IT HAPPENED NEAR A LAKE  

John Henry Noyes Collier was born in 1901 at Carshalton, and was privately educated. His books include *Tom's A-cold* (1933) and several other full-length stories; he has also written short stories and poems. He is fond of gardening, and now lives in the U.S.A.

In this story Mr. Beaseley is a shopkeeper who has never made much money or done anything unusual or interesting. His wife treats him badly, and he tries to escape from his dull life by reading about the wonders of science. One day he receives a large number of dollars and decides to travel to interesting places. The first place he chooses is Yucatan. (Yucatan is mostly in Mexico; its famous ruins are chiefly those of splendid buildings put up by men of an ancient civilization.) His wife wants to have a flat in New York and a house in Miami; but she does not want him to escape from her, and so she travels with him (angrily). She behaves unpleasantly everywhere. When they go up the River Amazon in search of a terrible creature in a lake, she at last loses all patience. She declares that she will leave for Para. (This is a port at the mouth of the Amazon; its full name is Belem do Para.) In fact, she never leaves the lake, and the story explains why.

MR. BEASELEY was fifty. He was shaving and he was looking at his face in the glass. It showed him that he was very like a mouse.

"I'm older," he thought. "But what do I care? I don't care, except for Maria. And how old she's getting, too!"

He finished his dressing and hurried down the stairs. He thought anxiously that he was probably late for breakfast. Immediately after breakfast, he had to open his shop; and that always kept him busy until ten o'clock at night. He never made much money although he worked so long. Sometimes during the day Maria came into the shop and showed him his mistakes. She did this even when there were people there.

He found a little comfort every morning when he opened the newspaper. When he read it, he could escape from his dull life. For a short time he could forget it. On Fridays he enjoyed himself more than on other days. On Fridays he received his copy of the other paper, *Wonders of Science*. This paper showed him one way out of his terrible and hopeless life. With *Wonders of Science* he escaped from the dull house into a splendid country.

On this particular morning, splendid news kindly came to Mr. Beaseley in his own home. It came on fine paper in a long envelope from a lawyer.

"Believe it or not, my dear," Mr. Beaseley said to his wife. "Someone has died. I've been left four hundred thousand dollars."

"What?" she said. "Where? Let me see! Don't keep the letter to yourself like that! Give it to me!"

"Go on!" said he. "Read it! Push your nose into it! Do you think it will help you?"

"Oh!" she cried. "The money has made you rude already!"

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "I've been left four hundred thousand dollars. Four hundred thousand!"

"We'll be able to have a flat in New York," she said, "or a little house in Miami."

"You may have half the money," said Mr. Beaseley. "You may do as you like with it. I myself intend to travel."

Mrs. Beaseley heard this remark without pleasure. He belonged to her. She never liked losing anything that belonged to her. She always wanted to keep everything, even old and useless things.

"So you want to leave me!" she cried. "I want to see other places, unusual places, different places. In *Wonders of Science* it says that some people have very long necks. I want to see them. And I want to see the very little people, and some of the strange birds. I want to go to Yucatan. I have offered you half the money because you like city life. You like high society, but I prefer to travel. If you want to come with me, come."
She did not hesitate much. "I will," she said. "And don't forget I'm doing it for your sake. I have to keep you on the right path. When you're tired of wandering about with your mouth open, we'll buy a house. We'll have a flat in New York and a house in Miami."

So Mrs. Beaseley went angrily with him. She hated it; but she was ready to bear anything that took away some happiness from her husband. Their journeys took them into deep forests. Their bedroom walls and floors were often made of bare wood; but outside the window there was a beautiful scene like a painting. The colours of the flowers and the straightness of the trees looked fine in the bright light.

In the high Andes their window was a square of burning blue. Sometimes a small white cloud appeared in a lower corner of the square. On islands in the sun they took huts by the sea. There the tide brought offerings to their door in the mornings. They found shells on the sand or creatures of the sea. Mr. Beaseley was glad, but his wife preferred bottles of wine to shells. She dreamed every day of a flat in New York; or she thought of a little house in Miami. She tried endlessly to punish the man because he kept them from her.

When a beautiful bird settled on a branch over her husband's head, she gave a terrible cry. Then the bird flew away before Mr. Beaseley had the time to examine it. He wanted to see birds like that, but she tried to prevent him. They planned a trip to some old buildings in Yucatan; but she told him the wrong time for the start of the journey. When he tried to watch an interesting animal, she pretended to have something in her eye. So he had to look into it and get the thing out. Usually he found nothing.

She was determined to stay in Buenos Aires for a long time. Her hair had to be arranged; she needed a permanent wave. She also needed some better clothes, and she wanted to go to the races. Mr. Beaseley agreed because he wanted to be just. They took rooms in a comfortable hotel. One day, when his wife was at the races,
She was not pleased, and she insulted the little doctor. He only gave a polite reply to her hard words. He had no need to worry. He was going to be paid highly for his help. Mrs. Beasley complained loudly all the way up the river. She told her husband that there was no monster in the lake. She mentioned that the doctor was not an honest man. Although her husband often suffered from this kind of remark, he was hurt. He felt ashamed in front of the Portuguese. His wife's voice, too, was loud and sharp. One result was that every animal hurried away from them. Mr. Beasley saw nothing of the animals except their back legs. They all left the great river and the terrible voice at high speed. They hid themselves in the dark forest behind the biggest trees.

The little party reached the lake after many days on the river.

"How do we know that this is the right place?" Mrs. Beasley said to her husband. She was watching the doctor, who was talking to some Indians. "It is probably any lake. It's not a special one. What are those Indians saying to him? You can't understand a word. You're ready to believe anything, aren't you? You'll never see the monster. Only a fool would believe that story."

Mr. Beasley gave no reply. The doctor continued his conversation with the Indians, and they gave him some useful news. They told him about a hut which was made of grass. It was near the lake and no one was using it. The little party found this hut after great efforts, and they stayed in it for several days. Mr. Beasley watched the lake every day, but never saw the monster. In fact, he saw nothing at all. Mrs. Beasley was very satisfied with this result of their long journey, but she always looked angry.

One day she spoke severely to her husband. "I will bear this kind of life no longer," she said. "I've allowed you to drag me from one place to another. I've tried to watch you and take care of you all the time. I've travelled hundreds of miles in an open boat with Indians. Now you're wasting your money on a man who only wants to trick you. We shall leave for Para in the morning."

"You may go if you wish," said he. "I'll write you a cheque for two hundred thousand dollars. Perhaps you can persuade an Indian to take you down the river in a boat. But I will not come with you."

"We shall see," she said. She had no wish to leave her husband alone. She was afraid that he might enjoy himself.

He wrote out the cheque and gave it to her. She still threatened to leave him, but she stayed.

She got up early the next morning and went outside the hut. She decided to have breakfast alone, and walked angrily towards some trees. It was her intention to get some fruit from the trees; but she had not gone far when she noticed a mark on the sand. It was the mark of an immense foot nearly a yard wide. The toes seemed to have sharp nails, and the next footprint was ten feet away.

Mrs. Beasley looked without interest at the marks which the monster had left. No very strong feelings reached her mind. She was only angry at the thought of her husband's success. She was angry because the Portuguese had been telling the truth. She neither cried out in wonder, nor called to the sleeping men. She only gave a kind of bitter laugh.

Then she picked up a small branch which was lying on the ground. The monster's footprints had never been seen before by a European, but she rubbed it out with the branch. When this had been done thoroughly, she smiled bitterly. There was now no sign of the mark, and so she looked for the next one. She wiped that mark off the sand too. Further on she saw another, and then one more. She rubbed both out. Then she saw another, moved towards it, and rubbed it out. She continued in this way, holding the branch with both hands. In a short time she had rubbed out every mark down to the edge of the lake. The last footprint was partly in the water. The monster had clearly gone back to the lake.
Mrs. Beaseley rubbed out the last mark with pleasure, and then stood up straight.

She looked back sourly towards the hut. She said some words to her husband, who was asleep up there. "I will tell you about this," she said, "when we are far away. We shall be living at Miami, and you will be an old man. You will never have seen the footprint or the monster. You'll be too old to do anything then."

At that moment there was a sound in the water behind her. She was seized by a set of teeth. The Portuguese doctor had described these teeth very well: they were exactly like swords. He had mentioned various other details, but she had no time to prove their correctness. After she had given one short cry, she was pulled under the water. Her cry was not heard by either of the men. It was given in a weak voice. She had used her voice too much during the past weeks, and it was tired.

A short time later Mr. Beaseley awoke. He saw that his wife was absent. He went to talk to the doctor, and mentioned the fact; but the doctor knew nothing and went to sleep again. Mr. Beaseley went outside and looked round for his wife; but he could see nothing. He returned to his friend.

"I think my wife has run away," he explained. "I've found her footprints. They lead down to the lake. I suppose she saw an Indian in his boat. Perhaps he has taken her away from here. She was threatening to leave yesterday. She wants to take a small house in Miami."

"That is not a bad place," the doctor replied; "but probably Buenos Aires is a better one. This monster is a great disappointment, my dear friend. Let us go back to Buenos Aires. I will show you some things there that will surprise you. They are very different from anything here, of course."

"You're a very good companion," said Mr. Beaseley. "You make even life in a city seem attractive."

"If you get tired of it," the Portuguese said, "we can always move on. I know some wonderful islands, and they have splendid people in them. We can visit them after we leave the cities."