

# The Last Door

COLLECTOR'S EDITION

A Prelude

# The Five Arches

By David Conyers



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## Prologue

The jungle is eerie, alive, crawling with noises, and yet the thick obscure green conceals all. The evening's foliage seen from the deck of our riverboat fills my vision, comprises of a carpet of tall trees, tangling vines and exotic epiphytes of a numerous variety, grown one upon another, and another, blocking all signs of fauna that are the source of the noise. I hear the chirps of birds, the chatters of monkeys, the buzz of insects and maybe even the growl of a jaguar, but I will never see them. They are hidden.

But not forever, for my name is Anthony Beechworth. I am a scientist, and I possess a key...

In this year of our Lord 1886, I am on expedition in this green heart of terror. I seek answers to questions that few men have ever thought to ask. And yet I follow no science that the rational, learned men of the lecture halls of Great Britain understand. I have entered this nightmarish landscape because of my desire to comprehend what lies beyond.

Men of science do not understand what I know, for many of life's mysteries cannot be answered with rational explanations. Isolated tribes of India and Africa, and here in South America are the only peoples who have achieved transcending visions beyond the veil of human senses, achieved through the use of drugs and the power of suggestion imposed during their religious rites. These are the people I seek.

I wish to transcend to their great heights and do so as their equal. I wish to understand the nightmares I stumbled upon all those years ago, with the Four Witnesses during our time at boarding school in Scotland. I wish to obtain greater knowledge than the merest glimpses I have witnessed thus far.

I wish to understand why, Alexandre, you are achieving more success than I.

# 1.

## A Cryptic Conversation upon the Amazon

For six weeks my companions and I have journeyed up river, from the mouth of the Amazon, through the inland port of Manáos, and into the lands of Peru and the edge of the jungle-clad Andes. The river ahead has turned to rapids as the peaks steepen and the snow-capped mountains draw closer. Tonight is our last night amongst any resemblance of civility, for tomorrow we leave our riverboat and become true explorers. We will trek into the under-canopy, seeking answers to the questions I have sought all my life.

"They are savages," says Sir Alfred Mortimer, our expedition's great white hunter and seasoned explorer, whose resume includes a great many treks across the Dark Continent in service of Queen Victoria and the Imperial British East Africa Company.

His great double-barrel elephant gun rests upon his lap, with a dozen or more notches carved into the stock. One notch, I notice, he has tried to fill in again with putty. He cleans his weapon constantly, except when he is hunting.

With night upon us and the only light originating from lanterns and the stars of the Milky Way above, his rugged features are sharpened with deep shadows. His handlebar moustache and thick curling hair are drenched with perspiration, adhere to his scalp and lip like they are the leaches we have to burn off our skin whenever we dip our feet too long into the cooling waters.

"Your obsession, Beechworth, will not serve you."

I nod and say nothing. Although I am wealthier than Sir Alfred, and despite that I am paying for his services in this savage land, I am without title, and so he sees me as his lesser. He refers to me only as 'Beechworth', not 'Mr. Beechworth' or 'Professor'. It is a trait that infuriates me, but I will not give him the satisfaction that his attitude bothers me.

"Be gentle on Mr. Beechworth," says Sir Alfred's newly-wed wife, Clementine, who is at least twenty years his junior, and barely into her twenties.

She is beautiful, proper in an aristocratic manner, and yet she has balked not once while journeying into this untouched land so far removed from the manor houses and cast of servants at her beck and call in England. I admire her, for her courage, and her natural abilities at calming her husband, who has a tendency for hyperbole and self-noting. She grounds him.

“Our sponsor is a learned man, a scientist. I’m sure, Darling, his reasons are sound and proper.”

Her husband does not like her words, but he will not argue, besotted as he is.

Sir Alfred is not an attractive man, and he knows it. He similarly understands that a beauty of Clementine’s stature and breed is a rare catch, and it was her who chose him, not the opposite. I can only imagine it was his adventurous streak that captivated her, because she seems to thrive in the constant heat and primitiveness of Amazonian jungle. The wild frees her.

“This is madness,” Sir Alfred exclaims, unable to hold his tongue any longer. “When we march into that jungle, it is easier than you may imagine to become lost. If this fate befalls you, Beechworth, death will be the only release. And it will be a long and painful death, from starvation, disease and parasitic infections.”

“I understand the dangers, Sir Alfred,” I say after a long pause, choosing my words well in advance of speaking them. “But some truths are worth more than the lives of a few men, and women,” I add with a quick nod and a smile for Lady Clementine’s benefit. “You of all men should know this, who braved the Mountains of the Moons and the interior of the Congo, and the lands of the Nile, in the name of discovering new territories, and more importantly, new truths.”

He frowns. I sense a fear he is working hard to obscure with bluff and bravado.

“These Yani tribesmen,” he speaks with gruff, “or whatever you call these savages, they will teach you nothing. But it is your money we are spending here, so why should I complain?”

“Yes,” I say with a grin. “It is my money.”

I stop saying more before I remind Sir Alfred that a lack of personnel funds is his sore spot, not mine, that it is he who is constantly bothered that I possess far greater fortunes than he. I don't need to point this failing out to him, when it is so obvious to both of us. No wonder he will only call me 'Beechworth'.

Jaquez, the Portuguese captain of the riverboat, and his muscular and short-statured Indian manservant Pequi, then join us. They will only stand upon the edge of the circle of light that our lanterns cast, because they are servant class, and know their place.

"Señores, if I may be so humble to impose," Jaquez speaks in clipped, proper Spanish which he knows we all understand fluently. He looks to Pequi as if to seek permission to continue, then says quickly, "But have you not heard of the Nazca people of the great deserts to the west?"

We all turn to Jaquez, each curious yet reluctant to ask a man beneath our stature for his opinion. But he explains himself anyway, saving us from our awkwardness of appearing interested.

"The Nazca possess a great map that can only be seen from a great distance, for up close the details are lost."

"How does this information help us here?" I ask, my curiosity getting the better of me, while wondering what exactly is the relationship between Jaquez and his manservant, for it seems Pequi's treatment is more akin to that of a father.

"I've heard those legends," shouts Sir Alfred, his words accompanied with a loud snort. "White men have explored the Nazca plains for many years, but there are no signs of this great map, anywhere."

Jaquez smiles, "It is because they are looking with the wrong eyes."

Our great white hunter bellows with laughter, belittling our captain. "Then whose eyes should they be using? A donkey's? You speak nonsense, you strange little man."

Our captain only nods, bows slightly as indication that he meant no offense, and yet I detect a confidence—an arrogance that he 'knows' a truth Sir Alfred will never understand.

I am intrigued.

"You are obviously a more learned man than myself, Sir Alfred," Jaquez appeases the man with flattery. "I came merely to report that your beds are turned down, your cabins are cleaned, and ready for whenever you wish to retire for the evening."

Blustered, Sir Alfred knows not what to say, then shouts some more. "Very good, a restful night's sleep is what we all need, for we will be up and out early in the morning. Adventure awaits!"

We finish our drinks, say our goodnights, and the evening ends.

And I can't help but think that I must corner Jaquez at some point, or perhaps Pequi, and interrogate them, to understand exactly what the meaning of this conversation might be.

# 2.

## An Unexpected Sickness and Isolation

A fever has taken me.

For days, maybe a week, I have forgotten who and where I am.

Early during my convalescence, Sir Alfred blustered that I was fool enough to contract malaria, and that I had delayed him a week or more. In contrast, Lady Clementine sat with me for hours, bathed my forehead with damp towels and fed me water to keep my temperature down. For a time the pain I bore was excruciating I thought I was going to die, and I believe the others did too.

Then, after an unknown period, no one came to see me.

I drink water from a wooden barrel left in my cabin. I quench my thirst unaided with the tepid liquid because I am alone. Other than to drink I'm too exhausted to move, so I lay in my sweat-drenched bed, shiver and thrash against the fever and dreams that plagued me...

...I witness an eagle high above, with the sun above it, staring down at me...

...days have passed, a week maybe, the fever finally breaks, and I realize there are no sounds to be heard.

I feel the gentle rock against the fast flowing waters of this Amazon tributary, but that is the only movement. When I step out of my bed my feet enter the cool waters a foot deep in my cabin.

We are sinking.

I dress quickly, pull on my boots and stumble through the lower deck of the riverboat. Water is everywhere, and although we have not sunk completely, we must have run aground. The riverboat is on a gentle angle, adding to my fears of what has transpired during my illness. I worry that our transport from this awful place was now useless to us, and I fear what fate might have befallen Jaquez and the crew.

I fear for Clementine more.

I noticed green leaves and vines sprinkled on my bed, and have no idea how they came to be here. Not sure of their purpose, or who had left such a peculiar gift, I pocket them.

I go to Sir Alfred and Clementine's room first. There is no sign of the married couple, but there are signs of a struggle. Clothes have been thrown about the room and many are torn. Travelling cases and trunks are overturned and emptied. Most telling are several bullet holes in the wall near the door, and the absence of the Sir Alfred's prized elephant gun.

I slosh through the water, looking for I do not know what.

I spy a letter on the bed, post marked from England. I recognized the handwriting immediately. In a fury I quickly read the letter contained inside.

*February 26th, 1886*

*Pevensey, Wealden District, East Sussex, England*

*Dear Anthony,*

*I hope this letter reaches you in Manáos, and that you read it before you embark on this terrifying journey into the heart of the Yani tribal lands.*

*My investigations have concurred that the drug you seek is Ayahuasca, which when combined with the roots of the caapi, becomes a powerful hallucinogenic. This is a well-documented source to the veil, and samples of each plant would greatly enhance our research.*

*The shamans of the Yani people will use Ayahuasca regularly, and the drug will provide them with foresight.*

*Be prepared.*

*Videte ne quis sciat.*

*Alexandre*



I am overcome with anger and trepidation. Somehow Sir Alfred stumbled up this letter while we were in port at Manáos, read it surreptitiously, and failed to pass it on to me. What schemes did he hope to accomplish behind my back? What knowledge did he uncover in Alexandre's words that held meaning for him, and for him to want to hold this knowledge from me?

I touch the leaves and the vines in my pocket, and consider who might have left them for me: Jacques perhaps, or his Indian manservant, Pequi? There have been no signs of either.

I search Sir Alfred's possessions again. I find a book, *Travels in the Lands of El Dorado*. One of the pages is book marked, a sketch of an Incan ruin constructed of a great bridge spanning one side of a jungle clad chasm with the other. The bridge intrigues me, because there is no deck to walk upon, even though it possesses many paths from one side to the other.

I hear a scream!

It is a woman's curdling cry, in pain and distress, originating from up on deck.

I race through the murky waters, to stairs and make for the open deck. The riverboat is not long, forty feet at most. In the humid, hot morning air, I see we have run aground, our fore wedged into a sandy embankment, and spilt through the middle as if we had rammed the bank at speed. My fever must have been horrific, because I remember none of this, and a collision of this magnitude would not be an event easily dismissed.

I hear moaning, the same woman. I dread this must be the lovely Clementine, and that she is in pain.

I find her at the aft of the riverboat, bloody and beaten, the lower half of her body sunk into the murky brown waters of the Amazon that flow unimpeded through the ruined aft of our transport.

I go to her.

She stirs. Her eyes open for the briefest moment, and although she smiles, she does so with great effort, and she cannot hold her focus.

"You came," she hoarsely whispers.

"I will get you out of here, save you!" I cry, both frustrated and fearful. "Who did this to you? Where are the others?"

She tries to speak, but no words emerge. Blood trickles from her lips.

I motion to lift her but this only causes her further pain. I feel a brush against my leg, a fish perhaps swimming fast just below the water, or a snake, or an eel.

"I need to get you somewhere dry, and safety, so I can help you."

"You can't help me..." Every word from her crimson lips is an effort and barely a whisper. "Save yourself, and my husband... if you can..."

I lift her, and to my surprise, she is lighter than I expect. She cries from the agony of movement, contorts, and then expires. Her slender frame turns limp in my arms, and I know in my heart she is dead.

I see to my horror that her legs are little more than bone, the flesh and muscle stripped and eaten away over a period of time.

In the water, I see fish everywhere. Blood red eyes stare up at me through the muddy flows. Their stares are unblinking and without souls, and the mouths of the fish are like a scowl lined with sharp, viscous teeth.

These are piranhas, and they have only not attacked me for the easy feast that is Clementine which they have not yet consumed.

In my fear and disgust, I drop Clementine's lifeless body into the water. She sinks and I run, to higher ground on the riverboat, out of the water.

The waters thrash and churn, and I know I will never see the lovely Clementine smile ever again.

# 3.

## A Journey Inwards with Blue Frogs

I'm certain that our riverboat was subjected to an attack by the Yani people.

I find a broken spear embedded in the hull, and bloody bare footprints from men of shorter stature than Jaquez, Sir Alfred or I. There are three drag marks that lead off the boat and onto a trail disappearing into the jungle.

To prepare myself, I search the riverboat. I find a machete and a water bottle in Jaquez's cabin. I obtain a compass and map from Sir Alfred's scattered possessions. I eat my first meal since contracting malaria to give me strength of body, and consume half a flagon of wine to give me strength of mind. Then I set off.

The jungle trail is easy enough to follow, giving me comfort that in my return I will not become lost.

Soon the canopy envelops me and an eerie silence spreads across the semi-darkness, down deep beneath the tall emergent trees a hundred and fifty feet or more above me. I see beetles, leaf-cutter ants, worms, centipedes and a host of other active insects everywhere, but that is all. I hack with my machete to clear the invading undergrowth that wishes to claim back the trail.

Soon the path forward is rising, and I am headed up the steep side of a jungle-clad mountain. The trail becomes stone steps, and I remember that the Incan's built great paths across this continent so runners could carry messages from one city to another. An accomplishment considering these people never invented the wheel or an alphabet.

I turn a corner, cut down a strangler vine that blocks my path forward, when a dozen or more parrots that are as startled as I am, fly into my face in their haste to escape my intrusion.

A stone jaguar stares me down, and the fury of birds flutter from its dark mouth. The Jaguar's black circular pits of unblinking eyes will not cease to follow me, whichever way I turn.

But the jaguar is not real, merely a carving, to frighten intruders like myself from advancing forward. But I am not afraid of stone.

Behind the stone horror, I spy a body.

Jaquez, I soon discover, has not survived. His bloated, bloody corpse is face down in the jungle mud and this is my next macabre discovery. I see he has bullet wounds in his back. I find a revolver discarded next to him, but no bullets. The initials A.M. are prominent on the stock. Sir Alfred Mortimer has been surreptitious all along, but why did he shoot Jaquez and not the Indians who captured them? Was Jaquez in league with these people? Was Sir Alfred?

I notice movements, a cause for the bloating. A score or more of tiny blue frogs with black dappled skin spots jump over and around Jaquez's corpse. I have heard stories of these amphibians, for their skins contain toxic secretions that the Amazonian tribes use to coat their blow-dart arrows. If the bullet wounds had not finished him, Jaquez would have likely ingested through his skin enough poison to kill a hundred men.

I step away, afraid of the tiny frogs in case one jumps on me.

When I turn a Yani shaman has snuck up behind me. He wears only a loin-cloth, his body decorated with red ochre paint. He wears a golden collar laced with bright macaw feathers that matches his crown of similarly brilliant avian decorations. His face is painted like a skull.

He lifts his blowdart and blows.

A dart embeds itself in my neck, and the pain is merely mild.

I fear the poison of the blue frogs. The world around me seems to transform into watery substances, and flows away, and I pass into unconsciousness.

# 4.

## A Bridge of Sacrifice

"Wake up man! You're about to die!"

I stir. I open my eyes and battle against the bright blurry green. Shapes come into focus and so does the pain in my head, ankles and wrists. I'm bound by taunt vines to a stone altar, on my back.

I look to the sound of the voice, to see Sir Alfred is similarly bound. We are laid out as sacrifices, upon ancient Incan altars, stone carved with such perfection and laid one upon another that their joins will not allow a single sheet of paper to fit between the cracks.

Sir Alfred is bloody and beaten. He is half the man I remember, his bravado and bluff broken, stripped from him. He has accepted his death is imminent.

"What happened?" I ask with a drooling mouth, half spit and half blood.

"You're savages came for us, Beechworth. We are soon to be offered up to their pagan gods."

"Was Jaquez one of them? Betrayed us to them?"

Sir Alfred nods.

I nod, not knowing what to say. I have nothing to say. We were doomed from the start.

"Did you find Clementine?" he asks, and I can hear in his voice he is afraid to learn the answer.

"I did."

"And what fate has fallen upon my beautiful wife?"

I swallow. I feel a dark sickness rise from my gut. "She's dead."

I look to Sir Alfred to gauge his reaction. He nods silently. There is a slow tear rolling down his weathered skin, and into his ear.

“Did she suffer?”

“No,” I lie.

The shaman approaches with his entourage of a few dozen warriors, in their loincloths and face paint, brandish spears, blow darts, and bows and arrows. I see the shaman again, and think of death. His face is painted as a skull.

“Why did you hide the letter?” I call out, knowing that Sir Alfred and I might never speak again, and I need to know his answer.

They cut the ropes from Sir Alfred and I, pull us to our feet, and push us forward.

We are in a clearing in the jungle, on the edge of a high chasm. A bridge, with five stone arch entries, crosses the chasm. It is midday, and the sun beats down upon the tops of our heads.

The Shaman speaks to us, points to Sir Alfred and I in turn. We do not understand him when he speaks his local tribal tongue. While I am pushed forward, I stare at Sir Alfred until he has my attention.

“Why did you hide the letter from me?” I demand, with a raised voice.

His eyes are sad. He has nothing more that can be taken from him now, that there is no escape for us.

“I wanted you to fail Beechworth.”

“Fail?” I ask.

“I’ve seen more than you can imagine, in Africa, terrible things. You and I don’t need to know the truth of what now inevitably comes for us.”

“What do you mean?”

But it is too late for him to answer, as Sir Alfred is pushed forward. He is taken to the five arches, each of which leads to a different path that will cross the chasm.

The Shaman presumably asks which path he will take, but Sir Alfred does not and cannot understand what is asked of him. So the warriors prod him with their spears. In response he thrashes with his fists and fights back, so they nick his skin with their spears, and blood runs as free flowing trickles from his wounds.

“You need to choose a path, to cross the chasm!” I yell to Sir Alfred.

He stops then. He has heard me but he won't look at me. He is sizing up his foes, wondering how many he can take down before suffering a fatal blow. Not many I suspect, but I'm certain that is how he wishes to end his life now.

He still won't look at me. His stares at the shaman are a mixture of hatred and disbelief. “Very well,” he exclaims. “I'll cross your goddamn bridge.” He spits into the ground, with the same mixture of blood and saliva that lines my gums.

The shaman folds his muscular arms across his wide chest. He is pleased.

Sir Alfred takes the second arch, he can only choose at random, and disappears from sight.

All of us, we wait in silence, knowing that Sir Alfred is now deep inside the maze bridge. I count the seconds slowly, waiting to learn his fate. I reach the number four.

We hear the sound of branches breaking. We see a shape fall from a pit beneath the bridge. Sir Alfred is too proud to call out his pain, and he drops a hundred feet or more in silence onto the cragged rocks below. Beyond my vision at the depth of the canyon, I hear a wet, cracking noise, and then nothing.

The Shaman then looks to me.

I reach into my pocket and feel the vines and the leaves that were left for me to find in the riverboat. I push several into my mouth, and begin to chew. I have nothing left but to drug myself now when the very fate of my life is before me.

As I chew, the jungle transforms. Trees become fluid and soft, shake and shift like hunting wolves prowling in the night. The warriors transform, into living golden statues a dozen or more feet tall. Shapes everywhere become geometric, and if I stare into any one point long enough, it transforms into a swirling, sinking whirlpool of

sharp edged lines and solids.

The Shaman talks to me with his mouth, and I do not understand.

When he talks to me with his mind, I hear all.

\_Prove what you are, what you can see\_ he says to me with words that are not words.

And I see it then. The Shaman is Pequi, Jaquez's manservant.

My focus returns to the five arches, or five doors. I stare at each in turn, but there is nothing about either that distinguishes one from another.

Roots shake free of the earth and squirm, become snakes. Leaves fall from the many tall trees and metamorphosis into butterflies, moths and dragon flies. The stone jaguar walks out from the shadows, growls at me.

The air is filled with birds.

The bridge, it has five entrances, as I know, but the paths crossing the chasm intersect. Some floors are made of stone, laid over with leaves, and these are safe to walk upon. Others are made of thatch and branches, ill-equipped to hold the weight of a man, but also covered over with leaves.

I step forward. I cross the bridge maze, one stone step at a time. The veil is opening to me now.

THE EYE!



## Epilogue

*My Dearest Friend,*

*I do not know what fate befell me after that. All I know is that I survived, crossed the bridge unharmed, and I glimpse again what rational, learned men refuse to see, but only briefly.*

*There is a truth, an understanding of the universe that only crossing over can explain. I am not sorry what I did to you, and Devitt, and Monsignor Ernest Glynn, all those years ago in Aberdeen. I have become the Fifth Witness, and for a good reason.*

*You were right to warn me, but I do not believe a warning could have changed our fates. The Yani Shaman taught me a valuable lesson. What might seem cruel and unusual is usually nothing of the sort when all truths can be seen with equal merit. But we humans, as a whole, we never see the truth. We suffer because we are ignorant.*

*We refuse to open our eyes.*

*I found myself in a hotel room in Manaus, with no recollection of how I came to be there. I was returned to my world, unharmed. I feel I passed the shaman's test, but what was its purpose?*

*I do not believe this test will be the last one.*

*Beware the eye!*

*Videte ne quis sciat.*


*Anthony Beechworth*

END



David Conyers is an Australian science fiction author and editor residing in Adelaide. In 2013, after a long history of contributions to *Albedo One*, he was named the magazine's Art and General Editor. He has published over fifty short stories in various anthologies and magazines, many of which are collected in his e-books *The Entropy Conflict*, *The Uncertainty Bridge* and *The Nightmare Dimension*. David is the author of the Lovecraftian espionage science fiction series featuring his ongoing character, Major Harrison Peel, collected in *The Impossible Object*, *The Weaponized Puzzle* and *The Eye of Infinity*, with many more additions planned. He is the editor of the anthologies *Extreme Planets*, *Undead & Unbound*, *Cthulhu's Dark Cults* and *Cthulhu Unbound 3*.

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