MIRACLE GROW

 Drs. Archibald (“Archie”) and Ida Hirschfeld were scientist-explorers in their mid-fifties, on an expedition to the Amazon in their continuing quest to discover new medicinal plant species. Married for thirty years, gray-haired, fit but childless by mutual consent, they were both professional botanists, currently home-headquartered in Cambridge, England. The couple had met while both were doing graduate studies at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. Over the next two decades, the couple did further research at Ghent University in Belgium, Cornell University in New York, and most recently the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil. They achieved world-wide notoriety in 2019 by accidentally discovering – while on a plant foray -- a beetle species in Madagascar which uniquely had eight legs. Entomologists were still scratching their heads over that one. It was a kind of freak hybrid between spiders and insects

 It was June, 2021. The Hirschfelds were on their fourth annual expedition into the remote, unexplored regions of west-central Brazil.

 The vast Amazon basin can be a deadly horror, dubbed by those in the know as the “Green Hell.” Untold numbers of people over the centuries had entered its dark bowels and simply vanished. The hot, steaming jungles and swamps are merciless and unforgiving. There are places that have never been seen by human eyes, places that even native peoples have completely avoided. True, the Amazon is teeming with life – plants, animals, insects – but much of its life is hostile to human habitation. There are anacondas and pythons and other lethal snakes. There are stinging and poisonous insects, and the waters are home to piranhas, incurable parasites, and crocodile-like caimans. The soaking rains transform clothing into rotting tatters, the heat and humidity saps one’s strength and will, and the jungle’s claustrophobic isolation can drive men’s minds to madness. Former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt almost died here of fever and disease in 1914 while mapping an Amazon tributary called the “The River of Doubt.” Explorer Percy Fawcett disappeared here in 1925 while searching for the legendary Lost City of Z. Yet there is sheer beauty here too – stunningly colorful birds and butterflies, for example --and useful trees and beneficial plants. It was this last item that was the sole driving force behind the Hirschfeld Expedition, which was systematically exploring carefully gridded sections of unknown rainforest in the search for new plants which might harbor medicinal wonders.

 The two scientists flew from Sao Paulo to Manaus, then by light plane from there to Jacareacanga. They next drove the Trans-Amazon Highway in a rented Land Rover to their waiting 24’, fully-equipped, aluminum-hulled research vessel --nicknamed “Penelope” -- anchored in the Aripuana River. Finally, they headed south to tiny Sumauma, the last outpost of civilization. Using their satellite communications, they contacted the University to let them know they arrived safely, but would be ‘going off the grid’ and out of contact with the outside world – except for any unforseen emergency – for the next month.

 Archie and Ida were ultimately heading for an unexplored tributary called the “River of Regret.” Its name came from an old superstition in both native Kalapalo and Kuikuro lore about some horrific catastrophe that supposedly occurred on or near it long back in the mists of time. Speaking with the locals in Sumauma in their native tongues (Tupian and Arawakan, and even trying some more common Portuguese), the couple was unsuccessful in gathering any further information about the mysterious tributary. Likewise, any attempt in hiring temporary assistants to help with the month’s research was unexpectedly futile. When told where they would be going on their newly offered job, the locals looked disturbed and then declined, shaking their heads as they walked quickly away. As a result, the Hirschfelds found themselves on their own, but they knew they could manage, as they had many times before.

 Once they found the entrance to the River of Regret, Archie and Ida motored west stolidly up the murky brown tributary. They spotted several black and yellow caimans, and heard howler monkeys screeching in the trees. Despite wearing repellent, the couple swatted at biting flies and mosquitoes, their clothing drenched in sweat in the sweltering heat and humidity, their eyeglasses fogging up despite repeated wiping. The musty air was heavy and fetid. They spied families of black tapirs foraging for food near the river bank. Brilliant scarlet and hyacinth macaws flew and hopped on jungle tree branches and vines. The dark green jungle canopy was mostly gloomy shadows with an occasional stab of direct sunbeams where a gigantic tree had collapsed, revealing a bit of brilliant blue sky. Faithful Penelope motored smoothly forward, bold and confident. But the two botanists felt as if they were the only people on Earth, an Amazonian Adam and Eve. They cautiously stayed on board their research boat to sleep fitfully each night. So far, they had journeyed steadily upriver for two days and two nights.

 It was on the third morning that Archie saw something unexpected through his binoculars. It was a rocky black mound about 50 meters from the shore. He estimated that it was about 9 meters high and twice that measure wide. Although they were officially on the hunt for new medicinal plants, this outcrop was so unusual that he felt they should explore it and also use it as their base camp area. Ida agreed. “We can use it as our landmark, and never get lost,” she offered. So Archie hove towards the river’s bank, and tied up Penelope to a nearby fallen log. The couple systematically began to organize their camping supplies and their scientific equipment. The temperature was already uncomfortable. They sensed the heat increasing as they stepped on jungle land for the first time, away from the slightly cooler water. Archie noted where the highest water line during river flood was located, and they off-loaded their gear another 5 meters inland after clearing brush. Luckily, they had tied up near a suitable but small area with mostly brush and few trees.

 The explorers set up two large netted tents: one for habitation and sleeping (two folding chairs and table; a toilet bucket; two cots and thin bedding), and the other for their botanical collections and experiments. Next, they set up an open-air (though also mosquito net-covered) cooking area. Their food cache was both freeze-dried and tinned, along with some fresh fruit: a large bunch of green bananas and a dozen ripening mangos. Although they had twenty-five gallons of fresh drinking water, they also had river water purification equipment. Other supplies included an elaborate medical kit, four battery-powered lanterns, two rifles with ammunition, a GPS unit with back-up compass, an emergency locator beacon, a compact weather-monitoring station, some topographical maps, assorted knives and machetes, a microscope, two magnifying glasses, various bottles of chemical preservatives, assorted scientific manuals and a few light-reading leisure paperbacks, a shortwave radio, various shovels and tools, several changes of clothing, two digital cameras, and plant specimen collecting containers in three different sizes. Finally, Archie had brought a tin of his favorite pipe tobacco and two bottles of fine French cognac.

 When their toil was completed and they were both soaked in sweat, the Hirschfelds stripped and carefully bathed on the bank of the River of Regret, splashing each other with buckets of brown, tepid water. The late afternoon Amazon jungle was very still now, other than for some buzzing insects. Ida spied an armadillo burrow, and Archie thought he saw some peacock bass swimming in the river’s current. There were the usual rainforest ants marching in single file going somewhere, and a small green whipsnake was spotted as it quickly slithered for cover in the jungle floor undergrowth. Ida noted that there were “no jararacas (deadly pit vipers), payayra vampire fish, or other nasties observed so far” when she wrote in her journal that night before they retired, exhausted, in their cots after dinner. They switched on the bow spotlight and the other running lights on Penelope -- securely anchored roughly 10 meters away -- for some nighttime illumination, the light of which spread reassuringly to their camp. The bats came out, however, and well as all the other night predators, so the jungle was alive with various cries and noises, mostly from frogs. Just before Archie drifted off to sleep, he thought he heard a lone jaguar investigating the perimeter of camp, but dismissed it as mere imagination.

 Ida woke first the following morning, as was her habit, and noticed an emerald tree boa lazily still asleep, nestled in a nearly tree branch. She dressed, walked to Penelope and turned off her lights, then returned and put the kettle on for breakfast tea. When Archie awoke and dressed, they ate their morning meal, then discussed the day’s activities, which would begin with an exploration of the atypical black rock outcrop beckoning about 40 meters away.

 Using their machetes, the botanists hacked their way through hanging vines from their camp clearing to the mysterious outcrop. Upon arrival and slowly walking around it, they clearly saw that it must be a cave of some sort, for on the reverse side facing away from the river there appeared to be an entrance, but it was blocked by a two-meter high pile of carefully placed black stones beneath enveloping jungle growth. Ida and Archie pulled off the vines and roots and then decided to clear the blocked entrance. Archie went quickly back to camp and grabbed two battery lanterns and one of their digital cameras and returned to Ida. After photographing the cave entrance in situ, they proceeded to remove the crude stones one by one. The couple was confident that no animals were hiding inside, so well had the uncut stones been placed. Once the entrance was cleared, they stepped carefully inside, feeling like Howard Carter entering King Tut’s tomb for the first time.

 They switched on their lanterns and their eyes adjusted to the light. The interior appeared to be about 5 meters high and 10 meters in circumference. The cave was empty, the floor bare dirt. But suddenly Ida exclaimed, “Look, Arch…there in the back. It is some kind of upright stone.”

 Sure enough, they beheld a reddish stone about a meter high, 50 cm. wide, and 10 cm. thick, sticking vertically up from the cave floor. Upon closer examination, they saw some carving on the front. It looked like the contorted face of some kind of demon with vines growing out of its mouth. It looked to be in agony.

 Bending down further with their lanterns, the two scientists saw something unexpected. Plants. About a dozen, growing near the base to the demon stone. Archie quickly took photos of both the stone and the unusual plants from various angles, placing his shirt pocket fountain pen next to both finds for size comparison.

 “How could these plants exist in total darkness without light, unless they are related to mushrooms or other fungi?” Ida asked. “Yet they appear to have true leaves. Incredible! I’ve never seen anything like it.”

 Each plant was about the size of a man’s open hand. There were thirteen of them. Each plant had six, short-stemmed bluish-purple leaves with flaming scarlet veins and a blood-red center core. Each plant also had six small tendrils. No visible flowers or seeds. Crouching down and using his pocket Swiss Army knife, Archie gently dug around the base of one specimen and lifted it slightly. His trained eye noticed six healthy main roots. He returned it carefully to its soil base. 6-6-6, he thought.

 “I think we have a whole new genus here, my dear,” Archie proclaimed. “How about we nickname it ‘purple triple six’ for the time being?”

 “Hmm…Purpura Tria Sexus…I like the sound of it,” Ida beamed. “Let’s go back to camp for some collection boxes. I think three samples with native soil kept in total darkness and three kept in clear light should tell us something. I want to get this special little bugger under the microscope, and do some chemical analysis. Maybe we’ll be lucky and score a new species of medicinal plant!”

 “The anthropologists will have a field day figuring out the age and meaning of that carved demon stone too,” Archie mused. He filled his briar pipe from his tobacco pouch and lit it in minor triumph as they happily marched back the short distance to camp.

 Upon returning to the cave and methodically collecting their precious plant samples, the pair slowly re-stacked the entrance stones and noted the cave location on their GPS unit. In their laboratory tent, they went to work for the next two days (one of which poured rain), until they had exhausted all the necessary tests, notes, sketches, and measurements on Purpura Tria Sexus. The most surprising result was the fact that sunlight did not harm the unusual plants in any manner. After serious discussion, the couple decided to head back to civilization to proclaim their discovery and submit their samples’ photos and field analysis to sophisticated world laboratories, rather than continue to search for any further new plants in the chosen grid quadrant for an entire month as originally planned. That night, after taking their daily malaria pills, they dined on freeze-dried spaghetti and meatballs, tinned crackers, tinned green beans, ripe mangos, and tea. To celebrate, they toasted with small metal cups of cognac. The following morning, they broke camp and reloaded all of their equipment on faithful Penelope, just before another rain storm hit. Three days later, they were safely back in Sumauma, where they used satellite communications to report their discovery back to the University at Sao Paulo. After welcome hot baths, they had their laundry done, then took Penelope back to her original berth near the Trans- Amazon Highway where it crossed the Aripuana River. Botany graduate students from USP met them, and heard a short eyewitness account of the Hirschfeld’s journey. Naturally, they wanted to see the rare plant specimens, so they were treated to a brief but thrilling viewing. The six samples of Purpura Tria Sexus were then loaded carefully onto a waiting Land Rover, and the explorer-scientists drove them back to Jacareacanga. A specially chartered plane took the Hirschfelds back to Manaus, refueled, then continued to Sao Paulo and the University.

 Seven weeks later, anthropologists from Harvard University announced that the so-called ‘demon stone’ – based on Archie’s detailed photographs -- was probably carved about 6,000 years old, which pre-dated the rain forest ecology of the Amazon basin, it then being similar to African savannah. The natives in Amazonia at that time had virtually vanished overnight, however. Yet another unsolved mystery. And the experts also deduced and hence declared that the stone was some kind of dire warning of unknown purport -- perhaps fear and superstition of something long gone and now forgotten.

 Meanwhile, after returning home to Cambridge for a three month break, the Hirschfelds began working tirelessly for the next eleven months with other medical and chemical researchers in laboratories at both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta and the World Health Organization in Geneva. The team analyzed every aspect of the new plant species, and were eventually able to chemically synthesize the basic components of the leaves, roots, tendrils, and stems. As no flowers or seeds were evidenced, reproduction of the plant was oddly found to be done through microscopic spores -- much like those found in mushrooms -- which were transmitted through the air. Gestation took six months. Growth, once begun, was rapid – but only in sunlight. In darkness, however, growth was extremely slow. So ‘purple triple six’ was proven hearty and healthy, even in domestic captivity.

 Animal testing was first attempted in late 2023. Various diseases were introduced to the host subjects, with the plant’s replicated chemical components singularly added to ascertain any healing effect. After four months, however, the results were all negative. Ida and Archie were frustrated and disappointed. They were hoping for a ‘medical miracle’ plant discovery -- not for their personal fame, but rather sincerely for the benefit of all humanity.

 Next came human volunteer subjects plagued with a variety of lethal and non-lethal illnesses. Fourteen different plant enzymes were injected, as with the animal subjects. Eight months of testing, however, came up with nothing. It increasingly looked like the plant was simply useless as any kind of medicine.

 One day, in December of 2024, something startling was announced. A renowned botanist from India, Dr. Kiran Gupta, who was granted a single plant from the WHO labs for experimentation, suggested ingesting the leaves of Purpura Tria Sexus directly, rather than through synthesized chemical injection. He had tried his theory upon himself in desperation when he was unexpectedly diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Amazing, his tumors regressed, then vanished completely! When this news was released, tests on human cancers were started in countries around the world. The results were the same. In fact, every type of cancer was reversed within six weeks by simply ingesting just one leaf from the plant. After further testing and examinations, it was medically shown that the common platelets in human blood activated the plant’s living enzymes in such a way that it literally ‘ate’ any tumor – malignant or benign -- away without affecting surrounding normal healthy tissue. The only side effect after initial ingestion was 24 hours of mild hallucinations.

 Soon, plant hothouses were being assembled around the world, as the demand for the new miracle ‘wonder plant’ surged. Political pressure was placed on the world’s governments by their populations to formally approve the new cancer cure. In the United States, the Food and Drug Administration was the first to certify purple triple six – “PTS” -- for general public use. Europe and the other continents quickly followed suit. PTS ‘starter’ plants were shipped around the world to procreate and then assuredly save the lives of millions. Professors Hirschfeld were ecstatic. A miracle had been found!

 Dr. Gupta was the first to get sick. Eight months after his lung cancer reversed itself, he began to feel strange and weak, with continuous, uncontrollable coughing. In hospital, his body was found to be harboring small green patches of some unknown growth under his skin. Then, doctors were horrified to find minute, slowly growing, green tendrils growing in and later out his mouth, eye tear ducts, nose, ears, penis, and anus.

 The world health community was alerted immediately, but in a short time, experts announced their failure using radiation, chemotherapy, surgery, and other methods to stop the spread of the deadly intra-body green plant growth. It killed everyone who had ingested a single leaf of PTS after the eighth month – an agonizing ordeal that completed its wrath in 48-72 hours, depending on the victim’s age and weight. By the time the corpses were cremated, they were mostly a huge plant and hardly even resembled human beings anymore.

 But the final horror was still to come. Further research showed that PTS had deposited growth spores in each human’s lungs as they breathed in normally while ingesting its leaf. The spores matured in the lungs after eight months, then began to grow as a plant. As the victim was dying, he or she continually coughed, which released activated spores into the atmosphere. There, the spores were carried on the world’s air currents to every corner of the globe – to be eventually breathed in by every innocent person on the planet.

 It took just twenty years for PTS to kill every human being on Earth. After 200 years, the world’s cities and all of man’s achievements were reclaimed by dark green jungle growth. It was as if mankind had never existed…

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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