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Opening extract from

Young Sherlock Holmes 2: Red Leech

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Published by

Macmillan Children's Books

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PROLOGUE

James Hillager thought he was hallucinating when he first saw the giant leech.

The Borneo jungle was so hot and so humid that walking through it was like being in a sauna bath. His clothes were sopping wet, and there was so much water vapour in the atmosphere that the sweat wasn't even evaporating from his skin: it was just dripping from his fingers and his nose, or rolling down his body and collecting wherever his clothes touched his flesh. His boots were so filled with water that he could hear a squelching sound whenever he took a step. The leather was going to rot away within a few weeks if this kept up. He had never felt so miserable and uncomfortable in his life.

The heat was making his head swim, and it was that – and the fact that he was dehydrated and he hadn't eaten properly for days – which made him think he was hallucinating. He'd been hearing voices in the trees around him for some time now: whispering voices that were talking about him and laughing at him. Part of his mind was telling him that it was just the sound of the wind in the leaves, but another part wanted to yell back at them and tell them to shut up. And then maybe shoot them if they didn't obey.

He'd already seen animals that made his mind boggle. Maybe they were real; maybe they were hallucinations as well. He'd seen monkeys with huge, bulbous noses; frogs the size of his thumb that were coloured bright orange, or red, or blue; a perfectly formed adult elephant no taller than his shoulder; and a pig-like animal with dark hair and a long pointed, flexible snout. How many of them were real, and how many a product of his fevered brain?

Beside him, Will Gimson stopped and bent over, hands on his knees, taking deep gulps of the steamy air.

'Got to stop for a minute,' he said breathlessly. 'Finding it hard to move.'

Hillager took the opportunity to mop his brow with a handkerchief that was probably wetter than his face. Maybe he was hallucinating because he was coming down with some kind of tropical fever. These Borneo forests were rife with strange diseases. He'd heard of

men who'd been reported lost in the jungle wandering out after weeks missing, with the flesh of their faces covered in pustules, or literally sliding off the bone.

He looked around nervously. Even the trees seemed to mock him. Their trunks were twisted and gnarled, and smaller plants and vines grew out of them like parasites. They grew so close together than he couldn't see the sky, and the only light that filtered down here was diffuse and shaded in green.

Despite the heat, he shivered. He wouldn't be in this terrible place if he didn't fear his employer even more.

'Let's call it a day,' he urged. He really didn't want to spent any more time in that jungle. He just wanted to get back to the port, load up the crated animals they'd already collected and get back to civilization. 'It's not here. We've already collected enough animals to make him happy. Leave this one behind. He won't even notice.'

'Oh he'll notice all right,' Gimson said grimly. 'If we only return with one critter, this is the one he wants.'

Hillager was about to argue the point when Gimson added: 'Wait! I think I can see one!'

Hillager moved to join his colleague. The man was still bending over, but he was staring at the base of one of the trees.

'Look,' he said, and pointed.

Hillager followed the direction of the man's pointed finger. There, in a pool of water between two tree roots, was what looked like a bright red clot of blood the size of his hand. It glistened in the weak light of the sun.

'Are you sure?' he asked.

'That's what the Duke said it would look like. That's *exactly* what he said it would look like.'

'So what do we do?'

Instead of answering, Gimson reached out with his hand and took the thing between his finger and thumb. He picked it up. It drooped bonelessly. Hillager watched, fascinated.

‘Yeah,’ Gimson said, turning it over and examining it closely. ‘Look – there’s the mouth, or the sucker, or whatever you call it. Three teeth, set around the edge. And the other end’s got a sucker as well. That’s how it holds on – it attaches itself at both ends.’

‘And sucks your blood,’ Hillager said darkly.

‘And sucks the blood of anything that passes by slowly enough that it can get a grip,’ Gimson explained. ‘Those tiny elephants, that tapir-thing with the pointy snout – anything.’

The leech was changing shape as he watched, becoming thinner and longer. When Gimson had picked it up it had been nearly circular, but now it was more like a thick worm. His fingers were still clamped about a third of the way along from its head – if the bit with the mouth could actually be called a head.

‘What does he do with them?’ Hillager asked. ‘Why does he send people all this way to collect them?’

‘He says he hears them calling out to him,’ Gimson replied. ‘And as to what he does when he gets them – you really don’t want to know.’ He bent closer to the creature, examining it carefully. The creature waved blindly towards him, aware somehow that there was warm blood in the vicinity. ‘This one hasn’t fed for a while.’

‘How can you tell?’

‘It’s looking for something to attach to.’

‘Should we leave it?’ Hillager asked. ‘Look for another one tomorrow?’ He hoped Gimson would say ‘no’, because he really didn’t want to spent any more time in that jungle.

‘This is the first one we’ve seen in a week,’ Gimson replied. ‘It could be longer before we see another. No, we need to take this one. We need to get it back home.’

‘Will it survive the journey?’

Gimson shrugged. ‘Probably – if we feed it before we start back.’

‘Okay.’ Hillager looked around. ‘What do you suggest. A monkey? One of those pig things?’

Gimson didn’t say anything.

Hillager turned back, to find Gimson staring at him with a strange look on his face. Partly it was sympathy, but mostly it was distaste.

‘I suggest,’ Gimson said, ‘that you roll your sleeve up.’

‘Are you *mad*?’ Hillager whispered.

‘No, I’m a tracker and guide,’ Gimson explained. ‘What exactly did you think *your* purpose on this expedition was? Now roll up your sleeve. This horror needs blood, and it needs it now.’

Slowly, knowing what Duke’s reaction would be if he found out that Hillager had let his leech die rather than feed it, Hillager began to roll his sleeve up.