

**A  
SHIPMENT**

**OF  
MUTE**

**FATE**

by Les Crutchfield

**DANGER**

**FRAGILE**

# Why does Chris Warner, the young zoologist, “shiver with sudden dread” there in the warm sun at the harbor’s edge?

## Cast

**Chris Warner**, a young zoologist  
**Captain Wood**, captain of the *Chancay*<sup>1</sup>  
**Sanchez**,<sup>2</sup> native guide  
**Mrs. Willis**, stewardess  
**Mr. Bowman**, chief steward  
*Other crew members*  
*Other passengers*  
*Orchestra*

<sup>1</sup>*Chancay* (chän kî').

<sup>2</sup>*Sanchez* (sän' chas).

**Chris** (*narrating*): I stopped on the wharf at La Guaira<sup>3</sup> and looked up the gangplank toward the liner *Chancay*—standing there quietly at her moorings. The day was warm under a bright tropic sun, and the harbor beyond the ship lay drowsy and silent. But all at once in the midst of those peaceful surroundings, a cold chill gripped me, and I shivered with sudden dread—dread of the thing I was doing, and was about to do!

(ORCH: ACCENTS AND DISSOLVES SLOWLY.)

**Chris**: But too much had happened to turn back now. I'd gone too far to stop.

(SOUND: WOODEN BOX SET ON WOODEN WHARF, BOAT WHISTLES, ETC.)

**Chris**: I set the box down on the edge of the wharf, placed it carefully so as to be in plain sight—and within gunshot—of the Captain's bridge.<sup>4</sup>

(SOUND: STEPS ON GANGPLANK, THEN UNDER.)

**Chris**: Then I turned and started up the gangplank. I knew what I was going to do—but I couldn't forget that a certain pair of beady eyes was watching every move I made. Eyes that never blinked and never closed—just watched—and waited!

**Willis** (*coming in*): Oh! You startled me, sir! I didn't hear—why—(with relief) why, it's Mr. Warner!

(SOUND: STEPS STOP.)

**Chris**: Hello, Mother Willis. How's the best-looking stewardess on the seven seas?

<sup>3</sup>*La Guaira* (lä gwî'rä), seaport near Caracas, Venezuela.

<sup>4</sup>*Captain's bridge*, a platform above the deck of the ship for the commanding officer.

**Willis** (*a bit evasive*): Why, I'm—I'm fine, Mr. Warner. Nice to see you again.

**Chris** (*joshing*): Wait a minute! That's a fine greeting after two months.

**Willis**: Well—it's just that I'm so busy.

**Chris**: I don't believe a word of it. Sailing day's tomorrow. You're simply avoiding me—that's all.

**Willis**: Oh, no—really I'm not.

**Chris**: And on the trip down from New York you said I was your favorite passenger.

**Willis**: But I'm only——.

**Chris**: Here—what's that you're carrying in your apron?

**Willis** (*nervously*): Oh, it's nothing. Just——supplies.

**Chris**: Supplies? Let's have a look.

**Willis**: No! Please!

**Chris**: Why—it's a cat!

**Willis**: It's Clara, Mr. Warner. Mr. Bowman said I had to leave her ashore—— and I just couldn't!

**Chris**: Who's Mr. Bowman?

**Willis**: The new Chief Steward. Clara's been aboard with me for two years—— and I just can't leave her here in a foreign country. Especially with her condition so delicate and all!

**Chris**: Yes—I see! I see what you mean. Well, I hope you get away with it.

**Willis**: You—you won't tell anyone?

**Chris**: Not a soul. As a matter of fact, if I don't get my way with the Captain, you and I may *both* end up smuggling!

(ORCH: BRIEF TRANSITION, DISSOLVES UNDER.)

**Captain** (*fades in out of music*): Most happy to have had you aboard on the trip down two months ago, Christo-

pher, and I'm very glad you're coming along with us on the run back to New York.

**Chris**: Thanks, Captain Wood. There is one thing, though. I'm having a little trouble with the customs men<sup>5</sup> here, and I wondered if you——

**Captain**: I can't do it, Christopher. I just cabled your father this morning—— told him I'd have done it for you if I possibly could. He sent a request from New York, you know.

**Chris**: Yes, I thought he would. I——wired him from upriver last week.

**Captain**: I hated to refuse——but it's absolutely out of the question.

**Chris**: Captain Wood, I'm afraid I don't follow you.

**Captain**: Responsibility to the passengers, son. We'll have women and children aboard——and on a liner the safety of the passengers comes ahead of anything else.

**Chris**: But with proper precautions!

**Captain**: Something might happen.

I don't know what——but something might.

**Chris**: You've carried worse things!

**Captain**: There isn't anything worse—— and any skipper afloat'll bear me out. No, Christopher—I simply can't take the chance, and that's final!

(ORCH: ACCENTS HARD AND SUSTAINS UNDER.)

**Chris** (*narrating*): Final! It wasn't final if I could do anything about it. I hadn't come down here to spend two months in that stinking back country and then

<sup>5</sup>*Customs men*, officials of a government who check on things being brought into or taken out of a country.

be stopped on the edge of the wharf! Two months of it—heat, rain, insects, malaria—I'd gone clear in past the headwaters of the Orinoco; (*fading from mike*) traveled through country where every step along the jungle trail might be the last one. . . .

(ORCH: SWELLS AND DISSOLVES.)

**Chris** (*up a bit*): Oh—Sanchez!

**Sanchez** (*coming in*): *Si, Señor Warner.*<sup>6</sup>

**Chris**: Better start looking for a place to camp. Be dark in a little while.

**Sanchez**: *Si, Señor*—very soon we turn to river, camp on rocks by water. This very bad country.

**Chris**: This very bad country! You've been saying that for ten days now. Very bad country.

**Sanchez**: *Si, Señor Warner*—this very bad country.

**Chris**: Oh, skip it. For all the luck we've had so far—it might as well be Central Park.

**Sanchez**: Central Park? I no understand.

**Chris**: Never mind. If we don't—

**Cast** (*excited cries*): Bushmaster!

(SOUND: SCRAMBLING.)

**Chris**: Here—what's the matter? Quiet now! Sanchez—what's wrong?

**Sanchez**: There in the path! See? Bushmaster!

(ORCH: ACCENTS, THEN SUSTAINS BACK.)

**Chris** (*narrating*): Bushmaster! The deadliest snake in the world! Bushmaster—is Latin name was *Lachesis mutus*—mute fate!<sup>7</sup> It lay there in the

<sup>6</sup>*Si, Señor* (sē sā nyôr') *Warner*, Yes, Mr. Warner. [*Spanish*]

<sup>7</sup>*Lachesis mutus* (lä kä' sas mü' tüs)—*mute fate*. The Latin name of the bushmaster which can be translated as mute (silent) fate, or death.

center of the path—an eight-foot length of silent death—coiled loosely in an undulant loop, ready to strike violently at the least movement. Here was the one snake that would go after any animal that walked—or any man. It lay there and watched us—not moving, not afraid, ready for anything. The splotch of its colors stood out like some horribly gaudy floor mat—lying there against the brown background of the jungle—waiting for someone to step on it. Here was what I'd come two thousand miles for—a bushmaster!

(ORCH: BUILDS UP, THEN OUT SHARPLY AS—)

SOUND: PISTOL SHOT.)

**Chris**: Sanchez! I didn't want that snake killed!

**Sanchez**: He no killed, *Señor*—he gone. Bushmaster very smart, very quick—see bullet in time to dodge.

**Chris**: Anyway, he's gone! And the only one we've seen in five weeks!

**Sanchez**: Oh, we find other. This very bad country.

**Chris**: Well, lay off that gun the next time. Don't shoot—do you understand?

**Sanchez**: Why you say no shoot? You want bushmaster.

**Chris**: Sure—but I want it alive!

**Sanchez**: *Nombre sacristo!*<sup>8</sup> *Señor Warner*—you tell me you want bushmaster, but you no say "alive"! **Chris**: You're getting two hundred dollars for it.

**Sanchez**: For dead man—what is two

<sup>8</sup>*Nombre sacristo!* (nôm' brā sā crēs' tō), an exclamation. [*Spanish*]

hundred dollars? Tomorrow we go back to Caracas.

**Chris:** I'll make it five hundred, Sanchez.

**Sanchez:** I catch water snake, rattlesnake, any other kind. But I no catch bushmaster. (*fading from mike*) We go back to Caracas.

**Chris** (*fading*): Sanchez—I'll give you a thousand dollars!

(ORCH: SWELLS BRIEFLY, THEN DISOLVES.)

**Chris** (*narrating*): It cost me fifteen hundred—but three days later Sanchez brought me the snake in a rubber bag. He was shaking so hard I thought for a moment the thing had struck him....

**Sanchez:** One thing you make sure, *Señor* Warner. No turn him loose in Venezuela. Because he know I the one who catch him—and he know where I live.

**Chris:** All right, Sanchez—I'll keep an eye on him.

**Sanchez:** *Tambien*,<sup>9</sup> he know you pay me to catch him. All the time he watch and wait. You no forget that, *Señor* Warner—because he no forget—not ever!

(ORCH: ACCENTS SHARPLY, THEN UNDER.)

**Chris** (*narrating*): Well, after going through all that trouble and danger, I wasn't going to let a pig-headed ship captain stop me at the last minute! At least not as long as the cables were still in operation between La Guaira and New York....

(ORCH: SWELLS FOR TRANSITION, THEN CUTS AS—)

SOUND: DOOR CLOSSES AND STEPS COME IN.)

**Chris** (*coming in*): Morning, Captain

<sup>9</sup>*Tambien* (täm' byen'), also. [*Spanish*]

Wood. The boy at the hotel said you wanted to see me.

**Captain:** That's right, Christopher. Sit down. Seems you weren't willing to let matters stand the way we left them.

**Chris:** Sorry to go over your head, Captain Wood—but I had to. The museum sent me all the way down here for it, and I'm not going to be stopped by red tape. This'll be the only live bushmaster ever brought to the United States.

**Captain:** If I had my way—but orders are orders. Got a cable from the head office this morning. All right. Suppose we talk about precautions.

**Chris:** I'll handle it any way you say.

**Captain:** It's got to have a stronger box. That crate's too flimsy.

**Chris:** It's stronger than it looks—and that wire screen on top'd hold a wildcat. But anyway, I bought a heavy sea chest this morning. We'll put the crate inside it.

**Captain:** Sounds all right. Got a lock on it?

**Chris:** Heavy padlock. It's fixed so the lid can be propped open a crack without unlocking it. The snake's got to have air.

**Captain:** But in dirty weather, that lid stays shut. I'll take no chances.

**Chris:** Fair enough.

**Captain:** We'll keep the thing in my inside cabin, where I sleep. Can't have it in the baggage room. And nobody on board's to know about it.

**Chris:** Whatever you say, Captain. But we won't have any trouble. After all, it's only a snake—it doesn't have any magical powers.

**Captain:** I saw a bushmaster in the zoo at Caracas once. Had it in a glass cage with double walls. It'd never move—just lie there and look at you as long as you were in sight. Gave a man the creeps!

**Chris:** I didn't know they had a bushmaster at the Caracas Zoo.

**Captain:** They don't now. Found the glass broken one morning, and the snake gone. The night watchman was dead. They never found out what happened.

**Chris:** Well—the watchman must've broken the glass by accident.

**Captain:** The way they figured it—the glass was broken from the inside!  
(*pause*) We—sail in four hours.

(ORCH: TRANSITION TO SOUND, THEN SUSTAINS BACK.)

**Chris (narrating):** Into the Caribbean—with perfect weather, and a sea as smooth as an inland lake. The barometer dropped a little on the third day, but cleared up overnight, and left nothing worse than a heavy swell. But in spite of the calm seas and pleasant weather, I was becoming possessed with an ominous anxiety. I was developing an obsessive fear of that snake! I stayed clear of the passengers pretty much—got the habit of dropping into Captain Wood's quarters several times a day. . . .

(SOUND: DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES. STEPS )

**Chris:** He kept the heavy box underneath his berth. I'd approach it quietly and shine my flashlight through the open crack. . . .

(SOUND: TWO OR THREE STEPS AND STOP.)

**Chris:** Never once could I catch that eight-foot devil asleep, or even excited. He'd be lying there half-coiled, his head raised a little, staring out of those beady black eyes—waiting. He'd still be like that when I'd turn away to leave.

(SOUND: SLOW STEPS.)

**Chris:** Maybe that's what bothered me—that horrible and constant watchful waiting. What in the name of heaven was he waiting for?

(SOUND: DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES.)

**Willis (fades in):** Well—hello there, Mr. Warner!

**Chris:** Oh—how are you, Mother Willis?  
**Willis:** My, but you and the Captain spend an awful lot of time around this cabin. I'm beginning to think the two of you must have some guilty secret!

**Chris:** Oh, no. Nothing like that, Mother Willis. I don't know about Captain Wood, but I—I certainly don't have any guilty secret!

(ORCH: TRANSITION INTO SOUND.)

(SOUND: OPEN FOREDECK OF LINER BUCKING A SWELL.)

**Chris:** Well! She's running quite a swell out there, Mr. Bowman!

**Bowman:** Yeah—it's a little heavy all right, Mr. Warner. Guess a storm passed through to the west of us yesterday.

**Chris:** Think it missed us then, huh?

**Bowman:** Yeah—that's what the mate figures. Sure stirred up some water, though.

**Chris (laughing):** This'll put half the passengers in their bunks.

**Bowman:** Makes it great for my departure. Two thirds of 'em will want a steward to hold their heads!

**Chris:** They'll keep Mother Willis so busy she'll— Hey! Look at that wave!

**Bowman:** Huh? Great Jehosophat!<sup>10</sup> We're gonna take it on the port bow! Hang on!

(SOUND: HUGE WAVE SWEEPS THE FORE-DECK . . . AND SUBSIDES.)

**Chris:** Wow! That was a freak! Not another wave that size in sight.

**Bowman:** You see 'em like that sometimes—even in a calm sea. I'd better get topside, Mr. Warner. That water probably did some damage on the officers' deck.

**Chris:** Yeah, I suppose— *What did you say?*

**Bowman:** Wheel companionway<sup>11</sup> was open on the port side—bridge cabins<sup>12</sup> must've taken a pretty bad smashing. They're right below the— Is something wrong, Mr. Warner?

**Chris:** No. No—nothing at all, Mr. Bowman. At least—I hope not!

(ORCH: ATTACKS AND SUSTAINS BACK.)

**Chris (narrating):** Of course I knew it was only one chance in a thousand—but the chances against that freak wave were one in a thousand too! I stumbled up the companionway and along the passage to the Captain's cabin.

<sup>10</sup>*Jehosophat!* (jihohs' a fat), a slang expression.

<sup>11</sup>*Wheel companionway*, a stairway leading from the pilot house where the wheel by which the ship is steered is located.

<sup>12</sup>*Bridge cabins*, captain's quarters, located just below the bridge, or platform from which he controls the ship.

(ORCH: OUT AS—  
SOUND: DOOR OPENS.)

**Willis:** Oh—come on in, Mr. Warner.

**Chris:** Mother Willis!

**Willis:** My, isn't this cabin a mess? I'd better get some of these things out to dry.

**Chris:** Yeah. Well, I just wanted to check— Where's that box that was under the Captain's bunk?

**Willis:** Oh, that! I just moved it out on deck.

**Chris:** What!

**Willis:** The desk over there slid into it. It was all smashed.

**Chris:** But the smaller box inside of it! What happened to it?

**Willis:** Oh, they were both splintered, Mr. Warner—broke wide open.

**Chris:** Oh, no!

**Willis:** Why, Mr. Warner—you're as white as a sheet!

**Chris:** Mother Willis—will you go find Captain Wood? Tell him to come down here immediately.

**Willis:** Well—of course, Mr. Warner. (*going*) I'll go tell him right away.

(SOUND: DOOR CLOSSES.)

**Chris (narrating):** I pulled open the top drawer of the bureau beside me. . . .

(SOUND: DRAWER OPENS.)

**Chris:** I took out the Captain's flashlight and a loaded pistol.

(SOUND: DRAWER CLOSSES.)

**Chris:** Mother Willis had left a mop standing by the door. I put my foot on the head of it and snapped off the handle.

(SOUND: SNAP OF HANDLE.)

**Chris:** Every move I made turned into slow motion. I could hear my own



heart beating. Slowly I started to search the cabin.

(ORCH: SUSPENSE MOTIF.)<sup>13</sup>

**Chris:** Sudden heaps of clothing were scattered around on the wet, black floor. I punched at them one at a time—holding the gun cocked—the flashlight pointing along the stick. Nothing! I worked around the room—throwing the light into the dark corners, back of the desk, under the bunk. And wherever I turned, I could feel those cold, unblinking eyes at my back—watching and waiting. (*pause*) Using the stick, I pushed open the closet door and threw the light inside. Carefully I poked at the boxes and junk on the floor. (*pause*) The snake was not in the closet. Inch by inch, I covered the entire cabin—slowly realizing the horrible truth.

(SOUND: DOOR OPENS.

ORCH: UP AND OUT SUDDENLY.)

**Captain:** Mother Willis just told me, Christopher. So it's happened!

(SOUND: DOOR CLOSES.)

**Chris:** That's right, Captain. It's happened.

**Captain:** I see you found the gun. We'd better start searching the cabin.

**Chris:** Captain Wood, I—just finished searching it.

**Captain:** Then— Women, kids—and that thing loose on board. A thousand places for it to hide. Heaven help us, Christopher!

(ORCH: ESTABLISH THEME FOR THE "SEARCH.")

<sup>13</sup>SUSPENSE MOTIF, a particular theme or strain of music which suggests suspense to the listeners.

**Captain (fades in):** There's no use starting to blame anybody now, gentlemen. I didn't call you officers in here to pass judgment. The thing's done—and that's that.

**Mate:** You're right there, Captain.

**Captain:** What we *have* got to do, is make up our minds about how we're going to handle it.

**Bowman:** It'd be easier if we didn't have to tell the passengers and crew, sir. I've seen panics aboard ship before!

**Captain:** Yes, I agree with you, Mr. Bowman—but I don't quite see how we can avoid it.

**Mate:** They've got a right to know! As long as that snake's loose, everybody on board's in the same danger—and they all ought to know about it!

**Chris:** Captain Wood, that thing is eight feet long. It can't simply crawl into a crack. Why don't we make a quick search of the whole ship before we spread any alarm?

**Captain:** Yes, I've thought of that.

**Bowman:** As far as I can see, the only place it couldn't be is in the boiler or on top of the galley stove.

**Mate:** It might've crawled overboard.

**Captain:** We can't count on that. We've got to assume it's on the ship somewhere.

**Mate:** Yeah, and that could be anywhere. In a coil of rope—or in a pile of clothes.

**Bowman:** Yes, or under some woman's berth—or a baby's crib.

**Mate:** Or even in——

**Chris:** You've already said it! That bush-master could be anywhere. We've got to do something—fast!

**Captain:** All right, I think the best idea's to follow Mr. Warner's suggestion and make a quick search first. You agree to that?

**Cast:** *Alibis assent.*

**Captain:** Then if we don't find it—we'll have to warn the passengers.

**Chris:** Captain, we've got to find it.

(ORCH: UP, THEN SUSTAINS BACK.)

**Chris (narrating):** Alone in the dim baggage room, I went through the same movements as I had earlier in the Captain's cabin—gun in one hand, flashlight in the other, poking into every dark corner, behind every trunk and box. Since there was no one in the baggage room, I could keep the gun cocked and ready. The rest of those poor devils were having to do the same thing—barehanded! All over the ship the search went on.

(ORCH: CUT OFF.)

**Woman (fades in):** Here, now, Steward! What on earth are you doing, rummaging through my cabin?

**Bowman:** Just—checking up, ma'am!

**Woman:** Well, I'm sure there's nothing in here that has to be checked.

**Bowman:** Sorry, ma'am—Captain's orders. It'll only take a few minutes.

**Woman:** Well, I never heard of such a thing! A passenger simply doesn't have any privacy at all! (*fading back into music*) I've traveled on a lot of different lines, but I've certainly never heard of anything so completely high-handed before!

(ORCH: UP AND BACK UNDER.)

**Mate:** Sorry, sir. Wonder if you'd mind moving over to the other rail? I'd like to look through these lockers.

**Man:** Sure—go ahead. What's the matter—you lost something?

**Mate:** No. No—just looking things over.

**Man:** Nothing in there but life preservers.

**Mate:** Yeah—that's right.

**Man:** You must be getting ready to sink the boat. (*laughs*) Gonna collect the insurance, eh? (*fading back into music*) Gonna send us all to the bottom? (*laughs*)

(ORCH: UP AND BACK UNDER.)

**Chris** (*narrating*): But not one of us could find that deadly shape—coiled in some dark corner, or outstretched along a window seat. Not one of us caught a glimpse of that horrid head, with its beady, black, watchful eyes. (*fades*) It was nearly dark when we met together again in the chartroom.

**Captain:** Well, gentlemen—there's no way around it. We've risked all the time we can. We've got to warn the passengers!

**Mate:** How'll we do it, Captain? Call 'em all together in the lounge?

**Captain:** No. If we did anything like that, we'd be asking for a panic.

**Bowman:** We'll get one—whether we ask for it or not!

**Captain:** Pick a few men and go through the cabin decks. Tell 'em individually—*inside their cabins*. Watch for any that act like they might cause trouble—and we'll keep an eye on 'em. Handle the crew the same way.

**Cast:** *Adlibs agreement.*

(SOUND: STEPS, SCRAPPING OF CHAIRS.)

**Captain:** As soon as you're finished, arm all the deck officers and start searching again. Our only chance of preventing a panic is to find that snake!

(ORCH: CRASHES IN, SETS GROWING TENSION, THEN SUSTAINS BACK.)

**Chris** (*narrating*): The slow nightmare that followed grew worse by the hour. None of us slept. All the ship's officers not on duty kept on with that endless search. Passengers locked themselves in their cabins, or huddled together in the lounges—knowing all the time that no spot on board could be called safe. Fear was a heavy fog in the lungs of all of us—and every light on the vessel burned throughout the night. Morning came and brought no relief. Terror and tension mounted by the hour.

(ORCH: SWELLS, THEN BACK UNDER.

SOUND: WOMAN SOBBING.)

**Willis:** There now, Mrs. Crane. Go back to your cabin. The horrid thing's probably crawled overboard.

**Woman:** You're just saying that! You're paid to say it! You don't know! Nobody does!

**Willis:** Now, now. Everything's going to be all right.

**Woman:** If we could only get off the ship, they could fumigate it. Yes! That's what we've got to do! (*fading from mike*) We've got to get off the ship!

**Willis** (*loudly*): Mr. Bowman—she's going to jump.

**Bowman** (*in distance*): No you don't, lady.

**Woman** (*in distance, sobbing*): Let me go!

**Captain** (*coming in*): Nice work, Mr. Bowman. Get her down to her cabin. And whatever you do—don't turn her loose!

(ORCH: UP AND BACK UNDER.)

**Man** (*fading in*): You never know when

it might strike you. You can't put on a coat or move a chair without risking your life. Something's got to be done. It might be right here in this lounge.

(SOUND: STRIP OF FRIGHTENED CROWD.)

**Mate** (*coming in*): All right, mister—better quiet down and take it easy.

**Man**: Take it easy, huh? You're a great officer! Why don't you do something about it? That thing might be crawling around here right under our feet. . . .

(SOUND: EXCITED VOICES.)

**Mate**: I said shut up! Are you trying to start a panic?

**Man**: I've got a right to talk! I don't want to die! Nobody's gonna tell me what—

(SOUND: SOCK IN JAW—BODY FALLING.)

ORCH: UP AND BACK UNDER.)

**Chris** (*narrating*): The second night passed, and morning came—a gray and rainy day that dragged by with leaden hours; then night came down again—third night of terror. Again every light burned, and the whole ship seethed in the throes of incipient panic. Faced by a horror they'd never met on the sea before, crew and officers alike were on the verge of revolt. Passengers sat huddled in a stupor, ready to scream at the slightest unknown sound.

(ORCH: DISSOLVES SLOWLY.)

**Chris**: At seven bells,<sup>14</sup> I made my way forward to the chartroom and found Captain Wood bent over a desk.

(SOUND: DOOR CLOSES. STEPS ENTERING.)

<sup>14</sup>seven bells, 11:30 P.M. in this context. On shipboard, time is recorded by the stroke of a bell every half hour.



**Captain** (*wearily*): Oh—hello, Christopher. Come on in and sit down.

**Chris** (*on edge*): It's got to be somewhere, Captain Wood! It's got to be!

(SOUND: STEPS STOP.)

**Captain**: I don't know. You could search this ship for six months and never touch all the hiding places aboard. If we can only hold out for two more days—we'll be in port.

**Chris**: What's your home office say?

**Captain**: Here's the latest wireless from them. "Keep quiet—and keep coming." Huh! What else can we do? How is it below?

**Chris**: Pretty bad. Anything could happen.

**Captain**: Yeah, that's why I took the guns away from the men. One pistol shot, and we'd have a riot on our hands.

**Chris**: The whole thing's my fault, Captain Wood! That's what I can't forget!

**Captain**: Take it easy, son.

**Chris**: If there was only some way I could pay for it myself. Alone!

**Captain**: No—I know how you feel. But it's no more your fault than mine, or the man who asked you to bring that snake back—alive. Nobody planned this. You'd better try to get a little sleep.

**Chris**: Sleep!

**Captain**: Mr. Bowman made some coffee down in the steward's galley a while ago. Better go on down and get yourself a cup—then rest for a couple of hours.

**Chris**: Rest—I can't rest!

**Captain**: Christopher—it's not going to help anything if you stumble through

a hatch half asleep—and break your neck. Go on and get some coffee. One way or another we've got to hold out for two more days.

(ORCH: TRANSITION AND DISSOLVES.)

SOUND: DOOR CLOSES, STEPS UNDER.)

**Chris** (*narrating*): The light was on in the steward's galley, and the coffee pot was standing on the stove.

(SOUND: STEPS STOP.)

**Chris**: The coffee was still warm so I poured out a cup.

(SOUND: POURING, STEPS.)

**Chris**: I carried it over to the porcelain table in the center of the room and started to light a cigarette. The door of the pan cupboard beneath the sink was standing slightly ajar, and I happened to glance toward it. I dropped the cigarette and moved slowly backward. I'd found the bushmaster!

(ORCH: ACCENTS AND CONTINUES UNDER VOICE; MOVEMENT SLOW AND TENSE.)

**Chris**: As I moved, the snake slid out of the cupboard—and drew back into a loose coil on the galley floor—never taking his eyes off me. I backed slowly away—waiting any moment for that deadly, slithering strike. How had he known it was me? He'd stayed quiet when Bowman was here. How had he picked the first time in five days that I was without a gun? My hands touched the wall behind me, and I stopped in terror. The call button and door were on the far side of the room; I'd backed into a dead end! I stared at the snake in fascination—expecting any moment the ripping slash of those poisoned fangs. The lethal coils tightened a little—then

were still again. Ten million years of evolution to produce this moment! *Homo sapiens*<sup>15</sup> versus *Lachesis murtus*—a man against mute fate. And all the odds were on—fate. I knew then that I was going to die!

(ORCH: LONG CHORD AND OUT.)

**Chris:** I could feel the sweat run down between the wall and the palms of my hands pressing against it. My skin crawled and twitched, and the pit of my stomach was cold as ice. There was no sound but the rush of blood in my ears. The snake shifted again—drawing into a tighter coil—always tighter. Why didn't the devil get it over with? Then for an instant his head veered away. Something moved by the stove. I didn't dare turn to look at it. Slowly it moved into my line of vision. It was a cat—the scrawny cat that Mother Willis sneaked aboard in La Guairai!

(SOUND: LOW, THREATENING GROWL OF CAT.)

**Chris:** Its back was arched, and every hair stood on end. It moved stiff-legged now, walking in a half circle around the snake. The bushmaster moved slowly and kept watching the cat. He tightened—he was going to strike at any second.

(SOUND: THUD OF STRIKING SNAKE, AND SCRAPE AS IT RECOVERS. CAT SNARLS AND SPITS . . . THEN BACK TO THE LOW GROWL.)

**Chris:** He struck and missed—the cat was barely out of reach. Now she was walking back and forth again. She was asking to die.

<sup>15</sup>*Homo sapiens* (hō' mō sâ' pi enz), man.

(SOUND: THUD AND RECOVERY. SNARL, SPIT, AND BACK TO GROWL.)

**Chris:** Missed again—by a fraction of an inch. He was striking now without even going to a full coil!

(SOUND: THUD AND RECOVERY. SNARL, SPIT, AND BACK TO GROWL.)

**Chris:** Missed! Again and again—always missing by the barest margin. Each time the cat danced barely out of reach—and each time she countered with one precise spat of a dainty paw—bracing her skinny frame on three stiff legs. And then suddenly I realized what she was doing!

(SOUND: THUD AND RECOVERY. SNARL, SPIT, GROWL.)

**Chris:** The bushmaster was tiring—and one strike was just an instant slow. But in that split second, sharp claws raked across the evil head and ripped out both the lidless eyes. The cat had de-liberately blinded the snake!

(SOUND: SNARL, SPIT. REPEATED THUDS UNDER THE FOLLOWING.)

**Chris:** He didn't bother to coil now—but slid after her in a fury—striking wildly but always missing. And every strike was a little slower than the last one. Until finally—

(SOUND: THE THUDS CHANGE TO THE FRANTIC SCRAPING OF A HEAVY SNAKE IN AGONY. THE CAT'S SUSTAINED GROWL IS MUFFLED. SHE'S GOT A MOUTHFUL OF SNAKE.)

**Chris:** As the snake's neck stretched out at the end of a strike—the cat made one leap and sank her razor-sharp teeth just back of the ugly head—sank 'em until they crunched the bone. She clung, as the monstrous snake flailed

and lashed on the floor—striving to get those hideous coils around her, trying to break her hold, to shake off the slow and certain paralysis that gradually crept over him, and at last stilled his struggles forever!

(ORCH: SUSTAINS BACK.)

**Chris:** I took a deep breath—the first in minutes. The cat lay on her side on the floor, panting—resting from the fight just over. She had a right to rest. That mangy, brave, beautiful alley cat had just saved my life—and maybe others as well. But as I turned toward the stove, I suddenly became very humble, and I knew all at once what a small thing a human being really is. There were three reasons why that cat had fought and killed the world's deadliest snake. And those three reasons came tottering out from under the stove on shaky little legs. Up on the decks, hundreds of passengers were waiting for news that the days and nights of terror were ended. They could wait a little longer. *(pause)* I pulled open the doors of the cabinet and found a can of milk and a saucer. Then I dropped down on my knees on the floor of the galley.

(ORCH: SWELLS TO CURTAIN.)



### Talking it over

1. What is the meaning of the title?
2. How does the snake happen to escape?

3. List the sequence of events from the time the bushmaster escapes until it is killed.

4. a. What superstitious feeling does Sanchez have about bushmasters?

b. How do you know that Chris has some of the same superstitious dread of the snake that Sanchez has?

5. Do you think Chris is right or wrong when he insists on bringing a live bushmaster on board ship? Explain.

6. As Chris is telling this story he says, "I suddenly became very humble, and I knew all at once what a small thing a human being really is." What makes him feel this way?

7. Who do you think is the "hero" of this play?

8. Describe in detail some of the scenes you would have if you were making this into a television play or movie.

### Words in action

In each of the following sentences try to figure out the meaning of the italicized word from the clues the sentence itself gives you. Then look up the word in the Glossary to see whether you have arrived at the correct meaning.

1. Chris knew that those *lethal* fangs could cause death.

2. He stood there in a *stupor*, unable to feel or to move.

3. The *undulant* coils of the snake wove themselves into a tighter and tighter pattern.

4. The snake *flailed* wildly on the floor, trying to shake off the cat.