

VAGABONDS OF THE EARTH

—BY—
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I HAVE often wished that I could bring those six men together, and yet, on the face of it, the wish is impossible of fulfillment. They are scattered to the corners of the earth. Some I have heard from through round-about channels, but most have passed beyond my ken. All but two were chance acquaintances, with whom I spent an hour or so.

There was Helmslund for instance. His line is birds—sea-birds, although, as far as that goes, anything wild and unknown attracts Helmslund. I dare say you never heard of Helmslund. You would soon enough, though, if you undertook to collect rare birds as a hobby. Helmslund is indispensable to scores of collectors in this country and Europe.

I met him one Sunday afternoon at the house of a friend who possesses a really remarkable collection of North American birds.

"Odd sort of fellow—Helmslund," our host later remarked. "I've known him several years, now, and he's just getting to the point where he gives me a sketchy account of the main incidents of interest in his trips."

"What trips?" I asked.

"After birds," replied my host. "That's Helmslund's work. He gets birds, not for the feather people—who would regard that as sacrilege—but for collectors like myself. He goes everywhere to get them. I don't suppose there's a country he hasn't been to in search of some particular specimen."

And that was how I happened to hear the story of Helmslund's battle for life on the wretched waters of Lake Kibushka, far up by the Arctic circle in the grim desolation of the Siberian steppes. It had happened the summer before, on a trip he had taken to secure some specimens of the rosy gull for a European collector.

With a single companion and a couple of dog-teams, he was working around the country, paying special attention to the marshy tracts bordering several large lakes, which are the habitat of various species of water fowl. There is probably no more desolate country in the world than this portion of the steppes.

Helmslund soon found that the rosy gulls had deserted the shores of Lake Kibushka, and he determined to cross the lake, which was about twenty miles wide, and try his luck in the country beyond. So he secured a craft which he called a dingy and which was large enough to hold his companion and three of the dogs, besides himself, and the party set out early in the morning. They propelled the craft by paddling, and it was slow work. At first, everything went well. Then a brisk breeze sprang up, agitating the surface of the lake until the waves became as large as those of the open sea. To add to the confusion, the dogs became frightened and started to quarrel among themselves.

Before they realized the danger, the boat had capsized and the two men and three dogs were struggling in the water. Helmslund kept his wits about him and helped his companion to swim to the overturned dingy. The dogs had already clustered about it and were fighting desperately in the water to climb on the bottom, but Helmslund pushed through them ruthlessly and helped the other man to get a seat, before he followed him. Luckily, he had retained possession of his paddle and he used it to beat off the dogs, crazy with fear as they felt the steadily increasing weight of their heavy water-soaked fur. Snarling fiercely, the beasts attacked the boat again and again, snapping at the men's legs and leaping out of the water in wild attempts to seize their throats.

Early in the afternoon, Helmslund's companion fainted and dropped off. My friend said that the tears stood in the little man's eyes as he told of this occurrence. He told it quite simply, as he told the whole story, indeed—without any straining for effect. It was only by direct questioning that my friend discovered that Helmslund had fallen off the boat himself in his efforts to save the other man, who had sunk like a stone. When Helmslund gained the boat a second time he was utterly exhausted and barely able to crawl on to its bottom. He had lost his paddle and had no means of directing his progress or even of determining in which direction he was going.

Fortunately for him, the wind was on-shore, and late in the afternoon he drifted within sight of land. The sight gave him renewed energy to strip off his shirt and use it to signal to a village of natives.

Whenever I smell the sickly-sweet scent of South American orchids a vision rises before me of another one of the six—a fever-racked specter whom I met toiling down the gang-plank of a fruit-steamer from La Guayra. His name was Grayson, and he belonged to that legion of reckless adventurers, the orchid hunters.

Grayson had gone to Venezuela some months before, with a vague determination to strike into the jungle country in the direction of the Guis-

as. In a cafe in Caracas, however, he heard a tale which caused him to change all his plans.

This tale, or, rather, legend, had filtered into the city through the medium of up-country planters, and had been imparted to them by tame Indians, who in turn, had heard it from their wild brethren of the jungle. It had to do with a mysterious place known as "El Lugar de los Flores Venenosas" (The Place of the Poisonous Flowers), a great clump of weirdly beautiful flowers, exhaling a deadly perfume, which was said to be located in the dense wilderness that lies about the headwaters of the Orinoco. This perfume was noticeable two days off; within a day's march it was sickening; and by the time a man was within sight of the flowers, he was overcome by the intense smell.

With the instinct of the orchid-hunter, Grayson divined that the legend implied the presence of his quarry. He scouted the melodramatic features of the tale, setting them down to the imagination of the countless untutored individuals through whom it had passed, and without more ado he set to work organizing an expedition. Strange to say, he preferred to be the only white man, although he took with him an old half-breed who had been his companion on several other expeditions, and a large train of Indian porters.

One morning there was a perceptible odor of flowers in the air; by noon it had increased considerably. When they camped that night, the jungle-smells had been entirely supplanted. Their nostrils were filled with the cloying scent. A number of the Indians refused to go any farther, but Grayson, the half-breed and a half dozen of the staunchest porters pushed on in the morning. The perfume grew heavier and heavier as they advanced.

Finally, one of the porters collapsed in his tracks. Another went down, and another. Grayson could feel his senses leaving him, although he struggled on. He said he had never smoked opium, but he imagined that his sen-

Another one of the six was Carriere. He was big and quiet, with a deceptive placidity—not at all the sort of man you expected to meet if you had ever heard of him.

Like many other adventurers, Carriere ran away at sea. Like all who have ever done so, he paid for his fun in sweat and agony. He was a sailor before the mast for several years, on coasting vessels, tramp steamers, trading schooners in the Far East. He was in the Philippines when the war broke out, and he was captured by the insurgents and held prisoner for several months. He was engaged in vague, ill-formed revolutionary plots; he joined secret societies that bore for their aim the emancipation of British India; and he did many other things in many other places that took him down into the depths of life.

Finally, he drifted to the Balkans, about the time Macedonia was in the throes of the terrible revolt against Turkish rule. Carriere became intensely interested in this blind struggle of a Christian people for freedom, and he determined to let the world know some of the inside details of prevailing conditions. He believed, too, that he could be of help to the revolutionary chiefs in perfecting their organization in the villages and towns of the five vilayets.

In the course of nearly two years' work he had carried out his entire plan of organization, except in Salonika and some of the territory around that city. He left that to the last, because it was the most difficult task, and he thought that with the prestige of what he had accomplished, success would be more easy. The chief of the local committee in Salonika had rather a sinister reputation. It had never been proved against him, but there were rumors of blackmail.

For several weeks, Carriere lay in hiding in one of the suburbs of the city, receiving prominent members of the committee and talking over the new schemes he advocated. He had no suspicions at first, although he did not like the local voyvode, and it came as a wholly unexpected shock when his secretary was shot down on the streets at night, after he had ventured out for a brief walk. The local committee claimed that a Greek had done it, but Carriere was suspicious.

Two nights passed, and then the old woman in whose house he was hiding came to him with a seared look on her face. She had heard two men talking in her garden about sekares and the approaches to the house. One of these men was the local voyvode.

not bear the full story of his wanderings for many months. We knew he had sailed from England for Rio in the cabin de luxe of an English packet boat. From week to week, for possibly two months, we received letters from him. Then came the silence.

The silence continued for six months, until one morning I received a note written on American Line paper and postmarked Southampton. It was signed by Ford.

"Shall arrive on Philadelphia within 48 hours after you receive this sheet of cash. Do you remember that ten dollars you owe me?"

"That was impudence for you! I should have known who wrote that note, without a signature. However, I clapped a ten-dollar bill in an envelope and mailed it promptly. A week later Ford dropped in to see me.

"Much obliged for the cash, old man," he said. "It came in handy. You see, they trimmed me beautifully in Paris, and I started out for Rio with my steamship ticket and barely enough coin to last me three weeks. In fact, when I got to the Chilean frontier town across the Andes, I was strapped. That made me sick of the whole job, and I decided it was time to head for home. There was a prince of a British consul there, who loaned me a ten-spot and got me a pass for donkey transportation across the mountains to the Argentine railroad.

"Just by blind luck, I chipped acquaintance with the chief engineer of the construction gang on the Argentine side, and so when I hit him for a pass to Buenos Ayres, he pointed up like a good one.

"I was feeling pretty disconsolate and I went into a cafe near the water front to forget myself for an hour or two. That was the time when Brazil and the Argentines were seeing which could build warships the quickest, and there was a big Brazilian sitting in the place, with his feet up, passing remarks to the occupants in general. As soon as he saw me, he concentrated his attention, apparently on the supposition that because I was small I must be easy. I stood about two sentences and then I went for him. We were rolling promiscuously around the restaurant, and I was getting a bit the worse of it, when a little man with an arm like a steel-fall came through the door. After he got through with my Brazilian friend there were no straws to be picked up.

"Well, we shook hands and told each other we'd always been longing to meet, and afterwards we had a drink. The little man was a Britisher, captain of a tramp steamer due to sail the next afternoon, and when I told him of my troubles he clapped me on the back and offered me free passage to Rotterdam. 'I'll have to put you down on the books as cabin boy or steward,' he said. 'But you'll do no work. Come as my guest; I'll be glad to have you.' He was a prince, that skipper. Fed me at his own table, gave me his own cigars and wine, and when we reached Rotterdam he staked me to Paris.

"Aunt Jane was in Paris, fortunately for me, and I think she was so glad at the prospect of getting me back to America that she dived up without any side remarks."

I never really knew Chatton, the fifth of my vagabonds. I had been dining at a club in Piccadilly with an engineering friend, and as we were passing out through the club parlors my friend drew me aside to make room for a big, broad-shouldered man wearing him spectacles. "That's Chatton," he whispered. "He was one of the principal assistants in the construction of the new trans-Andean line. He's always had bad eyes, and the doctor told me he ought not to work above the snow line, but that wouldn't do for Chatton. He wants to be where the fun is. You see, engineering as a science means little to him. It's the game he likes—the fight to overcome some problem. Poor Chatton! Whenever there was a desperate job to be done, he was bound to be on it—and all for a beggarly six or seven pounds a week, I suppose."

"Why do you say 'Poor Chatton'?" I asked.

"Because he'll never get over this latest eye trouble. He got it from the snow glare, just as the doctors said he would."

"But what will the man do?" I exclaimed. "How is he going to live?"

"He'll live—survive, rather," rejoined my friend, bitterly. "His people have money. But he'll never work again. Every one who knows him is always cut up. And he feels it, too, although he's deuced plucky about it."

If you have been in the habit of frequenting police courts or cheap lodging houses it is possible that you have met John Kelly.

As near as I could make out from stray admissions Kelly made to me, he gave up a reputable position in life to undertake a study of the psychology of tramps and thieves. He used to speak with genuine pride of his researches, and he was particularly proud of what he termed "his life work"—the compilation of a dictionary of thieves' slang, together with a compendium of the rules of house-breaking and safe-cracking. Nobody was ever permitted to get an extended view of this. For a dollar or two, now and then, when the man was hard up, he would permit one to copy out a few stray phrases; but he was very suspicious, as a rule, and believed that every one was in a conspiracy to tear the fruit of his years of labor away from him.

What became of him I never heard. He drifted away, his manuscript with him, to the end steadily refusing the propositions that he regarded as little less than insulting.



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