

THE LOST KINGDOM



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by Chester Bryant

THE LOST KINGDOM



hirteen-year-old Rodmika is well acquainted with the crystal-clear rivers and tangled vines of the Green Jungle. So when his family moves to the other side of the jungle, leaving behind his chance for an education, Rodmika is perfectly suited to find a way to return. As Rodmika searches for a way back to the place of his schooling, he uncovers much more than a path.

Set against the backdrop of a lush, untamed Indian rainforest, *The Lost Kingdom* weaves adventure and mystery into a thrilling tale that will resonate with readers who have a love for exploration and excitement.

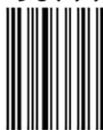


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Rodmika was thirteen years old, and compared with most Hindu boys, he was big for his age. He lay flat upon the rock, his chin resting on the back of his crossed hands. The sun burned into his bare brown back, and a slight breeze fluttered the loose end of the turban bound about his head. Below him the surface of the pool was ruffled too, hiding for a moment the long, gray shape of Ajgar, the python, that lay on the bottom.

The boy closed his eyes as if it helped him enjoy all the more the cooling movement of the air in the steamy Indian jungle. With the breeze came the fragrance of flowers blooming on a distant hillside.

Rodmika smiled. “The wind is like the great mother of the jungle passing by with flowers in her hair,” he said to himself. “The hem of her cotton *sari* drags the pool as she comes, and her sleeve caresses my back. She drifts beyond the pool, gently rustling the leaves high in the forest trees. Now she is only a murmur far away.”

He opened his eyes. The pool was still again, but Ajgar had moved. Then, a short distance away, ripples suddenly circled

outward from where the great serpent's head broke the surface. Its seven-yard-long body trailed like a thick vine into the depths. An innocent teak leaf floating on the water would look the same, thought Rodmika.

The flat head glistened in the sunlight, and Rodmika spoke aloud, "Hear me, O creature without any ears." He laughed, and his laughter echoed from the forest beyond the pool, but Ajgar showed no sign of hearing. Reaching cautiously with one hand, the boy grasped a small stone and tapped it sharply against the rock. Again, the ripples circled outward from the serpent's head, and like a hand bent at the wrist, it rose a few inches out of the water.

Its forked, black tongue lapped the air. Rodmika was still again. "Find me, O serpent who listens with his stomach," whispered the boy teasingly. "Find where the tapping came from that reached thee through the water." The black tongue continued to flash out from between the long, closed jaws. Rodmika chuckled. "O one with eyes that never close, see me here upon the rock. As long as I am still, my brown face and the white cotton *puggaree* bound about my head are a part of the rock to thee."

At that moment an excited chattering broke from the treetops behind and above him as the leader of a troop of gray langurs spied the searching head of the python. Then a panic-stricken retreat of the entire tribe of gray monkeys began. Their flight carried them over the narrow end of the pool as they leaped from tree to tree. Rodmika turned his head to one side and watched. He saw a dozen or more of the four-handed creatures in the air at once. Half of them seemed to drop into the leafy branches of one outstretched limb. It swung down with the sudden weight and snapped. The scampering gray monkeys caught new branches, but the shock of the broken fall dislodged one baby from where it

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clung beneath its mother's body, and Rodmika saw it drop like a plummet into the water.

Ajgar saw it, too, and felt the impulse of the small body striking the pool come to him through the water. The great serpent lowered its head and began to swim cautiously.

Quickly, Rodmika measured the distance from the python to the gray shape struggling helplessly below him. Pushing his turban from his head as he jumped to his feet, he made a low, running dive from the rock.

He thought of the python's powerful jaws and long, needle-sharp teeth as he came up a yard short of the baby monkey. Two overhand strokes and he ducked his head and felt the little hands grasp his thick black hair. He swam on as fast as he could toward a log that sloped into the water. It seemed that he would never reach it. But now his down-surfing hand struck it. He struggled to his feet and splashed onto the dry, mossy upper end. Above the wild screaming of the langurs, there was a loud hiss of the serpent at Rodmika's back. The boy whirled and waved his arms, but already Ajgar, puzzled and startled at seeing a man creature where he expected to see only a small monkey, was lashing back upon his own whipping coils to disappear in a burst of foam and spray.

Rodmika sank to the log to get his breath and pulled the little animal from his head. For a moment he held it by its hind legs and shook it. No water came from its nose or mouth. "Thou art all right, little fellow," he said, "thy lungs are dry."

Back on the rock, he recovered his turban and dried the little langur with it, then laid it upon the sun-heated stone and covered it against the chill of a new breeze.

The monkeys chattered anxiously, but the wild panic in their hearts was gone. Rodmika was no stranger to them. The mother of the little one crept to the edge of the rock.

“Not yet,” cautioned the boy; “let him rest and get warm.” He removed his wet *dhoti* from about his waist and spread it on the rock to dry while he continued his conversation with the mother langur. “Thou, *bandar log*, must learn that the python thou canst see is harmless. It is the one lying still and unseen upon a shadowy rock that is dangerous.” He was careful not to smile at the monkey, for smiling revealed his teeth, and a show of teeth to wild animals, he knew, was taken as a sign of unfriendliness.

Soon the little monkey began to squirm beneath the cotton covering, and presently a small hand found its way out, then its head and shoulders. It sat up, examining the cotton cloth as the mother approached, chattering nervously. She extended her paw to her baby, but the little one was in no hurry to leave the newfound comfort of Rodmika’s *puggaree*. It screamed at its mother and pulled the cloth folds over its tiny, manlike face.

The old monkey seemed puzzled for a moment, then impatiently snatched the cloth away and picked up her angry infant. She held it as a human mother holds her child, and as she leaped away to the trees, a little head peeped over her shoulder, taking a last look at the boy and his wonderful cotton coverings.

For a few minutes more, Rodmika lay on the rock. When his *dhoti* was dry, he arose, draped it about his small waist, and squinted at the sun. It was nearing mid-afternoon. For two days he had been in the jungle, and his bag of cooked rice was exhausted. He stretched and yawned and turned toward the home of his parents at the American Foundation near the village of Valdapur.

In going from island to island in the watery jungle, he was forced twice to swim, but the remainder of the crossings he was able to make either upon logs or through the trees.



The way through trees was the hardest and often dangerous. As dangerous, he thought, as swimming through the darkly stained water where crocodiles and pythons lurked.

He was almost two hours reaching the edge of the great swamp, and as he walked along a log, he heard the distant jingle of bells. He stopped a moment to listen. The bronze tinkling grew louder as it came to him from the jungle-hidden hillside above.

Rodmika smiled and spoke aloud, as if addressing the small yellow bird that searched industriously through