

The Free Press Short Story

JUNGLE JUSTICE

By JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

NELSON WATSON dived off the drowning aeroplane, counted ten as she fell swiftly into space, and then pulled her rip-cord. Her heart was pumping heavily as she waited for the parachute to billow open. Finally it "cracked" with a report that caused her eardrums to ring.

With a detachment which slightly surprised her, the girl gazed about as she fell. She saw the white-capped mountains under a broiling sun, the thickly-forested jungle which spread like a smooth green sea everywhere about her. Directly beneath her was the lake, shimmering like hammered bronze, unmarred by a ripple even where that inflated rubber boat rested in mid-centre.

It was this inflated boat, the kind carried by aeroplanes anticipating water landings, which had determined her to jump from the biplane piloted by her brother, Bradley. His aeroplane now buzzed over the jungle to the westward. The girl's anxious blue eyes darted back to the soggy rubber boat. Motionless in the lake's brassy centre, it still told its story. It was the first link in unraveling the mystery surrounding the complete disappearance of her father and older brother, March, a mystery now a week old.

A thousand feet above the lake, Helen prepared for the landing, loosening her chute harness so that she could quickly free herself of its encumbering weight when she struck the water.

Fifty feet above the surface, she dropped free, striking with a great splash and plunging down—down into the lukewarm lake. She drove herself swiftly to the surface with powerful strokes of her slim, browned arms, and struck out for the boat. Although its soggy condition indicated days of exposure to a tropical sun, it still supported her weight when she clambered over the doughnut-shaped ring of inflated rubber to safety. She found a paddle and a hand-pump in the bottom; with the latter she pumped fresh air into the boat.

Glancing about for sight of a log-like shape, the girl was relieved to see none. If there were alligators in this lake, they had sunk into the mud to escape the merciless afternoon sun. Bradley's aeroplane was now silent. The absence of its pulsating beat left her feeling singularly alone. She felt small, chill fingers of terror creeping about her heart and fought a hysterical impulse to cry out.

Could her father have landed here? If so, where was the aeroplane March had piloted? Was it, too, swallowed up by the ever-creeping jungle? Swallowed up as had been the marks of a great Mayan civilization which now decayed in its depths?

Helen shuddered slightly as she picked up her paddle. For the first time, then, she saw a great, gleaming palace of white stone, with steps leading into the water. It was a Mayan edifice buried here in the jungle for centuries.

"That explains what brought Father down to this lake," thought Helen, with a faint feeling of relief. "Pummy Brad and I didn't see it before. But I guess that isn't so strange after all. The way it's buried in jungle foliage."

She remembered that she had promised to call to Bradley after he had landed. It was too easily possible to become lost in that impenetrable tangle of palms, lush jungle growth, and liana vines. She called at intervals as she paddled toward the white stone palace, and presently awoke the mocking echoes of the jungle. Monkeys chattered angrily in high-drooping palms. Parrots commenced an agitated diatribe. Crinoid flamingoes beat long graceful wings against the dead air as they flew hurriedly away. She received no answer to her calls. Had Bradley been hurt landing in what, from a distance, they had supposed was a clearing?

As Helen approached the Mayan palace, her clear blue eyes grew wide with wonder. It was a structure of finely-fitted stones, surpassing anything she had ever seen for architectural beauty.

She drew her rubber boat up onto the tiny steps which fitted the small feet of a prehistoric people. Her heart leaped as she saw the mark of shoes in the aged-green slime on the bottom steps. They must be the tracks of her father or brother; the boat with the number of their aeroplane on it testified to that! Turning up the steep stone stairway, she reached the top breathless, and panting. Once more she called to Bradley. This time, percolating through the chattering of monkeys and raucous cries of parrots, his reply drifted to her.

She continued to call, her eyes meanwhile sweeping the jungle-fringed shore of the lake. The water had been clear while she was in the boat close to the surface; now, from an elevation, it had turned brassy again. Nearly an hour later Bradley appeared at the bottom of the stairs a mangle, with which he had cut his way out of the "brush," gripped in his hand. He mopped perspiration off his bronzed forehead, and

smiled up at her. "Any sign of Dad?" he panted.

"Footprints right near where you're standing," said Helen, then added hopefully, "He must be somewhere near. That's his boat, all right."

Bradley nodded, staring at its number. "This must have been a big city," he said, after a moment's rest. "I ran across decayed buildings all through the bush. And do you know why there was a clearing where I set down my plane? That spot had been paved with stone blocks at some distant time, Helen."

She nodded, her eyes filling with wonder. "The monoliths at Quirigua were erected around 551 A. D.—These buildings must be much older—perhaps centuries."

"I guess I can make the climb now," said Bradley, starting up.

When he had joined her at the top of the steps, they explored the rooms of the palace. The dust of ages had settled in niches and on protrusions which must have served as shelves. Here and there was a place where the dust was missing.

"Some one's recently taken relics from here," said Helen.

"Trust an archaeologist like Dad," said Bradley, smiling. "He must be somewhere around. But where is his plane?"

"He had a land plane just as we did," said Helen. "He couldn't have landed in the lake. And that clearing's the only possible landing place near here."

Her brother's lips tightened in a white line and his lean, serious face sobered. "No one's ever landed there before," declared Bradley with certainty. "I've heard seen wheel tracks."

It put a grim interpretation on their expedition.

A week earlier Mr. Watson had left with March, his oldest son, from Guatemala City. He had made frequent trips over the jungle in search of a lost Mayan city whose only claim to existence lay in an ancient Mayan legend. Consequently, neither Bradley nor Helen had felt any concern regarding this particular flight until he had failed to return that night. Then their apprehensions rose.

The next day the two of them set out in the second aeroplane which Mr. Watson used in archaeological exploration. Both Helen and Bradley could fly a ship as well as March. Mr. Watson had given them all training when he had decided to retire from business to devote the rest of his life to the furthering of human knowledge by archaeological research. One day Helen would take the controls, the next day, Bradley. They pushed farther and farther over the trackless jungle until on this, their sixth day of search, they had seen the rubber boat in the lake.

Helen's firm little jaw suddenly stiffened. "Listen, Brad, there's no use pretending Dad's somewhere around. He isn't, or he'd have heard all that clamor I was making to lead you here. We'll have to face facts and get to work if we're to leave this forlorn place before dark. Either Dad and Mark upset in the lake and drowned, or else they tried to escape through the jungle."

Bradley nodded solemnly. "That's logical. And if they took to the jungle, there's little chance of their getting through alive. It looks bad."

"Let's not jump to conclusions," Helen said hurriedly. "I'll search the lake, and you look for signs of their departure through the jungle. What say?"

Bradley agreed. Helen walked slowly down the steep stairs, pushing out again

in the rubber boat. She had covered half the lake when she saw her father's aeroplane in the clear waters, quite plainly visible fifty feet below her.

Helen was inclined to return to Bradley with her discovery, but some impulse drove her on to further investigation. She was glad it had, for at the opposite end of the lake, she uncovered something far more startling. Plainly visible in the short expanse of soft mud at that end were the pontoon marks of an aeroplane.

A second aeroplane, an amphibian, had landed at this lake shortly after her father had, evidently rescuing him! Why had not he communicated with them at Guatemala City if he was safe? She could find no satisfactory answer to this question, so she paddled back to the palace.

Bradley met her on the steps, his face flushed with excitement. "I found where they'd camped for perhaps four or five days!" he greeted her. "They'd built a cluttered hut against the side of the palace, and there were the bones of quite a number of iguanas. The number of these reptile bones gave me an estimate of their length of stay. Something I can't understand though, is that their machines are in the hut and there's only one place where they've cut into the bush, and then for only fifteen or twenty feet. It looks as if they'd tried to hide that trail, too. I can't understand it."

Helen laughed at her brother's seriousness, and then explained what she had learned. "Oh," said Bradley with a relief, "then they got out safely. Perhaps just this morning."

"I'm going to take a look at that trail before we leave," said Helen. "The fact that they're tried to hide it puzzles me."

She made her way around the palace with difficulty to the trail worn through the heavily matted bush. At the end of the short trail she stopped, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Suddenly dead leaves to one side caught her attention, and she dove into the bush with a cry.

Under the dead leaves were a number of priceless archaeological finds—a beautifully carved golden disk; a number of strings of tiny golden bells, perhaps strings once worn by some Mayan prince; bronze and gold rings and earrings; gold-embossed plaques; obsidian knives with carved, golden handles; a miniature spindle whorl; a golden scepter; and jade ornaments. Last, but not least, was Mr. Watson's big camera.

For a minute Helen could not trust herself to speak. She looked up at Bradley with trembling lips, and saw his jaw muscles white and strained under his tan. "Brad, you know Father would never go away leaving these things behind him! Something's happened to him!"

"You're right," said her brother slowly. "There's something sinister about this whole business."

Panic began to seize Helen at her brother's words. Somehow the words of her minister back home came flashing into her mind, flooding her soul with relief. The sermon had faded into the limbo of the past, but his quotation had remained bright and shining in her mind. "Be still, and know that I am God." Those words had often saved her from anger, anxiety, irksome quarrels. Now, in this moment when it seemed that some terrible disaster had befallen her father, those words gave the girl hope and courage.

She said with a calmness which surprised Bradley: "You're sure Dad didn't push through the bush?"

"Absolutely."

"Then Dad went out by plane," said Helen with finality. "Come, we'll take these things he left with us. They represent a priceless find, Brad."

He stared at her for a moment in perplexity, and then silently stuffed his pockets and his flying helmet with Mayan relics. They found their way to the clearing by the trail he had made, and pushed the aeroplane back to the extreme end of the stone amphitheatre.

It was a narrow squeeze, getting out of that clearing, despite the fact that Bradley "gunned" the biplane savagely for fifteen minutes before taxying down

the clearing. They brushed the tops of the highest palms, and then climbed in spirals above the lost Mayan city and the little lake.

They arrived without mishap in Ciudad de Guatemala, and sped along to the Palace Hotel in a taxicab.

Bradley asked at the desk if any telegrams had arrived, but the obsequious clerk shook his head in a definite negative. Bradley paced the room like a caged lion when they reached their suite of rooms. "They would have communicated with us if they'd gotten out safely," he declared. "Something terrible happened to Dad and March."

"Be still, and know that I am God!" commanded some inner voice. "Don't let Brad stampede you into doing something you'll regret." Aloud, Helen said quietly, "Brad, will you please let me think this out clearly, and stop your pacing?"

Her brother stared at her a moment, shaking with anger. "You're hopeless! I'm going down to the telegraph office to see if any messages have come." He slammed out of the room.

Helen was relieved. Now, at least, she might have a chance to think. Suddenly an unforeseen possibility occurred to her, so simple that she marvelled she had not thought of it before. When Bradley returned soon after, she knew from his expression that there was no word.

"Come with me, Brad," she said. "I'm going to visit the various airports."

He followed without questioning. She went to three airports, asking about an amphibian. At the third she learned that one occasionally landed there. The owner was an archaeologist of more pretension than accomplishment. His name was Sidney Vandell, a name which stirred unpleasant memories in her mind.

Sidney Vandell had once been a member of the Royal Geographic Society, but had been requested to resign when her father, utterly unconscious that he was hurting anyone and seeking only the truth, had exploded Vandell's supposed discovery of heretofore unknown Mayan ruins. Her father had followed the trail of Stevens, an early writer about the ruins of Yucatan, and had published the photographs. Unwittingly Mr. Watson had caught some queer angles on some of the buildings; and Sidney Vandell, consciously taking only queer angles of the same long-known ruins, had been caught in his own deception through the intent of her father. Vandell's claim to fame faded when Mr. Watson's photographs proved that the importer's lost city was only a photographic delusion, for the Yucatan city had been known for thirty years. Vandell had subsequently been asked to resign from the Royal Geographic Society, and he bore Mr. Watson an unreasoning dislike.

Helen had heard of late that Sidney Vandell was trying to vindicate himself (Continued on Page Seven)

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SLATS' DIARY
BY OLIVER N. WARREN

Sunday: Well, I went to S. S. & church. Not with my perennial tho. The S. S. teacher & church preacher ain't so hot with your treasury. Who had much druther listen to some thing on the raydes. Or go a skateling and etc.

Monday: Cents they are so much getting down over the U. S. P. H. I. decided to try & dis satisfy are hens some how. He declares they ain't a setting down often enuff to plect him or neether Jno. L. Louis.

Tuesday: A ladle which cum to are skool was a cutten out alioetta out of paper of us kids. She cut 1 of Jake that were no good it shode the wart on his nose & when the kids seen it—well, that broke up the party so to speak.

Wednesday: Bilsore gramma got onto him for not bowing his head in church Sunday when the preacher was praying & Bilsore (he ain't so dum) wanted to no how his gramma found out he was wusing the scenery.

Thursday: June dont no hardly nothing in skool but she gets by in purty good shape. Recent the teacher ast her to tell the No. of Negroes in the U. S. in any given year on the blk. bd. & she tuk a peace of chock & writ instant 14 and 92—none. The teacher ult & sed that are co-reect.

Friday: Jake aint ever been so hot for Elys Ma so when she ast him al Elys partle last evning did he want to becum her sun in law he up & sed no but he guest hede haft to be when he married Elys. They gotta get up erly to hed off Jake.

Saturday: Put got a nother 1 on Ma. He was enviled to dine with his editur last nite. & diddnt. So he sed when the editur ast him why he repilde & sed circumstances over witeh he had, no control & the editur sed when did you get to callen your wife Strcumstances. I thot it a good joak but Ma diddnt seem to enjoy it. Mutch.

ALL EXPLAINED

"I can't think why they make so much fuss about Miss Smith's voice. Miss Jones has a much richer one."

"Yes, but Miss Smith has a much richer father."

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