

Title

J. Allan Dunn

***The Treasure
of Atlantis***

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About this eBook

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I. The Flowing Road

"It's good to be back again, Morse, back to civilization, and it's mighty good of you to take me in this way."

Stanley Morse looked at the orchid hunter as the latter leaned forward from the cozy depth of the saddlebag chair and stretched his lean hands to the blaze. The fingers were more like claws than human attributes; the whole man seemed little more than a well-preserved mummy, a strangely different person from the vigorous naturalist Morse remembered meeting three years before on the higher reaches of the Amazon - the "Flowing Road." The man's clothes hung in ludicrous folds about his gaunt frame, and he shivered despite the heat of the blazing logs that almost scorched his chair.

"Nonsense, Murdock!" he said. "I'm only trying to repay your own hospitality. Do you suppose I have forgotten the time you took me into camp on the Huallagos River, when my raft had gone to pieces in the Chapaja Rapids with all my equipment? You've got the malaria in your system yet. Let me get you something to offset that ague."

"It's more than malaria, Morse. There's nothing in your medicine chest, or anyone else's, that can help me,

He laughed a little hysterically and stripped back the sleeve from one arm. The limb, save for its power of movement, seemed atrophied, flesh and muscle and skin had shrunk about the bones until they looked like two sticks held together with twisted cords.

"That's emblematic of the rest of me," he said, as the loose cloth slid back over his knobby wrist. "I've done my last league on the Flowing Road or any other road, for that matter. I've found my last orchid."

"You'll be all right with a few weeks' rest," replied Morse, with forced optimism. "As for the financial end of it, we can build a bridge across that stream."

"I need no man's charity," said Murdock, with a flash of fierce resentment. "If you'll put me up for a while - it won't be long - as you have offered to, I'll accept it gladly; but I can pay my way, Morse."

"That's all right," answered Morse, sensing the excitement of his guest; "we'll not talk of payment. Tell me about your trip, if you feel up to it. And join me in a hot toddy."

He touched a bell, and a deft man-servant answered, retiring to bring in the necessary concomitants.

"This beats chacta," said Murdock, as he sipped the steaming liquid. "And this" - his eyes roved round the big room, the walls set with well-filled bookcases that reached half their height, the spaces above covered with curios and trophies of the chase, mostly South American - "this is a long way from Ucali's hut on the headwaters of the Xingu."

He lapsed into a reverie, staring into the fire, his skull-like head sunk between his hands, as if he could see in the glowing coals the seething cataracts of a torrent racing between

rugged sandstone palisades clothed with dense forests, where the lianas writhed between the trees and bound them together in an almost impenetrable jungle.

Stanley Morse, gentleman adventurer, who spent his bountiful income in the exploration of unknown lands for the sheer love of sport and the thrill of danger, watched his guest pityingly. There were hardly ten years between them, he reflected, remembering the man of three years ago, bronzed and lusty, barely entering the prime of life. Now he seemed sixty, twice Morse's own age, and prematurely old at that. Presently he relapsed with a long sigh, finished his toddy, and settled back amid the cushions luxuriantly.

"The headwaters of the Xingu. That was where you came out?" Morse queried. "Don't talk if you are too tired. Let it go until tomorrow, and turn in."

"There may be no tomorrow," answered the orchid hunter. There was nothing morbid in his tone. He spoke cheerfully, as one who recognizes overpowering odds and accepts them bravely. "So I shall talk tonight. Yes, that is where I came out of the carrasco (brush) - alone. But the story I want to tell you begins back of that, on the chapadao (plateau) between the Xingu and the Manoel, south of Para, in Matto Grosso State."

He turned his head, with its dark eyes glowing in deep hollows sunk in the skin that looked like brown parchment, and spoke in a low tone fraught with impressiveness.

"Did you know, Morse," he queried, "that there was a great city on the southern part of the Amazonian plateau?"

"It hardly surprises me," said Morse. "I've never seen any evidences in Brazil myself, but I made a trip to Chan Chan, in Peru, near Trujillo. Pre-Inca they call it. Not much left but a honeycomb of mud walls now, though."

"Mud walls! Pish! I'm not talking of ruins, man! I mean a living city. Temples cut from the living rock, great buildings of stone set along the shore of a mighty lake amid tropical foliage and cultivated fields. Paved roadways, and people thronging them clad in brilliant garments. Boats on the lake, with banks of oars and striped sails. A city set in a bowl of gray cliffs in the shadow of a snow-capped peak with a plume of smoke coming from it like the curl of a lazy fire!"

"You've seen it?"

"Twice!"

He spoke with conviction, and Morse for a moment shared the vision. The next sentence shattered it:

"Twice in the air. Don't think I'm crazy, Morse. It was a mirage, but even a fata Morgana has to be projected from an actual object. And there's tangible proof to back it up. They were not air castles I saw, not the 'airy segments of a dream.'"

Morse tried to veil his growing skepticism. The orchid hunter was Scotch, and the Gaels, he reflected, were apt to be "fey" and see visions. The man was physically and probably mentally sick. But he humored him. "A mirage is an optical effect rather than an optical

illusion, I believe," he said. "Undoubtedly there was some solid basis for the reflection. Are you sure about the smoke above the peak? It was my impression that Brazil was free from disturbances. It's a long time since I read up anything about it, but I seem to remember that there were no eruptive features since the Devonian period, according to the scientists."

"A fig for the scientists! Let the scientists travel a country instead of theorizing about it. Show me the scientist who has hacked his way through twelve miles of carrasco and charted the lower Amazonian chapadaos. I lay no claim to being a scientist. I know one branch of botany, but I know it well, and I know enough of geology in that connection to tell a crystalline formation from an amorphous. The valleys of the Madeira, Tapajos, Manoel, and Xingu are floored with crystalline. And the rest of the formations are tilted and faulty. In fifteen years I've known a third as many temblors (earthquakes), and I know a volcano when I see one. Twice I saw it, across the canyon - the temples by the lake, the snow-capped cone, and the plume of vapor. Twice!"

Again he focused his attention on the burning logs, speaking as if the fiery recesses were focal points through which he viewed the strange sights of the land that is bordered by the Flowering Road, the mighty Amazon.

"You know, without my telling you, the general characteristics of the chapadao region," said Murdock. "The main plateaus at an average level of three thousand feet, but up by the streams and rivers into sections, dense forests in the lowlands, woodlands in the shallower valleys, and the grassy campos on the heights. It seemed as if misfortune trailed us. Our bogadores deserted us, the cargadores were a lazy crowd, reports of rare blossoms turned out myths, hardly a week occurred without some accident, common enough, save when they happened so frequently.

"I had started late, owing to difficulties brought up by the European war, going up the Amazon eight hundred and seventy miles from Para to Itacoatiara and so up the Madeira River six hundred and sixty-odd miles to San Antonio Falls. From there I had to traverse and raft it to the Small Pebble Rapid, Guajara Merim, they call it, and it was hard work. I was after a *Cycnoches*, a weird, night-blooming orchid that looks, by moonlight, exactly like a great azure butterfly. It was worth five thousand dollars to me for every fertile capsule I could bring out, and I stayed longer than I should. It was the middle of September before I started on the four-hundred-and-fifty-mile trek - that's as the parallel rulers mark it on the map - to the Alto Tapajos, with another four hundred miles downriver through almost continuous rapids to really navigable water to Marahao Grande. It was foolhardy to stay that long, but it looked like my last trip with a fortune at the end - and I found my orchid!

"Then the luck turned. definitely. Our stores were low, and we hurried along, half fed, in an attempt to forestall the rainy season. You know what that means - a difference of forty feet in the rivers, making them all but impassable. I never met with such a mat or jungle, lianas fighting us every foot of the way, and the gnats, flies, and beetles, to say nothing of the vampire bats and leeches, draining our strength and impregnating us with their poisons. I had a young chap named Gordon with me. I left him behind, poor fellow! He was a clever naturalist and a plucky comrade. We staggered on, delirious from insect venom often - the whole trip seems a nightmare - and, after crossing the Janiar, the ill luck culminated.

"We came across a settlement where the native chief was sick, and we were called upon to cure him - a common enough occurrence, but one that landed us this time on the horns of a

dilemma. The man was dying, due to pass out in forty-eight hours or less, from enteric fever. You can imagine the situation. Fail to treat him, or treat him and fail! It made you either a beneficent wizard or a devil! I did the best I could, and kept him alive a week. He was grateful enough, poor wretch, but there were ugly looks as we left the pueblo, and I knew the news would be sent ahead by the 'jungle wireless,' the hollow logs hung on lianas that they beat with a stick coated with rubber.

"As we advanced, I had evidence of increasing hostility. We had dogs with us, and they constantly warned us of lurking enemies. We extinguished all fires and buried the embers before dark, and all smoking was stopped after nightfall while we kept constant watch. We caught the sound of drums one afternoon, first in one direction, then in another, and I knew we were trapped. The cowardly cargadores started to pick up their packs and flee, but I made them stop, and we felled trees for a barricade. Well, they attacked just before dawn, and poor Gordon was hit with an arrow tipped with urari.

"We beat them off that time, and pressed on, with Gordon in a litter. He lasted three days, with his arm swollen up twice the size of his thigh, and passed out in coma. Four times different bands tried to leave us in the jungle, and each time I lost two or three of the cargadores through flight that undoubtedly cost them their lives. The last time an arrow scratched me, passing under my arm through my shirt. I put leeches on the wound and took strychnine, but I was a doomed man from that moment. My heart failed me at every exertion and the poison was absorbed inevitably into my system.

"We shook them off at last, and two weeks later we crossed a campo of dried grass and came to a great cut in the plateau eroded by a stream that ran in rapids five hundred feet below. I made camp there, hoping to gain strength.

"It was the next morning I saw the mirage. Not I alone, but the half dozen carriers still left with me. It was as I told you, plain in the sky - temples, buildings, lake, boats, and the crowded causeways. I had practically no fever that morning. The cargadores prostrated themselves in terror. That afternoon they left, taking their 'packs with them while I was having my siesta. My two machete men stayed behind, not from any particular fidelity, but, as they expressed it, we were bound to be killed, anyway, and they might as well stay where they were comfortable and meet death rather than try and run away.

"You may imagine it was not a cheerful situation! I was on my last legs in the heart of the Brazilian jungle, the rainy season close at hand, practically all my supplies gone, without bearers! It was a tight hole. To crown the trouble, the cargadores had taken along my orchids in their scurry.

"There was nothing to do but to make the best of it, and that meant getting under way. My rifles and ammunition were in the shelter, and one of the dogs had stayed behind. There was no use crossing the stream, for the opposing cliffs were sheer and apparently unscalable, though I thought I saw traces of a succession of rough steps that almost looked like masonry leading to a ledge halfway up the cliff. But there they ended definitely in a smooth wall. So I decided to follow the stream downward. It ran almost due northeast toward the Amazon, and I hoped that later it would widen and become navigable for a raft. Shorthanded as we were, that was a slim chance, but the only one in sight.

"It was useless to follow the carriers. The day was drawing to a close, and I determined to pass the night where we were. At sunset I heard a shout from the machete men, and found them groveling on the edge of the precipice. It was the mirage again, floating in a sky of pale green. It was no hallucination, Morse. I was not the only one to see it, and if ever a man had braced himself for an emergency I was in that condition. I found that the Indians considered it a sure sign of death, a vision of their heaven, I imagine. But the two who stayed with me were real men.

"We struck out early next morning. The plateau sloped sharply downward, and in two hours we were clear of the grass and brush and among trees and jungle once more, following a fairly well-beaten trail. About a mile in, the dog got restless, and we advanced cautiously. Suddenly the hound, which was ahead, began to whimper - he was trained not to bay or howl - and stood still. I crept up to him. The trail widened out. Swinging face downward in the center of the opening, his outstretched fingers a foot clear of the ground, a man hung, one leg caught in the running loop of a rope that was attached to a springy palm, the noose trap that the Indians set for tapirs in the river runways. But this was not a tapir trail. The man had evidently hung there for a long time. The free leg swayed limp, the body was relaxed, and the face, as it swung toward us, was congested. There was a red fillet about his hair that proclaimed him a chieftain, the alcalde of some pueblo.

"We had him down in a jiffy. I could scent help to ourselves from his gratitude if he wasn't dead. We worked over him, and presently he groaned and opened his eyes, and then his mouth, down which I poured some chacta that helped him to tell his story.

"His name was Tagua, chief of a tribe inhabiting the village of Apará. He was an old man, but still too fond of life to suit his nephew who wanted his place. This precious relative had set the trap and then told Tagua that he had seen a tatu (armadillo) on the trail, knowing the old man would travel ten miles to get its flesh. That was the day before. Tagua walked into the trap in the afternoon, and was jerked up in a second. It was fortunate for him that no peccaries came that way, or a jaguar. None of the villagers did. His nephew looked out for that.

"When we had kneaded and rubbed Tagua's joints into place and pliancy, his gratitude knew no bounds. He knew all about us by the wireless drums, and volunteered to send back a message that would leave us immune. He may have given up the information that we were murdered.

"When we marched into Apará, Tagua managing to put up a front for the entry, we created a sensation. Mbata, the nephew, had already usurped the leadership, but he was quickly convinced of his mistaken ambition. After a big feast, Tagua put me up in his own hut, and that night I solidly cemented the friendship. Mbata paid us a visit about three o'clock with a big knife calculated to sever all friendly relations. I woke as he came in, and dropped him with a revolver bullet as he leaned over Tagua, knife in hand.

"After that I owned the village. I had not only saved Tagua's life, but snuffed out that of the one man he was afraid of. He gave me ten of his pisanos (villagers), four of them boatmen and six carriers, and all the yuca, dried fish, and bananas we wanted. More than that, he sent out scouts for my missing carriers, but they failed to find any trace of them.

"I left him my hound and poor Gordon's rifle, with a good supply of cartridges, and he forthwith adopted me. It was not all form, as I will show you. The night before we left, I spoke of the mirage and Tagua confirmed its existence. It was known to his people as Dor, and its inhabitants were not Indians, but men whose skins were white as mine. Long generations before, his people had been used as slaves over a period of years. When the work was complete they had been driven out through a hole in the cliff at the head of the masonry steps I thought I had seen, and the place closed up after them. His own great-great-grandfather had been among the captive workmen, and when he left he had stolen a vase from the house of his bondlord.

"This vase had long been a fetish in Tagua's family. It was one of the things Mbata had desired. But Tagua had hidden it cunningly in the floor of his hut, and Mbata had been unsuccessful. It had been a bad fetish, he declared, and to my astonishment, seriously gave it as his opinion that stolen goods never brought good fortune.

"So he insisted on my taking it. And it was gold! He said that twice a year the people of Dor threw many vessels and ornaments of gold and jewels into their lake for sacrifices. The city was sealed in by cliffs that could not be climbed, but it was rich in metal. Gold was used for ornaments, for plates, for drinking cups.

"Whatever his imagination though, the vase attested that he told at least some measure of truth. I took it. We got to the Xingu in the rains, and to Para - "

"And the vase?"

"Is here. I brought it with me."

II. The Vase of Minos

Long after the orchid hunter had gone to bed, Morse held the vase in his hands, turning it over and over while the ruddy firelight played upon the repousse surface, speculating upon its history. Had he known what the cup held for him of perilous adventure upon the very rim of death, it is possible that he would have resisted the spell it gradually wound about him.

It was untarnished and undented, despite the softness of the beaten surface of unalloyed metal, and it was of the most exquisite workmanship. Finally he set it upon the table beneath the glow of his lamp. The vase was an oval container, exquisitely symmetrical, supported by four serpents of solid gold whose heads met with forked tongues touching beneath the center of the bowl.

Its main surface was divided into two panels by the duplicated design of a double ax. On one side a superbly modeled bull was being baited by a youth and a maid, clad in garments apparently Grecian. The figures were lithe in action, beautiful in pose. Darts clung to the snorting, wounded bull that pawed the ground with lowered head. The other panel was filled with ancient writings above which, in raised letters, was the word *minos* that Morse easily deciphered, though the characters were ancient Greek.

Here was a riddle: a golden vase brought back from the heart of Brazil, yet eminently Grecian! He turned to his bookshelves, the word "*Minos*" stirring his recollections. Far into