

Herbert Strang



***A Thousand
Miles an Hour***

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CHAPTER THE FIRST - IN THE AMAZON FOREST

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DERRICK MOORE turned up his shirt sleeves, at every twist wringing drops of water from the thin material.

"A Turkish bath every day and all day is rather excessive, Pedro," he said.

His cousin smiled.

"You will get used to it," he said. "And the heat won't be so bad when we have left the river. Come and look at the map."

He lay flat on his face near a small tent, just capacious enough for two, and a canvas-backed map was outspread before him. Derrick flung himself down beside his cousin.

"We should be about here," said Pedro, placing his finger at a spot upon a wriggly black line—one of innumerable similar lines that formed a sort of network across the paper. There were few names printed on this part of the map; it showed little except the black lines indicating rivers and the conventional marks representing forests.

"Don't you think we ought to have taken this branch that comes in on the south?" said Derrick, pointing to a tributary a little east of their present position.

"Juan ought to know," Pedro replied. "He says he has been here before."

"Well, I hope he is right. The men are getting very sullen."

"It's their own fault we had to halve the rations."

"That doesn't make it any better. But it's rotten bad luck that we haven't shot anything for three days but a single peccary. Which reminds me: it's time we had something to eat, though I confess I've no appetite. It's too hot for anything."

Derrick got up, stretched himself, wrung more water from his shirt, and sat down on a rock at the door of the tent. Silently folding up the map, Pedro also rose to his feet, and called sharply, "Juan."

A small, thick-set, swarthy man appeared from among the bushes at the farther end of the clearing in which the tent stood. To him Pedro addressed a few words in Spanish. The man listened with a somewhat sullen air, then, without speaking, returned to the place he had come from.

"I don't like the fellow," said Derrick.

"I neither like him nor dislike him," responded Pedro. "He's useful; that's all."

The two lads sat in silence side by side, waiting for Juan to provide their evening meal. They were cousins, but there was no likeness between them except in their age. Both about eighteen, Derrick Moore was tall, lithe, of the fair Saxon type; Pedro Alvarez was several inches shorter, of a larger frame, and dark like his Bolivian father. His mother, Bertha Moore, had married the owner of a large mining property in the foothills of the Andes. The father was now dead, but the Señora Alvarez continued to live in the country of her adoption, and the mine was worked as in her husband's lifetime. Pedro had been educated in England, and had just completed a year's studies in a college of agriculture, that being the subject in which his main interest

lay. A few months before the opening of our story it happened that some machine parts were needed at the mine which could only be obtained from England. Derrick Moore had had some training in engineering, and being an orphan without ties, he had welcomed an opportunity of visiting his Bolivian relatives, and had come out on the same vessel that brought his cousin and the new machinery. This had been transhipped at Para, and conveyed up the Amazon and its tributary the Madeira to San Antonio, beyond which steam navigation was impossible. There the boys had been met by Juan, a half-caste guide, and a crew of eight native Indians with four canoes. The journey up the winding tributaries of the Amazon had already occupied several weeks-weeks of monotonous paddling up the broad sluggish streams, diversified by frequent portages where the streams narrowed to rapids and cataracts.

It was at one of these rapids that an accident occurred. By what appeared to be mere clumsiness on the part of the crew of the canoe containing the machine parts and a considerable proportion of the provisions, that canoe had been drawn into the whirlpool at the foot of the rapids, swamped and broken to matchwood. Its cargo was lost, its crew barely escaped with their lives.

To Derrick the journey at first had had all the interest of novelty. Accustomed to boating on the upper reaches of the Thames, he was impressed by the contrast presented by this mighty Amazon, sometimes miles wide, its banks lined by huge forest trees, shrubs and creeping plants; the strange brilliant flowers, the bright-hued butterflies as large as birds, the tropical animals which hitherto he had known

only in the pages of books or the cages of the Zoo. But for some days he had been feeling oppressed by the unvarying scenery, the constant steamy heat, the wearisome marches over sludge and slime when portages were necessary, the pestilent attentions of innumerable fierce insects which buzzed and stung from sunrise to sunset. Recent torrential rains had been the climax of discomfort. A new-born suspicion that Juan the guide was not so well acquainted with the country as he professed to be, together with signs of discontent and mutiny among the Indians, had bred in him a keen uneasy longing to reach his journey's end.

The little tent in which he spent the nights with Pedro had been pitched on a rocky bluff a few yards above the level of the river. Juan and the Indian crews were camped a short distance away. Below them the three canoes were moored to trees on the bank. On both sides stretched the forest-not such immense trees as Derrick had admired lower down, but trees which, though smaller, grew more closely together, and were thickly festooned with creepers and climbing plants. At this point the stream was about two hundred yards broad. The opposite bank also was densely wooded; whichever way he looked Derrick's eyes met nothing but sluggish muddy water, green vegetation dotted with bright spots of colour, and the heavy grey sky above.

While he and Pedro waited for their supper, a sudden jabbering broke out among the Indians beyond the bluff. Presently they came running up, their leader holding something in his outstretched hand. He halted in front of the two young men and began to pour out a torrent of shrill discordant cries, to Derrick incomprehensible.

"What does he say?" he asked.

Pedro sternly signed to the man to be silent.

"He says he and the rest are going no farther," said Pedro. "Juan has given him for supper no more than a handful of grain. He says they will starve if they go on."

"They will certainly starve if they go back," said Derrick. "Surely we are not very far from your hacienda now?"

"Unless Juan is quite at fault. I will tell them so."

He addressed the Indian in his own tongue. The response was another outburst.

"According to him," said Pedro, "Juan himself says that they ought to return. That's hardly credible. Where is the fellow?"

He called for Juan, and the man came up slowly.

The Indians grouped themselves about him, clamouring, gesticulating.

"Peace!" cried Pedro. "What is this I hear, Juan? The men say you advise them to go no farther."

The guide looked embarrassed. His eyes would not meet his employer's.

"They are hungry," he said. "I have little food to give them. How can I feed them? How can I prevent their grumbling?"

"We are all short of food," said Pedro, "through their carelessness in losing the fourth canoe. But we have not much farther to go. You engaged them for the journey; you must keep them in order. We have had bad luck in not sighting any animals or birds lately, but—"

He was interrupted by a sudden exclamation from one of the Indians, who stretched out his hand and began to dance

up and down excitedly. Turning, Pedro saw an animal swimming from the opposite bank of the river, about a hundred yards away, its strange elongated snout just showing above the water.

"A tapir!" he cried. "Good meat, Derrick. Come along."

They dashed back into the tent and emerged with their sporting rifles.

By this time the tapir was already among the roots of the overhanging trees. Derrick took a shot at it. A violent splashing followed, but the animal disappeared.

"Follow us, Juan," said Pedro.

Making what haste they could, the three pushed along the bank of the river, stumbling over roots, forcing their way through the matted vegetation, sinking ankle-deep into the swampy soil, wrenching themselves from the clutches of creepers and thorns. The spot where the tapir had landed was indicated by the crushed plants and the water that had poured from its body; and Pedro, who had some experience in forest hunting, marked signs of the course it had taken.

"You hit it, Derrick," he exclaimed. "I see spots of blood."

They followed up the trail for some minutes, until even Pedro had to own that he had lost it.

"It's a pity," he said, stopping. "The tapir's flesh is very good, and it would have kept the men quiet for at least a day."

"Don't give it up," Derrick pleaded. "Listen! Isn't that—"

"You're right," cried Pedro. "That's the beast in the undergrowth."

Following the direction of the sounds they presently caught sight of the animal's hindquarters; but before either

could fire it had disappeared.

"We have lost it," said Pedro. "A hunted tapir always makes for water, and swims under the surface."

"But if I hit it—There it is again," cried Derrick, as a crash sounded just ahead.

Once more they went on. It seemed that the tapir was making short plunging dashes through the jungle, stopping when it had outdistanced its pursuers, then bolting on as soon as it heard them getting near. Pedro led the chase, Derrick keeping close on his heels. The foliage overhead was not so dense as to exclude the daylight, and now and then Derrick caught sight of a squirrel or a monkey in the branches, and was tempted to try a shot at them. But Pedro said they were not worth wasting shot on while there was still a chance of securing the tapir.

Guided always by the sound of the heavy animal's movements through the undergrowth they pushed on, regardless of time or their increasing distance from the camp. Suddenly they spied the black form loping across a space where the vegetation was thin. Derrick again raised his rifle and fired, but his hand after the long chase was unsteady; he feared he must have missed, for the animal swerved to the left and disappeared. Its movements could still be heard, but its rushes were apparently becoming shorter, and the two lads, now filled with the ardour of the hunt, kept up the pursuit relentlessly.

At last they were brought up by a tangle of impenetrable thorn. They walked this way and that, trying in vain to find a gap.

"We can't get through this without a machete," said Pedro. "Perhaps Juan has his in his belt. Juan!" he called.

There was no answer.

"Didn't he follow us?" said Pedro.

"He certainly did at first," replied Derrick. "I was so keen on following you that I didn't miss him."

"He could have kept up without difficulty. Juan!" he called again. "The wretch is lazy, I suppose; or he was afraid he'd have to carry the tapir. We shall overtake him on the way back. And it's time we returned. It's getting late, and we shall soon have darkness upon us."

They waited for a few moments, listening. Juan had not answered Pedro's shout: they no longer heard any sound of the tapir's progress. Bathed in sweat, they mopped their dripping brows and turned to retrace their steps. And then Pedro stood stock still.

"What's the matter?" asked Derrick.

"I'm not sure of our direction," replied his cousin.

"But we can find our trail," said Derrick.

"Perhaps. But we've been moving round about since we were stopped by the thorns, and there's very little light. You had better stay where you are until I have had a look round. Undergrowth as thick as this shows very little trace of passage through it."

He went off alone. Derrick felt uneasy. He remembered having lost his way once on a moor in Sussex, and how impossible it had been to discover in the yielding bracken the track he had made only a few minutes before. Here in the subdued light of a tropical forest the difficulty was

tenfold. Every now and then Pedro called, and he answered. Presently his cousin returned.

"Well?" said Derrick, looking at him anxiously.

"I can't find any track," said Pedro. "I was afraid to go very far, in case I got out of touch with you. Sound doesn't travel well in the forest."

"Don't you think we came that way?" asked Derrick, pointing.

"I should have said more to the right."

"Shall we try that way, then?"

"And what if it is the wrong direction?"

They were silent, and in their eyes as they looked at each other there spoke a terrible dread. It was the shock of realisation that they were lost in the forest.



CHAPTER THE SECOND - A NIGHT IN THE JUNGLE

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Pedro looked at his watch. "What time did we start?" he asked.

"I haven't an idea," replied Derrick

"It's half-past five now," Pedro went on. "In half an hour the sun will be down: then it will be dark almost at once, as you know. We must have spent nearly an hour chasing the tapir."

"So we couldn't get back before dark even if we knew the way?"

"Unless the tapir led us in a circle. What has become of our wretched guide?"

He made a trumpet of his hands and sent a loud prolonged call rolling through the forest. There was no answer only a muffled echo: it seemed that the sound was blanketed by the vegetation all around. He fired his rifle twice in quick succession: the cracks met with no response except the flitting of a colony of bats disturbed in their leafy perch.

"What's to be done?" said Derrick, his voice sounding huskily.

"Keep cool," returned Pedro, smiling as he brushed the sweat out of his eyes. "I've heard of lost lonely travellers getting frantic: that's fatal. We have each other's company. Let us look at things calmly. It's hopeless to think of finding our way in the dark; we had better seek a shelter for the

night. No doubt Juan and the crew will try to find us in the morning."

"They won't carry out their threat and paddle away down stream?"

"They won't dare!" cried Pedro, his black eyes flashing. "In any case we can find our own way tomorrow. Somewhere or other we shall come across a stream, and if we follow that we shall strike the river. The rest will be easy. So we had better set about finding a shelter while daylight lasts."

"Up a tree?"

"No, except as a last resource. I shouldn't feel comfortable in a tree: the forest animals are tree-climbers, many of them, and there are snakes. But the ground hereabouts is rocky: if we are lucky we shall find a bare spot somewhere, with perhaps a tall rock we can set our backs against. Let us try that rising ground over there."

They pushed their way through the undergrowth in the direction Pedro had indicated. The ground rose gradually, and the vegetation grew thinner as they proceeded. Presently they reached a fairly level stretch where there were no large trees, but only dense low-growing scrub.

"The soil's very thin," said Pedro, prodding with his rifle stock. "And see: here's bare rock, volcanic by the look of it. I think we are in luck's way."

They made towards a spot where the ground again rose steeply. Going round a patch of scrub, they found themselves opposite a rugged irregular wall of hard blackish rock, seven or eight feet high. In front of it was a floor of rock bare of vegetation, and here it seemed they might rest with some security from molestation by forest animals.

"It will be a hard bed," said Pedro, "and I am afraid a damp one, for the dew will be as thick as rain before long. But we can't do better."

"Are you sure?" said Derrick, who had wandered a few yards beyond his companion. "Look at this opening."

He pointed to a natural archway in the wall of rock, which appeared to be the entrance to a cave. They went in, looking heedfully around. A few yards within the entrance there was a small pool of water.

"I am frightfully thirsty," said Derrick. "Will it be safe to drink?"

"I am pretty sure of it," said Pedro. "I've myself drunk water from pools and streams and never taken any harm."

Derrick stooped and lapped up a mouthful.

"It's cold, and rather alkaline," he said. "I won't drink any more till I know it's safe."

Beyond the pool the cave was already almost completely dark. As a measure of precaution Pedro fired his revolver, standing aside at the entrance to avoid the rush of any wild animal that the sound might have disturbed. But there was no movement within, and the cousins agreed that Fortune had smiled on them in affording so convenient a shelter. They chose for their resting-place a flat slab of rock about a dozen paces from the entrance, gathered armfuls of grasses to soften their seat, and settled themselves with their backs against the cave wall just as darkness fell.

"We had better sleep in turn," Derrick suggested. "And keep our rifles between our knees," said Pedro. "Some beast may take it into its head to come in during the night."

"Couldn't we start a fire?"

"The plants are so damp that we should only raise a smother. I wish we had had something to eat. By the morning I, at any rate, shall be ravenous, and I daresay you'll have found your appetite too. Have you ever slept upright?"

"Sometimes, at lecture, after I've been up late."

"Well, I'll take first watch. Sleep if you can."

It was some time before Derrick's head nodded forward. At first he was kept awake by the various noises of the forest. From a distance came the hollow booming of frogs, proving that a stream must be somewhere in the neighbourhood. Monkeys yelped in the trees; the nightjar kept up its mournful cry; birds which Derrick could not identify chattered discordantly; and once he was startled by a shrill scream: some small creature had fallen a victim to a more powerful enemy.

He did not know how long he had slept when Pedro awakened him.

"Your turn, old boy," said his cousin. "I've had great difficulty in keeping awake. Nothing has happened. Good luck!"

In a moment Pedro had fallen asleep on his bent arms. Derrick straightened his back and gazed into the darkness. The sounds had died away except for the chorus of frogs and the low drone of myriad insects. Derrick sat musing, going over in his mind the incidents of his long journey, wondering how he would like the life on his aunt's estate, trying to divert his thoughts from the fact that he was lost in the Amazon forest. Presently he noticed that the darkness was thinning; he could make out the outline of the archway.

"Surely it's not morning already," he thought, and then realised that the moon was rising. Its light increased: the beams struck directly into the entrance: and Derrick was suddenly aware of a strange flicker in the moonlight, like motes in a sunbeam: it was as if innumerable gnats were flitting in a giddy dance. All at once the flicker ceased; the moonbeam was clear radiance; Derrick supposed that the swarm of gnats had flown away into the open. But no: after a short interval the minute forms came again into the light; they danced for a few moments and again suddenly disappeared.

Derrick began to be interested. The coming and going of these tiny objects seemed to occur at regular intervals, and were always sudden. Idly, as a means of passing the time, he took to measuring the interval, counting as though marking the seconds. He found that the flickering lasted about half a minute: for half a minute it ceased: then it suddenly recurred, and after the same interval disappeared.

"Strange insects!" he thought. "They keep time like a clock."

He watched the periodic movement until the moonbeam slanted across the cave and finally left the entrance altogether. Then his thoughts wandered into other fields, and by the time he woke Pedro for another spell the phenomenon had passed from his mind.

The long night dragged itself out. When Pedro roused Derrick from his last nap the dawn was stealing into the cave.

"Sorry to disturb you, old man. You were snoring beautifully. You wouldn't snore if you kept your neck

straight: I've learnt that."

"I'm frightfully stiff," said Derrick, getting up and stretching himself. "And hungry!-my word, I am hungry. But I suppose we can't get anything to eat in the forest, so the sooner we find our camp the better."

They left the cave and came into the open. The forest was alive with noise, trumpeter birds, macaws, parrots, monkeys vying with one another in creating pandemonium.

"I'll try another shot," said Pedro, "in case our men are searching for us."

But, as on the previous evening, the sound of the rifle-shot died away without awakening any response.

"Our direction should be eastward," said Derrick, "but we can't tell east from west until the sun gets higher. Shall we wait, or try our luck?"

"I'm for starting. Anything rather than inaction."

"Very well. But wait just a minute."

Derrick had suddenly remembered the strange phenomenon he had witnessed in the moonlight, and was curious to discover whether the multitude of gnats had their home in the cave. He walked back through the archway; several yards of the cave were now visible in the daylight. The floor was for the most part of hard volcanic rock, but at one spot, on the side opposite to his resting-place, he came upon a pocket of sand some nine or ten feet across; it was greyish in colour, and almost as finely divided as ground pepper. Derrick took up a handful, and let it slip through his fingers, half expecting a swarm of gnats to rise from it. But there was no sign of insect life: the fine particles, apparently, were nothing but sand.

He went all round the cave, poking here and there with his rifle. So far as he could discover, there was no nest of gnats. Retracing his steps, he was suddenly aware of a disturbance in the sand. "They are there after all," he thought, and stooped down to examine it more closely. Instantly he drew back, uttering a low cry: for his face was peppered by innumerable particles of sand, which stung his flesh and made his eyes smart.

"Pedro, come here," he called.

"What is it?" asked his cousin, entering hurriedly. "Nothing alarming, but something very strange," replied Derrick. He explained what he had seen in the moonlight, and the sudden upward shower of sand. "I was fairly pelted," he added: "it came with extraordinary force."

"Strange, indeed! Let us see if it happens again." They stood back against the wall. For half a minute there was no movement in the sand: then a small cloud of particles rose with astonishing velocity to the roof, where they appeared to cling. The cousins noticed now for the first time that the roof was deeply encrusted with this finely divided powder. They prodded it with their rifles, and a small quantity fell; but a good deal, though apparently quite loose, remained clinging to the roof.

The upward shower ceased, but in half a minute it was repeated.

"I never saw anything so extraordinary," said Derrick. "One would think that the roof had some magnetic attraction for the sand; but that can't be the explanation, because the attraction couldn't be switched on and off at regular intervals."

"We haven't time for scientific investigation," said Pedro. "We've still to find our camp. Someday, if you like, we can come back here and—"

"I say," Derrick interrupted, "I've just noticed another thing. That last shower happened just after a trickle of water from the pool had reached the sand. Let us watch: a few minutes won't make much difference to us." In a minute or two they had definitely established the coincidence. An upward flight of sand took place only when water had trickled on to it from the pool. This fact led to a further discovery: that the pool overflowed periodically, and the overflow was caused by a periodic inflow of water from a narrow fissure at the base of the arch. About twice a minute a small gush from the fissure entered the pool, and a tiny rivulet trickled over the rocky floor until it reached the sand. As soon as the water touched the fringe of the sand pocket, the particles covered by the water instantly sprang vertically upward as though under some electric impulsion. When the inflow from the fissure ceased, the overflow from the pool ceased correspondingly, and the sand was left dry and undisturbed.

"Well, have you solved the mystery?" asked Pedro quizzingly.

"No; it's deeper than before. All we know is that this water—it has an alkaline taste, you remember—appears to force the sand in mad haste towards the roof. But nothing is explained. We don't know the properties of the water, or of the sand: I haven't the least idea why the sand behaves as it does; but there's no question that when the sand and the

water meet, a tremendous force is generated, and I shan't be happy until I know more about it."

"Now you really must come away. Have you forgotten that we are lost?"

"Upon my word I had almost forgotten it; but—"

He paused. The archway had been suddenly darkened. Looking round, the cousins saw a tall figure standing in the daylight.

"You've given me a mighty deal of trouble," growled the stranger.