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CULT OF THE SPIDER QUEEN

S.A. SIDOR

This is an excerpt from

CULT *of the* SPIDER QUEEN

An Arkham Horror Novel

BY S A SIDOR

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*Deep in the Amazon jungle, the boundaries between intrepid adventurers, dreamers, and deranged fanatics blur inside a web of terror in this chilling **Arkham Horror** novel of cosmic dread.*

When Arkham Advertiser reporter Andy van Nortwick receives a mysterious film reel in the mail, with a simple note: “Maude Brion is very much alive!”, he steps onto a path which will lead him to the brink of madness. Brion, the famous actress and film director, vanished a year ago on an ill-fated expedition into the Amazon rainforest, delving into the legend of the Spider Queen. Thrilled by the prospect of his big break, Nortwick swings the funds to launch a rescue mission. He gathers a team of explorers and a keen folklorist to bring back Brion and cement his reputation. But deep in the Amazon jungle, the boundaries between intrepid adventurers, dreamers, and deranged fanatics blur inside a web of terror.

1927

1

Attention Andy

The package was not for him. Andy never got any mail at the paper. He did not rank high enough among the reporters, and he never would, not with the kind of stories they were assigning him. He was bored and wandering down in the mailroom one sleepy, dreary Monday morning, a cup of hot coffee in his hand, lamenting this fact when he spotted a curious parcel on the mailroom's sorting table. The size itself was not remarkable. Round, flat like a box of candy. What caught his eye, besides the well-traveled look of the wrapper – khaki, rain-spotted, frayed at the edges, and tied with a dark, mildewed string – was the abundance of red stamps and the postmark.

From somewhere in Brazil? Is that what it said?

He leaned forward and rotated the box to read it better.

Heck, he was right.

Manaus, Amazonas, Brasil.

No name or street mentioned in the return address. The *Advertiser's* address was general too, without any further direction to pass it along to a specific editor or reporter.

Just the word: ATTENTION!

And scrawled underneath that: PLEASE OPEN IMMEDIATELY! URGENT!

Hmm... that was interesting. Who in the Amazon jungle would be shipping mail to the *Arkham Advertiser* in chilly, old, gloom-capped New England, USA? He lifted the edge of it. Heavy. A cardboard box of sweets was out of the question. More like a tin case of something.

But what?

He was tempted to give it a good shake. Then he might have an idea...

"May I help you, young man?" The mailroom manager was a middle-aged gent with a sharp moustache and a bowtie that looked like a strangler tied it. His eyes bulged.

Andy startled, nearly spilling his coffee. The cub reporter had been staring so hard at the package he hadn't noticed the other man approaching. They stood on opposite sides of the cluttered table. The man looked at him frostily.

"Hi, I'm Andy Van Nortwick. I work upstairs."

No reply.

He'd been an employee of the paper for almost a year. A lot longer if you counted his time as a paperboy, biking up and down Arkham's early morning streets. Home delivery was catching on then. He tossed his bundles on porches and

stoops, testing out his shortstop's arm.

"I bet you've seen me around, haven't you?" Andy tried again.

"No."

Andy glanced down, disappointed. "I'm working on blending in so I can observe others. That's what an ace reporter does. Never get in the way of the big story. I must be good at it."

"You could do better," the manager said. His eyes narrowed to slits.

Andy was about to excuse himself when a crazy idea charged into his head.

"Say, I was wondering. Long as I'm down here, do you have anything for me to carry upstairs? Save you a trip later." Andy smiled. His thumb plucked the package string. He hoped he wasn't being too obvious. But he had a sudden urge to know what was in the box.

He *needed* to know.

"I haven't finished sorting." The manager's attitude warmed. "Mondays are bad. The Saturday crew is an utter disaster. What's on the table are their leftovers. Who knows what they do besides devising ways to add to my list of chores? Today's mail hasn't even come yet."

The bell over the door rang. A uniformed man shouldering a satchel pushed inside.

"Speak of the devil. Be with you right away, Ed." The bow-tied manager turned toward the counter facing the Armitage Street public entrance of the *Advertiser* building. "*Neither rain nor sleet nor gloom of night*,' as they say. Did you know that line comes from Herodotus?"

“That old Greek must’ve had a postman’s heart,” Ed said. His cap dripped rain, and his wool uniform smelled musty. A gust of November wind rustled papers in the mailroom.

Andy shivered. Boy, he was not ready for another long cold winter stuck indoors.

He had a hunch about the Brazilian package. A quiver in his gut told him there was a hot story inside. Damned if he was going to let it go to waste. Or worse, watch it passed along to one of the hacks from upstairs, sneaking slugs of whiskey from their desk drawer bottles, chomping on putrid cigars, and treating him like a nobody.

As the other two men moved off to the other side of the mailroom, Andy snatched the pencil from behind his ear. Without a moment’s hesitation, because if he thought about it too much he’d lose his nerve, he bent over the package and jotted a quick addition to the address.

So now it read: ATTENTION! ANDY VAN NORTWICK, JOURNALIST!

That’s more like it, he thought.

One little worry, though.

His note didn’t match up with the rest of the message, which was written in ink. But the ink was faded as if it sat roasting on a tropical dock before being tossed into the leaky cargo hold of a northward-bound freighter for a weeks-long journey trod upon by rats. Andy dipped his finger in the dregs of his coffee and smeared a drop across his name. Far from perfect. But the letters darkened. Close enough to still get noticed but not too much to cause any suspicion. He shoved the package between two piles of envelopes.

And went upstairs to wait for his big break to arrive.

Something More Than Curiosity

Andy shared a desk with the *Advertiser's* best-known sportswriter. Sean "Red" Phelan had another desk among his athletically minded cronies, where they jawed about baseball, horseracing, and boxers. The desk Red shared with Andy was where he went to get away from the boys. That meant Andy had to find somewhere else to scam to whenever Red needed to meet a deadline or grab shuteye after a night out. Their desk tucked conveniently behind a pillar.

Right now, though, Andy had it to himself.

He tipped back in his chair and daydreamed.

The Amazon...

If that place didn't spell adventure, nowhere did. Andy loved the idea of jungles. Challenging yourself to survive on the knife edge between life and death in a truly wild place. Dropped into the middle of miles of impenetrable green, indistinguishable from the elemental world of the dinosaurs. A person moved forward according to their skills. And what they knew mattered more than who. Nature's awesome

indifference set the only rules. You weren't subject to human whims or favoritism. He'd trade it for this stuffy office with its smoke-blue haze and backroom politics. No birdsong here but clacking typewriters.

The only river made of talk and more talk.

As a student, Andy had found escape in adventure stories. Schoolwork bored him, but he was always a reader. Haggard, Doyle, Kipling, and Burroughs. He dived into their fantasies. Ultimately, they weren't enough. He suspected it was because they wrote *fiction*. None of it was real. Paeans to empire: that quality was evident. The authors championed examples of colonial violence and ugly cultural injustices under the banner of Western progress. Elitist white men trumpeting their dominance of the globe. At what cost?

Andy was no John Reed radical. With President Coolidge deciding not to run for re-election, he didn't know who he'd vote for next year. Lots of people around Arkham, mostly the rich ones, hoped the boom years would last forever. Young Andy yearned for an authentic life experience, a journey outside Arkham, where he'd spent his whole dull life. Get away. That was the key. He wanted a broader worldview. Andy leaned forward and peeked around the pillar.

No mail cart.

His mysterious package from Manaus was stuck in transit.

He could barely keep from scouting the hallways. But he had to stay calm. Not act suspiciously. What he'd done was ethically questionable at best.

At worst...

He didn't let himself think about it. Andy wanted to make a name for himself. The *Advertiser's* editor, Doyle Jeffries, ran

a tight operation and didn't put up with rule-bending. Not from his news department. He was a muckraker through and through, a stickler for hard evidence and high standards. But it wasn't easy breaking into the circle of investigative reporters. Issue after issue, the same people got their bylines on the front page. Heck, Andy would admit he was jealous. Sure he was! He wanted in. For the longest time he was convinced Jeffries didn't even know his name. He went as far as to bet fellow reporter Minnie Klein a slice of cherry pie at Velma's that she couldn't get Jeffries to identify him after a meeting. Minnie paid for the pie.

The one time he had gotten Jeffries' undivided attention had ended in total disaster. Andy was lucky to still have a job. He shouldn't be risking blowing up his livelihood over a box he couldn't even guess the contents of. If somebody found out he doctored the address...?

Jeffries wouldn't take him back. Not the way he did seasoned staff like Rex Murphy who, despite a few major foul-ups, had the editor's respect. Andy needed to earn his way up the ladder to reach the level of a Minnie or Rex.

How could he do that with the scraps they were feeding him?

News didn't even really sell papers. Flashy sports writers like Red Phelan did. Andy wasn't about to catch any lucky breaks from the sidelines. He could feel his opportunities slipping away each week. If he didn't grab something soon...

A person had to seize their future.

He'd learned that.

What he planned to do was open the package. Carefully. Give it a good inspection. See if there was anything

newsworthy. Perhaps a rumble of international intrigue that sent waves all the way to the banks of the Miskatonic. Andy had a feeling the package held something important. He knew how clichéd that sounded. A reporter's hunch. It went beyond journalistic instinct. He felt an almost eerie connection. That box held his destiny. He just *knew* it.

If he ultimately decided to pass, he'd put everything back. Say it came to him by mistake.

He put his feet up and flipped through his assignment notebook.

Sigh.

This week they wanted him to spill ink about the revised bus schedule to Innsmouth. A museum exhibition. Church bake sales. A burst pipe that flooded a warehouse on River Street.

Andy chucked his notebook.

Bus schedules and bake sales ... leaky pipes ...

How could he be expected to move up?

That box, though. That little brown box ...

A headache pulsed in his temples. In the dark behind his eyes, he saw the box shifting. Imagined it coming to him. Floating.

Why was something unknown suddenly so important to him?

Is this how obsessions started? A drip, drip, drip that slowly filled your brain until there was no room for anything else. The pressure in his head grew.

The box.

The person who mailed it from Manaus obviously didn't

know him. To them Andy didn't exist. To Andy they hadn't existed until this morning in the mailroom when something more than curiosity told him what to do. Write down your name, Andy. Make it yours. Steal it if you must.

Now he was able to picture them in a foggy way.

The humid air. The smell of water, mud. Two tanned hands tying the string. Bustle in the port. Noises of life. Voices. Speaking in one or more languages he didn't understand.

A rattle of coins and a pile of wrinkled bills sliding across a counter.

Licking the stamps, pressing them down on the paper.

He saw it.

Andy knew *that* sounded even more far-fetched.

But after this past summer and what he'd witnessed at the Silver Gate Hotel he wasn't discounting anything. Certainly not the possibility of anything... uncanny.

Andy had gone to the hotel to interview a famous artist. A painter of the Surrealist movement named Alden Oakes. The hotel had burned a year earlier, and Oakes was a survivor of the horrific, deadly fire. Back in town for the Silver Gate's grand reopening. The story he told Andy over the next few hours was... peculiar. Riveting but strange. Andy wasn't sure how much to believe. But he'd unexpectedly gotten what he thought was a really good story out of it. A hot story – he wondered if he should risk the pun when he pitched it to Jeffries. If the editor in chief gave him the go-ahead, it would be the biggest piece he'd written for the *Advertiser*. They couldn't ignore him then.

Only that wasn't the end.

Andy was the last person to see Alden Oakes. Ever.

The man went missing after the interview. Vanished. Andy saw something that day in the hotel ballroom when he and the painter were alone. Or Andy thought they were alone. What he observed brought up more questions than answers. It was almost like Andy stepped into another man's dream. Or nightmare. Depending on how you interpreted things. And Andy wasn't sure. He'd changed his mind a thousand times in the past few months. The longer it receded into the past, the less certain he was. Not of the facts, but of his own perception. He wished he had another person he could check things with, a second eyewitness. Someone to validate his memories. He knew what he saw. Afterward his mind was opened to... other possibilities. This much he was convinced was true: supernatural phenomena do occur. Unexplained events *have* explanations. Some people just aren't ready to hear them.

One of those people was Andy's editor.

Doyle Jeffries.

Andy ran to the *Advertiser's* offices that day, after a quick search of the painter's hotel room. He demanded to see Jeffries. The editor sat there staring while Andy ran through his tale, leaving nothing out. After he finished, he was breathless; his collar loose, sweat-soaked.

Jeffries made a tent of his fingers and pressed them to his lips.

"Who put you up to this?" the editor said.

Andy didn't understand. He had another one of those gut feelings. This one was like a slick ice block falling inside him. Falling and falling. He was going to be sick. He had seconds to save his career, to save himself from losing his dream of

frontpage headlines and fame.

“Red Phelan,” he said. His deskmate. It was the only name he conjured in that moment.

“Red?” Jeffries said, arching an eyebrow.

“Yes, sir.”

Andy’s face felt in flames.

Then Jeffries did the most unexpected thing. He started laughing. And didn’t stop until he had tears in his eyes. “I don’t go for shenanigans. You must know that about me, Anthony.”

Andy Van Nortwick didn’t correct his boss. Instead, he forced a smile and nodded.

“That I do,” he said.

Jeffries slammed his palm on his enormous desk. Everything jumped. Andy included.

“Like a great engine a newspaper can build up heat. Things will explode, mind you. Depend on it. Unless every so often we let off a little steam. I’m not a humorless man.” He removed his glasses, wiping the lenses. “Is Red here? Is he outside my door listening?” He called out. “You almost had me fooled, you redheaded, ink-stained wretch. But not quite. If you’re there, you might as well come in.”

Andy turned to stare at the open doorway, hoping that Red was anywhere else on earth. He prayed Red was at a ballgame. Somewhere, anywhere, but the newsroom.

His prayers were answered.

Later, Andy bought Red’s future silence on the matter with a case of Canadian whiskey. Red never forgot the dubious deal they made.

“Didn’t know you had it in you, kid. How about picking up a ham sandwich for me?”

Andy was reliving his brush with career self-destruction when a cough rang nearby. It was Red. Standing over him, disheveled, the sportsman blinked.

“Kid, the chair,” Red said.

Jolted out of his revelry, Andy climbed away from the desk, retreating to the windowsill.

Red sat. The stogie in the corner of his mouth had gone out. He angled the chair, thumped his heels on the desk, and tipped his fedora over his face, preparing to ship off to Slumberville when the worst thing in the world happened.

The mail cart squeaked around behind the pillar.

The mailroom manager wrinkled his nose in the direction of the fragrantly reclining Red, and said to Andy, “Young man, you have an item of mail.”

He held out the string-tied box from Brazil.

Awakened and alert, Red shot out his freckled hand and intercepted the delivery.

Curious Development

“Who do you know in Brazil?”

“Nobody,” Andy said, trying to sound casual.

“Hmm, hmm, hmmm...” Red tested the weight of the box.
“Heavy.”

“It’s probably nothing. Brazilian newspapers. I won’t even be able to read them.”

Andy was standing, inching closer.

“Well, nobody went to great lengths to send you nothing. Not cheap, either.” Red squeezed the box with his chunky thumbs. “Why’d you suppose a stranger in a foreign land would do that? I’d be hard pressed to locate anybody who’s heard of you in Arkham.”

“I don’t know if that’s true.” Andy’s ears turned hot. He’s trying to get your goat, he thought. Don’t give him the satisfaction.

Andy picked up a pencil.

“Sure it is.” Red clutched the box. His knuckles whitened. He smiled the kind of smile you see on an alligator in a sandpit at the zoo and ran his fingertip over Andy’s name. Peering at

the letters. Tap, tap, tap. The rumor about Red was he'd spent a couple years at Harvard before being expelled. Intelligence shone in his bloodshot eyes. His rough persona was an act. But not the drinking. Andy smelled the bathtub gin oozing from his pores.

"Just what is it you're up to, Andy Boy?" Red said toothily.

"Me? I'm not up to anything."

Red popped a match and relit his cigar.

"You don't care if I open it?"

Before Andy could object, Red flicked open a pocketknife and sliced through the string. Two quick swipes slashed an "X" in the paper wrapper. Red skinned it back to reveal a cardboard box. He shook the lid off. Red held up the prize.

"It's a film canister," he said.

Andy was too fascinated to object. "What sort of film is it? The label's blank."

"So it is." Red touched the piece of tape that ran along the outer edge of the canister.

"Let's open it," Andy said.

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because, kid, then you really do have a box of nothing from nobody. The film in that can is exposed but not processed. If light gets at it, forget it." He tapped his ash on the floor.

Red *was* smarter than he acted. Andy's eye followed the falling ash and spotted a slip of white paper inside the box. "Look, there's a note," he said.

Red brought the paper up. "It says, 'Maude Brion is very much alive!'"

Maude Brion. The name sounded familiar, as if Andy had heard it or read it somewhere.

"You don't even know who she is. Do you, Andy Van Nortwick?" Red cocked his head.

Andy paused, trying to catch the name out of the air. *Maude Brion*.

"She's an actress," Andy said.

"That's right, boy. And what else?"

"Oh, she's that actress who went missing last year making a movie in the Amazon!"

"Give that man a prize." Red handed over the note.

Andy reread it. Just one sentence.

Maude Brion is very much alive! Well, hot damn, this was a story.

Red said, "She is that actress who went missing on the river. But she wasn't acting. She was directing a picture. Documentary. Looking for a long-lost rainforest god. Maybe I ought to take a break from ballgames and do an investigation. I might get a book out of it. If I asked Doyle, he'd let me take a sabbatical. Amble on south. Maybe do a little fly fishing while I'm there. Catch me a peacock bass, a mess of pacu, or the legendary pirarucu."

Andy sweated. His brain full of worry. His spirit crushed with disappointment. Until he saw Red didn't mean it. Not really. He'd done his teasing and had his fun. Red wasn't interested in leaving Arkham or the *Advertiser's* offices. Why should he be? This was his jungle, and he was the sleepy old big cat. Red kicked his feet up. Rearranged his hat so the shade disappeared his face.

Without looking, he tossed the canister to Andy.

“Make yourself scarce. I sense a dream coming on, and the dancer in my dream says she don’t want you here. Skeedaddle.” Red wagged his fingers.

Andy tucked the can under his arm.

“You think there’s any shot at finding Maude Brion?” he said.

“Kid, if you find anything at all, it’ll be bones.”

“Where can I get this developed?” Andy asked.

“Talk to Darrell Simmons. Now. Leave.”

“I’m going,” Andy said, smiling to himself.

“Sweet dreams, kid. I got a feeling you’re gonna need ’em.”

Before Andy left the newsroom, Red’s snores were buzzing like a rusty saw.

The Forest

When the dead man visited her, his face was purple as a plum. He parted a path through the thick bush using a walking staff carved from cocobolo rosewood. Her senses were sharp, heightened, but she could not move. Despite the jungle heat, she shivered at his appearance. Because she knew this man. The staff he carried – she had bought it for him, a gift before their long journey together. She recognized the rich, darkly striped grain and the twist in its design. The man's hand – his clothes – were beyond filthy.

He stared at her but did not speak. His eyes were opaque. A milky film masked their blue.

“Can you see me?” she asked.

He must be able to see, she thought. He came to me through the forest. If he were blind...

He didn't answer.

“Can you hear me?” she said.

The man nodded.

“Good, good. Do you know who I am?”

Her heart drummed as she waited for an answer. A “no” would’ve added to her pain.

He nodded. Yes.

“I am so happy to have found you.” Joy filled her, but she reminded herself to contain her reaction. She needed information from him. It was unclear how much time they would have. “I looked for you for so long. I did everything I could think of. Séances. Mediums. Where have you been?”

The man remained silent. He turned and gestured with his staff. Behind him, at the trees.

The forest.

Emerald leaves dappled with golden sun. He was in the forest. She already knew that.

“Why aren’t you speaking? Have I done something to upset you?”

He shook his head, tilted it back and showed her his whiskery throat. Grossly swollen, blistered. The skin taut, its color blacker than purple. He clutched it with his fingers, grimacing.

An unknown bite. The venom had spread quickly. Nauseated, he lay in his hammock, drenched with sweat, muscles twitching. Paralyzed. Wheezing with each shallow breath he drew.

She remembered.

She would never forget the sight of him struck down and her inability to help.

“I’m so sorry this happened to you,” she said. It wasn’t her fault but still she felt guilty. They would never have come here if it weren’t for her. The river trip attracted them both, but this spot, where they landed their boats and pitched camp, was

her suggestion. She had picked it out. “Here’s a proper base on dry, level ground,” she said, satisfied. Then the tragedy occurred.

He was suffering terribly.

How will it all end? she wondered. Is his fate mine too?

Another pang of guilt for thinking about herself. But as she was instructed, she tried to resist any negative feelings. They had a bad effect. The energy created might even be dangerous.

Guilt is of no good to us now, she told herself. I’ve found him and that is a win.

In the distance, the sound of a snapping branch traveled down the green-covered hills.

They both looked up. Too far away to make out anything moving along the ground. Through a gap, a single vine was swinging gently. It might’ve only been a monkey. Or a bird.

Whatever it was, it was getting closer. It had crept down from the hills.

She had the feeling of being watched. Of being prey.

Maybe it was nothing, she told herself. A case of nerves. Paranoia. But she could not shake it off. The hair prickled on her neck. She’d better hurry if she wanted to find things out.

“Where did you ...?” she began to ask him.

She was standing alone. The trees, the bushes surrounding her grew still. The light faded.

“No! Don’t!” she shouted into the jungle. *Not again.*
“Listen! Please, come back!”

But it was too late.

The man was gone.

5

Movie Palace

“You can tell Red he was wrong. This isn’t a negative. It’s a 35mm print. All you need to watch it is the right projector,” Darrell Simmons said.

He switched off the darkroom’s red light and handed the reel back to Andy. The room smelled of vinegar. Leaving the darkness, Andy squinted as he followed Simmons to his kitchen.

Simmons was a photographer who worked for the *Advertiser*. Andy had gotten his address from the paper’s office after Red Phelan mentioned him. He took a bus to Simmons’s neighborhood. Knocked on the front door and caught him at home, finishing up some photos of what appeared to be rundown old houses. Head tilting sideways, Andy attempted to get a better look, but Simmons tucked the still damp photos behind his back. Andy had talked his way into the house, the mysterious film canister and Simmons’s obvious curiosity doing most of the work.

“Great. So, where can I find a projector?” Andy said.

“You’re in luck. I happen to have one in the basement. Care to see a picture?”

Andy smiled. “Love to,” he said.

“Right this way.” Simmons opened a door and led him down an unfinished staircase. “Do me a favor and pin that sheet to the clothesline. I can do the rest. Oh, I’ll need the film.”

Andy set up the makeshift silver screen. Simmons wheeled in the projector on a cart.

“How’d you get your hands on a piece of machinery like that?” Andy asked.

“I write letters. You’d be surprised what I find. I’m willing to take castoffs, the unwanted. I love tinkering with gadgets old and new. I picked up this Pathé-Freres from New York after a blaze. Nitrate film is serious business. Like a celluloid firebomb. It took me some time, but I got it working. There’s an old armchair in the corner. Drag it over. You can sit.”

In the shadows, something gauzy and invisible tickled Andy’s face. He brushed it away. Cobwebs hung from the floor joists above their heads. Basement creepy crawlies no doubt.

Simmons threaded the film, plugged in the projector’s lamp. He switched off the lights. The sheet turned bright white. “I have to hand crank this French model. I’ll stay here. Comfy?”

“Better than Grauman’s Egyptian Theatre,” Andy said, patting the dusty cushion. He was more excited than nervous, but he realized if the film turned out to be nothing, he’d feel crushed.

“Welcome to my movie palace. Ready? And... action!”

Simmons turned the crank. The white sheet came alive with moving images.

Maude's Party

The flickering pictures blend to tell a story.

The camera is wobbly since it is standing, along with its unseen operator, in the bow of a steamboat. Midriver currents keep things moving constantly. Waves slap the hull. The crew, mostly indigenous men, are loading gear and themselves into canoes in the water alongside the much larger boat. The camera pivots to show the stern. They have towed the skinny dugouts in a line tied behind the boat. All the dugouts are filled but one. A rope ladder hangs over the side.

The river is so large the shoreline appears surprisingly far away. Dense vegetation covers the hills. A pie-shaped section of riverbank is less overgrown. No tall trees grow there. It may be a landing area. Beyond it, the possibility of a trailhead.

JUMP CUT TO:

View from inside the empty dugout. Camera bounces. The camera operator is seated in the middle of the hand-hewn canoe. A woman climbs into the first seat. The view of the back of her head shows a frizzy, curly bob cut. A bandana

keeps her hair off her neck. She stares ahead. When they hit the shallows, she is first out. Into the water. Splashing. Hauling the front end of the boat onto dry land. But not too dry. Mud everywhere. Footprints? She wears sandals. Her pantlegs are rolled. Laced-together boots are slung over her shoulder. She's done this before.

The image rocks as the camera operator goes ashore. It aims at the ground.

Yes, there are footprints in the mud on the riverbank. They lead toward the forest.

The woman charges forward with a couple of the indigenous men who are already busy swinging machetes. She has a machete too. She joins them cutting aside the brush.

The woman sees something and points. The three of them hack in that direction.

An oblong of white stone stands inside the tree line. Partially hidden but soon uncovered. The woman slices down the last barrier of vines and leafy jungle plants. She brushes the surface of the pale stone face, beckoning the camera to come in for a closer look. A carved symbol.

She turns and grins straight into the lens.

This is Maude Brion. Star of several silent films. Screenwriter of a few more. Director. Now a documentary filmmaker. We are seeing footage of her travelogue. A scenic adventure shot along the Amazon River. *Variety* magazine mentioned her departure from Hollywood. *Photoplay* gave it a full story treatment, with photos of her wearing prop shop expedition garb.

Hunt for the Spider Queen. That was the shooting title of her picture. The media reaction has run the gamut from

skepticism to tongue-in-cheek enthusiasm to admiration for the boundary-breaking filmic adventurer. Mostly, they don't know what to believe. Are jungle gods real or fodder for the pulps? Maude appears as unfazed as she is determined. Curse the critics!

One legend tracks down another. That's what the *Photoplay* story claimed. A bit of exaggeration: Maude Brion wasn't a legend yet, but she'd made a good start. No one could say exactly where she'd come from. She just appeared one day in LA. She hailed from Texas, was the gossip going around Tinseltown. Her father was an oilman, a wildcatter who'd struck it rich. But she didn't talk like a Texan, although she did ride every horse like she was stealing it. She had style. She made people nervous. A dabbler in the occult, one rumor avowed; they even hinted she belonged to a clique of Devil worshippers. She filmed a séance where a man slit his own throat. She'd only show it to if you were her friend, or if you paid a price. But you hear such stories in Hollywood.

Maude smiles at the camera.

Any person can see she has it. Magic. The camera loves her. It captures a strange energy and transfers it the movie watcher. You want to know her, what she's doing, where she's going.

Maude deflects the camera's attention. It's the white stone she wants captured.

The camera pushes in. Focuses.

The lighting isn't perfect. Too much shadow. But there's a carving etched in the rock: a round shape with multiple arms. Or are they legs? Six, seven, eight. Eight legs like an octopus.

Or... like a spider. Is this a marker? A signpost of sorts? The lines are deep. Are they old or new? It's hard to say. But

it could be a clue as to the whereabouts of the Spider Queen. Maude is no archaeologist, not a scientist or expert of any kind when it comes to myths and legends.

She is a moviemaker. And she's taking her camera where no one has filmed before.

While Maude and the camera operator are studying the stone, the other men locate signs of a trailhead. Her full crew is there now, a half dozen lean men chopping away. She abandons the carving, instead plunging down the pathway which reveals itself more and more with every slash of their blades. They mount a steep, slippery climb, grabbing hold of low-hanging limbs to keep from backsliding. Eventually the terrain levels off. Behind them, the river is a lounging anaconda. Through the trees ahead, the shapes of human-made structures emerge. Buildings.

Is it a village?

No. It's a modern worksite. A plantation. The rubber companies set up stations in the rainforest. But the rubber boom is over in Brazil. Cheaper rubber can be had from Malaya. The cost of extracting rubber from the Amazon rainforest is too high. After they've drained the local resources for huge profits, the foreign business operations have pulled stakes and left the jungle.

This is a ghost plantation. Vines reach through the windows. The roofs have dark holes. Monkeys and birds pass through the openings. The interiors show a real mess. Toppled furniture. Water-damaged maps on the walls. Animal droppings litter the planks. The camera catches a not-small snake fleeing the intrusion; it moves like a bullwhip dragging down the steps and along the ground. The film is silent, but

you can imagine the noise the new arrivals must be causing.

Yet there is more to discover.

Not far from the buildings, half-buried under leaves and pools of stagnant water, a pair of train tracks lay in the mud. They lead deeper into the undergrowth. Maude's party follows them.

Until the tracks end.

Abruptly.

Like a conversation cut off midsentence. The two steel ends jut up out of the muddy earth.

And no one in Maude's party is talking either. Their faces are frozen in awestruck wonder. Before them looms a second upright oblong stone covered in spider carvings. But they, and the camera, do not focus for long on the mysterious marker. Because a short distance away, housed within the shady, green cathedral of enormous trees, are the limestone ruins of a shrine.

The natural light here is poor for filming.

Yet the sight is as impressive and haunting as any old castle from a gothic novel.

Mostly silhouettes and shadows. Rubber trees stand guard around the multiple shrine structures, their trunks scarred from years of tapping. Insects dance excitedly in shafts of sunlight. Slabs of rock have crumbled to the forest floor. Plantation workers never built this place. Finding it might have contributed to their decision to get out. Because, despite the rough, intricate beauty of the arches and pillars, a sense of foreboding permeates the scene. This is a place where something bad has happened long ago. And may happen again. One cannot see the ruins and feel anything else. Yet

how much of that reaction comes from a lack of knowledge about the people who made this their sanctum? For there is reverence in the placement of the ancient stone platforms, how they form a perfect ring, wearing their lichen badges and mossy cloaks – ceremonial altars erected in the smothering hot and humid, lush equatorial gloom.

The light fades.

But not before Maude records more spider renderings – on steps, altars, and pillars.

They are everywhere.

CUT TO:

Night.

Maude's party uses a lantern. They have decided for some unknown reason to remain at the shrine after dark rather than return in their canoes to the steamboat. Why did they camp there? Perhaps the path out was too difficult to follow at night. Though this scenario seems unlikely given the short distance and the local guides familiar with navigating in the woods.

Perhaps they wanted to stay.

They've gathered on one of the shrine platforms, inside a temple-like structure with no roof. Was there once a roof constructed of plant matter that has rotted? Was it always open?

Pricks of moonlight shine above, here and there between the trees. But the party gathers around the lantern. Is it too wet to start a fire? Or do they feel building a fire here might be somehow disrespectful? The faces of the indigenous members of the party show the same uncertainty as Maude. Uncertainty, but also excitement. One of the men takes control of the camera for a brief interval. He

is curious, confident. The previously unseen cameraman shows up for the first time. He appears to be an American, or at least a white person, like Maude. The cameraman and Maude are sitting on the temple floor, arm-in-arm, celebratory. They toast one another with their canteens. Singing. Laughter. Their long journey on the river has borne fruit.

All heads turn at what must be a loud sound coming from the jungle.

The cameraman takes back his camera. Pivots.

In the woods, lights flicker. The orbs float like glowing buoys on a black sea.

Coming closer.

Everyone is on their feet. Machetes in hand. They watch.

Figures dart in the woods at the edge of the shrine complex.

They're inside the ruins now. Dark shapes. The lights accompany them.

People emerge from the darkness. Men and women. Some of them are wearing modern Western clothes. Mud-spattered. Hanging on them like rags. They are carrying torches. And ...

Rifles.

Dozens of people surround Maude's party. Some stay back, are little more than pairs of eyes in the dark. Half-lit faces. The torchlight changes them, makes them seem sinister.

Others come forward.

Maude is afraid. But she drops her machete. Holds her hands up, showing she is no threat.

The people from the forest are speaking to her.

Looking puzzled, she talks back to them. How are they communicating with no translator? Are these people

Americans? Or Brits? It is impossible to decipher what they are saying. One of Maude's men points up into the treetops. Maude looks but does not appear to see anything. Then the torchbearers toss their fires into the center of the ring of stone platforms.

There is a firepit there, hidden under leaf debris.

Flames leap high into the air. Higher than one would expect, illuminating into the trees.

Someone knocks the camera to the ground.

The cameraman's flailing arm enters the frame, a blurred profile of his bearded, panic-stricken face slides past the upper part of the frame. The glint of fire reflected in a pair of eyeglasses. The camera is righted again. And now it angles upward, pointing just beyond the tips of the flames. Columns of smoke. A blurry image beyond them. Firelit. Several crooked, digitate obelisks pierce the leafy treetops. Fingers spread apart, beseeching like supplicant's hands uplifted in a moment of worship. Frozen there in stone.

Are they a part of the shrine complex the expedition failed to notice in the daylight?

But how...?

A huge net stretches between the obelisks. Hard to make out. Unfocused. It sways. Trembles. The net is silver. Its thick cords are woven in an intricate pattern. More like a web.

From one corner, a black hulking mass darts out. Stops. Did it really move?

The web sways in the moonlight. Dots of moisture drip down, falling from its strands.

As back and forth it sways...

The reel ends.

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