H. DE VERE STACPOOLE, *son of an Irish clergyman, author of "The Blue Lagoon" and many other romantic tales, was originally a medical student. He was first attracted to literature by reading Carlyle and the works of the French romantic novelists. He has travelled widely and participated in deep-sea expeditions. Translator, poet, and adventure-seeker, he has written a large number of colourful tales set in remote and rarely visited places.*

DEEP IN THE FOREST

MEN will talk and tell you stories if you have the art of listening to them.

In this way you get ideas, but scarcely ever the complete thing such as was given me by Mynheer Andreas Capelmans one day in his tulip loft at Tergou as he sat, looking like a dried bulb, by the long, narrow table littered with cigar boxes holding specimens of mould and small paper bags containing bulbs sent to him from all over Holland for examination.

He is the greatest authority on fungoid diseases and on all diseases affecting the *Liliaceæ* to which natural order the great family of the tulips belong, and the microscope which he had been using stood before him discarded; he had finished his morning's work, and finding in me a ready and willing listener, he was discoursing on the one subject that was the only subject appealing to his heart and understanding—Plants.

Men are born like that, sometimes; men to whom women, war, wine, art, cookery, or the chase, are as nothing compared with the one subject appealing to their understandings and their hearts.

This great botanist, for Capelmans is great, I have seen putting salt in his coffee without discovering the error; but for his housekeeper the condition of his wardrobe would long ere this have made him a guy to be followed by all the boys of Tergou. I doubt if he carries in memory anything of the Great War, and as for love, he had one love affair which I discovered fossilized in the mass of his conversation, but of whose existence as a fresh thing or a fossil I believe him to have been scarcely conscious.

Here is the fossil and with it the story in which it is stuck.

. . . . . .

There is no doubt to my mind, said the old gentleman, that the Prehistoric held vegetable existences equally strange as those animal existences which are disclosed to us by the bones of the mammoth and the sabre-toothed tiger.

Only the vegetables, being more easily destroyed, have not remained to tell us of themselves or their properties. Of course, many old vegetable forms are still held, to exhibit themselves to the eye of the geologist, but of their finer properties there is nothing in the way of indication.

Yet I believe, and my belief is based on what I came upon near the Javari River in the year 1884, that the old world, the world in which the vegetables reigned supreme, possessed plant forms not without intelligence and power of intelligent movement. Not movement away from the root, but movement of the limbs, tendrils, or leaves.

Indeed, the researches of Sir Chandra Bose on the nervous and arterial systems of plants have revealed a new physiology which denies plants neither movement nor thought, and forestalling him, even in those early days, the conception had come to me that there was a time when there was war between the later plants and the earlier animals.

That there were warrior plants, vaguely represented now by the Venus fly-trap that wars against insects, that the animals by superior intelligence and the power of perfectly free movement obtained the victory, destroyed these warrior plants, all but a few still existing, though maybe in degenerate forms, in the depths of the primæval jungle.

The idea seems fantastic, yet what is there more fantastic than life; that microscope will show you a whole world of intelligence amidst things without central nervous systems or brains, and are not the peaceful tulips always at war with the spores that would otherwise destroy them? There is only one true definition of Life—a battle-ground. Well, well, I am wandering from my ground, which is the Javari River.

It was in 1884 that I made my first acquaintance with the upper region of the Amazon, and those vast forests from whence the rubber comes down to Para.

I was travelling for Justus von Beerbohm, collecting plants and making notes of the rubber possibilities of the unexplored regions between the Javari and Marañon.

The Javari, you must know, divides Peru from Brazil, it is more than 2000 miles from where the Amazon disembogues,

and of all forest lands and tracts, these vast woods are the least known, the least visited, and the least understood. For there are the rains that bring the floods during which millions of acres of forest are submerged, there is the malaria which fills the air with death, there are the diseases like beri-beri, and the snakes and water reptiles deadly as the diseases.

There is no food here for a white man worth considering owing to the floods that make all attempts at agriculture futile, so that everything has to be imported, yet there are natives, tribes of Indians, inhabiting those higher grounds that are free from water during the flood times.

And, strange to say, these Indians are not of the lowest order of mankind, they possess arts and crafts, are not unpleasing to look on, and show courage of a high order in their wars with the Peruvians.

Louis Teick was my chief man, the same who was killed in the frontier dispute on the Brazilian border in 1906.

He was a keen hunter and a tried explorer, but he was not a botanist, at least, at heart. Under him I had six Seringueros from the rubber plantations below Nazareth, men who had forsaken their work on the plantations, breaking their contracts for the higher pay which I held out as an inducement to them, for such is the ruling passion for money that men, even honourable men of the type that the Seringuero generally is, have all, with few or no exceptions, their price.

We followed the river with a motor launch of the type used in those times, and it was after a journey of six days, and on reaching the great bend above the junction with the Curucu River, that we tied up definitely, using this place as a starting-off point for our exploration of the forest and leaving two men in charge of the boat.

In five minutes from the time of leaving the river bank a veil had fallen behind us, cutting us off from civilization. Tree ferns, palms, vast matamata trees, liantasse festooned with orchids all joined to make this veil, with numberless other forms of vegetable life expressed in leaf, flower, trunk, or tendril.

I confess I was intoxicated. It was my first real experience of what the vegetable world was capable of doing, it was as though I had come into my own kingdom and on a fête day—here in the glasshouse atmosphere where the extraordinary called to the miraculous, and where growth was a passion, a flame burning with sublime fury.

In the botanical garden of Caracas there existed a con-

volvulus that lengthened itself, in the period of growth, at the rate of an inch an hour, here, without doubt, were lianas and air shoots capable of exhibiting a linear energy as great or greater, and pausing to listen, one could hear the voices of this green multitude and the sounds of the business of this green commonwealth, the crash of some distant tree felled at last by the axe of its own rottenness, the drop of a fruit or nut, the many changing voices of the leaves, for here, as in the forests of Europe, every tree has its voice, its song, its gesture.

Mynheer Capelmans paused for a moment as if contemplating the objects of his passion. It seemed to me that in this inspired moment he grew less like a withered bulb, swollen yet upheld by the passion of his subject, he seemed, indeed, as though he might suddenly burst into flower.

He went on :

Striking north, we maintained our way, crossing a small tributary of the Javari and pausing continuously, as you may imagine, for the purpose of the collecting box, tree measurements, and so forth.

Teick, who had some knowledge of the coleoptera, asked permission to add those he found to our collection, but I would have none of that, these things did not interest me at all ; as a consequence he sulked and, being a man of moody disposition, things might have gone badly between us had we not struck an Indian encampment on the evening of the third day of our journey through the forest.

The chief of the Seringueros, who could speak the Indian dialect, went forward to prepare the way for us with these people, who received us well, giving us of their best and without fuss or inquiry.

Once satisfied that we were not enemies, they treated us as friends, and though we must have been of considerable interest to them, they exhibited a wonderful restraint, asking few questions and leaving us to our own affairs, which was a matter of considerable moment to us as we determined to make the Indian encampment our base of operations, not only on account of its high position in the forest, but also because of the fact that the Indian hunters could supply us with food in exchange for the few small articles of barter which we had brought with us.

But there was one young girl who did not observe the reticence and restraint of the rest of the tribe. Her name was Araya, she was well favoured and plump, with a skin like polished bronze and a figure whose grace was not lessened

by the fact that her dress consisted only of a few feathers of the mutum bird.

This girl, for some reason hard to seek, was attracted by me and became my unsought-for but very willing slave, she would carry my collecting box in the short expeditions I made by myself into the near-about parts of the forest, and in the camp she was always close to me, insisting on preparing my food and helping in arranging my specimens, and all this without exciting any remark amongst her fellows.

It seemed that amongst these tribes the women have a freedom unknown to the more civilized peoples; they, in fact, do the courting and choose their mates, the man being purely a hunting animal, or at least without any special interest in the business of mating and home-making.

However that may be, Araya had attached herself to me as a wife might attach herself to a husband, and though, of course, there was no feeling of that sort between us, at least on my part, the fidelity was as great, and fortunately so for me, as I will show you in a moment.

II

ONE day Teick, who had been out with Jaos, the head of the Seringueros, prospecting to the west in search of a rubber belt that was supposed to lie in that direction, returned late in the evening and in a state of considerable excitement. He was a different man, in fact, from the man who had started out the day before.

He seemed light-headed and his manner exhibited a subdued exaltation which I would have put down to alcohol had I not known that the forest, whilst producing many things, did not produce that.

At supper he scarcely spoke, but afterwards, as we sat smoking by the light of the fire, he broke silence, and in a most surprising manner.

"To-day," said he, "I found something out there—the expedition has come to an end. Here is the spot I have been making for all my life, and I have found that which will make the whole world envy us."

Thinking he referred to some vast tract of rubber forest found by him or to some plant more wonderful than any yet discovered, I questioned him, and at once he fell into one of his fits of moodiness.

"You cannot think but as a vegetable," said he, "plants,

plants, plants, they are for you as people." Then his mood suddenly changed as though a new thought had come to him. "Let it be so," he said, "it is a plant I have found, the only plant that can confer happiness, the tree that can confer good on those who eat wisely of its fruit and evil on those who do not. I have found this tree of good and evil."

I thought clearly this man is deranged, and fearing to excite him, I pretended to show interest in what he said, and when he asked me would I come with him on the morrow and see this thing for myself, I agreed, hoping that by the morning his mind would have cleared.

But next morning he was just the same and there, talking to him in the light of the day, I saw that whatever affected him it was not madness.

He had evidently found something that had put him into this strange pass, and I must confess that a burning curiosity seized me and that it was I who proposed that we should start at once so that I might see what he had seen.

Jaos was laid up with a bad foot so we started alone, taking provisions enough for two days; the trail had been blazed by Jaos, still, I took my compass and two hours after sunrise we left the camp, striking our way through the forest.

Scarcely had we gone a hundred yards when I found that I was followed. Araya had joined us.

"That girl," said Teick, then he laughed, saying, "Well, let her come, she may be of use, who knows?"

I said nothing and we went forward, a party of three, Araya following, carrying her blow-gun which she always took when journeying in the forest, and a long sharp knife strapped to her waist by a belt.

There are parts of the forest where you cannot move without a knife to cut the lianas, but here and for most of our journey we required nothing in that way, as Jaos had cut our road the day before.

The blaze marks on the trees led us, the toucans and scarlet parrots calling after us and wood beasts rustling away into the thick growths at our approach.

It was getting on for dark when Teick said, "We are now close to the spot. Here is the *tambo* Jaos built, it will shelter us for the night and to-morrow when the sun is up you will see."

In truth, I did. We started at sunrise and, Teick leading, we left the leaf-thatched *tambo* and followed a line of great pachyuba palms that seemed planted with design, so straight

was their row in the midst of the multiform trees of the forest, then I was aware of a brilliant light ahead and the trees, tendrils, and leaves fell aside to show an open space where the ground rose steeply. It was, in fact a hill in the midst of the forest, a hill of rock on which nothing would grow and whose side facing us was cut sheer as if with a knife.

Teick led me up to the cliff thus formed.

" This is it," said he.

III

THE rock face, which had the appearance of cement, was strewn with yellow lumps. Teick took his knife and attacking one of these lumps dug it out, it was the size of a musket ball, heavy as lead and yellow. It was gold. Virgin gold. I bit it and found it dented.

This must have been the bed of some great river in ancient days, a river that brought the gold down in its wash, and its mud turning to cement had clung to the nuggets, preserving them. They were, in fact, like the plums in a pudding or the almonds in nougat, with this difference, that they varied vastly in size. Some were only the size of a pea, others big as an orange. There was enough of the metal here to make happy the hearts of a hundred men caring for gold, and, musing on this and the strangeness of the ways of nature that had in this inaccessible spot set up a cache of that which would satisfy all men's material desires I forgot the trick that Teick had played me, but only for a moment. Gold—though a great thing, was not what my mind had been playing with in imagination, and suddenly, through my sense of wonderment, the disappointment came on me. I turned to Teick.

" This, then, is all," said I, " this, then, is what you led me to see ? "

" And what could be better ? " he asked. " It is true I told you an untruth when I hinted what I did, but what would you have ? If I had told you I had found gold, you never would have come with me to see and touch this wonder—plant-hunter that you are and with a turnip for heart and a cabbage for head." He laughed in great good humour at this joke, which I resented.

The gold did not appeal to me at all, and you must understand that in this I was not singular. We who follow science must so be built that wealth for us is not except in Discovery. And this is not a virtue, just a law of mind. Quite lately if I

had chosen to leave my researches I could have been wealthy twice over from the artificial manures, the secret of which I have put in the hands of manufacturers—for what? The State pension which I enjoy suffices for all my needs.

I do not want gold, I have never wanted gold, and so now before this Golconda I stood, not only without desire but filled with disappointment.

The Vegetable Wonder I had been expecting had vanished from my dreams, leaving this!

I have a friend, Mynheer Beerbohm, who is greatly attached to the game of golf, which, as you no doubt know, is played with little balls. He tells me that he often loses these balls, and states as a strange fact that finding them again he often finds two together or close to one another. So it was to happen to-day, and the strange plant which I had hoped to find but had lost, was destined to lead me to a plant, the strangest plant in the world. But I did not know this, else perhaps I would not have quarrelled with Teick.

We in fact came to words, and so hotly that in one of his tempers he left me, striking back to the *tambo* and taking the trail for the camp.

Araya, who had taken her seat on a block of stone, and to whom the gold was as nothing, watched him go with a smile on her face. She seemed pleased that we should be alone together, and as for me I was indifferent, as each carried his own provisions and I had the compass.

Tired, and determined to let him have a good start, as I had no desire for his company, I sat down beside the girl.

"This, Araya," said I, "is what comes from uncontrollable temper joined to an unstable mind." She could not understand me, of course, but so we sometimes talk, when alone, to a dog or cat or just to ourselves. "Here is a man who has forgotten duty and, disturbed in his worship of the golden image, has, in fact, deserted his companion in the wilderness, than which in an explorer there can be no greater sin."

I was meditating on the truth of these words that had escaped from me in the fulness of my feelings when, of a sudden, I felt something around my waist; it was the girl's arm.

Mynheer Capelmans stopped and sighed and seemed looking back into the past, but without regret or any of those emotions that are supposed to accompany the backward glance.

Indeed, from the expression on his face he might have

been watching the antics of two of those infusoria revealed to him by his microscope.

Well, well, he said, going on after a moment. Man is weak and we are all men—especially when we are young men. Suffice it, that we did not hasten to catch up with Teick, in fact we delayed our departure from the *tambo* close to the gold outcrop till the following morning, and when we left I did not even take a specimen of the precious metal with me.

I had determined that Jaos should come back with Teick, not only to take exact bearings of the deposit, but to camouflage the cement cliff so that no stray traveller might come on what we had discovered. I was indifferent to the gold, but not insensible to its value—but even had I been a gold-hunter pure and simple, there was another matter to occupy my mind just now, Araya.

What was I to do about this girl who had suddenly attached herself to me? Man has been called a hunting animal, it would be more true to name him the hunted animal, for that is indeed what he is where woman is concerned.

Woman, who has reduced defence and retreat into forms of attack and who is never more dangerous than when she is seemingly most docile.

He rubbed his shrivelled hands together in a way he had when making some triumphant point against an antagonist in argument.

" It is true," I said, " she seemed to have hunted you from what you say—all the same——"

I know, said the old gentleman, but we need not debate upon that matter, it is sufficient that I was in a position detrimental to her happiness and my interests. I would have to leave her to return to civilization and she was not of the order of being that is easily left and there was also the tribe.

However, all that was nothing, had I known, for things were to take a sudden and most dramatic turn.

We had deviated from the blazed trail by accident, it did not matter much as I had my compass and could soon find the track again, all the same the going was bad on account of the lianas.

We had reached a clearer space where the trees stood farther apart, when before me I saw a mound scattered with the bones of animals. It was a strange thing to come upon these in the twilight of the woods and with the long liana tendrils hanging down towards it like bell ropes, it looked like some natural altar where sacrifices had been made; a grim tomb to which animals had come to die.

Then as we stood looking a most surprising thing happened, the body of a bush pig fell from the air above and lay amidst the bones on the mound like a dropped fruit.

A bush pig !

There was only one solution possible. Monkeys must have carried the body up into a tree and dropped it. I looked up. There was nothing to be seen but the tendrils hanging through the gloom and the breaks in the foliage far above. There were no monkeys.

These creatures were thick in the forests, always scampering overhead and springing from bough to bough, there were none here ; there were no scarlet parrots, no loud-voiced toucans, no tree life at all ; nothing but the gloom and the up-rushing tree boles and the down-hanging lianas ; complete silence as though the place were under the spell of some Merlin, some wizard of the trees whose presence had scared away the people of the trees, and this wild idea was not without its basis in truth, for the most fantastic thing in the world is Fact.

Araya was shivering and staring like a fascinated thing, and when I made a step forward towards the mound and for the purpose of examining the body of the pig, she tried to prevent me, talking in her language which I could not understand, even stepping in front of me to block my path. But I pushed her aside.

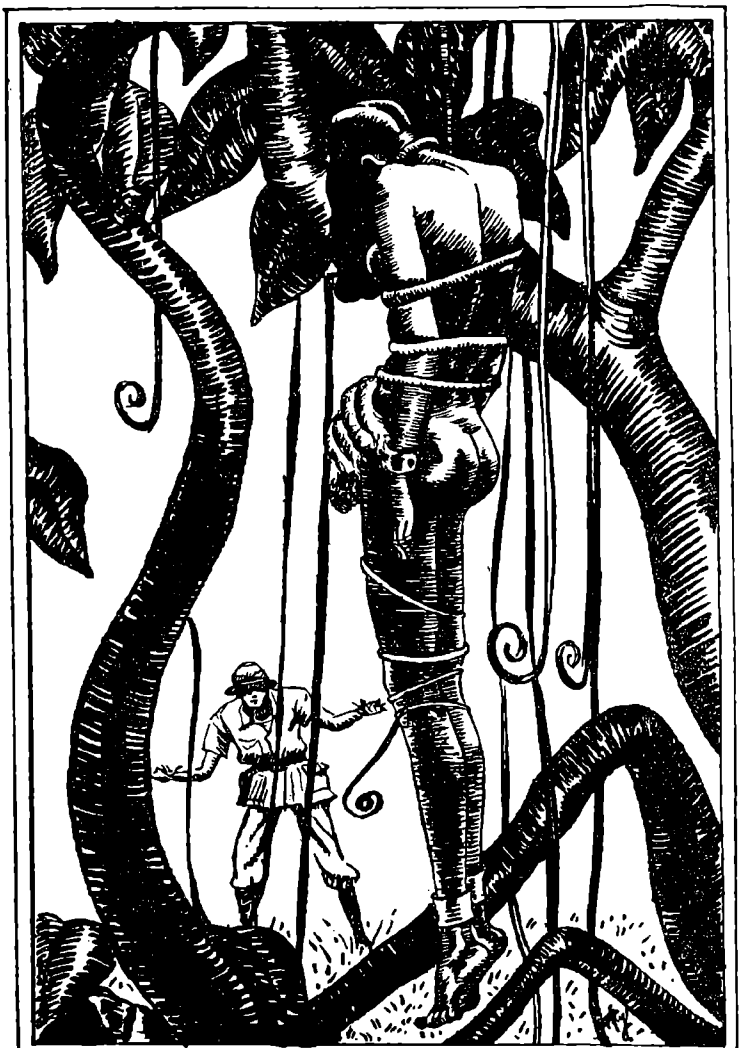
She followed me as I came like a fool to that terrible midden heap.

Mynheer Capelmans stopped for a moment and took his handkerchief from his pocket and worked it in his hands. He seemed drying the palms of his hands as though sweat had started out on them at the recollection that had risen in his mind.

As I stood, said he, a few feet from the body of the pig, I was suddenly and cruelly seized by the elbow. A down-sweeping and curling tendril had seized me and was lifting me from the ground. I felt in the grip of a monster—then I was free. Araya, springing upwards, had slashed the tendril across with her knife.

I fell on my knees and hands. When I rose she was gone. The tendril, or another, had seized her and winding on her like thread on a bobbin had shortened itself twenty feet or more. She was hanging twenty feet up, motionless, without a sound, evidently crushed or strangled.

This what I am telling you, is true.



The tendril was winding on her like thread on a bobbin

I was paralysed yet fully able to think. I said to myself, "Now, in a moment, I shall be seized again." I saw the down-hanging bell ropes in agitation like the hair of Medusa, yet none of them reached for me.

The horrible, filthy thing was evidently out of action for the moment. Its function had been performed.

Slowly and by degrees movement came back to me and I crept away.

Free of the place, I sat for an hour before I could continue my journey, but I was not blinded to the fact that I had discovered in its lair that which no other white man had ever seen, nor was I incapacitated for performing my duty. I had to return and examine this thing fully.

With the aid of my compass I struck out blazing my way till I met the old trail, and that night I was in camp.

IV

WITH the aid of Jaos I informed the Indians of what had occurred and of the fact that I had marked the way to the spot.

The effect of this news on them was profound.

Jaos said to me, "They are not troubling about the girl, they are rejoicing. They say you have found an O-te-Amoy and they are going to kill it; the last was found and killed ten years ago in a different part of the forest. It is a plant that makes war on men and animals."

Then I said to Jaos and Teick, who was standing by, "I have always felt the possibility that in the old days there were plants like this. It is true. This horrible thing did nothing with the body of the pig, just killed it and dropped it. I have seen, and you will see the last, maybe, of the warriors of a day when the vegetable world did battle against the animal with more weapons than thorns or poison berries."

The next morning we started, every man, woman, and child of the Indians were of the party, and beside the blow-guns which they always carried, the men had armed themselves with the long knives which they used for cutting their way through the forest growths. They also took with them certain leaves gathered from the tree that stood nearest the chief's *tambo*, and also a figure made of bark and dyed a vermilion colour which one of the women had constructed during the night.

Then I knew that I was witnessing something as interesting

as the O-te-Amoy itself—the ceremonious preparations for an attack on it and its destruction.

Something that had come down through the ages, a ritual unknown to all men but these few poor savages who were yet in ancestral touch with the world where once the O-te-Amoy, and perhaps worse fiends of the vegetable world, were frequently to be found.

When we reached the spot we could see from a distance that the body of Araya had been dropped and was lying beside the body of the pig.

Now, a massed attack would have meant that all the tendrils would have fought, reaching instinctively and through a sense that might have been likened to the sense of smell for the individual attackers.

A victim had to be given to quiet the plant and neutralize by satisfaction its fighting powers. This, which I had found out, the Indians well knew from tradition, and they selected an old man whom they had brought with them and who, so far from resisting, seemed pleased at the function he had to perform.

He walked forward to the mound—which I afterwards discovered to be made from the bones of animals piled there through many years and overgrown with plant life—and almost before he reached it, he was seized.

I had the opportunity of watching carefully the seizure. All the hanging tendrils of the O-te-Amoy fell into tremblings and twitchings at his approach and then the nearest one swung towards him as though it were blown by a gentle wind, and then, as though blown by a hurricane, it slashed round him and instantly began to curl on itself with him for a centre or bobbin, shortening itself with amazing rapidity, and lifting the victim as a consequence.

The approach of the tendril reminded me of the comparatively slow approach of a tea-stalk on the surface of a cup of tea to the cup wall, you know that, and the sudden snap with which gravitational attraction ends the business.

Instantly, now that the O-te-Amoy was defenceless because, so to speak, gorged, the attack on it began, men slashing away at the tendrils and others climbing to attack the great central body of the thing.

The attack was of all things I have seen the most interesting.

The fury of the attackers was of the sort that can only be inspired by a living and sentient enemy, yet the thing attacked, could one call it sentient ?

It was a trap, a killer, like the sundew; like the sundew it exhibited intention, that is all one could say—only this, that, unlike the sundew, its misdeeds were not of the hunting and necessitous kind. It did not feed on its victims. No, it was truly a warrior whose only business was to kill and that constituted the profound interest of the thing, opening as it did a peep at the world's earliest history.

Men climbing cut away the body of the thing and flung it in masses to the ground.

I examined one of these masses, it was composed of vegetable substance convoluted and twisted, and as it lay there before me I thought it moved with a slight expansion and contraction; I examined portions of the tendrils, they varied from an inch to three inches in diameter, possessed cup-shaped suckers and a tubular structure from which oozed sap mixed with air bubbles, but I could bring nothing away, all had to be burned in a great pyre and on top of the pyre was placed the Ju-Ju stained with vermilion.

Then having buried the girl and the old man we returned to camp—all but Tcick, who started alone to get some more specimens of the gold—I may say that though he got up an expedition of his own in the following year he failed to find the gold deposit, a year had obliterated all the blaze marks and the track.

"Tell me," I said, "have you ever published an account of this plant?"

"No," said Mynheer Capelmans, "I had intended to publish it at a meeting of the Royal Society of London which I attended the following year, but when I saw all those men, those square heads, those practical faces, those convex glasses, I remembered the fate of Du Chailu. My speech on plant life in the Javari district contained nothing of the O-te-Amoy. I wished to retain the respect of my confrères, for there is one golden rule in science, 'Above all things, nothing of the Marvellous.'"

"May I publish it?"

"With pleasure, it won't hurt *you*."

I tried to get him to speak of the girl again, but the girl seemed to him of no more interest than the old man or the bush pig, and I came away with the feeling that one sometimes comes across animals more extraordinary than even the most extraordinary plants.