

The Emerald Forest

Name: _____

Jean had almost finished packing up the picnic things. As Bill approached she glanced up. "Did you find anything?"

"Imagination. Bird song. Shadows. That's all. Indians don't come this close to the edge."

"Where's Tommy?"

"He's right here ... "

Bill turned, then froze. Heather was swinging on the liana up by the jungle's edge. Tommy was nowhere to be seen. And yet ... And yet Bill could have sworn that the boy had come running out of the forest and followed him down, back to the picnic site.

He turned back to Jean, who was staring at him. And Bill Markham suddenly realized that the two of them were exchanging a gaze of growing terror. He frowned. His heart started to pump with noisy energy. The bare land, and the forest, began to swim in his vision.

Jean stepped towards him, the mugs falling from her grasp. All the blood had drained from her face ...

In that instant they were aware of it, sensing the danger, sensing the tragedy. They moved towards each other, but the daylight had slipped away, the sun dimmed, the warmth drained away into a terrible chill.

"Tommy..." Bill said. "Oh my God..."

And then they were running. Bill grabbed the shotgun. Jean screamed the boy's name. Heather started to cry as she saw the panic and terror in her parents' faces. They flung themselves into the bush, scrabbling and crawling (1) into the gloom (2).

"Tommy! Tommy Answer me!"

"Oh God! What can have happened?"

"Tommy!"

They were two wild figures, weaving their way between the dark trunks of trees.

Around them, bird and animal life fled. They heard a bird sing, deep in the forest, the same bird song that had sounded when Tommy had said, "That's them".

Jean was sobbing. Her voice became almost hysterically high as she called for her son. Bill shouted too, and his throat grazed. He realized, with a sudden, sickening wave of despair, that it was too late. He discharged both barrels of the shotgun up into the air, then reloaded and raced back towards the edge.

As he ran something caught his eye. Behind him, Jean was still frantically screaming into the darkness, her body like that of a wild cat, crashing through the plant life, breaking through screen after endless screen of the jungle.

What Bill had seen was a pair of black and white feathers. As he drew close he saw that the feathers were attached to a long, elegantly shafted arrow, stuck horizontally into a tree. He wrenched the arrow out and inspected the narrow stone blade. He managed to break the thin shaft during this violent motion, and he cursed (3) loudly.

Then he went to the edge of this emerald world and fired twice again. Already, a stream of men and four bulldozers - alerted by the first shots - were racing towards them.

At dusk, the last of the searchers emerged from the dense forest. They shook their heads, or shrugged, and one of them spoke sad words in Portuguese.

One of them spoke to Enrico Costa, pointed to the wood, made two or three elaborate gestures with his hands, then walked away. Costa nodded, then came over to where Bill and Jean Markham were standing, a forlorn (4) and bedraggled (5) pair, their arms around each other.

Costa said, "I am so sorry. This is a terrible welcome to Brazil for you."

"What have you found?" Bill asked hoarsely.

"Tracks. The Indians must have been watching you for some time. But the tracks end about one hundred paces into the forest. I am very sorry."

"Definitely Indians, then", Jean said, "and not a wild animal."

Costa nodded sympathetically. When Jean turned to Bill and said, "So there's hope, they might bring him back", he squeezed her tightly and glanced at the Brazilian, who almost imperceptibly shook his head.

Robert Holdstock, *The Emerald Forest*.

(1) scrabbling and crawling: à quatre pattes. (2) gloom: darkness. (3) curse: jurer. (4) forlorn: lost and alone. (5) bedraggled: wet.

