

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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THE GOLDEN CAVERNS

A Condensed Novel

By JULIAN KILMAN

WHEN Ericson quietly toppled over and the paddle slipped from his grasp, our canoe was instantly broadside in the rapids. But Zangaree immediately brought the heavily-laden craft head on, his skill once more saving our slender expedition from the disaster that had trailed us so persistently since leaving the large steamer at Itacoatiara.

A faint shout from the second canoe sounded through the din of racing water. Evidently Van Dusee and Hardy had observed our mishap. I waved a hand in reply, and then I bent over Ericson who lay with his eyes rolling. Instead of sunstroke, as I had assumed, he had been wounded; a thin stream of blood ran from his temple. Zangaree whirled the canoe to the small islet we were just passing. But we were too late. Ericson was dead.

The shock of our fellow-voyageur's death was still on me as, amid the amazing splendor of that tropical scene, we made preparations to dispose of the body. Much later in the night, when all were sleeping, I felt a tug at my mosquito netting, and in the dim starlight I made out Hardy's pioneer head, with its square-jawed face, peering at me.

He motioned me to follow him quietly. Wonderingly, I made my way after this soldier of fortune, who, by the sheerest good luck, we had picked up in the Brazilian capital. Presently he stopped.

"Do you wish to continue your journey?" he asked.

Despite Ericson's death, I could not think otherwise; already we had come four thousand miles, of which the last fifteen hundred had brought us into the very interior of the South American continent. Too much capital and energy had been expended for us lightly to abandon our project. And I said so.

"You misunderstand," he returned quickly. "It is not Ericson's finish that made me ask, *but the manner of it!*"

The thin edge of doubt as to Hardy's fortitude perhaps began to insert itself into my mind. He observed it.

"Damn it, man!" he exclaimed. "I am game. But you are to know that from now on we'll have to buck not only the elements, but that toad-faced *de Silva* as well."

At mention of the Spaniard who had tricked and nearly outmaneuvered us at Rio de Janeiro with the officials, something like a chill came over me.

"What brings him into this?" I demanded.

Hardy's answer was dramatic enough.

"Only this," he said. "It is a little thing. But it killed Ericson."

I gazed at the slender blow-pipe arrow in Hardy's hand. It had done for our archaeologist.

"That type of arrow is unknown hereabouts," went on Hardy, "It is poisoned and is used by the Amajuca Indians six hundred miles back on the Amazon. It means that we are being followed."

The camp fire was dying out when Hardy and I returned from our talk, both of us determined to make the additional four hundred miles that we estimated lay between us and the point we planned to reach—and to gain it by land if the water route on the gradually diminishing stream was to afford our enemies too easy an opportunity to decimate us.

I stood there, surveying the sleeping figures of my comrades: Van Dusee, the true scientist, whose interest in his beloved hemiptera seemed to render him impervious to the sting of insect pests and the pains and dangers of our journey; young Anderson, son of the president of our Institute; Zangaree, sleeping in his giant strength like a child.

And Ericson! A lump came into my throat at the thought of the gallant fellow who had so suddenly come to an end. Had I known then what was in store for the surviving members of our little band, surely I would have cried aloud, for all told, counting the mighty

Zangaree, the half-breeds and Indians, we numbered only ten men.

By the time the morning sun was flooding the ravine with light, we were all astir. Caching much of our supplies, we ferried to the right-hand bank of the stream farther down. Here, with no sign of the enemy we secreted our canoes in the bushes, and, distributing among ourselves ammunition, food, a light silk tent, blankets and scientific impedimenta, we shouldered our packs and started on the long hike inland.

For two days we made slow progress, because of the luxuriance of the undergrowth; but in time this gave way to vast primeval woods. Never shall I forget the solemn mystery of it! Trees rivaling in size the gigantic redwoods of California raised themselves to enormous height, where their tremendous columns spread out in Gothic curves, which interlaced to form a great matted roof of green—architecture of the Greatest of All Architects!

As we walked noiselessly but hurriedly under the lash of Hardy's impatience amid the thick carpet of decaying vegetation, we were hushed in spite of ourselves. Vivid orchids and marvelously-colored lichens smoldered upon the swarthy tree trunks. Climbing plants, monstrous and riotous in verdure, fought their way upward, seeking futilely at once to throttle tree-life and to reach the sunlight.

Of animal life there was little movement amid the majestic vaulted aisles which stretched from us as we pursued our way; but the slight though constant agitation far above us told of that multitudinous world of snake and monkey, bird and sloth, which lived in the sunshine and regarded with wonder our puny stumbling figures in the depths below. At dawn the howler monkeys and parrakeets filled the air with shrill chatter; and in the hot hours came the drone of insects.

As yet there had been no indication that any one was following us. Indeed, we seemed to be untold miles from civi-

ization and I was commenting to young Anderson on the likelihood of our escape from the pursuit of *de Silva* when I caught a look in Hardy's eyes.

"Oh, pshaw!" I exclaimed later, slightly nettled. "You are pessimistic, Hardy. Had *de Silva* been after us we should surely have heard from him before this."

"No. That isn't so," retorted Hardy. "Our leaving the river has deceived him. I am satisfied that he planned an ambush farther along the stream. In a short time he'll discover we have given him the slip. Then he'll be after us."

"And just why, Hardy," I demanded, "is this insane Spaniard following us?"

Hardy's expression was quizzical.

"I have a sort of hunch—that's all," he returned, non-committally.

The next day one of our Indians was missing. He had been sent back over the trail a mile or so to recover a small rifle that had been lost. Hardy himself and young Anderson made the tiresome hike to the rear to learn if possible the whereabouts of the Indian. Later, when the two rejoined us without the Indian, Hardy did not have anything to say.

Anderson told me afterwards that they had found the Indian curled up at the foot of a tree. He was dead without a mark on him.

Depressing as was this development, our little party found scant time to discuss it. The way had grown much more difficult, for our road persistently ascended. Huge trees now gave place to palms, with thick underbrush growing between. We traveled entirely by compass, but missed Ericson, who had been a navigator and had from time to time "shot the sun" to verify our position.

On the fifth day we encountered a tremendous wilderness of bamboo, which grew so thickly that we could only penetrate it by cutting a pathway with the machetes and bill-hooks of the Indians. It took us a long day, with only two pauses of a half hour each to get clear of this yellow-walled obstacle.

Once free of it, we were glad to throw ourselves down for the first real rest which Hardy was willing that we should take. But it proved to be of short duration, because Anderson, eternally on the move, discovered, less than half a mile away, that another path recently had been cut through the bamboo nearly paralleling ours.

That night we slept behind some slight attempt at a barricade. This protection, consisting of a circle of thorn brush piled three feet high, at least sufficed to keep out a few wailing animals that filled the air with weird noises, and most

of us rested the night through without fear.

Next morning I discovered the presence of a soil that was like sand. This was consistent with the dryness of the air, but was disconcerting as I knew that the terrain and climate of the spot whither we were bound was of no such character as that which surrounded us.

It was about this time that young Anderson made a second startling discovery, and one fraught with momentous consequences for our expedition. Our compass was out of order. This defection was serious in the extreme. It meant that we were lost, for there was no knowing how long the instrument had been untrue.

The day went badly. The farther we progressed the more sandy it became. We seemed about to enter upon a great desert, and to make matters worse our Indians showed signs of discontent. Our supply of water was low; still we knew that only a day's march behind us we had passed a stream of clear water. Study of the maps that night failed to account for any considerable expanse of desert, and it was decided to push boldly across on the chance of later picking up our route.

We waited two days while Zangaree and the half-breeds made the trip back for additional water. Then we started. If our suffering in the past had been great, it now increased a hundredfold. The heat, instead of having that suffocating quality peculiar to humidity, was burning in its intensity; and, to add to our discomfort, Hardy kept us going at top speed.

In this the rest of us felt he was justified, as there could be no doubt that *de Silva*, with a larger party than ours, was in the general neighborhood, and looking for us. Hour after hour, until four days dragged by, we trudged on late into the night, with the aid of an erratic compass, through that Sahara-like sea of rippling sand.

By the severest rationing of our supply it was estimated that we had less than one day's water. Our situation was serious. To go back was as deadly as to go on.

And it was at this point that our spirits were sent to low ebb by Zangaree's astounding discovery that we had doubled in our tracks in the night and for two days *had been traveling in a circle!*

II

I THINK even young Anderson, for the time being, lost heart at sight of that bit of inanimate evidence—a trifle of card board that had been tossed

aside—which drove home the knowledge that we were hopelessly lost.

But not for long was that restless youth depressed, and while Hardy and the rest of us sat in solemn council that evening, he wandered off by himself. Perhaps he had been gone half an hour when we heard him shout:

"Water!"

We ran toward him, and presently came to what might be called a minute oasis. Quickly a spade was brought and work was started at the damp spot located in the center.

In the meantime I studied the environs. A few scrubby bushes grew about, while at one side stood a low triangular column of stones. I discovered that each stone had cut in it a series of cuneiform inscriptions which even the untold years of contact with the eroding sand had failed to eradicate.

Quite idly I had laid my arm on the top when a curious thing happened; half of the upper stone, under the slight weight of my elbow, swung down silently, as if on a ballasted hinge. Then I stared into the interior of the column, which I had supposed solid, and saw, to my amazement, that a narrow stairway led down.

It was the work of only a moment for me to crawl in, and presently, in pitch darkness, I was following the steep stairway. My fingers told me that the sides were firm and well-bricked.

I came shortly to what seemed to be a tunnel, and in this I spent some fifteen minutes, finding the air good and congratulating myself on my successful descent and discovery of the unique underground passage.

I was about to start up again to tell my companions of my strange discovery when there was an explosion. It lifted the helmet from my head and was followed by the rattle of stones and debris that deluged and buffeted and pounded me until I sank under the weight of the impact.

When I regained consciousness I lay in the open air. Anderson was bending over me solicitously.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Here you are—all sound except for a cracked arm."

"What happened?" I asked.

He grinned at me. "Why, we were all helping at the water-hole when Van Dusee missed you. He remembered that you had been standing by the stone column one minute; the next you were gone, absolutely vanished, just as if the earth had opened up and swallowed you."

"Which in fact it had," I said, grimly. "But wasn't the top open?"

"Open!" shouted Anderson. "I should say not. Hardy and I hammered that pile of stone and we couldn't make a dent in it. We never thought of trying the top. Finally Hardy slipped a little dynamite under the column and we followed you down the stairway."

By degrees I got my strength back.

"Ready for some big news?" Anderson said, presently.

I nodded.

"All right, then. Hang on now. We came to South America to get scientific data, didn't we?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, that's all gone by the board now," went on the young man. "We're going to explore the Caverns of the Atarupe."

The "Caverns of the Atarupe" meant precisely nothing to me.

"Listen to me," he explained. "The Atarupe are a lost race of people. Hardy picked up the dope during the time he hung around Rio; he says the archives of the Brazilian government are full of old maps purporting to give the location of treasure; some of these maps were made in the fifteenth century and actually purport to show where the Eldorado may be found.

"It is said that in earlier days expedition after expedition was fitted out and despatched to find the 'Gilded King,' a chap whose people had such quantities of gold that they built their houses of the solid metal. But the best story of all is that of the Caverns of the Atarupe, a race that lived more than a thousand years ago, and came from Asia; they were wonderful goldsmiths, possessing untold quantities of gems and all the precious metals. The legend is that the Atarupe used to come in large numbers down the rivers to the coast to trade, scattering among the natives quantities of gold pieces of exquisite design such as had never before been seen; but that after a certain date no one ever saw them again; nor has anyone ever been able to locate the particular part of the country where they resided."

As the young man ran on a light began to dawn in my mind.

"And *de Silva*?" I interjected.

"Sure! You've struck it!" was Anderson's swift response. "Hardy says the officials long have felt that the Atarupe came from hereabouts, and Hardy claims the Spaniard, representing some of them, suspects our expedition of searching for the treasure."

"Were the cuneiform inscriptions on the stone column examined?"

"Certainly," said Anderson. "Hardy got all that. I never saw him so inter-

ested before. He swears we have struck it rich."

Suddenly I realized that my throat was burning with thirst.

"How about some water?" I asked.

In a moment a brimming cup of the precious fluid was at my lips. I drank greedily and, I fear, with little thought as to the source of supply.

While we were yet discussing the altered aspect of our situation a voice hailed us, and we turned to discover Hardy just emerging from the hole that gaped where the triangular stone column had stood. Following him came Van Dusee and the rest of the party.

When all were safely out Hardy touched a match to the long fuse he had laid from a mine placed under the obstruction in the tunnel, which had prevented further progress. There came a dull boom, a whirl of air, and then all was still.

"Now, sir," announced Hardy. "In the morning we shall see what we shall see."

There was little sleep for any of us that night, and before dawn we were ready for the descent. My crippled arm made the way arduous for me, but it would have been doubly hard had not young Anderson lavished on me so splendidly his surplus strength. Eagerly our party trailed along that tunnel, led by Hardy and Van Dusee.

The dynamite had done its work well, as the passageway, which ever continued to descend, was entirely cleared. After journeying, as near as we could judge, about three-quarters of a mile, we came to a turn which appeared to be carrying us slowly upward and almost back in the direction from which we came.

I noted that our candles were burning brightly and that the air remained surprisingly fresh. There was little conversation. Once Hardy spoke abruptly to the halfbreed Gomez, who pressed forward a trifle precipitately.

The way grew suddenly light and I had about decided that the other end of the mysterious tunnel would terminate at the surface, when there came a cry from ahead.

"At last!" shouted Van Dusee.

We hurried forward, breathless with interest, and found ourselves confronted by a high but very narrow stile, consisting of six steps of some twenty-four inches each, and glaring down, with jaws wide-open and huge paws outstretched immediately over the apex, was a towering sculptured monster with brilliant green eyes.

The sight of that crouching beast, obviously placed there as a guard, was one to appal the stoutest heart. In turn,

we passed under the stupendous overhanging paws, all save Gomez, making way with a display of confidence that we were far from feeling.

In a moment our blinking eyes beheld that for which we came: a gigantic cavern, nearly light as day. I think the wonder of that moment, as I became accustomed to the peculiar radiance of the light and my eyes took in the many evidences of an extinct, yet highly cultivated, life, will never leave me.

Row on row of seats in the form of a huge amphitheater lay in cathedral silence before our fascinated gaze. At the sides there extended beautifully-cut galleries, hewn out of the solid crystal rock and giving mute testimony of a civilization at least as ancient as that of the Greeks. Here and there the fresco-work was interrupted to give place to heroic-sized figures in pure white marble as marvelously sculptured as anything that ever left the mallet of Praxiteles. There were scores of them!

High above, I was interested to note that the ceiling was of the same rock-formation that had crystal clearness, which accounted for the plentitude of light, as I was certain we were not more than a hundred feet below the surface.

Slowly we began a circuit of that wonder-home of a lost people. To the right lay a vaulted passage, and we came presently to that. It was darker here, and young Anderson and I, detaching ourselves from the rest of the party, made our way along it. We came soon to a circular series of highly ornamented chambers. Anderson was slightly in advance of me, and as he peered into the central and larger one of these I heard him draw in his breath sharply.

"Look at that!" he exclaimed, awe-struck.

My eyes followed his into the beautifully tapestried room, and there, seated in a high-backed, canopied, throne-like chair, extravagantly adorned with glistening jewels, was the figure of a man!

He was apparently in the full vigor of existence. The cast of his face was Mongolian. *And he was smiling!*

It was too lifelike! We drew back.

Then the certainty that he could not be living forced itself home; and we entered that sacrosanct interior. Scores of highly-colored tapestries were suspended from the walls, the exposed portions of which showed mural decorations finer than any I had ever seen before and which, in tint and conception, were essentially Oriental.

Closer view of the man who smiled at us showed a skin texture which even the

most wonderful embalming could not conceal as that of death.

Our sense of having profaned the regal place presently wore off, and Anderson, as much, I fancied, from a nervous reaction as anything, moved nearer to the figure and lightly tapped it with the bamboo stick he carried.

"How are you, old top?" he asked.

An instant later the man, chair and canopy absolutely dissolved before our eyes and lay on the raised dais in a small pile of dust through which the numerous diamonds and opals gleamed at us like evil spirits.

"Let's get out of here," I muttered.

III.

THE EXTENT of the underground system seemed endless, as long, high-arched corridors opened up in vistas before our astonished gaze.

From another point I could hear the excitable Van Dusee, enraptured over some new-found curio or work of art. Making careful note of our course, Anderson and I pressed on, coming shortly to a rough, unfinished cavern that glowed with sunlight as if exposed to the open sky. There came a shout in my ear. It was from Anderson.

"See!" he exclaimed.

And well might he cry out, for in the center of the chamber lay piles of delicately contrived golden goblets, mixed with hideous-jawed dragons, flying-birds, pedestals of intricate pattern—all in gold! But most astounding of all were the replicas of human figures in gleaming yellow metal, some of them quite of life-size, others in miniature, that tilted here and there among the shining mass—all of the most exquisite workmanship, though many pieces were dented and broken; apparently the mass had been allowed to accumulate by the addition, from time to time, of defective pieces.

However, one piece, the reproduction of a slender female figure just budding into womanhood, about eighteen inches in height, lay quite near us, as if unwittingly it had been dropped. Young Anderson picked it up. The figure was heavy but quite perfect. In silent amaze we studied that exhibit of a handicraft that surely would have brought a shout of appreciation from Benvenuto Cellini, the great Italian goldsmith.

I was about to stroll over to the pile of gold, when I heard the sound of someone running. Then a man burst into the chamber. His entrance was unseemly, and I turned to chide him.

With difficulty I recognized the half-breed Gomez. His eyes were dilated,

his features transformed, as, mouthing unintelligible noises, he ran toward that heap of yellow gold.

If his appearance was terrifying, the shriek that now left his lips came as a thing yet more awful. For before our gaze, while he was still a good thirty feet from the gold, there was a spurt of smoke from the running man, and he stumbled, curled up in a blaze of fire, and actually *burned to death!*

In my weakened condition my senses reeled at the sight and I caught at Anderson for support. Hardy and Van Dusee were soon with us, and again our worthy leader demonstrated his quick perception and resourcefulness.

"Don't move!" he commanded. "The place is full of death points!"

A glimmering of his reasoning came to me, and I raised my eyes to what constituted the ceiling of that extraordinary cavern. The answer flashed to me that the artificers of the Ataruipe must have fashioned portions of that wondrously clear crystal formation overhead into gigantic burning glasses which, in that land of eternal sunshine, daily projected down into the cavern focal points of condensed sun's rays that were terrific in their heat units.

But Hardy was demonstrating, and we watched him. With a long bamboo the ingenious chap *felt* out the deadly heat points, each of which in turn discovered itself by sending a spurt of flame from the end of the pole.

"Altogether, there were nearly fifteen of the deadly contrivances in that cavern, none of which, with the exception of the most powerful one that had killed Gomez, *being visible to the human eye!*

The reason for this was that the focal point invariably centered about five feet ten inches from the basaltic floor—the precise point where the head of the ordinary man would be while walking.

But if the discoveries made by Anderson and me were remarkable, those of the rest of the party were equally so. Zangaree had stumbled into a chamber evidently reserved for the woman of that lost people. Here, mounted gems of unrivaled quality and size abounded, most of them proving that the Ataruipe as jewelers were equally at home in precious stones and gold.

The apparel of the men in our party was filled to overflowing with the scintillant fragments; Zangaree, in pure Afric joy, tossed a handful into the air and in the unusual light of the cavern they sparkled like fireworks as they fell. From the walls, lustrous opals flashed at us their iridescent rays; there were gems underfoot, cleverly laid in fantastic

mosaics such as the mind of modern man never had conceived.

It was all too overwhelming, and we were a sobered party indeed when again we assembled for the very necessary purpose of outlining our future plans. Of course, each one of us was rich, rich beyond the dreams of avarice, and it seemed the end, or beginning of everything.

I think that for the time being there was not a single one of us, lounging there in the pit of that ghostly amphitheater, who gave a thought to the long hard way we had come, or to the thousands of miles of jungle and river that lay between us and the consummation of our desires.

Night came on apace, and soon we found ourselves enveloped in a darkness that was only saved from completeness by the trifling fire Hardy had built. Van Dusee presently sprawled down at my side, and pulled at his pipe, talked calmly, as I had never heard him talk before. For once the entomologist was gone. The thing, our experience, had swept him off his feet; his pet subject was forgotten; he had gained new orientation.

"Such artists!" he breathed prayerfully. "Those sculptured women! That exquisite miniature of Bobby's! And all for what? To what end? Of what avail? Ah! The futility of it!"

And again he murmured, half to himself:

"To think that a thousand, yea, two thousand years ago, these wonderful people lived, breathed and had their being in this very place! What were their thoughts, their pleasures—and what, in Heaven's name, became of the last of them?"

I told him of our experience with the figure which at Anderson's touch had disintegrated so swiftly that the incident seemed like black magic. And for the first time it occurred to me that, aside from the man I had just described, none of us had seen a single skeleton or other evidence of the human occupants.

Van Dusee laughed shortly when I put my query.

"We found their burying place, all right," he said.

"Where?" I asked.

"Thousands of them," his voice went on, and in the darkness it seemed that I *must* be dreaming; "rows on rows of them up in those interminable galleries, each body—or what was left of it—in a handsomely woven basket, with gold trimming. Hardy and I passed along touching an occasional one for the striking effect of seeing it crumble into nothingness—as your king did. Ah, the pity

of it that poor Ericson did not live to see this!"

Van Dusee's voice droned on, and I fell asleep. I suppose I must have lain there for several hours, getting only such rest as is granted to a man with a recently-broken arm, when I awoke with a start. It was just dawn.

Hardy was on his knees, his rifle poised, and his keen eyes fixed on the spot where the massive green-eyed dragon kept guard over the stile. He signed to me not to disturb the others who still slept.

In a moment I detected some moving object as it came down our side of that guardian monster. It was a man! I glanced swiftly at those of our group. They were all accounted for. This meant either that our trail had been discovered from above, or that there were surviving Atarupe—which last was incredible.

Even as my mind grappled with the problem, another figure followed stealthily. Then Hardy's gun spoke. The noise of the explosion seemed out of all proportion. The first man ran a little, then suddenly bent over as if hurt in the side. He was sliding to the ground when his follower ran to his assistance.

Hardy and I by this time were nearing the two strangers. The second man was struggling furiously to get his companion up the steep stairway beneath the dragon. Just as we came up, he succeeded with a final heave in landing the wounded man on the top step of the stile. Hardy raised his gun. I shouted: "Don't shoot!"

Then a dreadful thing happened. The apex-stone of the stair seemed suddenly to sink beneath the combined weight of the two men. An instant later, with the swiftness of thought, the gigantic paws of that stone monster descended. They struck and crushed to death the two puny men who lay beneath; one of the bodies disappeared over the other side.

And as Hardy and I stared at this additional example of diabolical ingenuity, the apex-stone reappeared and the paws, as if alive, slowly began to elevate themselves to their original position, by some odd quirk of fate, surely not contemplated by the builder, carrying with them the body of the slain man that had remained.

IV.

NO MORE was necessary to advise us that *de Silva* had stumbled onto our blundering trail.

The dead man, caught in that ghastly embrace, was a white whom Hardy readily recognized as an associate of the evil Spaniard in Rio de Janeiro.

Though we had been but twenty-four hours in the caverns of the Atarupe, we had observed no other sign of egress than the one that led to the water hole. Nor, in fact, was there any reason to assume that the original occupants found it necessary to go abroad very frequently. And while it was likely there were other exits, yet in the vast system of that underground world, with but a limited supply of food, it would be folly for us to attempt to locate them.

So it was that all of us felt we should at once attempt to make our escape the way we had entered, even allowing for the probable attack planned by *de Silva*.

First, therefore, we gave attention to that not unimportant matter as to how much treasure we should take with us. It went without saying that we planned a return with better transportation facilities, but that was in the future and much beclouded by the uncertain course of the divers persons in our band, once we were separated. Curious, indeed, was the effect on the individual members of our party of this struggle between cupidity and the instinct to survive the long journey home.

Like drunken men, the half breed Castro and the Indians wandered around, hopelessly mulling over the golden treasure there in such quantities for them to take, and which, oddly enough, seemed to attract the Indians so much more than the gems.

Anderson and I stowed our pockets with diamonds and rubies and opals, but the youth also clung to the miniature he had acquired on the first day. The artist in Van Dusee, so long latent in this man of science, now blazed forth with the fierce light of a falling star. Above all else, he yearned for the party to carry to New York one of the surpassingly beautiful heroic-sized female figures. For an hour he seriously expostulated with Hardy, but received, I fear, slight sympathy from any of us, as one of the statues alone must have weighed many hundreds of pounds.

Our lack of interest in his project left Van Dusee in a pet, and he vowed finally that he would not remove a single article from the caverns. Hardy, always in character, asserted that he intended to have both eyes of the dragon guarding the apex of the stile, and in fact, actually did ascend to the top step from which, by a daring feat of climbing, he swung himself to the lower jaw and coolly proceeded to chisel the magnificent emerald-eyes from their ancient sockets. All this within five feet of the ghastly trophy as yet in the paws of the stone animal!

About four o'clock in the afternoon we met for the last time in front of the gigantic stone brute, his empty eye-sockets seeming to give him an expression of increased ferocity as they bore done on us.

Van Dusee, in a condition bordering on nervous breakdown, was begging for just a little more time that he might get with his camera some final views of the godlike stone images. So far as I know, the entomologist actually had made good his word, for when we left the caverns of the Atarupe he did not have with him a single gem or bit of precious metal; merely the camera with its recorded impressions.

Presently Hardy took the lead over the fearsome stile. It had been discovered that there was no danger from the massive paws so long as the top stone did not receive more than what was equal to the weight of a normal man. This Hardy had tested. Surely that contrivance was an example of remarkable hydraulics!

With Zangaree, he cautiously moved along the five-foot golden statue that it had been decided to take to the surface; and, by dint of much easing and shifting of the heavy object, the two men succeeded in getting it safely past the trap-stone.

As sick man of the expedition—and what expeditions do not have their sick man?—I brought up the rear with Anderson. Busied with my own thoughts, I failed to note that one of the Indians had dropped out.

Keeping my eyes on Anderson's back, just a step below me, I slid my scant hundred and fifty-odd pounds (and thanked God for my light weight!) on to the apex-stone, which was about four feet square and too broad to avoid entirely. As I worked my way along, for I was sitting, I was horrified to note a sinking sensation—the block of stone was descending!

Then the air was filled with two shrieks: mine, as I flung myself from that place of death, and the cry of a man *behind* me.

The terrific paws, cutting the air like rapiers, literally beheaded the Indian, who had stolen back in his greed for more gold, and then, in following me too closely, had entrusted his weight to the trap with mine.

The gruesome tragedy depressed all of us, and I am certain we were relieved when the immediate turn in the tunnel shut off from our view the stone monster, then in the very act of elevating his two dreadful paws and leering at us, I could swear, with living malignancy for the desecration of his features.

We had not proceeded far along the passageway when it became evident that our enemies were waiting for us.

The first indication was the different character of the air. It seemed closer, and not to have any movement. The thought at once leapt into our minds that very likely the entrance by the water-hole had been blocked.

As time passed and we worked our way up the rather steep incline, there could be no doubt about the situation. The thought was a terrifying one, and we pressed on, eager to know the worst.

When finally we stood at the end of the tunnel there was not a ray of light from above. Wedged midway of the stair, reposed two of the cuneiform stones that had first attracted my attention. Apparently quantities of sand had been shoveled into the hole, for much of the fine stuff had trickled on down the steps almost to our feet.

Use of dynamite in that narrow way was, of course, out of the question; imprisoned in the tunnel, we could not possibly live through the blast. Hardy, therefore, set to work promptly to dislodge the stone. This was dangerous for the reason that it was literally suspended over him as he labored and if suddenly released it meant an avalanche that would be certain to destroy him who stood beneath.

The problem was cleverly solved by Hardy, who ascertained the location of the "key" strain. He proceeded by inserting immediately above this spot one foot of the golden statue we had lugged with us. Surely it was sacrilege to use that triumph of the goldsmith's art as a crowbar!

But the statue nevertheless was effective as an instrument, as Hardy attached a rope around the bust which projected to within ten feet of the tunnel; and from this point of comparative safety the men put their full weight on the rope. There followed a moment of intense strain, the golden figure, of none too stiff an alloy, appeared to bend—and then it came, a perfect welter of flying sand and debris that left us gasping.

In a few minutes this cleared, and we could see Hardy grinning at us through the blessed daylight that poured down that stairway once more.

"Who'll be the first to greet *de Silva*?" he demanded.

I recall heretofore setting forth a number of reasons why we decided to attempt our escape via the water hole tunnel. It is my belief, on more mature reflection, that with all my care I have failed to state the most important one: that of the sheer desire of the majority of our

party—a desire that had been fed by the continued hounding *de Silva* had given us—to meet him and fight it out.

At any rate, the manner in which Hardy answered his own question by leaping up the stairway, afforded every evidence of how *he* felt about it.

We followed closely. But nothing in the line ahead of me seemed to occur, and to our astonishment, on gaining the surface, there was no one to meet us. Soon we found the explanation, for not far distant lay the bodies of a white man and an Indian. They were locked together in death, while a rod farther on was the body of another Indian. He had been shot in the back. Scattered about in the sand, evidently where the running man had dropped them when hit, were numbers of brilliant gems. *They were gems of the Ataruipe!*

In frank wonder, we gazed upon that indisputable proof that at least some of the members of the *de Silva* party, unbeknown to us, had got past the fatal stile and explored a portion of the caverns. But where was *de Silva*? And what had become of the rest of his crowd?

Our interest in this matter soon gave way to that far more important problem as to the direction in which we were to move. In the apparel of the dead Spaniard Zangaree discovered a compass, and while this seemed almost heaven-sent, yet it did not tell us the way we had come.

A final effort was made to dislodge from the debris the beautiful statue which we had used as a lever, but it was solidly buried and we soon gave over the attempt. Then, with little further discussion, we shoved off, following the trail of the many feet that led to the east from where we had found the gems in the sand.

We had not gone far when it became evident that those ahead of us were struggling with the transportation of heavy objects, which it was thought might prove to be golden statues. The correctness of this surmise was later borne out in a dreadful manner, for about four o'clock in the afternoon we came upon one of the beautiful objects. It lay in the sand and only a few yards away were three more dead men. Again two of them were Indians and the third a white, the features of all three being horribly slashed with the knives that had been used in the fighting.

Night overtook us still on the trail of the *de Silva* party, which now, judging from the foot-marks, consisted of about six men. We slept well, and at dawn pressed on.

The unexpected happened—and it came as a glorious surprise—for by ten in the morning we sighted signs of vegetation, and an hour later were nearing the exact point of our departure into the desert the week before.

This quick return drove home forcibly that near-tragedy of our four days' wandering in a desert which, after all, was comparatively small in extent.

Once enabled to shield ourselves beneath the trees from the sun's powerful rays, Hardy appeared willing to permit us to loaf a bit, and so it was that we whites had an opportunity to take stock of ourselves. Poor Van Dusee was thin to the point of emaciation, and I verily believe the man was wasting away as much from disappointment as from hardship. Anderson, brilliant-eyed and lean, was the same enthusiast, while the imperturbable Hardy seemed not to have altered a whit: he was the identical, brick-red, level-eyed, well-fleshed individual that we had first encountered in a cafe in Rio de Janeiro in January. As for myself, I must have looked bad, as my arm had given me constant pain.

By this time we felt that *de Silva* deemed our party to have been buried alive in the Caverns of the Ataruipe, for he had not taken the slightest pains to conceal his trail. Thus it was that the tables, in fact, had turned. *We were now pursuing de Silva!*

No one of us voiced that thought, but that it was in the minds of each there could be no doubt. Personally, I know that I did not care to analyse my own attitude toward the cowardly Spaniard. I did not dare to! But what remained unnecessary to phrase in words was that if *de Silva* did escape with his booty to Rio de Janeiro, no one of our party would have any opportunity to visit again the wonderland of the Ataruipe. And this, especially to Hardy (for entirely mundane reasons) and to Van Dusee (for the purely esthetic) was unthinkable.

We pushed on, encountering fresh signs of the expedition ahead of us which evidently, owing to the heavy treasure its members carried, was making slower progress than we were. Very shortly we came through our hard-won channel in the bamboos, and from then on we kept sharp lookout for *de Silva*.

On our third morning in that interminable brushwood tract, while Anderson was building a breakfast fire for which Zangaree and the Indians were collecting dry wood, Van Dusee, who had strolled on a bit, called back to us quietly:

"In that bush over there to the right," he said, "is a white man. He is spying on us."

It was only a moment before Anderson and Hardy, guns in hand, were on their way. I shouted a warning and followed more slowly. Suddenly Hardy lowered his rifle, and when I came up both he and young Anderson were silently regarding a bit of thick brushwood.

And well might they stare, for there, leering out at us, through the foliage, was the face of *de Silva*. It was livid and ghastly, and a number of vicious-looking red ants were moving jerkily around the face.

Closer inspection was not needed to verify *de Silva*'s decease; but as the manner of it also concerned us we did

Immediately back of the brush in which had been thrust this shocking exhibit there was evidence of a furious struggle. The Spaniard's body also had been knifed, as were the others, and this within comparatively recent hours, as the fresh appearance of the wounds testified.

There was no sign of his companions, and somehow the conviction took form in our minds that *de Silva*—a man who at one time, we learned afterwards, had been a professor of mathematics—very likely the last surviving white man in his party, had been set upon by the others and murdered.

But we had little time or spirit to expend in comparison for this villain, who, after all, had received his just deserts, and soon we were again on our way. The Indians ahead of us may or may not have suspected our presence; at any rate, they were now making as good speed as we were, in spite of the fact that they still clung to the heavy golden statue.

We reached the vast primeval wood, without apparently gaining on them. Our burning desire was to get to the river at least as soon as the Indians so that that little matter of the possession of our canoes might be definitely settled, for without the assistance of our light craft we were, in the face of the rapidly approaching rainy season, doomed to certain death amid the maze of that alluring yet deadly tropical fairy land.

We had spent one day in pushing on through the big woods, when a most untoward event overtook us. That was the sudden and complete breakdown of poor Van Dusee. Day by day, I had observed his failing strength and I knew that it was on his nerve alone he had kept up with the rest of us. Poor chap! He lay now at full length amid the vaulted silences of those stupendous trees, babbling first of his beloved *hemiptera*

and again of the profound art in the sculpturing of the Atarupe. It was not permissible to carry him, for the man was actually dying before our eyes.

The pitiful sight was too much even for the hardened Hardy, whose eyes once actually filled with tears as he regarded the form of the plucky, devoted, defeated, over-idealistic man of science. At noon that day Van Dusee closed his eyes for the last time, and we buried him as reverently, but as quickly, as possible. No time was there now for sentiment. The delay of six hours might ultimately prove to be our death warrant.

All that unending night we drove on until at times it seemed that I myself must follow Van Dusee. However, dawn came at last, and with it the definite knowledge that Hardy had led us correctly, for there in the distance lay the fringe of verdure defining the course of the river that meant for us home and safety.

In that moment we needed no spur, and very soon we came abreast of the hiding place of our canoes. Zangaree, bounding ahead, disappeared into the thicket. His black face reappeared almost immediately.

No necessity for him to speak. His expression told.

Both canoes were gone!

V.

IN MY hypersensitive condition a pall of black despair settled over me. Here we were, rich beyond belief in precious gems and holding the key of knowledge of fabulous, undreamed-of wealth—and yet about to die like defenseless stricken animals! The irony of it!

But it was not so with Hardy and Anderson. With great energy, they searched the locality for traces of the miscreants (whom it had been hoped we had passed in the night), and, finding traces of them still fresh, set off in the manner of hounds in chase.

The two men had not far to go, for in less than an hour they reported back to us, procured more ammunition and led the way. So it came about that, nearing them silently, we had our first view of the men who had killed *de Silva*. There were four of them, all Indians, hunched together in a circle on the bank of the river. One of them was talking. To one side, tilting rakishly against a tree, stood a three-quarter size statue of exquisite proportions done in solid gold.

There it was, prime art of the Atarupe, pulled, hauled, carried and dragged thither by an infinity of patience and endurance on the part of those aborigines, who now gave no heed to the play

of the sunlight on that marvelous work of the goldsmiths; instead they were entirely engrossed in their own affairs. Our canoes were not visible, but we believed they were launched in the water, which at this point was placid and deep.

Hardy had just left us to get close to the river, when something, or someone of us, moved with too little caution, for the next instant the Indians were up, and, catching their treasure, ran down the bank of the stream. In full cry, we followed.

It has been said that the pen is mightier than the sword, and the sentiment is as pretty as it is ancient; but of one thing I am certain and that is, even in this enlightened age, the sword, allegorical and actual, is a much swifter instrument than the pen.

Much happened in the next thirty seconds. Our two canoes rode the water near at hand. Into one of them two of the Indians, with the help of a third, cast the gold statue, the first two following it with their bodies. In a moment they reached midstream. But the canoe began to sink.

Several shots split the air. I saw the two remaining Indians, now seated in our other canoe, were shooting at Hardy and young Anderson. Their fire was promptly returned. It proved deadly. Both Indians were hit, and the canoe began to drift.

Meanwhile, the Indians in the sinking canoe were fighting to shift the heavy weight of the statue, which must have punctured the bottom. They up-ended the figure precariously near the bow. The canoe listed suddenly, going nearly under water, and in that same instant there was a flash and into the murky stream shot the figure of gold. But none of us had eyes for that, because our ears were being filled with a succession of horrid cries.

They came from the swimming Indians, who perished miserably. The river was alive with crocodiles.

Hardy always has maintained that even had we not recovered our own canoes as we finally did that day, in time we could have located those of *de Silva*'s. But I have questioned it. That the Spaniard secreted his canoes, without permitting the Indians to know their whereabouts, I was satisfied; and this, it seemed to me, was confirmed by the fact that the Indians had made so surely for our canoes, the location of which they must have found when *de Silva* retraced his course to the point where Ericson had been killed. All of which meant to me that the other canoes were well-hidden, indeed.

Of the long journey back to Itacoatiara, where we were to catch the steamer, there is little to tell. Hardy attempted a rough valuation of the gems and odd bits of gold that our expedition carried. On the most conservative basis, it ran into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, and there was really no telling what the wealthy collectors of unique stones would be willing to pay for some of our gems, which were of a size and clarity beyond description.

Plans were discussed for a return to the Caverns of the Atarupe next year, and at Itacoatiara our two loyal Indians left us after having been bound to secrecy by oaths as formidable and impressive as the ingenuity of Hardy could make them.

That the doughty Hardy himself considered this method of questionable efficacy was evidenced by the droll expression of his eyes during the mummery. He, in fact, was placing entire reliance on the inability of the dull-minded fellows to find their way back even if they tried, coupled with the knowledge that the faithful Zangaree, who was to leave us but a short distance farther along, would be able to account for the Indians until our plans for return were perfected. Castro, the remaining half-breed, took the steamer with us for the long ride down the Amazon River to Rio de Janiero, and presented a much more difficult problem. There had never been a time when Hardy completely trusted the half-breed, though it was true he had not once during the entire experience by word or deed shown any sign of treachery.

At the Brazilian capital Anderson and I went to a hotel, leaving our companion to look after the half-breed. Hardy's plan was frankly to go to the officials and attempt an arrangement whereby the three of us, under proper guaranties, might be authorized to lead an expedition in behalf of "The United States of Brazil" to the Caverns of the Atarupe.

On the second day, and while no word yet had come from Hardy, our rooms in the hotel were rifled in our absence and almost one-third of the gems stolen. Anderson had deposited with the hotel proprietor for safe-keeping his golden replica and a goodly share of our gems; the rest we had secreted about our rooms or carried on our persons.

We were totally unable to decide whether or not the thief had been inspired by a knowledge of our treasures. It was true we had been regarded curiously by many of the loungers about the hotel lobby and in the streets, but no

mention had been made of our experience.

We were debating the advisability of reporting to the police, but were rather hoping Hardy would come to us before we took this step. The following day, a Tuesday, we were surprised to receive a visit from a pompous-looking official. In hitchy English he informed us that as a special favor he had come to advise *los Americanos* that they were about to be charged with the murder of one *de Silva*, and that officers with warrants were soon to be on hand.

Then the gentleman grinned with surprising amiability, and added:

"Ze next steamair for New York, she leave in three hour."

He still stood, hat in hand, saying nothing further.

Suddenly it came over me what he wanted. *He was out for himself!*

Frequently since that incident, I have laughed at the quickness with which Anderson and I leapt at his fat, smug person. In less time than it takes to tell it, we had booted, hauled and dragged that chap out into the hall, where Anderson finished him off with a neat black eye for good measure. The flurry attracted attention, even on that tenth floor, and, darting back into our rooms, young Anderson and I decided that it was time for us to get out.

We packed our stuff, and a few minutes later called at the hotel office for our valuables. These were handed over to us with gratifying promptness. Then we hailed a taxi and sped for the address Hardy had left with us.

Though we could not see that anyone was following us, still there was much traffic in the streets, and we felt sure we were under constant observation. At Hardy's address we found a highly nervous old lady, who was very deaf. With much difficulty, and repeated shouting of the name "H A R D Y" we finally made her understand.

She led us to his rooms up the stairs. Hardy was not there, nor was there much of his belongings in evidence. The old lady left us and returned after a bit with a book. This she handed to me, making signs that it was from Hardy.

Thumbing it quickly through, I found what we were looking for. The message, folded and inserted between the pages of the book, was dated two days previously. It ran as follows:

"My Dear Comrades: Castro, the half-breed, double-crossed us. His cut-throat crowd, I have just learned, are now waiting for me outside, and I am writing this note in the hope that you will follow me

up and find it. You must at once leave Brazil. Castro has informed certain political hangers-on of the treasure. These fellows have trumped up a charge against the three of us of having murdered de Silva. In five minutes I shall leave this room by the window in an attempt to escape. I have never yet waited for a Spaniard to come and get me. I like to go to him first.

"If you don't hear from me before Tuesday you may reasonably assume that I have been done in. The game is big and they'll go the limit. DO NOT TRUST ANYBODY, not even the local American consul. He probably is all right, but in this land of 'honest graft' the trail leads to high places, believe me. Get that boat for New York that leaves Wednesday at four in the afternoon. Good-bye and good luck!" "HARDY."

I heard a sob from Anderson as we finished reading the missive. That the indomitable Hardy had come to his end seemed incredible, and yet not only had Tuesday gone by with no word, but this was Wednesday, and less than three hours remained before the boat sailed, with our passage and berth arrangements still to be made.

Outside, our taxi, with its motor still running, waited for us, and if ever mortal men were in a dilemma Anderson and I were those individuals. Finally Anderson strode over to me, and, with a look in his eyes such as I had never before seen, he said:

"I can't go and leave Hardy without making some effort to help him."

I gripped his hand. What a relief! It seemed almost as if already we had rescued him—and yet there we were, two utter stangers in that great South American city, with a band of conscienceless rascals after us, backed by the power of the law!

We started down the stairs where we observed the old house-wife. She was reading a newspaper, which she now hurried to show us. And there, in a comparatively prominent place, was the news that Hardy had been killed in what was designated as a street brawl. Even our slight knowledge of Spanish made that short paragraph all too intelligible.

Into the taxi we hurried, with Anderson pinching my arm.

I regarded him in surprise.

"Different driver," he said, nodding to the man on the front seat.

I glanced sharply at the fellow, but could not say.

"Let's go on," I murmured, "and trust to luck."

"You bet you!" returned the young man. "But there won't be any luck about it. We'll try this."

When the chauffeur turned around for instructions he got them in forcible and understandable proportions. Anderson's revolver was within six inches of his back. The man went white.

"*A vapor! The boat!*" ordered Anderson.

The vigor of that driver's assent was comical. His head rocked and bobbed with eagerness.

"*Si! Si! Madre de Dios!*" he exclaimed.

SEVERAL YEARS have passed since the occurrence of the foregoing events, and young Anderson since has married. In his nest of a home, to which I am a frequent bachelor visitor in good standing, there is prominently located a certain replica of a beautiful young female just budding into womanhood. It represents the best in the art of the Atarupe and is regarded by the lady-of-the-house as perhaps just the least bit too naturalistic.

Among artists and archaeologists, however, it has inspired more controversy than anything else in the present century. The trend of opinion is that the figure is an extravagant but exceedingly clever bit of modern work which is being foisted on a gullible public, ever

too quick to give credence to cock-and-bull stories of lost treasure such as Anderson and I relate.

They ask for the camera and photographs that Van Dusee had. We say that we did not miss them until on the boat bound for New York; that they were probably stolen from our rooms at the hotel in Rio de Janiero.

They ask us for sight of some of the marvelous jewels. We show them some of the smaller ones, but they tell us these are ordinary and may have been acquired any place; and at their insistence for a view of the big gems we are compelled to advise them that the package handed us by the clever hotel clerk was a duplicate of the one we gave him containing the select stones brought by us from the Caverns of the Atarupe; that we learned that it contained common pebbles some time before the port officials at Rio de Janiero went through our effects, confiscating everything they could find and seeming particularly happy at discovering the package described so minutely in their search-warrant—the one the scoundrel hotel clerk made up in imitation of Bobby's wrapping, which we had been careful to restore to its original appearance after discovering the cheat.

"Yes, but how did you save this beautiful statue if they got everything else?" is the final thrust.

And here Anderson lapses into silence, for the matter is a delicate one. It involved thrusting the small package into

the arms of a handsome young lady who stood in the throng that curiously watched us come aboard the ship at the last moment under the guardianship of numbers of Brazilian officials, who hovered over us with the eagerness of flies. As she caught Anderson's eye and got the idea that leaped from it, I am sure she giggled with delight at the ruse, for she was pure American.

Once a year each of us receives a communication from Rio de Janiero that purports to come from government officials. The letters are entirely preposterous in their content—they read like the notorious Spanish legacy letters so long the vogue of confidence men, and speak urgently, earnestly—yea, almost beseechingly—of untold wealth that awaits us if we will but come to Rio de Janiero and assist in the quest for the lost Caverns of the Atarupe.

But we feel, young Anderson and I, that constant and continuous governmental search must be going forward for the immense treasure; and we feel, further, that in all fairness to the world at large that wonderful collection of art material should be restored to humanity; but we find it difficult indeed to see just why two Americans—even conceding that their help might be of value, which is doubtful—should assist a greedy and unjust officialdom that is absolutely guilty of the death of the best guide and friend it was ever the good fortune of either of us to have encountered.

Another story by JULIAN KILMAN will appear in the next issue of WEIRD TALES. It is called "The Well," and it's a "creepy" yarn, warranted to give you "goose-flesh" thrills
