

The Cup of Nestor

SIMON BROWN

Simon Brown's most recent books are *Daughter of Independence*, the third book in the Chronicles of Kydan trilogy from Pan Macmillan, and the short story collection *Troy*, from Ticonderoga Publications.

He lives on the New South Wales south coast with his wife Alison and children Edlyn and Fynn.

About 'The Cup of Nestor', Simon writes, "This story took nearly twelve years to write, and was influenced by a Stephen Jay Gould essay about 19th century scientists. The story didn't turn out the way I expected, which was disconcerting at first, but ultimately more rewarding."

* * * *

JUNE 1866

W

hen the Thackeray Expedition arrived by steamer at the river port of Manaus it was welcomed with more grace than curiosity - scientific expeditions being almost as common as mosquitoes in Amazonas - although the fact that the daughter of the expedition's sponsor was in attendance allowed it some extra notoriety. Nevertheless, most excitement was reserved for another passenger on the same steamer; Jenny Lind, the famous Norwegian opera singer, had agreed to suspend her retirement in England to sing in Manaus's new opera house. A small detachment from Milan's Teatro alla Scala had already been in town for several weeks, rehearsing the repertoire they would be performing for the next six months, and they were on the dock to greet her.

Young William John - student, veteran and hollow man - had left his own cabin in time to watch Lind disembark with all the style and precision of a wading bird. Her admirers clapped and cheered enthusiastically, surrounded her with parasols and fluttering fans, and shepherded her towards the town's best hotel, the white and indomitable Christabelle. John was joined at the railing by his master, Professor Nestor John Saumarez, a small dapper man despite his paunch and the salt-and-pepper moustache

that draped across his upper lip like a signature.

“And there, untouched by nature, marches culture,” Saumarez said in a voice that was both admiring and regretful.

“Sir?”

“Look around you, William. Here we are, several hundred miles inside the Amazon jungle, and what greets us? A town that would not be out of place in Estremadura.” He glanced at his student, his eyebrows arching. “That’s in Portugal.”

“Yes, sir,” John said, trying not to sound resentful. Saumarez always assumed his students, lacking his knowledge of biology, were ignorant in all else as well.

“I cannot help but applaud Madame Lind’s progress. She is everything our civilization aspires to: art and artifice, dignity and gravitas, romance and allure. And yet...” Saumarez raised one index finger, his signal for the imminence of a concluding remark, “... and yet, for all she represents, for all Manaus represents, there is no accounting of that bounty surrounding us. It is as if God’s very thoughts had no place in our own.” He shook his head sadly. “Art has no use for science,” he added lowly, “and that is the shame of our species.”

Lind and her party were almost out of sight, their coloured parasols twirling in the sun like tiny flowers spun in the hands of children. The figures seemed to wash in the light for a moment and then they disappeared behind the wall of the Christabelle. With their passing the town became darker, the jungle closer. John held his breath, expecting something more. Perhaps a sign from Saumarez’s God, which he sometimes imagined to be part patriarch and part tree, a strange amalgam of religion and nature and equally terrifying in either aspect.

Saumarez touched John gently on the shoulder and said, “Do not let me persuade you to despise our race.”

Before the weight of the comment could bear down on John, Charles Thackeray appeared from his cabin. He was a tall, well-built and self-made man with a strong desire to be famous for something other than his wealth, hence the expedition. He was followed by his daughter, the long and angular Alexandra, her face as blank as a cloudless sky. Her gaze fell on John and he felt his skin prickle. Thackeray smiled broadly at Saumarez and said in his conniving voice: “Who’s despising who? How could anyone

despise anyone on a day like this?" He swept out one arm to encompass Manaus. "Just look at this magnificent place!" He had not expected an answer, and did not receive one. He was, as usual, smiling with that effortless ease that comes to those who are sincerely convinced they are universally liked and admired.

John wanted to escape Alexandra's stare, which settled on him like a judgement. Before he could go, Thackeray grasped his elbow and beamed down at him. "You must be *very* excited about all of this... umm..."

"John, father," Alexandra said evenly, as if she was reading from an attendance book. "William John."

"William, eh? Young students like you don't get an opportunity like this every day."

"Once in a lifetime, sir," John agreed hurriedly. Thackeray, pleased with the reply, released his grip and John made his escape.

On his way back to his cabin he passed his fellow student, Nathaniel Slater. Slater's blue, watery eyes regarded him with interest. "Was it fine?" he asked.

"The disembarking of Miss Lind? Oh, yes, a grand procession. It was an admirable affair."

"And our reception?" Slater asked nervously. He was extraordinarily shy, and hated attention.

"None at all, I should think. Miss Lind has quite taken everyone's breath away; there is little left for us."

Slater nodded. "I must see about organizing the unloading of our equipment. Professor Saumarez was *insistent* the equipment be my responsibility."

John nodded gravely, repressing a smile. "Can I give you a hand?"

"Thank you, but I think I will be all right."

"Let me know if you change your mind."

Slater promised he would and continued on his way. When John reached his cabin he loosened his tie and shirt. Even though the expedition

had been sailing up the Amazon for over a week before swinging northwest into the Negro River to reach Manaus, he was still not used to the heat and humidity. He opened the cabin's single porthole, seeking a breeze, but all he got was a view out across the water and in the middle distance a green fringe indicating the far bank of the river. In two or three days, perhaps less if Saumarez could arrange guides and porters, they would be making their way upriver, deeper into the jungle, collecting specimens for Harvard and some of the world's leading museums. Thackeray was right: it was a unique opportunity for John and the other five students. In exchange for their assistance in catching and sorting specimens, Saumarez would deliver a lecture to the students every afternoon in nature's own classroom.

John grimaced. *Assuming the heat does not first addle all our brains.*

He lay back in his bunk and closed his eyes. It was hard for him to breathe in the confines of the cabin, but he did not want to leave and risk encountering Thackeray or Saumarez again. The first was too loud and the second too domineering to be taken in large doses. And then there was Alexandra and her eyes; he was frightened of her, he was embarrassed to admit, and without knowing why.

He turned over in his bunk and tried to will himself to sleep. God knows, he needed it, and would need it twice as much once they were in the jungle, but his own anxiety worked against him. When at last he admitted failure and opened his eyes he saw, without surprise, that everything was changed. Instead of the steamer's bulkheads he was surrounded by the thin green foliage of a northern summer, and though he could not see it he could smell and hear the smoke, the burning and crackling of sap wood and cotton and wool, of leather and human flesh. In the distance, too, he could hear the peppering of rifle muskets, the deeper cough of 6 lb Napoleons, the hurrahs and cries of men.

No...!

And he opened his eyes and saw the heavy metal hull all around him, smelling of paint and rust and tropical water. He sat up, sighing so heavily it was almost a sob, his skin glistening with sweat.

* * * *

Though careful with his money, Thackeray was no miser. The members of his expedition were established in one of Manaus's better hotels. If not the Christabelle, the Zezere was at least more comfortable and considerably

cooler than the steamer that had brought them this far. Even John found himself falling for the charms of Manaus. Every day the students, with nothing to do while Saumarez made final preparations for the expedition, would wander between cafes and restaurants and salons. At night they would walk by the glittering whorehouses, but never enter - some because they were afraid for their souls and the rest because they were afraid Saumarez would hear of it and send them home in disgrace. They would saunter by, as casually as their naiveté allowed, and beneath the brim of their hats slyly ogle at the women who decorated the entrances of the brothels with such practiced ease it made the students envious. John would sometimes find his glances returned, would glimpse soft brown eyes flashing at him above round moons of tempting flesh; ironically, their voluptuousness reminded him of Alexandra, who seemed to him as dry as kindling and as unappealing as Saumarez's puritanical virtue.

Profits from the trade in timber, rubber and coffee had made the people of Manaus among the wealthiest in the world, and they proudly decorated their town not only with an opera house, but with a museum and an art gallery as well. The museum was popular because of its collection of shrunken heads. Slater, without any evidence, said they were fakes. John visited the art gallery on the second day; the paintings and sculptures were pleasant enough without being exciting, and it wasn't until he had left he realized he had not seen a single depiction of the jungle.

Towards the evening of the second day, John and Slater were drinking coffee and sharing a seed cake when Saumarez sat down next to them. The professor was looking pleased with himself.

"We have the guides and porters we need!" he told them cheerfully. "And the mayor has arranged for several boats to take us. Tomorrow we can load our equipment, and the day after that leave Manaus!"

"As well, the mayor has invited our party to Jenny Lind's Manaus debut tomorrow night." He glanced at John. "A last taste of culture, William, before we leave man's world and enter God's. I look forward so much to showing all of you His song first hand."

John was not sure how to reply to this, but Slater broke the silence for him. "And may we learn to recite some of it." From anyone else it would have sounded obsequious, but from Slater it had the ring of absolute loyalty.

Saumarez always seemed slightly surprised by Slater's earnestness, as if his own shadow had suddenly spoken out. "That is our plan, Nathaniel,

but all will depend on the Creator's will, not ours." Slater nodded deferentially.

"Come," Saumarez urged. "We must tell the others the good news." He led the way back to the hotel. John followed almost reluctantly; on this day Manaus was filled with a gentle light, and at that moment he felt as if he walked in a better world than the one he was used to. He did not want to go into the jungle. He had enough darkness of his own.

The next day passed swiftly. Saumarez, whose facility with Spanish was good enough to let him make do in Portuguese, explained to the new porters what their duties would be on the expedition. With their assistance, the equipment was packed into several long boats, and these in turn were then stored in a small warehouse by the river ready for their departure the next day. That evening, alerted by anticipation, the Thackeray party made its way to the opera house.

Miss Lind and the singers from the Teatro alia Scala sang excerpts from Mozart's works; Saumarez, familiar enough with the composer's virtuosity not to be dazzled by it, snatched moments to observe his companions. Most of his students formed a coterie of promising if not brilliant biologists, especially Slater, whose diligence and devotion seemed obsessive even by the Professor's standards; the odd one out was John. Saumarez could not help liking the Rhode Islander and his blunt honesty, but found himself puzzled by John's infatuation with systematics and Charles Darwin's heretical theories on natural selection. The man was Saumarez's newest student but the oldest in years, having interrupted his studies to fight for the Union, and possessed a nature so sombre Saumarez assumed his heart carried a great tragedy.

Completely opposite to John in character was Thackeray; an ebullient, successful businessman who had done well out of the war. His manner was abrasive because it was so constantly lighthearted and eroded good will like a tide working on a beach. But he was rich, and enthusiastically supportive of Saumarez's aim to collect as many new species of insects as he could from the Amazon rainforest, and for that alone Saumarez would forgive him anything. It seemed to him that his daughter, Alexandra, could have been made from the same mould as John, and played the cloud to her father's eternal silver lining.

During the last piece of the performance, an aria from *Don Giovanni*, Saumarez observed a single tear roll down John's cheek. He felt guilty for seeing it, and was glad the theatre was too dark for anyone to notice him blush.

* * * *

JULY 1866

A breathless John arrived late for the noon lecture. He took the last camp chair under the awning and nodded his apologies to Saumarez, who graciously smiled back and continued with his lecture on the structure of insect wings. Alexandra Thackeray, her face as impassive as ever, held up Saumarez's little blackboard for all to see; on the blackboard a rough picture of the hooked wings of a fly had been drawn out in blue chalk.

John pretended to listen to the lecture, but his mind was on the occupant of the little polished wooden box with a muslin lid which he held in his hand. A beetle, over an inch in length, uselessly struggled to escape its prison; its elytra shone with a beautiful metallic blue. Most interesting was that it possessed both mandibles for chewing and stylets for stabbing, something John thought could have been unique. He was sure it was a new species, or more likely an entirely new genus or even family. He raided his memory of Latin to come up with a binomial for it. *Caduceus* meant staff; that could describe the stylets. But he remembered the caddis fly had been named after that. Perhaps *Gladius*, for sword. He studied the beetle more closely. The stylets were quite short, really. *Pugio*, then. The dagger. That was it. And a species name to describe the wonderful colour of its wing cases. *Pugio caeruleus*. Yes, that had quite a ring to it, he told himself. The dagger beetle.

He turned his attention to Saumarez, who had erased the first drawing and was busy sketching the wings of a butterfly; his attempts at drawing some kind of pattern on the wings drew muffled laughter from his students, and he faced them with mock gravity.

"I am a scientist, not an artist. At least it *looks* like the wing of a butterfly; you all should be grateful for small blessings."

"Looks more like an ear," Thackeray muttered, and even Saumarez joined in the laughter then. The businessman enjoyed sitting in on the professor's lectures, especially since Saumarez had named a new species of dragonfly after him two weeks before; the science of biology had become personal.

"Well, an ear that flaps," Saumarez conceded. He rubbed his forehead with the flat of his hand. For a moment he looked as if he was

confused, unsure of where he was. Then he seemed to gather his thoughts and he continued quickly. "Just as Manaus - a city amid the jungle - gives perfect architecture to God's own creation, so does taxonomy give architecture to the chaos of life. By studying how nature is ordered we discover the keys to God's secrets, secrets left by Him to challenge us; and it is through such challenges that God propels us in our ascent over nature. We are his city in the chaotic verdure of life." He pointed to the sketch of the butterfly wing. "Even Michelangelo could not have drawn a butterfly wing that properly reflects its symmetry, its intricate design so matched to its function.

"But!" he declared, holding up a finger to his audience. "But never believe that such perfection is due to the workings of nature alone. Do not mistake the sign of God's greatness for a sign of His irrelevance. Nature does not accomplish its miracles alone. There is a guiding hand, the Great Draftsman's will, behind all you now see around you."

John listened with increasing impatience. He knew Saumarez really was holding his finger up to Darwin: his theory of natural selection strayed too far from God for Saumarez. But John believed differently. He had actually read *On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, one of the very few of Saumarez's students to have made the effort, and it had been a revelation. So much that he had not understood before started to make sense. And he knew why he and Saumarez's opinions were divided over this. Saumarez believed in a God.

But I have seen God die, John reminded himself.

* * * *

"The dagger beetle," Slater said flatly. "And those stylets were formed from the maxillae alone?"

"Yes. If you look closely, you can see that neither the labrum nor the labium have evolved at all."

Slater looked disapprovingly at John. "Don't let the Professor hear you use that word."

John nodded stiffly. He knew that Slater's views were closer to those of Saumarez than his own, and yet Slater accepted John's radical opinion about evolution with equanimity. When John had first arrived at Harvard, still recovering from his physical and mental wounds, Slater, who himself had been in the war, accepted him immediately. In the past year the two

students had formed something resembling a friendship, and often worked together. John often wondered what it was Slater saw in him, apart from their shared experience in the army of the Union, but never questioned the relationship itself.

“Where did you find it?” Slater asked.

“About half a mile from here.”

“Do you think you could find the spot again?”

“I think so. Do you want to go now?”

Slater checked his fob watch. “We have an hour before the evening meal.”

John led the way from the camp, heading west along a trail the expedition had themselves made over the last two weeks. After ten minutes he headed south, and the going became much rougher. They clambered over roots and vines. Insects buzzed around their heads. Monkeys hooted at their invasion.

John eventually stopped before a fallen tree; to John it looked like an ancient cannon covered in moss and fungi; saplings grew around it, reaching for the hole in the canopy left behind by the giant. He pointed to a branch stump about halfway along its length. “I found it on that.”

They both leaned over the tree and carefully studied its surface. There were several insects, most of them beetles, wandering over the bark; John lifted one paper-thin section to show there were as many crawling underneath. But no *Pugio caeruleus*.

“Are you sure this is the right -?” Before Slater could finish his question, a beetle with electric blue elytra appeared. If anything, it was larger than John’s first specimen. For a moment they watched it stalk an almost equally large weevil, but it took so long to do the business that eventually Slater sighed in frustration and picked it up. He placed it in his open palm.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” John said, but too late.

The beetle’s head jabbed down into the pillow of flesh at the base of Slater’s index finger.

"It stung me!" Slater exclaimed, brushing it off. John inspected the wound; it was too small for his eyes, but a small bead of blood welled up to mark the spot.

"You don't suppose it was poisonous, do you?" Slater asked.

"I've never encountered a poisonous beetle. How much does it hurt?"

"More of an itch now, but that's not necessarily a sign. Who knows what toxins are yet to be discovered in the Amazon?"

"Well, let's return to the camp and await developments." John meant it lightly, but Slater seemed annoyed by his casualness.

"I think I will let you study the pest and its offspring by yourself, William. I have no intention of being poisoned - or worse - in the name of science."

* * * *

The mosquito net divided the night sky into small squares like a graph sheet. It seemed to John that each square claimed a single star. He reached up a hand and ran his finger along the net; the sky seemed to ripple like a river, and for a moment the stars were nothing more than reflections of some greater light.

The idea made him start. He tried to recollect the date, and realized with a shock it must have been close to the middle of July. It had been three years since that afternoon on Little Round Top when God had died. He closed his eyes, tried to squeeze the memory from his brain, but the sounds and smells of the battle came back as if it had been yesterday. He gasped and opened his eyes, focused on the stars; no great source of light, but things unimportant and far, far away. Slowly he remembered where he was. The sounds of insects filled the air, and nearby he could hear the sighing of the Negro River. For the first time on the expedition, he was glad to be surrounded by jungle, as far from civilization as it was possible to get.

Later, he was woken by the sound of someone moving nearby. He sat up in his cot and looked around. Slater was still asleep. Then he heard the sound again and turned. Alexandra Thackeray was crouched down over his sample boxes; she turned her head and their eyes met. He hurriedly pulled on his pants under his blanket, threw the blanket away and brushed aside the mosquito net. Alexandra watched him with a detached amusement.

“What are you doing?” he asked sternly.

“Slater told me about your new beetle. I wanted to see it.”

“You should have asked.”

“You were asleep,” she said simply, and returned to sorting through his boxes. “But now that you’re awake, I expect you won’t mind. Which box should I be looking at?”

John did not know whether to be affronted or embarrassed. He felt Alexandra was assuming too much, but her blunt curiosity was something she had never revealed before and it made him feel he was imposing on her rather than the other way round. He pointed to a box she had already discarded. “That one.”

Alexandra picked it up again and peered into it. “No wonder I missed it. Such a plain thing.”

“Its elytra - that is, the wing cases –”

“I know what the elytra are,” she said evenly.

“— the elytra are quite beautiful in full light.” He swallowed. “Anyway, it isn’t its colour that makes it interesting.”

Alexandra looked at him with the hint of a mocking smile on her lips. “Shouldn’t you put a shirt on?”

Confounded by this, John scabbled among his clothes at the end of his cot, found his shirt and pulled it over his head. “Why couldn’t you have waited until everyone was up?” he demanded.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said. “Do you really think this is a new species?”

“I think it’s an entirely new genus,” he admitted. “Look at its mouth parts. To the best of my knowledge, there is nothing else like it.”

She peered even closer at the specimen. “This is a predator, then?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“I wonder what it preys on?”

“Naturalists,” he said, remembering Slater’s wounding. The thought made him smile. “Among other things,” he added quickly.

“Have you shown this to Professor Saumarez?”

“Not yet. I was waiting for the right moment.”

Alexandra looked at him strangely. “And when would that be?”

John felt himself grow smaller under her gaze, as if he was being accused of a wrong. “I’m not sure.”

“You think it’s important, don’t you?”

John shrugged, then realized the implications of her question. “But that’s not why I haven’t shown it to the Professor!” he said quickly, suddenly alarmed.

Alexandra shook her head. “I wasn’t thinking that.” She handed him the specimen box. “If you find more of these in the jungle, I’d like to see them.”

John nodded and she left. He slowly let out his breath and noticed Slater looking at him from under his blanket.

“What was that about?”

“I haven’t a clue,” John said quietly, and then looked at his friend accusingly. “If you were awake, why didn’t you say something? I could’ve done with some help.”

“Safer under cover,” Slater said. “She reminds me of a preying mantis.”

* * * *

AUGUST 1866

It was a Sunday, and Professor Nestor John Saumarez was delivering a sermon, his words floating up into the air and becoming part of the canopy, part of the dark sky and endless forest that enveloped them like great hands. The words seemed fitting in this place, so despite his natural inclination, John found himself intrigued by Saumarez’s vision of God and

the destiny of His creation. He closed his eyes and listened, and the sound of Saumarez's voice was like the hum of bees on a warm spring afternoon, and he wanted to be a boy again, growing up on his family's Rhode Island farm, believing everything he was told about the world with absolute faith. With faith came a freedom he had lost in the war, a freedom that allowed a mild consolation that for every event there was a cause, for every question there was an answer.

John opened his eyes.

But he did not believe, because there was nothing to believe in. There was no cause apart from chance. And most important questions had no answers, and the few that did offered no comfort.

Saumarez finished and led the gathering in prayer. From habit, John bowed his head with the others, but instead of praying he studied the new specimen in the box he held in his hands. When he had first found the beetle, John thought he had found a specimen from another population of *P. caeruleus*, but on closer inspection had discovered the mouth parts had a slightly different arrangement. The stylets were even longer, and the elytra flashed green, not blue, when caught in the sun. He was sure it was a related species, and tentatively named it *Pugio viridis*. On reflection, it was interesting that he had not yet rediscovered *P. caeruleus* anywhere within walking distance of the new camp, only four or five miles upriver from the old one. It was as if an invisible shield had been placed between the two species.

Deciding it was time to consult Saumarez, John had come to talk to him about the find, but the Sunday service had stopped him short. He felt as if he had walked into the wrong temple, and he was no longer sure he wanted to discuss the beetle with the professor. At that moment, Saumarez seemed smaller to him, and his respect for the other's authority was so reduced it shocked him into inaction.

The prayer finished, and the gathering of students and clerks and natives dispersed. John did not move at all. The air in the clearing stilled. A shaft of sunlight traced across the grass, the tents, scalloped off the river, then across John. The beetle shone.

"That's an interesting specimen," Saumarez said.

John's head jerked up. He thought Saumarez looked flatter, less exuberant than usual after worshipping his god. Reduced by the heat and humidity, John thought. "I wanted to show it to you."

Saumarez smiled benignly. "I would be pleased to see it, William, but first I must consult with Charles Thackeray about transporting our specimens home. He seems to think that since they are dead they will not object to rough treatment."

John nodded. "Of course. I will show you later."

Almost like a father to a son, Saumarez patted John's shoulder and ambled off, humming a psalm.

Although relieved he had not lied, John felt ashamed of how easily he had blurted the first thing that came into his head. It was uncharacteristic of him to panic, or be so acquiescent; he marvelled, too, at how with an expression of interest and the slightest physical contact, Saumarez effortlessly restored his authority, never knowing it had been under threat.

His enthusiasm at discovering the beetle was overwhelmed by listlessness, and he did not know what to do next. Distantly, he heard parrots in the jungle, and he decided to go back, to search for more specimens of *P. viridis*, but his legs did not want to move.

"Is it the same beetle as before?" Alexandra took the canvas chair next to his.

He regarded her warily, but what he had once taken for a blank expression he now saw as an openness, a completely guileless interest that he found almost flattering.

"No. Not quite."

He handed her the specimen and she studied it closely. "Could it be a juvenile of the other beetle?"

"I don't think so. I was about to go back and see what other examples I can find. I need to return to Harvard with as many specimens as possible and compare them properly with the literature, and the university's collection. But I'm sure I'm right, and that this and the first beetle you saw belong to an undiscovered genus. After all, there are more species of beetle in the world than any other kind of animal."

"Really? Beetles, and not fish or birds?" She swatted at an insect. "Or flies?"

John's smile widened into something genuine. "As a group, they found the most adaptable body shape very early on, and have capitalized on it ever since." He looked around at the forest. "Of course, who knows what will be found here in Amazonas? Or in the depths of Africa or New Guinea? Or the jungles of Siam?"

"Or the Appalachians or the Everglades." She handed him back his specimen. "Tell me, Mr John, did you come on this expedition to find new beetles, or to get away from home?"

"I don't know what you mean," he said, suddenly on his guard.

"You seem like a lost child to me. A runaway." She took a quick breath. "Could I come with you?"

"Excuse me?"

"If you are going after other specimens now, would you mind if I accompanied you?"

John did not know what to say. He was reluctant to agree - he again found himself on his guard with her - but after succumbing so easily to Saumarez's authority he no longer felt he had any of his own.

"You must lead the way," Alexandra said, as if the matter had already been decided.

A short while later he had returned to the site where he had found *P. viridis* - a tangle of branches and vines on the bank of the river and extending over it somehow like a half-completed bridge - and almost immediately found another specimen. They watched it ambling along the bridge for a while before John reached out to collect it with his left hand, using his right to steady himself against the branch. Alexandra pulled him back. "Look," she said, nodding to where his right hand had been. The biggest centipede John had ever seen, almost as long as his forearm and an inch thick, was curling itself around the branch and heading for the beetle. Involuntarily he pulled back, almost losing his balance. Alexandra put a hand behind his back to steady him, all the while watching the centipede to see what happened.

The beetle seemed unaware of its danger, and John found himself losing any detachment as a biologist or student. He wanted the beetle to get away, and at the same time recognized how ludicrous that was - under other circumstances he would not hesitate to capture and kill the beetle

himself. He could even sense Alexandra tensing beside him.

The beetle realized its danger too late. It turned in the opposite direction, did a little wiggle with its abdomen and scurried away. The centipede realized its meal was escaping and put on an extra burst of speed that was astounding for a creature its size, and was within an inch of catching the beetle when, suddenly, it stopped. John and Alexandra could see the centipede struggling to continue the chase but its first two segments seemed stuck fast somehow, as if a nail had pinned them to the branch.

“What happened to it?” Alexandra asked, nodding at the centipede.

“I have no idea,” John confessed.

Then they saw the beetle do another turn around and come back towards them. It carefully avoided the centipede’s poisonous jaws, ambled onto its enemy’s back and jabbed it between the second and third segments. The centipede’s struggles stopped almost instantly.

“That’s remarkable,” Alexandra breathed.

“It must be venomous,” John said, then felt stupid for having stated the obvious, and then guiltily thought of Slater. But no, Slater was alright, so *P. caeruleus* was either not venomous or not venomous enough to affect humans.

The beetle leaned over its catch and tapped the branch with its two forelegs. A few seconds later a dozen of its kind scrambled out from behind leaves, knotholes, and loose bark and converged on the centipede. John and Alexandra watched astounded as the beetles collectively dismembered and then consumed the centipede; within half-an-hour all that was left were the pincers and fangs.

“You had better be careful collecting any more specimens or you might end up being collected yourself,” Alexandra chided.

* * * *

Saumarez joined John before the evening meal to see his specimens. John kept his two species of *Pugio* until last, and when he presented them held them out like gifts to a king. Saumarez studied both carefully, holding each carefully up to the light as John described how and where he found them.

“Well, William, I am sure you are right. This must be a new genus.” Saumarez held them up together. “And you say you found the blue one near our first camp, and the green one not far from here?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“And did you see any intermingling of the two species?”

“No, Professor. None.”

Saumarez looked uncomfortable. He drew a long breath, wiped sweat from his forehead. “God’s garden is not an easy place to endure, William.”

“No, sir.”

Saumarez looked up, searching the clearing and the surrounding jungle almost as if he thought his god would stride out from among the trees at any moment. “But I am sure Eden would not be an easy place to endure, either. God made it a place of suffering, I am sure, which is what the Old Testament means when it says it was taken from us.” He looked at John with a bewildered expression. “Who would have thought that a place filled with so much of His creation could be so...” His voice drifted off and he handed the specimens back to John.

“Thank you for showing me. Nathaniel said you have names for them.”

“Provisionally.”

“Of course.”

“*Pugio caeruleus* and *Pugio viridis*.”

Saumarez smiled. “Ah, good. Yes, for the colour of the elytra. Good.”

John put the specimens down. “Professor, are you all right? You’re not ill, are you?”

Saumarez seemed puzzled by the question. “Ill? Oh, no. I am never ill. God takes care of me. I rest myself in his hands and he carries me through all trials and all tribulations. Did you know I think we’ve discovered twelve new species of ant over the last week?” He stood up slowly. “The good lord only knows how many other species we have stored away in our boxes. It is really quite remarkable. If mysterious. But quite remarkable, and

evidence of God's imagination and dedication to creation."

John gathered his courage and said, "It might also be considered evidence of natural selection, each species finding its own role to play in creation."

Saumarez smiled thinly. "You know, William, I am not as close-minded about Mr Darwin's theory as some would have it. His research has some merit. But I am absolutely certain that no species evolves into its own role. God is not merely inspiration, not merely the guiding hand. He is entirely and absolutely the driving force."

He patted John on the shoulder, just as he had earlier in the day, reaffirming his authority.

"This can be a terrible place if we forget our creator. We can find ourselves led into gross error. Nature can dazzle us as assuredly as words and blind us to the truth."

* * * *

Slater volunteered to help John dissect one of his examples of *P. viridis*. The humidity made it difficult work, and they were constantly swabbing sweat from their foreheads and wiping their hands dry on their pants.

After separating the beetle's head, thorax and abdomen, they started on the creature's amazing mouth parts, John dissecting and describing and Slater recording.

They had been going at it for half an hour when Slater said, "Saumarez is concerned about you."

"He has no need to be." John pushed the beetle's head aside and brought the thorax under the magnifying glass. "Alright, we have six pair of spiracles on the thorax; that might be important. The first pair of legs stem from prothorax -"

"It's not just your opinion on evolution," Slater continued, undaunted. "He is worried about your health."

John grunted. "He should be worrying about his own health, not mine. He has not looked well for weeks. Second pair of legs attached to mesothorax, third pair from the metathorax. All normal there. I'm now making a medial incision."

Slater cleared his throat. "He likes you, you know. Admires you. It is ironic that for someone who abhors violence, he thinks more of you than his other students because you fought in the War." His voice was tinged with a hint of indignation.

John cut the thorax along its ventral length and gently pulled the exoskeleton apart. "We both fought in the war."

"I never fired a shot in anger, William," Slater said, his tone subdued. "I was never fired at in anger, either."

John paused, remembering what it was like to be fired upon. He lifted his head from the magnifying glass and put down the scalpel. "Where is all this leading, Nathaniel?"

Slater swallowed. "And there is talk, you know, about you and Miss Thackeray."

"Talk from whom? About what?"

"Mr Thackeray and his daughter have argued. It is well known."

"It is not well known to me."

"And, well, Mr Thackeray has asked Professor Saumarez to consider your position."

John felt as if ice water had been spilled down his back. "I have done... I mean we have done nothing improper... she asked to accompany me when I search for specimens..." He stopped his gabbling, a terrible suspicion forming in his mind. "You have heard this argument between Mr Thackeray and his daughter?"

"Well, no -"

"And you overheard Mr Thackeray talking to the professor about me?"

"Not as such, but Professor Saumarez assures me -"

"Yes," John said firmly. "I'm sure he did." He picked up the scalpel and returned his attention to the specimen. "But he has made no such assurances to me. Shall we continue?"

* * * *

SEPTEMBER 1866

Saumarez had given permission to one of the students to use a rifle to shoot a monkey from a troop that never seemed to come to ground, and whose members were too wily to be caught out with traps or nets and had proven too quick and observant to be felled by any of the native guides with their blow darts.

John, who had been expecting the sharp report of the rifle, was still caught out by it and could not help jumping. The specimen box he was holding dropped from his hand.

“Are you alright?” Alexandra asked.

John did not answer. He was seeing clouds of black smoke and yellow dust and could feel only his left thigh which was as heavy as lead and slick with blood, coppery and almost golden in the light.

“William?”

He looked up to see Alexandra staring at him, frowning with concern.

“I’m fine.”

He stood up unsteadily and rubbed his thigh over the old wound. It was not hurting at all. But still, out of the corner of his eye, he could see the line of infantry to his right falling one by one, slowly forward as if they had been pushed gently by an invisible hand. All his friends. And then the ground tilting as he fell, too.

“William!” Alexandra grabbed him as he swooned and held him upright.

“It’s nothing,” he said automatically, struggling to stand on his own.

“Sit down,” she ordered, and he did not have the will to resist that voice.

“Alexandra?”

John recognized the sound of Thackeray, but not in full flight; there was curiosity with effrontery mixed in.

“It’s William John,” Alexandra explained.

“I can see that for myself.”

“He was faint and I caught him before he fell.”

“Are you well, boy?”

John thought there was more threat than concern in the question. “Yes, sir. I am all right, thanks to Ale... thanks to your daughter.”

“Well enough. He will do fine by himself, Alexandra. Come away. There are some things we need to discuss.”

Hesitantly, Alexandra left, but it was not long before John was able to stand again. At first he saw only the canopy and the columns of light underneath and smelt only humus and rain. Then he noticed Saumarez staring at him strangely, almost glaringly, before the student with the rifle ran up to him holding a small dead monkey by the tail, diverting Saumarez’s attention. John was puzzled by what he took to be a sign of ambivalence if not actual hostility from the professor. He remembered the specimen box then and found it near his feet. The muslin lid had held, and inside was his new prize. Another species of the dagger beetle, he was sure. The elytra were a brilliant yellow, so *Pugio croceus* seemed an appropriate binomial, and although the stylets were still present they were so short they might as well have not existed as far as he could see; as if in compensation the mandibles were huge. He wondered how many more species there were to find, and what variations they would show. Perhaps every time the expedition set a new camp he would find another. If the expedition lasted his whole lifetime he might spend it collecting examples of the dagger beetle. That would give his life purpose.

He heard a rustling near his head and glanced up. Hanging from a branch of a giant fig tree was a glistening metallic lump that looked like some exotic drupe made from mercury. He edged closer but then stopped suddenly when he realized what it was he was looking at. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of the new beetle he had found, all clumped together in one huge colony. He stared at it for a long time. The individual beetles hardly moved, but the colony as a whole moved slightly with any breeze, and the surface of it rainbowed and ribboned like oil on water. Cautiously, but driven by an almost overwhelming curiosity, he gingerly tapped the outside of the colony. It swayed a little but affected no change. He searched for a fallen branch, found one nearby, and used it to prod the colony a little harder;

some of its individual members tried to move aside but were stuck fast, and John realized that the huge mandibles of the species were used to clasp onto the abdomen of the beetle in front. He prodded harder. And harder again. This time the end of the branch disappeared inside the colony. He jerked it out, and the colony exploded. There was a puff of wind that made him blink. Skittering, chittering beetles fell to the ground and scattered. Some whizzed past, green diaphanous wings humming in his ears. And there, hanging from the tree, was the corpse of a small monkey, a member of the troop Saumarez had been so interested in. Its little dark eyes stared into his. There were no marks on its body, but its fur was slick with moisture. A cord of what could have been silk connected it to the branch above. Even from where he was standing, John could feel the heat emanating from it. Steam started to rise from the fur.

“What’s that?” Saumarez demanded.

John whipped around, and Saumarez retreated a step. The professor’s eyes were recessed so deeply in his skull they were covered in dark shadows. His moustache seemed more like a strange growth than a jaunty signature. His grey hair was thin and plastered to his skull.

“William? What happened to you?”

John held up his specimen. “There were hundreds of these beetles, maybe more, surrounding that poor monkey.” He pointed behind him.

Saumarez looked around him. “I see no such beetles -”

“I saw them!” John snapped. When he saw the reaction on Saumarez’s face he swallowed and mumbled an apology. “But I did see it, Professor. It was like a bee swarm. And in the middle was this monkey.”

There was a sound like a thread snapping and John turned in time to see the monkey hit the ground. The remnant of silk cord shrivelled away.

“I saw it,” he said weakly.

* * * *

John felt everyone was avoiding him. Except for the most necessary courtesies, no one talked to him at all that afternoon or at the evening meal. Even Alexandra seemed to be avoiding him. It was not until he made his way to his cot that Slater caught up with him and took him aside, away from the camp where no one might overhear them.

“The professor has asked me to have a serious talk with you,” Slater started.

“Why doesn’t he talk to me himself? He’s had plenty of opportunities.”

“He’s increasingly worried about your state of mind, William. He’s concerned that his relationship with you may be part of the problem.”

“There is nothing wrong with my state of mind, Nathaniel, and the only thing wrong with our relationship is that where I closely study nature to explain nature’s diversity, he closely studies theology. He thinks any explanation that distances god is automatically heretical and therefore scientifically untenable. He thinks Darwin’s theory is anathema”

“Can you be surprised the professor reacts so strongly to Darwin’s theory when what Darwin proposes does not merely distance God but removes any need for him entirely?”

“But that is not a refutation of the theory, Nathaniel! I have shown Saumarez proof of natural selection here in Amazonas!” William rubbed his temples. “No, no, I’m sorry. Evidence. Strong evidence, not proof. But what does Saumarez show me?”

“Respect,” Slater said.

John shook his head. “Oh, Nathaniel. This is not about respect. I do not doubt the professor’s good heart, nor the good work he has done in our science over the years. But you have seen for yourself the effect this trip has had on him. Have you ever seen him so unsure of himself? So bewildered by nature?”

Slater avoided John’s earnest gaze. “He would say it is you who have been bewildered. Bedazzled. Deceived.”

“Ah. Deceived. Theology again, Nathaniel?”

“I believe too, William. It is not just Professor Saumarez. All of us on the expedition share a strong faith. I see the same wonders you do every day we are here. I remember how overwhelmed I was when I was a child and walked in the forest at home for the first time. I see with the same eyes as you, my friend, but I do not doubt.”

“But your eyes have not seen everything that I have seen.”

Slater nodded. "You mean the War. It's true. None of us has gone through what you have gone through. But at least credit me with enough imagination to comprehend something of your pain."

"God was felled with a musket ball, Nathaniel. And round shot. And bayonet and sabre and the surgeon's saw. It was nature, too, in a way, the other side of the forest, the dark side where most of us never go and those that do never return quite the same. But I did not die. I realized something. Nature needs no god. We need no god. There is as much comfort in death as in life, because it does away with the past. Saumarez has his theology, you have your faith." John looked out into the jungle. "I have this."

"And that will always be enough?"

John drew a deep breath. "It will have to be, my friend. There is nothing else."

* * * *

In the morning John woke before anyone else except the native guides. He took with him a machete, a flask of water, a compass and nothing else. He walked north from the camp, keeping the river in sight when he could but using the compass to orient himself when he could not. He stopped every hundred yards or so to search the ground, the trees, in burrows, in clearings. He ignored everything that did not bear at least a passing resemblance to his dagger beetles. He found another colony of *Pugio croceus*, but despite almost overwhelming curiosity he did not disturb the swarm. He wanted to cover as much ground as possible before returning to camp.

After he had gone what he estimated to be some four miles, he found *Pugio atramentum*, with glossy black elytra and stylets formed from the mandibles as well as the maxilla. They patrolled the jungle floor in a column several beetles wide and forty yards long, like the soldier ants he had heard about in Africa. They looked like a flotilla of ironclads, and moved with the sinuous ease of a snake. Tapirs and monkeys and lizards scampered ahead of the beetles in a panic.

John marched on, following animal trails when he could. He found no more of the black dagger beetles, or any other new species, and when it was midday he turned around to head back to the camp, and walked straight into a sticky glittering curtain. He reeled away slapping at his face, thinking it was a spider's web. And realized there was no web on him. The

curtain was in front of him, a wide sheet of shining beetles that hung suspended from a branch and fell all the way to the ground. For a moment he thought it was *P. croceus*, and that this was how they captured their prey, ensnaring any animal that blundered into them and surrounding it to suffocate it. But it was yet another species of the dagger beetle, with elytra as white as ivory. No, John corrected himself. As white as silver. So perfectly silver he could see his own face reflected in the sheet.

No, part of his mind told him. He should see his face reflected back to him in the elytra of every beetle. Instead, what he saw was a copy of his mouth and nose and the mole on his chin and the flaring cheek bones and his eyes, his staring eyes, his whole face writ as large as the shining, living sheet. What he saw was William John - student, veteran and hollow man - waiting for him here in the middle of the jungle, and somehow he knew it had always been waiting for him. The mouth opened and out of it came the ear-piercing, chirruping song of a thousand thousand beetles, and it was the most beautiful song he had ever heard.

* * * *

Saumarez remembered the single tear he had seen rolling down the cheek of William John during the performance of *Don Giovanni* in the opera house of Manaus, and remembered too how it had made him blush, as if he had glimpsed a part of the man's soul. He had no doubt that what he had seen was part of the divine, the supraordinary element that gave Man his exalted station in nature, the connection with the godhead that every human carried. And yet it only made him more curious about what William John had become, how his humanity had so subverted his holier self and left him lost and bewildered in Amazonas.

"Nestor?" It was Thackeray, unusually subdued. "I am sorry to trouble you. But the boats are packed. Everyone is waiting."

"Yes, of course," Saumarez said. He continued to stare into the jungle, hoping, willing, that John would step out into the light and be saved.

"It has been five days," Thackeray continued. "Our supplies are almost completely gone. No one will blame you for returning now."

"I know, Charles. There is nothing more to be done. Of course." He turned and led the way back to the boats, boarded the one with Nathaniel Slater. The guides pushed the boats off and they glided into the current.

He saw Thackeray in the boat ahead talking quietly with his daughter

and then place his hands on her shoulders, and saw her grasp them with her own and Saumarez knew it was right. Then he stared at Slater's back, hunched and heavy with guilt which Saumarez knew did not belong to him, but he no longer knew what to say to ease his student's burden. As if he knew he was the centre of the professor's attention, Slater twisted in his seat and said eagerly, "I will lead a search party back here as soon as we can resupply at Manaus."

Saumarez smiled and nodded, but he knew it was pointless and later would dissuade Slater from even trying. Saumarez was sure that William John had found his Eden, his dark paradise, and that the gates had closed behind him as surely as if God's angels themselves had descended from heaven to block the way.