

In the still of night,
a pursuit so relentless
that even a gun
could not deter
the invader

Nest Robber

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AT dawn, when the placid waters of Gatún Lake in the Canal Zone were ruffled by no waves save those slight spreading ones created by the passage of my slender cayuco, I would paddle to where some caciques were at work.

They were near the end of a long, slender arm of the lake, which reached far inward between two of the innumerable wooded ridges of Barro Colorado Island. A low decaying trunk stood there, a lone remnant of the forest, which had been drowned when this valley was flooded by the impounded waters of the Chagres River. Although its own leaves had long since withered and all its branches had fallen, the stump was verdant with the foliage of a variety of orchids, ferns, bromeliads, and even bushes, which here found a place in the sun; and it was draped and embraced all about, from the water up to the





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broken summit, with the roots of its aerial garden. Bees had built their hives and wasps attached their nests amid this tangled mass of vegetation; and this flock of Yellow-rumped Caciques (*Cacicus cela*) were weaving their swinging pouches at the tips of the branches of the bush that flourished at the top of the stub, which was about 25 feet high and stood 100 feet from the nearest shore.

They were black birds as big as pigeons, with patches of bright yellow on their wings and rumps and beneath their tails. They had sharply pointed, pale yellow bills. The females closely resembled the males but were smaller and less glossy, with eyes less intensely blue, or even brown on some. These hens went quietly and efficiently about the weaving of their long, pensile nests. They used slender vines and narrow strips torn from palm leaves

and tough vegetable fibers, all brought in their bills from the neighboring forest. When the thin, strong fabric had been completed and the rounded bottom closed, they lined it with silky down from the bursting seed pods of the *bar-rigón* trees on the shore, and soft fibrous materials. They required from six to eight days to weave and line their nests.

As with *oropéndolas*, grackles, and other members of the oriole family (Icteridae) which nest in colonies, the males, less numerous than the other sex, gave no aid in the construction of the nest, the incubation of the eggs, or the care of the young. They were brilliant vocalists and seemed to be fully aware of their musical genius. Perching on the coveted top of the trunk, or close beside the nests, or even clinging to their walls, they uttered a variety of beautiful, clear,

liquid phrases, to which I never tired of listening. As they delivered their matchless songs they bowed slightly forward, vibrated their relaxed wings, shook their tails, and raised the bright yellow feathers of their rumps, making them more conspicuous. They spent much time chasing each other about; but it seemed to be all a game, for they never fought and rarely so much as touched each other. If a male cacique occupying the favorite position at the top of the trunk saw a second one coming toward him, he invariably relinquished his perch to the latest claimant.

By the beginning of May, when thirteen female caciques had completed their nests and settled down to incubation, the colony became quieter. Two brown-eyed hens, probably younger than the others, abandoned their nests unfinished. Soon weak cries issuing from some



ALMOST THE FIRST BEAM of the flashlight disclosed a snake—a yellow and gray mica—stretched in sinuous line along the branch

of the pouches, and the food in the bills of their owners as they returned to them, advised me that the eggs had hatched. For a few days the number of nestlings increased and the colony prospered. But then, watching from the cayuco tied to a submerged stump at the head of the cove, I found that some of the nests were no longer visited by the hens. Daily the number of abandoned pouches increased, until half were unoccupied. Since none of the nestlings was yet old enough to fly, it was evident that something was preying upon the eggs and young. But it was quite impossible for me to reach and look into the nests

hanging from the extremities of the slender branches.

During all my hours of watching by daylight, I had never seen any creature molest the caciques, so it was a fair conclusion that the nests were plundered during the night. Accordingly, seated with a companion in the cayuco tied at the head of the cove, I kept vigil as the twilight faded into darkness. The caciques had retired into the forest to roost, leaving, as is their custom, the older nestlings that still survived alone in their swinging cradles. In the dusk the call of the Poor-me-One, most melancholy yet one of the most beautiful of bird

notes, floated out of the woods on the right side of the inlet. Presently the big, dusky bird of night emerged from the trees and flew over the water toward the caciques' colony but swerved to pass it by and continued to the opposite shore. In form and mode of flight it resembled a large, slow-flying hawk, a similarity that quite spontaneously suggested predatory habits.

Could it be that this potoo, this larger relative of the goatsuckers, which I knew only as a soul-stirring voice sounding through the moonlit forest, preyed upon the nestling caciques? I did not want to believe

that a creature with voice so divine had habits so disagreeable; yet this was my first clue to the mystery of the nestlings' disappearance. Pushing the cayuco farther back into the shadow of the trees on the shore, where we would be less conspicuous to the penetrating vision of a night bird, we waited breathlessly. Again the Poor-me-One winged toward the colony but flew above it without alighting, then vanished into the forest. It did not again appear.

We continued to watch in the darkness, hearing only the liquid calls of the frogs along the shore, and once the grunts of some pecararies off in the forest. We waited until the waning moon, rising late, floated up over the crests of the trees on the eastern ridge. But all remained quiet among the caciques' nests; and at last we reluctantly paddled away through the moonlight, the mystery unsolved.

Armed Vigil

The following evening I returned alone to guard the caciques' blighted colony. As daylight waned, the young birds in one of the nests cried out loudly for food, impatiently shaking their swinging cradle; but their mother did not bring them more. All the other nests of the caciques appeared to be deserted now. The pair of yellow-breasted Cayenne Flycatchers were bringing insects frequently to their nestlings in the oven-shaped nursery of straws, situated a few feet above the water among the roots of the air-plants that covered the stump. Still harboring the delusion that the attack on the nests would come from the air, I made a berth for the cayuco among the tall, dense marsh grasses at the head of the cove. There I could wait in partial concealment, viewing the nests in silhouette against the sky. As daylight waned, I loaded the little revolver that I carried for personal protection, the only firearm I possessed, and placed extra ammunition and the electric torch in readiness for immediate use.

On the farther shore of the lake,

at the end of the long, forest-bordered vista down the cove, a massive cumulus cloud rose above the darkening hills, the colors of sunset playing round it. The roseate glow of the early sunset deepened to purple, which was in turn gradually extinguished, leaving the cloud a dull, leaden mass, sharply outlined against the clear amber of the tropical afterglow in the open spaces of the sky. The birds had all retired to their roosts, and the bats began to flutter erratically above the water. The brilliant *Pyrophorus* fireflies threaded their triple illumination through the forest on the shores. The mosquitoes began to buzz and the beetles to boom among the lush grasses around me. Frogs along the shores called in liquid unison, and the Poor-me-One sounded a few weak notes in the woodland but did not fly above the water nor show itself as it had done on the preceding evening.

The afterglow slowly faded from the west, but the stars now shone brightly overhead, with the Great Bear standing up above the mouth of the cove. The caciques' nests and the foliage about them coalesced into a single dark mass, which formed the effigy of a horse with a bushy tail, perfectly black against the starlit sky. Every nest and every leaf that was visible in silhouette remained motionless, and peace seemed to prevail in the devastated colony.

The Culprit

Time slipped by, and since no sign of menace came from the air, I pushed the cayuco out from its bed of grass and paddled toward the colony, into which I threw the beam of my electric torch. Almost the first glance revealed a snake—a yellow-and-gray mica (*Spilotes pullatus*)—stretched in a sinuous line along a branch that supported several nests, now hanging empty and deserted.

Holding the torch in my left hand and the revolver in my right, I fired at the snake, repeating the shots until the magazine was exhausted. Neither the sudden blaze

of light nor the loud reports of the gun seemed to make any impression upon the reptile. Deliberate and impassive as Time, it continued to slither along from nest to nest, each of which it had already sacked and now found empty. Meanwhile the cayuco drifted slowly about; and I found it difficult to keep the long craft in position while I loaded and aimed, all by the light of the torch held in one hand. Again and again I fired, until I had shot off all my 20 cartridges, and the revolver's barrel became too hot to touch. But a snake, even at 20 or 25 feet, is a slender target to hit with a short-barreled revolver in an uncertain light; and when I had exhausted my cartridges the serpent continued its search among the pouches it had already plundered.

Relentless

As a last hope, I threw an extra paddle, then three spare flashlight batteries, all of which missed their mark. There were no stones on the neighboring shores, and I had nothing more to throw at the unheeding plunderer. But I shouted, hissed, whistled, and splashed water, all without effect. There was a horrid fascination in watching this pursuit of prey so concentrated that nothing else, neither noise nor peril nor strange illumination, made the slightest difference. Finally the snake stuck its head into a nest at the end of a twig and emerged with a bulge in its body just behind its mouth. Then it opened wide its jaws and vomited up two eggs, which struck the water with a splash and sank. I concluded that the gluttonous creature perhaps cared only for nestlings, now that it had intruded into the midst of plenty! About this time a steamship, aglow with many lights, slipped steadily through the dark water beyond the mouth of the cove. Its passengers, had they been looking over the port rail, might have noticed a beam of light directed into a low tree by the distant shore; but they could not possibly have guessed the tragedy that the beam revealed to me.

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When it had completed its search among the abandoned pouches on the side of the bush where they hung closest together, the serpent slid across to the opposite side of the colony, where hung the only nest that I knew to be occupied,—its nestlings now ten days old. I had fired my last shot and hurled the last detachable object that I could spare, and still Death advanced relentlessly toward its goal. The wasps and bees whose nests were plastered or suspended all over the tree did not sally forth to punish the invader, which slipped too smoothly and silently over the boughs to arouse them from their night's repose. Nor did it occur to me until later that I might have stirred them to fury by hammering against the trunk. What I had already seen was sufficiently distressing to a bird-lover, and I had no desire to witness this nocturnal drama to its tragic end. I turned the prow of my little vessel toward the open lake and with heavy heart paddled away into the darkness of the night, leaving it to cover an act that no true friend of birds would willingly behold.

Next morning I returned to make another effort to dislodge the snake from the blighted colony. Even if the last of the caciques' nestlings had been devoured, I might at least

save the young Cayenne Flycatchers in the nest among the roots near the water level. I concluded that the snake, easily swimming across the water upon which the caciques had foolishly relied to protect them from the attacks of terrestrial enemies, had climbed to the top of the stub by way of the roots draping it all around. Then, after cleaning out some of the nests, it had made its lair in a deserted pouch by day, to sally forth and plunder others while darkness shielded it from the attacks of hawks and prevented all possible defense by the purely diurnal caciques. So it would continue until the last egg and nestling that the tree held had been devoured.

But as the cayuco drew near the head of the inlet, to my amazement I beheld the snake hanging head downward beside one of the caciques' abandoned pouches. A nearby nest, contrary to my expectation, still cradled living nestlings; and their mother, devoted bird, was carrying food to them, less than a yard from the motionless body of the destroyer. On the neighboring shore I cut a long pole and managed to pull down the snake, which had already begun to putrefy. There were three bullet holes in its posterior half, through one of which the viscera extruded! The serpent,

in its death writhings, had tied a tight knot in the hinder portion of its length. With a lack of sensibility that one would hardly expect to find in any living thing, the ravening snake, which might easily have dropped into the water and swam unharmed away, not only continued its search for booty after being thrice struck by bullets but even swallowed two eggs when mortally wounded, which probably explains why it had disgorged them.

The nestlings, which I had supposed to be doomed when, my last shot spent, I left the serpent advancing toward them, also miraculously escaped destruction; and their mother continued faithfully to attend them. Other female caciques, recently bereft of their young, still came to the colony bearing food. After delaying a while, they would swallow this or carry it off again in their bills. Still others came to peer into empty nests or cling to their sides. Despite all that these poor birds had endured, their attachment to their nests and young remained unshaken. Nor did the males, although they took no active part in caring for the nestlings, utterly desert the stricken colony. Until the last youngster could fly, they came at intervals to pour forth their mellifluous songs among the swinging empty pouches.