

The Mark of Cain

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I was trespassing in the rain forest's of Peru, along some of the tributaries of the Amazon River. Those are dreary, dark places marked off into territories by the native Indian Tribes. The rains are perpetually drenching the jungle, and the canopy of the forest drips water almost continuously.

I had a young guide, named Ernesto, who spoke the English, Spanish, and Quechua languages. He stood about 5' 6" and weighed near 110 pounds. He carried a machete that seemed to be an extension of his right arm. I never saw him lay it down while we were on the trail. He was always hacking and cutting at the green hell that relentlessly encroached upon our path. With this formidable tool, he provided food from the indigenous trees and plants as we moved along the jungle floor.

We had visited two camps of Indians on this day. If they wore clothes, it was only a loin cloth made of native grasses. The houses were raised on stilts, with a bamboo floor, no side walls and terminated with a grass thatched roof. Pigs, chickens, and dogs walked, wallowed and pecked in the pools of stagnant, green water under the houses. The village was composed of six of these houses, with old men and women going about the various duties of life just as they have done since before recorded history. I was told that the young men were off on a hunting party. Hunting and fishing were their responsibility. The material worth of the entire village, on a salvage basis, would not have brought \$50 on any market.

One old man, too old for the hunt, maybe 50 years of age, was sitting in the opening by the houses. Near the center of the circle of dwellings was a council house. It was four bamboo poles with a dirt floor and a thatched roof. In this arena was the only metal object that I saw. It was a black cast iron pot slowly cooking over a very small fire. Ernesto lifted the lid of the pot with the end of his machete, and exposed a simmering, clear, straw colored liquid. He said it was a drink that the Indian prepared by sitting on the ground, and chewing tapioca root until it was a pulpy mass. This was then spit into the pot, which was soon full because this was a community project. It was allowed to ferment for a couple of weeks, and I was seeing the finished product. I was offered a drink of this potion which I politely declined. I have often wished that my Mother had not raised me so germ conscious, for looking back on the matter I should very much like to have given it a taste.

The old gentleman, of whom I have earlier spoken, was asked to demonstrate the use of the blowgun. He was very silent and stoic, never changing expression. He arose, picked up his six foot long gun, and inserted an arrow. The entire weapon was made of things found in the jungle. He placed a leaf that was about the size of a man's hand on a distant tree. In the old days the little arrow was tipped with a poison from some native plant. When they shot a monkey it became

paralyzed and fell from the tree, thus they had primate stew for dinner that night. As the short arrow was inserted into the gun, the entire opening was sealed with a cotton like grass blossom from the jungle.

He grasped the blowgun at the top with his left hand, and gently placed his right hand around the the barrel up against the left hand. He raised the weapon to his mouth and waited for the distant end to become steady, and then gave a quick puff of air and the leaf was pierced through at its center.

As we were leaving the camp, crossing a small clearing that sloped downward, I could hear someone laughing loudly and running down the trail behind us. It was a young girl in her late teens. She was a healthy looking specimen, and well pregnant. Her face was covered with a charcoal mixture, highlighted with pink areas here and there that had not been daubed. She ran rapidly up to Ernesto and with a couple fast swipes of both hands, blackened his face also, and still laughing returned to her village.

The message was very clear, and the expression on Ernesto's face a true study. He was the father of this forming child, and the unwed mother had been given the Mark of Cain, as a symbol of disgrace. She was sharing the disgrace and naming the father of her fetal child. I mulled over in my mind these strange happening as we made our way back to the canoe. The ways of the jungle are many and strange, but this was the strangest of them all.

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