WAS anxious to do some length y scientific research concern ing curare—the dart-poison of the South American Indians—on the spot where it is made and used in blowguns. So, with Yvonne, my wife, as sole companion, I set out for the unexplored and hazardous wilds of Upper Amazonia. She had turned a deaf ear to all my pleas that she should stay behind, and as a result we began a jungle life which lasted several years, surrounded by Jivaros, the elusive and untamable Aucas, and various other primitive tribes.

When we first took up our residence at the "back of beyond" we made arrangements for Indian runners to go "outside" every month to a small frontier town, bringing back mail, reading matter, tobacco, tinned goods, tea—all those little oddments which the white man deems indispensable wherever he may be. Friends in Quito, Ecuador, and elsewhere had previously agreed to attend to our wants and see to it that these necessities would be duly delivered to the frontier station for collection by our native messengers.

Our system worked tolerably well at times, but during the rainy season tropical storms would render the rivers un navigable for long periods, with consequent delay to our supply line. Not even a huge native dugout could ferry the runners across the raging waters, where giant trees—roots, branches, and all—were being swept headlong downstream.

On one such occasion we found ourselves practically without meat; for a whole month hunting and fishing had been exceptionally barren of result, forcing us to fall back on tinned goods and jars. Our Indian neighbours, tempted by rewards of beads and salt, sauntered forth with their blowguns into the sodden bush, only to return bedraggled, disgusted, and empty-handed. It seemed that all forms of game had holed-up to await sunnier weather, and the Indians themselves were likewise inclined. Prolonged rain imposes no great hardship on these simple folk; if need be they are quite content with a diet of yucca-root and boiled bananas, washed down with generous swigs of the native beer, known as acía. I suppose, if it had come to it, that Yvonne and I could likewise have existed on this meagre fare, but we weren't at all anxious to make the experiment.

Day after day the rain drummed monotonously on our thatched roof; meanwhile the food situation grew steadily gravier. Our egg-supply had practically ceased, our chickens having been seriously depleted by the depredations of a leopard-like ocelot whose bold daylight raids were so cunningly timed that neither rifle, shotgun, nor revolver were readily available when he made his forays.

Finally, at long last, the clouds lifted, and one morning, determined to go hunting, I took my trusty Winchester from its bamboo wall-rack.

"I hope you'll get a deer," remarked Yvonne, wistfully, as I pulled on my boots.

"So do I," I told her, "but, if I can't, anything from a marmoset to a tapir will satisfy me!"

A Jivaro Indian neighbour, Imondi, offered to join me, and I was glad of his company, for he was a real expert at hunting, although he used only his twelve-foot-long blowgun. The dank forest held small hope of game, so Imondi suggested that by following a path which paralleled the Rio Bobanaza we might surprise sundry wildfowl or animals on the rocky playas. We therefore headed eastward along an Indian trail.

This sounds simple enough in the telling, but the doing is a very different story! Is there a single experienced white explorer or hunter who has not at some time or other envied his brown brother's freedom from encumbering accoutrements, thus enabling him to glide silently through thick jungle like the shade of a long-dead ancestor? We whites burden ourselves with a heavy rifle, spare ammunition, boots, khaki shirt, and trousers whose pockets bulge with miscellaneous trifles. Ahead moves your primitive guide, his equipment consisting of one breech-clout, one blowgun, a small belt-knife, and a quiver of thin, light-weight poisoned darts—nothing more!
"Instinctively I ducked my head."

Thorns snatch viciously at the white man's clothing despite all his attempts to dodge them, but the Indian's hide seems rhinoceros-tough, and his bare feet are shod with self-repairing soles.

Such thoughts passed through my mind as I trudged heavily along behind Imoni's easy stride.

Suddenly I saw him "freeze," but before I could check my progress he relaxed and turned towards me, his hairless face breaking into a wide grin.

In answer to my question he informed me that he had spotted a weesha, a grey, grouse-like ground-bird; but he politely refrained from mentioning that I had frightened it off, even though his grin said as much. The white man's noisy passage, to the savage, is a never-ending source of amusement. Hiding my disappointment, I eagerly searched the tangled undergrowth ahead.

"Where did it go?" I demanded.

The Jivaro pointed to a big pucal tree, and we crept forward again.

Pucals are forest giants which often tower branchless to a height of a hundred and fifty feet or more, their spreading crowns being interlaced with massive lianas, orchids, tons of moss, and many air-plants. To sustain this tremendous weight and prevent the pucal toppling in high winds these trees have a very peculiar root-system. Starting from about twelve feet above ground on all sides of the enormous trunk, the roots sweep down and outwards. They are not round and gnarled, like those of other trees, but resemble thick flat sheets standing on edge, so to speak, and shaped very much like a Grecian lyre. This remarkable growth creates deep V-shaped cells at the base of the trees which, cur-
and betray my presence. Again I heard a peculiar sound, different from the first, and I halted in my second stride, striving to analyse and classify it. Just then a vagrant breeze curled into the next recess and wafted out a few grey tweeta feathers. The sight completely reassured me; I regretted that I hadn't brought along my shot-gun instead of the rifle. This would have to be a pot-shot!

Experience told me my chances were odds-on. Weeshas, once they imagine themselves hidden, sit tight like quail, trusting to their protective colouring. Slow movement would not flush my bird.

As I began to peer into my cell I saw it was narrower than the others, and therefore much darker. I strained my eyes, seeking to penetrate its gloomy depths. What strange and mingled odour was this which now assailed my nostrils? I hesitated for an instant, and then edged forward once more, my rifle-muzzle pointing into the chamber. Without warning there came a wicked snarl; then something seemed to explode inside that murky den, finally resolving itself into a black-and-yellow-spotted mass of fury, which launched itself straight at my face!

My trigger-finger curled instinctively as I recoiled, and I fired from the hip, the report echoed deafeningly in the confined space. In the gun-flash I recognized a big ocelot in mid-air, its baleful yellow eyes fixed on mine. Instinctively I ducked my head, my face being thus protected by my sun-helmet, held by its chin-strap. Next second the flying beast hit me, its heavy impact on my headgear hurling me backward and bowling me over. As I fell I clung desperately to the rifle, which was swiftly crushed down on to the helmet-brim as the great cat leaped upon my prone figure. Stiletto-like claws began raking my heavy shirt to shreds; what seemed to be red-hot needles raced down my arms. I strove madly to fight free from the crushing weight, but was hampered by an instinctive desire to protect my face and eyes. I vaguely recall hearing Imundi's shout of surprise. Then something went "whack-whack" above me, and I felt the ocelot cringe.

Suddenly the weight was lifted from my body, but the vicious snarls continued. I sat up—to behold a remarkable spectacle. Standing close by, Imundi was warding off the infuriated animal's onslaughts, using his long blowgun like a spear to keep it at bay, and meanwhile urging me to shoot. The cat, luckily, was handicapped by a broken front paw, the result of my blind
shot. Evidently Imundi had pluckily beaten the infuriated animal off me, thus undoubtedly saving my life.

So far he seemed to be holding his own, deftly thwarting its attempts to get the iron-hard blowgun between its teeth and wrest it away. As he adroitly halted its furious lunges I slowly raised my rifle and drew a bead on the broad, ugly head, carefully following its weaving motion. Finally I squeezed the trigger. Even a novice could hardly have missed at such close range. The heavy impact of the bullet caused the ocelot to turn a somersault and then lie motionless. The danger was over!

Rushing to my side, Imundi helped me to peel off my tattered shirt. My arms bore long rents, not particularly deep, but bleeding freely. Hurrying into the undergrowth, the Jivaro began to tear handfuls of leaves from a *situli* bush. Returning to my side he bruised them and then instructed me to apply them to the wounds.

As I obeyed his orders I was astonished to note that the blood-flow was stanching as efficiently as with any modern styptic! Then he proceeded to bandage me, using *cawoan* leaf for coverings and vines to keep them in place.

Finally I arose, still feeling somewhat shaky. From Imundi’s remarks it was quite obvious what had happened. The luckless *weesha* had dodged into the ocelot’s temporary lair—to be promptly grabbed and silenced by its natural enemy; the snapping sounds were its bones being chewed up! Stumbling on to the scene, I had of course interrupted the feast, thereby enraging the ocelot and precipitating the battle. I thanked Imundi for saving my life, and determined to reward him later. Meanwhile I was quite content to call it a day. We still hadn’t got any meat, but the ocelot would yield a fine pelt. So we headed homeward, the Jivaro carrying our trophy.

When he’d seen me to my door he departed, saying he would try his luck alone, and Yvonne proceeded to wash, sterilize, and bandage my wounds. Then she and I went out to inspect our prize. Standing over the ocelot, which was in prime condition, we suddenly glanced at one another with that silent understanding which comes to long-married people.

“Ocelots live on small game, wild fowl—and our chickens!” remarked Yvonne, thoughtfully.

“How about the meat?”

“I certainly think it’s worth experimenting,” I conceded. “If we don’t like it we needn’t eat it!”

“Just what I thought,” she went on. “One never knows until one tries, and at this moment I’m willing to try anything! I’ll see if I can make some sort of a curry sauce.”

We decided that, since we possessed one of those most useful articles, a pressure cooker, it would be advisable to cook as much of the flesh as possible; our canning jars—long ago emptied—were now standing idle. Thus, if we liked the stuff, we should be secured against further shortage until supplies arrived. On the other hand, if the experiment proved a failure, we could always dump the meat with no harm done.

That evening, very tired, we sat down to a dinner of ocelot steak with *Sauce à la Río Bobanaza*. To our astonishment and gratification the dish proved to be one to delight an epicure’s palate! One can best describe its flavour, I think, as a subtle blend of haunch of venison and saddle of tapi. For the benefit of those who have never tasted the latter, it may be stated that tapi-meat compares very favourably with good English beef.

Whatever the reader’s preconceived ideas on the subject may be, however, Yvonne and I can heartily recommend ocelot meat for trial if some rare chance makes this possible.

Do the Indians eat it? They do not; their tribal taboos forbid such food. These superstitious jungle-dwellers firmly believe that the *ayus* (spirits of departed warriors) dwell in the bodies of ocelots, and no Indian would dream of taking the risk of evicting an ancestor’s spirit!