

The Lost World

A.C.Doyle

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Arthur Conan Doyle did not only write about Sherlock Holmes, although nothing else that he ever wrote struck the same nerve with the public. I read the book as a child in a Swedish translation. I cannot date it but probably in the early 60's, as I definitely was very familiar with the author as an inventor of Holmes, and by 1965 I started to read books in English almost exclusively. Anyway I knew very little English at the time, and 'Challenger' was just a name, not a word. I do not remember very much of it, except that there was an expedition to a plateau in the Amazon jungles, in which prehistoric animals had survived, and we are talking about pre-historic indeed, namely the Jurassic. I also recall, maybe because this was an illustrated edition, how the professor exhibited a pterodactyl in a lecture hall, which unfortunately escaped through an open window. Nevertheless the idea of extinct animals nevertheless exerted a powerful influence on my youthful imagination, so strong indeed that I could not get it and the book out of my mind as opposed to its contents, so when a quarter of a century later while I was in Durham I must have ordered the book. The proof of that fact remains in the form of some old-fashioned credit card slips, stemming from the time now lost, when you used your credit card to physically imprint by means of a special machine, as well as a handwritten card from the Gothic Bookshop, which I assume must have been the bookstore I used. The surprising thing is that it is dated in May 1990, which means that it must have arrived by mail almost a year later. I think I started reading it right away, but judging from the position of the slip I could not have proceeded very far. It was after all a book meant for children, or at least mainly appreciated by such, and it failed to engage me. Now I made a second try and managed, as with an old cold left-over, imbibe it more out of misplaced duty than for culinary pleasure.

It all starts with the protagonist, a young journalist of Irish extraction (as was the mother of Doyle) paying court to a young lady. She is rather indifferent to his advances but gives him hopes, or at least so he thinks, by suggesting that he embarks on an adventure so she can admire him (and thus kindle her desire). He meets up with Professor Challenger, whose claims of having discovered pre-historic animals, is challenged and met with derision. The first encounter is not too felicitous ending a brawl and being Catherine-wheeled out of his residence, but nevertheless they patch up. To make a somewhat involved story short, the protagonist, along with an aristocratic professional adventurer - Lord John Roxton and a scientific critic professor Summerlee team up with the indomitable professor Challenger to revisit the haunts of the latter. The expedition is small, involving some treacherous half-breeds and a devoted Negro - Zambo, and manage finally to arrive at the plateau, whose vertical rock walls, with overhangs had frustrated the efforts of Challenger to scale. They nevertheless manage to scale an adjacent cliff and by means of a felled beech, used as a bridge, scramble onto the plateau itself. However, this bridge back is destroyed by one of the avenging half-breeds, who is summarily shot as so much prey by the lord. In other words

they are being trapped, a fact which is essential for the plot of the story. And indeed they encounter those ancient beasts, known only by artists speculative reconstructions. More to the point they are attacked by ravenous ape-men of extra-ordinary physical strength, holding their own only because of their fire-power, never seeming to run out of cartridges. It also turns out that there are Indians living there in caves, in perpetual war with the missing links. In a final combined effort the expedition with their guns and the mass of Indians manage to exterminate the apes. Soon thereafter the expedition, aided by one of the Indians, is able to escape through a tunnel back to civilization. They are received as heroes, and at a large meeting, in which Challenger releases his prime specimen, the living pterodactyl, their claims are vindicated. And what about the protagonist and his object of desire? She has in the meantime married a most domestic man to the perplexity of the young journalist. But this is life. And it frees him to have more adventures with the lord in the future.

The book is weak, the plot straining credulity and belief. Of course it is not meant to be realistic, but even in fiction there is normally some consistency. The author obviously banks on the fascination felt by the public for the lost worlds and is sprinkled with references to it and the vicissitudes of evolution. By modern standards it is blatantly racist, on the other hand it is not so easy to decide how much of that is ironic or how much is the expression of standard sentiments. The drama of the piece is enacted by their struggle with the hairy beasts and shows a lot of bloodlust. The effect is numbing and non-engaging. The idea of a fossilized fauna for millions of years is of course not very realistic, for one thing the enclave is far too small, something of the size of a minor continent is needed. On the other hand evolution certainly would have played on and changed it drastically, although of course some species of insects shows stability over hundreds of millions of years, and some trees are very ancient, conifers in one form or another already being prevalent in the Mesozoic era.

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