



Curare

So stable is the poison that even after it had been preserved for forty years at Waterton's home in England, it was still found to be effective. Many have been the attempts to discover how it is prepared since he wrote his account, many the expeditions sent to find its ingredients or to purchase it for testing. Even today it is largely mysterious, though various components have been isolated, and some have proved important in inducing relaxation of muscles, such as is required in treating tetanus or in abdominal surgery. The most active ingredients are derived from vines of the genus *Strychnos*, but are not at all like strychnine (which comes from a tree of the same genus), either chemically or in effect. They are called curarines, and produce a paralysis of the nerve-centres if introduced into the blood (but no effect in the stomach, for

which reason animals killed with curare may be eaten), resulting in relaxation of the muscles, and death primarily from slow suffocation, because the lungs cease to work. There is no known antidote, except artificial respiration and oxygen. The Indians themselves, if accidentally poisoned, are said simply to lie down and die.

Extract from **Wai-Wai, Through the Forests North of the Amazon**, by Nicholas Guppy, first published by John Murray, 1958. Published by Penguin Books 1961.

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