

Alexandrian Light

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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The rain continued to drive into the trees above them, dripping from the highest canopies to the shorter trees, then onto the lower vines and creepers. It dribbled along the leaves to fall finally in heavy dollops that Pereira called *gotarãos*. The two men sat outside the small tent that sheltered the radio, their tools, and the dynamite. Both listened carefully to the transmissions on the military band, though Hacker understood no Portuguese.

The garrison at Obidos, Pereira told Hacker, was falling to the Soviets.

Hacker again pulled the length of cloth from his knapsack. Even in this grey light its colors were brilliant and shifted subtly across the spectrum as his hands moved beneath it. A drop fell and pooled there. Hacker turned the cloth over, and the water rolled off. He felt where it had been. Dry. But the material seemed too soft, too natural to repel so completely. The shifting colors shimmered hypnotically.

Pereira had switched bands and had more news. Someone was bombing Manaus. If it was the Americans, they would be able to stop the Soviet convoy on the Amazon and shield the paratroops who had dropped hours ago into Cairo.

So it was the Americans who would arrive here first. It didn't matter. Hacker and Pereira had made up their minds hours ago when they had pieced together what was happening and why. They had decided how they would act, and that decision meant that it mattered little who arrived first.

If the Americans found them, they would see Hacker as a traitor. Traitors didn't get trials these days. If the Soviets were to arrive first, they would see Hacker as a saboteur. In either case, Pereira was an accomplice.

Their one chance for survival, aside from the unlikely possibility of remaining undetected in the jungle, had been to be captured by the Sino-Japanese. Hacker reasoned that, of the three superpowers, they were the least imperialistic. They were more interested in maintaining the balance of power than in getting an edge on the Soviets and the Americans. The Sino-Japanese might even welcome the two geologists as heroes. But the Asians were still crossing the Andes from Peru. Their army would be the last on the scene.

Pereira killed the radio. The paratroops cutting their way through the jungle would arrive soon, and air support much sooner. They could put it off no longer.

Together they gathered their dynamite.

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The walk to the site was much easier than the first time when they had hacked their way through with machetes to investigate what they had assumed was a meteorite impact. It had seemed like an adventure, a fine excuse to leave off the serious work of their geological survey.

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Not a hundred meters from where they had left the tent, there it was, cracked open like two nut halves on the black jungle floor. The child-sized bodies were covered with a fabric that changed colors as

Hacker moved around to examine them again. Not human, but, mangled though they were, not unimaginably alien. Tetrapods. Close-set, forward-looking eyes. Membranes that might be ears. Openings that might be mouths, once capable of uttering who-knows-what extraordinary thoughts and wondrous sounds. About them lay pieces of their fantastic machinery.

Strange, Hacker thought, but these twisted bodies sticky with red blood did not repulse him. In their strangeness, in the slight swelling of their forms, they seemed somehow angelic. And that, he thought, was the problem. Who knows what swords angels may bear?

As he and Pereira packed the dynamite inside the ship, piled in the bodies and mysterious objects, Hacker wondered; Who am I, doing this?

A Viking in Ireland?

An Ostrogoth chieftain?

Cortez?

He connected the caps and spooled out wire as he walked back into the jungle. He set down the equipment and went back to push the two halves of the small ship together in order to maximize the blast damage. He stepped back for a last look, and he knew. Goths, Vikings, Conquistadors, all had been great vandals. But he was none of these. He knew better than any of them what he was destroying. He was like one of Caesar's centurions, standing in the libraries of Alexandria, torch aloft-- overawed and admiring-- before letting the torch fall.

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Out of the explosion grew another sound: the beating of metal wings. A helicopter gunship roared over their heads. Then another, and another.

Hacker stuffed the length of cloth, shimmering now red, now gold, now blue and green, into his knapsack. And the rain came falling in the huge drops Pereira called gotarões, following them into the jungle, flooding their footprints away.

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