umbrella Ant soldiers is so tenacious that the natives often use them to suture wounds. After the mandibles have bitten into flesh (or, as in this photo, cloth) they can only be removed by being crushed, even though the heads be cut off.





by heavier, darker, gray 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—every-

thing 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 spadelike 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 humoring 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 skepticism 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,” quoth 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 center 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, businesslike 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 *zanjopos* 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 fiber, 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 toward 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 antennae.

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 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 center of the mound. By keeping my helpers working in relays, I had the trench well into the center 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 center, the more spirited became their defense. 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 center of the formicary we uncovered the spongy masses of gray fungus. They were as big as cauliflower heads, of a grayish color, 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 ultramethodical. Only repeated catastrophe will disturb the workers. Despite the hurried antennae-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 number is never large. As soon as the eggs are laid, workers carry them off to the warm fungus cells. The eggs hatch and the larvae 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 mold 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 exo-skeletons 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 odor 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 larvae. 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 haephae 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 feces. 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 larvae 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 today.

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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 acclimated 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 color. 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 vapors that looked hellish and terrible in the west, while thunderheads mounted in the north. Toward 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 intensity of firehoses. 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."

"*Sí, 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 Commandante 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."

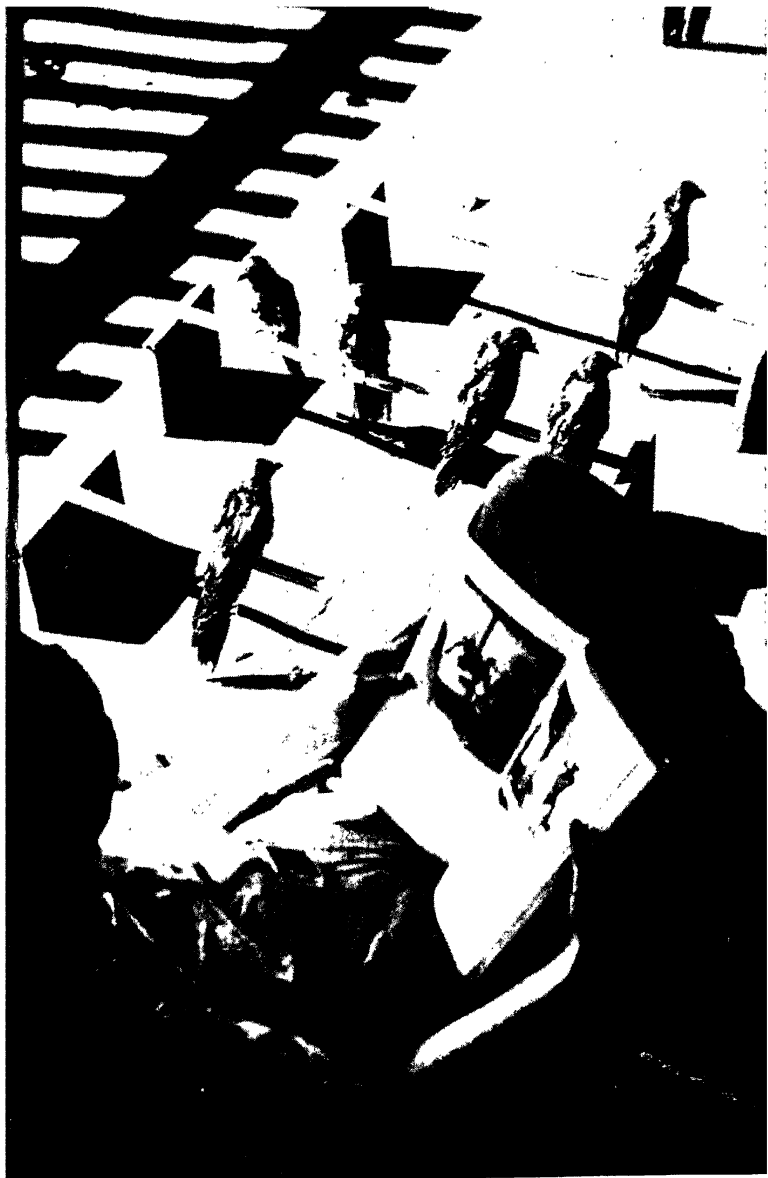
"You mean, take those small birds on an eight-hour ride? You must be insane!"

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 airplane 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 maneuvered painfully through tumbled masses of earth and roots. Slabs of mountainside 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 roadside, imminent with landslide, holding our tender burden with aching wrists and cramped fingers. It was lucky we had set



How the fledglings got their daily constitutional: A photo made at Subirana, showing Christine relaxing in a deck chair, while the young Quetzals hop from



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 Beasley'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 payroll 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.

Montaña de la Flor: The range of hills where we found the aboriginal tribesmen of the supposedly extinct Jicaque culture, as seen from the flowery valley of the Rio Guarabuqui. The discovery of these primitives was made on an excursion from the Valley of Subirana.

We might never have known of the Jicaques' palisaded villages had not one of the tribesmen come up unawares while I was lunching with Jesus López just below the cloud forest. He was hunting with a blowgun like the one in the photo, a weapon





Christine feeding newly arrived Quetzal nestlings. The baby birds were perpetually hungry and demanded constant attention, hissing for food.

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 rumor 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 fre-

quently 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, they 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 rumors. 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 rumors 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 southwest 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. *Vamos.*"

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.

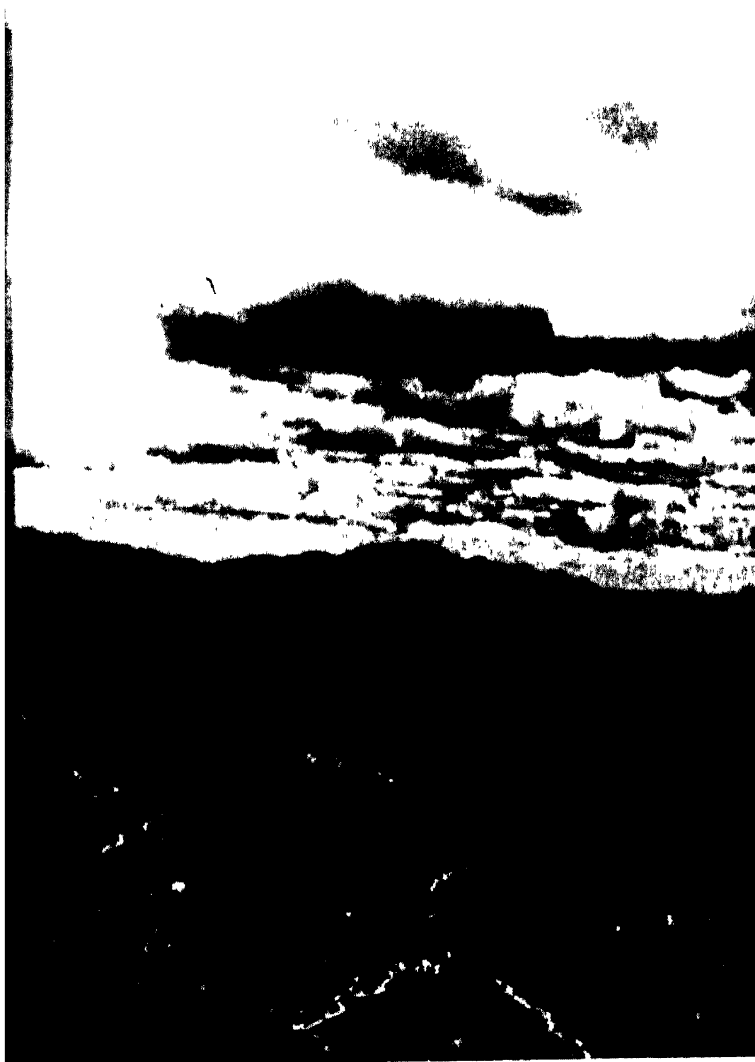
When I told him that these Jicaques belonged to a culture that was supposed to be extinct, he offered to let us have a camp site near by so we should have an opportunity to get to know them at leisure. He said he knew just the place for us to camp. I explained that I now had other matters to attend to, 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 *Subirana* 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 archaeology. 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 people 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.

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 rugged landscape of central Honduras is almost unpopulated and communications are so inadequate that the land languishes in a state of arrested development, only the northern seacoast being agriculturally profitable.



The Sierra de Pijol, as seen from the unhappy little town of Negrito. On our first arrival here the sky was blackened and the crops destroyed by a swarm of locusts.

Workers' quarters in a banana town.



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 center for banana planting, in advance, in order to reconnoiter 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 24. 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 honored 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 center 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 honored 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.

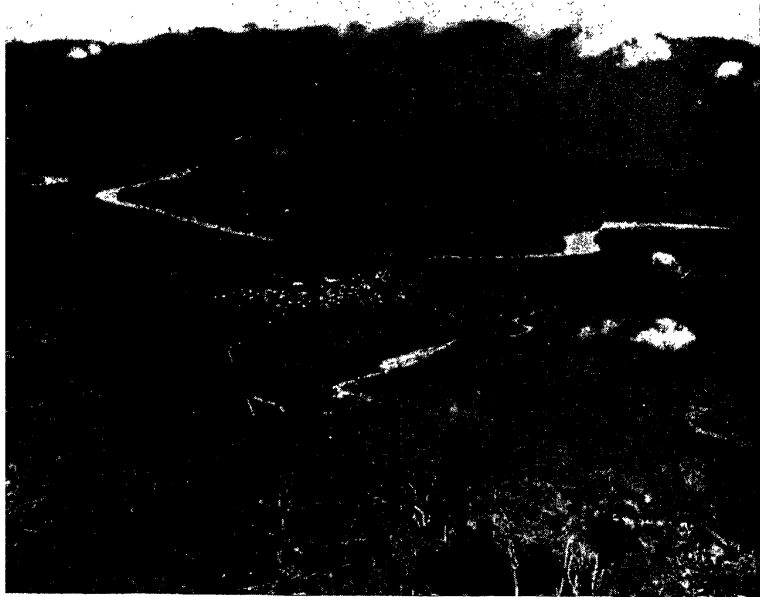
By four o'clock we were on our way to the next village, Negrito. As we approached it, towards dusk, we became conscious of a high menacing whine like a strident fiddle being tuned in the sky. The landscape was darkened by a cloud so black and fearsome that we spurred on our mules, hoping to escape the 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 Sierra de Pijol rises out of the Valley of Subirana to an altitude of seven thousand feet, the summit of the range being capped by the dense cloud forest where the expedition captured the Quetzal birds. Note the mass of parasites clinging to the tree in the foreground.

The trek to Ulua Valley: One of our chief difficulties was occasioned by high waters. In the photo our two porters are shown following Christine across a swift stream, carrying the covered cages containing the Quetzals.





Eureka: A view of the Ulua Valley from Mount Mico Quemado. In the center below the curve of the Ulua River, is the town of Progreso, which marked the end of the expedition's difficult trip with the Quetzalitos. It was at the point from which this photograph was made that we realized that the undertaking might be successful and that the rare birds could be brought out of the cloud jungle alive.

On the second day of the hard nerve-racking march from Subirana to the summit, we paused while Christine fed the birds and a muleteer struggled with the burden of a pack mule.



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 favorite 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 mustache, 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 pretense 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 northeast toward 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 honor, 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 made 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 ar-



Deserted village: Comyagua was the colonial 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.



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Retreat of the unregenerate Jicaques: This view of the Montaña de la Flor shows the cleared patches where the aboriginals have for generations cultivated manioc, corn, and a few other vegetables, and have preserved their ancient customs intact.



range 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 to 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.

X. The Legend Hangs in the Balance

AT ONE o'clock 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 pague*"—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 gray 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 tunneling 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, Víctor," she exulted, as I rode up the other bank, "aren't you glad now that I insisted on send-

ing 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 joggled 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?

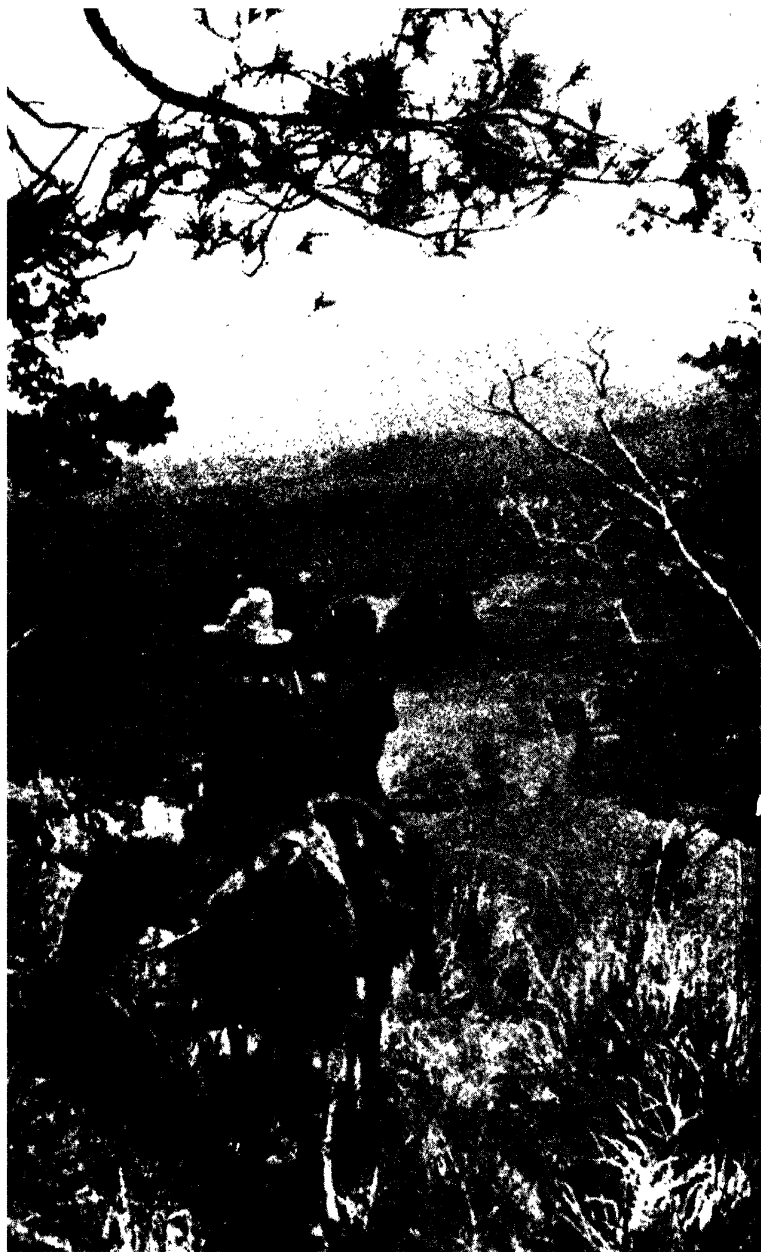
Morazón came into view at two o'clock, but I was certain it was too late to make any difference. The



La Lima in the Ulua Valley is the headquarters of the United Fruit Company in Honduras. Here we stopped to refresh ourselves and our store of provisions for the second phase of the expedition.



The Camino Real, Honduras' main highway. The traffic consists mostly



birds were obviously deathly sick. We staggered up to the house of Clarita's friend. The men set 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 traveling 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 countryside was lost on us. We moved machinelike. Wooden. Often Christine and I would get down and walk, letting Valentin 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 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 anesthetic 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 could 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 forever.

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



An interior view of the cloud forest shows the rich luxury of the foliage. The trees are matted by vines and lianas. Note the giant tree fern in the center of this landscape.



Building a lean-to: The rain in the high cloud forests was so hard that we had to protect our tents with thatch. Without this additional protection the canvas would have been no shelter and the water would have penetrated as if through muslin

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 believe 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 boy from 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 toward 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 traveling 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 loud-speakers. 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 Honduran 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 honor 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 halfway 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 honor 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 gas and to give the gendarmes another chance to check our papers and destinations. Sitting there, I noticed a Ford touring car also getting gas. Suddenly it occurred 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 gas 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 traveled 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 kilometers (about eighty-five miles) of all-weather roads. Perhaps the figures now could be raised to two hundred kilometers. 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? 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



Building our house: Ramon López and his father lashing cross-poles to the roof frame of the shelter they built us beside the Rio Guarabuqui. Afterwards the Jicaques brought palm leaves from the forest and thatched the roof for us, as shown in the other photo.





Our camp on the Guarabuqui: Two views of the stout shelter built for the López family and three neighboring Jicaques. The setting was idyllic, simple, and pleasant. Our tent was pitched at one end of the thatched shelter, while the other was enclosed for a kitchen. In between we had a comfortable pavilion.



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 groundswell 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 odor of rosin fills the air, the gray 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 northwest 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 meager 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 everyone 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 fibers 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 odor 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



Inside the stockade of the Jicaque tribe we had come to study is seen one of the primitive windowless huts in which the Indians lived.



Jesus López standing outside the stockade chats with the Jicaque Indians :
in the photograph below, squatting beside their hut and refusing to com
nearer. The Indians were inveterate pipe smokers and almost their only c
sion to "modernity" was the use of flint and steel to light their pipes



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 savored 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 neighborhood close to the ranch of Jesús López.

He had promised to receive me here on November 15, 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 homemade 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 Guarabúqui 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 rosin 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. Tomorrow 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.

Honduran 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 Guarabucui, 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 the shotgun shells which I held out to him. Then he turned and walked back into the house without a word. I turned in 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 primi-

tive-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 mustaches), 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 demeanor was shy and embarrassed. They answered only with noncommittal 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 tomorrow. 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-by, 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 inclosed 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 powwow. 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 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 seen 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 signaled 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 *ocotal-robledal*, 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 toward 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 toward 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 aeons 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 airplanes, 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 coloration. The Sloth's hair is a mass of algae 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 kidnaped were

the 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 toward 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

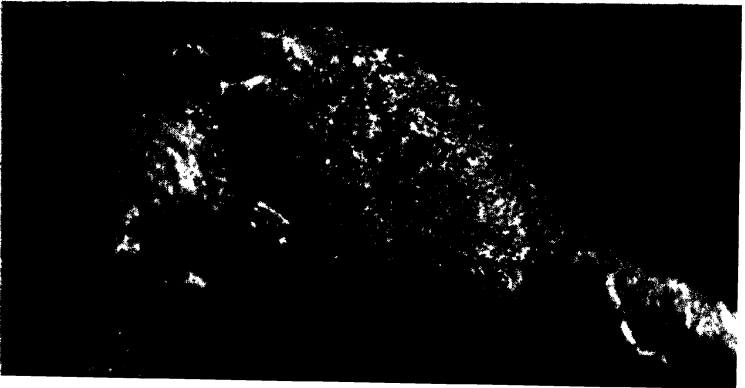


The Three-toed Sloth moves with maddening precision and absence of energy from branch to branch of the tree where we held him captive for several days before his tragic end.



Our captive Sloth was helpless on the ground, being fitted only for arboreal life. However, he was able to move forward to a tree, looking ludicrous and a little terrifying. This is the apparition that frightened Señora López away from camp and led her to tell the dread story of the Sisimici.

Anteater: The tiny Flor de Balsa looks so much like the silky seed pods of the balsa tree where we found this specimen that I started to pick him before recognizing him for an animal. The moment his first fear was overcome the Anteater fell asleep in this curious position.



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 Spanish settlers ironically dubbed it the “swift little dog.”

Father Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit missionary who introduced 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,* 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

* *Hai* is the Guiana Indians' name for the Sloth.

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 defense—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 neighborhood 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.

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 maneuvered for the Sloth's blind spot, the fawn-colored 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 neighbor 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 humored 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 color 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 toward 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 came 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 neighbor 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 countryside 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 that 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 mountaintops 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, Sisi-mici 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 countries 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 corn-fields—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 endeavoring 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, afterward 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 gasoline tin, I sat down beside him with a notebook 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*, potatolike 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?

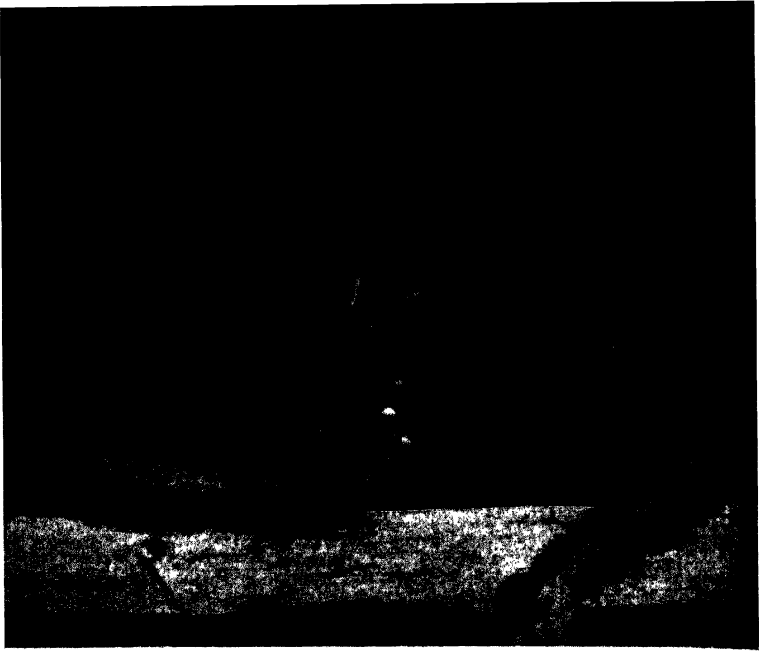
The known history of the Jicaques * begins with Columbus' arrival on the shores of Honduras in 1502. It was his fourth and last voyage to the Americas, and after stopping at the Bay Islands, his crew landed at a cape which he called Punta Caxinas (later Truxillo), the port where we ourselves had landed. 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

* 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."



first conquest: A Jicaque named Felipe was responsible for our success in winning the confidence of the shy Indians whom we came to Montaña de la Flor to study. When we succeeded in curing the painful boils on his legs, Felipe was so impressed that he got us an invitation to enter the secret palisaded village.



The chief: Fidelio, the second chief of the Jicaque tribe that lives at Montaña de la Flor, leans pensively against a fence rail sucking at his pipe.



A young Jicaque Indian with

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 honor and to offer their fealty to his emperor—or god.

At that time the tribal organization of the Jicaques 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 neighboring 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 laborers 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 garroted 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 garroting, an iron collar is placed about the neck, a screw is turned in back 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 practiced 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 brought—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, neighbors 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,

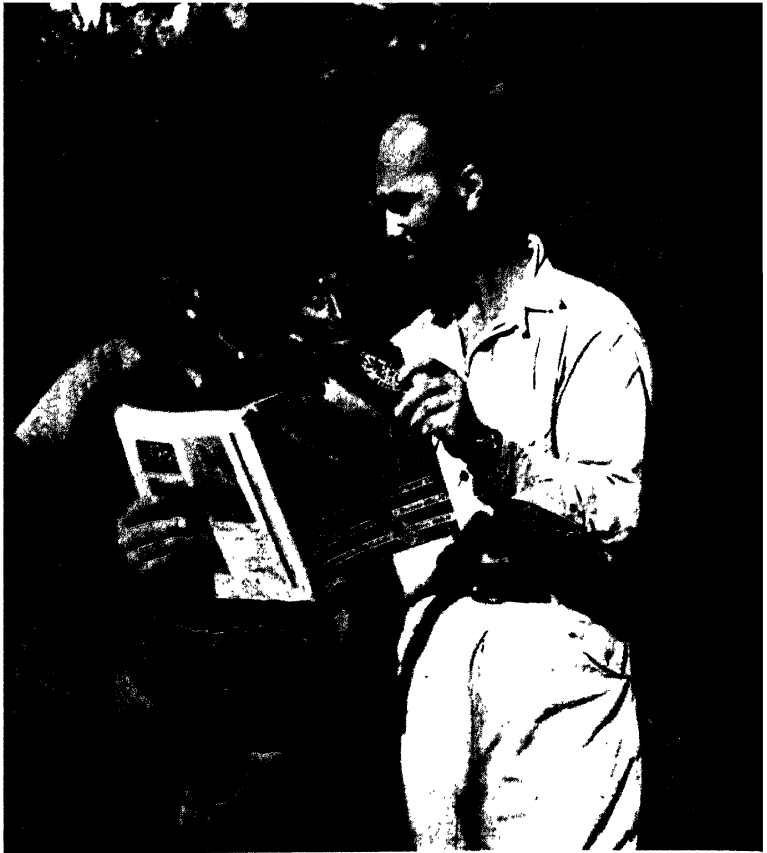
he clothed in blouse and skirt after the fashion of his day. And then, like God, Subirana saw that all was good, and rested.

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.

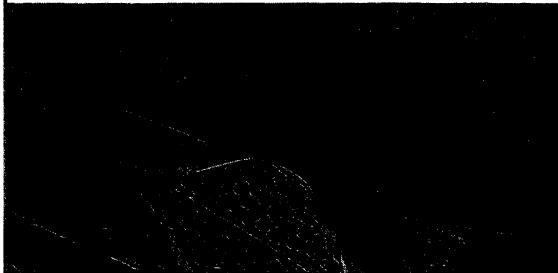
Once more Subirana got his primitive charges together, calmed them, and persuaded them to return to their settlements. Then in 1866 the good Padre died in the beautiful valley named for him below Mount Pijol. One Jicaque called Pedro (for Subirana had of course baptized them all and given them Christian names) took the body of the mission-



An elderly Jicaque shows his profile. Members of this secluded tribe have been inbreeding for centuries and there is a remarkable uniformity to their features. Most have extremely bushy hair and thin scraggly beards.



The author shows a group of Jicaque Indians a copy of the magazine *Nature History* and the first photographs they have ever seen.



Blowgun ammunition: A rude basket containing baked clay marbles which

ary 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 Gurrápára, 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 together, 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.

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 of 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 fiber. 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 skeptical whether any good-size 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 caliber as that of the blowgun, they are laid on a palm leaf in the center 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 seminomadic 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.

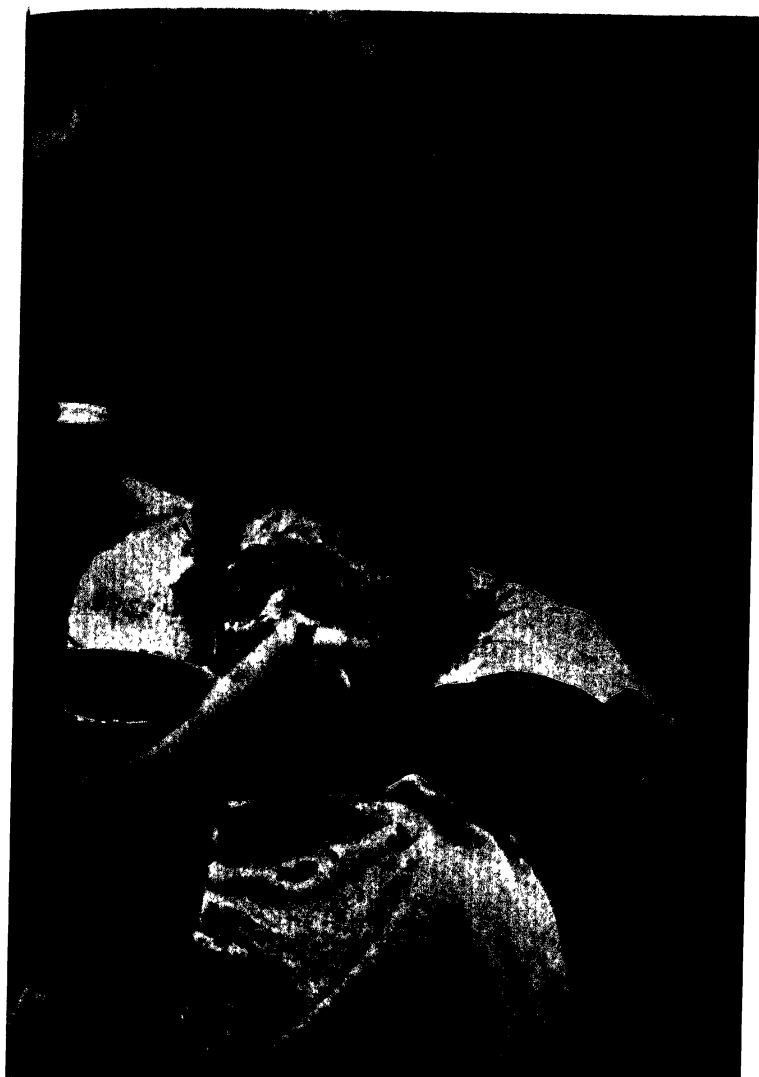
It had taken us four weeks to gain the confidence of the Jicaques, but we no longer regarded them as laboratory specimens after our first visit to their village. Soon they became in fact our friends. If I gave them presents of matches, a new pipe, other souvenirs, they immediately responded with gifts of deli-

cacies: *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 ethnological artifacts.

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 rubberlike 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



mask making: Christine applies the negative composition to the features of a illing subject to get an accurate anthropological record as part of our collec- on. During the process the Indian's brother appeared and saw the sight repro- ced here with consternation. He interrupted us, rushing in with drawn ma- chete. . . .



The finished mask: Two photos that show the fidelity with which the anthropological masks reproduced the features of the Indians.

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 pry 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 vic-

tim 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 mold 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 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



The Jicaques go fishing: Above is shown the reed weir constructed as part of the trap the Indians use to catch the fish brought down by the poisoned stream. Below, one of the Indians beating a bundle of poisonous bark against the rocks of the Rio Guarabuqui several miles above the trap.





Indian fishermen poisoning the water of the Rio Guarabuqui to stun the fish and float them, helpless, into the trap downstream. Below is Jesus López, who came up after the unsuccessful fishing expedition and gleefully exhibited one of the unfortunate catch.



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 soulder 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.

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-by 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 ad-

mit, 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 labor 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 kindness, 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 neighboring family to come to us. We found a small pine that would do for a Christmas tree, and trimmed it with tin foil from films and with decorations cut out of colored paper. We bought an eighteen-pound turkey (for fifty cents), and it 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 honor, 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 favor 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 preparations 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 Am-

erica, 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 pine wood 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-by gravely. The others followed and we shook hands all around, as if we were running for office. Then, forming themselves in single file, they followed Fidelio off up the mountain at a dogtrot.

And that was the last we saw of them.

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 archaeological 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 chili 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.

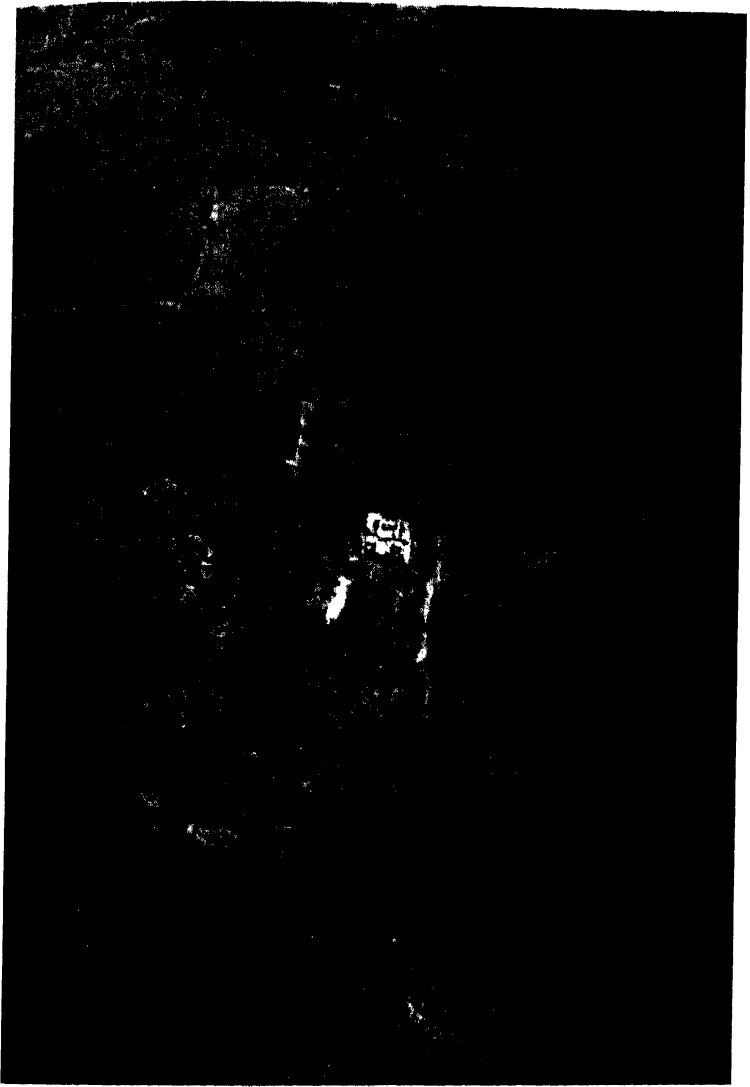
Tortilla making is a technique acquired with years of practice. Three times a day, all their lives from childhood on, the women fashion the mashed kernels into those corncakes. With each slap of the hand the tortilla is turned as regularly as if by a machine. Each tortilla to them is a work of art—it 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 traveler 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 numer-

ous 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."

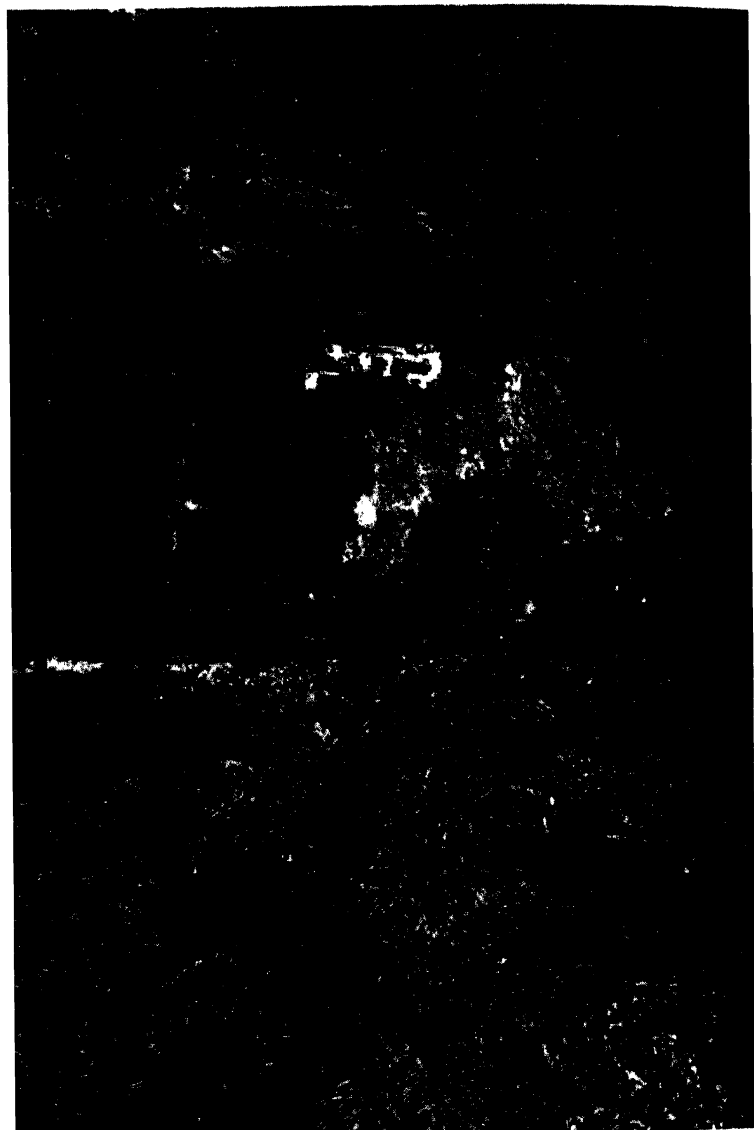
We drove off down the white dusty road. It was lined with convicts busy extending and repairing it. It corkscrewed. It was like the caracole of a snail shell, spreading out into the valley that surrounds the capital. The sun emerged from the dark rain clouds as we neared the city, and the shining belfries 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 color you might name.

We were searching for one thing—"a good hotel



The ruins of Copán from the air: The "Acropolis" is here shown surrounded by dense jungle growth. Note how the river has sectioned the hill on which the city was built, thus saving the archaeologist years of excavating.



telescopic photograph of the Copán ruins, made from the south wall of the valley, shows the thick growth of forest that has hidden the templed hill for centuries. Note the way the Rio Copán has cut into the hillside.

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 cobblestone 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 check to back it up. A letter from London was equally satisfactory. The Quetzals there were in excellent shape. Another check. Reports from the Museum acknowledged letters. First copies of my book about the headhunters. 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 today 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 centuries 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 trimotor taxied out 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 Honduran family—fat papa, fat mamma, four children dressed in the style that was fashionable for mid-Victorian picnics. Lying about them in a semicircle were bags and cases, pineapples and mangoes, and—as usual—a couple of live chickens. When the announcer called out the name of Olan-chito, 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, "*Vam-amos, 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 toward the plane. After them came their baggage and then traveling 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 traveling 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 archaeological 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. Into Prehistory

DURING the first hour heavy fog banks obscured the ground eight thousand feet below. The pilot went still higher. Then the clouds broke and we could see a river through the wisps of mist. The pilot consulted his chart, nosed the plane down, and in a few minutes we burst through the cloud bank and a beautiful valley became visible. He throttled down the engine, indicating to us that we were now over the valley of Copán. Tobacco fields and cornfields checkered the earth.

I searched in vain for the ruins. At this altitude I couldn't make them out. The plane banked. The world rose. We leveled off at three thousand feet, a thousand feet above the valley. As we reached its center I suddenly sighted the Acropolis of Copán. I motioned to the aviator to drop still lower. Part of the main temple was visible, its dazzling whiteness

set off by the green of its hill pedestal. Then the Bellanca soared for a better view. The Rio Copán cuts into the hill on which the ruins stand and flows northward toward Guatemala. From this perspective we could see how nature had decked out the land and how the river had led the Mayas hither. Everything desired by such a people was here: healthy two-thousand-foot altitude, water, and fertile soil for the corn. The symmetrical peaks near by suggested volcanoes, an additional attraction, since where there are volcanoes there is obsidian for knives and other carving tools. Here too could be found the coarse basalt which makes mortars for grinding corn, and that cliff towering a hundred feet above the valley to the north provided a goodly quarry of andesite, volcanic tuff soft enough to be carved with stone instruments (for the Mayas had no metals), yet hard enough even when exposed to air to last for centuries.

We circled, banked, flew up and down the valley until I had photographed the surroundings, then skimming past one of the temples, came down on a runway upon the valley floor. At the end of the field was a small building used as a local museum to house the smaller pieces uncovered in the excavation, as offices for the Carnegie Institution archaeologists when they were working on the ruins, and as headquarters for government officials. We were met by a square-set official, heavily armed, but warmly

affable—Señor García. He held in his hand a message from the Minister of Education, who has jurisdiction over national monuments, instructing him to place all the facilities of his office at our disposal.

By terms of a contract between the Carnegie Institution and the Republic of Honduras, who are jointly restoring Copán, only those engaged in the project are permitted to photograph the recently uncovered or restored material or carry on extensive researches. This temporary rule was generously suspended for us.

We pulled our suitcases and blankets out of the plane and set them down beside a cart with solid wooden wheels, drawn by two immense bullocks. Señor García, commandant of the ruins, suggested that we put up at the house of General Juan del Campo in the modern village of Copán where Carnegie archaeologists stayed when they were working on the restoration during the dry season.

“When you are settled,” he went on, “I will have a guide take you to the ruins, which lie, as you see, just a few hundred yards from here.”

We rode into the village in style, sitting in that colonial ox cart. It was one of those indescribably lovely Central American days. Full billowy clouds drifted across the turquoise sky, and the black vultures circled endlessly. Near a small stone bridge women were gathering water, carrying it home on their heads in huge *ollas*. Over a thousand years had

passed since their ancestors built the magnificent stone city, yet the pattern of life now must be pretty much what it was long ago. We followed them to the little grass-covered plaza, and there we jumped down to find a one-legged gentleman awaiting us—General Juan del Campo. Tall and gaunt, he bade us welcome with grandiloquent courtesy, hobbling after us into his small courtyard with the aid of a crutch.

“These rooms, Señores, are at your service. When Mr. Stronsvik, who has charge of operations, is here, he stays with us also. You ask about meals? Simple: you may have them here.” And he waved his arm toward a long corridor decorated with Japanese calendars, at one end of which was a big table. He left us in a bare white-walled room with a tile floor and army cots. Our window opened on the plaza and immediately the light was shut out by curious children crowding and climbing up the grille to give us the once-over. They stayed there in the window and were not embarrassed even when we began to change.

The General, now shaven and adorned with a tie that was an obvious rarity, hobbled out with us into the open plaza. There was a bandstand, but the General explained that the Sunday concerts had ceased, since three musicians had joined the latest uprising and had been most regrettably “liqui-

dated." The church had been split by an earthquake, and "God is on a vacation," he told us. In the plaza stood an enormous slab of rock, carved on one side with allegorical figures in bas-relief. Maya chiefs with curious headgear were depicted in conference with men in weird animal masks. On the other sides were rows of hieroglyphics. General del Campo, who had known every visiting archaeologist since 1890, explained to us that the modern village was the site of the first Mayan capital in Copán.

Off the plaza a large mound rose from one of the narrow cobbled streets, and we followed our gallant one-legged General to the top. From the summit, one hundred and fifty feet above the village, we could easily follow the diagram of the ruins drawn in the air by the General's crutch.

"Now," he went on, "if you let your eyes follow the river, you can see, about a quarter of a mile away, 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 the carvings? Well, those are what you'll see tomorrow—perfectly *marvelous* carvings." The General dwelt on the word as if he were barking for a sideshow.

Copán is an impenetrable enigma. Why was a superb city erected and after four centuries abandoned? What happened to the thousands who patiently cut and brought from the quarry the im-

mense stone blocks, laboriously carved these monoliths, erected them in a magnificent architectural setting, and then deserted their work? War? But the Mayas were a peaceful people. Martial motifs appear only rarely in the decorations at Copán. Earthquakes? Hardly; the city was left in good condition, and only time has toppled some of its priceless architecture. What made them relinquish their metropolis? Pestilence? Exhaustion of the soil? Change of climate? But more than that, who and what were they, these carvers who had no metal instruments? What kind of men?

No one really knows. No one even knows the right names of the cities we choose to call Copán, Chichen Itzá, Uxmal, Quiriguá. . . . No one knows what the people whom we call Mayas called themselves. True, the Mayas have left a remarkable series of hieroglyphics carved on monuments and façades of their buildings and even painted on their pottery. Over fifty per cent of these hieroglyphics have been deciphered. But what do they tell us about them? Practically nothing. Here, for example, is an immense monolith, thirty feet high, a single block superbly decorated with rich allegorical animals, flowers, and rosettes, a colossus carved on both sides. Down the sides are rows of carefully cut and remarkably clear hieroglyphics. Eagerly the archaeologist copies them down, translates them into English (or French, or German, or Spanish). What will they re-

veal? Will they tell how the Mayas came to Copán, whose portraits these figures represent, historical or religious?

No. All this painstaking verbosity tells nothing beyond the exact date when the monument was raised—nothing about the people. The Egyptians in the same space would have told how Ptolemy put to flight the enemies of his people, the number of children he had by his first wife, the amount of wheat harvested that year. . . . The Mayas of Copán told little. Their time capsule reveals only an obsession with astronomy and arithmetic.

Well, then, if the Mayas tell us nothing for themselves, we may learn something about them from their buildings. How did they build their palaces, their temples? What did they wear and eat? How did they play and amuse themselves? Some of these things we know, and the restoration of these ruins continues to add fragments of information.

In the interior of Guatemala and southern Mexico there are other magnificent ruins, but Copán in Honduras is unique, for it was a distant outpost, the southernmost known boundary, of the so-called Mayan Old Empire. None of the contemporary cities of the Mayas surpassed it. By the sixth century A.D. (according to one of the two accepted reckonings), the Mayas at Copán had an advanced astronomy, art, and architecture—far beyond the narrow conventions of earlier work in these fields. All

Mayadom looked to Copán for new and more subtle patterns. 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 puzzling in their observations, they seem to have come here for a solution. Copán, according to one of America's foremost archaeologists, was the site of the first astronomical congress in American history.

These ruins have another significance in world history. Not only was Copán the center of a Mayan renaissance, but it was the first of the ancient Mayan cities to excite the imagination of the modern world, so that the discovery of its ruins virtually marks the beginning of American archaeology. Previous to John Lloyd Stephens' visit there, in 1839, the majority of historians were of the opinion that there were no pre-Spanish architectural remains of any artistic significance in the Americas. As Stephens pointed out in his remarkable book, *Incidents of Travel in Central America*, the reading public had previously been content to accept the authority of the eighteenth-century Scottish historian, Dr. William Robertson, who wrote: "There is not in all the extent of that vast empire [of the Americas], a single monument or vestige of any building more ancient than the Conquest."

Stephens, whose writing set off the world's im-

agination, was not himself an archaeologist. A lawyer by trade and a successful Tammany orator, he was the author of some of the most popular travel books of his time, and he came to his great archaeological discovery by way of diplomacy.

It happened that on the eve of a trip which Stephens planned to take to Central America, in company with an English artist named Frederick Catherwood, the American minister designate to Central America died. Being an active Democrat, Stephens was able to get himself appointed in his stead. His mission was nebulous enough. He was supposed to present his credentials to the Central American government, whatever and wherever he might find it. Apart from that he had a "special confidential mission," which must have consisted largely in reporting to President Van Buren the state of affairs in Central American politics. As five previous consuls and ministers had died in office, Stephens had not inherited a particularly attractive political plum. Nevertheless, the office lent dignity to his person while in search of archaeological curiosities.

The travelers embarked in October, 1839, for Belize, the capital of British Honduras. There they were well received by the English colonial officials and given a rough idea of the political morass into which they were about to wade. They were accorded all the honors due an American diplomat, including a brave salute, as their little steamer left Belize with

Stephens in nominal command, and started south, heading for the strip of Guatemalan coast that separates Honduras from British Honduras. It was the last of such amenities. From then on they were on their own, Stephens' diplomatic passport being of dubious value in a country where most of the soldiery were illiterate.

They left their steamer at the little Guatemalan port of Izabal and organized a string of pack mules to carry them farther into the interior. An Irish priest who had started out from Belize with them became terrified on hearing of the dangers ahead and turned back. In the provincial capital of Zacapa, Stephens wrote: "I had an opportunity of acquiring much information about the roads and the state of the country; and, being satisfied that so far as the purpose of my mission, it was not necessary to proceed immediately to Guatemala [sic], and, in fact, that it was better to wait a little while and see the result of the convulsions that then distracted the country, we determined to visit Copan."

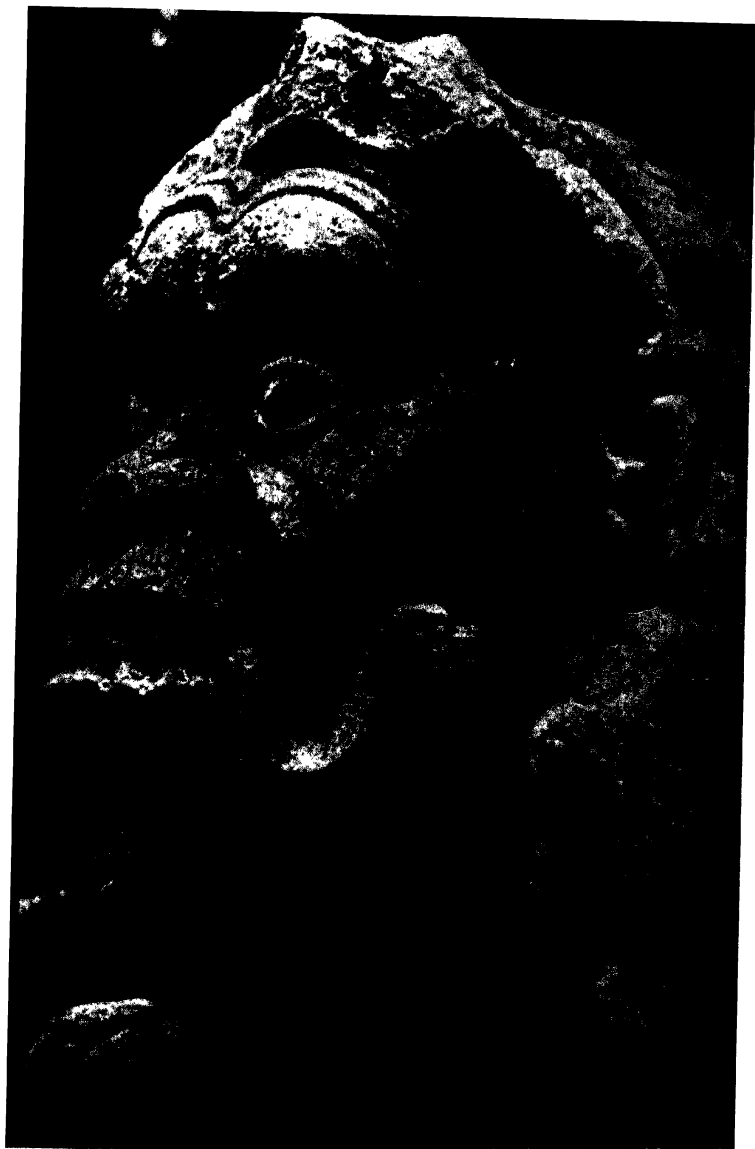
Fording the Rio Motagua and proceeding southward to Chiquimula, another provincial capital, they found the military governor and obtained from him a visa which they assumed would safeguard them on their side trip into Honduras. They proceeded southward, and arrived toward evening at the village of Comotan.

"At six o'clock," Stephens wrote, "we rose upon

a beautiful table land, on which stood another gigantic church. It was the seventh we had seen that day, and, coming upon them in a region of desolation, and by mountain paths which human hands had never attempted to improve, their colossal grandeur and costliness were startling, and gave evidence of a retrograding and expiring people. This stood in a more desolate place than any we had yet seen. . . . Not a human being was in sight, and even the gratings of the prison had no one looking through them. It was, in fact, a picture of a deserted village. We rode up to the *cabildo*, the door of which was fastened and the shed barricaded, probably to prevent the entrance of straggling cattle. We tore away the fastenings, broke open the door, and, unloading the mules, sent [the servant] Augustin on a foraging expedition. In half an hour he returned with *one* egg, being all that he was able to procure; but he had waked up the village, and the *alcalde*, an Indian with a silver-headed cane, and several *alguazils*, with long thin rods or wands of office, came down to examine us. . . . They could not read the passport, but they examined the seal and returned it.

"We abused the muleteer for stopping at a place where we could get nothing to eat, and made our dinner and supper upon bread and chocolate, taking care not to give him any.

"Mr. C. was in his hammock, and I half un-



This grotesque carved head shows the magnificence of Mayan sculpture as well as its terrifying weirdness. A second snake squirms out of the other corner of the monstrous mouth of this giant.



Two views of the Copan "Acropolis": One shows the partially restored stairs of the so-called Sacred Temple; through the doorway barely made out at the top we had a vision of the continuity of life and change in Honduras, as we watched the sun set on the workers in the cornfields across the valley. Below is a close-up of the eroded face of the hill with our guide standing at the mouth of a dissected tunnel.

dressed, when the door suddenly burst open, and twenty-five or thirty men rushed in, the *alcalde*, *alguazils*, soldiers, Indians, and *Mestizoes*, ragged and ferocious-looking fellows, and armed with staves of office, swords, clubs, muskets, and machetes, and carrying blazing pine sticks. At the head of them was a young officer of about twenty-eight or thirty, with a glazed hat and sword, and a knowing and wicked expression. . . . The *alcalde* was evidently intoxicated; and said that he wished to see my passport again. . . . He handed it to the young officer, who examined it and said that it was not valid. . . . The young man said that we should not proceed on our journey, but must remain at Comotan until information could be sent to Chicimula [sic], and orders received from that place. We . . . threatened them with the consequences of throwing any obstruction in our way; and I at length said that, rather than be detained there and lose time, we would abandon the journey to Copan altogether . . . but both the officer and the *alcalde* said peremptorily that we should not leave Comotan.

“The young man then told me to give up my passport. . . . I would not give it up. Mr. Catherwood made a learned exposition of the law of nations, the right of an ambassador, and the danger of bringing upon them the vengeance of the government del Norte. . . . Finding arguments and remonstrances of no use, I placed the paper inside

my vest, buttoned my coat tight across my breast, and told him he must take it by force; and the officer, with a gleam of satisfaction crossing his villainous [sic] face, responded that he would. I added that, whatever might be the immediate result, it would ultimately be fatal to them; to which he answered, with a sneer, that he would run that risk . . . but most fortunately, before he had time to give his order to fall upon us, a man, who entered after the rest, of a better class, wearing a glazed hat and round-about jacket, stepped forward and asked to see the passport."

Once this spokesman had explained the genuineness of Stephens' passport and the danger of arresting a U.S. minister, the officer gave up his attempt to take the passport, but warned the Americans not to leave the place. Stephens then wrote an indignant letter to the military governor, sealing it impressively with a new half-dollar for want of an official die. After this the company departed, but during the night they all returned. "To our surprise," Stephens wrote, "the alcalde handed me back ~~my~~ letter with the big seal, said there was no use sending it, and that we were at liberty to proceed on our journey when we chose. . . .

"We were too well pleased to ask any questions, and to this day do not know why we were arrested. My belief is, that, if we . . . had not kept up a

high and threatening tone to the last, we should not have been set free. . . .

“At two o’clock we reached the village of Copan, which consisted of half-a-dozen miserable huts thatched with corn. . . . We inquired immediately for the ruins, but none of the villagers could direct us to them, and all advised us to go to the hacienda of Don Gregorio.

“. . . He was about fifty, had large black whiskers, and a beard of several days’ growth; and from the behavior of all around, it was easy to see that he was a domestic tyrant. . . . I have never yet received anything quite so cool as the don’s reception of me.”

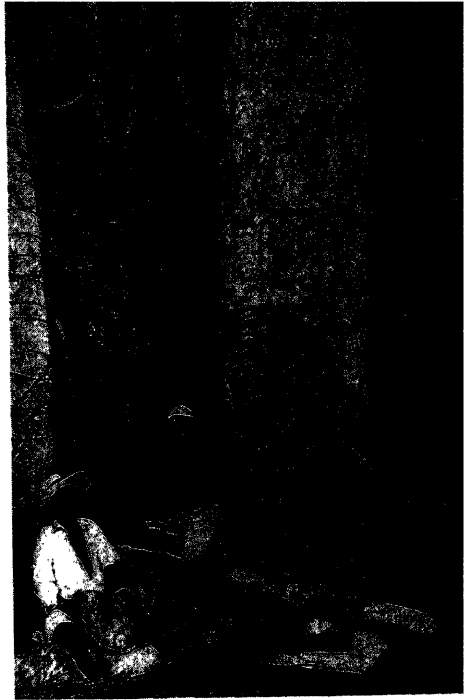
Despite this antagonism, Stephens and Catherwood were able to get a guide to show them to the ruins next morning. The ancient city was buried in jungle growth so dense that they were at first able to make out little of the character of the ruins themselves. However, they were soon led to the section which archaeologists now refer to as the Great Plaza, which is the site of a group of the most imposing monoliths ever discovered in this hemisphere. The first fourteen-foot stele they came across “put at rest at once and forever in our minds all uncertainty in regard to the character of American antiquities, and gave us the assurance that the objects we were in search of were interesting, not only as the remains of an unknown people, but as works of art, proving

. . . that the people who once occupied the continent of America were not savages."

It was this realization that made Stephens' writing important.

Stephens and Catherwood were still unable to win the tolerance of the self-important Don Gregorio. After a taste of his inhospitality, they determined to move to the hut of a tenant farmer near the ruins. They did so, but the don was determined to drive them out of the neighborhood altogether. To prevent this Stephens sought out the impoverished landowner on whose property the ruins were situated. Don José Maria Asebado, "inoffensive, though ignorant," lived in one of the best huts of the village with a rheumatic wife. Since Catherwood had been successful in curing the minor ailments of many of the natives of Copán and had even won a good reputation in the surrounding countryside, his medical talents were brought into play and they won the friendship of Don José Maria. To prevent further interruption while Catherwood was drawing the ruins and they were making a survey of the buried city, Stephens now determined to buy Copán. He even thought of shipping some of its artistic treasures back to New York, but had to abandon this wild plan for lack of transportation facilities; the rapids of the Rio Copán do not permit travel even by canoes.

When Stephens put up his proposal to Don José



A Mayan stele and the drawing of it John Catherwood made in 1838. He was the archaeologist and draughtsman who accompanied John Lloyd Stephens to Central America and their published works revealed to the world's "discovery" of ancient Colombian art in America. Previously all Indian art had been considered primitive and barbaric.



The hieroglyphic stairway (above) led to a temple that has disappeared with the centuries. Each of its sixty-five steps is embellished with decorative glyphs which have not yet been perfectly deciphered. When the photograph was made the stairway was in process of reconstruction. The other photo shows Christine resting on the steps of another temple.



Maria, the impoverished don was flabbergasted. "I think he was not more surprised," wrote Stephens, "than if I had asked to buy his poor old wife, our rheumatic patient, to practise medicine upon. He seemed to doubt which of us was out of his senses."

To convince the landowner that he was a bona fide prospect Stephens showed Don José Maria his papers and even pulled his diplomatic coat out of a trunk and put it on over his soiled work clothes. The large gold eagle buttons were his best argument. As to the price, that was agreed on immediately; Stephens offered the munificent sum of fifty dollars. He says that if he had offered more the don would have known him to be completely out of his mind and would have refused to have any further dealings with him. When all the terms were finally agreed on, Don José Maria refused at last to execute the deed, being mortally afraid of the ire of Don Gregorio, who ruled the whole community.

The two travelers were made a little safer in their position, however, by the arrival of a letter of apology from the military governor. Stephens gave a handsome tip to the Indian runner who brought it, anticipating correctly that this would assure getting the news spread around the village. Don Gregorio's wife paid him a call after hearing about it. She came escorted by all the women and young men of her large *hacienda*. "It can hardly be believed," Stephens wrote, "but not one of them, not even Don

Gregorio's sons, had ever seen the 'idols' before, and now they were much more curious to see Mr. C.'s drawings."

The making of these exquisite reproductions was a lengthy and difficult process, since the artist was forced to find new methods of drawing the hieroglyphics and the infinitely complex reliefs and engravings. Moreover, most of the monuments were so hidden by tropical foliage that trees had to be cut down by the score, and this had to be done with machetes, axes being unknown in that part of the world. Finally Stephens decided to leave Catherwood to his work and go off to Guatemala and present his credentials. After a long and hazardous journey, he arrived to find the city under a terror; the upstart Carrera was in possession with an undisciplined wild army recruited from the hinterland. When the two friends eventually reunited after a series of perilous adventures, they swore never to separate again so long as they were in Central America.

Afterwards they continued their hunt for a responsible government and for the ancient cities that were not even names to their generation: Chichen Itzá, Palenque, Uxmal, Labna, and Tulum. They never found the government, but what they found will remain for all time a historical record of superlative fascination, poetically suggestive, mysterious, and revealing.

XVIII. *The Acropolis*

AT DAWN the day after arriving in Copán we hurried through the streets to have our first close-up look at the ruins.

The village was gradually coming awake. Smoke rose from the kitchens. We could hear the slap, slap of the tortilla makers as we followed the narrow cobbled streets through which we had jounced the day before. Heavy dew covered the grass. Butterflies fluttered lazily in the cool air, and parrots flew low across the road, screaming invective. For the rest, the path that led to the huge, tree-covered acropolis was still asleep with the centuries. Passing the stone markers which defined its boundary, we found ourselves in a few minutes at the base of the mound-like hill on which the ancient city was situated.

We crawled up the jumbled staircase that led up the hill, crawling over treads that time and earth-

quakes had dislodged, and came out presently in the first courtyard. Its magnificence burst on us dramatically. The plaza was as long as a city block.

On our left, in partial reconstruction, rose a pyramid, set back in tiers like a New York skyscraper. At its base was a kind of platform or reviewing stand, behind which was a heroic stone figure unlike any we had ever seen in other Mayan ruins. The statue represented a frail grotesque god kneeling and holding aloft in one hand a torchlike ornament. The glory of the statue was its head—a massive head with bulging forehead and spreading nostrils. The mouth was embellished with vast protruding teeth and from between them issued two snakes, writhing out on either side and up along the jowls.

Christine declined my invitation to join in climbing the pyramid, and sat down on one of the carved stone fragments that littered the center of the plaza to await my return. I scrambled up the steep pile to the top, which is about two hundred feet above the West Court.

This pyramid was at the exact center of the ruins, and here on the top was an entrance leading down into the pile. Flashlight in hand, I let myself down into the hole, which was just large enough to admit me. After a few yards the dark passage came to an end. The restorers had gone no farther. Disappointed at finding no mysterious catacomb, I returned to

Christine, and together we continued our exploration of the ruins.

The main city is composed of five plazas, each surrounded by pyramids, temples, and buildings which may have been the palaces of the priestly caste that ruled the Mayan city state. The main courts of the acropolis cover an area of some five acres. They are connected by narrow corridors or alleys running between the buildings. Naturally the whole group of buildings was not constructed at once, but grew up over a long period, the great pyramids presumably replacing more modest ones.

At the east end of the first court we had entered stood an enormous pyramid, the tallest of the whole group. It is some three hundred and fifty feet in height, and no attempt has yet been made to restore it. Large trees grow out of the sloping sides, and many of the immense stone blocks of which it was built are covered by vegetation. Yet much of its original magnificence remains. Placed here and there, looking grotesquely real, were carved stone skulls, forming part of the decorative motif of the lower slope.

From the West Court we followed a narrowing corridor which led to the other side of the acropolis. Its floor was covered with all manner of scattered fragments, some hidden in the tall grass, others still erect. Among them were stones carved in exquisite, sensuous relief, equal to anything carved by the

Egyptians, while beside them lay stark and horrible figures symbolizing death, abstractions which would have delighted a modernist.

A gigantic monolith that must have weighed two tons was covered with hieroglyphics and represented a group of men squatting on the ground as if engaged in disputation. Their legs were crossed Oriental fashion and their hands raised in eloquent gestures.

Archaeologists have deciphered enough to state with some assurance that this carving represents a meeting of priestly astronomers, possibly to discuss the vexing question of the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. The Maya calendar is one of the most monumental achievements of an early civilization, and after its final revision it was more rational and exact than the one we use today. Time had a deep religious significance for the Mayas, and their astronomer priests seem to have spent most of their time in intricate observations and calculations. The monument we had found possibly represents the meeting which achieved the final rationalization of the calendar.

We left the monolith after a careful examination and followed a worn path beside the second pyramid of the West Court into the adjoining East Court. Directly ahead of us was the dazzling white façade of the restored main temple. It rises in a series of immense steps and dominates the square.

The East Court is only half as large as the West. It is surrounded by tiers of stone seats and makes a sort of amphitheater or stadium. The blocks that form these seats are so heavy and solid that they still remain in almost perfect alignment. At one end of the court there is a series of broad steps, much like the ones in the West Court, which make up a kind of stage. Dominating either side of the steps were stone figures.

"Jaguars," said Christine in a low whisper as if she did not wish to raise the ghosts of the Mayas. "Jaguars—I can tell them by their spots."

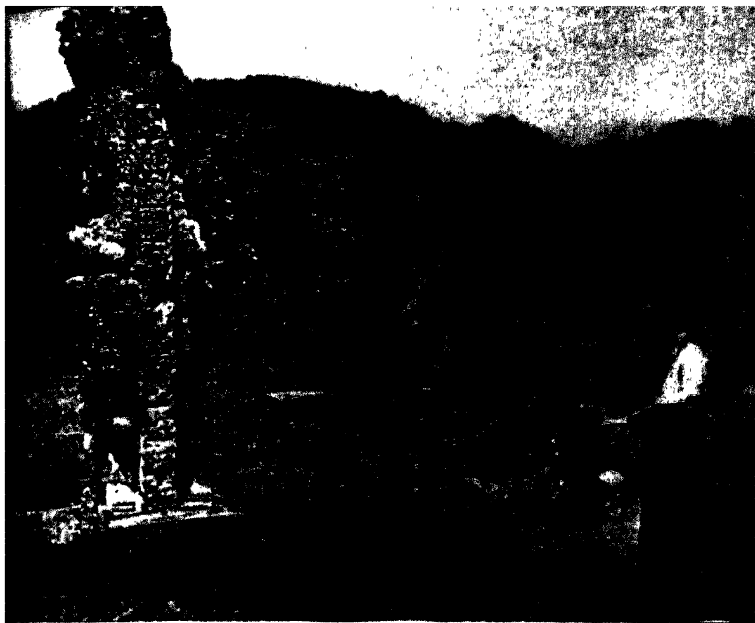
And so they were, foreshortened and conventionalized to give emphasis to the powerful crouch of the American tiger. The tails of these animals are disproportionately long and their tips foliated. But the most whimsical thing about these animals is their posture. They are carved in a standing position, one foreleg bent so that the paw rests on the hips, the other outstretched, the claws extended. And the spots, which had enabled Christine to recognize them as jaguars at a considerable distance, instead of extruding, were sunk in intaglio, looking for all the world like the work of a mischievous boy who had struck a rounded object in wet cement. It was a bold convention which may have upset the aesthetic sensibilities of the theocracy as much as a modern rendering of the Christ by Jacob Epstein does the conservatives of today.

From the top of the steps flanked by the jaguars we could see across the tiers of steps opposite. At the base of the tier directly across the court I noticed an opening through which light came. I went over to investigate. The opening was indeed a tunnel, its entrance a Mayan arch. It was only waist high, and I had to bend double to enter. I crawled along the narrow passage, which was neatly paved and walled. Ahead of me I heard the sound of rushing water. I proceeded cautiously, fearful of a sudden crevice, and suddenly the passage ended. I stood at the edge of an abyss. Two hundred feet down I saw the bed of the Rio Copán.

Originally the acropolis had risen from the bank of the river, but at some time in the past, probably after the Mayas had abandoned the city, the Rio Copán had changed its course, cut its way into the acropolis, and destroyed a considerable portion of it, at the same time forming one of the most revealing archaeological cross sections in existence.

I rejoined Christine and we walked together toward the main temple.

There is simple grandeur in this sacred white temple. Huge steps rise up to the inner sanctum of the Maya priests. The treads are very high, and we were forced to crawl up the Gargantuan stairs almost as we might a ladder. How different it would have been with the Mayas, who were accustomed to these great stairs and must have marched up them



Christine sketching the magnificent monuments which adorn the so-called G Plaza. These impressive monoliths recorded the passing of periods of year
Southward view of the Copán Valley made from the porch of the temple in East Court.





Styles change in Copán: A superlatively fine carved gateway in the Sacred Temple suggests an unflattering comparison with the poor wattled hut which typifies the building standards of the modern village near the ruins.



proudly erect. The imagination struggles hard to reconstruct the scene as it must have been centuries ago. The same sun's rays would have slanted down in midafternoon on the temple, throwing a deep black shadow across the court and over the same steps, as, erect in bizarrely-fashioned jaguar skins and intricate ritualistic dress, the Maya priests slowly mounted the steps and passed into the inner shrines, there to pay homage to their gods.

We climbed to the top and sat down.

Behind the inner sanctum of this sacred pile was an elaborately carved doorway, embellished with an overhead panel of hieroglyphics and figures. On either side were two well-proportioned caryatids, kneeling with one foot on the ground, arms bent overhead to support the panel. The panel was obviously allegorical—a cacoplastic mélange of arms, gnomelike figures, feather decorations, dragonlike heads. . . . The design was mobile; it moved out into space, formless, yet form-consuming.

Beyond the doorway, in the far distance we could see the natives of the modern village of Copán cultivating their corn. The afternoon sun cast long shadows over the white andesite cliffs beyond the city, and the shadowed cornfield was half hidden in darkness. Here were these people still repeating the ancient pattern of corn culture in the very shadow of their glorious ancestors' high city. Watching them, the figures of the doorway took on new mean-

ing. It was still their soil. They epitomized the substance of Mayan life in their gestures. Time was nothing to them, for they had conquered it; and yet it was everything. It was the sprouting and the harvesting of the corn. And it was the soil that survives the tilling and the reaping. Here was something older than their gods and more permanent than their temples. Time and soil were concepts which they need not understand, yet to which they paid continual homage. The continuity of the doorway and what lay beyond was so mystic and compelling that we could feel the loneliness of this temple's empty walls recede. And we were warmed by the consciousness that we were part of this picture ourselves, and part of its unity.

We went back to sit on the massive steps overlooking the North Court. Here was deathlike repose. Save ourselves, there was no living thing in sight. Then a large green frog hopped up the gigantic steps and jumped across to one of the giant figures to find a cool cranny and go to sleep.

We sat there smoking, watching the blue smoke drift up into the motionless air. So bewitching were the silence and utter beauty of that place that if a priest had walked through the court in his rich robes and tall plumed headdress, I think I should have taken it quite for granted, as you accept the most outlandish tricks of a dream.

XIX. *The Mystery of Copán*

THE MOST impressive spectacle the ancient city affords is its so-called Great Plaza—a field almost three times as long as a football stadium, built up on three sides with tiers of stone seats. Studding the center of this court are numerous monoliths, carved animal forms, and sacrificial altars unlike any I have ever seen. This Plaza must have been big enough to contain the whole population of Copán and the surrounding countryside. One can hardly imagine the magnificence of the processions and the solemn rites that took place when the priests came here to dedicate a new monument or issue proclamations and decrees. The high priest, his head correctly flattened from birth, as prescribed by custom, would enter first, his black headdress surmounted by the carved head of a serpent, from the nostrils of which waved the sacred plumes of the Quetzal. His heavy red cot-

ton robes, weighted with polished jade, were a superb background to the brilliant polychrome bowl of copal incense in his hands. After him would come the nobles, each dressed in graceful mimicry of the god to be propitiated; captains of war, dressed for their martial trade, carrying obsidian-tipped spears—the assorted grandees of a great city state.

One fancies that the common people who watched such ceremonies differed little from their descendants today. They must have worn similar white clothes and lived in similar grass huts. Doubtless they knew little of the complicated laws and sciences that absorbed their priests and masters. Knowledge belonged to a tiny caste, and when that group died out, the commoners continued in much the same pattern of culture as their lives had followed before.

Corn was their staple food and no doubt represented four-fifths of their diet, as it still does today. The whole valley of Copán must have been covered with cornfields, the lower slopes terraced to provide additional acreage. For it would have taxed every available acre to support such a population as was required to build the city. How large this population was is not known, but in its prime the city cannot have contained less than fifty thousand. A smaller population could not have afforded the time to erect, year after year, century after century, the towering temples of the acropolis and the huge

carved monoliths of the Great Plaza. The city must have had not only a large society, but a well-organized one.

Time was the religious and philosophical focus of Mayan life. The huge monoliths of the Plaza are time markers. They are the most prominent feature of the place and their erection must have been the occasion for the city's most important festivals. These originally took place every twenty years. The monoliths became increasingly complex and ornate, indicating a cultural and artistic change in the life of the place as time went on. One could make out quite a case to prove that these steles are a product of the struggle for mastery of materials and that art declined as mastery was won. There are thirteen steles still standing in the Great Plaza, and the intricacy of the carving, which was done without metal instruments of any kind, indicates that the sculptors must have worked ceaselessly to complete each one by its allotted time.

Calculations indicate that architectural activity at Copán went on over a space of some three hundred and forty years. Each century the acropolis was built higher, the temples became more elaborate, the city's cultural influence spread. No one knows just how much territory was dominated by Copán. It may have been a provincial capital, this southernmost outpost of Mayan culture, or it may have been an independent city state. It is assumed, however,

that a city like Copán must have ruled, or exercised control over, an extensive territory.

As Copán's culture matured, the time demarked by the steles in the Plaza was shortened, so that they came to denote ten-year periods, then five-year periods. Then, abruptly and without explanation, the last one was erected during a year some archaeologists decipher as A.D. 534. After that no large dated piece of sculpture was erected in the Plaza or on the acropolis. There seems to have been no gradual slowing down of life. Calendar time simply stopped, so to speak, and the ritual of demarking it ceased. The cause of this conclusion is a profound mystery, one that pertains not only to Copán, but to all the other Mayan cities as well. Each in turn died out and passed into the limbo of unrecorded time.

Some decades before the close of its dated history Copán showed one possible clue to impending change. The city had begun to create colonies in adjacent territory. The most notable of these was Quirigua, thirty miles to the north in Guatemala. In A.D. 497 (as it is deciphered by Dr. S. G. Morley) something occurred which was of such importance that both Copán and Quirigua commemorated it in a marker. But what that something was has not been definitely determined, and the mystery of Copán's decline and fall is as obscure as ever.

When the Spaniards discovered Copán in 1567 they found it completely deserted. There was no

evidence of sudden catastrophe, no sign of war or earthquake to account for its abandonment. The few simple natives who lived near by could shed no light. They did not know who were the original builders or what had happened to them. Garcia Palacio, the discoverer of the ruins, wrote: "I endeavored with all possible care to ascertain from the Indians, through traditions derived from the ancients, what people had lived there or what they knew or heard from their ancestors about them.

"They said that in very ancient times there came from Yucatan a great Lord who built these edifices at Copan. But at the end of some years he returned to his native country, leaving them entirely deserted."

Many archaeologists—though by no means all of them—believe that the migrations and eventual dispersal of the Mayas have something to do with their system of agriculture. Corn made possible the rise of the Mayan civilization. Corn may have brought about its downfall. It is possible that the catastrophe which recently occurred in the dust bowl of the western United States, when the plowing under of short prairie grass and the planting of wheat resulted in topsoil erosion, was paralleled by the phenomenon that drove out the Mayan farmers. Or, since the basis of Mayan economy was a one-crop agriculture, exhaustion of the soil may have necessitated their emigration.

This conclusion is not mere theory.

As we sat on one of the huge carved monoliths of the Great Plaza we could watch the present inhabitants of the valley tilling their *milpas*, patches of cornfield that used every available yard of earth. Late in the afternoon the farmers began to drift back to the village. They wore the usual loose cotton pants and shirts, sandals and tall conical hats, and they carried their spades over their shoulders.

We remembered that it was time for us to go back, too, and hopping down from our seat, we followed the farmers along the path. As we came within earshot of the men we overheard a conversation that seemed to bear out our theory that soil depletion had caused the abandonment of this great city. Ahead of us an old man shifted his spade from one shoulder to the other.

“Well, my friends,” he announced wearily, “this looks like the last year I can plant my corn in this valley. The soil is old. It will no longer yield enough corn to feed us. Perhaps I shall have to move over to Chamelicon, into the next valley, and plant a new *milpa*.”

“Perhaps you will,” his friend answered. “*Quien sabe?*”

XX. The Plumed Serpent Comes to Life

THE DAYS at Copán went by much too rapidly. We became so absorbed in the ruins that we scarcely realized that our boat was due to sail from Guatemala in less than a week. So we set out to spend our last day on the acropolis. We wanted to make the most of it.

Señor García, the commandant, met us that morning and insisted that we take along his assistant as our guide. Much against our will we complied. The assistant, a young man named Ricardo, was wearing riding-breeches and a huge revolver and cartridge belt. But Señor García said he "knew everything about the ruins," so we made the best of it and took him along.

It was that day that we found the Plumed Serpent.

Among the monoliths in the Great Plaza I came

upon a huge stone that I had not examined before.

It was a colossal head, with much of the magnificent Quetzal headdress intact. The human face was carved very realistically, but the Quetzal plumes sprang from a mask which simulated the open jaws of a snake. Here—since Copán was one of the oldest of the Mayan cities—was one of the earliest connections between serpent and Quetzal, one of the first approximations of the plumed serpent, Quetzal-coatl.

As I was studying the carving and musing on the evolution of this monster into the highly stylized design which it was to become I was interrupted by the guide, Ricardo. "Señor," he said, "would you like to see an interesting very deep tunnel?"

"Where?" I asked.

He pointed to a gigantic figure, a monolith some twenty feet high, flanked by carved priests in Mayan vestments. The central statue, one of the dated time-markers, was a conventionalized figure of god or priest, his hands folded delicately in front of the chest, his arms supporting a ceremonial bar in the shape of a two-headed serpent. The headdress was high and fantastic, carved with such zeal that not an inch of the whole was without some form of decoration.

We walked to the base of the altar before this great stele and behind it found another pyramid. At the base of the pyramid was an entrance. It was the

tunnel Ricardo wanted to call to our attention. The pyramid was the same we had seen in the West Court the first day we visited the ruins, but we were now on the opposite side. I stooped and started to enter the low portal.

Ricardo was nervous about this. He warned me that there might be animals inside and said that "with God's permission" he would never enter such a place himself.

But I had a flashlight, and the passageway I could see ahead intrigued me. It extended far into the base of the pyramid, and when I went deeper I found myself at the foot of a flight of stairs. I was suddenly overwhelmed by a swarm of bats that had been clinging to the ceiling and were disturbed by my light. They circled the crypt and flew down the passage. I could hear Christine scream as they flew out into the open. The air in the tunnel was foul with the odor of bats, but before leaving I wanted to see where the stairs led. I walked up, but the stairway ended in a blank wall. I went back and found at the foot of the stairs another passage, running off to the left. Following this, I came to another flight of stairs parallel to the first, but likewise a dead end. Apparently the wall had caved in somewhere. At any rate it blocked both stairways effectively, and I was forced to return without finding out anything about the crypts into which they seemed to lead. I decided to get out. The whole

colony of bats was aroused now. They filled the tunnel with their sharp screeching *tzeek-tzeek* and the whir of fluttering wings. I came to the long aisle that led to the entrance portal.

I don't know what made me flash my light beam on the floor directly in front of me that instant. What I saw there made me recoil as if I had touched a live wire. A six-foot Barba Amarilla, deadliest snake in the land, lay stretched out in the center of the passage. I had a bad moment, acutely aware of the blocked steps behind me and the distance to the entrance and from the entrance to the village, where we had left our snake serum. All I had in my hand was the flashlight. I thought of the hideous death that follows a Barba Amarilla's bite. The venom induces excruciating pain, hemorrhage, and oozing of blood through the pores and the intestinal tract.

As long as I stood perfectly still the snake lay there sluggishly watching me. Its tongue played in and out of its mouth, trying to pick up the vibrations of my movements. Doubtless it was frightened too. I moved to the wall, thinking I might be able to edge up and make a sudden jump for the entrance. The snake seemed to guess my intention, for it recoiled slightly as if to prepare to spring. For a moment panic seized me. I was trapped.

I shouted to Ricardo. The echo of my voice vibrated down the passage, yet it seemed small and inadequate. The air filled again with bats that

brushed past my head. The snake moved slightly. But Ricardo had heard.

"What is it, Señor?"

"Look, Ricardo—cut me a forked stick, quickly. Make the handle about two meters long and the prongs about three centimeters each. There's a snake in here. Hurry."

"*Caramba*, Señor! I'll get it right away!"

Christine came to the entrance and I told her the snake was only a boa constrictor and harmless—that I merely wanted its skin.

Ricardo came back. "I'm afraid to bring you the stick, Señor. . . ."

"You don't have to," I told him. I gauged the distance. It was about fifteen feet to the entrance. "Hold it like a spear and throw it to me."

Ricardo stepped back, grasped the bar at one end and in the center, and heaved. The stick whirled past the snake, striking it a glancing blow, and landed four feet beyond its head. The Barba Amarilla doubled back, ready to strike, and waited. I reached for the stick and tried to pull it slowly towards me. The snake struck suddenly—at the stick. A spray of venom wet my hand. I grabbed at the stick again, got it in my hand this time, and maneuvered in front of the snake. A lucky thrust pinned its head under the fork. I lunged forward, sliding the writhing body along the floor of the passage. Before the snake could recoil I had the head

pinned down again. Ricardo and Christine disappeared from the entrance.

"Ricardo," I called, "when I throw out the snake strike off its head with your machete."

I thought I heard a tremulous "Sí, Señor."

Once more I pressed down and caught the snake's head, then twisted the stick and threw the snake into the open. It landed heavily and made for Ricardo. He jumped aside and brought his machete down, missed the head, but struck its back, breaking the spine. The crippled snake still dragged forward. This time Ricardo took better aim. The machete came down and cut off the head.

Even then its jaws continued to open and shut in the severed head, baring the inch-long, lethal fangs.

"Now," Christine said heartlessly, "will you listen to me and not go poking into these holes?"

For once I was licked. I could only nod.

But as I recovered from the terror that had shaken me I became aware of another emotion like triumph. Now I had lived the ancient myth of the serpent and knew its meaning. I had captured the Quetzal and killed the snake that spat on my hand. I had come here to destroy a legend, and the truth in it had come alive and nearly destroyed me.

XXI. *L'Envoi*

GENERAL JUAN DEL CAMPO himself saddled our mules before sunrise. He leaned his crutch against the wall of the barn while he hopped about on his one leg to adjust the cinches. I made a gesture of protest, but he wouldn't allow me to help him.

"It is an honor," he chuckled, "an honor. Had I had any idea you were the gringos . . ." He checked himself; gringo is not a nice word. "Had I had any idea you were the Señores who caught the Quetzal bird alive, I should not have received you so casually. That was a great feat. The very first time! And to think that you who accomplished it slept in my house."

Christine caught the irony in his tone and laughed. "Ah, Señor General, you sound as if you thought my husband was Quetzalcoatl himself."

"Almost, Señora," he laughed in reply. "I tell you

it did the heart of old Juan del Campo good to hear 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 laughed me out of it. 'Never been done,' they told me. 'In three hundred and fifty years, it's never been done.' So I gave up trying.

"Well, here we are," he added, snapping the last cinch knot tight and giving the mule a smack on the hindquarters. It turned around obediently where Christine waited to mount. "I have sent my boy, Emilio, ahead with all your luggage. And I got off the telegram all right; an automobile will meet you just across the Guatemalan border. You have a nice day for your trip, and if you keep moving you will be in Comotan in eight hours."

Christine mounted her mule lightly and held out her hand to the General. "Adios, Señor General—and many thanks for your kindness to us."

He bowed gallantly, balancing deftly on his one leg. "I kiss your hands and feet."

The little courtyard resounded with the clatter of horseshoes and we were off. We waved good-by to General del Campo and passed through the wide portal of his house out into the plaza.

The village was not yet up, but smoke was beginning to trickle through its plaited palm-leaf roofs. A few dogs dutifully came out to bark at us as we

rode by. Man and beast awaited the sun. Even the vultures we passed, perching nightmarish on a roadside fence, waited for its warmth before attacking the carcass of a horse that had died beside the road.

Once out of shouting distance of their master, General del Campo's mules shifted into their habitual slow steady walk and we let the reins hang loose as they followed the hairpin turns that lifted us from the valley to the breastworks of the surrounding hills. Just before the road dropped over the ridge into the next valley, we took a last look at Copán. The little village just below us was now awake and the sky was full of the blue and aromatic haze of wood smoke. Far in the distance we could make out the stately acropolis beside the silver ribbon of the Rio Copán.

Over this same road, a century earlier, John Lloyd Stephens had come on his way to Copán. Through this same narrow valley, its walls spiny with cactus and sharp-pronged brush, had come the fearless bravos who bore the colors of Spain into the wilderness and looked with awe on the mysterious temples deserted in the jungle. And over the same road we were following, but centuries before, had come the first Mayas, seeking new life in the rich valley they decorated with their fabulous monuments.

Just before the acropolis disappeared from sight

the sun crept over the walls of the valley and caught the white-walled temples in its rosy rays. We looked back at the land we were leaving and then spurred forward into Guatemala and the end of our Honduras adventure.

