

Headwaters of the Amazon River

*The Fieldjournal and Diary of
explorer Maple White*

Henrik Höijer

Inside the office stood three other persons who didn't know. Maple estimated that the three of them were around thirty-five to forty years of age and fit. He also recalled that he had seen one of them before in connection to the Zoo, it was the ape-handler.

- *Maple!*, I want you to meet Mr Jeffrey Hiddins, botanist and Mr Jonathan Auldridge, Zoo keeper and ape handler at the Zoo, and also Mr. Mark Evans, veterinary, who often works in connection with the Zoo. They are here so that we all together can go through a very curious discovery that was made recently in South America. In the jungles of Brazil to be more precise.

- *Over a month ago wasn't it?*, the professor asked the botanist.

- It was actually little bit longer time ago, we travelled far up the river system, hence it took us a long time to travel back home. I will explain it all later, said the botanist.

- You were the leader of that expedition, *were you not?*, the professor asked.

- Yes, that's correct, the botanist replied.

The professor continued.

- As you all know by now, Young Maple here has also proven himself to be a great asset during expeditions, and he will lead my next. How ever, you must assist him whenever you are able.

Mr Jeffrey Hiddins he is needless to say a botanist of distinction, he knows a lot about different plants of the jungle, more than most botanists. He has cataloged several himself. He is here on behalf of the other members of his

botanical expedition team as their spokesperson. *Please, sit down gentlemen!, please take a seat!.* They all sat down around a large dark wooden table. The professor continued, *how ever*, he has not been summoned to hold a lecture about plants, although that would be interesting I'm sure, *you see*, Mr. Hiddins has arrived due to another reason.

During the expedition in question, Mr Hiddins and his team made a discovery, a very tantalizing discovery. We could not reveal this during our first hearing with you a few days ago because Mr Hiddins was preoccupied attending to other duties that day. He was busy with reporting to *his* superiors, *isn't that right?*, the botanist nodded, *and besides*, it probably would have been too much for you to bear during the first hearing. *How ever*, *now* that we are all gathered here, let's hear your first hand witness account, the professor said and looked at the botanist.

Chapter 2

*The botanist reveals what he saw
in the jungle.*

Thank you Sir!. First let me briefly introduce myself. I have been on many different scientific field-trips and expeditions. My speciality as mentioned, is botany, and mainly encompasses the study of plants native to the Amazonian rainforest. I have made a career in the botanical field. It has given me opportunity and the means to travel far and wide. As the professor told you, I took part in an expedition to Brazil and we returned one week ago. The main objective with the entire expedition was to reach a area of virgin and prestine rainforest on the upper reaches of the Amazon River system. There we would set out on a botanical quest. The area is huge and virtually untouched by man, this much we knew. Some parts of this unexplored area are situated at a higher elevation, thus the vegetation would be somewhat different there, and that's what brought us to that place. It was in this area we hoped to discover and catalog new species of plants. I have been to the Amazon basin several times and my fellow expedition members have also been to different parts of the Amazon on various occasions, needless to say we are all seasoned, but

never before had neither me nor any of my colleagues ventured that deep into the jungle. It's a serious undertaking and also a dangerous one, but we managed to get permission. The journey one has to do is very long, and it might get confusing for you now by talking too much about all the waterways along the headwaters of the Amazon River, how ever I will try to narrow it down for you. The area can be reached by travelling upstream via one of the many larger tributaries to the mighty Amazon River. Then continue further up on it's lesser streams, for it has it's own tributaries, and finally continue the last leg on foot. After we had arrived in Brazil, me and my small team of botanists travelled up the great Amazon River onboard a river-boat. It brought us to our first port of call, Manaus, a quite large settlement near the main river. From Manaus our journey continued by riverboat. When we could not travel any further via the tributaries by boat, we used dug-out canoes. These brought us further upstream on the smaller streams that confluence with the tributary that I mentioned earlier. We ventured deeper into the very heart of the rainforest. With the larger tributary located far behind us, we struggled on and we managed to reach a long distance up-stream on the smaller rivers, "small" compared to the mighty Amazon, still quite large though. We then came to a point were we could no longer travel any further by canoe and we left our canoes by the bank of a smaller river, at a spot that would become our starting point for the trek. There a trek, several

days long, awaited us. Our plan was to head farther away from the main waterways than any other explorers possibly could have managed to do on foot. With us we brought paid native Amazonian Indian guides, who also served as our porters and hunters. A few days into our trek something happened. Here's where it starts to get intriguing. On the night of the third day the Indians abandoned us. When we woke up the very next day they were gone without a trace. We are not entirely sure as to the reason for their stealthy departure during the night, however, already at an early stage, as a matter of fact, at the start of the trek, we instinctively got the feeling that something wasn't right. They seemed to be on edge all the time, almost as they were very scared of something. What the cause for this fear was, we don't know!?. Why they abandoned us is a matter for speculations, however, we made a few observations and given the gut feeling we experienced at times, followed by a few occurrences that took place, come to think of it, could explain some of it. All put together it made the whole thing quite clear in retrospect. They were clearly unhappy due to something. Maybe they became afraid that they wouldn't get paid for their services?. For example, they asked for more money should we have wished for them to continue further. They were talking to each other using words we could not understand. Furthermore, at times they became very upset at each other. People get upset at each other every now and then, *nothing really remarkable about that,*

especially when conditions are harsh, *but I'll tell ye one thing*, at one point one of the Indians, and I will never forget the angry look on his face when he grabbed the arm of a fellow Indian and pointed his finger in the opposite direction of travel. *If only we could have been able to understand what they were saying there and then, it would have explained everything, but I guess now we will never know.* We experienced language difficulties all the time, *you see*, only one of the Indians could speak a little bit of english, "english", was hardly the word for it, he knew a few words in english, that's it. This made it very hard for us to discuss things with him, you can imagine how frustrated we became?. Oft times we were forced to resort to some kind of sign language, often ending with both parties being confused and frustrated. *The bottom line is*, they became very afraid and left. *My theory* is that they didn't trust foreigners. Maybe due to language difficulties?, and hence decided to head back to their village, too afraid to let us now about it. *Or* maybe they lied to us before we were setting off, giving us the false impression that they knew the area, when in fact they themselves probably never had been there before. You must excuse me gentlemen if my narrative sounds a bit confusing, but to tell you the truth, I am still puzzled by what happened to us there and then myself. *Anyways*, there we were, abandoned and on our own in a unforgiving place. But as you understand we are used to the jungle, that's what we have studied and have become used to over the years and the reason why we went there in the first place, so we

didn't panic, nor did we become paralyzed by fear given the situation we found ourselves in. I guess we were far too focused on our mission to explore the area and finding new plants that the loss of the native Indians wasn't that big of a deal at that point. We had to make a decision though, regarding whether we ought to continue without the native guides or not. We held a short meeting and decided to go forward with our quest, despite the early setback. As a matter of fact, we saw no other outcome really. We had made it too far to turn back at that stage. We could not face returning empty handed, and besides, the allure of the unexplored rainforest had put a spell on all of us and it made everyone hellbent on venturing deeper into the jungle, no matter what. Looking back at it now, I guess we were a bit naive and over confident in ourselves at that point, but that's the way it was. The loss of the native Indians meant that none but ourselves helped out to share our load. We soon realised that we were faced with a huge problem. How would we manage to bring sufficient amount of supplies and equipment in order to continue the long trek into the jungle?.

We came up with a solution to our problem in the shape of a make-shift stretcher. We lashed it together with thin roots and lianas that we gathered and used as cordage. In this way we could bring most of our supplies, however, as a result you can imagine our progress became painstakingly slow. We tried to lighten our load by ditching some of the gear. It worked for a short while, then it was back to tough going again. We

often had to stop due to the heavy rains, heat and humidity and add to that we became forced to negotiate many obstacles in our path. We grew weaker and weaker day by day, still we carried on like this for several days. We did not dare to leave a depot of food somewhere either, for we were afraid that animals or the humid heat would spoil the food. Determined to reach our designated area we struggled on, *and then*, deep inside the thick rainforest disaster struck. One of my colleagues took a bad step on a steep descent. He placed his foot on a slippery root and fell. The weight of our gear came tumbling down on him. He landed in an awkward position and sprained one of his ankles, *or "something"*. I'm a botanist, not a doctor, so I couldn't really tell, but it looked pretty serious, anyways, he was unable to walk. We patched him up to the best of our capacity. Afterwards we sat down and faced our dilemma. *Our expedition had utterly failed!*. At that point I knew that we could not travel any further. It would have been very foolish to struggle on at that point, so I told my comrades.

– Ok guys, listen up!, *Here's what we'll do!* We will set up camp near to here and rest for a few days, said I. We must find a good spot for to set up a camp, look's like we will be stuck here for some time. We lifted our injured companion onto the ready made stretcher and hiked further on, but only for a short distance. We headed for what looked like an opening in the foliage, a larger glade or something similar. We all hoped that it would turn out to be a lake or a river. When we

arrived at what we had envisioned being a glade, we saw to our excitement that it was a lake, quite large with peat stained, almost tea-colored water. Up ahead in the distance we could see a cliff that was of a considerable height, tower high above the canopees of the trees. It was part of a much larger mountainous area that seemed to stretch out for miles. Further than the eye could see. We all felt sorry for our situation, but at least we were alive and as luck would have it we had arrived at a water-source. All of a sudden, by a twist of fate, *maybe*, our prospects did not seem so bleak after all. We could make day excursions from our camp and explore the area around this lake. New horizons would appear beyond the lake, we thought. Afterwards we would only have to backtrack towards the main river. We hoped that, *maybe*, we would be able to find and catalogue some plants not yet discovered around the lake. That would at least make up for lost time in the field. We wasted no time and early the next day we left our injured companion in our camp that we named, "*The lake camp*". Armed with equipment and notepads my fellow botanists and I fanned out in different directions. Before setting out we had agreed to meet back at camp after four hours. When the hour struck all excepting one botanist had returned to camp. We sat down and wondered what to do. After a while we spotted him coming out from the foliage at the edge of the glade not that far away. He came towards us, half-running, screaming as he went. In pure terror we stood and watched as our companion came closer

and closer, not knowing what had happened. We all thought that he had been bitten by a venomous snake or something that would add to our misery. Luckily, this was not the case, but we soon realized that something most unusual must have happened to him out there in the jungle.

My colleague staggered into our camp grasping for air. He stood transfixed in front of us, his body shaking and judging by the state he was in we could tell that he clearly wasn't his usual self. He had that look of total disbelief written all over his face. Thinking back on it now, I remember it all as if it was yesterday. I will never forget the frightful look on the face of my colleague when he returned to our camp and the scary feeling I experienced that fateful day. The whole thing left a mark on me. I remember that we told to each other at camp, *we ought to tell no one about it, because we were afraid that no-one back home would believe us.* The botanist paused for a second with his narrative. A exciting thrill or maybe a shudder must have passed through the narrating botanists body and soul, for not only did the tone of his voice reveal that he himself was deeply moved by all the curious facts he had revealed to his listeners, his facial expression also changed. It was as if he really did relive that moment in the jungle. He then continued with his narrative. From my memory I will now try to render the conversation that took place in our camp. *Now gentlemen, I will tell you the most remarkable part.*

- What's the matter?, I asked our frightened companion.