

## Excerpt from *In Search of the Unknown*

by Robert W. Chambers

- 1 It was at that time the policy of the trustees and officers of the Zoological Gardens neither to employ collectors nor to send out expeditions in search of specimens. The society decided to depend upon voluntary contributions, and I was always busy, part of the day, in dictating answers to correspondents who wrote offering their services as hunters of big game, collectors of all sorts of fauna, trappers, snarers, and also to those who offered specimens for sale, usually at exorbitant rates.
- 2 To the proprietors of . . . mangy lynxes, moth-eaten coyotes, and dancing bears I returned courteous but uncompromising refusals—of course, first submitting all such letters, together with my replies, to Professor Farrago.
- 3 One day towards the end of May, however, just as I was leaving Bronx Park to return to town, Professor Lesard, of the reptilian department, called out to me that Professor Farrago wanted to see me a moment; so I . . . retraced my steps to the temporary, wooden building occupied by Professor Farrago, general superintendent of the Zoological Gardens. The professor, who was sitting at his desk before a pile of letters and replies submitted for approval by me, pushed his glasses down and looked over them at me with a whimsical smile that suggested amusement, impatience, annoyance, and perhaps a faint trace of apology.
- 4 “Now, here’s a letter,” he said, with a deliberate gesture towards a sheet of paper impaled on a file—“a letter that I suppose you remember.” He disengaged the sheet of paper and handed it to me.
- 5 “Oh yes,” I replied, with a shrug; “of course the man is mistaken—or—”
- 6 “Or what?” demanded Professor Farrago, tranquilly, wiping his glasses.
- 7 “—Or a liar,” I replied.
- 8 After a silence he leaned back in his chair and bade me read the letter to him again, and I did so with a contemptuous tolerance for the writer, who must have been either a very innocent victim or a very stupid swindler. I said as much to Professor Farrago, but, to my surprise, he appeared to waver.
- 9 “I suppose,” he said, with his near-sighted, embarrassed smile, “that nine hundred and ninety-nine men in a thousand would throw that letter aside and condemn the writer as a liar or a fool?”
- 10 “In my opinion,” said I, “he’s one or the other.”
- 11 “He isn’t—in mine,” said the professor, placidly.
- 12 “What!” I exclaimed. “Here is a man living all alone on a strip of rock and sand between the wilderness and the sea, who wants you to send somebody to take charge of a bird that doesn’t exist!”
- 13 “How do you know,” asked Professor Farrago, “that the bird in question does not exist?”
- 14 “It is generally accepted,” I replied, sarcastically, “that the great auk has been extinct for years. Therefore I may be pardoned for doubting that our correspondent possesses a pair of them alive.”

15 “Oh, you young fellows,” said the professor, smiling wearily, “you embark on a theory for destinations that don’t exist.”

16 He leaned back in his chair, his amused eyes searching space for the imagery that made him smile.

17 “Like swimming squirrels, you navigate with the help of Heaven and a stiff breeze, but you never land where you hope to—do you?”

18 Rather red in the face, I said: “Don’t you believe the great auk to be extinct?”

19 “Audubon<sup>1</sup> saw the great auk.”

20 “Who has seen a single specimen since?”

21 “Nobody—except our correspondent here,” he replied, laughing.

22 I laughed, too, considering the interview at an end, but the professor went on, coolly:

23 “Whatever it is that our correspondent has—and I am daring to believe that it *is* the great auk itself—I want you to secure it for the society.”

24 When my astonishment subsided my first conscious sentiment was one of pity. Clearly, Professor Farrago was on the verge of dotage<sup>2</sup>—ah, what a loss to the world!

25 I believe now that Professor Farrago perfectly interpreted my thoughts, but he betrayed neither resentment nor impatience. I drew a chair up beside his desk—there was nothing to do but to obey, and this fool’s errand was none of my conceiving.

26 Together we made out a list of articles necessary for me and itemized the expenses I might incur, and I set a date for my return, allowing no margin for a successful termination to the expedition.

27 “Never mind that,” said the professor. “What I want you to do is to get those birds here safely. Now, how many men will you take?”

28 “None,” I replied, bluntly; “it’s a useless expense, unless there is something to bring back. If there is I’ll wire you, you may be sure.”

29 “Very well,” said Professor Farrago, good-humoredly, “you shall have all the assistance you may require. Can you leave to-night?”

30 The old gentleman was certainly prompt. I nodded, half-sulkily, aware of his amusement.

31 “So,” I said, picking up my hat, “I am to start north to find a place called Black Harbor, where there is a man named Halyard who possesses, among other household utensils, two extinct great auks—”

32 We were both laughing by this time. I asked him why on earth he credited the assertion of a man he had never before heard of.

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<sup>1</sup>**Audubon:** John James Audubon, an ornithologist and artist who created scientific illustrations of birds

<sup>2</sup>**dotage:** a loss of reasoning brought about by old age

- <sup>33</sup> “I suppose,” he replied, with the same half-apologetic, half-humorous smile, “it is instinct. I feel, somehow, that this man Halyard *has* got an auk—perhaps two. I can’t get away from the idea that we are on the eve of acquiring the rarest of living creatures. It’s odd for a scientist to talk as I do; doubtless you’re shocked—admit it, now!”
- <sup>34</sup> But I was not shocked; on the contrary, I was conscious that the same strange hope that Professor Farrago cherished was beginning, in spite of me, to stir my pulses, too.
- <sup>35</sup> “If he has—” I began, then stopped.
- <sup>36</sup> The professor and I looked hard at each other in silence.
- <sup>37</sup> “Go on,” he said, encouragingly.
- <sup>38</sup> But I had nothing more to say, for the prospect of beholding with my own eyes a living specimen of the great auk produced a series of conflicting emotions within me which rendered speech profanely superfluous.

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