

Hunting the HORNED LIZARD

in HAITI

Thrilling Experiences in
"The Valley of Death,"
Where Saurians, Believed
Extinct, Battle White
Invaders, Told by
Dr. G. Kingsley Noble,
of American Museum of
Natural History



One of the strange monsters found in the Valley of Death was the rhinoceros iguana, a fearsome creature armed for deadly combat and eager for it

FEARSOME lizards that added their quota of terror to a world dominated by hair-raising monsters and supposed by scientists to be long extinct have recently been placed on exhibition in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The museum lizards are stuffed and mounted, but in the New York Zoological Park are several live specimens brought back from the island of Haiti by an intrepid scientist who, through his discovery, has completely upset the savants who devote themselves to prehistoric affairs.

In a valley of death, shunned by the natives, and on an island in a dead sea, the grotesque saurians that roamed the earth when pterodactyls screamed overhead and dinosaurs and carnivorous tyrannosaurs belched their challenges in the eerie light of a crimson moon, were discovered by Dr. G. Kingsley Noble, in charge of the Anglo-Haitian Expedition. It is well over fifty years since one of these rare lizards has been seen by white men, and until Dr. Noble's surprising find it was generally supposed by scientists that they had passed forever into oblivion.

In addition to the supposedly extinct lizards or iguanas, known to science as *Cyclura* Ricordii, the expedition discovered a number of extremely rare saurians which have been named rhinoceros iguanas because of their strange head resemblance to the African monster. Armed with a well-developed tusk upon their snouts, these rhinoceros iguanas are panic personified.

Dr. Noble, who is associate curator of herpetology in the American Museum of Natural History, had no idea of the amazing discovery he was to make when he set out for Haiti in command of the Anglo-Haitian Expedition. The party started in pursuit of toads and did succeed in capturing the largest known to modern man, but that prized find was dwarfed in importance with the discovery of the ancient lizards.

Although but a few days' sail from the port of New York the island of Haiti is the rendezvous of animals and birds and reptiles rarely, if ever, seen elsewhere on land or sea. And that portion of the island where the rhinoceros iguanas and their presumably extinct brethren were found has seldom been seen by white men and very few natives. It is an ideal setting for prehistoric life, and the members of the expedition would not have been greatly astonished had they encountered a *brontosaurus* in full regalia or witnessed the flight of a pteranodon over the silent, salt-lake water that was once an arm of the ocean.

While engaged in field work in the Dominican Republic the members of

the expedition, in talks with natives, were told of a strange lake whose waters were salty and about the banks of which strange monsters had been seen by hunters sufficiently daring to penetrate into the land of terror. From the descriptions they were able to gather, and after making due allowance for native exaggeration, Dr. Noble and his associates, among them his wife, Ruth Crosby Noble, concluded that the place of fearful reputation must be the habitat of monster lizards. Their scientific appetites whetted by the thoughts of possible discoveries of value, preparations were at once made for a trek to the lake of brine in the Valley of Death.

The bourn of scientific desire toward which the members of the expedition turned their steps is Lake Enriquillo, which with Lake Saumatre, a few miles to the westward, remains as mute evidence of a time in the Pleistocene period when that entire region was under the sea and a great arm of the ocean separated Southwestern Haiti from the rest of the island. During that period corals and sea fans thrived and tropic fish of dazzling splendor sported in the brilliant waters. Sea monsters, long since eliminated from the scheme of life, coursed in pursuit of prey and on the banks and overhead weird creatures in a world of terror had their day.

INTO the lakes, lying in the great valley that has once been an ocean's bed, mountain streams poured their fresh water and the trapped sea life perished. Then, gradually, under a tropic sun the waters receded, leaving behind miles and miles of scorching salt plains and cliffs of coral limestone. On the sunburned sandbars the whitened skeletons of annihilated sea creatures bear mute testimony to nature's malevolent moods.

It was to this uncharitable and drab region that Dr. Noble and his little band of scientists made their way over roads and trails that beggar description, and finally they came to a native settlement known as Duverge, consisting of a few scattered and unimpressive huts, situated on an arid plain between Lake Enriquillo and the Sierra de Bahoruco. The party found that the country about the lake has been regarded by the natives as a valley of death as far back as memory or tradition will carry them. Today a few natives laboriously eke out an existence near the mountain streams that feed into the lake, which under the hot sun continue to recede.

Eager for the trail, and burning with desire to get sight of the great lizards depleted to them, the scientists lost no time in arranging their living quarters, and the next morning found

them heading for the forbidding hills, a few miles distant, under the guidance of two natives. Arriving at the base of the hills the party made its tortuous way through dense forests of cacti and tamarind. Once through the heavy tropic growth and upon the hillside the way was easier, for vegetation was sparse. However, the deep chasms cut into the limestone by torrential streams during the short but violent rainy season in those parts made the progress of the party slow and tedious.

"We came at length to the brink of one of those dry arroyos, one that was a little dustier and more stifling than the others," said Dr. Noble in describing the venture of the party into the haunts of the grotesque saurians. "The canals which had once grown there had been scorched out of existence, leaving only their gnarled roots to twist and writhe among the sun-baked limestones. Here and there little clumps of organ cacti had survived by drawing close together, like so many soldiers withstanding a final attack. The guide had stopped and was pointing at something far up in the canyon."

"At first I could see only the twisted roots of the dead trees. Gradually there took shape in the shadow of one of the larger trunks the crest of a rhinoceros iguana. Slowly the beast raised itself. Its deep-set eyes stared coldly in our direction. I noted that he was directly in front of a jagged burrow and quietly I slipped my heaviest charge into the breach of my shotgun. Slowly the stock came to my shoulder; a terrific report echoed through the canyon. The lizard reared, then dropped down the burrow."

DR. NOBLE and his companions rushed to the opening of the burrow, but the iguana had vanished. They made efforts to dig him out, but without avail. The next day with pick and shovel they dug their way into the bank for fourteen feet and came to a chamber three feet square, but no quarry was to be found. However, the encounter with the rare lizard but stimulated the scientists to greater effort. Methodically for a week the party, with the aid of natives, searched the canyons and cliff-faces for the nose-behomed leftovers of an ancient world. They found that the rhinoceros iguana dug his burrow only in the cliffs or in the walls of sink holes. Search the sandy plains that stretched about for many miles as they might, no trace was found of burrows,

and with this knowledge the scientists concentrated their efforts in the cliffs. They were soon rewarded by the capture of a few half-grown iguanas, but the larger and more wily lizards evaded capture.

And then came the tale of the mysterious isle that lies within the brackish waters of Lake Enriquillo.

Native tradition had it that the island in the great salt lake was inhabited by ferocious lizards of gigantic size. Few there were who had ever set foot on the island, for a quarter of a century had elapsed since natives of sufficient daring had ventured upon the waters of the dead lake. Being fully 50 per cent more saline than the ocean, it is impossible for fish to exist in Lake Enriquillo, and offering no food yield and being regarded as a place of death, it had been studiously avoided by the few natives who dwell in the vicinity.

This desolate, tideless sea was without a boat or ferryman, and although regarded as a lake of death, no Charon offered passage to the venturesome visitor. The island of scientific desire, a sandpit twelve miles in length and a mile in width, lay four miles off from the nearest point of the mainland, and it was imperative that a boat be secured if the party was to personally view the monsters described to them by the awe-voiced natives.

Confronted by an emergency, Dr. Noble decided to tell his trouble to the marines, and forthwith dispatched a messenger to the nearest station occupied by Uncle Sam's soldiers of the sea. He besought the officer in command to provide him with a boat. In concrete demonstration of their efficiency in times of war and peace, the appeal to the marines was acceded to and several days later the settlement of Duverge was startled beyond measure by the roar of a motor as an army truck, bearing a boat, thundered into view.

Juan Herrera, an ex-bandit, who ruled over Duverge, grew excited over the visit to the island of fable and immediately organized a party of his more doughty followers to assist the scientists in their undertaking. On the day that the party set forth on its quest, which was destined greatly to enrich scientific lore, it was necessary to drag the boat across two miles of quaking mud that intervened between the mainland and the water's edge.

Inasmuch as the boat would hold but four persons with safety, it was decided that Dr. and Mrs. Noble, Juan Herrera

and a guide would be the first to make the venture. As Dr. Noble, at the oars, headed into the lake of brine toward the low-lying island of mystery, a strong wind sprang up that caused the waves to dash close to the gunwale of the not altogether too staunch craft.

After more than two hours of rowing the boat grounded on the shore of the island that was largely covered with strange candelabra-like cacti; fit hiding ground for weird saurian life. Hardly had the four voyagers disembarked and started inland than they were startled by a crashing sound and directly in their path four grotesque saurians charged out from under some fallen cacti and with great speed they slithered out of sight. Before the creatures disappeared Dr. Noble had time to note the fact that they were lacking in the tusk of the rhinoceros iguana and that they were equipped with whorls of spikes upon their tails.

In that instant Dr. Noble realized that he had come upon the *Cyclura* Ricordii, a species of lizard that had been lost to science for over fifty years and conceded by investigators to be lost forever to the world. The balance of the day was spent in search of the iguanas, but the wily lizards evaded detection. No trace was found of the rhinoceros iguana, the island being seemingly the exclusive habitat of the supposedly extinct variety. The search revealed the fact that the newly discovered lizards differed from the rhinoceros iguana in that they dug holes in the flat, salt-incrusted flatlands, where the rhinoceros variety burrows into the sides of cliffs.

CONSUMED with a desire to add further trophies to their goodly collection, and hoping for the discovery of further rare specimens, Dr. Noble and his party decided to strike out for Lake Saumatre on the Haitian border. Long after dark the expedition arrived at Las Lajas, consisting of a half dozen hovels and representing the last Dominican outpost. In the larger of the group of huts, one of three rooms, the scientists were bid welcome by the town's leading citizen, who in extension of his hospitality set out embossed rum glasses on a great table.

The objective of the party on the following day was an island a quarter of a mile long and about 100 yards wide. That they might capture iguanas alive dogs were necessary, and after considerable effort two yellow mongrels were rounded up for the hunt. Hardly had the party landed on the island than the dogs, with much ado, set into the brush and a minute later a huge iguana scurried into view, closely followed by one of the dogs. At the water's edge the great lizard turned at bay, but as the dog tore at him the grotesque beast plunged into the lake.

Here was an amazing thing. These saurians live their entire life on land, preferring sun-baked rocks and bad lands and steadfastly avoiding water. Several minutes elapsed after the rhinoceros iguana took its plunge, and Dr. Noble presumed that it had drowned. Then, suddenly a betusked snout appeared above the surface. Quickly one of the Haitian boys headed into the lake and presently emerged, holding the lizard by the neck. Others went to his assistance and the prize was speedily landed.

"This experience solved a problem that had long been a puzzle to me," states Dr. Noble. "Why is it that many of the West Indian islands which are supposed to be volcanic in origin—to have arisen from the depths of the sea—are, notwithstanding, peopled by reptiles and amphibians that are never known to approach the sea, and hence could not have been carried from the mainland

A nest of the *Cyclura* Ricordii, a supposedly extinct reptile, was found by one of the natives with the party. He dug into the sandy soil and found several little iguanas just emerging from the shell

by accidents? Here in the iguana we had an explanation. Although the iguanas in their ordinary round of existence avoid the sea, nevertheless, when thrown by accident into it, they are perfectly at home. Potentially they are water reptiles, even though the daily exigencies of life do not call forth any contact with the ocean."

ALTHOUGH the days that followed proved golden in the number of iguanas captured by the party, the scientists seemed thwarted in their desire for thorough information concerning the life and habits of the queer denizens. Furthermore, they were unable to capture any particularly large specimens. It was decided to return to the coast with the collection in hand, and in a few days the expedition arrived at Barahona and took up quarters in the marine barracks.

One of the marines of a venturesome and curious turn of mind informed Dr. Noble that on a visit to the island of Beata, meaning the blessed one, and which lies off the coast, he had seen iguanas as big as crocodiles. From other sources Dr. Noble heard of gigantic beasts that struck terror into the marrowbones of all beholders, and he had visions of a second island of Komodo. This island, which lies off Borneo, is inhabited by the largest lizards in the world. From Komodo have come reports of a lizard twenty-seven feet in length and one actually thirteen feet in length has been shot.

For the trip to Beata a sloop was engaged and the anchor was presently dropped off the seven miles long and triangular block of eroded limestone that bears the fanciful name. On the island the scientists joined forces with a party of native hunters who had come to the place in quest of wild goats and pigs and soon they were assailed with yellow dogs leading the way. One of the dogs encountered a monster iguana near its burrow, and when the lizard disappeared into its hole the dog followed. As the party reached the opening the dog emerged, dripping with blood and a badly bitten head as a result of his encounter with the ferocious iguana.

Nearly the burrow the party came to a clearing that had once been the site of an ancient Indian settlement, and as Dr. Noble began an inspection of the ground his trained eyes discovered broken eggshells. Examination of the shells showed that they were of an unknown variety. Then, when the realization came to the scientists, that they might be iguana eggs, an intensified search was immediately inaugurated. One of the natives started digging and suddenly he jumped to his feet with a cry and held out to view a baby iguana in the very act of emerging from an egg. The pinnacle of success had been attained. The Anglo-Haitian Expedition had accomplished a work that would be of great value to the world of science.

Further digging revealed many nests of the strange lizards and the party was able to make a comprehensive study of the little-known rhinoceros iguana. Larger iguanas than ever before captured by investigators were taken by the party and in addition four species of smaller lizards, entirely new to science, were discovered. Loaded down with specimens, alive and preserved the expedition was eager for the return to civilization that the world of science might be given the results of their labors under a broiling tropic sun.

OF THE captured iguanas more than forty were returned to New York alive and many of these were sent to the New York Zoological Park. Here a strange thing occurred that has caused Dr. Noble and his associates to marvel. They found the iguanas to be ferocious in temperament and entirely opposed to friendly advances. But within a short time after their arrival in the Zoological Park reptile house Headkeeper Tommey began to cultivate friendship with the fearsome-looking arrivals. It was not long before he could enter their cages without a display of temper on their part and, as he persisted in his experiment, the keeper finally won the confidence of one of the betusked lizards to the point that it will climb onto his knees.



The Marine Corps furnished Dr. G. Kingsley Noble, head of the American Museum of Natural History expedition, a boat with which to cruise about in the dead sea, and in it he and his party visited the mysterious island in the center of the salt lake