

Through the Crater's Rim

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CHAPTER I INTO THE UNKNOWN

"I tell you it's there," declared Lieutenant Hazen decisively. "It may not be a civilized city, but it's no Indian village or native town. It's big—at least a thousand houses—and they're built of stone or something like it and not of thatch."

"You've been dreaming, Hazen," laughed Fenton. "Or else you're just trying to jolly us."

"Do you think I'd hand in an official report of a dream?" retorted the Lieutenant testily. "And it's gospel truth I've been telling you."

"Never mind Fenton," I put in. "He's a born pessimist and skeptic anyhow. How much did you actually see?"

We were seated on the veranda of the Hotel Washington in Colon and the aviator had been relating how, while making a reconnoissance flight over the unexplored and unknown jungles of Darien, he had sighted an isolated, flat topped mountain upon whose summit was a large city—of a thousand houses or more—and without visible pass, road or stream leading to it.

"It was rotten air," Hazen explained in reply to my question. "And I couldn't get lower than 5,000 feet. So I can't say what the people were like. But I could see 'em running about first time I went over and they were looking mightily excited. Then I flew back for a second look and not a soul was in sight—took

to cover I expect. But I'll swear the buildings were stone or 'dobe and not palm or thatch."

"Why didn't you land and get acquainted?" enquired Fenton sarcastically.

"There was one spot that looked like a pretty fair landing," replied the aviator. "But the air was bad and the risk too big. How did I know the people weren't hostile? It was right in the Kuna Indian country and even if they were peaceable they might have smashed the plane or I mightn't have been able to take off. I was alone too."

"You say you made an official report of your discovery," I said. "What did the Colonel think about it?"

"Snorted and said he didn't see why in blazes I bothered reporting an Indian village."

"It's mighty interesting," I declared. "I believe you've actually seen the Lost City, Hazen. Balboa heard of it. The Dons spent years hunting for it and every Indian in Darien swears it exists."

"Well, I never heard of it before," said Hazen. "What's the yarn, anyway?"

"According to the Indian story there's a big city on a mountain top somewhere in Darien. They say no one has ever visited it, that it's guarded by evil spirits and that it was there ages before the first Indians."

"If they've never seen it how do they know it's there?" Fenton demanded. "In my opinion it's all bosh. How can there be a 'lost

city' in this bally little country and why hasn't someone found it? Why, there are stories of lost cities and hidden cities and such rot in every South and Central American country. Just fairy tales—pure bunk!"

"I know there are lots of such yarns," I admitted. "And most of them I believe are founded on fact. Your South American Indian hasn't enough imagination to make a story out of whole cloth. It's easy to understand why and how such a place might exist for centuries and no one find it. This 'little country' as you call it could hide a hundred cities in its jungles and no one be the wiser. No civilized man has ever yet been through the Kuna country. But I'm going. I'll have a try for that city of Hazen's."

"Well, I wish you luck," said Fenton. "If the Kunas don't slice off the soles of your feet and turn you loose in the bush and if you *do* find Hazen's pipe dream, just bring me back a souvenir, will you?"

With this parting shot he rose and sauntered off towards the swimming pool.

"Do you really mean to have a go at that place?" asked Hazen as Fenton disappeared.

"I surely do," I declared. "Can you show me the exact spot on the map where you saw the city?"

For the next half hour we pored over the map of Panama and while—owing to the incorrectness of the only available maps—Hazen could not be sure of the exact location of his discovery, still he pointed out a small area within which the strange city was located.

“You’re starting on a mighty dangerous trip,” he declared as I talked over my plans. “Even if you get by the Kunas and find the place how are you going to get out? The people may kill you or make you a prisoner. If they’ve been isolated for so long I reckon they won’t let any news of ’em leak out.”

“Of course there’s a risk,” I laughed. “That’s what makes it so attractive. I’m not worried over the Kunas though. They’re not half as bad as painted. I spent three weeks among them two years ago and had no trouble. They may drive me back, but they don’t kill people offhand. Getting out will be the trouble as you say. But I’ve first got to get in and I’m not making plans to get out until then.”

“Lord, but I wish I were going too!” cried Hazen. “Say, I tell you what I’m going to do. I’ll borrow that old Curtiss practice boat and fly over there once in a while. If you’re there, just wave a white rag for a signal. Maybe the people’ll be so darned scared if they see the plane that they’ll not trouble you. Might make a good play of it—let ’em think you’re responsible for it you know.”

“I don’t know but that’s a mighty good scheme, Hazen,” I replied, after a moment’s thought. “Let’s see. If I get off day after tomorrow I should be in the Kuna country in a week. You might take your first flight ten days from now. But if things go wrong I don’t see as you can help me much if you can’t land.”

“We’ll worry over that when the time comes,” he said cheerfully. A few days later I was being paddled and poled up the Cañazas River with the last outposts of civilization many

miles behind and the unknown jungles and the forbidden country of the wild Kunas ahead.

It was with the greatest difficulty that I had been able to secure men to accompany me, for the natives looked with the utmost dread upon the Kuna country and only two, out of the scores I had asked, were willing to tempt fate and risk their lives in the expedition into the unknown.

For two days now we had been within the forbidden district—the area guarded and held by the Kunas and into which no outsider is permitted to enter—and yet we had seen or heard no signs of Indians. But I was too old a hand and too familiar with the ways of South American Indians to delude myself with the idea that we had not been seen or our presence known. I well knew that, in every likelihood, we had been watched and our every movement known since the moment we entered the territory. No doubt, sharp black eyes were constantly peering at us from the jungle, while bows and blowguns were ever ready to discharge their missiles of death at any instant. As long as we were not molested or interfered with, however, I gave little heed to this. Moreover, I believed, from my brief acquaintance with the Kunas of two years previously, that they seldom killed a white man until after he had been warned out of their country and tried to return to it.

At night we camped beside the river, making our beds upon the warm dry sand and each day we poled the cayuca up the rapids and deeper into the forest. At last we reached the spot where, according to my calculations, we must strike through the jungle overland to reach the mountain seen by Hazen. Hiding our dugout in the thick brush beside the river we packed the

few necessities to be carried with us and started off through the forest.

If Hazen were not mistaken in his calculations, we should reach the vicinity of the mountain in two days' march, even though the going was hard and we were compelled to hew a way with our machetes for miles at a stretch.

But it's one thing to find a mountain top when flying over the sea of jungle and quite another to find that mountain when hidden deep in the forest and surrounded on every side by enormous trees. I realized that we might easily pass within a few hundred yards of the spot and never suspect it and that we might wander for days, searching for the mountain without finding it. It was largely a matter of luck after all. But Hazen had described the surrounding country so minutely, that I had high hopes of success.

By the end of the first day in the bush we had reached rough and hilly country, which promised well, and it was with the expectation of reaching the base of the mountain the following day that we made camp that night. Still we had seen no Indians, no signs of their trails or camps, which did much to calm the fears of my men and which I accounted for on the theory that the Kunas avoided this part of the country through superstitious fears of the lost city and its people.

At daybreak we broke camp and had tramped for perhaps three hours when, without warning, José, who was last in line, uttered a terrified cry. Turning quickly I was just in time to see him throw up his hands and fall in a heap with a long arrow quivering in his back. The Kunas were upon us.

Scarcely had the realization come to me when an arrow thudded sharply into a tree by my side and Carlos, with a wild yell of deadly fear, threw down his load and dashed madly away. Not an Indian could be seen. To stand there, a target for their missiles, was suicidal, and turning, I fled at my utmost speed after Carlos. How we managed to run through that tangled jungle is still a mystery to me, but we made good time, nevertheless. Fear drove us and dodging between the giant trees, leaping fallen trunks, tripping over roots and scrambling over rocks, we sped on.

And now, from behind, we could hear the sounds of the pursuing Indians; their low guttural cries, the sounds of breaking twigs and branches; constantly they were drawing nearer. I knew that in a few minutes they would be upon us—that at any instant a poisoned blowgun dart or a barbed arrow might bury itself in my body; but still we strove to escape.

Then, just as I felt that the end must be at hand —just as I had decided to turn and sell my life dearly—the forest thinned. Before us sunlight appeared and the next moment we dashed from the jungle into a space free from underbrush but covered with enormous trees draped with gnarled and twisted lianas. The land here rose sharply and, glancing ahead between the trees, I saw the indistinct outlines of a lofty mountain against the sky.

Toiling up the slope, breathing heavily, utterly exhausted, I kept on. Then, as a loud shout sounded from the rear, I turned to see five hideously painted Kunas break from the jungle. But they did not follow. To my utter amazement they halted, gave a

quick glance about, and, with a chorus of frightened yells, turned and dashed back into the shelter of the jungle.

But I had scant time to give heed to this. The Kunas' cries were still ringing in my ears when a scream from Carlos drew my attention. Thinking him attacked by savages I rushed towards him, drawing my revolver as I ran.

With bulging, rolling eyes, blanched face and ghastly, terror stricken features he was struggling, fighting madly, with a writhing, coiling gray object which I took for a gigantic snake. Already his body and legs were bound and helpless in the coils. With his machete he was raining blows upon the quivering awful thing which slowly, menacingly wavered back and forth before him, striving to throw another coil about his body.

And then, as I drew near, my senses reeled, I felt that I was in some awful nightmare. The object, so surely, relentlessly, silently encircling and crushing him was no serpent but a huge liana drooping from the lofty branches of a great tree!

It seemed absolutely incredible, impossible, unbelievable. But even as I gazed, transfixed with horror, paralyzed by the sight, the vine threw its last coil about the dying man and before my eyes drew the quivering body into the trees above.

Then something touched my leg. With a wild yell of terror I leaped aside. A second vine was writhing and twisting over the ground towards me!

Crazed with unspeakable fear I struck at the thing with my machete. At the blow the vine drew sharply back while from the gash a thick, yellowish, stinking juice oozed forth. Turning,

I started to rush from the accursed spot but as I passed the first tree another liana writhed forward in my path.

Utterly bereft of my senses, slashing madly as I ran, yelling like a madman, I dodged from tree to tree, seeking the open spaces, evading by a hair's breadth the fearful, menacing, serpent-like vines, until half-crazy, torn, panting and utterly spent I dashed forth into a clear grassy space.

Before me, rising like a sheer wall against the sky was a huge precipitous cliff of red rock.

Now I knew why the Kunas had not followed us beyond the jungle. They were aware of the man-killing lianas and had left us to a worse death than any they could inflict. I was safe from them I felt sure. But was I any better off? Before me was an impassable mountain side. On either hand and in the rear those awful, blood-thirsty, sinister vines and, lurking in the jungles, were the savage Kunas with their fatal poisoned darts and powerful bows. I was beset on every side by deadly peril, for I was without food, I had cast aside my gun and even my revolver in my blind, terror-crazed escape from those ghastly living vines, and to remain where I was meant death by starvation or thirst.

But anything was better than this nightmare-like forest. At the thought I glanced with a shudder at the trees and my blood seemed to freeze in my veins.

The forest was approaching me! I could not believe my eyes. Now I felt I must be mad, and fascinated; hypnotized, I gazed, striving my utmost to clear my brain, to make common sense

contradict the evidence of my eyes. But it was no delusion. Ponderously, slowly, but steadily the trees were gliding noiselessly up the slope! Their great gnarled roots were creeping and undulating over the ground while the pendant vines writhed and swayed and darted forth in all directions as if feeling their way. And then I saw what had before escaped me. The things were not lianas as I had thought. They were parts of the trees themselves—huge, lithe, flexible tentacles springing from a thick, fleshy livid-hued crown of branches armed with stupendous thorns and which slowly opened and closed like hungry jaws above the huge trunks.

It was monstrous, uncanny, supernatural. A hundred yards and more of open ground had stretched between me and the forest when I had flung myself down, but now a scant fifty paces remained. In a few brief moments the fearsome things would be upon me. But I was petrified, incapable of moving hand or foot, too terrified and overwhelmed even to cry out.

Nearer and nearer the ghastly things came. I could hear the pounding of my heart. A cold sweat broke out on my body. I shivered as with ague. Then a long, warty, tentacle darted toward me and as the loathsome stinking thing touched my hand the spell was broken. With a wild scream I turned and dashed blindly towards the precipice, seeking only to delay, only to avoid for a time the certain awful death to which I was doomed, for the cliff barred all escape and I could go no farther.

CHAPTER II

AMAZING DISCOVERIES

A dozen leaps and I reached the wall of rock beyond which all retreat was cut off. Close at hand was an outjutting buttress, and thinking that back of this I might hide and thus prolong my life, I raced for it.

Panting, unseeing, I reached the projection, ducked behind it, and to my amazement and unspeakable delight, found myself in a narrow canyon or defile, like a huge cleft in the face of the precipice.

Here was safety for a time. The terrible man-eating trees could not enter, and striving only to put a greater distance between myself and the vegetable demons I never slackened my pace as I turned and sped up the canyon.

Narrower and narrower it became. Far above my head the rocky walls leaned inward, shutting out the light until soon it was so dim and shadowy that, through sheer necessity, I was forced to stop running and to pick my way carefully over the masses of rock that strewed the canyon's floor. Presently only a narrow ribbon of sky was visible between the towering walls of the pass. Then this was blotted out and I found myself in the inky blackness of a tunnel—an ancient watercourse—leading into the very bowels of the mountain.

But there was no use in hesitating. Anything was preferable to the cannibal trees, and groping my way I pressed on. Winding

and twisting, turning sharply, the passageway led, ever ascending steeply and taxing my exhausted muscles and overwrought system to the utmost. Then, far ahead, I heard the faint sound of dripping, falling water and with joy at thought of burying my aching head in the cold liquid, and of easing my parched, dry throat, I hurried, stumbling, through the tunnel.

At last, I saw a glimmer of light in the distance and in it the sparkle of the water. Before me was the end of the tunnel and sunlight and with a final spurt of speed I rushed towards it. Then, just as I gained the opening, and so suddenly and unexpectedly that he seemed to materialize from thin air, a man rose before me.

Unable to check my speed, too thunderstruck at the apparition to halt, I dashed full into him and together we rolled head over heels upon the ground.

I have said he was a man. But even in that brief second that I glimpsed him, before I bowled him over, I realized that he was unlike any man I or anyone else had ever seen. Barely three feet in height, squat, with enormous head and shoulders, he stood shakily upon the tiniest of bandy legs and half supported his weight by his enormously long muscular arms. Had it not been that he was partly clothed and that his face was hairless, I should have thought him an ape. And now, as I picked myself up and stared at him, my jaws gaped in utter amazement. The fellow was running from me at top speed upon his hands, his feet waving and swaying in the air!

So utterly dumbfounded was I at the sight that I stood there silently gazing after the strange being until he vanished behind

a clump of bushes. Then as it dawned upon me that no doubt there were others near, and, that as he had shown no sign of hostility, they were likely peaceable, I hurried after him.

A narrow trail led through the brush and running along this I burst from the shrubbery and came to an abrupt halt, utterly astounded at the sight which met my eyes. I was standing at the verge of a little rise beyond which stretched an almost circular, level plain several miles in diameter. Massed upon this in long rows, compact groups and huge squares, were hundreds of low, flat-roofed, stone buildings, while upon a smooth green plot at a little distance, stood a massive truncated pyramid.

Unwittingly I had reached my goal. Before me was the lost city of Darien. Hazen had been right!

But it was not this thought nor the strange city and its buildings that held my fascinated gaze, but the people. Everywhere they swarmed. Upon the streets, the housetops, even on the open land of the plain, they crowded and each and every one an exact counterpart of the one with whom I had collided at the mouth of the tunnel. And, like him too, all were walking or running upon their hands with their feet in air!

All this I saw in the space of a few seconds. Then, to add to my astonishment, I saw that many of the impossible beings actually were carrying burdens in their upraised feet! Some bore baskets, others jars or pots, others bundles, while one group that was approaching in my direction, held bows and arrows in their toes, and held them most menacingly at that!

It was evident that I had been seen. The excitement of the beings, their gestures and the manner in which they peered towards me from between their arms, left no doubt of it, while the threatening defensive attitude of the bowmen proved that they were ready to attack or defend at a moment's notice.

No doubt, to them, my appearance was as remarkable, as inexplicable and as amazing as they were to me. The greater portion were evidently filled with terror and scurried into their houses, yet many still stood their ground, while a few were so overcome with curiosity and surprise that they dropped feet to earth and rested right side up in order to stare at me more intently.

I realized that it behooved me to do something. To stand there motionless and speechless, gazing at the strange folk while they stared back, would accomplish nothing. But what to do, what move to make? That was a serious question. If I attempted to approach them a shower of arrows might well end my career and my investigations of the place then and there. It was equally useless to retrace my steps, even had I been so minded, for only certain death lay back of me. By some means I must win the confidence or friendship of these outlandish beings if only temporarily. A thousand ideas flashed through my mind.

If only Hazen would appear the creatures of the city might think I had dropped from the sky and so look upon me as a supernatural being. But it was hopeless to expect such a coincidence or to look for him. I had told him to fly over on the tenth day and this was only the seventh. If only I had retained my revolver the discharge of the weapon might frighten them

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