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# 1

## *Mystery in the Night*

Rain! A dark, driving, soaking, tropical downpour was heading my way. I had to run for shore or get tossed around all night like a cork in the ocean. Not to mention the risk of being run down by a larger boat in the darkness that accompanies a storm on the upper Amazon River.

Everything had been going well on a trip that was definitely out of the routine for me. I had gone with my dad to Benjamin Constant, a small town located in the state of Amazonas in Brazil on the upper Amazon River.

We had traveled the thousand miles from Manaus to Benjamin Constant by river steamer, towing our little aluminum motor boat with us. Dad had figured on doing some Indian survey work from our mission headquarters there. But after four weeks of interior food he developed dysentery and had to fly back to Manaus by one of Pan Air's Catalina amphibians. That left me the job of bringing the little boat back to our Manaus station.

The thousand miles was difficult but the river was all downhill and I had plenty of confidence in my ability to make the grade. Dad had taught me all about the fifty-horse outboard that would be pushing me and I had plenty of spare parts. Then, too, there were occasional villages and towns along the river where I'd be able to gas up.

So I'd said good-bye to our friends and roared off for home with plenty of food and enough gas to take me a couple hundred miles.

We have a little short-wave radio built into the boat and I was getting some good music from HCJB, the Andes station. I took a drink of cold thermos water from time to time, to keep myself well awake. In short I was really having a good time. Of course I felt a little lonely perhaps—the size of the Amazon makes you feel like a waterbug skittering around on one of the Great Lakes. But I listened to the radio and sang to keep my courage up. After two days and a couple of stops at villages I was getting pretty well along to halfway down.

About three o'clock the third day I was clipping along with the motor almost wide open. Suddenly the outboard began to skip and pop. My heart did a couple of skips too. Then the motor surged on to full power again and I whistled with relief—prematurely. The next instant the motor gurgled again and quit cold.

Suddenly everything was quiet and my little boat drifted along, with the current whipping by its aluminum sides.

I checked the gas—plenty! Spark plugs were still clean at the points! Everything I looked at seemed OK and yet I soaked my shirt with sweat trying to kick over the motor. It just wouldn't catch. So I hauled out the tools for a general check-up. At five thirty I was finally able to get the trouble taken care of and was getting ready to start up again.

I hadn't seen a palm hut for the last fifty miles and though I had drifted for some distance I still saw no signs of humanity near. I was flanked by about a mile of river on each side; its banks were lined with impenetrable tropi-

cal trees and undergrowth. A feeling of loneliness began to creep over me.

It was just at this time that I looked down the muddy expanse of water and saw the rain coming to meet me.

I don't know if you've ever seen a real Amazon rain-storm when it decides to go all out but they're a good thing to get shelter from if possible. Moisture-laden blue-gray clouds were charging through the air toward me. The distant thunder rolled like ten thousand drums and lightning flickered here and there above the darkened mass.

I knew I had just about twenty minutes to make it to shore and tie up before she hit. I was almost there when it got completely dark. I worked hard and finally tied up near a large rock that jutted out of the water along the shore. I covered the motor with canvas and went inside the waterproof cabin to make up my supper and get some sleep if possible. With that storm, I knew I wouldn't be leaving tonight.

Just about then a jagged streak of lightning pulled the zipper on the leading clouds and the rain cascaded down.

For three hours the storm waged a battle with the jungle above me—wind howling and lightning snapping like a whip. After the crack I'd wait a few seconds; then the crash of the thunder would come. Once I heard the creak of a breaking tree, and one of the big giants of the forest gave up the battle and came smashing down about fifteen yards from the boat. It was a pretty scary time.

It was a strange thing that the rain stopped when it did. I'd never have heard the sound if it hadn't. Suddenly there was silence and just the pleasant ripple of the water flowing by the boat and dripping off the trees. Then I heard it—the tone of a bell. It wasn't near but rather distant. I

had never heard a bell like it in purity of sound. Not at all like the cracked, leaden ringing of bells that are in the churches of this area. Did you ever flick your finger off expensive crystal glassware? That's just the way it sounded. Just three quick tones barely audible. But they seemed to shimmer over the water after they'd rung. I couldn't imagine what they could be.

Then I remembered what an old Brazilian backwoodsman had recounted:

"You may not believe me," he had said, "but there is in the Amazon jungle a ghost church with a beautiful chime. Once when I was coming down the river high on the Solimoes I heard it. I landed and tried to trace the sound but I never heard it again and never located the source."

I had laughed inwardly at the old man's tale that was just typical of the ones that Brazilian caboclos like to tell and even believe. But now the story came back to me with new force. Was there something to what he had insisted was true? I listened intently but I heard it no more. It was gone as suddenly as it had come.

But while I concentrated on listening for more chimes I suddenly heard a second sound that was, in a way, even stranger than the first.

It was a low-pitched rumble of powerful motors. At first I thought it was just a large boat feeling its way through the blackness on the other side of the river. Then at once I realized it wasn't that, because the roar was close and coming at an incredible speed. Could it be a low-flying airplane? a super-fast speed boat? I was plenty glad that my little tub was hugging the shore. I'd hated to have been

in the way of that thing. The muffled rumble continued until it seemed almost on top of me. Then it stopped.

Incredibly, I heard the rattle of machinery that came from inside the rock behind which I was tied up, and the clank of what seemed to be a heavy door opening. And in the darkness I thought I saw the rock then move upward and something big and dark slipping beneath. Then I heard the most unbelievable of all—the sound of motors fading out—inland. I had no further chance to listen. Just then the thunder rolled and the rain began to pelt down again.

I had to take stock: Here I was, Steve Collins. Born in Brazil of missionary parents, just back from four years of high school in Los Angeles, just an average guy, B student, fullback on the football team, and above all never the imaginative type. I'd come down to spend six months with my folks in their work out of the old rubber capital of Manaus, Amazonas, before going on to college. I had never been much for adventure stories but always liked realistic stuff. For that reason I was pretty sure that I hadn't been hearing things or imagining them. The whole experience gave me a weird feeling.

What could I do? I couldn't forget the whole business—it was too real for that. So I decided to at least investigate and find what I could.

The rain had slacked off again so I climbed out of the cabin with my flashlight, untied our little boat, the *Esperança Bendita* (in Portuguese that means Blessed Hope).

I eased the craft around the rock but saw no sign of anything resembling a door and no mark of any kind on it. I tapped but it sounded solid as a slab of cement.

A moment later a light flicked on about a hundred yards

down the river and revealed what I hadn't noticed before. It was a floating house that we call here a fluctuante. It is a wooden hut built over two or three great logs and used by families and merchants along the river.

I made for it as fast as my awkward paddle would let me. Any company was acceptable now and perhaps they had heard the noises that I'd heard.

The *Esperança* is a light boat and makes no noise without its motor. As I pulled alongside I saw a swarthy-skinned man whose high-cheekboned face was half shadow in the flickering kerosene lamp light. He was busily concentrating on packing some electrical apparatus in a large leather bag. I got a good look at his hands—some of the fingers had the look of being sandpapered off at the first joint. The same thing that we had often seen in our work in the leper colonies near Manaus. I knew the man was or had been a leper.

The minute my foot touched the fluctuante he sprang erect, his eyes wide. "What do you want, senhor?" His words fell haltingly from his lips.

I briefly outlined my situation and how I came to be there, and he relaxed a bit. Then I questioned him. "Did you hear a bell ringing and the roar of a powerful motor just a short while ago?"

His eyes narrowed to slits and through nearly clenched teeth he ground out, "No! And neither did you, senhor."

But he quickly recovered himself and with an embarrassed smile apologized. "Excuse me, senhor, I am not myself these days."

I asked him why he was here at that lonely location. Once again his eyes became warning slits but he managed to curve the corners of his mouth upward as he thought for

a minute, then replied: "I am a storekeeper, senhor." He pushed nervously at the bag behind a box. "I am waiting for a friend to come with his boat to tow the fluctuante to a better location."

I did not say so but I knew the man lied. I couldn't see a single can of meat or sack of beans in the whole place.

I changed the subject and requested permission to tie up to his fluctuante and sleep the balance of the night. It was on his lips to say no, then a tricky look came over his features and he nodded. We spent a few more minutes in general talk. Then I excused myself and climbed back into the *Esperança Bendita*. After an enjoyable time of prayer and Bible study, I bedded down to sink into a heavy slumber.

A heavy whistle blast almost shattered my eardrums and did my dreams. A large river-going steamer was passing too close to my bobbing boat for comfort. At first I had to think hard to recall where I was. But then as I remembered and looked for the fluctuante I saw that I was in the main stream of the river slipping along with the current. A quick glance at my watch showed me that it was now ten o'clock in the morning. The rope at the prow, with which I had secured the craft to the floating house, was cleanly severed. I was sure that I had been cut free and had floated along for hours. Of the fluctuante or the rock there was not the slightest sign!

## *The Mystery Deepens*

I turned my attention to the outboard and found that it began to work. As soon as I was satisfied that it would keep going I shut it off and checked my watch with the speed of the *Esperança* as she floated with the current. It wasn't long after that I came to a place that I knew that I could remember as a landmark. With this a base to figure from I made the calculations and knew that I wouldn't have too much trouble locating the large rock again, near which I had tied up.

Almost three days later found me pulling into the Manaus harbor. I docked the boat at the Paddle Club, where we always keep it, and got a taxi home.

Mom and Dad gave me a great welcome. They had been just a little worried about me on the trip. I was relieved to find that Dad was recovering from the dysentery but he'd been warned to watch it for a while. I took him aside later and told him about what I'd heard. He was inclined to dismiss it as just a mistaken notion of mine, but he agreed that it would be good to remember the place in case we passed by again some time and could check it more carefully.

However, the incident played itself over and over in my mind, especially when I'd be wakened by a thunderstorm.

I could still hear the chimes, the roar of the swiftly approaching something, and I could still see the dark scowl of the leper. I just couldn't forget the mystery of it. It must have weighed heavily on my mind, because Mom complained that I was yelling in my sleep about hidden bells, roaring motors, and men with worn-off fingers.

By a month later I'd ceased to think much about the incident and was getting back to normal when a Brazilian friend of mine—Alberto—who worked on the Manaus police force, brought the experience back to me with a rush. I was chatting with him about one thing and another and suddenly something I said reminded him of what he'd heard the day before. It was to be kept strictly confidential because he himself wasn't supposed to know.

It seemed that the harbor police and the customs officials, and just the top brass at that, were keeping a story quiet from the newspapers. He'd accidentally found out about it as official police scribe as he was making duplicate copies of some secret papers that mentioned the incident.

No less than three steamers from Rio de Janeiro and one from England had been stopped about two hundred miles below the place where the Solimoes and Rio Negro join to form the main Amazon River. It had happened over a space of some months. Most of the time the boats never knew they had been boarded until they were unloading at Manaus. In discharging the cargo they discovered that they had been robbed.

However, the last one to be boarded had caught the thieves red-handed. There was a brief skirmish along the decks but the boarders had made off with cargo in a boat cleverly camouflaged so that it was hard to identify it in the

darkness. Its speed was so great that it seemed to outrace the bullets that were fired after it.

The captain's report showed that he had no idea that he was being boarded until someone went to replace the watch at the stern and found him bound and in a heavy sleep. Strange men in black outfits had seemed to know the plan of the boat and were soon carrying valuable cargo to their boat that was following close behind. Anyone that came near was shot with a gas and immediately got sleepy and lost interest in the proceedings.

There had been no way to identify the invaders except that one, who seemed to be the leader, was of great size.

The police were keeping everything quiet to keep from frightening the passengers on the riverboats and to make it easier to lay a trap. Already plans were being formed to get the robbers by sending men with the next cargo ship up the Amazon to Manaus. The police felt fairly sure they wouldn't find it so easy next time.

The word about the high-speed motorboat made me wonder about my experience on the rainy night. But I rationalized that it couldn't be because that would be a voyage of over five hundred miles to the rock. So I shelved the matter for further consideration at a later date.

Two weeks later, Alberto, who was a faithful churchgoer, nudged me after Sunday service and motioned me to one corner of the auditorium. He wanted to know if I'd kept quiet on what he'd told me before; and when I replied that I had, he excitedly told me the latest.

"Last night there was another raid," he whispered. "The police watched the boat all the way from Belem near the coast." He looked around to make sure no one was listening. "When they were just out of Manaus they figured

that the raiders were going to skip that one and went to sleep. It was then that they attacked and got away with cargo practically in the Manaus harbor." And he added that the police and shipping authorities were really stirred up.

"There's just one thing that really makes them curious," he added with a grin, "and that's the cargo that they stole."

"What was it?" I asked.

"Medicine for leprosy, technical electrical equipment, and bicycle parts."