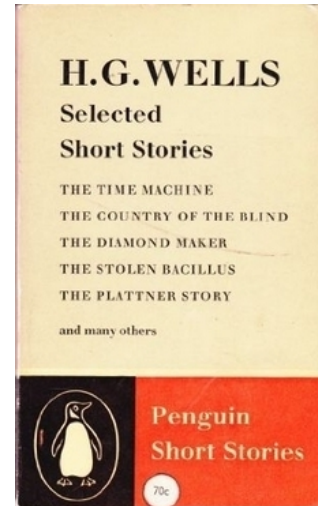


Aepyornis Island by H.G. Wells (Learn English with a Short Story)

In this episode I am going to tell you another story and use it to help you learn English.



The story I'm going to read is called *Aepyornis Island* and it was written by English author HG Wells. I'll explain the title a bit later.

I have talked about this story before, in episode 838.

[838. A 3-Hour Mega-Ramble / Reflecting on a Wonderful Spring Day in Paris | Luke's ENGLISH Podcast](#)

In that episode I talked about a lovely day I had when the sun came out and I sat in a little square in Paris and read an old book of HG Wells short stories which I happened to have in my pocket.

This is the story which I read that particular day and I really enjoyed it and I told you about it and re-told the story in episode 838 in my own words, but in this episode I'm going to read the entire text to you. Hopefully you will enjoy it as much as I did on that day, and it will be good for you English too.

Here is the approach I'm going to take this time.

I'm going to read the story to you twice.

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First I will read it from start to finish, without stopping to explain things. All you have to do is try to keep up with what is happening and hopefully just enjoy listening to everything. Try to get lost in the story - follow every detail and try to immerse yourself in what's happening.

Then I will read the story again and will explain all the details as I go, including a lot of vocabulary.

This story is about 5000 words, so it's reasonably long and will probably take about 20 mins for me to read from start to finish. Doing that, and then explaining a lot of vocabulary afterwards (and there is a lot!) - all of that will probably make this episode very long, but that's fine. It'll be as long as it needs to be!

Let's get ready for a good, lengthy session of learning English with a short story that's actually not that short.

Feel free to read with me as you listen, or just listen to my words and study the text later in your own time if you want to.

About the story

It's worth giving a little bit of background context here because it will help you understand and appreciate the story.

This story was written by HG Wells, an English author who is generally considered to be one of the most influential writers of modern times. His influence on literature and cinema is clear - particularly modern Hollywood action, adventure and science

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fiction films. I read out extracts from one of his other stories - War of the Worlds on the podcast a few years ago.

This story, which is not a science fiction story, was first published in 1894, but dispute the fact that that is over 100 years ago, the story is still quite fresh and I think the language isn't really too old-fashioned. I think it is still a perfectly good representation of English.

In fact, it's great writing - very descriptive, clear and evocative, and great writing is always worth reading, and in my opinion it will have a lot of educational value if you are learning English.

Historical Context

The end of the 19th century was a time of exploration, research and discovery, especially from the European perspective, and travellers from places like England or France would go to other remote areas in order to study and collect things like new animal and plant species, and bring them back to be studied or sold. This is controversial today, of course, because there are arguments about the ethics of this and how developed countries have profited from the resources of other less-developed countries. In fact, I think the character in this story sort of pays the price for this in a way, as you'll see.

In those days, there were companies that paid people to go out and collect things. Remains of extinct animals such as dinosaurs were particularly valuable and there were private collectors who would pay quite a lot of money for items like dinosaur bones or

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eggs - the more well-preserved these items were, the more value they had.

Also, museums such as the British Museum in London would buy these interesting items and artefacts and then keep them to be studied and put on display. Scientific researchers were particularly keen to acquire specimens. This is how explorers and collectors made their living.

This story describes the experience of a man like this - employed by a company in England, to go out in search of remains of extinct animal species.

It's a sort of adventure story, based in reality but with a little twist.

Imagine this

Our first narrator is sitting in a cafe somewhere in a far-flung part of the world ("far-flung" from an English perspective anyway) perhaps somewhere in Africa. He happens to have some orchids (rare flowers) with him.

Another man is sitting opposite him. He has a long scar down his face and is curious about the orchids. The narrator and this man strike up a conversation and the man, whose name is Butcher, then becomes the main narrator of the story as he describes a peculiar experience he had when he was once stranded on a desert island near Madagascar.

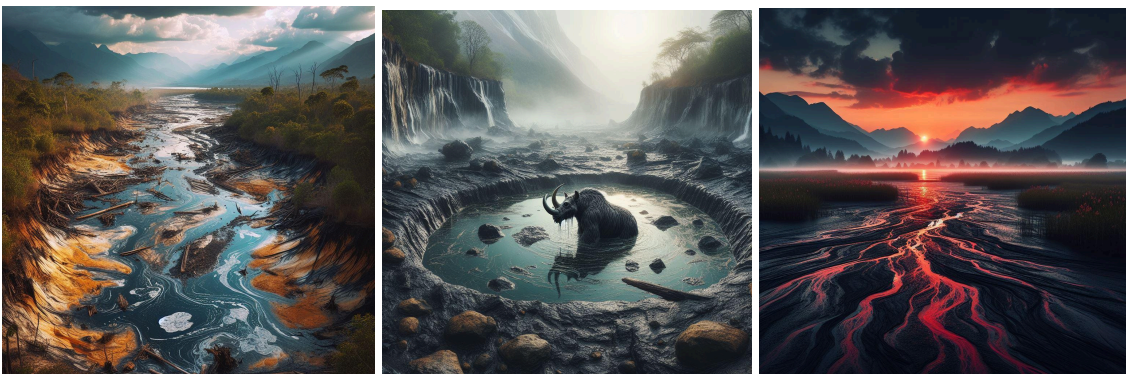
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Butcher explains how he was in that part of the world, employed by a collector, to try to find remains - bones and eggs - of an extinct species of giant bird, known as the Elephant Bird or Aepyornis.

The remains were to be found in tar pits (or something similar) which are like deep swamps full of some kind of oily liquid, which perfectly preserved the remains of animals which must have somehow fallen in there thousands of years ago. The Aepyornis is one of these animals, whose bones and eggs could be recovered from these tar pits.



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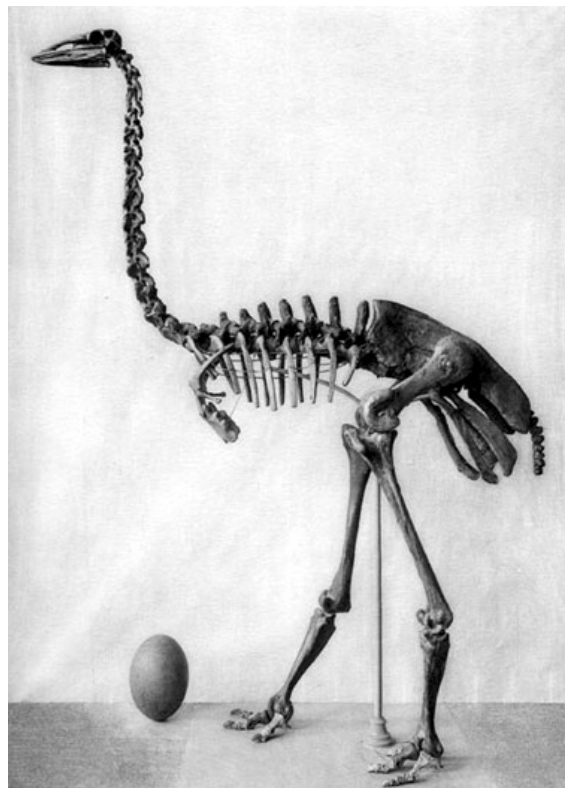
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The Aepyornis is a real bird, although it doesn't exist any more. It became extinct about 1000 years ago. It was native to Madagascar and is considered to be the largest bird ever to have lived.

Apparently some species of Aepyornis used to grow to about 3 or 4 metres in height. That's about the height of an elephant.

Imagine that for a moment. Imagine a chicken the size of an elephant. Now imagine standing next to it.

It's quite frightening actually, when you think about it. What would happen if it pecked you? These elephant birds were absolutely real. Complete skeletons of them and their eggs have been found, and also the local people have stories about them.



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Back to the story: The job of this explorer, called Butcher, was to find remains of these birds in these weird pits, and bring them back to his employer, to be sold in London.

Butcher describes what happened to him while he was doing this.

So, imagine we are in some sort of remote place, perhaps the south east coast of Africa, on an island off Madagascar. We're probably in a simple cafe or bar there, or something similar. The first narrator has a bunch of rare flowers (orchids) with him, and the other man (Butcher) leans over the table to start a conversation.

Now, just try to follow the story, and remember that when I have finished, I will go through the whole thing again and will explain everything for you.

You'll see that some vocabulary in the text is highlighted in a pale orange colour. Those are the words and phrases I am going to clarify later.

Story starts on the next page 

Aepyornis Island by HG Wells

The man with the scarred face leant over the table and looked at the bundle of flowers I had collected.

'Orchids?' he asked.

'A few,' I said.

'Cypripediums,' he said.

'Mostly,' I replied.

'Anything new? I thought not. I did these islands twenty-five – twenty-seven years ago. If you find anything new here, well, it's brand new. I didn't leave much.'

'I'm not a collector,' I said.

'I was young then,' he went on. 'My goodness! how I used to fly around.'

He seemed to measure me with his eyes.

'I was in the East Indies two years and seven in Brazil. Then I went to Madagascar.'

'I know a few explorers by name,' I said, anticipating a story.

'Who did you collect for?'

'Dawsons. I wonder if you've ever heard of the name Butcher?'

'Butcher--Butcher?' The name seemed vaguely familiar; then I remembered Butcher v. Dawson.

'Wow!' I said, 'you are the man who sued them for four years' salary – you got cast away on a desert island...'

'At your service,' said the man with the scar, bowing.

'Funny case, wasn't it? Here was me, making a little fortune on that island, doing nothing for it as well, and them quite unable to fire me. It often used to amuse me thinking it over while I was there. I did calculations of it - big ones - all over that damned atoll, written in the sand, you see.'

'How did it happen?' I said. 'I don't quite remember the case.'

'Well... you've heard of the Aepyornis, haven't you?'

'Yes, I have. My colleague Andrews was telling me of a new species he was working on only a month or so ago. Just before I sailed. They've got a thigh-bone, it seems, nearly a yard long. The thing must have been an absolute monster!'

'I believe you,' said the man with the scar. 'It was a monster. But when did they get hold of these bones?'

'Three or four years ago--'91, I think. Why?'

'Why? because I found them – Goodness me! – it's nearly twenty years ago. If Dawsons' hadn't been silly about that salary they might have made a fortune.... I just couldn't stop the infernal boat going adrift.'

He paused.

'I suppose it's the same place. A kind of swamp about ninety miles north of Antananarivo. Do you happen to know? You have to go to it along the coast by boats. You don't happen to remember, perhaps?'

'I don't. But I'm pretty sure Andrews said something about a swamp.'

'It must be the same place. It's on the east coast. Somehow there's something in the swamp water that stops things from decaying. It smells like creosote. It reminded me of Trinidad. Did they get any more eggs? Some of the eggs I found were a foot and a half long. The swamp goes circling round, you know, and cuts off this bit. It's mostly salt, too.'

Well.... What a time I had! I found the things quite by accident. We went for eggs, me and two native chaps, in one of those funny canoes all tied together, and found the bones at the same time.

We had a tent and provisions for four days, and we pitched on one of the firmer places. Thinking of it brings that old tarry smell back to me even now. It's funny work. You go probing into

the mud with iron rods, you know. Usually the egg gets smashed.

I wonder how long it is since these Aepyornises really lived. The missionaries say the locals have legends about when they were alive, but I never heard any such stories myself. But certainly those eggs we got were as fresh as if they had just been laid.

Fresh! Carrying them down to the boat one of my local chaps dropped one on a rock and it smashed. I was absolutely furious I can tell you. I couldn't contain myself, and I gave him a bit of a beating I have to say. But the egg was perfect, fresh as the day it was laid, not even smelly, and its mother dead for four hundred years, perhaps. The assistant who dropped it said a centipede had bitten him.

However, I'm getting sidetracked from the story. It had taken us all day to dig into the sludge and get these eggs out unbroken, and we were all covered with disgusting black mud, and naturally I was cross. As far as I knew they were the only eggs that have ever been removed not even cracked. I went afterwards to see the ones at the Natural History Museum in London; all of them were cracked and just stuck together like a mosaic, and with bits missing. Mine were perfect, and I meant to blow them when I got back. Naturally I was annoyed at the silly fool dropping three hours' work just on account of a centipede. I hit him about a bit.'

The man with the scar took out a clay pipe. I placed my tobacco pouch before him. He filled up absent-mindedly.

'How about the others? Did you get those home? I don't remember hearing about them...'

'Well, that's the strange part of the story. I had three others. Perfectly fresh eggs. Well, we put them in the boat, and then I went up to the tent to make some coffee, leaving my two heathens down on the beach--the one fooling about with his sting and the other helping him. It never occurred to me that the beggar would take advantage of the peculiar position I was in to stab me in the back like that. But I suppose the centipede poison and the kicking I had given him had upset him --he was always a bit bad tempered - and he must have persuaded the other one.

'I remember I was sitting and smoking and boiling up the water over a little spirit-lamp I used to take on these expeditions. Incidentally I was admiring the swamp under the sunset. All black and blood-red it was, in streaks--a beautiful sight. And up beyond the land rose grey and hazy to the hills, and the sky behind them was red, like a furnace mouth. And fifty yards behind the back of me were these two locals I'd brought along--quite uninterested in the tranquil air of things and this incredible view--plotting to cut off with the boat and leave me all alone with three days' provisions and a canvas tent, and nothing to drink whatsoever beyond a little keg of water.

I heard a kind of yelp behind me, and there they were in this little canoe thing --it wasn't properly a boat--in the water and, perhaps, twenty yards from land. I realized what was up in a moment. My gun was in the tent, and, besides, I had no bullets--only duck shot. They knew that. But I had a little

revolver in my pocket, and I pulled that out as I ran down to the beach.

' "Come back!" I said, waving it in the air.

'They jabbered something at me, and the man that broke the egg jeered. I aimed at the other--because he was unwounded and had the paddle, and I missed. They laughed.

However, I wasn't beaten. I knew I had to keep cool, and I tried him again and made him jump as it whizzed past him. He didn't laugh that time. The third time I got his head, and over he went, into the water, and the paddle with him. It was a precious lucky shot for a revolver. I reckon it was fifty yards away. He went right under. I don't know if he was shot, or simply stunned and drowned. Then I began to shout to the other chap to come back, but he huddled up in the canoe and refused to answer. So I fired out my revolver at him but never got near him.

'I felt like an utter fool, I can tell you. There I was on this rotten black beach, flat swamp all behind me, and the flat sea, cold after the sun set, and just this black canoe drifting steadily out to sea. I tell you I cursed Dawsons' and Jamrach's and Museums and all the rest of it. I shouted at the local to come back, until my voice went up into a scream.

'There was nothing for it but to swim after him and take my luck with the sharks. So I opened my clasp-knife and put it in my mouth, and took off my clothes and waded in.

As soon as I was in the water I lost sight of the canoe, but I aimed, as I judged, to head it off. I hoped the man in it was too bad to navigate it, and that it would keep on drifting in the same direction.

Just then it came up over the horizon again towards the south-west. The afterglow of sunset was well over now and the dim of night was creeping up. The stars were coming through the blue. I swam like a champion, though my legs and arms were soon aching.

'However, I came up to him by the time the stars were fully out. As it got darker I began to see all manner of glowing things in the water – phosphorescence, you know. At times it made me dizzy. I hardly knew which was stars and which was phosphorescence, and whether I was swimming on my head or my heels. The canoe was pitch black, and the ripple under the bows like liquid fire. I was naturally wary of clambering up into it. I was anxious to see what he was up to first. He seemed to be lying cuddled up in a lump in the bows, and the stern was up out of the water. The thing kept turning round slowly as it drifted--kind of waltzing, don't you know. I went to the stern and pulled it down, expecting him to wake up. Then I began to clamber in with my knife in my hand, and ready for a rush. But he never stirred. So there I sat in the stern of the little canoe, drifting away over the calm phosphorescent sea and with all the host of the stars above me, waiting for something to happen.

'After a long time I called him by name, but he never answered. I was too tired to take any risks by going up to him. So we just sat there. I think I dozed off once or twice.

When the dawn came I saw he was as dead as a door-nail and all puffed up and purple. My three eggs and the bones were lying in the middle of the canoe, and the keg of water and some coffee and biscuits wrapped in a Cape Argus newspaper by his feet, and a tin of methylated spirit underneath him. There was no paddle, nor, in fact, anything except the spirit tin that I could use as one, so I settled to drift until I was picked up. I examined him, decided he'd been bitten by some snake, scorpion, or centipede unknown, and sent him overboard.

'After that I had a drink of water and a few biscuits, and took a look around. I suppose a man positioned as low down as I was doesn't see very far. In any case, Madagascar was clean out of sight, and any trace of land at all.

I saw a sail going south-westward--looked like a schooner but her hull never came up into view near me. Then the sun got high up in the sky and began to beat down upon me. My goodness! It pretty near made my brains boil. I tried dipping my head in the sea, but after a while my eye fell on the Cape Argus newspaper, and I lay down flat in the canoe and spread this over me. Wonderful things these newspapers! I'd never read one thoroughly before, but it's odd what you get up to when you're alone, as I was. I suppose I read that old Cape Argus twenty times. The pitch in the canoe simply reeked with the heat and it rose up into big blisters

'I drifted for ten days,' said the man with the scar. 'It's a little thing in the telling, isn't it? Every day was like the last. Except in

the morning and the evening, I couldn't even keep a lookout --the blaze of the sun was so unbearable.

I didn't see a sail after the first three days, and those I saw took no notice of me. About the sixth night a ship went by only about half a mile away from me, with all its lights ablaze and its ports open, looking like a big firefly. There was music aboard. I stood up and shouted and screamed at it, but to no avail.

The second day I tapped a hole in one of the Aepyornis eggs, scraped the shell away at the end bit by bit, and tried it, and I was glad to find it was good enough to eat. A bit flavoury--not bad, I mean--but with something of the taste of a duck's egg. There was a kind of circular patch, about six inches across, on one side of the yolk, and with streaks of blood and a white mark like a ladder in it that I thought looked a bit odd, but I did not understand what this meant at the time, and I wasn't inclined to be too fussy as I was so completely ravenous.

The egg lasted me three days, with biscuits and a drink of water. I chewed coffee-berries too--invigorating stuff. The second egg I opened about the eighth day, and it scared me!

The man with the scar paused.

'Yes,' he said, 'it was developing.'

'I expect you find it hard to believe. I did, with the thing right in front of me. There the egg had been, sunk in that cold black mud, perhaps three or four hundred years. But there was no mistaking it. There was the--what is it?--embryo, with its big

head and curved back, and its heart beating under its throat, and the yolk shrivelled up and great membranes spreading inside of the shell and all over the yolk.

Here was I hatching out the eggs of the biggest of all extinct birds, in a little canoe in the midst of the Indian Ocean. If old Dawson had known that! It was worth four years' salary. What do you think?

'However, I had to eat that precious thing up, every bit of it, before I sighted the reef, and some of the mouthfuls were horribly unpleasant. I left the third one alone. I held it up to the light, but the shell was too thick for me to get any notion of what might be happening inside; and though I thought I heard blood pulsing, it might have been the sound in my own ears, like what you listen to in a seashell.

'Then came the atoll. Came out of the sunrise, suddenly, close up to me. I drifted straight towards it until I was about half a mile from shore, not more, and then the current took a turn, and I had to paddle as hard as I could with my hands and bits of the Aepyornis shell to make it to the place. However, I got there.

It was just a common atoll about four miles round, with a few trees growing and a spring in one place, and the lagoon full of parrot-fish.

I took the egg ashore and put it in a good place, well above the tide lines and in the sun, to give it all the chance I could, and pulled the canoe up safe, and wandered about prospecting.

It's funny how dull an atoll is. As soon as I had found the spring all the interest seemed to vanish. When I was a boy I thought nothing could be finer or more adventurous than the Robinson Crusoe business, but that place was as monotonous as a book of sermons.

I went round finding edible things and generally thinking; but I tell you I was bored to death before the first day was out.

It shows my luck--the very day I landed the weather changed. A thunderstorm went by to the north and flicked its wing over the island, and in the night there came an absolute downpour and a howling wind slapped overhead. It wouldn't have taken much, you know, to upset that canoe.

I was sleeping under the canoe, and the egg was luckily in the sand higher up the beach, and the first thing I remember was a sound like a hundred pebbles hitting the boat at once, and a rush of water over my body. I'd been dreaming of Antananarivo, and I sat up and shouted to Intoshi my maid to ask her what the hell was going on, and clawed out at the chair where the matches used to be. Then I remembered where I was. All alone, stranded.

There were phosphorescent waves rolling up as if they meant to eat me, and all the rest of the night was pitch black. The air was simply yelling. The clouds seemed down on your head almost, and the rain fell as if heaven was sinking and they were bailing out the water above the sky.

One great roller came writhing at me, like a fiery serpent, and I bolted. Then I thought of the canoe, and ran down to it as the water went hissing back again; but the thing had gone. I wondered about the egg, then, and felt my way to it. It was all right and well out of reach of the maddest waves, so I sat down beside it and cuddled it for company. Lord! what a night that was!

'The storm was over before the morning. There wasn't a rag of cloud left in the sky when the dawn came, and all along the beach there were bits of plank scattered--which was the broken up skeleton, so to speak, of my canoe. However, that gave me something to do, for taking advantage of two of the trees being together, I rigged up a kind of storm-shelter with these bits and pieces. And that day the egg hatched.

'Hatched, sir, when my head was pillowed on it and I was asleep.

I heard a whack and felt a jerk and sat up, and there was the end of the egg pecked out and a funny little brown head looking out at me. "Lord!" I said, "you're welcome"; and with a little difficulty he came out.

'He was a nice friendly little chap at first, about the size of a small hen--very much like most other young birds, only bigger.

His plumage was a dirty brown to begin with, with a sort of grey scab that fell off it very soon, and he didn't really have feathers - it was more like a kind of downy hair.

I can hardly express how pleased I was to see him. I tell you, Robinson Crusoe doesn't make nearly enough of his loneliness. But here was interesting company. He looked at me and winked his eye from the front backward, like a hen, and gave a chirp and began to peck about at once, as though being hatched three hundred years too late was just nothing.

"Glad to see you, Man Friday!" I said, for I had naturally settled he was to be called Man Friday if he ever hatched, as soon as I found the egg in the canoe had developed.

I was a bit anxious about his feed, so I gave him a lump of raw parrot-fish at once. He took it, and opened his beak for more. I was glad about that, because, under the circumstances, if he'd been at all fussy, I should have had to eat him after all.

'And he grew. You could almost see him grow. And as I was never a very social man, his quiet, friendly ways suited me to a T.

For nearly two years we were as happy as we could be on that island. I had no business worries, because I knew my salary was mounting up at Dawsons'.

We would see a sail now and then, but nothing ever came near us. I amused myself, too, by decorating the island with designs made with sea-urchins and fancy shells of various kinds. I put AEPYORNIS ISLAND all around the place very nearly, in big letters, like what you see done with coloured stones at railway stations in the old country, and mathematical calculations and drawings of various sorts. And I used to lie watching that bloody

bird stalking round and growing, growing; and I'd think how I could make a living out of him by showing him about if I ever got taken off that atoll.

After his first moult he began to get handsome, with a crest and a blue wattle, and a lot of green feathers at his behind. And then I used to puzzle whether Dawsons' had any right to claim him or not. During stormy weather and in the rainy season we lay snug under the shelter I had made out of the old canoe, and I used to tell him lies about my friends at home. And after a storm we would go round the island together to see if there was any driftwood.

It was a kind of idyll, you might say. If only I had had some tobacco it would have been simply just like heaven.

'It was about the end of the second year our little paradise went wrong. Friday was then about fourteen feet high from toe to beak, with a big, broad head like the end of a pickaxe, and two huge brown eyes with yellow rims, set together like a man's--not out of sight of each other like a hen's. His plumage was fine--none of the half-mourning style of your ostrich--more like a cassowary as far as colour and texture go.

And that was when he started to act arrogantly and kind of show off in front of me, and show signs of a nasty temper...

'At last came a time when my fishing had been rather unlucky, and he began to hang about me in an odd, meditative way. I thought he might have been eating sea-cucumbers or something, but it was really just discontent on his part. I was

hungry, too, and when I finally landed a fish I wanted it for myself. Tempers were short that morning on both sides. He pecked at it and grabbed it, and I gave him a whack on the head to make him let go. And at that he went for me. God!...

'He gave me this in the face.' The man pointed to his scar. 'Then he kicked me. It was like a cart-horse. I got up, and, seeing he hadn't finished, I ran off full tilt with my arms doubled up over my face. But he ran on those gawky legs of his faster than a racehorse, and kept striking out at me with sledgehammer kicks and bringing his pickaxe down on the back of my head.

I made for the lagoon, and went in up to my neck. He stopped at the water, because he hated getting his feet wet, and he started to make a big fuss, somewhat resembling a peacock's display, but with a harsher tone. He started strutting up and down the beach. I'll admit I felt pretty small to see this fossil lording it over me. And my head and face were all bleeding, and--well, my body just one jelly of bruises.

'I decided to swim across the lagoon and leave him alone for a bit, until the whole thing blew over. I shinned up the tallest palm-tree, and sat there thinking about it all. I don't suppose I ever felt so hurt by anything before or since. It was the brutal ingratitude of the creature. I'd been more than a brother to him. A great gawky, out-of-date bird! And me a human being--heir of the ages and all that.

'I thought after a time he'd begin to see things in that light himself, and feel a little sorry for his behaviour. I thought if I was to catch some nice little bits of fish, perhaps, and then go

to him in a casual kind of way, and offer them to him, he might do the sensible thing. It took me some time to learn how spiteful and bad-tempered an extinct bird can be. Pure malice!

'I won't tell you all the little tricks I tried to win that bird round again. I simply can't. It makes my cheek burn with shame even now to think of the snubs and buffets I had from this infernal curiosity.

I tried violence. I chucked lumps of coral at him from a safe distance, but he only swallowed them. I threw my open knife at him and almost lost it, though it was too big for him to swallow. I tried starving him out and stuck to fishing for myself, but he took to picking along the beach at low water after worms, and got by on that.

Half my time I spent up to my neck in the lagoon, and the rest up the palm-trees. One of them was hardly even high enough, and when he caught me up it he had a regular Bank Holiday with the calves of my legs.

It got unbearable. I don't know if you have ever tried sleeping up a palm-tree. It gave me the most horrible nightmares. Think of the shame of it, too! Here was this extinct animal stalking about my island like a sulky duke, and me not allowed to rest the sole of my foot on the place. I used to cry with weariness and frustration. I told him straight that I didn't mean to be chased about a desert island by any damned anachronisms. I told him to go and peck someone his own age. But he only snapped his beak at me. Great ugly bird, all legs and neck!

'I wouldn't like to say how long that went on in total. I'd have killed him sooner if I'd known how. But eventually, I hit on a way of dealing with him at last.

It is an old South American trick. I joined all my fishing-lines together with stems of seaweed and things, and made a kind of tough string, perhaps twelve yards in length or more, and I fastened two lumps of coral rock to the ends of this. It took me some time to do it, because every now and then I had to go into the lagoon or up a tree when he came by.

Eventually I had it ready - a kind of roughly assembled bola. This I whirled rapidly round my head, and then let it go at him. The first time I missed, but the next time the string caught his legs beautifully, and wrapped round them again and again. Over he went. I threw it standing waist-deep in the lagoon, and as soon as he went down I was out of the water and sawing at his neck with my knife...

'I don't like to think of that even now. I felt like a murderer while I did it, though my anger was hot against him. When I stood over him and saw him bleeding on the white sand, and his beautiful great legs and neck writhing in his last agony...Pah! It broke my heart.

'With that tragedy, loneliness came upon me like a curse. Good Lord! you can't imagine how I missed that bird. I sat by his corpse and sorrowed over him, and shivered as I looked round the desolate, silent reef. I thought of what a jolly little bird he had been when he was hatched, and of a thousand pleasant tricks he had played before he went wrong. I thought if I'd only

wounded him I might have nursed him round into a better understanding. If I'd had any means of digging into the coral rock I'd have buried him. I felt exactly as if he was human. As it was, I couldn't think of eating him, so I put him in the lagoon, and the little fishes picked him clean. I didn't even save the feathers. Then one day a chap cruising about in a yacht took it upon himself to see if my atoll still existed.

'He didn't come a moment too soon, for I was about sick enough of the desolation of it, and only hesitating whether I should walk out into the sea and be done with it all that way, or fall back on the green things...

'I sold the bones to a man named Winslow--a dealer near the British Museum, and he says he sold them to old Havers. It seems Havers didn't understand they were extra large, and it was only after his death they attracted attention. They called them Aepyornis--what was it?'

'Aepyornis vastus,' I said. 'It's funny the very thing was mentioned to me by a friend of mine. When they found an Aepyornis with a thigh a yard long, they thought they had reached the top of the scale, and called him Aepyornis maximus. Then someone turned up another thigh-bone four feet six or more, and that they called Aepyornis titan. Then your vastus was found after old Havers died, in his collection, and then a vastissimus turned up.'

'Winslow told me the same thing,' said the man with the scar. 'If they get any more Aepyornises, he reckons some top scientist

will go and burst a blood-vessel. But it was a strange thing to happen to a man; wasn't it--altogether?'

I don't know what to say at the end of that, except that I just find it to be such a vivid tale and so ironic - to find yourself in such an extraordinary situation where you are being hunted by an animal that by all rights shouldn't even exist, back from extinction, but it's primal nature took precedence over everything else, and it is exactly the sort of thing that would happen in nature, but humans are not very used to it happening to us these days as we are rarely knocked off the top of the pecking order.

Actually I find it so terribly sad, especially the moment when he had to kill the bird.

But yes, it was a strange thing to happen to a man!

This was written a hundred years before Jurassic Park by the way.

Listen to the episode to hear me explain all the highlighted vocabulary.

875. Aepyornis Island by HG Wells (Learn English with a Short Story)

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