

MADAGASCAR

Land Of the Man-Eating Tree

By Chase Salmon Osborn, LL.D.



Somerville, MA
USA

AUTHOR'S DEDICATION
DEDICATED TO THE LONDON MISSIONARY SOCIETY
AND THE CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES
WHO HAVE LABORED SACRIFICIALLY IN MADAGASCAR

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We reproduce the photographs in their originally published sizes, slightly cropped. We apologize for their poor quality, but our copies were all ex-library and had seen heavy use.

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Heliograph, Incorporated
26 Porter Street
Somerville, MA 02143 USA
www.heliograph.com
info@heliograph.com

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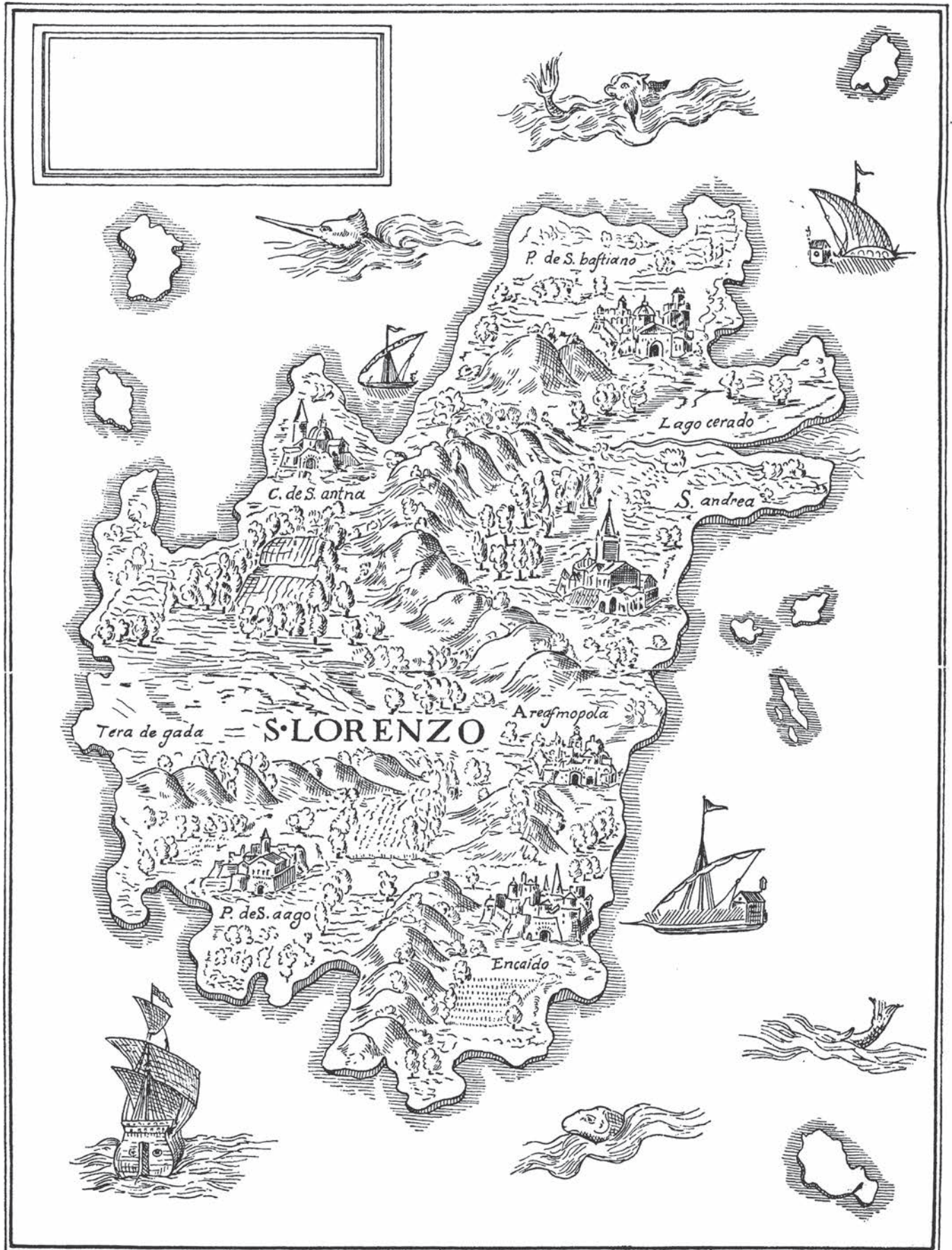
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ANCIENT MAP OF MADAGASCAR

Madagascar

Geographie Pl. 11^B

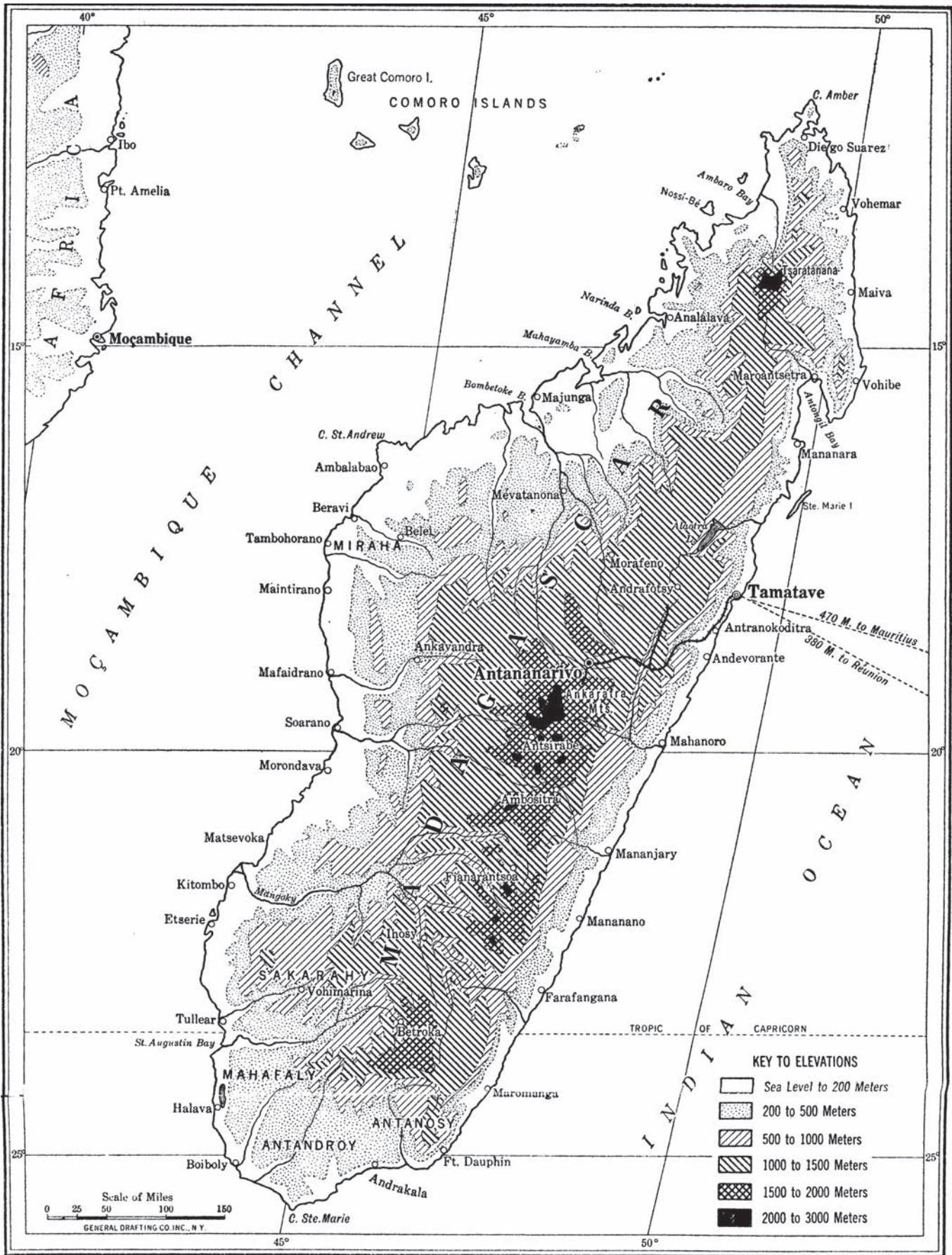


Traced first by me from Original Map

Carte de Madagascar par Gastaldo (1500)

in the British Museum, 1879 James Sibbet.

MODERN MAP OF MADAGASCAR



ISAGOGE

THIS is the first attempt on the part of any American to write a book about that strangest and most characteristic of all places, the Island of Madagascar. The two regions on earth least known to-day are Madagascar and New Guinea. There is more literature on New Guinea than on Madagascar. This is strange because Madagascar is worth while in every way and New Guinea has only certain phases of value and interest.

Although Madagascar has always been a theatre of dramatic human action, the literature on it is small and in the English tongue is confined to a few excellent books by British missionaries written from the standpoint of their own activities—to a small work by Captain Pasfield Oliver; to the war books of Knight and Burleigh; to the translation of the interesting account of Abbé Rochon, who lived two centuries ago; to the strange tale of Robert Drury, by some doubted, told more than an hundred years ago, and to a very few other works. The great French work by Grandidier is the most ambitious study of Madagascar. It is a monument to a master scientist.

Americans have played an interesting part in the Mozambique arena. The first and only pirate republic was founded in Madagascar. American whalers, as at the Falklands, raised the Stars and Stripes over a portion of the island and claimed it for the United States. Benjamin Franklin unwittingly abetted an expedition to harass the French there at the same time that he was endeavoring to secure the aid of France in the War of the Revolution. Madagascar was the theatre of some of the tales of the Arabian Nights. The roc was probably the æpyornis titans and the tale of Sinbad the Sailor and the Old Man of the Sea had Madagascar for its scene. The island gave quarters to The Cid and Captain Kid and Vasco da Gama and Flacourt and Bourdonnais. It was the Cerne of Pliny and the Minuthiasde of Ptolemy. Marco Polo reported impressively upon Madagascar.

When the French ruthlessly seized it in 1896 there were more Christian churches to the population in Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, than in Paris. That was within two years of the time when the Philippines fell into the lap of Uncle Sam.

There is a vast difference between the policy of this nation in the Philippines and that of the French in Madagascar. We are planning to grant independence to the Filipinos. Nothing is more remote from the French thought than to grant independence to the Malagasies. Not one Malagasy, it is said, served France willingly in the World War. Many Filipinos served in the army and the navy of the United States of America with love and loyalty and courage.

In order to get to Madagascar one sails on a French ship from Marseilles. There are some other ways of getting there, but they are few, irregular and indirect. I visited the Island for the purpose of studying it. Also I delved in the archives of Lisbon, Madrid, Amsterdam, Paris and London for particulars. In this work I gathered enough material for twenty ponderous tomes. To select some of the material for a modest book was my greatest task. It is submitted as it is with no apology and no vanity. I have travelled and studied in every country on the globe. To me the most strange and interesting is Madagascar. It is a thousand miles long, has an area of more than two hundred and thirty thousand square miles and a population estimated at between four and five millions of peaceful, industrious, capable natives.

CHAPTER I

THE LAND OF THE MAN-EATING TREE

MOST of the time I shall be honest in this book. All of the time I shall try to be honest. Because of this pledge I am going to tell you that the purpose of the title of this chapter is at once to enmesh your interest. Madagascar has been called "The Land of the Man-eating Tree," since prehistoric times as our vain and insufficient chronology goes. I do not know whether this tigerish tree really exists or whether the bloodcurdling stories about it are pure myth. It is enough for my purpose if its story focuses your interest upon one of the least known spots of the world.

Now you are, at the most modest estimate, of average intelligence. Please for a second consider how little you know about this second largest island on the globe—in fact nearly a continent. Only New Guinea is vaster in area than Madagascar, and size

is not always a safe measuring standard of values.

But let us return to the man-eating tree. Why should there not be such a tree? There are insect-eating plants. The same tendency and mechanism in a tree would permit it to gorge a human being. In travelling from one end of Madagascar to the other a thousand miles and across the great island, many times traversing the nearly four hundred miles of breadth, I did not see a man-eating tree. But from all the peoples I met, including Hovas, Sakalavas, Sihanakas, Betsileos and others, I heard stories and myths about it. To be sure the missionaries say it does not exist, but they are not united in this opinion, despite the fact that it is properly their affair and responsibility to discredit and destroy anything and everything that fosters demonism and idolatry. No missionary told me that he had seen the devil tree, but several told me that they could not understand how all the tribes could believe so earnestly in it, and over hundreds of miles where intercourse has been both difficult and dangerous, unless there were some foundation for the belief. Again, it may be emphasized that while a man-eating tree is an unlikely thing it is not an impossibility. The upas tree is said to exhale a deadly poison; other vines and vegetation are so toxic that susceptible persons are affected who go near without even touching them; there are nettles that sting painfully and there are plants that entrap their live insect prey and consume it. The best known of the latter are the sarraceniaceæ. *Sarracenia purpurea* is the well-known pitcher plant or hunter's cup.

At the London Horticultural hall in England there is a plant that eats large insects and mice. Its principal prey are the latter. The mouse is attracted to it by a pungent odor that emanates from the blossom which incloses a perfect hole just big enough for the mouse to crawl into. After the mouse is inside the trap bristlelike antennæ infold it. Its struggles appear to render the Gorgonish things more active. Soon the mouse is dead. Then digestive fluids much like those of animal stomachs exude and the mouse is macerated, liquefied and appropriated. This extraordinary carnivorous plant is a native of tropical India. It has not been classified as belonging to any known botanical species.

The most lurid and dramatic description of the man-eating tree of Madagascar I have seen was written by a traveller named Carle Liche in a letter to Dr. Omelius Fredlowski, a Pole. This letter was published in several European scientific publications, was given popular circulation in Graefe and Walther's magazine, of Karlsruhe, and was first published in America by the New York World in 1880. Then it pursued its conquest of interest around the world and appeared in the South Australian Register. Dr. R. G. Jay, of Willungo, Australia, read this account at a soiree at the Willungo Institute. So much for the character of the reception given to this long-forgotten report of the arboreal monster. One of the first inquiries I made in Madagascar was about this tree. Of all the tales I heard none was better than the description in Liche's letter, and also Liche seemed to be better informed as to detail and to possess enough character to make his report impressive.

The letter of Liche to Dr. Fredlowski was written from Madagascar in 1878 as follows:

"The Mkodos, of Madagascar, are a very primitive race, going entirely naked, having only faint vestiges of tribal relations, and no religion beyond that of the awful reverence which they pay to the sacred tree. They dwell entirely in caves hollowed out of the limestone rocks in their hills, and are one of the smallest races, the men seldom exceeding fifty-six inches in height.

At the bottom of a valley (I had no barometer, but should not think it over four hundred feet above the level of the sea), and near its eastern extremity, we came to a deep tarn-like lake about a mile in diameter, the sluggish oily water of which overflowed into a tortuous reedy canal that went unwillingly into the recesses of a black forest composed of jungle below and palms above. A path diverging from its southern side struck boldly for the heart of the forbidding and seemingly impenetrable forest.

Hendrick led the way along this path, following closely, and behind me a curious rabble of Mkodos, men, women and children. Suddenly all the natives began to cry 'Tepe Tepe!' and Hendrick, stopping short, said, 'Look!' The sluggish canal-like stream here wound slowly by, and in a bare spot in its bend

was the most singular of trees.

I have called it 'Crinoida,' because when its leaves are in action it bears a striking resemblance to that well-known fossil the crinoid lily-stone or St. Cuthbert's head. It was now at rest, however, and I will try to describe it to you. If you can imagine a pineapple eight feet high and thick in proportion resting upon its base and denuded of leaves, you will have a good idea of the trunk of the tree, which, however, was not the color of an anana, but a dark dingy brown, and apparently as hard as iron. From the apex of this truncated cone (at least two feet in diameter) eight leaves hung sheer to the ground, like doors swung back on their hinges. These leaves, which were joined at the top of the tree at regular intervals, were about eleven or twelve feet long, and shaped very much like the leaves of the American agave or century plant. They were two feet through at their thickest point and three feet wide, tapering to a sharp point that looked like a cow's horn, very convex on the outer (but now under surface), and on the under (now upper) surface slightly concave. This concave face was thickly set with strong thorny hooks like those on the head of the teasle. These leaves hanging thus limp and lifeless, dead green in color, had in appearance the massive strength of oak fibre. The apex of the cone was a round white concave figure like a smaller plate set within a larger one.

This was not a flower but a receptacle, and there exuded into it a clear treacly liquid, honey sweet, and possessed of violent intoxicating and soporific properties. From underneath the rim (so to speak) of the undermost plate a series of long hairy green tendrils stretched out in every direction towards the horizon. These were seven or eight feet long, and tapered from four inches to a half inch in diameter, yet they stretched out stiffly as iron rods. Above these (from between the upper and under cup) six white almost transparent palpi reared themselves towards the sky, twirling and twisting with a marvelous incessant motion, yet constantly reaching upwards. Thin as reeds and frail as quills, apparently they were yet five or six feet tall, and were so constantly and vigorously in motion, with such a subtle, sinuous, silent throbbing against the air, that they made me shudder in spite of myself, with their suggestion of

serpents flayed, yet dancing upon their tails.

The description I am giving you now is partly made up from a subsequent careful inspection of the plant. My observations on this occasion were suddenly interrupted by the natives, who had been shrieking around the tree with their shrill voices, and chanting what Hendrick told me were propitiatory hymns to the great tree devil.

With still wilder shrieks and chants they now surrounded one of the women, and urged her with the points of their javelins, until slowly, and with despairing face, she climbed up the stalk of the tree and stood on the summit of the cone, the palpi swirling all about her. 'Tsik! Tsik!' (Drink, drink!) cried the men. Stooping, she drank of the viscid fluid in the cup, rising instantly again, with wild frenzy in her face and convulsive cords in her limbs. But she did not jump down, as she seemed to intend to do.

Oh, no! The atrocious cannibal tree that had been so inert and dead came to sudden savage life. The slender delicate palpi, with the fury of starved serpents, quivered a moment over her head, then as if instinct with demoniac intelligence fastened upon her in sudden coils round and round her neck and arms; then while her awful screams and yet more awful laughter rose wildly to be instantly strangled down again into a gurgling moan, the tendrils one after another, like green serpents, with brutal energy and infernal rapidity, rose, retracted themselves, and wrapped her about in fold after fold, ever tightening with cruel swiftness and the savage tenacity of anacondas fastening upon their prey. It was the barbarity of the Laocoön without its beauty this strange horrible murder.

And now the great leaves slowly rose and stiffly, like the arms of a derrick, erected themselves in the air, approached one another and closed about the dead and hampered victim with the silent force of a hydraulic press and the ruthless purpose of a thumb screw. A moment more, and while I could see the bases of these great levers pressing more tightly towards each other, from their interstices there trickled down the stalk of the tree great streams of the viscid honey-like fluid mingled horribly with the blood and oozing viscera of the victim. At sight of this the savage hordes around me, yelling madly,