

MOUNTAINS OF MYSTERY

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THE KING OF NO MAN'S LAND, ETC.



GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

AL 1591.1.20



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MOUNTAINS OF MYSTERY

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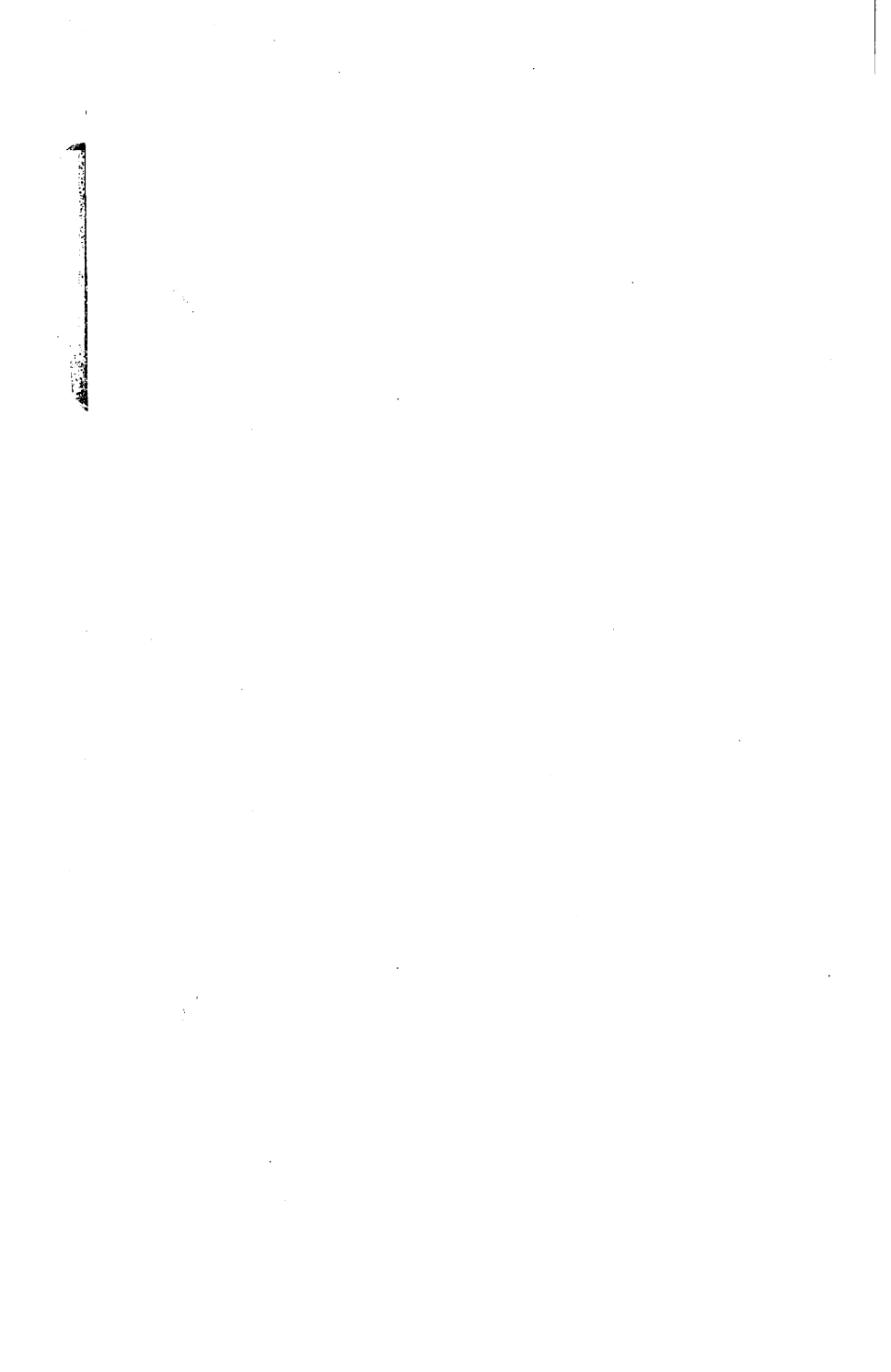
Printed in the U. S. A.

First Edition

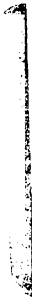
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MOUNTAINS OF MYSTERY



MOUNTAINS OF MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

MAROONED

THE moon sank.

Behind a black bulk of cloud, looming like a tremendous dragon couchant on the rim of the world, the brilliant disc slid into eclipse. Along the irregular back of the cloud-beast flamed a bright, cold fire. Then the weird radiance paled, died out. Across the tropic wilderness of Guayana swooped darkness.

Dimmed by a thin veil of mist, stars looked wanly down on a chaotic land of disordered mountains—some peaked and ranged, others flat-topped and isolated; on rolling wastes of barrens, on wide sweeps of jungle; on a network of rivers, writhing and twisting, sometimes creeping as stealthily as serpents, sometimes snarling over rapids and roaring down cataracts—ceaselessly hurrying northward, westward, or southward to escape the harsh uplands and lose them-

selves in the encircling Orinoco. On all this night-shrouded expanse the scattered eyes of the sky dwelt with faint interest; for everything there was as it had been nightly for thousands of years. But over one of the myriad rivers their gaze grew a little more sharp and bright. There, in midstream, on a small sandy playa left temporarily bare by receding waters, lay little dots which had not been there on the previous night: the forms of sleeping men.

Four of them, there were. Three, resting side by side on outspread rubber ponchos, slept with light blankets loose-wrapped from shoulders to feet. The fourth, a little apart, had neither poncho nor blanket, but was completely muffled in a length of old sail-cloth. Close beside each of the three lay a rifle. The other man apparently was unarmed. A few steps away stood a tiny cooking-tripod, beneath which were a few charred fagots. Near it rested an aluminum kettle and a small heap of unused fuel. And that was all. No fire, no food, no boat. On either shore, vertical clay banks heavily grown with tropical timber. Around the playa, empty water. Four men marooned on a few square rods of sand.

These things the stars of the heavens saw. And down on the earth, other stars also saw them.

Twin stars, these were; malignant, evil stars which glared from the top of a shore-wall. They moved along the bank, appearing, disappearing, glaring again, and again vanishing. After a time, from the thicket where they had gleamed, broke a harsh cough. Several times that ugly noise rasped. Then it was heard no more.

The form in the sail-cloth moved. From the shapeless huddle protruded a head. It listened intently. Somewhere far off sounded a hideous laughing noise. Somewhere nearer whistled the unutterably sad plaint of a sloth. Two or three fish-splashes broke the quietude of the water. The listener sleepily subsided. But he did not again cover his head.

Over where the evil stars had blazed, a long shape crept with incredible silence down the sheer bank. Projecting tree-roots, gnarled or sinuous as petrified snakes, gave foothold for its taloned paws. The few small blobs of clay dislodged by its movements fell with almost inaudible plops. In the darkness, the creature itself was invisible now that it had veiled its glare. And presently it was gone from the shore.

Across the smooth current grew an angular ripple. At its apex, steadily nearing the playa, moved a wicked flat-nosed head. Its eyes now

did not glimmer; their lids were drawn to malevolent slits. Its jaws worked soundlessly, already writhing into the grimace of attack. Under the surface swam those great hooked paws. Nearer—nearer—

Again the man moved. He rose on an elbow, peering fixedly across the stream, straining his ears. In all the sounds of the night—some faint, a few more noticeable—was one which was not right. Just what or where or why it was, he did not know. But something—

“Crra!” he gasped.

His cover flew aside. Headlong he dived toward the nearest sleeper—snatched his rifle—threw himself up on one knee. The gun darted to an aim; hung motionless for a fraction of a second. And up from the shallows of the shelving playa rose the ferocious head which had made the ripples.

A shot cracked.

A horrible snarl retorted. A fierce swash and splash—the beast came on, hurling itself to the grapple. The man leaped erect. Again his gun-flame slashed the dark. Then he sprang aside.

The three blanketed men were up now. Bedding swirled in air, steel glinted, quick ejaculations sounded. Two thumps terminated the

swirl of motion. One was that of the brute, which staggered and flopped as the second bullet struck home. The other was that of the rifle, descending in a terrific blow on the beast's back. Only the quick dodge of the rifleman had evaded the eviscerating sweep of the giant paws. The great cat, still grimacing, died on the spot where the man had just stood.

For a moment none spoke. Every eye, every sense, was fixed on the dead destroyer. Then the man beside it relaxed from his tense poise. His teeth gleamed in a shadowy grin.

"Un tigre, señores," he casually remarked.

"Gee cripes!" rumbled the shortest of the three. "I'll say it's a tigre and a half! And right on top of us before we knowed it!"

"Good work, Portonio!" heartily commended the second, lifting his head. "Straight shooting and a sharp eye. But I thought you said no tigres were here."

"Few, señor," Portonio mildly corrected. "I said that on this Rio Ventuari they were few. So I was told, and I believe it is truth."

"Begorry, if them few are all big go-gitters like this here one, there's plenty for me!" asserted the stocky fellow. "I've seen plenty o' tigres, but I never knowed one to swim a river to git to me."

"He was hungry," Portonio laconically explained.

The tallest of the trio, standing straight and soldierly, had said nothing at all. His keen gaze had studied cat and man, glanced across the water, dwelt again on the quiet Portonio. Now he turned his head, as if seeking other men. Then he wheeled abruptly and stood staring downstream. At the same moment Portonio, as if smitten by the same thought, started and squinted past him.

"Ajo!" he swore. "La lancha—"

"Boat's gone!" finished the tall one.

A swift about-face by the other two. Then a growl from the short one.

"Wal, the lousy bums! They've deserted and took everything with 'em! And here we laid like a string o' dead fish and let 'em git away with it!"

For another minute or two the others said nothing. They peered about them, striving to pierce the farther gloom, listening in vain for voices or other sounds of men; scanned the sands; looked into one another's faces. All three keenly studied the fourth, Portonio. His return gaze was square and steady.

"Capitán," he calmly reminded, "I too am here."

The tall captain nodded. But the short man growled again.

"Looks fishy to me, cap. He's stuck here, same as we are, but— He was awake when this cat come. Why was he dead to the world when them guys sneaked—"

"Oh, pipe down, Tim!" interrupted the man next him. "He's in the clear. He's been with us all the way up the Orinoco. He got those two mestizos at San Fernando only because we wanted him to. He slept farther from the boat than we did. If anybody ought to have heard their get-away, it's you! You were nearest to them. Quit your bellyaching."

Tim grumbled something, but subsided. The captain nodded again.

"You heard nothing, Portonio?" he asked.

"Nothing," echoed the Venezuelan. "Nothing until the tigre woke me. He barked over yonder." His head tilted shoreward. "Then I nearly slept again. But I heard a thing—the breathing of the tigre as he swam—sí, that was it! It puzzled me, and I looked and saw his head. So I took the gun and shot."

He extended the borrowed weapon, butt first. The captain—it was his gun—declined it.

"Keep it for the time," he said curtly.

Portonio's strong teeth showed again in a pleased grin; for he knew, without further words, that the tall commander had faith in him. The latter drew out a watch and scanned its faintly glowing numerals.

"Nearly four," he announced. "Not long to dawn. About an hour and a half. Can't do anything until then. Might start up the fire and stew some tiger-meat. That's better than nothing. Got some matches, Merry?"

"Guess so. Portonio, make a fire."

With a grunt of assent, the Venezuelan lounged back to his place on the sand and picked up a naked machete. At the little woodpile he deftly made kindlings. Ignited, the sticks gradually flamed up into a goodly blaze. Into its light the big cat was dragged, and by that light were revealed both the superb proportions of the beast and the faces and physiques of the marooned men.

Even in death, the jaguar was formidable: a muscular-bodied brute, seven feet from tip to tip, whose powerful legs, massive paws, and hooked claws bore eloquent testimony to its ability to twist and break the necks of creatures much heavier and stronger than mere human beings. The sinister savagery of its destructive build,

merciless head, and cruel mouth was enhanced by its funereal color; for, unlike the usual dappled animal of its class, it was black as night—an embodiment of stealth, gloom, and death. Breast and head now were dyed red from wounds. The first bullet, striking a trifle low as the brute rose from the water, had drilled through the thick-thewed chest. The second, more luckily placed, had gone through an eye into the brain. And even then, with its center of life destroyed, the beast had almost made its kill in the last few seconds of existence.

Portonio, its slayer, now viewed it with a slight smile, but with no particular show of interest. The firelight disclosed him as a bronzed giant—curly-haired, square-jawed, brown-eyed—clad in a loose cotton shirt and baggy trousers, and bare-foot. The others, though sunburned, were lighter of skin than he, and only one of them—the tall, gray-eyed, stern-faced man whom he addressed as “capitán”—was black-haired. Tim was florid of face and of hair; blue-eyed, wide-mouthed, pugnacious of jaw; broad of shoulder, muscular of build. Merry was a pronounced blond; slender, yet strongly knit, with a hint of the dreamer in his curving lips and long-lashed eyes. Even now, with the loss of the boat and all it contained

hanging heavy on the minds of all, this golden-haired fellow was smiling with care-free satisfaction as he contemplated the great cat.

"A black one, Rod!" he rejoiced. "They're rare. I'll just have to undress this chap and take along his hide."

"What'll ye take it along in, and where to?" demanded Tim. "The only way we can git anywheres now is swimmin' and walkin'—and gosh knows what'll grab us while we're swimmin'. Hey, Tonio, is there any o' them big water-snakes in this here river?"

"Culebras de agua? Men say there are many, señor. I do not know. I never before have been on this Ventuari."

"The cat swam over here," reminded the captain. "We can swim over there."

"Oh, yeah. And then what do we do? D'ye mind the bank's like a wall, straight up and down? It's like that for miles. That's why we tied up here in the middle. How do we git topside?"

"Oh, just climb," retorted the blond. Sinking on one knee, he unsheathed a keen belt-knife and began deftly slitting the skin. "Cheer up, you old grouch! Luck's with us yet. Here's a lot of meat. We can ferry it ashore somehow, smoke

it well, and live on it for days while we walk. And I'm betting something will turn up."

"Yeah. Prob'ly one o' them big snakes."

Tim scowled at the mysterious darkness, doubly dark now by contrast with the fire's glow. As if in answer, near at hand sounded a rushing splash. Tim jumped, clutching his rifle tighter. Portonio smiled slightly, casting a nonchalant glance outward.

"A large fish, señor," he explained.

"There, there, little man!" sarcastically soothed Merry. "Was mother's lamb afraid of the darky-dark and the boogy-boos? Come here and let mamma wipe his little nosey—"

"Aw, shut up!" flared Tim, reddening furiously. "I'll wipe *your* nose on me fist, ye big stiff!"

Merry laughed mockingly. Portonio chuckled. Even the iron-faced captain smiled. After a minute Tim himself grinned a little, though he cleared his throat harshly to conceal it.

"Take a run down the river and beat up those two halfbreeds," advised Merry. "That'll sweeten your temper. Bring the boat back with you."

"Umph! What I'd do to them birds if I got a holt of 'em! But say, come to think of it, they

can't be so far off, at that. They dunno how to run the engine. How are they goin' to make their gitaway? She's heavy, that boat is, and there's a bunch o' sand-bars— Say, mebbe they're aground somewheres, right close by! When it comes light we'd better trail down the bank and see if we can nail 'em."

"Right," vouchsafed the captain. "That's what I had in mind. We'll get 'em if it takes a year. The only way they can navigate her is by poling, and that's slow work. The fools!"

Tim again eyed the dark.

"It'll be hard goin' in all that tangle. Aw wal, we've got out o' worse scrapes than this here, many's the time. Wonder why they didn't knife us before they beat it."

"Afraid to chance it. One of us would be sure to wake up and shoot."

The blond now had stripped a haunch. From it he carved slabs of flesh, which he tossed into the kettle.

"Portonio, put this to boil," he instructed. The Venezuelan, with his usual slow smile, carried the pot to the water's edge, returned, set it on the tripod, and squatted to tend the fire. The skinning proceeded. The captain and the red man produced cigarettes, lit them, and squatted

also. Presently the kettle began to bubble. Tim gave a reminiscent chuckle.

"Funny, ain't it, us three comin' back to tiger-meat?" he said. "Mind the time we went battin' round the bush down on the Amazon and got up the Tiger River? 'Twas fair crawlin' with cats. And we run out o' meat and had to live on them tigres till we made our big gold-strike. And now here we are, all of us rich as mud, comin' down here jest to do a little explorin' to pass away the time—and plunk! we wake up broke and stranded. Money to burn in the bank up home, and a fat lot o' good it does us! We're down to chewin' the tough ol' cat-leg again, and glad we've got good teeth."

His two mates smiled, but made no answer. While the blond worked absorbedly at his task, the gray-eyed man squatted with gaze far away. Portonio, incurious, continued his imperturbable watching of the fire.

At length the big black pelt was off. After spreading it out and washing knife and hands, the blond straightened his blanket on its poncho and lay down. The other two joined him.

"Daylight pretty soon," remarked the captain.

"M-hm. And then cat stew without salt. Ugh! And no coffee. That's what hurts my

feelings worst. If we catch those two sneaks I fear my temper may be unmerciful."

"So'll theirs," grunted Tim. "And they've got guns, mind ye."

"A fact which will make our proceedings much simpler." The blond man's tone was hard-edged.

"Yeah! Ye said a mouthful that time. No questions asked. Shoot on sight."

For awhile they lay quiet. At length the watching stars grew a shade paler. Across the sky sped a faint sheen. Rapidly the eyes of the night closed; the light brightened; the sky turned to a glowing blue. From towering jungle, root-studded clay walls, and olive-green water the shadows were wiped in a trice. And from the river forest, near and far, rose a discordant chorus of monkey-bellows, turkey-moans, toucan-barks, tapir-whistles, and nameless gobbles and rattles, screams and hoots. With one accord the three sat up and fell to adjusting their sleep-disheveled clothing.

"Now come on, bugs!" gloomily invited Tim. "Our skeeter-nets are gone with the boat. And come on, sun! Helmets are gone too."

A blaze in the east heralded the coming of that malign sun. And a sudden myriad of moving specks announced the arrival of the bugs—a

stinging horde of tiny day-mosquitoes which would attack ceaselessly until sunset. The three stepped into the thin smoke of the fire, where the insects would be fewer.

"Umph!" grunted Tim, eyeing the stew-pot in distaste. "I'm hungry, but I dunno about eatin' that. If we only had some salt —"

"Which we haven't," clipped the captain. "Portonio, take it off the fire. Let it cool. Then we'll claw it out with our hands and worry it down."

With the last remaining stick the cook swung the kettle from the blaze and set it on the cool sand. Rising, he stretched himself, his warm brown eyes traveling smilingly from face to face and reading the expressions there.

"I have eaten worse things, señores," he comforted.

"So have we," admitted the blond. "But not lately."

For several minutes they stood in the smoke waiting for the unpalatable meat to cool. Then Portonio, stooping to test the breakfast with a finger-tip, let his gaze rove upstream. In that bent position he froze, his gaze suddenly fixed and sharp.

"Mira, señores!" he murmured. "Look!"

CHAPTER II

LOCO LEÓN

LOW-RIDING, slow-moving, down toward the marooned men floated a dugout canoe.

It had crept stealthily around the next bend, a quarter-mile upstream, and was drifting near shore. Its black body, rising but a few inches above the surface, blended with the dark water; its low curved cabin of bleached palm-fronds merged with the yellowish dirt wall. Its crew, bent low and peering at the playa, made only an indeterminate blob against the shadow within the cylindrical hood. Along its gunwales moved no paddles. The river-beast was warily reconnoitering, keeping itself so inconspicuous that, but for the chance discovery by Portonio, it could easily have withdrawn unseen by the smoke-wreathed men on the sand.

Now those men sprang forward, shading their eyes beneath their palms for a few seconds, then raising their hands and waving them in imperative gestures. From them broke a chorus of shouts. Only the Venezuelan remained silent,

still studying that creeping craft whence sounded no response. After a little, however, he relaxed into his usual easy poise and his slow smile dawned.

"What the devil ails them guys?" grumbled Tim. "Ye'd think we had smallpox, the way they lay off. He-e-ey!" His voice rose again into a foghorn bellow. "Come here, ye poor fish! Aquí!"

No answer. The canoe floated at the same creep. But now, deliberately, a figure arose and stood before the cabin—a blue-clad, sombreroed form which remained motionless for minutes. The Americans grew silent. Then, quietly, spoke Portonio.

"It is a señor. See the carroza on his boat. None but a señor uses a cabin here. I think it is Loco León."

Lifting his voice in a riverman's hail—not loud, yet musically clear and long-drawn—he called:

"Ho-o-o-o-o! Amigos!"

Now came a reply, curt and incisive.

"Quién es? Who are you?"

"Por-tonio Ma-ri-ño," rang the slow response.

As if the name were a countersign, the drifting men dropped their suspicion. Paddles rose and fell. The canoe surged forward, a small creamy

roll forming under its overhanging prow, a quick cadence of gunwale-thumping strokes beating in unison. The three Northerners looked queerly at their employe, who, though he had professed ignorance of this river, was so readily recognized. In a moment, unasked, he gave an explanation.

"It is Loco," he declared, still watching the canoe. "I have known him long."

Merry, the blond, laughed.

"The very chap we want to see! Didn't I tell you our luck was still with us? I'll bet he has some decent grub, too. We won't eat cat-leg until we find out."

Swiftly the craft bore down on them, its paddles throwing water into the air at each vigorous stroke, its master balancing easily before the swaying cabin. The crew, loose-shirted, light-skinned, seemed to be mestizos. The paddlers numbered three; a fourth, seated behind the cabin, was steersman. The owner, despite deep tan, was obviously a pure-blooded white; above medium stature, lean, and wiry.

With a loud swash, the crew held their paddles rigid. The blunt-nosed boat lost way. Another swash, and it swung broadside on to the playa; drifted into the shallows, and stopped, aground.

"Buen' dia'," formally greeted the blue-clad

man. "Good morning. How are you, Portonio?" His eyes, blue and keen, rested steadily on the strangers.

"Bien. Well." Portonio lounged forward. "These señores come to visit you, Loco. They are from North America. We have lost our boat."

With this laconic summary of the entire situation, he glanced at the captain. The latter promptly took up the conversation.

"You are Señor Lucio León? Good! I am Roderick McKay. This is my friend Meredith Knowlton." He nodded toward his blond partner. "And this is Timothy Ryan. We are three fools who have come to explore and allowed two men of San Fernando to steal our boat."

León's eyes twinkled. He answered McKay's Spanish with fluent English.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, gentlemen. Ah, yes, I speak English—I lived for some years in Trinidad. It was in the time of Cipriano Castro."

He paused. The three smiled. They knew that the British island of Trinidad, off the mouth of the Orinoco, was a haven for thousands of Venezuelan political refugees; and the reference to the deposed tyrant Castro made doubly clear

the reason for this nonchalant fellow's sojourn there. He laughed lightly and went on.

"Life on an island grows stale after a time, I have found. If by chance you have tired of yours, the ship is waiting. Ah—who were those San Fernando men?"

"Their names were Tito and Mateo," supplied Knowlton.

"Ah. Tito Coro and Mateo Collado, perhaps?" He glanced at Portonio, who nodded. "Ah, yes. I think I understand. Did you hit either of them? I heard you shoot in the night."

"Oh, that wasn't a war," Knowlton explained. "Portonio shot something for breakfast."

He moved aside, giving a view of the stark carcass. León's quick gaze took it in; also the hide and the kettle beside the fire.

"Válgame Dios!" he ejaculated. "You shall not eat *that*, friends! I have food—rough fare, but far better than that. But perhaps we had better start the chase at once. We can eat on the way, and then make a better meal when the business is settled. Let us be off. And since you do not need that tigre meat, give it to my Indians."

The marooned three, already turning away, turned back, looking quickly at the crew. Portonio kept on moving toward the blankets.

"Indians! These chaps are Indians?" blurted Knowlton.

"Of course. They are almost white, yes—but they are full-blood Indians." Without change of tone, but with slower diction, he spoke in Spanish to his crew. "The strangers have meat of the tigre. They go on a blood trail of their enemies. Eat the meat that you may have the strength of the tigre for the journey. It is in the pot. We go to kill men of San Fernando."

Into the cool brown eyes of the canoemen came a glow that increased as he spoke. At his final sentence those eyes flamed, and hard grins shot across their faces. With a simultaneous spring they were out and bounding across the playa, shirts flying behind them, strong bare legs sprinting for the prize pot. As one man they pounced on it, hands clutching the unseasoned meat; and with loudly guzzling jaws they gnawed down the wet portions, their eyes still shining with a tigerish gleam.

"Begorry, they're Injuns, all right," asserted Tim. "No pants—no hats—muscles like snakes—yeah, they're hard gorillas, I'll tell the world, even if they do wear nightshirts. And they don't like them San Fernando guys for a cent. Some-

thin' tells me bad luck is trailin' them two deserters. Wal, le's go."

Portonio was rapidly rolling blankets and ponchos into a compact bundle. Knowlton gathered up the black hide. McKay and Tim picked up the rifles. Meanwhile León, who had been unobtrusively holding a carbine beside his right leg all this time, lowered it and quietly slid it back into the cabin by a push of one alpargata-shod foot. The Indians, having gobbled the contents of the pot almost at one swallow, looked covetously at the big body on the sand. But their master grunted, and they returned slowly to the canoe, carrying with them both pot and tripod. After them flocked the laden whites, Portonio managing to pick his machete from the sand with one finger as he went.

"We'll be a bit crowded, I'm afraid," said Knowlton. "That is, for a while."

"It is nothing," answered their rescuer, speculatively eyeing the rifles of the Northerners. "I am riding light, and there is room in the carroza."

By his direction, the Indians stowed the bundles in the rear of the cabin. The four got aboard and crept into the shade of the hood. The crew tugged the craft off the sand, splashed in, and sunk their broad paddles in the water.

"Now let us see the strength of the tigre," suggested their commander. A powerful heave of the shoulders answered. The playa slid behind and was gone.

For a minute or two, while the passengers settled themselves in their cramped quarters—for the addition of four new men crammed the little place to the limit—there was no more talk. León calmly studied anew the faces of the strangers. He had taken off his straw sombrero as he crouched within, and the others saw that his hair was a golden brown, thick and wavy; his mustache, cut short but of heavy growth, and his eyebrows were so nearly the color of his bronzed skin as to be almost unnoticed at a little distance. His direct gaze was that of the frontiersman, and, though slightly narrow-lidded from habitual looking into sun-glare, frank and straightforward. After contemplating the strong features and steely eyes of McKay, the expressive face of Knowlton, and the tenacious visage of Tim, he smiled slightly as if well pleased with his new companions.

"You will pardon me for coming to you a little slowly at first," he said. "It is well, in this Rio Negro country, to look a little carefully. And I am not on good terms with the governor."

"Governor Ramirez? At San Fernando?" queried McKay.

"The same. It is not long since he sent a few men to—ah—remove me. So, as I say, I look a little carefully."

"Huh! Sent guys to kill ye?" Tim demanded.

"Quite so. They—were unlucky. But he might send others. The gentleman has a queer idea that if I should die he might enrich himself by working my rubber lands up here. I suppose you met him, and he was very gracious to you? Of course. You are foreign señores, and, no doubt, have letters from high officials. Quite so. But now—how did you happen to pick Tito and Mateo to come with you?"

"Why, we didn't exactly pick them," recalled Knowlton. "In the first place, we got Portonio, here, at Ciudad Bolívar. He was said to be an expert pilot and well acquainted with the upper Orinoco—"

"And he is," put in León. "There are better."

"Uh-huh. But he said he knew nothing about this Rio Ventuari. So at San Fernando we looked for a couple of men who did know it: one as a pilot, and the other as a handy man. Portonio found several who claimed to know something

about the Ventuari, but all but these two refused to go."

"Ah. And you had mentioned your need to the governor." It was not a question, but a statement.

"Yes."

"And he admired something of yours which you refused to part with."

"He did." All three eyed their new friend intently. "It was the launch. He was very eager to buy it—or, at least, to have us set a price on it."

"Launch?" The Ventuari man looked surprised. "You travel in a launch? And you forced it up into this country? Caramba!"

"Then, señores, all is plain. The honorable gentleman desired most earnestly to possess your launch. And you refused to consider the idea of parting with it. So he said no more about it, and bade you adios with the best of wishes. And meanwhile he saw to it that no men but Tito and Mateo should go with you. And they were good, faithful men—who watched for their chance and found it last night. Now they are poling their way down the Ventuari as fast as they can, taking the launch and all its goods back to their master, the governor.

"You are left without food or boat, more than a hundred miles from the Orinoco, and a hundred and fifty from San Fernando. If by any chance you live to reach San Fernando again, your launch is safely hidden somewhere beyond the town; Tito and Mateo are not to be found; everyone else is dumb; the governor is shocked and desolated by your misfortune. He will see to it that the thieves are hunted to the ends of the earth, and so on. After you are gone, in a rotten curial kindly loaned by the governor—which probably will sink and drown you before you go very far—Tito and Mateo and the launch reappear, and all the Rio Negro country laughs at the joke. But there is not much chance, señores, that the Ventuari will allow you to return to San Fernando. This river has a way of killing men."

The faces of his auditors hardened. McKay's gray gaze took on a cold glitter. Knowlton's mouth became a thin line. Tim's jaw protruded. Again León laughed lightly.

"You see, I know Governor Ramirez," he added. Then, turning to Portonio, he restated his assertions in Spanish. The riverman's eyes opened a little wider. After a short interval of consideration he drawled: "Sí."

"We must be growing simple in our old age," rasped Knowlton. "I sized up Ramirez as a rather smooth proposition and a bit of a grafter, but not so slimy as all that."

McKay made no answer. Tim was not so silent.

"Me, I've got a good mind to go right back to San Fernando—after we git our boat—and take this here, now, Rameery guy apart and see what kind o' works he's got! And I wouldn't put the pieces together again, neither!"

"There are others who feel likewise," rejoined León. "And sooner or later— Well, señores, the last two governors of this Territorio de Amazonas died very suddenly from an overdose of lead. But it is always a little embarrassing for those who give the lead; the federal government is far away and fails to understand the reasons. And since you must go out again through Bolívar, where there is a federal garrison—"

"Tim didn't mean exactly that," interrupted Knowlton. "What he'd like to do is to beat up the gentleman. As a matter of fact, it would be considerably more painful to Ramirez than merely being shot; and if Tim turned loose his full repertoire it would take some weeks for the victim's bones to grow together again. How-

ever, we'll pass up Ramirez and take it out on Tito and Mateo."

The Ventuari man smiled again, but said no more. All turned their gaze forward, seeking signs of the traitors and their stolen craft. None was visible. The clay banks slid past; turn after turn was rounded; the canoe quivered from the swift throb of its man-power propulsion, beating away with the regularity of tireless machinery. Still the water ahead remained empty of life, varied here and there only by a low playa or a cluster of gray boulders.

On the brows of the Northerners gathered thoughtful frowns. The thieves were making much better progress than had seemed probable. Either they had stolen away early in the night and worked strenuously with poles throughout the moonlit hours, or they had solved the problem of starting the engine. In the latter case the chase by canoe would be well-nigh hopeless—unless the launch should run hard aground. In any event, it was increasingly evident that, but for the lucky arrival of this canoe, the marooned men would have had scant chance of ever overtaking their lost boat.

With only one machete, their progress—hampered by the pathless tangle along shore, the

occasional side creeks blocking the way, and the necessity for hunting food—could hardly have measured more than ten miles a day. Ten hard days, at least, to the Orinoco; fifteen to San Fernando, the only settlement in this whole vast territory. It would have been a grim, dolorous march, with Death stalking close behind them; with venomous reptile and insect lurking on ground or in bush, with fever and beriberi hovering ready to seize on weakened tissues, with unknown aborigines likely at any time to strike down the staggering little band. No, there was not much chance that they would have survived to confront Governor Ramirez. And to this fate the men Tito and Mateo had abandoned them without a scruple.

Hour after hour snailed away. The voyagers broke their fast on slices of broiled peccary, mutely tendered by their rescuer. The morning breeze died; intense heat settled on the winding water. The paddle-beat slowed; the power of the strokes dwindled. The Indians still were doing their best, but no human frames could forever maintain that terrific labor. Then, suddenly, from the bowman broke an inarticulate croak of triumph.

Another curve had been rounded, and ahead

stretched a long straight-away. A couple of hundred yards beyond, hard aground on a shelving playa, lay a heavily listing motorboat. On either side of the stranded craft a man worked doggedly with a stout lever, vainly striving to refloat her.

The long stern chase was done.

CHAPTER III

REPRISAL

THE canoe rocked as the men under the hood attempted to rise and emerge.

"A moment!" cautioned its owner. "Let us make room." Then, to the paddlers: "Into the water!"

With swift precision the three obeyed. Their paddles came inboard and slithered along the curved bottom. They half rose, crouching on tense legs. The bowman grunted. With a simultaneous spring, the pair behind him leaped overboard, one on each side, while the bowman himself shot headlong over his prow. So accurately timed was the triple dive that the boat neither rolled nor yawed. Three splashes sounded as one. The men were gone—turning under water and swimming to the stern, where the steersman still held his post.

Into the space left vacant crept the three Northerners: McKay taking the extreme bow and lying prone, elbows resting on the flat-topped overhang, rifle-stock cuddling into his

shoulder; Knowlton and Tim kneeling behind him, guns at the ready. León, first out, had moved aside enough to let them pass, and now, wordless, watched approvingly their businesslike selection of positions. He himself stood before his cabin entrance, the short but big-bored carbine again dangling negligently beside his leg. Portonio, without a gun, grudgingly remained cooped within. At a word from León the steersman swung the boat obliquely across the current, giving the three riflemen room to fire freely without hampering one another's movements.

The triple splash had caught the eye or the ear of one of the traitorous San Fernandans. As the cabin yielded up its avengers, he stood motionless a few seconds, with gaze fixed on the canoe. Then, with a yell, he dropped his pole and scrambled monkey-like into the motorboat. His mate, after a second of staring, also flung away his lever and snatched a rifle which the other passed out to him. The first sprang out again, and the pair dropped on their knees in the shallow water.

As the canoe swung into firing position a wicked whine sounded above it. From the playa thumped a blunt report.

"Steady, León! Hold her!" snapped McKay.

A cool, curt command from the Ventuari man—the steersman held the boat motionless. Something sizzled along the water. From the sand came another bang.

With a crash three rifles opened an answering fire. From below retorted a ragged popping. Bullets thudded into the solid gunwales of the dugout. A segment of the palm cabin flew in air. From within sounded a sudden emphatic oath in the tones of Portonio. The guns of the Northerners leaped in a rapid, yet deliberately timed, succession of shots.

León, coolly careless, still stood with rifle unaimed, viewing the combat as unconcernedly as if it were a mere play. Now his sombrero flew off. At that his face contracted, and his carbine snapped to his shoulder. Even as his eye caught the sights, one of the malefactors down ahead slumped forward, struggled an instant, and went limp.

The other sprang up; threw a last bullet at his hunters; turned, and dashed in panic across the sand. Tim's gun cracked. The fugitive staggered. Then León, coolly marking down his man, fired for the first and last time. The San Fernandan took two more stumbling steps and collapsed.

For a moment utter silence held the river. No voice of bird, beast, or man broke the stillness succeeding the gunfire. The canoe drifted onward, the paddlers floating behind the stern, the gunmen lowering their pieces but keenly watching the fallen pair.

Then León spoke briefly. The bow swung again, pointing for the playa. The trailing Indians let go, swam forward a few feet, grasped the gunwale amidships with one hand each, and continued swimming with the other. The steersman began wielding his broad blade. Under the combined impetus of paddle and swimmers, the dug-out forged ahead at better speed.

"Huh! No wonder we had a long cruise! The engine's runnin'!" Tim discovered.

It was true. From the stern of the motorboat boiled a yellowish wake.

"Got her running and then didn't know enough to shut her off," McKay surmised. "We'll have a job."

No more was said until the canoe grounded beside the beached craft. Then, while Knowlton climbed into the throbbing launch, Tim promised:

"Now I'm goin' to git the goods on Rameery, if there's any words left in these mutts."

The one lying next the boat obviously possessed

no words; for he lay with face under water. The second, however, seemed to be still living. Toward him advanced the grim-faced whites and the dripping Indians—the latter carrying machetes which had mysteriously materialized from some shadowy part of the dugout. As they walked, the straining pant of the motor stopped.

The thief sprawling on the hot sand was still breathing. His rifle lay several feet away, but his nearly nerveless fingers held a knife, drawn with his last strength. As the men who had hunted him down stopped beside him, he quivered and his knife-hand moved slightly. McKay promptly stepped on his wrist, stooped, and twisted away the steel.

"Mateo!" he called sharply. "Mateo! Why did you do this?"

The glazing eyes moved a little. The lips, too, moved; but no sound came.

"Hey! Mateo!" roared Tim, bending close. "Who told you to leave us? Rameery?"

Far down in the fading eyes came a glimmer of hate. Through yellow teeth struggled a hoarse whisper. Then something rattled in the dying man's throat. He stiffened—then lay limp.

"No use," grumbled Tim, rising. "He's gone. Ye heard what he said, didn't ye? 'Twas one o'

the rottenest cussin's in the Spanish lingo—and that's goin' some. Now was he cussin' us, or cussin' Rameery for gittin' him into this? I dunno."

Nor did anyone else know. The putrid invective with which Mateo had died might have been intended either for his slayers or for the governor whose name was the last word to reach his mind.

"Well, that ends that." McKay turned away, throwing aside the captured knife. Instantly the Indians jumped after it. The steersman, nearest to the spot where it dropped, was first to pounce on it, and arose with a gloating grin. The others, moved by a simultaneous thought, dashed back across the playa to loot the body of Tito. To these aborigines a knife was more precious than a diamond.

Portonio, easy-going as ever, ambled over to the fallen rifle—an ancient Winchester of the usual .44 bush type. As he moved away, a big red splotch became noticeable on the back of his shirt.

"Gee cripes! Tonio's wounded!"

"Portonio! What is that wound?" This from León.

"Nada. Nothing." The riverman grinned and

picked up the gun. "A bullet came through the carroza and burned me. It is nothing."

Critically he examined the repeater, handling it like a man experienced in its use.

"Cool chap," commented McKay, walking onward.

"Sí," agreed León. "He has looked death in the eye many times. He was for years a river-captain on the upper Orinoco, bringing out rubber. A very quiet fellow, always calm—and honest. You are very lucky to get such a man."

They reached the boat and stood a minute looking down at Tito, whom the Indians had drawn up from the shallows. León waved a hand outward. His men picked up the body and walked around the boat. A splash sounded. Empty-handed, they returned and trudged over to Mateo. Another short trip, another splash.

"Crocodiles up here?" asked McKay.

"Only the small babicho—too small to be useful. But there are plenty of caribes."

The Northerners nodded. They knew the caribe to be the ferocious fish which, traveling in schools, quickly chops a man to bare bones. The faithless Tito and Mateo had disappeared forever from the sight of men.

With their passing, the victors turned their

whole attention to the boat: a trim, graceful vessel, with speedy lines which even her awkward position could not conceal. The force of her powerful engine had driven her high and dry forward, whereafter the vainly fighting propeller had scooped a deep hole from the slanting sands behind. Now she lay at a badly strained angle, bow high, stern nearly awash, stanchions and double awning tilted far to starboard.

"Think she's damaged, Merry?" asked McKay.

"Not much, Rod, if at all. Strained a bit, of course; but she's got a good sound hull, and she was doing only about eight miles when she hit—unless those fools throttled her down afterward; and that's not likely."

"No, they'd hardly do that. Must have started her accidentally in the first place, monkeying around. Probably didn't even get the power on until an hour or two ago. Then they just hung on and let her rip."

"Wonder how the dumbbells thought they'd git her off o' here with that juice on," snorted Tim. "The more they pried her the higher she climbed. Say, sling out me Englishman toppy, looey. I'm gittin' woozy with this here sun."

Knowlton tossed out a couple of helmets. Tim and McKay donned them, dropping the mosquito-

veils behind their necks, but leaving their faces uncovered.

"Ye know, Loco," Tim went on, with easy familiarity, "these here cake-eater hats and veils always make me snicker, but now I've got used to mine I'm scairt to go without it when the sun's goin' strong. Us three guys, now, we bummed round the Amazon a lot, and we never wore nothin' but felt campaign hats. But these ain't so bad—except they always make me feel like I was back in France with me tin dome on."

"Ah! France? You were in the war?"

"Oh, sure. Up to our necks. This hard guy McKay was a cap'n, and Pretty-Boy Knowlton there was a looey—lieutenant, y'understand—and I was sergeant. And between us we licked the kaiser."

"Ah. I see," smiled the Spaniard. "I have often wondered just what it was that ended the war. My country was not in it, you know, and I was busy here in the far forests, where news is scarce. But now I quite understand." His glance strayed to the military-looking rifle in the Irishman's fist—identical with those carried by Knowlton and McKay. It was evident that his understanding included the efficiency with which those rifles had just been handled.

At that moment Portonio, carrying the repeater which he had picked from the sand, quietly spoke up.

"This is a good gun, capitán."

His steady gaze rested on McKay. The latter glanced at him, at the gun—and smiled a little.

"It is yours," he responded. Then, to León: "Your country, like mine, has some fool laws."

"Which only fools obey—unless they must," was the rejoinder. "Sí, it now is unlawful for any man in Venezuela to own a rifle or revolver. And what is the result? Honest men like Portonio are disarmed, while snakes like Tito and Mateo have weapons. Every outlaw, every murderer and robber has his gun. So we who live in lawless Rio Negro see to it that we have our guns also—else we do not live long. And those in Caracas who make such laws make us spit at our own government."

"O' course," agreed Tim. "The only kind o' law that's any good is the kind that folks can swaller. Give 'em law that makes 'em sick and they'll spit it right back in yer face. And they'll keep right on spittin' at ye after that, and it's yer own fault for bein' a fool. But speakin' o' law, we'll pass one right here and now, to let Tonio pack a gun and shoot any guy that looks

cock-eyed at him. All in favor, aye. There ain't no contrary." Having thus made amends for his recent suspicion of the faithful riverman, he added: "And now le's git this hooker off the beach."

Again the Indians went to work. With their spade-shaped paddles they dug steadily at the sand, forming a watery trough in which the boat could settle to a more even keel. Meanwhile Portonio shifted the cargo—boxes of food, rolls of dunnage, cans of fuel—into the extreme stern. At length the vessel lay at an easy angle, nearly afloat.

Then the paddles were cast aside, and all except Knowlton gathered at the bow. Within, the lieutenant tested the controls, giving the propeller a few preliminary revolutions at idling speed. All the machinery responded. So did the Indians.

At the first lifelike purr and quiver they leaped backward. It was not until their Spanish commander berated them, and then leaned against the sharp cutwater to prove its harmlessness, that the aborigines would return to close quarters with the devil-craft.

"All set?" queried Knowlton. "Snap into it! Heave-o! Heave!"

The eight heaved, lifting as they pushed. The engine, running in reverse, tugged the hull backward. Grinding on the sands, she dragged herself slowly outward—then jumped away. Her liberators tumbled in a heap. When they arose, the boat was idling in deep water.

"Nothing hurt. She runs like a clock," exulted the driver. "Tumble in, fellows, and we'll go somewhere else and have a regular feed. By the way, Señor León, where were you heading for?"

"For my sitio, a long distance up the river. I have just been visiting some Indians on the Rio Parú, and am on my way home. If you had traveled another half-mile yesterday you would have caught up with me, for I camped above the bend beyond your playa. Perhaps now we had best go downstream a little more and eat." He glanced along the river, which, to the eyes of the Northerners, showed no distinguishing marks at this point, but which he evidently knew well; for he added: "The Caño Camani is not far down, and at its mouth is a good camping spot. If you do not mind losing a little more distance—"

"Sure. Pile in."

The dugout filled again. Its paddlers, with a few strokes, sent it across the intervening water,

and its master swung himself into the powerboat, followed by McKay, Tim, and Portonio. But the Indians refused to enter the infernal craft which moved without paddle or pole; and this time León did not urge them. The piassava rope of the canoe was hitched astern, and as the launch forged ahead the round-barreled river-beast began to swim after, her crew squatting low and tensely clutching the thick gunwales.

With a gentle swish of divided waters, the strangely mated pair of small craft—one gliding gracefully with her aristocratic nose in air, the other wallowing in uncouth ugliness—slid down the heat-hazed stream. Rapidly they diminished into the straight vista below, veered around a bend, and were gone.

CHAPTER IV

THE LEGEND

IN a thinly wooded glade at the junction of the river and a slow-flowing creek, two small groups of men squatted on opposite sides of a dying fire. On the one hand, men of Saxon and Spanish blood talked and smoked in easy comradeship. On the other, motionless Indians waited. At the shore a pair of boats also waited. Whether all should travel again together, or go their separate ways, depended on the outcome of the present conference.

"We're up here for a foolish reason," Knowlton was saying. "That is, if you call it foolish to do something just for the sport of it. We three fellows are the kind who have to cut loose from civilization once in awhile and see if we can find something new. Call us adventurers, if you like, or vagabonds, or just plain fools."

"Or, perhaps, loco," put in Loco León, a twinkle in his eye.

Smiles and a short silence met his reference to

his own sobriquet. Then Knowlton went on as if he had not spoken.

"Anyhow, we get restless. We've knocked around quite a bit on the upper Amazon, as Tim said awhile ago, and had about enough of it. We've traveled into other parts of the world, of course, but been rather bored by them. South America seems to be the one region that calls us back. So here we are, back in South America. And the reason why we're on your river at present is this:

"Awhile ago Rod, here, ran across a legend that down in this region there's a 'lost white race'; a bunch of people with white skins, blue eyes, yellow hair; regular blonds, like you and me. It seems that this story is two or three hundred years old, but nobody has ever found out whether it's fact or fiction. On the face of it, it's a rather improbable tale, of course; but we three fellows have been around enough to know that a story may be absolutely true even if all the wise boys say it's poppycock. And—well, here we are, taking a look around."

León inhaled a lungful of cigarette smoke and slowly breathed it out.

"I see," he said. "Your legend said those blond people were on this Ventuari?"

"Well, no. We didn't hear of the Ventuari until recently. The story was very vague, but indicated that the blonds were in the mountains a little north of the Orinoco, near its head. So we got all the information we could about the Orinoco, but still we didn't know much. Then we decided to travel up the Orinoco and see whatever we could. Brought along this speed-boat for fast travel—we didn't realize just how rocky the big river was. If we hadn't been lucky enough to get hold of Portonio at Ciudad Bolívar we probably would have wrecked ourselves in the rapids higher up."

"You would." León nodded emphatically. "Those raudales kill even experienced rivermen. San Borje, Caribén—all the rest—are death-holes. And Atures and Maipures—how did you ever get so heavy a boat around those long stretches? The bullock carts there could never carry it."

"Oh, yes, they did. We had to take her apart, though: engine had to come out. It was a tough job to take her down and reassemble twice. But we made out all right. However, I'm getting ahead of my story. At Bolívar we asked a lot of questions about this 'white race' up here, and nobody knew anything about them. Finally one chap mentioned you. He said you could tell us

about them if anybody could. So we kept you in mind—”

“If you please, I should like to know just what words were used about me. And by whom.”

Again the Northerners looked quizzically at him. Suppressed smiles twitched the corners of all three mouths. Through those habitually half-closed lids the blond Spaniard watched them. Then Knowlton chuckled.

“Well, if you will have it, old chap, the words were about like this: ‘Find Loco León, who trades in the balata rubber in the Rio Negro country. He can tell you of more wonders than are in all the earth.’ As to just who said it, I’m not certain. There were several present at the time.”

“Ah, yes. And when it was said, all laughed.”

“Well, yes, they did.”

León smiled again, nonchalant as ever, and flipped his cigarette stub into the smouldering fire.

“And then?”

“Well, then we asked where to find you, and somebody answered: ‘In the wilds of Guayana, or the jungles of the Alto Orinoco, or wherever else the Mad Lion chooses to walk. The Rio Ventuari is his home—when he is there.’ We got a bit sore then,—thought they were kidding us

with riddles. But later on Portonio told us that what those chaps had said was literally true.

"Then at San Fernando we asked more questions. Rubbermen and others were positive that no blond Indians were on or near the Orinoco, but some said they'd heard of such people away up in the Guayana mountains—where this Ventuari comes from. So, as I said before, here we are."

"I see." The Ventuari man tilted his peaked sombrero a bit and reflectively rubbed an ear. "And what do you know about this Ventuari?"

"Nothing, except that it's said to be very rough in the upper part."

"Sí. Rough indeed. As for these lost white people, señor—what gave you faith that such people exist?"

"Meaning that they don't exist?" McKay thrust in.

The Spaniard smiled, his expression unreadable.

"I have not said so, my friend," he countered. "Perhaps they do—perhaps not—quién sabe? I merely asked a question."

McKay's eyes narrowed a trifle. But Knowlton answered the question.

"I wouldn't exactly say that we had great faith in that legend. As I've said before, we were restless; wanted to go somewhere; and this

was a good excuse to come here. At the same time, such a thing may be possible. For instance, it's a pretty well accepted fact that North America was visited—long before Columbus' time—by the Norsemen; there are even indications that they made settlements there. They disappeared. It also may be possible that the Norsemen, or some other blond people, reached South America, and haven't died out. If they coasted down North America and then followed the line of the Indies, they'd hit South America near the Orinoco mouth. Then, for some reason or other, they might get up into the Guayana highlands and, through force of circumstances, remain there. Nobody knows to the contrary. In fact, so far as we can learn, nobody knows anything about what's in this Guayana territory—a fine large piece of land full of forests and mountains and rivers, practically all of it unexplored. In such a place almost anything's possible!"

His voice took on a tinge of enthusiasm as he talked, and under his silky lashes grew the fire of the dreamer, forever looking beyond the far horizon for mystic lands: the flame which, centuries before, must have glowed in the souls of Drake, of Raleigh, of many another adventurer who journeyed over the rim of the known world

to seek the unknown—and which still burns, inextinguishable, in the heart of many an unsung rover today. And under the drooping lids of Loco León, watching him, suddenly kindled an answering spark. Hitherto he had been weighing these newcomers, building up his judgment of them through word and act, through movement and expression. Now, as he glimpsed the inner spirit of the other blond and caught its reflection under the brows of his red- and black-crowned mates, he ceased to probe; for now he knew them.

But of this he gave no sign. Coolly he drew out a roll of tabarí bark and stripped from it a thin sheet; produced a small rubber pouch and dropped shreds of black tobacco from it to the bark; rolled the cigarette, licked it, lit it, and drew a long puff.

"True," he said then. "In this Guayana almost anything is possible. I myself have seen strange things here. How many other strange things there may be—things which I, living here for years, have neither seen nor heard—I cannot guess. It is an amazing land; a land of mystery, of secrets which no man born outside its hills can comprehend—yes, of things which even its own sons do not understand."

He paused, his glance straying to the four aborigines. Although they could not hope to understand the outlandish language with which he talked to the foreigners, they were listening intently to his voice, watching him with unwinking attention; four sphinxes, betraying no thought of their own, but seeking to absorb his.

"There," he continued, nodding toward them, "is Guayana. These men are born of Guayana. I have known them, and their nation has known me, for years; they are my most trusted men, and I am the only white man in the world who is trusted by their race. They will work for me, fight for me, even die for me, because they know and trust me so well. Yet they will not tell me the secrets of their nation. In all the years I have known them, they have never even told me their names!

"They have given me names, yes,—but they are Spanish names, every one; not their real names. You will find it so with all the Indians you meet here. Few of the Indians of this Ventuari can speak Spanish; but if by chance they meet a white man, every one of them has a Spanish name to give—the few who do know Spanish give names to all the rest.

"These men are of the Maquiritare nation.

All this Ventuari country, and the country of the Rio Caura to the eastward, is the land of the Maquiritares. All Maquiritares are my friends. But when I go about in their land, there are some places where even I cannot go. The Maquiritares—these men squatting here, who will do almost anything for me—will not go into those places with me. Neither will they let me go there alone. If I try, accidents happen; my canoe disappears, my food vanishes, or I fall sick. As soon as I turn back, the canoe is found again—new food appears—my sickness leaves me. And I never learn why I must not go into those spots. My men will not tell me what is there. They are utterly dumb.

“That is Guayana. It holds its secrets well. To us white men—to us who are not of Guayana blood—it will not give those secrets. And I know that even to its own sons it does not tell all. By living among these people I have picked up a little of their language—not much, for it is a very queer tongue, but enough to understand them at times; and I have never let them know that I did understand it. So I have heard them talk to one another, and sometimes their talk has shown that there are weird things which they cannot grasp: things dreadful, mysterious,

inhuman—I do not know what to call them—in some parts of this country. Yes, señores, Guayana is—”

Abruptly he halted, searching the faces of his auditors. Then he gave a short, hard laugh.

“But these are the ravings of Loco León—the Crazy Lion—who ‘can tell you of more marvels than are in all the earth’! So I shall say no more.”

The three frowned.

“Oh, say, old chap, that’s not fair,” protested Knowlton. “What do we care for what those Bolívar wise-guys said? What we want to know is—”

“Pardon,” broke in León. “What you want to know is the truth. Bien. The way to know the truth is to see it with your own eyes. I may tell you the truth, but unless you can look on that truth you may not believe it. Go yourselves and see what you may. Whatever help I can give you is yours at command.”

“Thanks,” acknowledged McKay. “You’ve already helped us out of a rather bad hole, and we’re mighty grateful. If you could get us a good Indian or two, and give us a little map of the upper river—”

“If you wish, I will go with you myself.”

"Fine! We certainly do wish it."

"Bien." León nodded carelessly. "I am idle at present—there is nothing to do until the next wet season approaches and my workers begin to gather. So —"

"Say, listen, Loco," begged Tim. "Loosen up about them blondies, now. Are they real or jest a yarn?"

"You shall see," was the noncommittal answer. "Do you know, Señor Ryan, why I am called Loco León? Because I have told tales of this land to men who have not seen what I have seen. They made a joke of my tales, of my name, —changing my real name of Lucio to Loco. For the laughter of those town-dwelling fools I care no more than for the braying of burros. Yet you men heard that laughter before you met me, and I have seen that it is still alive in your minds. And since you are here and may see for yourselves what is truth, I shall tell no tales to you."

He smiled again, but his tone was final. The three probed his face a moment. Knowlton shrugged.

"So be it," he acquiesced. "By the way, are these Indians up above likely to resent our invasion of their country? We're strangers."

"I do not know," the Spaniard admitted.

"Those on the Ventuari itself will make no trouble, since they will see that you are my friends. But of those on the side rios and caños I am not so sure. Some of them are very wild. And you must understand, señores, that this country is closed to white men."

"Oho!" All three sat up a little straighter. "How's that?"

"Many years ago—perhaps a hundred, perhaps two hundred—soldiers and Jesuit priests came up the Caura. They made forts and tried to 'civilize' the Indians. The Indians endured them for a time. Then, in one night, they destroyed forts, soldiers, everything. And since that time no men from outside have been allowed to stay in the Guayana mountains—except myself."

"Hm! Sounds interesting," commented McKay. "But we don't want to fight these chaps."

"Nor do I want you to fight them. That is one reason why I go with you," was the candid response. "The Maquiritaires are my best friends. I want no harm to come to them, or to you. They are good people when one knows them, but—they are descendants of the old Caribs; and, as you may know, when the Caribs entered a fight it was to the death."

Tim nodded sagely, again glancing at the four sphinxes.

"I knowed these gorillas was hard-boiled," he asserted. "Missus Ryan's li'l boy ain't goin' to start nothin' with 'em, I'll tell the cock-eyed world."

León laughed and arose. The others, too, stood up, the Indians rising as if moved by a single spring. Portonio gathered up the metal dishes from which he and his companions had eaten provisions far more succulent than had seemed likely that morning. By tacit consent, all moved to the boats.

A brief bustle of embarkation, a gentle throbbing, a subdued swash—and once more the creek-mouth was empty. The council-fire became a mere patch of ash. Its work was done, its glow departed. Yet it was not dead; for its ruddy warmth had entered now into the red blood of men, welding those who had been strangers into a steel-strong band. And that flame was to burn on, sometimes flaring, sometimes flickering, but never failing, through many a weird hour to come.

CHAPTER V

A STONE IN THE POOL

ANOTHER afternoon sun hurled its javelins of heat down on the winding Rio Ventuari. Through its glare glided the incongruously mated pair of boats.

At the driver's wheel sat Knowlton, peering steadily ahead through amber goggles, responding at once to the occasional directions of Loco León, who lounged beside him. Lolling in folding chairs behind driver and pilot, McKay and Tim sleepily watched the passing shores. Still farther aft, draping his length over the cargo as loosely as a mere huddle of clothes, Portonio indulged in the South American's inalienable right of drowsing when other occupation lacked. And at the end of the tow-rope the Indians, their awe of the devil-boat now somewhat abated, loafed luxuriously in their master's cabin, enjoying to the full the miraculous experience of traveling upstream without work.

As ever, the shores were empty of human life—or, at least, appeared so. If any spying eyes

peeped from the dense greenery on either hand, their owners kept themselves hidden. Nowhere in the verdant wall was any man-made opening, any palm hut; nowhere beside the banks—no longer vertical and naked, but sloping and bushy—lay any canoe. Yet, from time to time, appeared indisputable evidence that men were not far away, or had been here and gone. At the mouth of some narrow caño occasionally showed a tripodic frame, resembling the bare poles of a tepee, enclosing a grate on which had been roasted big game; or a few palm-fronds, leaning aslant from a patch of sand like great feathers, betokened the recent presence of men who had slept a night beneath those frail dew-shelters. Sometimes on a playa, too, appeared charred fagots and the massive bones of a slaughtered tapir.

“Indios,” explained León. “They live up these caños—many days away, perhaps—and now in the dry time they come down to hunt and fish a few days, then go away again.”

“Maquiritaires?” inquired McKay.

“No. Other peoples. Macos or Yavaranos, Curacichanos or wandering Piaroas. There are several small nations—not all of whom are my friends, so I have nothing to do with them. The

Maquiritares are highlanders, and live always in the forests. This country along here is more low and open; there are many sabanas, with forests along all the streams, and great hills which stand alone, shooting up and standing like blocks. A queer land, with queer unknown peoples in it."

His mouth closed tightly again, as if to hold back any further information regarding those mysterious dwellers in a mysterious land. The Northerners, asking no further questions, covertly studied him once more. In a way, he was something of a mystery himself—at least, to his own countrymen; a man who, though possessing considerable wealth derived from his balata business, chose to pass his life in the wilds rather than in a town. This in itself was so incomprehensible to the townsmen of Ciudad Bolívar (the metropolis of the Orinoco region) that it was one of the reasons why they called him "Loco." To their minds there could be but two logical reasons for a man to live in this dangerous hinterland: that he was so keen to make money from the rubber trade that he was willing to gamble his life, or that he found it unhealthy to reside within reach of federal magistrates. To León neither of these reasons applied; for he was known to have no great regard for money—

though he brought out the best cargoes known in the entire region—and, since the ousting of the Castro regime and the assumption of power by Gomez, he had nothing to fear from the government.

Yet, though he was a mystery to Bolívar, it had been quite apparent that he was well liked there. At San Fernando de Atabapo, on the contrary, it had been fully as obvious that the reverse was true. There, though little had been said of him, the mention of his name had brought sinister looks into the eyes of men. In view of the unsavory reputation of that town, however, and the recent charges of León himself against its highest official, its enmity might be considered almost a compliment to his own character. The voyagers had already heard that San Fernando had long borne an evil name; that recently it had been for years the headquarters of an army of outlaws; that the rubber-traders and rubber-workers now composing the bulk of its population habitually enslaved and maltreated Indians in order to get out their balata crops. With the denizens of such a town Loco León, honest man and friend of aborigines, would hardly be popular.

The scrutiny and speculation of the North-

erners now was not prompted either by distrust of this self-reliant rover or by failure to understand him. Adventurers themselves, lovers of the wild places, they felt that here was a kindred spirit: that the spell of the wilderness held him in thrall, and that he could no more remain cooped in a town than could the restless león (puma) whose name he bore. And, though he refused the information they asked and was leading them into unknown dangers, they harbored no suspicion of his motives. What they most wished to know about him was the nature of his experiences in this land where, as he himself admitted, almost anything was possible. But to question him further would be worse than useless. The set of his jaw made that fact plain.

So they rushed on, covering hourly a distance which, in a pole-propelled dugout, would have cost at least half a day of steady toil. Sunset was at hand when their pilot gave the word to slow down and prepare to land. As the flow of power diminished and the up-tilted bow sank slowly to the surface, a dry creek-mouth became visible ahead, at the right.

"There," pointed León, "is the Caño Negro. On it is my sitio."

At the designated spot showed no sign of life.

Only the steep-walled gap yawned, like other dried-up caños seen at intervals farther down. Yet, as soon as the boats stopped at the opening, men appeared as if from nowhere: Indians who emerged from thick brush, grinned at their patron, and stared at the strange craft and the strange white men.

"This, señores, is the end of the road for your gas-boat," he went on. "A little way above here are the cataracts, which no boat can pass, by water or by land. Tomorrow we shall have your equipment shifted to canoes. Now let us see what we may find here."

With that he mounted a slope at one side of the ravine and led the way inland. Leaving Portonio to direct the transportation of the personal kits, the Northerners followed. Along a narrow foot-track they passed, and across a flimsy bridge spanning the waterless water-course, and so to the domicile of their new partner. And there, as the sun plunged below the horizon and swift night overspread the land, they made themselves at home.

The wilderness estate of the rover comprised a small clearing, a half-dozen palm huts, and a plantation. The houses stood only a hundred yards from the river, but were as invisible from

the stream as if they had been miles farther back; for between them and the Ventuari rose a tall curtain of trees and brush, pierced only by the creek-bed and the footpath. The plantation, farther back, was likewise concealed by a screen of verdure which seemed mere useless jungle. Like his Indian friends, Loco León dwelt in semi-seclusion, leaving at the main stream no advertisement of his whereabouts. And, like them, he made his habitation extremely simple.

To the Americans, who had expected a substantial adobe house, it came as a bit of a surprise to find their host's quarters no better than those of an Orinoco peon: a windowless, flimsy thatch structure, with walls and roof both of palm-fronds, and only one opening, high up at the peak, for ventilation and light. In lieu of doors, burlap curtains hung in the front and rear portals as partial protection against the swarming day-mosquitoes. Within, a crude table and a couple of chairs, with a hammock, comprised virtually all the furnishings. The only provision for a night light was a common kerosene lantern dangling on a palm-fibre cord above the table.

Externally, four of the other five huts were identical with that of the master, the walls pro-

tecting their Indian tenants from the insect plague. The odd one was without walls: an open-sided shed, wherein stood a mud fireplace—useful for baking cassava or roasting game—and a couple of pole tables on which various kinds of work could be performed unhindered by rain. In all, the place was a camp, rather than a home; a permanent and absolutely masculine camp. In it was no woman—not even a cook.

The cooking tonight was done by Portonio, who, at a small clay stove at the rear, concocted an excellent meal for his señores. When it was eaten he withdrew, carrying his rifle, to the power-boat, there to sleep as night guard. The others lounged in their hammocks, slung in horse-shoe formation from the pole rafters. Save for the feeble illumination from the lantern, the room was swathed in shadow. Outside, the gloom preceding moonrise lay thick.

"A rude, rough place," León deprecated, glancing about him, "but one which satisfies all my needs. If enemies come and destroy it in my absence—a thing which has happened more than once—they have burned only a few palm perreras—dog-houses—which my men can rebuild in a few days."

"But how about your goods?" inquired

Knowlton. "You must have quite a bit of trade-stuff for the Indians when the balata season is on."

"Oh, yes. Worth as much as ten thousand bolívares, sometimes. But you may be sure that I take good care of that. At a little distance from here, in three different houses hidden in thick bush and known only to my trusted men, I keep all those things. And I keep them under watch at all times. A few of my boys live in a small guard-house there, and any stranger who might blunder into that spot would not be likely to blunder out again. What is more, I keep here no Indian who has a woman. There is no such thing as keeping a secret when a woman has a way of learning it."

"So you don't trust all Maquiritaires," suggested McKay.

"I trust few men—white, black, or brown—and no women. Indians are human; some among them will lie and steal, just as among us whites. Why not? Should we, the noble white race, who kill and rob and cheat one another, expect the simple Indian to be better than ourselves? That is not sense. Yet the Maquiritare is usually far more honest than most of the civilized people who live outside this region. It is against the

few who are not honest that I keep watch; and against those other Indians who are not Maquiritaires and not my friends; and, most of all, against thieves and killers from San Fernando."

"But a woman wouldn't have much chance to tell tales here, would she?" quizzed Knowlton. "You can't have many visitors in this place."

"More than you would think, señor. Indians come and go. Let the father or brother of a woman living here come to visit, and she would tell him all she knew. No woman can keep her mouth shut. And the wilderness has many ears, my friends. Yes, in this empty land, where there seem none to hear, a carelessly spoken word may travel league after league—up the river, along the caños, across the sabana, over the mountains—and die only after it has gone north and south and east and west for hundreds of miles. It is like a little stone dropped into a quiet pool. It sinks and is at once forgotten by the one who dropped it there; but the ripples of that stone go on and on until they reach the shore."

There was a silent pause. Then the talk turned to the affairs of the outer world, and the little homily on the danger of loose tongues was forgotten. Tales of the war began to flow. Tim had just completed a somewhat indecorous, but

highly diverting, anecdote of his days in France, when León's gaze darted to the doorway. Outside had sounded a grunting remark and reply.

"Who is there?" demanded the master of the estate.

The burlap moved aside. In came a head, squinting toward the hammocks. A voice replied:

"Frasco. Men from Caño Tamara are here. One speaks for all."

"Bien. Bring him in." To his companions León added: "The Caño Tamara is up in the hills, and its people rather wild."

The man following the shirted Frasco bore out his words. Totally unclothed, save for a clout so tiny as to be scarcely a covering; ear-lobes thrust through with short sections of cane; hair hanging to his eyes, which glinted warily at the lounging conclave; body inclined slightly forward, step stealthy and tense as that of a stalking jaguar—this fellow was instinct with the spirit of the wilds.

"I have never seen this man before," quietly said León. "He is from far back." Then, in Spanish, to Frasco: "He brings no message?"

"No. He and three more travel about. Pepe met them in the sabana. They stay here tonight.

They hear three strangers are here. They will not sleep until you tell this one it is well."

"Bien. I will talk with him and calm his mind. He speaks no Spanish?"

"A little. He can understand."

"It is good." Aside, in English, he remarked: "This is one more of the many oddities of this land: an Indian who, I am sure, has never before met white men, yet who knows the white men's tongue. No doubt he has learned it from some Spanish-speaking Maquiritare." Addressing the newcomer, he declared: "All is well. These men are of good heart and from a land far away. Speak now the news of the Caño Tamara to Loco León."

The Tamara man made no answer. In his attitude, however, a slight change was noticeable—a subtle relaxation from his wary tension, as the calm voice reassured him. For a moment he keenly surveyed every face before him. Then his gaze returned to León.

"I have asked him too big a question," said the latter, "in asking for all news. It will take many small questions and answers to bring it out. If it wearies you, I will send him out and talk further in the morning."

"No. Go ahead," said McKay.

Deliberately León began, making inconsequential inquiries. The visitor replied, at first curtly, then with a little more detail—though always slowly and haltingly, as his command of the Spanish language was decidedly limited. Before long the others lost all interest in the trivial conversation and let their thoughts go roving to other matters. McKay and Knowlton yawned. Tim, on the other hand, grew restless.

Saying nothing, he arose and sauntered doorward; drew aside the burlap, looked out, and found the clearing lit by the moon, which now was rolling up from behind the trees. He stepped through the portal and stood a minute contemplating the clear sky and the shadow-streaked earth. Then, walking aimlessly, he strolled away among the other huts.

As he approached the open shed, figures suddenly materialized beside the mud furnace; forms of men who, hitherto squatting almost invisible in the shadow, had abruptly started up. Tim halted short. Then, noting that two of the five wore shirts, he resumed his easy stride. In a minute or two he paused again beside a corner-post, grinning at the silent quintet.

"Hullo," he greeted. Getting no answer, he repeated in Spanish: "Buen' noche'."

A grunt answered.

"Tamara?" he pursued, nodding toward the three unclothed men.

"Sí," answered one of León's retainers. "These are of Tamara."

"Uh-huh. Speak Spanish?"

"One does. A little."

"Bueno. You can sleep without fear, amigos. We are friends. Your comrade now gives news to Loco. All is well."

One of the three rovers—all of whom, Tim now perceived, grasped spears or bows—slowly assumed an easier position. The other two, not understanding, maintained their suspicious readiness until a shirted Maquiritare said something in monotone. Then they also stood more loosely. With another grin, Tim strolled onward.

After a few steps, however, he slowed, his lids narrowing shrewdly. Over his shoulder he asked in a casual tone:

"How many days to the place of the blancos puros—the pure whites—the blondos?"

"Twenty days," replied a voice.

Tim's eyes glistened. A chuckle of exultation rose to his throat, but he swallowed it. In the same casual tone he remarked:

"Good. Then we shall be there before another full moon."

No answer. He walked on, inwardly rejoicing, and swung around in an apparently unchosen circle, heading back to the house. He did not observe that the five aborigines had looked at one another with widening stares, nor pay any attention to the fact that they now were talking in low but excited tones.

As he reentered the house, León glanced at him, then at his drowsy partners. With a short smile, he arose and ended the uninteresting talk. The Indians filed out. León himself walked as far as the door, where he stood a minute with head outside, looking over his peaceful domain. Tim snatched his opportunity.

"Hey, fellers!" he whispered. "I got the low-down about them blondies. They're real! I jest asked an Injun, sort of off-hand, how far it was to the blanco puro country, and he says twenty days."

A quick look and a swift grin passed between Knowlton and McKay. Neither spoke. When León returned he found all three, with faces expressionless, undressing preparatory to donning pajamas.

Presently the light was blown out, and within

the house sounded only the breathing of five resting men. Outside, in the open shed, four more men—the naked rovers from the Tamara—hung their hammocks and lay down in them. The pair of Maquiritaires who had kept them company withdrew to another hut, muttering as if something troubled them. In all the clearing of the Caño Negro moved no human figure. It was the time for sleep.

But, after a time, those four men reclining in the shed sat up again. They looked and listened; put their heads together; talked in short whispers. Then spoke the oldest, in a low tone of decision.

“The time has come. Loco León has walked our ways alone. It was well. Now he brings strange whites. It is not well. The word must go to the Talking Mountain. It must go fast. It must go now.”

Swiftly, silently, they took down the light cotton nets, wadded them tight, slung them on their shoulders; picked up spears, arrows, bows; crept out into the moonlight; filed way toward the dark forest, beyond which lay the open, rolling savanna; and were gone, noiseless as flitting ghosts.

Into the vast pool of mystery which men call

Guayana had dropped a tiny stone: a few careless words spoken by a flame-haired stranger. And now, unseen and unsuspected, the ripple was stealing away across the silences, creeping steadily and surely into the shadowy Unknown.

CHAPTER VI

A SNAKE IN THE TRAIL

THUNDERING over a precipice, the river Ventuari plunged in white fury down a long boulder-bordered chute between steep jungled hills. Then it smoothed out and flowed in a sweeping curve away around a bend. Beyond that turn it hissed resentfully as it encountered the blunt bows of two dugout canoes forging doggedly upward against its strength. Finding its resistance futile, it slid away behind them and let them go their way.

Within those two slow-moving craft traveled fourteen men, all light of skin. Ten of these were at work: eight long-shirted Indians wielding lengthy but light poles, with occasional shifts to paddles; the other two holding the honored position of steersman. The pilot of the first boat was an Indian; of the second, Portonio. The remaining four were McKay and Knowlton, Tim and León, paired in separate canoes, and lounging against cargoes of equal size covered by tarpaulins. Over them arched no cabins.

Until they returned down the river they would not again see such comforts.

The speed-boat, which recently had kicked the leagues behind it with such contemptuous ease, now had vanished from the waterway. Up a narrow, deep, twisting and almost invisible caño it lay hidden, half a mile above the settlement of León; and there, moored by a long chiquechique rope which would allow it to rise or fall with any change of water-level, it would await the return of its masters from the fierce waters where it could not go. Within it, protected by a snugly tied canvas cover from rain and any prowling creatures, remained all superfluous equipment. Now their outfits consisted only of personal kits; a couple of army locker trunks containing photographic, medical, and similar supplies; food and matches, arms and ammunition. Since Loco León had volunteered his services and those of his men, all other articles had become unnecessary; and even these might, at least in part, be cached at some point higher up. It was a foregone conclusion that the upland of Guayana was no place for the transportation of excess baggage.

León himself carried only a change of clothing, a machete, a hammock, a lantern, some smoked

peccary and cassava, his rifle, and a goodly supply of .44 cartridges. Of these blunt bullets he seemed to have a plentiful store despite the rigid laws of Venezuela, and to Portonio he had given a couple of boxes as casually as if merely tendering a cigarette. That stalwart riverman now sat with his new-found San Fernando gun between his feet, where he could glance down at it occasionally in quiet joy of possession. As for the other rifle—the one taken from dead Tito by the Indians—that was now reposing in one of León's secret houses at Caño Negro. He had coolly taken it from the Maquiritare who first seized it, and that man had made no protest. For some reason of his own, the master of the Ventuari did not allow his retainers to possess rifles. The only weapons which they now brought with them were machetes, stiff brazilwood bows, five-foot cane arrows tipped with steel, and a long Maquiritare gun—this firearm being a single-barreled muzzle-loading shotgun of small gauge, useful only for killing birds at short range.

Steadily the two hollow logs breasted the current, crawling upward foot by foot as the polers swung and pushed and stooped with rhythmic sway. Around the curve they swam—and the listless passengers sat up straight, peering at the

white water beyond. The newcomers still were watching its savage rush when their canoes grounded at a sandy shore and León arose.

"The first of several little obstacles which you will meet," he remarked, with a wave of the hand. "The cataract of Equencua. We now must take to the broad highway and walk."

Tim scowled at the dense tangle of timber blockading both the shores above, while the other watched him quizzically.

"Yeah," he grunted. "I've traveled them broad highways before now. If they're real broad they're most a foot wide; otherways, about four inches. We ain't tenderfeet, Loco—not after muckin' round in the swamps over east o' the Andes. We've walked where there wasn't nothin' to walk on half the time. Let us git one toe-nail onto that road o' yourn, and ye can't lose us."

The rover nodded, looking well pleased by the red man's sturdy self-reliance, and stepped out on the sand. All the others debarked, and the Indians began removing cargo.

"What did you call this place?" asked Knowlton.

"Equencua. An Indian name. The Indians of our country, as you perhaps know, make their

manioc—or cassava—from poisonous roots which are grated and then squeezed in a long narrow basket, pressing out most of the poison. That basket is called 'equencua'. So, because the hills here narrow and squeeze the river together to drop over that cataract, the Indians have named the place Equencua, or Squeezer."

"Hm! And yet some folks say Indians have no imagination."

"I know. It only shows that they do not know the Indian. But let us go, friends. We have spent much of the day in reaching here, and we had best move on to the upper port. I have there a shed where we can sleep."

The Indians, without orders, were already dividing among themselves the articles to be portaged, which they laid in cylindrical pack-baskets with broad bark tump-lines—all except the two most muscular fellows, who were to transport the twin trunks on their heads. The Americans slung on their shoulders small but heavy-laden rucksacks—containing, among other things, rolled-up web belts with holstered pistols attached thereto—and followed their leader. Portonio, his rifle snuggled in the crook of an arm, loitered behind, keeping a watchful eye on the Maquiritaires to make sure that nothing was

overlooked or neglected. Tim, glancing back, chuckled.

"Hey, looeey, lookit Tonio," he prompted. "Notice how him and that gun are glued together? Git the way he stands, and the way his hat's canted over one eye—much as to say: 'I'll tell the cock-eyed world any gorilla that wants trouble can come and git it!' The lad can handle himself, I bet."

The others looked, smiled, and plodded on. With the acquisition of that rifle the stalwart riverman had, indeed, taken on a new air of self-reliance: an assurance wholly devoid of arrogance, yet tinged with that cool confidence marking the natural gunman when armed. Heretofore only a quiet subordinate, now he was virtually a comrade in arms.

While the leaders trudged away across an apparently pathless jumble of rocks, sand, and driftwood, he remained until the canoes were securely tied up and the pack-baskets and trunks hoisted into place. Then, as the Indians lined out toward the cataract, he trailed in the rear, gun swinging loosely in one brawny fist, eyes roving in casual but all-seeing surveys of ground and trees, after the fashion of a veteran wilderness traveler.

Before long the loosely joined column had entered a foot-wide path which squirmed along the slope among thick timber. At once the air cooled, and the mosquitoes magically vanished. With the disappearance of the stinging pests the Indians halted, unslung packs, stripped off their shirts, wadded them up as head-cushions; took up their burdens again, and resumed their progress. Attired now in nothing but small red clouts, carrying their jungle weapons with habitual readiness, planting their ground-gripping feet in true jungle style—one foot directly before the other in a straight line, instead of with the slight right-and-left irregularity characteristic of dwellers in more open lands—they were metamorphosed as subtly as Portonio; changed from semi-civilized boatmen to noiseless creatures of the tropic forest. Tim chuckled again as he viewed them.

“Begorry, this feels like ol’ times,” he asserted. “Marchin’ along in the bush, not knowin’ jest where we’re goin’ and not givin’ more’n half a dang, with a gang of Injuns trailin’ us. Boats are bokoo jolly and all that, but they ain’t like the ol’ shanks’ mare. Hep! Hep! Git-that-step! Here comes the Yanks!”

And with that he lifted up a raucous voice that

dominated the tree-muffled roar of the cataract in a burst of song.

"We're the infantree, the infantree,
With the dirt behind our ears!
The infantree, the infantree,
That laps up all the beers!
The cavalry and artillery
And the bloomin' engineers—
Say, they couldn't lick the infantry
In a hundred thousand years!"

As that stentorian howl tore through the rumble of the waters, Loco León and his Indians stopped dead; the Ventuari man squinting back, the Maquiritares staring ahead, at the vociferous songster. Knowlton turned his face skyward and voiced the long-drawn, lugubrious bays of a hound. McKay laughed aloud,—the sound of his mirth being drowned, however, by the discords of the other two.

"Caramba! What is the matter here?" demanded León, as the uproar ceased.

"Nothing," was Knowlton's sober response. "Tim had a bellyache and I had an earache. It's all over now. Proceed."

The Spaniard, after catching McKay's twinkling eye, proceeded. His pace now was almost a double-time, and after a few rods of maintaining the new gait neither Tim nor his partners had

breath to spare for vocal efforts. Nothing further was said—except that Tim muttered something to himself about “guys that ain’t got no ear for music,” and the Maquiritaires passed back one word which made Portonio snicker. Had he heard and understood that word, the red-headed man might have been wroth; for it was “areguato”—the Indian name for the big red howling monkey, than which no other tropic animal voices yells more atrocious.

The trail, despite windings, and a few sharp pitches at the beginning, was quite direct and showed signs of much use. Fallen trees encumbered it at intervals—prone trunks of mora, ceiba, or other giants so hard or huge that no attempt to clear them away had been made; and around these the path detoured through thicker going, where an occasional macanilla palm presented fearsome thorns to wound a carelessly swung hand. Along the narrow aisle drifted rare and beautiful butterflies. Overhead, with soft whistles of alarm, a troop of broad-tailed marimundos—resembling great squirrels—went leaping away among the branches as the dreaded humans were spied. All around stood a labyrinth of tree and bush and woody cables, through which the blazing sun penetrated so

weakly that the shadowy air was wondrously cool.

The muffled thunder of Equencua diminished to a growl, to a grumble, to a murmur—and died out. León held to his rapid stride, passing onward without sound save for the rustling of leaves touching him on either side. The Americans, a bit short-winded after their recent inactive voyaging in boats, were breathing hoarsely now, but keeping close behind. Suddenly he stopped.

“Cuidado! Culebra!” he warned. “Take care! Snake!”

His rifle darted to an aim. At the same instant a dark streak shot straight at him from under a fern, dead ahead. It failed—by inches only—to reach his feet. With blurring speed it twisted itself again into coil. During that infinitesimal interval the rifle-muzzle jerked downward to a new aim. A shot crashed—León leaped aside—a writhing form tumbled about in a whorl of blue smoke.

“Ajo!” he breathed. “That was close!”

Close, indeed; for only his swift, sure shot had saved him. The big bullet, shattering the reptile a few inches below the neck, had left the head intact, and as that head grew motionless its venomous flatness testified to its deadliness.

Though the body still squirmed, its approximate length could be gauged—nearly ten feet. Its color was a bluish green, with blue-black patches along its back: a hue blending so closely with the shadowy forest growth as to make it virtually invisible to the sharpest eye.

"A daya," explained its slayer. "The worst snake in our country, for it is not only poisonous but vindictive. It always attacks. It will sometimes follow a man in order to attack him."

"Pleasant little playmate to meet in the dark," commented McKay.

"Very."

León drew his machete, cut off the head, and, impaling it on the point, cast it far to one side; then heaved the body after it. As he cleaned the blade by shoving it repeatedly into the soil, an Indian called:

"What is it?"

"Traga venado," coolly lied the Spaniard. "A small one, asleep by the path."

The Americans gave him an odd look. They knew that the traga venado (deer swallower) was the land boa, non-venomous and marked much differently than this deadly reptile. But they said nothing. León turned away, and the march was resumed.

Presently they emerged into sunlight. In a gap amongst the greenery, perhaps ten yards wide, stood a pole-framed, palm-roofed hut. Beyond, in what seemed a rocky creek, lay moored three dugouts. Mosquitoes appeared—though not in such swarms as below the cataract. León walked into the hut and waved a hand toward the rafters in mute invitation to hang hammocks. The Indians, coming on with increased speed, hastily doffed their pack-baskets and donned their shirts, through which the short-jawed insects could not bite. To the stings on legs, hands, and faces they gave no attention.

Hammocks were triced up, and a fire built outside, where Portonio laid aside his rifle and once more became a camp cook. The Indians, drawn by the magnet of fire, squatted mute and expressionless around it. Then said León, with a look toward the canoes:

"You now have passed the first barrier, friends. Up to Equencua any man can go—with a good boat and good luck. Beyond this fall no man can go, unless men of Guayana lead the way. Here is a maze of islands and rocks and rushing currents, where a stranger can lose himself forever. You will see more of this part tomorrow."

He paused, his gaze straying to the Indians.

"If you believe in omens, you had best turn back now," he added. "That snake which just struck at us on our first march—that was very bad luck. It was the worst kind of snake, you remember; and it lay squarely in our path and struck hard. If these men of mine knew what sort of snake that was and what it did, they would be badly worried."

The three laughed shortly.

"What happened to the bad luck after it struck?" reminded Knowlton. "It got smashed."

"Now ye're talkin', looey!" approved Tim. "We've bucked worse luck than that—howlin' head-hunters and cannibals and the kaiser and worse yet—and we're still goin' strong. Me, I'm stickin' on this trail."

"Right!" clipped McKay.

Loco León, the Mad Lion, smiled and shrugged.

"So be it," he answered, and began building a cigarette.

The hammocks swayed in silence for a time, their occupants lazily flapping away insects, blowing smoke, and resting. Then Knowlton remarked:

"Wonder where those wild chaps went to—

those Tamara fellows. They lit out bright and early this morning."

"I have wondered a little myself," admitted León. "Usually such visitors like to linger for a day or more. But one never can tell what those wild ones are thinking. Perhaps they were uneasy about remaining near so many white men. *Quién sabe?* My own men know only that they were gone before anyone else arose."

They smoked on, while the sun climbed the trees and the little gap became a pool of shadow. Beyond, the waiting dugouts swung at the ends of their ropes, nodding to one another as if sharing some secret of the savage old river. Beside the fire the Indians, who had overheard that name "Tamara," glanced cornerwise from face to face; then, their brown eyes inscrutable, gazed wordless into the smouldering flame.

CHAPTER VII

THE BLACKENED MEN

FOR two days the oddly assorted expedition toiled upward through a welter of rocks, reefs, and rapids, following tortuous channels wherein snarling white waters fought to hurl it back on jagged fangs of stone. On every hand stood islands, varying in size from small bare domes to sizable expanses heavily jungled; and from all sides, as the canoes stubbornly nosed their way onward, new brawling currents lunged in to attack them. As León had said, the river now was a maze: a wide, bewildering raudal where the stream divided into a crazy network of tumbling creeks and brooks and little falls, among which no stranger could have picked his course.

Progress was attained only by poling in the brief smooth stretches and by hauling and heaving in others. For much of the time the Indians were overboard, some bracing themselves on spurs of stone ahead and tugging at the ropes, while the others, waist-deep astern, shoved the ponderous craft upward and forward to clear the

serrated edges of submerged dikes. Meanwhile the señores picked their way as best they could along the rubble at the sides, reentering the canoes wherever it was practicable to ride a few rods before again disembarking.

As they had done below Equencua, they journeyed with two canoes, the third one available at the upper port having been left at its mooring. Those with which they now traveled would in turn end their voyage below the next cataract, beyond which still others would be used. All these boats, and others besides, were the property of León, whose balata business and personal activities along the river necessitated the maintenance of a number of floating craft at different strategic points.

About midafternoon on the second day a rumble from upstream became gradually louder as the boats advanced. The second fall was at hand. Unlike Equencua, however, it was not visible to river travelers; for between the channel and the precipice intervened a tall-timbered point, and the raging white water rushing around that point would have hurled to destruction any canoe approaching it. This, León said, was the cataract of Oso—the Bear.

The two dugouts crawled along near the right

shore, turned in at a creek-mouth where the water lay smooth and still, and, a few rods inland, grounded on mud. Beyond stretched the rocky bed of the creek, now dried up: a steep-banked ravine nearly overarched by the far-reaching branches of the bordering timber.

"Now we walk again," announced their guide, leading the way to a faint footpath angling up the left bank. After a few minutes of climbing a stiff grade amid cool shadows, the column emerged into blinding sunlight and an expanse of rolling savanna thinly dotted with stunted trees. So unexpected was the widening of the view that the Americans, who for weeks had traveled between the confining walls of river verdure, exclaimed with pleasure. And when, reaching the crest of a hillock, they found spread before them a broad panorama, they halted to gaze.

Far in the distance towered stark mountains of sheer rock, veiled by a thin blue heat-haze, yet unable to conceal their harsh seams and their saw-toothed outline. Their bases were invisible, being masked by an intervening expanse of hills whereon grew a solid sea of trees. Near at hand lay the open savanna, burnt yellow by the pitiless heat of the dry time. The river had

vanished, flowing somewhere below the eye-level in its perpetual covert of shore-timber, and nowhere in all the far-flung countryside showed the tiniest glint of water. Nor in the snow-white clouds drifting slowly across the intensely blue sky was any hint of rain. Harsh and hot lay the land—yet, with its bold colorings and its masses of forest and mountain, savagely beautiful under the sun. And out from the heights blew a lusty breeze, dry, invigorating, which the men on the hill-top inhaled in great breaths while they looked abroad.

For a time they stood wordless, contemplating the wide land wherein moved no other white men. Then Knowlton unslung his rucksack, drew out a camera, adjusted a ray screen to cut the distant haze, and, with a tiny click, recorded the scene. When he had rolled the film they moved on.

As they moved, so moved the clouds, floating upon their way as the men crept along theirs. And when, presently, those men entered another belt of forest and lost sight of the wide reaches, one of the ever-changing clouds lengthened itself into a thumb and smeared out the brilliant sun. At once the light was gone from the face of the savanna; the jungled reaches became dull

green lagoons, harboring nameless creatures of the shadows; the far mountains turned into the dark, ugly teeth of a trap lying open, awaiting its prey. Guayana, the siren, had smiled bewitchingly at the adventurers while they paused to look upon her. Now that their eyes were blinded once more, the smile had become a menacing grin.

Down along a winding path filed the voyagers, to emerge ere long in a partial clearing where trees stood untouched by steel or fire, but where all bush had been cut away. There stood a palm hut closed on three sides, the fourth open toward the river, only a stone's throw beyond. There, too, several dugouts floated at the water's edge. The muffled thunder of the cataract now sounded below, instead of above, and the river had become once more a river instead of a maze; a rock-studded, growling stream, but still a united body, not a brawling chaos. As the newcomers stepped to the edge to survey it, the cloud-thumb overhead swung away from the sun, and the Ventuari became again a playground for diamonds of light—dazzling, dancing, luring the men again to her treacherous bosom, as the land had just beckoned them onward with its seductive smile.

"I like this here river, even if it does fight ye all the time—mebbe that's why I do like it," declared Tim. "D'ye notice, fellers, the skeeters ain't nowheres near so thick up here? And —— Say, lookit them big cherries over in that canoe! Looks like a whole pail of 'em. Oh boy! If we only had some Manhattan cocktails to go with 'em, now, we'd be set up right."

He strode over to the dugout, which, unlike the others, lay untied, partly hidden by projecting tree-roots. From its curved bottom he lifted a big gourd full of luscious-looking blood-red fruits.

"Cherries?" puzzled McKay. "Never heard of cherries in Venezuela. León! What are these? And how did they get here?"

Portonio, lounging near, spoke before the blond Spaniard; but his word conveyed no meaning to his employers.

"Sehi," he said.

León, approaching, gave one glance at the gourd, another at the canoe, a third at the trees, as if seeking someone there.

"Sehi," he echoed. "Fruits of the assehi palm. But —— This curial is not mine. Frasco! Men are here who left their curial and sehi. Go and find them."

Frasco and his companions came first and looked at the canoe, at the fruits, and, narrowly, at the gourd. This large calabash bore near its rim a wavy line of faded red paint, with a number of blackish dots.

"Maquirital," asserted Frasco. "Caño Cerbatana."

Without taking their weapons, he and his mates scattered into the grove, moving like men sure of what they would find.

"Maquiritares from Caño Cerbatana—the Creek of Blowguns," repeated León. "That is only three days above here. Two or three men have cruised down on a hunt, perhaps, and, seeing several white men coming with guns, they slipped into the woods yonder. They are not fond of showing themselves." A peculiar smile flitted over his face, and his gaze lingered again on the blood-red palm-fruits, as if they had some connection with the shyness of the Cerbatana men. "While we wait for them to come back," he went on, in an odd tone, "let me show you something new in the way of a drink. It is not the cocktail for which you wished, Señor Tim, but it will quench thirst much better."

With that he stepped into his house, took from some spot overhead a metal basin, came out,

dipped up some water, and, taking from Tim the gourd, returned to the interior and fell to work. Rapidly he pulped the fruits in the water, crushing them between his palms with a rolling motion, then squeezing the bruised mass into the basin. When he desisted his hands were dyed red, and so was the water into which he had pressed the pulps. Then, while Portonio held the calabash, he strained the sinister-looking liquid through his crossed fingers, holding back a useless residue of stones and skins. Casting these back into the pan, he took the gourd and its crimson drink.

"To you, señores—Salud!" He bowed, and took a swallow from the primitive bowl. Then he passed it to his fellow blond, Knowlton. "Drink of the sehi, which is good for many things: to quench thirst, to purge the body, to grow hair, to oil guns, to burn in lamps—and, sometimes, to drive men mad."

"What?" ejaculated Knowlton, abruptly lowering the gourd after nearly tasting from it.

"To drive men mad?"

"Sometimes. But this will not do so. Neither will it burn—as it is. It can be made to do all those things when rightly prepared. Now it is only a harmless drink. Try it."

Knowlton eyed the stuff dubiously. Then, recalling that the host himself had drunk from it, he raised it again and took a taste; considered it a few seconds, and imbibed more heartily.

"Not so bad," he approved. "Rather a queer taste, but— Try it, Rod?"

McKay, expressionless, downed a capacious mouthful and passed it on. Tim scowled at it; then muttered, "Wal, it can't be no worse than some o' the hooch I've lapped up since prohibition hit the States," and gingerly sampled it. Portonio calmly drained the remainder and licked his lips.

"Guess you were joking, weren't you, about the madness in that stuff?" asked Knowlton. "Or can it be fermented into a murderous form of booze? I've heard of Indians making some horrible brands of hooch that drove 'em crazy."

"No. It is neither a joke nor a liquor, señor. The only intoxicating drink used by these people—and then only when they have one of those mysterious dances of theirs—is the yaraqué, made from fermented cassava and powdered yaraquero leaves; and it is not violent. But this sehi—"

He broke off, his head turning toward the woods, whence now sounded an almost inaudible

tread of bare feet. His men were returning, and with them came strangers. León glanced keenly at the latter, then nodded as if seeing something he had expected.

"These men of the Creek of Blowguns have drunk the *sehi* once too often," he concluded. "Look well at them."

Approaching shyly, yet without the tense wariness of the wild rovers from the Caño Tamara who had visited the Spaniard's headquarters, came three unclothed Indians, each carrying a different weapon: bow and arrows, long lance, and ten-foot blowgun.

"Huh! Niggers!" remarked Tim.

León made no reply. The eleven aborigines came on and halted, the light-skinned ones grinning as if their companions were comical, the three dusky ones smiling slightly at León, whom they evidently knew. The Northerners scanned them sharply, seeking signs of the lunacy indicated by León's statements. They detected none. The brown eyes under the banged black hair were intelligent, mild, devoid of any hint of insanity. Their faces were gentle and expressive, their features remarkably good; their physiques, too, were slender and graceful, and their stature above that of León's retainers. In fact, they

would have been considerably more handsome than the others but for one all-pervading disfigurement—their livid skins.

Those skins were repulsively unnatural. At first sight they seemed to be, as Tim had said, those of negroes. Now, however, it was plain that they were not. The men were blackened, rather than truly black; their dermal pigmentation was not a solidly even duskiness bestowed by heredity, but a fine-grained, faded discoloration which looked filthy—as if they had been smeared from head to foot with a black paint which had been weakened, but not removed, by bathing. Moreover, their features were not in the least negroid. They were not only truly Indian, but Maquiritare Indian, in all save their color.

These points the men from the North observed, and on their brows gathered thoughtful frowns. They noted, too, the jeering grins of the other Maquiritares, whose skins were so clean and clear. And they perceived that the blackened ones were well aware that they were regarded with derision by their own countrymen, and that they showed no resentment; rather, they stood with the patient air characteristic of unfortunates long accustomed to ridicule.

"What ails these fellows?" demanded McKay. Instead of replying, the Ventuari man spoke in Spanish to the dusky ones.

"Why are you so black?"

A long pause. Then, with the weary intonation of a man explaining something well known, the tallest answered: "Yucut' 'sehi."

"Ah. And why did you drink the sehi?"

No answer. The three livid faces lost their good humor. The other Maquiritaires laughed aloud.

"You cannot make yourselves light once more!"

A short headshake. The three began moving toward their canoe.

"Do not go," León added quickly. "I ask no more questions. Stay and eat good rice and fish."

They hesitated, then turned back, mollified.

"Bueno. We stay," acquiesced the spokesman. And in token of their trust of León they leaned their weapons against a tree and squatted at its base, unwinkingly regarding the newcomers in their land, who still watched them.

"Now that you have heard from their own lips, señores, that it was the sehi which made them what they are," the Spaniard said, "I will explain. Among these people it is possible to

blacken a man's skin, as these are blackened, by giving them *sehi* to which other things have been secretly added. The *yucuta sehi* is a dainty dish to the Indian—*yucuta* being manioc in a gourd with water or other liquid, and *yucuta sehi* being the same manioc in the *sehi* drink. Now observe that these men once were handsome—and still would be, if their skins were not spoiled. Any Indian girl would look at them with admiration. So their own women have made them hideous for life by giving them the blood-changing, skin-changing stuff in a gourd of those palm-fruits. No other girl will want them now. Indeed, all *Maquiritaires* laugh at such men; they are jokes, because they have been trapped and tricked by women. They do not even live with other *Maquiritaires*, but in a small *paragua*—a tribe-house—of their own, on the *Caño Cerbatana*—which is a poor creek and full of mosquitoes. Nobody lives there except these, and the women who made them what they are, and their children.”

There was silence for a full minute. The Americans searched his face, finding there no levity; studied the branded trio again; and stared at one another.

“Gee cripes!” blurted Tim. “And they’re like that for life? And—did ye say crazy, too?”

"No. These are not crazy. But—suppose a man—a white man, say, very handsome and proud of himself—should be turned black like these, made unable ever again to mingle with white people— What would be the effect on his mind?"

"Do you mean that such a thing has happened here?" asked McKay.

León did not answer at once. Thoughtfully he regarded his questioner, as if debating something within his mind. When he did reply, it was with a true Spanish evasion.

"Quién sabe? Who knows what may have come about in this land of strange things? I was only asking you what such a trick would do to such a man."

"He'd go nutty," conceded Tim. "He'd have to live with niggers, and it'd break him. Lots o' fellers have killed themselves for less'n that. Urrgh! Nice pleasant ol' river ye've got here, with its nigger poison and— Say, I s'pose that blowgun there shoots them same poison darts they use on the Amazon, don't it? Wurali poison, that kills ye if it jest scratches yer hand?"

"The same, señor, although we call it curare here."

"I knowed it!" The red man's groan was

dismal. "That stuff makes me stummick turn over. I thought I was through with it for life—and here I am again, amongst poison cherries and poison darts and poison everything. The minute I git into South Ameriky I find somethin' like that. Do all the Injuns round here use that shootin' poison?"

León nodded. Tim turned away. Reckless in the face of most forms of danger, he yet possessed an unconquerable aversion to anything poisonous or insidious, and now he wanted no further revelations for the time. The Spaniard, too, walked houseward, giving his men orders for various things to be done before sundown, now close at hand. McKay and Knowlton remained where they were, Portonio silently loitering near. And the black men squatted motionless, wordless, steadfastly regarding the strange beings from another world.

"Well, if you see it it's so," mused Knowlton. "We see these three black crows sitting all in a row, and they're so. But I wonder why our friend yonder dodged your question about crazy black-white men?"

"I wonder," pondered McKay.

And, with little frowns of thought and formless surmise, they stood gazing up the mysterious river.

CHAPTER VIII

TOLL

THE three black men of the Creek of Blowguns remained that night at the Oso camp. The next morning, when the expedition resumed its ascent of the river, they accompanied it in their own canoe. And for the ensuing three days—until the mouth of the Caño Cerbatana was reached—they traveled always a little behind; silent, sombre, trailing the invaders of their country like dusky ghosts of the Carib warriors who, more than a century ago, had massacred soldier and priest and closed the land of Guayana to intruders.

In all the journey they seldom spoke and never smiled. The patient good nature which had been theirs when they first emerged from the woods seemed to have vanished over night. Not that they had turned sour or become menacing; their attitudes were as mild and self-effacing as before; but they were grave, almost grim, in their inscrutable quiet and their ceaseless surveillance.

On the first evening they squatted until supper-time—and later—watching every movement of the Northerners, listening to the sounds of their voices, reading their faces as best they might. Then they withdrew to a leaf-roofed lean-to under which their lighter confreres slept; and if they asked their countrymen questions about the newcomers, the latter never knew it. From that time onward they maintained the same unobtrusive but unending watch over the two canoes ahead. At night they camped at the same spots as the whites, though always at a respectful distance. At meal-times they accepted, as a matter of course, a share of the manioc and dried fish forming the staple diet of León's men; but they always ate a little apart from the rest, taking their common portion in their large gourd and then squatting a rod away to devour it. And when the swift darkness deepened they vanished into it, to be seen no more until morning.

To the few questions of Loco León they answered briefly. They had seen no other men along the river; the hunting was fair; their people were well. That was all they had to say—and that only to León. To the outlanders, who addressed a few tentative remarks to them on the

first day, they made no response whatever. Thereafter the visitors left them to themselves.

By contrast with this sable, solemn trio, the Maquiritaires who propelled the two leading boats seemed all the more fair of skin and light of heart. They now had become accustomed to the presence of the new white men; and, in battling with the river, they were in their element—fighting against the crafty old torrent which they had known since childhood, defeating its treachery by greater cunning of their own. The combat seemed to exhilarate them, bringing to the surface the innate joy of conflict which, in quieter moments, was hidden beneath their impassive exteriors. The more wicked the raudal confronting them, the more spirited their attack; and when it was conquered, they turned shining eyes on the Northerners and laughed like boys. Then, with smooth water ahead, they cooled into their former reserve, exhibiting no more enthusiasm until they met the next barrier. If the blackened men following felt the same joyous excitement in pitting their strength and stratagems against the powerful currents they did not show it.

The travel now was deceptively dangerous; deceptive, because the river was more silent than

below Oso, more smooth to the eye, yet more fierce. Between the cataracts the water had been divided among many channels, and thus, despite its raging tumult, had dissipated its energy. Here the river hurled its whole weight over the rock dikes, below which the bowlders threw up white waves leaping like ravening wolves; and it was up through these lashing white demons, up over the smooth but powerful crests of the drops, in the face of the full intensity of the current, that the ponderous dugouts must be forced. Only the canny skill of the Maquiritares and their unerring selection of the vulnerable spots made possible the passage of these death-traps.

The Indians worked now without shirts, for the mosquitoes had virtually vanished from the river in this higher altitude, and at these upper raudales the men wanted not the slightest impediment to free action. Even Portonio, though clinging tenaciously to the wearing of trousers, discarded his shirt at the rough spots, the better to bend his brawny back to the heaving upward of the canoes; for at those places he worked beside the Indians. To the Americans, working their way with machetes along the shore while the boats were shoved through, but keeping a sharp

watch of the activities in the water, it was noticeable that the color of the aborigines virtually matched that of the Venezuelan riverman—who, though swarthy, was indubitably white.

"I wonder," Knowlton suggested once, when León was not close at hand, "if those fellows themselves aren't the legendary 'white race' up here. They're as white as Portonio—almost. Suppose León's giving us a fine wildgoose chase?"

McKay shook his head.

"Those black fellows down yonder are niggers—almost," he countered. "But they're not niggers. No more are these chaps white men."

"And them Tamara guys said there was real white folks twenty days up," reminded Tim. The blond Northerner said no more.

As they mounted, the heavy forest on the banks became interspersed with open spaces where stood only stunted, scattered palms along shore, with no trees of any kind beyond them. Scaling the steep slopes to look around, they saw, across this savanna region, mountain masses. Everywhere rose those barriers, surrounding the open lands like grim guardians watching over solitudes wherein, by some mysterious decree, no man might make his home. And when, presently, a high bare hill was met and climbed for a broader

view, the sullen opposition of Guayana to white invasion and settlement became all the more evident. To east and north and south the jungled heights stood close-packed, invulnerable, barring all ingress save by such creatures, animal or human, as were born to their secret passes. Only at the west was visible a gap on the skyline; and it was through that gap that the river-following adventurers had come and must return—if ever they did return from the sombre labyrinth waiting beyond.

"There ends the sabana," said León, pointing toward the dense array of green giants at the east. "After we reach that point you will see nothing but the selvas—the forests—and the people of the shadows."

The people of the shadows! A peculiarly apt expression, this, which lingered long in the memories of his auditors; a descriptive phrase meant, perhaps, only to indicate that the inhabitants of those selvas lived in leafy shade, yet suggestive of some interpretation more ominous,—indeed, all the more sinister because groping fancy was free to attach to it whatever unpleasant meaning arose to mind. Too, the silent dogging of those dusky Cerbatana men gave a foreboding tinge to the cryptic words. Were there, perhaps, more

such black shadows as they in the gloomy depths of the unexplored forests ahead?

When, on the third day, those funeral trailers drew aside into the mouth of a caño at the left and León turned to wave a casual farewell, Tim quickly asked: "Is this the limit for them guys?" And when León simply replied: "That is the Caño Cerbatana," his canoemate breathed deep, as if a load had been lifted.

"Faith, now I can set up straight," he said; and he did so. In answer to the Spaniard's quizzical glance, he went on: "I dunno why, but I've been feelin' more comfortable when somethin' solid was against me back, these last three days. Some way I never feel right when a guy with one o' them blowguns is behind me. Oh yeah, I know these ginks are friendly and all that, but jest the same— I don't like them poisoned needles for a cent, Loco. When one of 'em's behind me I git kind o' clammy betwixt the shoulders."

León nodded without comment, but apparently with perfect understanding. Quite likely he, too, had experienced that chill along his spine more than once in his career.

In the other dugout Knowlton was admitting a somewhat similar feeling of relief, though his reason was different.

"Adios, you tar babies," he remarked, without raising his voice. "And I don't care if you never come back. Rod, I feel as if we'd ditched a jinx. Those three chromos of tough luck have been on our trail so long they were beginning to drag on my nerves."

The blackened trio themselves gave no word or sign of farewell. For a few minutes they held their boat at the mouth of the forested creek, watching the white men go their way. When next those whites glanced back they had vanished.

For the rest of that day, and for half the next, the party toiled onward in open country. Then, at a sharp angle of the stream, tall forest shot up on either side. The river still glared with the intense light of the midday sun, but to right and left hovered the dimness of the verdant woods. The wide vistas were gone, and before the roving eye lay only a short reach of the ever-turning, ever-narrowing Ventuari, with its next raudal snarlingly awaiting the approach of the invaders. And it was here, on the threshold of the land of perpetual shadows, that a son of that land passed into the shadows for all time.

So short was the rapid and so slight the drop of the miniature waterfall that the Indians—who

gave to such spots the contemptuous name of "raudalitos"—asserted their ability to slide canoes and passengers through, instead of landing the latter to walk along shore. At a number of similar small barriers they had already done this, and the present obstruction was no worse than those previously passed. Therefore the white men retained their seats while the Maquiritares, standing on underwater segments of rock, essayed the feat. The first dugout, carrying León and Tim, made good the passage. The second did not.

Just as it tottered over the verge and the half-submerged Indians were straining in the final shove, someone slipped. The boat swung. Instantly the current seized its advantage, throwing itself vindictively against the quartering side of the ponderous craft, which had been meeting it bow on. Portonio, standing in the stern and pushing with a pole set against a rock behind, found the tough wood bending like a reed. Then it snapped. A simultaneous gasping grunt from the Maquiritares—a short, hoarse cry of agony—the dugout was hurled backward.

Three of the Maquiritares, swept away with it, instinctively retained their holds on the gunwales. The fourth, crushed against a grim gray

boulder, collapsed and slid limply down in the current.

Bumping, cracking as if about to split asunder, half swamped by triumphantly leaping waves, the boat wallowed back through the welter, somehow refraining from complete capsize. Before it was fairly free of the white water McKay and Knowlton leaped overboard, throwing themselves toward the inert body of the crushed canoeman. Together they reached him, seized him, and struck out shoreward.

Swept into smooth water, they swam slantingly across, carried down by the speed of the flow, but unharmed. Meanwhile Portonio, thrown headlong into the stream, came up and battled his way to the bow; seized the long rope, pulled it overboard, and, with the end in his teeth, cast himself loose again and swam for the nearest rock. To him the fate of an Indian was nothing, the fate of his boat everything. Reaching his objective, he got a firm foothold on the stone, twisted the rope about his hands, put forth his vast strength, and halted canoe, baggage, and Indians in the teeth of the current. And he remained there, a straining Hercules, until the Maquiritaires drew themselves hand over hand up the taut rope and joined him. Then they

hailed up the water-logged dugout and swung it in to shore.

A low, smooth stone at the foot of the bank formed the death-bed of the Indian borne by Knowlton and McKay. Breathing hard, they drew themselves and their burden out on the rock; and there, after one glance, McKay panted:

"No use. Smashed to pulp. Gone."

But the victim was not yet gone. His lids fluttered open. His agonized gaze passed over his rescuers, fastened on Knowlton. Into his graying face came a look of supreme effort. From his mouth burst a red stream. Then, in a gurgling whisper, came words.

"No—montañ'—habl'—no—muert'—"

Another red eruption. A brief struggle. He was dead.

"No—mountain—speak—no—death—" mechanically translated Knowlton. "Meaning what?"

McKay shook his head. They turned their eyes upstream, watching the landing of the others. Beyond the raudal León had brought his boat to the bank, and as soon as it was tied he and the others came cutting their way along the top. The Maquiritares of the ill-fated canoe also

came as quickly as they could. Only Portonio remained behind, more concerned with bailing and setting things to rights than with viewing a dead man.

Around that lifeless figure the other voyagers clustered in silence. León, sober-faced, stooped and made a brief examination; then, rising again, gestured up the bank. The Indians, unspeaking, dug footholds and formed a line up the stiff slope, and from man to man the body was lifted to the top. There, preceded by a couple of machete-men and escorted by the rest of his comrades, the victim of the raudal was borne away into the forest.

For a little time the four below remained on the rock, while the sun dried out the wet clothing of McKay and Knowlton. León said nothing, but he was manifestly grieved by the fate of his faithful employe. At length McKay, without preamble, disclosed the unintelligible warning voiced by the man now gone.

The Spaniard frowned and stared blankly at the water, obviously as much in the dark as his companions.

"It means nothing to me," he slowly said. "We are going into mountains, but I do not understand— Those words might mean several

different things, and none of them makes sense to me. And why should he speak of the mountains? I have not yet told my men that we go there. They know only that we go to Uaunana—a tribe-house on the Ventuari, where I am well known and well liked. Perhaps he was trying to say montañés, not montañas—people living in mountains. But all the Maquiritare nation lives in mountainous country, so that means nothing. Or perhaps he meant— Oh, *quién sabe*? There is no answer to the riddle.”

“Where are those mountains?” quizzed McKay.

“Mountains are all about us, friend. But the ones I mean are at the south; eight days south on the Rio Periqueta, and some days farther by land. I have never been there. It is one of the places where I am not allowed to go.”

“Oho! Forbidden ground!” exclaimed Knowlton.

“Sí. But until this moment none but myself has known that I plan to go there. My men still do not know it. So why, in the devil’s name, should poor Curro have warned us against mountains? Bah! It was no warning. His mind wandered. ‘Hablo—no—muerte’ meant

‘I cannot talk—death takes me’, and the other words were nonsense.”

Turning, he moodily clambered up the bank. The others followed. Among the shadows beyond, nothing was visible. In single file they moved up toward the boats. The warning which was no warning was dismissed from their talk.

But it was not dismissed from their thoughts as well. Each eyed the river and the sombre depths beyond with frowning brow. Perhaps, as León had said, the dying man’s mind had been deranged, and the sons of Guayana knew nothing of the white men’s goal. Yet those white men felt that old Guayana herself knew, and that she had begun to take toll.

CHAPTER IX

A VOICE IN THE NIGHT

THE gloom cast over the expedition by the tragedy at the raudalito traveled onward with it. Although every man in the party was accustomed to the violent deaths of the tropic wilderness, the fate of Curro had struck with such suddenness that it lingered long in the minds of his companions. Moreover, Curro himself had been a most likable young fellow; merry-hearted, lively, given to occasional pranks which vastly amused his mates and brought smiles even to the faces of the señores. Now the Maquiritares no longer laughed, and the boats forged ahead in sober quiet.

There was no further talk, however, concerning the man who had passed out. The Maquiritares, on returning from the dusky depths where in they had completed their last service to the fallen, manned the fatal canoe in force and rammed it up over the barrier with an impetus bespeaking smouldering wrath against the murderous river. Thereafter they conquered every

new obstruction with due watchfulness to their footing. As for Curro, he was dead and there was an end to him, so there was no use in talking about one who no longer existed; such was their philosophy. The white men felt much the same way, both as to Curro and his last words. Those words had been once discussed, and no satisfactory explanation of them had yet occurred to anyone. Yet they arose time and again in the minds of Northerners and Southerner alike, and their effect was not cheering.

"I don't want to do no croakin', fellers," Tim declared at the next night stop, "but them omens that Loco was talkin' about, back yonder, don't look so good. First there's that snake in the path; and then them three poisoned guys trailin' us like Ol' Man Hard Luck; and then this thing today, and that warnin'—ye can't tell me it don't mean nothin', Loco. A feller busted as bad as he was don't talk jest for exercise; unless he's got somethin' mighty important on his mind he don't say a word. But gittin' back to omens, d'ye mind how many of us there is now? Thirteen!"

Slow nods concurred. Knowlton, however, laughed shortly.

"Feet getting chilly?" he derided.

"Not much. When ye see li'l Timmy Ryan droppin' out with frozen toes it'll be in a colder place than this. I'm jest sayin' the same things that all you guys are thinkin'."

"True enough," agreed León. "We all are thinking of those things. And if you would like to turn back—"

"Rot!" snapped McKay, his back stiffening. So decisive was his tone that the Spaniard chuckled softly and said no more. The next day the thirteen resumed their dogged journeying.

As ever, their course was obstructed by raudalitos; and steadily, imperceptibly, the forest on either hand crept nearer, as if the banks were gradually closing on prey which they would presently crush to nothing. Yet no further misfortune befell. And now Guayana dangled before the seekers of the lost white race a lure to draw them on; for the seemingly empty wilderness began to show infrequent indications that behind its baffling curtain lived men. Caught among snags lay a cracked, useless shell which once had been a good curial. At a creek-mouth stood a small pole hut roofed with withered plantain leaves—a ranchería, or landing spot for Indians during the low-water stage when the caño itself was unnavigable. On a large low rock

where the travelers lunched were found fish-bones, feathers, and dead embers of a cook-fire.

Of the men who had used these things there was neither sight nor sound along the waterway. And, though it was quite apparent that on some of the creeks were human habitations, the canoes held to their course, León stating briefly that side trips here were not worth while.

Two days after leaving the savanna, however, the boats turned into a caño at the left, stopping at an ancient-looking ranchería, from which a thread-like path led away into the jungle. Above that caño and beyond a big bend in the river, the Spaniard explained, was a long and absolutely impassable raudal, named Monoblanco; and around that death-hole all men must detour by a forest trail.

"Good enough!" yawned Knowlton. "I'm sick of riding. I want to stretch my legs again."

"The legs will be stretched, never fear," smiled the Ventuari veteran. "This is no stroll like that around Equencua. It is a hard day's march." Casting a reflective eye at the labyrinth around, he added: "This is the place where I had it in my mind to leave everything we can spare. We must come by this way when we re-

turn. And beyond here we must carry no useless weights."

The Americans, after studying the heap of duffle put ashore by the Indians, acquiesced.

"Good idea to have a general overhauling here," said McKay, "and find out whether that crack-up in the raudal damaged anything by water. If so, we'll chuck it. Better boil down the outfit to absolute essentials, anyway."

They went to work, sorting over the contents of trunks and pack-sacks; and almost immediately they made a discovery which evoked wrathful remarks. The top of a supposedly air-tight tin, containing all the spare batteries for their electric flashlights, had worked open somewhere between the Caño Negro and the man-killing raudalito, and enough water had sneaked into the can to ruin all its contents. A test of the torches themselves showed the light remaining in them to be very weak; another day or two would finish them. So, perforce, they abandoned the nicked cases here, to rely henceforth on the single weak lantern of the Spaniard. With considerable anxiety they inspected their supply of matches and the ammunition, and it was with vast relief that they found these well-nigh vital reserves to be unharmed.

While his comrades proceeded with their work of inspection and selection, León superintended the construction of the cache. A short distance from the path, atop a little hillock, the Indians built a stout pole table. On this finally were set the trunks, half the remaining cans of food, and whatever else could be dispensed with for a time. Within the trunks were left all the photographic chemicals, as León suggested that pictorial opportunities would be comparatively few during the succeeding days, and the films exposed could be kept undeveloped for some time without appreciable deterioration. As for food, a new supply of cassava could be laid in at the Uaunana settlement above here, and sufficient game would undoubtedly be met to furnish necessary meat. He himself left most of his rice, which seemed to be his mainstay as travel provender. Over all was fastened a poncho; bushes were bent down and cunningly tied to conceal the table more thoroughly; and on the ground were strewn sections of bristling macanilla bark, its myriad black thorns lying point upward, as a discouragement to prowlers.

This done, the travelers slept in the old rancharía; and the next morning they were off on their march. Before it was done, León had more than

kept his promise to stretch the legs of his boat-weary companions.

At the start, the Indians took the lead, the Spaniard trailing behind them at the head of the civilized contingent. As they progressed, the wisdom of this became increasingly apparent; for not only was the trail so dim as to be hardly visible, but it was beset by traps. Not actual traps in the usual sense of steel or logs or pits, were these, but cunning false trails, the deadliness of which speedily became evident to the jungle-wise eyes of the former Amazon rovers. The land was a maze of steep hills, dense forest and bush, and myriad streams flowing crazily along the snaky ravines; and it was at these streams that the snares were laid. No bridges crossed them; the path invariably led straight to them, broke off abruptly, and, actually or seemingly, recommenced directly opposite, on the farther shore; but fully half of these continuations were blind leads which faded out a few yards beyond—all the more deceptive because of the fact that other such openings were real. No eye unfamiliar with the entire route—not even that of a jungle Indian, if he was a stranger to this section—could have followed it

without confusion; and confusion meant complete and hopeless loss of all bearings.

The Maquiritaires, however, picked unerringly the false from the true. Where those deceitful lures lay so invitingly plain, they turned sharp to right or left, wading up or down the crooked watercourses until they passed around an abrupt turn; then they went ashore at some spot where the trail hid behind a bush, or where a rock or an old blow-down revealed no trail at all. Invariably a couple of strides beyond the bank revealed the true path once more, but at the edge itself was visible no sign.

"By cripes!" panted Tim, after struggling up over a bleached snag at the tenth such concealed entrance. "These guys ain't sociable! With all them man-killin' places down river to buck against, ye'd think they might leave a decent path along here for fellers that lived to git this far. But this lay-out would trip up the devil himself."

"That is the desire of these people," responded León. "To trip up any devil of a white man who may chance to come so far—or any brown devil of a Guaharibo. Those Guaharibos are savage beasts from the south who come northward at times to kill and rob. And as for white men—I

have told you that this country is closed to them.

"Once, for instance, a man from San Fernando came here, trying to reach the Rio Caura and so go to the lower Orinoco. He was fleeing to escape enemies who were hunting him in the San Fernando region. He reached this spot—and vanished. Indians coming overland by this path heard him screaming in the forest, lost and mad. They did not go near him. They left him to scream and rave and die, because they knew he must be some white man. We may be within ten feet of his bones at this minute."

The others glanced with narrowing eyes at the bewildering thicket hemming them in. Truly, those bones might be even nearer than León suggested, and still be unseen. So might their own lie for centuries if they should meet with mishap here. Among these steep slopes, sinuous streams, tangled growths and deluding paths, a whole party could disappear as irrevocably as one man, without the slightest hostility by the Maquiritaes themselves. The menacing jungle itself was their ally. About it hung the dankness, the clammy chill, of a tomb. Rain had passed in the night, and now, though the eastern sun was spraying its beams through all the leafy

interstices, from the high branches still fell a monotonous drip, drip, drip of cold moisture. The tongue-like foliage brushing against them as they walked, the squirming vines, the long dangling lianas, seemed merciless creatures stealthily reaching to enmesh them and suck their life-blood. Inscrutable, implacable, the forest brooded and waited for its invaders to slip, to stray, to fall and perish in its clutch.

It waited in vain, for the moving chain crept on—up slimy clay hills where hands seized trees and feet dug for holds, down precipitous slants where the bare-heeled Indians slid and stumbled, along the sides of other sharp grades—climbing, dropping, wading, winding, but never losing a link, never going astray. At noon it halted a little while beside a cool, clear cañito—a little creek—to rest, eat, drink, smoke. Then onward it wound until late afternoon. In all the traverse was heard no sound of beast or bird save one heavy rush among the bushes—a tapir, perhaps—and a toucan yelping somewhere in the branches like a scared, miserable puppy calling for protection from nameless horrors.

At last, abruptly, the party debouched into a tiny opening where a dilapidated rancharía leaned awry. Beyond seemed to lie another

ravine—a wide one, densely timbered on the farther side. On approaching the edge of the drop, however, the Northërnners found below them a smooth but swift stream, at the edge of which floated a cracked dugout. At first sight it appeared to be only a broad caño. But the speed and power of its flow, coupled with the presence of the canoe, prompted the conclusion that it was the river itself, grown much narrower above the long raudal. And so it was.

“Are your legs sufficiently stretched, señor?” asked León, himself hollow-eyed from the strenuous march.

“Quite,” admitted Knowlton. “In fact, nearly wrenched loose from the hinges. That confounded boat-riding made ’em soft.”

“Just so. Mine are much the same way, and for the same reason. But we shall all be stiff enough tomorrow.” With which satiric comfort he eyed the old boat, then added: “As it happens, we must rest for a day or two here. That curial is useless for our purpose, and there is no other nearer than Uaunana. So we shall lie here while four of my boys go to Uaunana for better canoes.”

“How long will that take?” asked McKay.

"Not more than a day and a half to go and return. We shall be at Uaunana in three days."

The others looked askance at the unattractive hole in the forest where they now stood, but made no comment—except Tim, who vouchsafed the declaration that he was game to lie in his hammock a week without a kick, and forthwith proceeded to have that hammock hung within the *ranchería*. The others likewise made their preparations for the night. Followed a bath at the edge of the water and a donning of dry clothes; a patching of the roof by some of the Indians, while the others slipped away into the bush on a hunting trip; a cooking by Portonio of the best food remaining for his señores, and a broiling by the Indians of the meat they brought in for themselves—a spidery yellow monoblanco monkey, an agouti, and a number of small black tree-toads; then darkness, silence, and sleep.

At daybreak the Indians were up, and, after a quick breakfast, four of them bailed the suicidal-looking canoe and nonchalantly started away, stroking rapidly with the banjo-shaped paddles brought overland from the lower port. The message they carried was succinct and imperative: that Loco León and three other white men, his friends, came to visit Uaunana; that these men

were of good heart; that the best canoes must be sent at once for their use, and a house made ready for them.

After the departure of the paddlers, the rest gave themselves up to a lazy day which, after their recent toil, was far from unwelcome; for the muscles of the white men were as stiff and lame as the Spaniard had predicted, and the work-hardened Maquiritaires themselves seemed sluggish. In the afternoon, however, inactivity became monotonous, and all except Portonio—who remained as camp guard—went hunting. The resulting bag was small; but the stiff legs were limbered up and the dull languor replaced by healthy fatigue. Then again came night.

"The men have reached Uaunana before now," said León, thoughtfully, "and perhaps they have started back, for I told them to travel with all speed. It is not likely that they will try to come on after dark; the moon now is very late and weak. Yet perhaps we had best hang the lantern near the edge and let it burn."

Two or three hours slipped past, the lantern shining bright amid the dense gloom enshrouding forest and shore. High over the river, thousands of stars gleamed in a marvelously clear sky, dropping a faint radiance to the water; but be-

neath the trees lay only blackness. At their end of the dusky ranchería the Indians slept, two in a hammock, deriving mutual warmth from each other's body. At the other end, the men of the superior race lay wakeful, Tim yarning away about the war—a topic which always interested León. But all at once both Venezuelans turned their heads riverward. Tim hushed and listened.

For a moment all was still. Then came faint sounds as of guarded voices, a muffled bump of wood on wood, a slight swashing noise, a rustle among bushes—all vague, and all from the other side of the stream.

"A curial. But not our men," León said softly. "They would have shouted and come to the light. Make no moves. We are out of sight, and ——"

He paused, listening again. McKay, holding a lighted pipe, covered its red coal with one hand. The rest lay motionless. From across the river came no further sound.

Minutes snailed away, the listeners hardly breathing. Then the stillness was shattered by a harsh yell that made every man jump.

"Loco León!"

León made no answer for a moment. The voice rasped again—loud, impatient, ugly.

"Loco León!"

"Sí," acknowledged Leon, speaking calmly and clearly. "Quién es?"

The reply sent a chill shuddering up the spines of the tense men in the hut. It came in tones frightful with madness and a howl of horrible laughter.

"Death! Death! Black death! A dead man walking in the night! A dead man without a face! A corpse crawling on the water! Yah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

CHAPTER X

A DEAD MAN WALKS

IN the momentary hush following that ghastly yell from the dark, Tim Ryan and Portonio Mariño involuntarily made an odd movement. Veterans, both of them, of many a weird experience in mysterious jungles, hard-headed and irreligious, fearing few things known or unknown, yet they now crossed themselves as if confronted by a fiend.

McKay and Knowlton, born to a different creed, gave no such acknowledgment of faith in powers celestial or infernal; but they, too, betrayed misgiving, for they started up, muttering: "Good God! What is it?" The Indians, roused from slumber, shrank against each other at the sound of the maniacal laughter. Only León remained apparently unmoved.

Into the minds of all—except, perhaps, the blond Spaniard—had leaped the thought of the lost man who, with mind wrecked by despair, had wandered screaming through this grim forest until silenced by some unknown doom. And

now—"a dead man walking in the night! A dead man without a face!" Cold sweat broke out on drawn brows, and dilated eyes stared toward the mockingly useless lantern beyond which nothing was visible.

León spoke again—and, in speaking, revealed that he was not immune to the nerve-strain gripping the rest of the company; for in his voice was a slight quiver. His words, however, were as calm as before.

"Good evening, White," he called, in English. "Come to this side and talk. Here are countrymen of yours—three men from North America."

A silence. Then a harsh, chuckling laugh.

"Huh-huh-huh! Fools! More fools coming to lose their faces! And you too, Loco—you're gone! Right now, you fool—you're as dead as I am! Your time's up! You're through, like those idiots with you! Five dead men now—Black White and Loco León and three more! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The wild mirth rang loud and high, then ceased abruptly. Dead silence hung heavy along both the unseen shores. Even the tree-toads, which had twittered and cheeped ever since sundown, were stricken voiceless. At length León replied, his tones cool and controlled.

"My time has been up more than once,—or so men said,—but I still live. As for my fellow fools, they are of your own country, White. What have you against them?"

"My country?" jeered the voice. "Yah! What country has a dead man? I'm dead! Buried! My country—huh! Got nothing against you fools. But you're dead ones all the same. After your faces are gone you can walk with me—howl to the moon with me! Arrrgh!"

The last inarticulate sound was a guttural snarl, more hideous than words. After another short pause León muttered: "Worse. He grows much worse." To the awful visitor he made no answer.

More minutes dragged away. From across the stream floated no sound. Within the hut no man moved. Then, with the same harsh abruptness, the voice tore again through the sable pall.

"León! You've got one chance! Back track! Get out of here! Down the river! Otherwise—Ugh! Huh huh huh!" Again that diabolical chuckle.

"Otherwise, what?" countered León. "Do you attack us?"

"Me? No. What for? I'm not so merciful! But you'll wish I had! He he he he ha ha ha!"

You'll wish I had—I'd kill you quick. But *they* won't! No. *They* won't! Uh huh huh huh! Hah!"

"Who?" demanded the Spaniard.

No answer; only a sour growl, as if the mad mind over there had tired of talk; but no words. León sat peering fixedly past the lantern. In the silence of the hut sounded a slight rustle of clothing. McKay, facing toward the river, was rising to full height.

"You, over there!" he snapped. "Are you American?"

A grunt. Then rasping words.

"I was. Dead now. Who are you?"

"An American. Named McKay. Come over here and let's look at you."

The command seemed to infuriate the prowler. He voiced a ferine snarl.

"Look at me? You damned half-wit! Look at Death! No white man sees me and lives!"

"Señor! Have care!" warned León. "He speaks truth."

The tall Scot frowned down at him. Knowlton and Tim, as if moved by a subconscious impulse which prompted these three to stand together in everything, rose to their feet and stepped toward their comrade.

"Bunk!" scoffed McKay. "You, there! White! Will you come over here, or do we have to come and get you?"

A wild shriek of laughter was the retort—a jeering ululation that rang eerily among the trees.

"Come and get me?" howled the voice. "Hah, yes! Come and get me! Ya-ha!"

"Blah-blah! Ye yellor-bellied fish!" erupted Tim, his previous dread giving way to anger at the sneering tone. "Show yer ugly mug in the light if ye've got any guts, instead o' yowlin' there like a banshee! What ye scairt of? We won't hurt ye. Come acrost like a man, even if ye ain't one!"

An instant of ominous silence. Then—

Smash! Crack!

The lantern shattered. A gunshot snapped—the keen report of a high-powered rifle. Instant darkness fell. And from that darkness roared the voice, savage now with rage.

"Man? I'm a better man than you and all your gang! I'll fight the whole damned pack of you! Come on, all of you! Shoot it out with a dead man! A dead man walking in the night! Yah! Hah! Fight, you yapping puppies! Show *your* faces! Fight, you—"

A torrent of epithets and taunts followed, ter-

minating in a screech and another shot. The bullet smacked into a tree beside the hut. With muttered exclamations, the Northerners—and Portonio as well—groped for their rifles. But León intervened.

“Señores!” he warned. “If you fight that man you are no longer my compañeros. He is mad—loco—twisted in the brain. Let me handle him.” Raising his voice, he went on: “White! Go your way. We go ours. There is no fighting between us. Do no more shooting, unless you wish to throw away bullets. We are behind trees.”

A wordless, mumbling growl floated back. After a minute or two came another chuckle—contemptuous, sneering, more biting than a curse.

“All right. Lie there on your bellies and hug the ground. Mouth-fighters! Huh huh huh! You’ll get yours! You’ll get plenty! Arrrgh!”

Not another sound drifted across the water. Time dragged past. Within the hut passed muttered remarks among the whites, hoarse whispers among the Indians. Without, the toads resumed their bird-like twittering. At length León sank back in his hammock, deftly made a cigarette, and, without attempt at concealment, lit it. The ignited match seemed to cast a wide illumination,

and its flare could hardly have failed to catch any watching eye. Yet it evoked neither shot nor voice from over the river.

"Cut it out!" admonished Tim, his old army inhibitions instinctively hostile to the telltale light. "Want to make us targets?"

The Spaniard, with mocking deliberation, held the tiny torch a second longer, then carelessly dropped it. After a long inhalation of smoke—which he drew deep into his lungs as if his nerves clamored for it—he coolly replied:

"There is no longer anyone over there. Our friend has gone."

"Yeah? Jest flew away, huh, without flappin' his wings or nothin'? Fat chance! If he's human he's got to go back up river, and he can't do that without some thumpin' and splashin'—"

León arose; walked to the edge of the bank, where the star-sheen now made the water visible; lit another match, and held it until it burned out. From the farther side came no noises. Obviously the river now was empty.

"They have simply floated away downstream," he said, returning. "The raudal is half a mile below here. They can go ashore before reaching it."

"They?" echoed Knowlton.

"Yes. He has paddlers, of course. And if they are his regular men, they have rifles. And Black White's men can shoot."

"So can we," retorted the ex-lieutenant. "But who and what is this Black White? Evidently he's an American, and crazy as a coot. But how — What do you know about him?"

The Ventuari man did not answer at once. He smoked awhile, the repeated glow of his cigarette dimly reflecting from his narrow-lidded eyes. At length he replied:

"Much. And yet little. He came here, some years ago, from your United States, to explore along the Rio Caura and learn its resources for some North American company. He strayed over into this Ventuari country, and—he was not wise. He was a very handsome man, señores, and accustomed to trifling with women. He trifled with a girl of the Maquiritares, and— Do you remember those black men of the Caño Cerbatana?"

A pause.

"Good Lord! You mean— The girl turned him black?"

"Just so, señor. And, as I have said, he was very handsome, and very proud of it. When he found himself repulsive his brain cracked. He has never left these hills, and never will. He

allows none but Indians to see him. When he told you that it was death to look at him, he meant exactly that. He will kill any white man who sees him. And when you told him to come and be looked at—when you jeered at his ‘ugly mug’ and called him no man—señores, you might better slap a tigre in the face than use such words to Black White. It was more cruel than to taunt a blind man about his blindness, and also much more dangerous: a blind man cannot strike you, while Black White can and will.”

“All of which you might have told us before we met him,” countered McKay. “As for striking, let him strike. He’ll get a come-back.”

“And as for telling him to come over here, the first one of us who did that was one Loco León,” reminded Knowlton.

“That is true, señor. But I did not tell him to come into the light. He could have talked to us from the bush, unseen. He knew what I meant. I have talked with him in that way before.”

With that he turned away as if a bit nettled. And not another word would he speak concerning Black White.

“Wal, as far as that ‘ugly mug’ stuff o’ mine goes, the guy had it comin’ to him,” rumbled

Tim. "He said he didn't have no face at all. Cripes! D'ye s'pose that's so! S'pose he's clawed his face off in one o' his spells? Or —"

"Oh, for God's sake, shut up!" protested Knowlton. "I'll be crazy myself if you keep up that line of talk. Pipe down! Let's talk sense or nothing. Better nothing. For all we know, that nut is ashore on this side and sneaking up on us. The less talk the better."

"Right!" McKay agreed. "We'll stand guard the rest of the night. It's now —" He peered at his luminous-numeraled watch. "— It's nine-thirty. I'll take first trick. Merry, second. Tim, third. Now dry up, everybody, and sleep with your mouths shut."

He found his rifle and took post at a corner. The others, with weapons close at hand, lay down; but it was long before any of the white men slept, for through each mind kept racing facts and fancies not conducive to rest. Portonio, least imaginative of the five, was first to sink into slumber. The rest dropped off one by one. As for the Indians, they had given no sign of wakefulness after their master's match-lighting had proved there was no further immediate cause for alarm.

For three monotonous hours McKay stood his

watch, motionless save for an occasional change of posture. To his ears came only the usual scattered sounds of the tropic night—sometimes weird and unexplainable, always unhuman. Half an hour after midnight he stepped to Knowlton, prodded him lightly, muttered "All well," and relaxed in his hammock. Three hours later Knowlton woke Tim in the same manner, and the Irishman took up the futile vigil. In all those long hours no sight or sound of lurking danger came to any of the three.

Dawn. Tim yawned, turned his back on the forest taking shape in the half-light, and voiced a stentorian bellow.

"Ro-o-oll out! Rise and shine, ye hammick-huggin' galliwampuses! Day's here, and yer scalps are still on yer cocos. Shake a leg and make some coffee for the poor ol' soldier!"

At the impact of his voice every man started awake; stared blankly an instant; then relaxed, or arose and stretched.

"I hope, señores, that you spent a pleasant and amusing night?" twitted León, grinning at the three sentinels. "I slept most soundly."

"Glad to hear it," was McKay's dry retort. "I had an interesting time thinking about things. One thing I thought about was this: I'm tired of

trailing along in the dark, León. I want to know what's ahead. Exactly what do you plan to do from now on?"

"A fair question," acknowledged the Spaniard. "I, too, thought before I slept that it would be well to make things clear. My plans, then, are simple and short: to go first to Uaunana, where you may see Maquiritaires in their homes; also, if possible, to get men there who will guide us up the Rio Periqueta; then—whether we get such men or not—to go up the Periqueta, and find what we may. Of the Periqueta I know no more than you, except that it enters this Ventuari a little way above here, comes in from the south, and is said to be eight days long. It is in the south that the blancos puros—the pure whites—live. Yes, señores, there are such people,—a few. I have seen one of them and heard of others. But I know nothing of their land."

"Where did you see that one?"

"At Uaunana, last year. He had light brown hair and blue eyes. He left almost as soon as I came, and he would not talk to me. Why he was there I never could learn. And now, señores, you know as much as I." He arose and stretched his muscles, tacitly dismissing the subject.

"Good enough, and thanks. Since you've

loosened up, we may as well tell you in return that we've known for some time that there are such people."

"How did you learn?" The Spaniard's eyes were suddenly sharp.

"Easy," Tim boasted. "I jest asked them Tamara guys down at yer headquarters. Twenty days travel, they said."

León stood very still, a startled expression on his face.

"The Tamara men," he repeated, slowly. "You asked them! And they went—" He paused, a frown furrowing his brow. Then he shrugged. "Bien. It is done. So we go on and see what we may see."

"Yeah! And we're goin' to see the whole works while we're here, feller. Turn this here country wrong side out and look at its gizzard. That's us. And that there warblin' cuckoo of a Black White—we might see him yet, too. Here's hopin'. I want to git close to that guy once."

Before anyone could answer, the shadowy forest itself gave a startling reply. Came a rapid series of soft impacts—the sound of something darting through air and striking leaf-tips in its flight—then a small but solid thump. Tim

started; then sprang around. Something had dealt him a stinging blow between the shoulders.

"What the devil's that?" he gasped, throwing a hand behind him to feel the smitten spot. Then his eyes dropped, and he grunted in mingled amazement and relief. On the ground lay a rifle cartridge.

"Gee cripes! Somebody's heavin' whole cartridges. And, begorry, it's a thirty, or I never handled a Springfield!"

He pounced on the conical cylinder of brass and nicked lead, glanced at it, threw it behind him to the others, and crouched with rifle up and eyes searching the misty maze beyond. A barely audible rustle sounded; but no sway of bush-branches was visible. The faint sound died.

McKay, catching the cartridge, gave it one look and held it toward Knowlton and León. As Tim had said, it was of .30 caliber.

"The guns of Black White and his gang," León said, in a quiet tone, "are thirties. While you have watched all night for him without seeing him, he has come here and stood almost beside you; stayed as long as he liked, heard what he waited to hear—and now has gone again. It is his way."

He had hardly finished speaking when the

jungle corroborated his words. From some point not far off, yet some distance from the spot where the thrower of that missile must have stood, broke a shriek of receding, blood-chilling laughter.

"Yah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Blind! Blind! Fools! Yee-he-he-ha-ha-hah!"

CHAPTER XI

THE HIGHLANDERS

TIM, eyes glimmering and jaw pugnacious, tramped with wrathful stride into the forest. The flying cartridge had struck him with its sharp point first, dealing so keen a twinge that his first shocked thought had been of the attack he most dreaded—a poisoned dart in the back; and now he was aflame with red rage. McKay, Knowlton, and Portonio seized their weapons and followed him. León, smiling sarcastically, remained where he was, and so did the Indians.

Half an hour's floundering in the pathless tangle resulted only in a grudging abandonment of the search. Not even a footprint was found. Not another human sound was heard. So the hunters returned to camp, ate breakfast, and spent the next few hours in lolling about.

Near noon, a sudden chorus of wild yells from upstream startled the drowsy camp into a swift reach for guns. Hands quickly relaxed, however, after the first momentary start of surprise; for it was self-evident that no hostile party would

thus announce its approach. A few minutes later two canoes came sliding along close to shore and stopped at the mouth of the little gap. From them debarked the four Maquiritares sent away yesterday by León.

No other Indians accompanied them. The men of Uaunana obviously were not in the habit of sending representatives to welcome visitors. Yet the dugouts which they had furnished were excellent, one being so new that its interior still retained the char of the fires by which it had been hollowed out; and the paddlers announced that the hut ordered by León was being constructed for the use of the white men. Thus it was evident that the up-river people were not opposed to the coming of the travelers. Preparations for the noonday meal and for subsequent embarkation were begun at once.

"Are any blondos now at Uaunana?" asked León.

The eyes of the Maquiritares narrowed. After a minute Frasco, their leader, answered in the negative.

"Bien. Where did you meet El Blanco Negro—the black white man?"

Silence. The four looked blank. At length Frasco replied:

"We have not seen him."

León gave each a piercing gaze, then turned away. They gravitated toward their mates who had remained at the camp, and a murmur of unintelligible conversation began. From the gestures of one of the latter toward the river, then toward the spot where that last frightful peal of mirth had been heard at dawn, it was apparent that the visit of Black White was under discussion; and the exclamations and expressions of the others bore out their assertion that they had known nothing of that wild man's presence on the Ventuari.

"Queer," commented Knowlton. "They went upstream, and White came downstream, and yet these fellows don't know anything about him. If he didn't meet them, how did he know you were here? And where did he come from, and why?"

"Quién sabe?" shrugged the Spaniard, who had been covertly listening to the Maquiritare jargon. "I am sure that these boys speak truth. Perhaps he saw them without their seeing him, while they paused somewhere to eat, and listened to their talk as he listened to ours this morning. He might have come from anywhere. He is a tigre: here today, there tomorrow—"

"Huh!" broke in Tim, smitten by a sudden thought. "A black tigre! Talk about omens! D'ye mind that night down below, when we slept on the sand and a tigre swum over to mop us up? 'Twas a black one! And he sure was hostile. There's an omen for ye."

Knowlton laughed shortly.

"Yes, and you remember what happened to Señor Tigre, don't you?" he jeered. "His black hide is stretched in one of León's houses at Caño Negro. Three pooh-poohs and a loud bah for omens! Let's eat and travel."

And eat and travel they did. As the canoes swung out into the stream, the voyagers took a long look backward, half expecting to spy another dugout lying half concealed at some spot farther down, or a weird face peering at them from the bush. But they saw only empty water sweeping away around a bend and blank jungle glooming along the shores. Facing forward, they left the mysterious forest of Monoblanco to brood upon its sinister secrets.

Steadily the paddles chunked against the gunwales, the rhythm ceasing only when some raudalito was met. Though now very narrow, the stream made up in depth what it lacked in width, and no poling was possible. The shores, at first

rising into steep hillsides on either hand, gradually sank to lower levels, but at no place revealed any thinning of the rank growth. The only openings were the mouths of little creeks.

At length, however, a wider gap appeared at the right: a waterway as wide as the Ventuari itself, and as wild. No ranchería, no cooking frame, no other sign of man stood at its junction with the master stream, and to all appearances it was utterly uninhabited. Yet this, León said, was the Rio Periqueta.

With pulses quickening, the three trailers of the centuries-old legend gazed up the flowing road to the land of the lost whites. For only a short way its water gleamed under the westering sun; beyond, where it disappeared behind a curve, the forest seemed to close together, jealously hiding it from spying eyes. In its emptiness, its silence, and its aloof concealment, the Periqueta seemed sullen and forbidding, yet grimly tempting. Until it had vanished into the receding shore the Northerners watched it without words. And, without words, the Indians exchanged glances and put another ounce of power into the strokes with which they left it behind.

Night found the party ensconced in another dilapidated ranchería—the first one seen since

their departure that noon, and the last they were to find on this river. As the darkness deepened, Tim inched back the breechbolt of his rifle, assured himself that the top cartridge lay ready, and shut the piece with an emphatic click.

"That there shell's the one Old Calamity throwed at me this mornin'," he declared, "and as sure as he comes round here spoilin' me sleep tonight I'll hand it back to him, hot. Nut or no nut, he ain't goin' to git gay with Timmy Ryan no more without a come-back. Once is plenty."

"He will not disturb us," León replied, easily. "He is too wily. If ever we hear him again, it will be at a time most unexpected. It will not be tonight."

The prediction proved truth. Not once that night was their rest disturbed.

Another noon, and they were struggling up over a five-foot barrier where white cascades fought them with vindictive rage. It was the last fierce, futile attempt of the Ventuari to hurl them back. A little way beyond, at the left, opened the mouth of a seemingly empty caño; and into this the boats turned. A hundred yards inland they stopped at a muddy landing-place where floated a couple of other dugouts. Up a stiff

slope led a well-trodden path, climbing until lost to sight beyond the heavy-leaved branches of the nearer trees.

"So we come to Uaunana," announced León. "The paragua is at the top of the hill. You will find its people friendly, but watchful; good-humored, but resolute and merciless if angered. Let no misunderstandings come about."

Leaving the paddlers and Portonio to unload and transport the duffle, he led the way up the hillside. For the first forty or fifty feet the climb was arduous. Then, emerging from the timber into a big clearing, the visitors found the slant less precipitous. Before them lay a chaos of prone, bleached trunks—the big trees laboriously felled by fire when the settlement had been made, and since then bereft of their branches—among which the path wormed its way upward to the summit; and, on that crest, stood a wide mud house whose palm-thatch roof rose in a broad cone. Beside that house stood three or four dwarfish-looking figures, watching the approach of the strangers. Nobody else was in sight, and the place was very still.

León called no greeting, waved no hand. Reaching the top, he paused, looking at the waiting Indians, who had not once moved. Deliber-

ately one of them now sauntered forward: a short, well-muscled man of mature years and intelligent face, about whom hung an air of quiet authority. No plumes or other regalia indicated rank; he wore nothing but a short red clout and a pair of bead armlets, just below the shoulders; but the Northerners felt that this was the chief. And so he was.

"This is Juancito, capitán of the tribe of Uaunana," said León. "Juancit', cómo está uste'? How are you?"

"Bien," Juancito replied shortly. His brown eyes traveled slowly from face to face, searching each answering gaze.

"These blancos are my friends and men of good heart," the Spaniard told him.

The chief's steady scrutiny continued: calm, cool, dispassionate, revealing neither cordiality nor hostility. Not until he had formed his own judgment of each man facing him did he speak. Then, satisfied, he quietly said: "Es bueno. It is good." With a slow gesture he designated a new ranchería, a stone's throw from the big house, as the quarters of his guests.

Toward this the four proceeded, throwing a glance toward the other Uaunana men, who still stood where they had been. These, like their

ruler, appeared totally unarmed. But at their feet, lying close against the clay wall of the house, lay a couple of brazilwood bows and a number of long arrows. And now, among the jumbled trunks and stumps flanking the path by which the white men had just come, appeared half a score of other aborigines of whose presence there had been no sign; and every man of them had his bow and steel-tipped shafts. Scattered about fanwise at the backs of the visitors, concealed and protected by bulletproof bulwarks, they could, at the first indication of treachery, have loosed at those strangers a silent blast of death.

With their ruler's acceptance of the Spaniard's companions as "men of good heart," these ambushed archers moved from left and right to the sinuous path and climbed it in file; walked into a small doorway in the tribe-house, and quickly emerged again, empty-handed. Thereafter they stood surveying León and his friends; remaining at some distance from the hut, silent, aloof, yet pleasant-faced. And out through the doorway, and from around the house, others came drifting noiselessly to join them.

León, with a glance at his comrades, put his rifle up overhead in a corner of the roof, concealing it from view. The Americans took the hint

and placed their guns beside his. Among the Indians passed a slight smile of approval. Mutual disarmament betokened mutual friendliness, even though the weapons of both races lay where they could be seized and used with speed. And when the Maquiritaires of León came up the hill and set about hanging their hammocks and placing their goods as directed, the sight of their nonchalant familiarity with the outlanders reassured the Uaunanans still more. Although they had been told once by the messengers, and again by Loco León, that the Northerners were good men, so deep-rooted was their ancient distrust of white invaders that words were not sufficient. They must see those white men act like good men, see them treated as such by members of their own nation, before accepting the fact. Now they were seeing, and so, in part, believing.

The Northerners, studying them with like interest, observed a marked variance of stature and feature, but an equally noticeable uniformity of color. Some few were hardly more than five feet in height; others rose a good two yards from their bare soles. The majority were fairly tall. So, too, with expressions: some were heavy of face and patently slow of mentality, but more—in fact, most—had alert countenances betokening

quick perceptions. One and all were strongly built, well shaped, and remarkably light-skinned—lighter, indeed, than the Maquiritares of León; for these forest-dwellers were less exposed to the scorching sun than the Spaniard's boatmen. All, too, wore the short red clouts and the bead armlets, and nothing else. The barbarian appendages through the ear-lobes, which had characterized the rovers from the Caño Tamara, were not to be seen among these men of Uaunana.

Into the minds of the legend-hunters came again the thought that, except for their uniform darkness of hair and eye, these light, dignified, intelligent-looking men might well be the traditional "white race" of Guayana. There could be no question that they were as white as many an Orinoco mestizo, and far whiter than some halfbreeds in whose veins flowed the blood of Indians of the western and northern plains.

"A bright-lookin' bunch, and not so homely, neither," declared Tim. "I'll take a look at their women any time they git over bein' shy. Where do they keep 'em?"

"Inside. They will come out when their men allow them," replied León. Then, to Juancito: "No blondos are here?"

The little chief's face tightened a trifle. Al-

though he apparently knew little Spanish, it was plain that he understood this simple question. Yet, for a moment, it seemed that he would feign non-comprehension. At length, however, he curtly answered: "No."

"No?" echoed the Spaniard. "Have any been here of late?"

No answer came. After a steady stare, Juan-cito turned coolly away, grunting a word to the others. To the paragua he walked, and into it; and after him went all his clansmen. The inquisitive newcomers were left alone.

"In other words," quoth McKay, "it's none of our business."

"That is the general idea, capitán," acknowledged León, with a wry smile. "It is not a subject for talk between Maquiritares and white men. But there shall be talk, and soon. Let us eat, and then—we shall see."

And he sat in his hammock and speculatively eyed the tribe-house.

CHAPTER XII

THE MESSENGER

WITH appetites satisfied by the contents of a couple of cans, the five sauntered around the paragua on a casual tour of inspection. They found its adobe wall to be perfectly circular, about eight feet in height, and pierced at eight equidistant points by openings—four doors and four windows. Two of these doors, León explained, were exclusively for men, leading to a central room where all bachelors must sleep; the other two, which gave entrance to family quarters, could be entered by the women, children, and fathers. The point of the conical roof stood perhaps thirty feet above ground, and the circumference of the house—according to the estimate of McKay, who counted his paces—was somewhat over two hundred feet.

At intervals around it stood several smaller structures, all without walls, which seemed to be work-places; for within them were log troughs, pole tables, and, in the largest, a mud fireplace where the cassava-cooking evidently was done.

From overhead hung large baskets, varying from pack size to long cylinders wherein the shredded yuca roots were squeezed. In a couple of pack-baskets resting on the dirt floor of the cassava-house were big chunks of fresh yuca, as yet ungrated; and near by lay several graters—hand-cut boards, about two feet long, whereon had been cemented myriad tiny pebbles and points of steel. These obviously had been hastily abandoned by the woman workers as soon as word had come from some sentinel that the strangers were approaching. No such sentry had been observed by the whites, but the laying of the ambush among the tree-trunks, as well as the evanishment of all women and children, made it quite manifest that some such watch of the river had been kept.

On their walk around the house, the visitors found the stout plank doors shut, and no face showed at any of the tiny windows. The portal opposite their own hut, however, had not been closed; and, on returning to their starting point, they found that their own Maquiritares had gone inside to visit the Uaunanans. The ranchería was deserted. After a glance around, León coolly entered the paragua, signing to the others to follow. They did so—but not until McKay had

given Portonio a gesture toward the hut, where the rifles lay unguarded. The riverman, with a grin of understanding, lounged away and lay down in a hammock.

Through a short passage-way, walled on either side by tall partitions of bark, the four others walked. Then they emerged into a circular room surrounded by similar bark slabs, a good ten feet in height, and so cunningly joined that no opening was visible save another corridor directly opposite the one by which they had entered: the other passage used by the males. The room was shadowy, yet well lighted from a large smoke-hole at one side of the roof. It was well filled with men: some standing, some sitting on diminutive carved stools, some lying in cotton hammocks; all giving their attention to some utterance by one of León's boatmen, who, catching sight of his patron, now fell silent. With one accord the Uaunanans turned their eyes to the intruders, remaining motionless, and giving no indication of displeasure at the entrance of the uninvited guests.

"Juancito," spoke León.

The chief did not appear. One of the men, however, moved to the partition; grasped some projection invisible to the whites, pulled, and dis-

closed a narrow opening between the slabs. Through this he sidled, the bark closing behind him so tightly that the wall again seemed solid. Apparently the family quarters were beyond that partition, ranged around in a ring between it and the outer wall; and the chief was at present in his own private domicile.

Again the Northerners looked over the habitants, who returned their gaze with cool composure. Then came a slight sound at the bark, and Juancito entered, advancing with questioning gaze fixed on León.

"Frasco!" called the latter. Frasco came, and the rest of León's men with him. León himself sat down in a vacant hammock, as if preparing to talk for some time. Juancito took another one, facing him. Behind their ruler the men of Uaunana gathered into a compact group. The Americans stood where they were.

"Frasco, say these words to the capitán," began the trader, in slow Spanish. "For many moons now the Maquiritares have known Loco León to be their friend. They know that Loco León is not a friend to men of San Fernando or to any other men of evil heart. So they must know that when Loco León brings here men who

are his friends, those friends must be men of good heart."

He paused. Frasco, in short gutturals, translated. Juancito seemed, however, to have followed the sense, if not all the words, of this preamble.

"Bien," he replied, without hesitation.

"Bien. Now Loco León and his friends go to the south to meet new people of Guayana. They go to see the blondos. They go with good in their hearts. They wish only to visit the blondos and then to come away."

Frasco stood silent so long that León gave him a stern look. When he spoke, it was reluctantly. And when he finished Juancito made no answer. His face seemed to harden.

"Once before now Loco León has seen a blondo," resumed the Spaniard. "That man was here at this paragua. Now Loco León has come to see if another blondo is here. There is none. But the men of Uaunana know the way up the Periqueta to the place where the white ones are. So León will take with him two men of Uaunana to show the way. Let Juancito pick those men."

His tone throughout was as casual as if he were proposing merely to cut down a balata tree. The expression which grew on the faces of Frasco and

his mates, however, was not so calm. They looked perturbed. And Frasco, instead of translating, jerked out a warning reply.

"Capitán! Es maluc'! It is bad!"

"Speak my words to Juancito," tranquilly commanded León.

The interpreter seemed about to refuse. But his employer held him with steady, steely gaze; and presently the gutturals fell again from his tongue. As he concluded, a perceptible start ran among the Uaunanans. The group seemed to shrink together. Their chief's visage became stony.

"No," he curtly refused. "Maluc'."

His tone was final. Yet the Ventuari veteran seemed in no wise disconcerted. He talked again, mentioning the fine presents which he would give the lucky men who went with them; speaking again of his long friendship with the Maquiri-tares; dwelling on the fact that the Northerners came from far away and were not bad whites with evil in their hearts toward the people of Guayana. Frasco kept translating, although his unwillingness was plain to all. Juancito made no further replies, but his expression remained obdurate.

This went on for some time, León never raising

his tone, never pleading, never arguing, but stating and restating the same proposition as if it were unanswerable and the outcome inevitable; Juancito giving not the slightest indication of yielding. The others, civilized and primitive alike, began to weary of it. Tim quietly moved away along the curving wall, looking at various articles upon or along it: long lances, new-made paddles drying into shape, a small drum covered with monkey-hide, and similar things. Knowlton presently followed him, and after them drifted a number of Indians, watching them with interest.

Reaching the darkened passage where the door still was closed, Tim turned a questioning look to the nearest Uaunanan and waved toward the portal. The Indian stepped over and opened it. From outside came voices. Tim accelerated his gait; and Knowlton, suddenly seeing through the red man's nonchalant maneuvers, laughed silently and followed on. The voices were those of women.

At that moment a boy came through the bark, walked straight to Juancito, and spoke one word. The chief, without change of expression, rose at once and disappeared through the wall. The remaining Indians glanced at one another, but voiced not a single grunt. León and McKay,

thus unceremoniously deserted, exchanged wry smiles and moved doorward.

"Looks as if we'd paddle our own canoe, for all the help we'll get here," said the Scot.

"It does," admitted the Spaniard. "But I shall try again. Ah! Your comrade Tim has found his women, I think. Let us see."

Outside, Tim and Knowlton stood surveying a number of short, chubby young women, wearing only small aprons, who apparently had decided that the presence of strange men must no longer be allowed to interfere with their daily duties, and who, therefore, had returned to the cassava work. At the appearance of those strangers, however, they had halted every movement and stood like statues. For the moment they held their positions like figures in a tableau, viewing the whites with the same unreadable expressions first shown by their men. Then one of them made a brief remark, and their faces brightened with quick laughter. Their tense poise relaxed, and they resumed their motions—though they kept darting looks at the Northerners.

"Gee! Not so bad!" admired Tim. "Not—so—bad! Bobbed hair, begorry! Git it, looeey? And one of 'em has rouged her face! Talk about lost white folks—these girls have got the Broad-

way make-up! And short skirts—oh boy! They've got everything beat that I ever saw up home, even when the girls only wore 'em to their knees. These only go half-way round. Beads, too; solid beads; nothin' ordinary, like cloth, for these janes. Class, I'll say!"

True enough, the aprons were of solid bead-work, strung in striking geometric designs of contrasting colors, the figures being as regular as if formed by machines, and the whole garment depending from a girdle of more beads. Bead arm-lets similar to those of the men also were noticeable, and two of the girls wore bead necklaces. Otherwise they were unclothed; and the prevailing dark shades of the ornaments served to accentuate the fairness of their clear, clean skins. So, too, did the thick black hair, cut straight across the forehead and then at a slant which half concealed the ears. And one of them, as Tim had detected, was rouged quite becomingly with the scarlet paint derived from the pods of the annatto tree. With the light smiles still lingering on their faces, they were far from bad-looking. And, smiling or serious, they were by no means such uncouth, unkempt creatures as might perhaps be expected to exist in Indian lands.

"Yeah, I've seen lots worse than these girlies,"

Tim went on. "D'ye know, looeey, I'm beginnin' to like this place. Folks are nice and friendly after ye git acquainted, I bet; and they're thawin' out already. I ain't in no hurry about movin' on."

"That, señor," dryly spoke León, behind him, "is what Black White once thought."

The red man started.

"Cripes! D'ye mean—'twas here that they fixed him?"

"Here. The girl was of Uaunana."

"Umph!" Tim eyed the girls again, not so admiringly now; indeed, he looked as if he had suddenly discovered that they possessed, instead of fingers, the claws of cats. And for some time he said not another word.

Having looked over McKay with the same attention they had previously given to Knowlton and Tim, the women affected to ignore them and went on with their work. For a while the men stood and watched them; there was nothing else to do, and the sun-slant was such that they were in comfortable shade. The Indian men loitered near at hand, conversing briefly among themselves, watching their guests carelessly, awaiting whatever move might come next. A few children appeared; then more women, moving about as

if no visitors were present. Apparently Uaunana had decided that these friends of Loco León truly were "men of good heart" and need no longer be regarded with alert wariness.

At length the Northerners yawned and began moving along the wall. But just then the same boy who had summoned Juancito—perhaps his son—emerged from the house and spoke to Frasco. The latter informed León:

"The capitán wants you."

"Bien." The Spaniard quickly reentered the paragua, followed by the Americans. They found the chief standing in the middle of the room. Without preamble he spoke. Frasco showed astonishment. For a long minute he stood wordless, staring at the ruler of the place. Not until the latter spoke again, with a touch of harshness, did he repeat the words in Spanish.

"Two men will go on the Periqueta with León."

León's lashes flickered; but he gave no other indication of amazement at this unexplained about-face. He answered only with a quiet "Bueno," and, after a pause, asked who those two would be. This question caused considerable stir among the Uaunanans themselves, and it was quite manifest that none wished to go. Juancito, however, quieted the commotion with

a few cryptic words which had marked effect. The opposition seemed to fade out, and when the chief called two names a couple of tall fellows came forward—although with noticeable reluctance. All the others regarded the white men with an odd intensity.

"It is good," said León. "Tomorrow we go."

Nobody answered. The Spaniard strolled out, his comrades trailing him with the same assumption of insouciance. As they went, the Maquiritares of León scowled at Juancito. Frasco, indeed, glared at the chief as if ablaze with wrath. The latter met their eyes with stony expression and inflexible gaze.

"Well! That was sudden and complete," declared Knowlton, outside. "What do you make of it?"

"Only that we have what we want," shrugged León. "I have known him to change as suddenly before now, and for no reason that I could see. Now that he has made his promise, though, he will not change again."

The door by which they came out was the one where they had first gone in, and before them stood their hut, with Portonio lying languid in his hammock. Toward him they walked to give him the news.

"Sure takes life easy, that feller," chuckled Tim. "Bet ye he's been sleepin' all the time we've been gone."

But Portonio soon proved that he had not. He listened, with his usual easy smile, to McKay's brief statement that on the morrow they would start up the Periqueta with two guides from this place. Then he drawled:

"Sí. The blondo went to tell his people that we come?"

A silence, broken by Knowlton.

"What blondo?"

"The one who just came and went, señor."

"A blond? Here?" demanded León.

"Sí. While you were in the paragua. An Indio came from the caño. I lay still, as if sleeping. He went around behind the house. Just now he ran down the hill to the caño. I thought you had talked with him inside. And you did not know he was here? Cra! I would have caught him if I had known that."

"A blondo!" repeated León.

"Sí. Tall and strong, with hair of gold."

The four stood speechless. While they had stood idly watching women work at the other side of the house, a mysterious courier of the white ones had been within speaking distance,

unseen and unsuspected. And now he had vanished. It would be useless, they knew, to dash to the creek after him. By this time he and his canoe must be out on the Ventuari and speeding away.

And Juancito, summoned to conference with that man in some secret nook between the walls, had then made his abrupt change of front. Apparently the ban on white strangers to the Periqueta had been lifted. Yet why, in that case, had not the blondo remained here to guide those strangers? Why had he fled—aided by Juancito, who had given him a clear field by recalling the explorers to the interior? What was afoot now?

"Fellers," growled Tim, "I smell somethin' fishy on that there Periqueta. And the minute we start up that river I'm goin' to strap on all the artillery I've got!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE RIVER OF DEMONS

ONCE more the dawn wind swept across the uplands of Guayana, bearing the discordant voices of waking creatures to the ears of those still asleep. Into the clearing of the Uaunana folk it dropped the squawks and screams breaking from the jungle at the eastward; then flowed on into the southwest. Under the green roof of the pole ranchería three Americans and two Venezuelans opened their eyes, blinked at one another and at the tight-shut tribe-house, yawned and arose. Under the palm cone of the paragua, where the shadows still lay dense and the outer noises were deadened by the mud wall, the Maquiritaes awoke more slowly.

In a corner of the hut Portonio kindled the morning coffee-fire. As the water came to a boil, the nearest door of the tribe-house opened. Several young fellows came forth, stood looking at the outlanders, and slowly drifted nearer. Another, stopping within the threshold, also watched the white men a moment, but then turned back

into the central room, where the Maquiritaires of León had slept with the others.

A little later the rear door was opened, and out through it filed six Indians. Keeping the house between them and the ranchería, they followed a foot-track winding away amid the stumps and trunks; reached the edge of the forest, and vanished into it. All were men of León.

Coffee, cassava, and cigarettes finished, the white men glanced again at the loitering Uaunans, than beyond them at the house.

"Where's all our gang?" wondered Knowlton. "Eating with their own crowd for once? First time I've known them to miss morning mess."

To the silent spectators León spoke, with a gesture doorward.

"Frasco," he said.

Two men departed. Soon they returned, and, with them, Frasco and one other of the Spaniard's crew, named Gil. Both the latter walked with lagging step, and their faces were gloomy.

"Capitán," jerked Frasco, "the others are gone." He moved his chin toward the forest.

The Spaniard's face darkened; but he answered as if he had half expected this desertion.

"Bien. You two come with us?"

The Maquiritare, whose intelligent face was

unusually expressive, seemed to struggle with himself. Gil, more phlegmatic, watched him intently.

"Capitán! Do not go on the Periqueta!" broke from Frasco.

"Why?"

"Muy maluc'! Very bad!"

"And why?"

"Diablos! Devils!"

"Ah! So? Devils of what sort?"

The Indian seemed to writhe again. Then his jaw set and his countenance went blank. Only his brown eyes, dumbly expressive as those of a fine dog, still pleaded with his master not to go.

León laughed lightly, turning his amused gaze to the other Indians. More of these had come out now, and several of them were watching Frasco with eyes narrowed. As the Spaniard studied their ominous looks his smile vanished.

"Go and get your weapons," he crisply directed. "Bring the two men who are to go with us. Let the cassava and other things be carried to a good curial. We shall use only one boat. Let nine paddles also be brought. Vaya!"

Frasco, following his gaze, swept the faces around him; walked away, and, in so doing, made two of those who seemed unfriendly get out

of his path. In his stride was a grim readiness which boded ill for anyone obstructing him. Gil followed after, giving no indication of any feeling whatsoever.

"Squall brewing," suggested McKay.

"Brewing, but it will not break," judged León. "There has been some bad disagreement between these two and the rest. Frasco remains faithful, and Gil. The others—perhaps they wish us to go to the devils on the Periqueta, perhaps not. But it is not good for Frasco to warn us of those devils, especially where these others can hear him. I am much surprised that he did so. You remember how dumb he was last night."

Nods answered. At that time León had made it known to all his crew that he was aware of the visit of the blond Indian, and had demanded an explanation. Not one word had come in answer. Frasco and all his fellows had remained absolutely tongueless, and finally had gone in a body to the paragua and remained there.

"Ye ain't got yer men under very good control, Loco," Tim had grumbled then. To which the rover had countered: "They are not *my* men, but their own men: free men. They stay with me because they will, and leave me when they will. One cannot drive these people."

The truth of this assertion was even more apparent now than it had been then. Six out of the eight had willed to quit the expedition and were gone; the other two could not be driven, either by León or by their own people; they were staying because they willed to do so. What talk had passed in the paragua during the night the white men could never know, but it evidently had been heated. Now they felt a whole-souled admiration for the loyal Frasco, who not only was forcing himself to enter a region obviously awful to him, but had fought to overcome some powerful inhibition in revealing to his Spanish friend diabolical horrors.

His warning, though outwardly disregarded by the inflexible adventurers, was not without effect. The manner of its delivery—the visible struggle to speak when every instinct commanded silence—made it doubly ominous. Too, it recalled forcibly the two previous warnings: the fragmentary admonition of the dying Curro, trying with his last breath to tell something to the white men who had leaped to rescue him, and the grisly prophecy of the madman who walked by night. And Juancito, with his first flat refusal and his laconic “Maluc’”—the palpable dread of the Periqueta shown by the other Uaunanans—the

desertion of the paddlers who hitherto had flinched from nothing—all these were portents of evil.

Now, unspeaking, Tim reached into his pack, brought forth his heavy ammunition-belt and holstered hand-gun, and buckled them on; then picked his rifle from the hammock—where it had lain all night beside him—and tested the action. Nobody laughed at him. Instead, McKay and Knowlton in turn produced belts and pistols and donned them. And Portonio and León looked toward their repeaters, then at each other.

The two loyal Maquiritaires were gone hardly a minute. Reappearing, they brought with them the guides. All four now were heavily armed; for they bore bows, basket quivers containing numerous long shafts, and machetes. Behind them came all the adult males who had not already appeared outside. Frasco evidently had given succinct commands which Juancito chose to obey, for everyone now became busy. Some disappeared down the hill, going to get a nine-man canoe; others gathered up loads of cassava, yams, and plantains, which they carried to the creek; still others volunteered to transport the personal goods of the explorers. Whatever might be their

reasons, the men of Uaunana were exhibiting marked readiness to speed the departing guests.

In less than half an hour camp was broken and the campers wending their way down through the tree-debris. At the top of the hill Juancito stood just as on the previous day: cool, impassive, his eyes on the white men. To him, in departing, each of those whites had given a straight look and a brief "Adios." He had not answered by word or sign. But now, as he saw the last of them turn at the edge of the tree-fringe and wave an ironical farewell, into his face came a brooding expression akin to sorrow.

That last man was Tim, and his parting flourish was not to Juancito but to any girl who might, unseen, be looking her last at him. Nor was the chief's misgiving—if he felt any—for Tim or his American partners; rather, it was for the blond Spaniard who had gone with them. To the chief and the people of Uaunana, Loco León had been a friend.

Down the last abrupt declivity the voyagers dropped, and the tribe-house and the clearing were blotted out. Once more they were among trees, with water and canoes lying before them and the unknown awaiting them. Into a long dugout they stepped, taking their respective

places: the Indians in the bow paddling seats, Portonio at the stern with a shovel-shaped steering blade, the señores amidships, with rifles and paddles laid ready to hand. And without a parting word to the Maquiritares grouped on the shore they slid away down the caño and out into the Ventuari.

"Well," said Knowlton, as they cruised easily down with the current, "we are no longer thirteen, if that indicates anything. Thirteen of us came up, and nine go down. Let's see, isn't nine a sort of mystic number—three times three—proof against spells and so on? Anyway, the thirteen of us didn't meet any horrible fate while we were together. That knocks one of your omens in the head, Tim."

"Mebbe," granted the Celt. "And then again, mebbe an egg got laid while there was thirteen of us that'll hatch out yet for the nine of us."

"Let her hatch," quoth McKay.

León said nothing. He sat watching the two new men, who stroked steadily without a word or a look for the Caño Negro pair behind them. For some hours nobody spoke again, save for a curt direction or two in passing a raudal.

Then, near noon, at their left yawned the mouth of the Periqueta. So strong had been the

push of the current that, with only four paddles swinging in effortless rhythm, the distance which the Americans remembered as a full day's journey had been covered in less than half that time. At sight of that dreaded water, Frasco and Gil halted their paddles as if paralyzed. The Uaunana men, too, slowed their regular sway, though they did not cease entirely. Portonio, imperturbable, swung the boat into the flow of the new stream. And the three Americans and the Spaniard simultaneously reached for paddles, dipped them overside, and drove their craft southward with determined power.

For a couple of hundred yards they forced their way into the teeth of the current, the Indians turning surprised faces as they felt the sudden surge of strength behind them, then picking up the stroke. In that concerted drive, in the set lips and level eyes of their superiors, the aborigines sensed a united, inexorable will, which they could but obey. The die was cast. The Periqueta was invaded—its waters flung aside, impotent to stem the irresistible rush of the white men. There would be no turning back. All this, and more, was driven into the Maquiritaes more forcefully by that initial onslaught than by any

words known to men. And they mutely bent their backs once more to the toil of carrying on.

"Now let's land and eat," said McKay. "We've tapped the Periqueta on the nose without a come-back. Don't see any devils making faces along shore, either. Portonio! Derecha!"

The steersman turned the prow to the right, as directed. At a wooded spot free from undergrowth they berthed and went ashore. There, undisturbed by any menacing sight or sound, they lunched in leisurely fashion, cool and comfortable in the shade.

"The river of demons," mused León, smiling reflectively as he gazed along the stream. "More than once I have thought to travel this river, but always something arose to turn me elsewhere. And now I am on it at last. I hope the demons have not tired of waiting for me and gone to some other place. I should much like to see one of them."

McKay's eyes twinkled approvingly. His only reply, however, was a question.

"What's your idea—if any—as to the nature of the demons?"

"Only this: I know that all the people of this Guayana believe high mountains to be the homes of demons, because around such mountains some-

times rage terrible storms; and this Periqueta comes from mountains at the south, some of which may be tall and stormy. Yet I never have known the Maquiritaires to fear a river because mountains were near it; it is only the mountains themselves which they dread. So—" He shrugged, hinting at the folly of wasting breath on surmises, and arose. They reentered the canoe, settled themselves for steady work, and pushed out.

"Vamos con Dios, patrón," the Spaniard jestingly voiced the old formula of departing boatmen. "Let us go with God."

"Y con la Virgen. And with the Virgin," Portonio smilingly gave back the steersman's requisite response.

"And the devil fly away with the guy that lays down first," contributed Tim. Which conclusion was so contrary to the one prescribed by custom that a chorus of chuckles swept the boat.

So, reckless of powers celestial or infernal, they paddled away: four silent Maquiritaires setting the short, rapid stroke; McKay and Knowlton, Tim and León, swaying in unison—the first three with pistols hitched over to hang between their thighs, the fourth with his rifle at his feet; Portonio lounging astern with paddle trailing and

gun leaning against gunwale. Around the first curve they crawled, and so out of sight from the Ventuari: nine men in a boat, paddling up the river of the evil name, who never were to paddle down it.

Beyond, they found only a continuation of the same empty water, the same blank jungle shores, the same occasional raudales, which had become so familiar on the river they left behind. And for the rest of that day—until sundown approached—they journeyed on without seeing any sign of man. The first indication that any human being had ever traveled here before them was discovered when, following the directions of the guides, they turned in at the mouth of a little caño—hardly more than a brook—and found a good camp-site where lay old fish-bones, rain-spattered feathers, and a few long-dead coals. No hut stood there, and it was apparent that the spot was seldom visited.

In less than half an hour a ranchería had been created and the hammocks hung. The Indians, still in pairs, went into the forest hunting. Presently they returned heavily laden, the Uaunans bringing in a curassow turkey each, while Frasco and Gil proudly bore a peccary. When darkness settled down the birds had become nothing but

bones, while the pig was roasting in sections on a pole griddle over a steady fire.

"Where are your demonios, Frasco?" gibed Portonio, glancing into the peaceful night. "Where do they hide from us?"

Frasco, squatting beside the cook-fire, met his mocking eye with sombre gaze. Then he moved his head southward.

"Why do you carry so many arrows?" quizzed Knowlton. "Can a demon be slain by them?"

Frasco made no reply. But, after a moment, Gil spoke.

"Guaharibos."

León, listening, lifted his brows.

"Guaharibos?" he echoed. "Guaharibos live here?"

"No. They come. They go."

"And the demonios do not harm them?"

No response. The subject of demonios was one on which not even Frasco would speak more.

When the Indians sought their hammocks—as they soon did—they showed no sign of expecting attack by man or spirit that night. True, they set their weapons close beside them; but then they curled up and closed their eyes without hesitation. The others' followed their example, keep-

ing no watch. And throughout the night reigned unbroken peace.

So it went for six more days and nights. Day after day the dugout forged on, its men spying no others. Night after night it lay at some spot selected by the Uaunana guides, while the paddlers slept the sleep of healthy fatigue. Yet, despite the absence of any visible or audible danger, despite the gibes and jeers voiced nightly, among the voyagers a growing tenseness made itself felt. It emanated, perhaps, from the Maquiritares; but every man in the party sensed it: a feeling that, blank though the jungle seemed to be, it had eyes, and that it was constantly watching—and waiting.

Now and then, as the shores crept past, an unexplainable movement of a bush caught their roving gaze: a clump of plantain dipping as if smitten by a breeze, when no breeze blew; a long fern bowing suddenly and remaining in that position; palm-fronds quivering for no reason. And when they went ashore, near at hand sounded faint rustlings which seemed too stealthy to be made by hastily retreating animals or birds. Indeed, after that first day there was a dearth of wild life in the vicinity of the camps. The Maquiritares found little meat. It was notice-

able, too, that now they hunted together instead of in pairs, as if whatever division had previously existed were obliterated by the need of a united front against some lurking peril. Still no actual, definite menace could be discerned by day or by dark. And when night closed down the mysterious movement round about them ceased, to be heard no more until morning.

Yet there remained always that sensation of being watched—even in the night. And, though they kept no counter-watch—feeling that night vigils would be useless—they slept ready for sudden action. Every weapon was within instant reach. The Americans, in fact, slept with pistols still belted on, where they could be seized without groping. No fire was allowed to burn after dark. Nightly the sky became obscured by heavy clouds; and when the gloom thickened under trees and roof the camp became invisible. Only the prescience of unhuman creatures, it seemed, could locate the hut and its occupants amid the moonless murk.

It was the seventh night when the demons struck.

The journeying that day had been hard, because of raudales; and on making camp—beside a noisy brook and below another brawling rapid—

all had gone early to their hammocks. No sound but the steady rush of the waters came to their ears, and all were soon asleep. Hours fled. Then, of a sudden, McKay found himself sitting up in his hammock, pistol ready in his right fist.

Darkness lay heavy around him. In it his dilated pupils made out only the vague forms of the nearest hammocks. Then behind him sounded a low, tense demand:

"Who moves?"

It was the voice of León. With it blended the click of a rifle hammer.

"McKay. What's wrong?"

"I do not know. Something."

For minutes they listened. Only a quiet snore from the net of Portonio came to them. They arose; moved slowly about, peering into the gloom; found nothing. Suddenly León voiced a startled exclamation.

"Los Indios! They are gone!"

Heedless of possible danger, he struck a match. Its brief light showed that he spoke truth. Not one of the Maquiritares remained. Their hammocks were there. So were their bows and arrows—even their machetes, standing upright from the ground beside the hanging beds. But

the men had vanished as if seized and swallowed by some gigantic ogre.

León whirled, stepped to the slanting stone beside which the dugout had been moored, and struck another match. As he dropped its charred stub and darkness swooped over him again, the tumbling waters beyond seemed to roar with malicious mirth.

The canoe, too, had disappeared.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DART

"WHAT's doin', cap?"

The guarded voice came from Tim's hammock. In the gloom McKay made out three shapes which had silently risen in their nets and now sat rigid and ready. The camp was wide awake.

"We're marooned again. Boat and Indians gone. All the guns here?"

Affirmative grunts answered, followed by Tim's sour growl:

"Made a sneak, hey? The low-down, yellor quitters——

"I would not say that, Señor Tim," interrupted León, a touch of asperity in his tone. "Men who mean to desert do not go unarmed. All their weapons are here. Neither would those boys try to pass through the raudales below here at night. It would be death to attempt it."

A silence ensued. Eyes vainly searched the density; ears strained for some suspicious noise. After a time Knowlton queried:

"Any blood in the hammocks?"

León moved to the untenanted nets, but struck no more lights. Instead, he passed a hand slowly along each one, his fingers seeking wet spots.

"None."

From that time until daybreak only two words were voiced. McKay, after peering at his phosphorescent watch-dial, announced: "One-forty." After a period of tense alertness, all slowly relaxed in their hammocks, rifles held loosely across their bodies; but not an eye closed.

As they hung there, every mind reviewed the last known words and movements of the Maquiritares, probing for some indication that they might have planned a desertion here. There was none. The Uaunana men had said that the raudal above was long and hard, and that there would not be time to traverse it before night. So the halt had been made at this spot, which, though a natural site for a camp, showed no sign of previous use. The Indians had made no attempt to hunt; they had caught a few small pampano fish, and, with these and the inevitable cassava, had made their meal while the señores opened the last of their cans. Thereafter their behavior had been in no way different from that of the previous evening; they had repeatedly eyed the surroundings, showing some signs of the nervousness which seemed

habitual of late, but none of incipient panic; they had carefully set their weapons close by the hammocks, and then had turned in. No, there had been no evidence of any intent to quit. Nor was there reason, even now, to accuse them of doing so.

To suppose that they would abandon arms and beds and fare down the reef-torn river in blackness—this was well-nigh preposterous. Even if driven by insane terror, it was hardly conceivable that, in springing from sleep, they would have failed to snatch up machetes—arrows—something with which to defend themselves. Still less was it imaginable that, if they did make a frenzied exodus, it would be so noiseless as to leave the white men undisturbed. Nor, for that matter, was it at all likely that anything which could rouse them and drive them thence would not wake everyone in camp. And neither McKay nor León could recall the slightest disturbance. Neither of them knew why he had started from sleep, every nerve alert to some dire thing to which he could not put a name.

So they waited in silence, half expecting a recurrence of the uncanny visitation which had obliterated four men; half hoping that they might delude the marauding Thing—whatever it was—

into believing them once more asleep; yet feeling that their vigil was futile—that the Thing knew they lay in wait for it. Within their meagre range of vision nothing moved. To their straining ears came only the continued mockery of the unseen rapid. This, as the hours dragged on, became more hideous than the crazy jeers which had chilled their blood at Monoblanco. Its ghastly gurgles, its low chuckles, its hissing undertone, made it seem a fiend chortling there in the dark. The voice of Black White, although that of a madman, had still been human. This was insensate, monstrous—the slaverling snarl of the demon-haunted Periqueta, torturing the invaders who had dared crawl into its maw and at last had heard its teeth snap behind them.

Listening against their will to that malignant exultation, the adventurers considered their own situation, present and future. They now must be within a day and a half of the head of the winding stream; for the stated length of the river was eight days' journey, and they had traveled on it for six full days and one afternoon. To go back down it—in a canoe—would hardly take more than three. But there was no canoe, here or anywhere along the course which they had traveled—unless their own boat, maliciously

loosed to drift to ruin, was caught among raudales below. Even if it could be found there, virtually all of their equipment was lost; for they had taken from the dugout only the articles they desired for use in camp over night, and everything else would be thrown overboard when the masterless craft capsized in the writhing waters on the reefs. And the boat itself was irrevocably gone, they felt. Since no other was available, and since any raft which they might build would be broken up in the rapids, the way out was closed. Well might the river gloat now over its trapped prey!

But to this question—the problem of getting out again—they gave but little thought. Time enough to worry over that when they were ready to go. Now, after rapidly running over these points, their minds reached ahead: on into the mysterious land of the blancos, toward which they had turned their faces and to which they were not disposed to turn their backs. That land must be near. Twenty days' journey from Caño Negro it lay, if the Tamara men had spoken truly; and the expedition now had traveled for seventeen days, excluding both the stops at Monoblanco and Uaunana and the time consumed in detouring to the latter place.

Thus they must be on the border of that land. And they would go on.

Were those blancos, perhaps, responsible for the disappearance of the four Indian members of this party? Was this region, by some occult decree, forbidden to Indians, however light of skin, but open to real white men? Knowlton nearly voiced an exclamation as this thought struck him. All the white men here had been unmolested by the Thing which had snatched the Maquiritares from their hammocks. Yet how could human beings have entered this hut and killed or captured and borne away four strong Maquiritares without struggle or noise? It was unthinkable.

So, too, was the surmise that it could have been done by those Guaharibos of whose possible presence Frasco had given a hint. In fact, this hypothesis was even more untenable than the other; for the Guaharibos were lethal savages with a centuries-old hatred for white men. Only last night León had talked about them, and the main facts concerning them were fresh in all minds. Their home land was more than a hundred miles to the south, at the sources of the Orinoco. During the dry season, however, they roved for great distances, marauding, killing,

looting, forever on the move. More than once they had come to the Alto Ventuari region on raids. They were utter barbarians, at odds with all other Indians, and intensely ferocious toward men of white or part-white ancestry. Had they come upon this camp, they would have bent every energy toward exterminating its white occupants first.

Thus all the mental groping of the vigilant five got them nowhere. They could only lie and listen, meanwhile wrestling vainly with the mystery, until something new should come about or dawn should bring light. Portonio, probably, had the easiest time of all; for he was one who took things as they came and devoted little mental effort to whys and wherefores. The curial and the Indios were gone; he and the rest were here; they had good guns; the hammock was comfortable, even though one did not sleep; tomorrow the señores would decide on something; then he would do what they did. So why need a man fight his head? He did not. He lay tranquil, though alert, and let the things of mañana shape themselves as they might.

Rain came, battered the leaf roof for an hour, and passed on. The sky cleared, but the hour was past moonset, and no light dissolved the

misty blanket enshrouding the camp. At last, however, dawned the new day.

At the first thinning of the shadows up rose the five, sweeping everything about them with piercing gaze. Then, as the light strengthened, they scanned closely everything in the hut. Inch by inch they surveyed the ground, seeking the smallest sign of flight or struggle, the tiniest spot of red—even though reason reiterated that no commotion could have passed unheard. They found nothing such as they sought. There stood the machetes, ready for instant seizure by the hands of the vanished four. There lay a few small fragments of cassava, dropped by some one of the Indians who had munched a piece while sitting in his hammock. Otherwise the earth beside and beneath those empty beds showed no vestige. The white cotton hammocks were unspotted. Above them, suspended from a cross-pole, hung the bows and quivers of arrows.

Unspeaking, they moved to the rain-wet rock where the canoe had last lain. It bore no traces. A steady look down the river showed it to be empty. The long boat had disappeared as completely as had its owners. A glance in the other direction, into the grinning raudal, served only to emphasize the folly of looking there. No

power could move the ponderous dugout up through that death-trap in the night.

"It looks, friend Tim, as if your blessing down below had come true in a way you did not mean," said León, with a tight smile, "and the devil had flown away with some of us."

"You said somethin', feller," morosely agreed Tim. "And the boat's spurlos versenkt, as the Heinies used to say: sunk without a trace. Lookit here. We tied her to this here tree. Ain't even a piece o' rope left."

True enough, there was not so much as a wisp of the piassava fibre. A close examination of the bark revealed only a rubbed spot where the painter had chafed. There was no knife-scratch or other mark.

McKay turned away, his gray gaze again plumbing the depths of the surrounding woods.

"Any coffee left?" he calmly asked. "Portonio, hay café?"

"Pocito. A little," responded the erstwhile pilot. With alacrity he returned to the interior and kindled a fire. The others, hollow-eyed from their useless vigil, moved after him and waited hungrily, all at once aware that their nerves demanded the usual hot stimulant. When it was ready they drank with avidity.

"It is the last," added Portonio, expressively up-ending the small can wherein the daily supply had been habitually kept. Nobody answered orally; but simultaneous scowls spoke volumes.

"Are we out o' smokes, too?" croaked Tim, after a vain search of pockets.

"I've got a full pouch of cube-cut," assured McKay. Knowlton and León, too, had tobacco of different grades—a fragrant, golden American mixture, and an ink-black Brazilian cigarette-brand of terrific strength. The red man's lugubrious face brightened again.

"Wal, we ain't so bad off, then," he rejoiced. "Gimme the makin's, looeey. Tobaccer and bullets, we've got—good thing we've been bringin' our belts ashore every night—but that's about all. No grub, after this breakfast. No boat. No nothin', but guns and knives and what we stand in and sleep in. But we can go quite a ways with them. Where do we go from here, cap?"

McKay's eyes met those of León. Of late the Spaniard had, by virtue of his position as comrade and guide, been practically in command of the party. Now he knew little, if anything, more about their environment than did the rest. It was essential that someone act as head of the

expedition; the tall Scot had been that head until León began to pilot it; and the leadership now was tacitly reverting to him. The blue-eyed Venezuelan grasped the situation evoked by Tim's careless question, and those blue eyes smiled into the gray ones. The two understood each other.

"Every man has his own say," was McKay's tactful reply. "But if you put it up to me, I'll say: first, take a look at the raudal below here and see if the curial or anything else is caught there; then, whether it is or not, carry on. We've all got legs."

"Attaboy!" approved Tim. "Me, I want to git to the bottom o' this funny business that's goin' on round here."

Vigorous nods by both Knowlton and León expressed their full agreement with this sentiment. Breakfast, comprising whatever scraps remained from the night meal, was eaten. Then said McKay:

"I'll go to the raudal. If anything's there I'll yell. The rest of you snoop around and see if you can find any sign. Stick together."

"You're not going alone, Rod!" disputed Knowlton.

"I am. I want you fellows to scout around camp. Anything that wanted to get me—or all

of us—could have done it in the night. Any devil that tries flying away with me in daylight will have his hands full. No argument, Merry!”

He picked up his rifle and a machete and turned downstream. But he was not to go alone, in spite of his decision; for Portonio, without a word, grasped his own gun and bush-knife, caught up with him in two strides, elbowed him aside, and took the lead. McKay growled; then grinned, and let the determined fellow have his way. The Venezuelan's first sweep of the long blade evinced a dexterity such as the Northerner did not possess, and the trip could obviously be made in much less time by his path-making skill.

Across the brook they passed, and on through the bush, now lit up by the fast-rising sun. In the morning breeze the foliage around and above them rustled like a long sigh, and from it fell a miniature shower of drops remaining from the bygone rain. Yet, despite that night deluge and the present wetness of the forest, the ground felt firm, not muddy. Subconsciously the pair noticed this, and Portonio formed a conclusion which he was soon to voice. At present, however, he was too busy with his steel and his watchfulness of the forest to propound any

theories. Steadily they kept on, finding no danger, until they reached the next raudal.

That reef, hidden from the camp by a turn of the stream, was perhaps a third of a mile below it. It was short, but full of rocks, and unlikely to allow an unmanned boat to pass through. Yet it held no dugout in its clutch. Nor was any unnatural object lodged on its stones. The rocks were bare. And the short river vista below it was empty.

After one survey which missed nothing, they turned back. They were half-way to camp when Portonio, studying the ground more closely now, spoke.

"Capitán. I think we are near open country. This ground is hard. It is like that of sabana. And an Indian on the Alto Orinoco once told me there are high sabanas and mountains here."

"Bueno. We shall see."

They pressed on a little faster. Recrossing the brook, they found the hut vacant; but a rod or two behind it the blue shirt of León was vaguely visible amid the greenery, and as they spied him he turned, as if sensing their presence. He beckoned. As they walked to him they mentally braced themselves for some grisly sight—the bodies of the Indians, perhaps, fearfully mangled.

Instead, they found their comrades clustered beside a small tree on which was affixed a cryptic object. It was at once an enigma and, at first sight, a menace; a silent messenger of jungle death: a blowgun dart.

It was not, however, a spent missile caught by its point and lost or forgotten by hunter or prowler. It had been deliberately and carefully placed: bound to the trunk by a slanting ligature of vine—fresh vine. And it was such a dart as no man here—all of whom had some familiarity with such sinister weapons—had ever before seen. In size and shape, to be sure, it was typical: a miniature javelin, a foot and a half long, a sixteenth of an inch thick, needle-sharp at the point, wrapped with a short conical plug of cotton near the butt. But it was dyed. From tip to mid-section it was jet black; from there to the dull end, blood red.

"A token and a guide," said León:

"Token of what?" puzzled McKay. "Death?"

"I do not know. But I do not think it is a threat. See, it points away from our camp, not toward it. What the colors mean I cannot say, though I know what made them. The black is curame—not curare, the poison, but curame, which the Indians use as black paint; and the

red is the onorte, or annatto. It has been left here for us to find. As you see, the camborita—the vine cord—is fresh. And the dart points—

“Points to a path!” broke in Tim, impatient of the explanation of what he had already learned. “Cap, it’s a traffic sign. Loco squinted along it, and we went straight ahead, and there’s a path. It ain’t much, but it’s somethin’ to walk on. It heads west. Ye didn’t find nothin’ down below?”

“Not a thing. Portonio thinks there’s savanna country near by. Probably it’s a little to the west. And you say that path runs west. Good! Let’s go!”

CHAPTER XV

GHOST LAND

ALONG an elusive thread of a trail, through tall forest which still shook down chill drops of moisture as the breezes swept its crown, marched the five remaining from the fourteen who had left the Caño Negro.

Once more the guidance of their course had swung to the lot of the Spanish-born; for, though neither of the Venezuelans was acquainted with the terrain now to be traversed, each of them was a veteran of similar selvas, and thus a shade more at home here than the outlanders. As McKay had put it: "You chaps have the feel of this region. We haven't. So you pick the way for awhile." And now León and Portonio walked in file at the head of the short column.

On each man's back hung a small pack: the meagre possessions remaining from the outfit carried by the canoe. The Americans, who habitually brought their rucksacks ashore at night, carried them now, with various small belongings

therein. Portonio and León portaged the hammocks, tightly rolled and hitched on by bark thongs. Under each Venezuelan's left arm hung his bullet bag, and in either fist swung rifle and machete. The Americans carried their ammunition in army web belts, heavy laden; their machetes—or, rather, those of the Indians who had failed to use them—thrust under those same belts, unguarded by any scabbards; their rifles in their right hands, and pistols swinging at their thighs. The hammocks, bows, and arrows of the Maquiritares had been left behind, stowed out of sight on an overhead shelf formed by a few small poles laid crosswise of the hut.

"We cannot use them," León had pointed out, "and it may be that the Indios will reappear here at some time in desperate need of them. I cannot feel that they have left us because they wished to do so; not Frasco, at any rate. If they still live they will return here—sometime. We shall take the machetes."

Before starting, they had taken careful stock of their cartridge supply, finding that it totaled about four hundred rounds. The .30's and .45's of the Americans aggregated about three hundred, while the .44's of the Spaniards (who car-

ried no revolvers) came to approximately a hundred.

"Enough to carry us a long distance," asserted Knowlton, "unless we get into a jam with a hostile gang or two. A stiff scrap would eat up these yellow babies in jig-time. Moral: don't start anything."

And now they were on the march, following the direction indicated by that strange red-and-black pointer on the tree. What lay before them none could guess, but each of the Northerners walked in half hope of meeting at last some member of that blond race for which they had so unswervingly sought. With a pang Knowlton thought of the camera and films, now lost, which could have recorded in indisputable form the existence of such a people, if actually it did exist. He had left the machine under the tarpaulin last night, and now it was forever gone. Gone, too, were all snapshots taken along the route above Monoblanco—snatched away as if grim old Guayana were determined to let no views of her secret places go forth to the world of white men.

So dimly marked was the path beneath their feet that they could advance only at a slow pace, constantly watchful against its total evanishment. It was damp, yet hard; nowhere on it could be

discerned the recent mark of a human foot. It veered and wound as if aimless, yet steadily led on to the westward. At no point was affixed any dart similar to the one which had first directed them, and which still led them—for León, in whimsical jest, had stabbed the cryptic token through the peak of his sombrero, and there it rode at the head of the party, its black tip foremost and its sanguinary butt cockily protruding behind.

For more than two hours they trudged on, feeling all the time that the ground was gradually rising. No living thing, afoot or aloft, moved or called. The forest seemed intensely quiet; and so shadowy was it that over the marchers crept the feeling that they were traversing a ghost-land, wherein dwelt no live man or beast or bird. When they spoke—which was seldom—they unconsciously hushed their tones. At length the ascending grade became more steep, and for another half hour they climbed at an angle which taxed legs and lungs. Then the light grew rapidly stronger; the trees thinned out; and beyond the branches became visible spaces of low sky.

"Sabana!" called León, quickening his pace. Portonio, chuckling at this vindication of his

judgment, pressed after him. Then, abruptly, both slowed.

"Caramba! What is this?" ejaculated the leader.

The open savanna now was plainly visible through the trees, and there the forest trail must end. Here, at the terminus of that path, a grotesque shape hung from an overhead branch; a black, sombre thing, dangling by a length of stout vine, and still with the absolute stillness of death. It resembled a bird—but monstrous and misshapen.

Approaching gingerly, they stared at it; then, at closer range, chuckled in relief, even while they shot mystified glances about them. The weird thing was a pair of paují turkeys, hanging by the necks from the same loop, so that they had appeared to be one creature bloated beyond recognition. A tentative sniff, followed by a practiced handling by both the Venezuelans, disclosed the fact that the birds were freshly killed.

"Wha'd'ye know!" marveled Tim. "A hand-out from the spooks!"

They stared around them again. No peering face, no flitting form met their gaze. A long sigh of wind overhead accentuated the loneliness of the place. Once more they eyed the birds.

McKay's mouth tightened.

"Looks too much like the bait in a trap to suit me," he crisply declared. And he strode away toward the open land.

The others, after a moment's hesitation, followed him. But during that moment Portonio swung his machete, severing the cord, and slung both birds over one shoulder. With them wobbling down his back, he proceeded. A score more of long strides brought all to the savanna.

There, after a quick, sweeping survey, all turned their eyes southward. They had emerged at a point of woods which thrust into the savanna like a short promontory into a small sea. To the right the forest edge curved away, then swung back westward again, running away across rolling hillocks into the distance. Straight ahead stretched an undulating expanse of scattered, stunted trees hardly taller than a man. But at the south rose a bulk which caught and held every eye: a huge rampart of rock, massive and grim; an unknown mountain of an unknown land, scowling down at these atoms of humanity, who had just crept out into its ken. Flat-topped, ugly, brutal, its stark seams clearly visible through the thin heat-haze, it glowered like the gigantic forebear of the fabled headless warriors

of the Caura—hulking creatures with malignant eyes in their chests. And the five men confronting it, who had faced and fought many a ferocious thing in other days, unconsciously set their jaws and gave it back scowl for scowl.

Presently, however, they recalled their attention to their nearer surroundings. There was nothing to see but the gravelly savanna and its dwarf trees, but these were weird: some thick-trunked, yet crowned only by a few miserable stubs of branches; others warped, gnarled, contorted like tortured gnomes twisted out of all semblance to human form. One might fancy that they were ghastly wrecks of once healthy beings, fiendishly crippled by brutalities inflicted by that monster at the south, then doomed to stand here forever while the giant gloated on their misery.

"Cripes!" muttered Tim. "This is a hell of a place!"

It truly was: a desolate inferno of diabolical shapes, grilling under the heat of a molten ball high overhead. The next moment the speaker made a discovery which did not tend to lighten his spirits. His glance happened to linger on the nearest dwarfed trunk, and there he spied a spot of red.

"Lookit!" he pointed. "There's the devil's traffic sign again!"

Knowlton squinted at the tree, then walked over to it.

"True enough," he announced. "It's another of those red-and-black darts. Points straight to that mountain. Well, we owe the highway department hereabouts a vote of thanks, fellows. Route markers—free air—turkey dinners gratis." After narrowly inspecting the missile and finding no poison on the point, he plucked it from its binding vine and slid it under the cloth button crowning his topi.

"Yeah," rumbled Tim. "But before I eat any o' that turk I want to know is it poisoned. These here blowgun needles sort o' take away me appetite."

Knowlton's lids narrowed, and so did McKay's, as they eyed the two fine birds on Portonio's shoulder. As Tim suggested, those curassows probably had been slain by darts dipped in the deadly curare; and, although they knew that weird venom to be innocuous to the stomach, the thought of devouring the flesh of poisoned creatures was unattractive. But León calmly pointed out:

"There is nothing else to eat, amigos. So let us not quarrel with what the gods provide."

"Any gods that feed me poison ain't the kind I'll say me prayers to," the Irishman retorted. "And I don't sink me teeth in no snake-bit free lunch."

León made no answer. With a gesture to Portonio, he stepped back into the forest shade and began hacking a dead branch into firewood. The riverman followed, leaned his gun against a tree, and rapidly plucked the birds. Obviously neither of the South Americans felt any qualms against eating the meat—even after it became evident that Tim's surmise was correct. Each naked body showed a telltale tiny wound surrounded by a small bluish blotch.

"I have eaten such meat many a time, señores," assured León, as he kindled the fire. "The poison can do no harm unless you have a cut in the mouth, or a hollow tooth, or some such way for it to reach your blood. If you prefer to walk with only wind in your stomachs, do so. I shall eat all I can."

And, when Portonio had deftly dressed and quartered the birds, the Ventuari man went to broiling his share on a forked stick. One by one the Northerners squatted and did the same—

even Tim. So intent were they on the cooking that they did not notice the departure of Portonio, who, after a long look around, quietly took the camp kettle from his pack and, rifle in hand, walked away into the woods. By the time they discovered his absence and started up in anxiety to look for him, he was emerging again from the obscurity, carrying the kettle as carefully as if it held eggs.

"Agua, señores," he grinned. "Water—a little. I found water vines and squeezed them. There is no other." He showed a small quantity of water in his kettle—enough for a few swallows each.

McKay's lips opened to reprimand him for departing alone, but he bit back the reproof; for it occurred to him that he himself had set a bad example that morning by starting alone to the raudal. The big riverman, however, read his frown, and, with a cheerful grin, added:

"Nobody is here. The ghosts walk only at night."

"True for ye, feller," agreed Tim. "The only bad crack that's come in daylight was Curro gittin' killed in that there rowdydow, or what ye call it—raudal? all right—and that was acci-

dental. Night's the time when we've got to watch ourselves."

"I don't believe we've got to watch ourselves at all," declared Knowlton, an odd light in his eyes. "I've been doping on this thing while we marched, and I believe we're in right. Certainly everything indicates it. We weren't touched last night. We find guide-posts along the way. We even have our grub hung up and waiting for us. A queer way for these 'spooks' to act if they don't want us in here!

"I believe this white crowd in here has made this section taboo for Indians; but real white men, like us, can come right in. They've heard about us and they want us to come on. That blond chap who came to Uaunana gave Juancito orders to help us along. That's why the old boy did a mental back-flip after refusing to give us a hand. They watched us come up the Periqueta; remember the mysterious movements we used to see? And they were around our camps. They're at the bottom of last night's doings—although I can't imagine why or how they pulled off that stunt. And they're helping us along now."

"Mebbe. But what for?" demanded Tim. "If they're so chummy why don't they come out

and lay down a door-mat with 'Welcome' on it? We're knockin' on the door now."

"Because they're wary. We're the first whites who ever came in here. We're packing guns. They're shy. By and by they'll come out in the open and be friendly. They're friendly now, but too uncertain of us to take chances."

He drew back his roasting-stick, inspected his meat, and held it aside to cool. León, already chewing at his own tough portion, munched meditatively, then slowly nodded.

"You may have it right, señor," he conceded. "It sounds probable. They know of our coming, beyond a doubt. Señor Tim spoke to the men of the Caño Tamara at my sitio, he has told me. That Caño Tamara is to the west of here, and those men must have come back to give the word. And Black White, at Monoblanco, heard our plans. He must know these people. He may have told them. But yet——"

He paused; frowning, and took another bite. Knowlton tore off a tentative mouthful and fell to masticating it.

"Yet what?" queried McKay.

"He came to warn us, capitán. There is between him and me a queer sort of friendship; that is to say, we would help each other in time of

need, if we could; and, in his crazy way, he was trying to help me then. And you remember what he said."

"Yeah. Said these gorillas would claw the faces offen us." Tim twitched his heavy shoulders as if chilled by the memory. "I think we're a bunch o' come-ons. They're kiddin' us along till they git us to the right place, and then ——"

"And then what'll *we* do?" challenged Knowlton. "Lie down and let 'em claw? Not with four hundred rounds and five machetes and ten fists and feet among us. As for Black White's yap, it amounts to about as much as the yelps of a cuckoo-clock. Come on, eat your poison and let's go. Mine tastes good."

With which he crushed another mouthful of turkey-breast between his teeth. McKay, his jaws working with the regularity of machinery, was chewing away with no visible interest in the theories propounded. The red man, who had been cooking his meat almost to a crisp—as if thereby he could neutralize the curare in its tissues—scowled at it, drew his face into a knot, and began to gnaw. Its unsalted flavor was unappetizing, but, once started, he ground away without a word.

Presently Knowlton, with a wink at León, said soberly to McKay:

"Maybe Tim's right, though, Rod. Perhaps we'd better hit straight west and try to get out of here. We can find some creek and get back to the Ventuari——"

"Huh?" Tim bristled. "Quit? Ye poor fish——"

Then he spied the twinkle in the blue eyes and caught his tongue.

"Hark to the Great American Doughboy," laughed Knowlton. "We had about a million like him in the army, León. Growl and grouch about going ahead—but try to turn 'em back and they'd knock your face in."

"Grrrump!" growled Tim, gnawing again. León snickered.

When the birds were reduced to bones they emptied the kettle of its water—a careful ration to each man, until it was gone. It was not enough to sate their thirst, but it had to suffice. Then, settling hats more firmly on heads and picking up packs and arms, they tramped out into the blazing savanna. There they turned to the left and began their dogged march toward the brute of a mountain.

Now, with open land about them and that

towering landmark ahead, they journeyed in a different formation: instead of a file, they made a straggling skirmish line, each man walking as he pleased, yet keeping approximately abreast of the others. No orders were given; they adopted this line of march instinctively, as giving them a wider range of view. Up over the crest of a low rolling ridge they trudged, and down its easy slant beyond; along the sides of a bumpy boil of gravel, passing around it on right and left and drawing together again; converging on a higher bump farther along, clustering on its summit for a brief survey in all directions, then scattering below. As they went, the forest at their left kept gradually receding, leaving them farther and farther out in the land of the ghost-trees.

Hour by hour they walked, meeting only the same weird dwarf growth, the same uneven swells and troughs of land. And, hour by hour, the giant ahead remained where it was, approaching no nearer for all their steady tramping. At length Knowlton called to León:

"How far off is that miserable rock, anyway? We can't reach it by tonight, can we?"

"Hardly, señor," the rover answered, repressing a smile. "Perhaps three days—perhaps four."

"Sufferin' camels!" croaked Tim. "And no water!"

Yet water did come. Late in the afternoon, when the thirsty band gathered once more on a hill-top to seek sign of the moisture which their sun-parched bodies now fiercely demanded, a sizable cluster of tall green palms caught their eyes.

"Un morichal!" rasped Portonio. "Agua! Carne!"

"A water-hole where grows the moriche palm. Water and meat," echoed León. "At such spots gather animals to drink at sunset."

They swung into a jog trot. In less than half an hour they were almost at the edge of the oasis. And there they met their meat—alive and coming to them.

From the greenery sprang a tawny creature, dashing toward them as if pressed hard by pursuers. Abruptly it halted, staring at the oncoming men; then swerved as if to flee westward. Three rifles spoke almost as one. The quarry pitched headlong and was still. Running to it, the marchers gloated down at a beautiful dwarf deer.

"Supper and breakfast!" exulted Tim. "And now for about forty gallons o' that wet water!"

He began trotting toward the trees.

"As you were!" barked McKay. "Something drove that deer out. Watch yourself!"

The band closed in. Guardedly they advanced—reached the trees—walked to the water. No man or animal opposed them; no sight or sound of lurking life came to them. Two by two they sank and drank, rose, stood on guard while the others imbibed the precious liquid and bathed their hot heads. Yet there seemed absolutely nothing to guard against.

Portonio strode forth, heaved the deer to his shoulders, brought it in. While he cut it up, the rest built a makeshift camp. A fire bloomed, and the odor of broiling venison tantalized their nostrils.

All were too tired for talk. But, as the sun touched the horizon, throwing a queer pinkish light over the wilderness of ghost-trees, the seldom-speaking Portonio voiced something which still puzzled all. In his river Spanish he drawled:

"I wonder what thing drove that animal to us."

Then from somewhere sounded a strange noise as if invisible demons laughed: an eerie chuckle that made the hair stir and hands reach for guns. It died, and came no more. The men looked at

one another speechlessly. The hissing of the flames was the only sound in the darkening morichal.

The sun vanished. The stars sprang out. The stunted trees became black monstrosities leering at the camp. Once more, under his breath, Tim muttered:

“This is a hell of a place!”

CHAPTER XVI

THE TALKING MOUNTAIN

THROUGHOUT that night every man lay with his rifle tied to his arm. And throughout the sunless hours the fire was kept burning.

The fact that the guns had been undisturbed in the ghostly raid at the Periqueta did not, as McKay pointed out, prove that no attempt to take them would be made at this or some future camp. The invisible, inaudible demons who had spirited away four Indians and a canoe might again steal into the sleeping quarters, this time to sneak away the weapons. Wherefore the Northerners extracted from their knee-boots the rawhide thongs and knotted them to the rifles and to their left wrists, holding the weapons in inescapable leash while leaving their right hands free. Then they took the guns to bed with them. Even a demon would find extreme difficulty in abstracting those firearms without arousing their owners.

As for the fire, it was replenished from time to time by whoever happened to awake. No watch

was kept, or even considered; for sleep was too badly needed. Yet nobody—except, possibly, Portonio—slumbered steadily through the dark hours. At different times each roused, looked about and listened, and presently lapsed back into unconsciousness. At no time was any figure, human or otherwise, seen in the vague light cast by the smouldering flame. Nor did any tug come at any of the rifle-thongs.

Once, and once only, came a noise which made those who heard it sit up and swing their guns out of the hammocks. Somewhere in the gloomy depths beyond the little pool sounded a sudden rush, a gasping, struggling commotion, and then a low, ferocious growl. Followed a vague sound suggestive of powerful jaws rending a bloody repast. Silence ensued. The listeners lay back. It was merely one of the nocturnal tragedies of the drinking-hole. Some animal had torn the life from another.

Dawn found them astir; untying their guns, relacing boots, freshening the fire, drinking and bathing at the pool. The broiled remnants of the deer—hung high above the fire, that no prowling animal might snatch them in the night—were taken down and eaten. The last rites of breaking camp were another long drink

and a futile attempt to devise some means of carrying water unspilled in the lidless kettle—the only vessel available. Had plantain leaves been at hand, a passable cover might have been constructed and lashed on; but there were none.

“This is one time when we traveled too light,” complained Tim. “If we’d only brought along that empty coffee-can and the coffee-pot, instead o’ leavin’ ’em because we didn’t have no more coffee ——”

“And if we’d sat awake all night and prevented our canoe from giving us the slip ——” ridiculed Knowlton. “What’s the good of ‘if’? We’ll find some more water when we need it. The spooks are taking good care of us.”

“Yeah. Same as a farmer takes good care o’ the turk jest before Thanksgivin’.”

“Crape-hanger! Come on, let’s go.”

They went. Out among the ghost-trees they marched, and, circuiting the morichal, on toward the mountain.

As before, they walked in a loose-flung skirmish-line which expanded or contracted in conformity with the ground-surface. And, as before, the terrain varied yard by yard, remaining constant only in two particulars—the presence of the malformed trees and the absence of water.

Not even the bottoms of the occasional ravines showed any trace of moisture.

Toward noon, however, Knowlton's faith in the beneficence of the "spooks" justified itself. Another clump of the water-loving moriche palms thrust their plumes above the stunted growth, and, on reaching it, the trampers discovered another "hand-out." At the edge of the small central pool stood a slender but long pole, shoved deep into the wet soil and slanting outward; and at its top, hanging high above the water and thus inaccessible to any leaping jaguar or other beast of prey, swung a cluster of four agoutis—rabbit-like animals whose succulent flesh formed a welcome change from the dry meats hitherto eaten.

"Better and better!" exulted Knowlton. "Next thing we know, we'll find our camps all built for us when we arrive, and grub cooked and smoking hot on a table. Lord! Rod, doesn't it remind you of the fairy-tales we used to hear when we were kids? An enchanted land with invisible people, and everything furnished just when it was needed, and so on. Maybe we'll find a sleeping beauty in a marble hall waiting for Tim to kiss her back to life."

"Huh! She's out o' luck, then," grunted Tim,

dipping for a drink. "I only kiss live ones. No dopes for me."

While Portonio went about preparing the meal, the rest thoroughly searched the little oasis for signs of their benefactors. They found absolutely none. Not even a human footmark was visible. The ground was too firm to hold any tracks except at the very edge, and there showed only the depressions made by animals and birds. When they were again resting beside the campfire, León said:

"The demonios are indeed taking good care of us. These little animals never lived at this place. They were killed this morning somewhere over in the forest—at some spot where a stream runs—and brought all this distance to await us."

The forest edge at the east now was nearly a mile away; and any stream therein must be considerably farther off. In all, several miles must have been traveled by the bearers of that sweet meat.

As they swung on through the afternoon glare, the five kept an even closer watch on the swells and folds of land; for again the feeling was strong upon them that they were being escorted by others who kept constant track of their march. But never could they detect any head watching

behind tree or over hill-crest, or any form moving on the sky-line or along the hollows. Around lay only empty wilderness; ahead loomed the stark mountain; above rolled the burning sun in a blank sky; and that was all.

Sundown drew nigh. The rock wall now was loftier, nearer, yet all too far away. And the water-hole which all had grown to expect did not appear. More and more anxiously they climbed each succeeding knoll, squinted with bloodshot eyes through the bluish haze, bit their dry tongues, and, wordless, toiled on to the next elevation. Nowhere could they find the green crowns of the slim moriche to beckon them on. At length León pointed eastward. The others nodded. The weary band began to labor in the direction of the distant forest, where, perhaps, some water-vines or other moisture might be found. The invisible guides and providers seemed to have failed them at last.

But then came a sound. From the direction of the mountain, in their previous line of march, floated weird voices.

"Ah-ho-o-o! Ah-ho-o-o-o-o!"

Long-drawn, blending in a mellow yet eerie chorus, the hails sang across the waste land with the resonance of softly chiming bells—not loud,

yet clear of tone. On the ears of the men who for many hours had heard only the empty flutterings of parched leaves and the slither of their own feet, they fell like muted trumpet-calls. They halted short, gaping southward.

"Ah-ho-o-o! Ah-ho-o-o-o!"

"Ajo!" echoed León, his tones rasping in his dried-up throat. "What is that?"

As one man, they right-faced and pushed southward again. On the crest of another knoll they stopped and peered toward the point whence seemed to rise those calls. And then the voices died out.

While they still strained eyes and ears, from among the dwarfs began to rise a dark, shapeless form, like a djinnee conjured up by some magician to perform the tasks of men. Wavering, then leaning off to the westward and fading out as the breeze sifted its upper portions into nothingness, still it held its foot fixed in the same spot: a gray-black spirit of smoke, marking the place toward which the wilderness wayfarers should hold their course.

That place was less than half a mile away. And without question or argument the five forthwith struck off through the stumpy growth, heading toward the beacon with resolute strides. No

more calls came to them; nor did they themselves voice any shouts. They had no breath to waste.

While they advanced, the djinnée grew thinner, sank lower, as if slowly withdrawing into some subterranean cavern, to vanish when these mortals should reach the spot whence it issued. When they did arrive there, it had sunk to nothing. But its lair was unmistakable: a fantastic rock, shelving outward at one side and forming a crude, columnless portico. Beneath that queer roof lay the earthly vestiges of the signaling spirit—a few coals and the blackened debris of handfuls of green leaves. There, too, waited the essentials of life for the men who had obeyed its summons. On the ground lay five monkeys; a small, jet black *mono viudita*, two larger tan-colored *monoblancos*, and two huge red *areguatos*. And near at hand stood three sizable clay jars, full of water.

As ever, no human being was there. For a few minutes, reveling in the refreshment of the life-giving liquid, the adventurers gave hardly more than a glance to the surroundings. Then they scouted briefly around the rock—and in vain. Finally Tim hurled a roaring bawl out across the stillness.

"Yah ho-o-o-o! Wah ho-o-o-o!"

Half a minute crawled away before any reply sounded. Then, faint yet clear, seemingly far off yet curiously near, back floated the ghost voices.

"Ah ho-o-o-o!"

Once only came that strange harmony of tones. Then—only the tiny sigh of drooping leaves on starveling branches, swept by hot wind. The bloated red sun slid below the horizon. A furnace glare flamed on a few skinny clouds, died to pink, faded out. Night strode over the waste.

Again the five slept on their arms. This time they hung no hammocks, but lay on the ground, protected from any chance rain by the outcrop of stone. No rain came, though, and for once the night sky remained clear, a lop-sided moon flooding the wilderness with silvery radiance. If any creature came near the camp in the night it stole away again undetected, leaving behind it no trace of its presence.

Dawn had not yet come when Portonio was up and rebuilding the fire. By sunrise every man had worried down his share of the monkey-meat, and the jars had been drained of their water. In the first rays of the new sun they clustered upon the rock which had sheltered them, studying the huge block at the southward which, all felt,

marked the final goal of their march. Massive and menacing, it now seemed to hang almost over them, biding its time to topple forward and crush to nothingness the puny human insects who dared approach its base. Yet it still was miles away.

"We should reach it this afternoon," judged León, "unless our demon friends fail us now and make us hunt for our food. And that does not seem likely. It seems that they wish us to reach them as soon as we can."

"About time for them to take visible form, if they're going to," said McKay. "Unless we see something human soon I shall be getting superstitious."

His face relaxed as he spoke, but his words were only half a jest. The uncanny attendance of unseen beings, the bodiless voices heard at sundown, the unnatural trees, the mute yet palpable threat of the stone giant ever before them—these things, combined with the soul-searing sun and the unbalanced diet and infrequent allaying of thirst, had drawn taut even his iron nerves. The pinched faces and restless eyes of his comrades betrayed a strain worse than his own. If only something—anything—even a

horde of murderous savages—would take shape and move!

"Well, they were within shouting distance last night," recalled Knowlton. "Today we ought to come into sight of them."

"Within shouting distance," echoed León. "Yet not within shooting distance. I have been thinking that perhaps that deer which we shot was driven out to make us show what we could do with our guns; and we did a little too well. But they are slowly drawing a little nearer, as you say. Bien. Let us walk to them."

They tramped away.

Midday found them toiling up a gradual ascent, lifting toward the mountain. The trees were becoming somewhat more dense, and the small hills which had afforded occasional elevated views seemed to have ended, giving way to a sloping plain whereon nothing could be made out save the nearer trunks. Again their dried-out bodies cried for water; but no water was in sight. The mountain wall, however, seemed now to stand almost within gunshot. Toward it they plodded; on and up, step by step, yard by yard, rod by rod, climbing that tilted surface which must lead at last to the cliff.

All at once the land fell away. Before they

were aware of it, they stood on the rolling verge of a steep down-grade, at the bottom of which stretched a long valley green with trees: no starveling dwarf trees, but tall, full-bodied growths betokening the presence of water. On the farther side, that green mantle seemed almost to meet the base of the towering precipice itself. One swift, sweeping survey they took, seeking huts, plantations, smokes, moving figures—any signs of man. Not one did they find.

Portonio, a little distance from the others, swallowed, pointed to the trees, and hoarsely called:

“Agua!”

Without reply, his companions pressed forward, licking their cracked lips with sticky tongues. Then all halted as if shot. From across the valley a hoarse voice croaked:

“Agua!”

It was a loud voice; louder than Portonio’s, yet strangely like it; withal, a harder, stonier tone, as if the stark cliff itself spoke. Staring, the men searched all along the line for the source of that startling answer. Nothing showed.

Tim, clearing his parched throat, demanded:

“Grrup! What the divil’s that?”

Seconds passed. Then, abrupt as a blow, something bellowed:

"Grrup! What the devil's that?"

After a stunned instant, the five broke into wild laughter as the explanation struck them. Their mirth was brief and harsh, but a relief from the sudden nerve tension. When the echo hurtled back at them, however, they scowled and ceased grinning. As before, the noise was startlingly loud; every tone was magnified; and the wild peals, with that stony harshness behind them, seemed horrible as the roars of exultant fiends. Indeed, for the moment it was hard to realize that the monstrous rock was not voicing its own savage delight at having lured the legend-hunters into its clutch, to break and twist them into such haggard cripples as those distorted growths among which they had marched so long.

It was too much for Tim. Fiercely he yelled back at the mocking voices:

"Shut up, damn ye!"

To which the malignant rock retorted with thundering ferocity:

"SHUT UP, DAMN YE!"

Tim gulped and glared, his eyes snapping. Knowlton chuckled dryly and adjured him: "Come on. You're crazy." With that he and

the others resumed their movements. Within three steps they heard a low, hideous chortle from the giant, and the satiric invitation:

"Come on! You're crazy!"

Tim clamped his lips tight. But, as he swung on down the slope, he told himself: "Begorry, that ain't no lie, neither. Everything's crazy round here, and we're crazy to ever come here."

They had nearly reached the timber when, from a point some distance to the westward, came a long shout.

"Ah-ho-o-o-o-o!"

The mountain promptly repeated it, but failed to confuse the listening men. Again and again it rang from the west and rebounded from the wall. After looking at one another, they shook their heads and marched on, straight into the forest. Water must be nearer than the place where those calls rose; and water they must have. All else could wait.

León and Portonio, with machetes swinging, led the way through the tangle, holding their course true toward the now unseen wall. But no water could they discover. They crossed the depression, found the ground rising again, and turned back; scouted a little way up and down the bottom of the hollow; and failed to detect so

much as a drop of moisture. The soil was rather soft, but nowhere wet. It became evident to all that whatever water nourished the luxuriant tree-growth was below the surface; and they had neither the tools nor the inclination to dig for it. Abandoning the search, they squatted for a time in the shade, finding a partial relief in rest and refuge from the grilling sun. No voices came to them now. The calls at the west had died out soon after they entered the woods.

"I think we have strayed," said León, speaking low, "and have missed some sign left for us. The people of this place look for us where they were calling. No doubt we shall find food and drink there, or be led to where those things wait."

For a moment all held their breath, awaiting the echo. None came. The thick growth, apparently, so deadened the Spaniard's quiet words as to prevent any reverberation.

"Well, let's go and see what the bill of fare is," prompted McKay. "I'm hungry."

"Me too!" loudly affirmed Tim,—too loudly; for, as they began to back-track, the sinister wall behind them responded in a muffled tone:

"Me, too!"

Once more in the open, they paused, looking for any figures moving about in search of them.

Instead, over at the west had risen another spirit of smoke, which stood up and waveringly summoned them to—what? The long-expected meeting with the white men of Guayana? They swung forward to find out.

Unlike the djinnee of the desert rock, this phantom did not withdraw into the ground as they approached. It did, however, grow thinner, paling from black to gray, as if the fresh leaves on which its fire fed were becoming exhausted. And when the rovers reached it they found only flames and charred foliage. There was no food. Nor were any men ——

“Mira! Look!” exclaimed Portonio, pointing.

In advancing toward the signal they had obliques upward to a point above the tree-tops. Now they looked across at the wall—and found there something not visible from their previous viewpoint. In the stark rock was a shallow fold; and in that depression showed a black hole—a cavern mouth. But it was not that cavity which held the gaze of the wanderers. Before the opening stood rocks, and on the tallest was a human figure. Voiceless, it was moving its arms slowly up and down.

As the riverman’s ejaculation bounded back across the little gulf, León added another.

"A woman!"

Whether his assertion was a certainty based on his keen sight, or merely a guess, the others could not tell; for, though the figure seemed nude, their heat-fatigued vision could not distinguish feminine contours at that distance. The one thing plain to all was that the signaler was alive and, as seen against the dusky cavern, white. Now, as the second echo resounded, the waving arms moved overhead and beckoned.

"Ah-ho-o-o!" called León. "Amigos!"

As ever, the stony mimicry returned. But then followed a voice more strange, more weird. From the cave behind the silent figure rolled a deep, hollow, sepulchral tone, totally unlike the resonant reverberations from the outer wall.

"Loco León! Blancos! Aquí! (White men! Come here!)"

The giant, tiring of empty mockery, had spoken of its own accord.

CHAPTER XVII

OUT OF THE STORM

THE white figure beckoning from the rock let its arms droop. For a moment it stood motionless. Then it stooped and sank from view, and the watchers saw only that cavernous mouth which had commanded them to come to it.

Presently they relaxed and let their gaze rove once more along the wall. No other opening was visible anywhere; nothing but the seams and ribs of the sheer block, rising for thousands of feet straight into the sky. As their eyes traveled toward the eastern extremity of the huge bulwark, something else caught and held their attention: a black, ominous shape rising out of the distant masses of jungle. Rapidly it mounted into the sky, becoming a colossus which strode in league-long paces across the earth, mighty and malevolent.

"Irresistible force," quoth McKay, "about to collide with an immovable body. There'll be a smash. Let's go."

"Must be a path through the woods here,"

judged Knowlton. "Otherwise the signal-fire wouldn't have been placed here. Come on!"

Amid the echoes they jogged down the slope, searching the forest edge for some opening. Por-tonio found it first—a narrow slot through the verdure, following a zigzag but well-trodden path. Along this they trotted. Presently the ground began to rise again, becoming more and more steep. The forest thinned, but the light grew all the more dim; the looming colossus now had reached forward and snatched the sun from the sky. Somewhere at the east broke out a booming report of thunder, hard as a cannon-shot. The men spurted into a run.

Panting, they debouched into clear ground, where the path still lay plain before them, scaling the last stiff slope to the rocks whereon that signaling form had stood. It ran now up a deep ravine, devoid of bush, which led straight to the opening in the mountain. From their present low angle of vision the cave-mouth was invisible, masked by its guardian stones; and only the blank face of the precipice soared into the upper distance, enwrapped now by the inky body of the storm-spirit. From that black demon now darted a dazzling flash, followed instantly by a stunning detonation. Deafened, half blinded, the five

threw every energy into reaching shelter before a drowning deluge should roar down on them. The irresistible force was already in combat with the immovable body. Amid such cataclysmic conflict as was breaking, no mere mortal could hope to stand.

Between two tall stones the track led by short, sharp twists. Then the mouth of the cave seemed to snap open before them—a gaping maw of gloom. The laboring five slowed to a halt, stabbing that murk with rapid glances which revealed no human form. As they stood there, overhead burst a terrific crash. They leaped forward again. Into the yawning gap they plunged in a compact body. As the rock roof slid out above them, at their backs sounded a solid slap of rain. Everything vanished in a roaring smother of water.

“Begorry, here’s a drink, anyways!” yelled Tim. “Tonio! La caldera! The kettle!”

Portonio, with another look around, swiftly divested himself not only of his pack, but of his clothing. Smiling, he ducked forth into the cataract of rain; set down the kettle, and, throwing his arms over his head, stood a minute reveling in the deluge, though staggering under its impact. The sight was too much for the rest. As he came

scrambling back in, gasping but grinning, he found his señores peeling their garments.

Two by two, while the others maintained vigilance, they jumped out into the elemental chaos; stood as long as they could, while every heat-expanded pore of their bodies sucked up the flailing drops; and bounded back, reinvigorated as by a plunge into an icy pool. Tim, last to return, brought in the kettle, now nearly half full. It afforded only a few swallows to each man, but between these and the absorption from their impromptu bath the tormenting thirst seemed magically appeased.

As they rapidly dressed again, the fury of the assaulting cloud giant became a paroxysm. The deluge was shot athwart by blinding glares of lightning; the rain-roar overwhelmed by stunning shocks of thunder. Flash upon flash, crash upon crash, flared and pounded earth and rock and air in frightful fulminations. So violent were the concussions that, though partly protected from the full force of the abysmal attack, the men within the cave-mouth found their sensibilities growing numb. Almost without conscious impulse they drifted back from it, moving farther and farther in, peering about them with lids

nearly closed as a defense against the searing bursts of light.

The flickering flares revealed only an empty gap in the stone, receding into unbroken gloom. No human figure was there. But for the evidence of the path, the adventurers might well believe that all beings in this land were unearthly. Voices and smokes, and one view of a distant human form which soon had faded into nothing—these had been all their guides. And now they became again aware of a voice, stealing from that darksome region beyond. At another time, when the outer world was at peace, that tone might have been sonorous. Now, amid the thundering tumult, it seemed a mere whisper.

“Aquí! Adentro!” it urged. “Come here! Come in!”

All faced toward the inner recesses, but none advanced. They had followed unseen guides long enough. Against this demand that they make themselves sightless moles in a subterranean tunnel both common sense and temper rebelled.

“Come out!” bellowed Tim. “Show yourselves!”

If any reply came, it was obliterated by another thunderclap outside. But his command was followed by involuntary compliance from an unex-

pected quarter. In the welter of rain and spray at the threshold, two blurred forms took shape. Slipping, scrambling, clawing for holds on the streaming slant, they lunged through the torrential downpour and reeled in under the protecting rock.

Something prompted León to turn his head. Instantly he whirled on his heels, rifle half lifted. The others, catching his startled movement, likewise spun about. The five confronted the two. For breathless seconds they stood rigid. Then they relaxed, their fingers leaving the triggers of their weapons.

At last they were looking at men indubitably human, mortal, and alive—or, at least, half alive. The pair stood now as if little life were left in them: stooped, with hands braced on knees, heads hanging, bodies wavering on legs which seemed about to sink under them; naked men battered into exhaustion by the tempest. Whether they were the hitherto invisible escort, or other men who had been trailing behind the advancing explorers; whether they had been lying hidden just outside with the intention of following the strangers toward the inner gloom and thus blocking their retreat; or whether they were merely habitants caught at some distance

outside by the deluge and forced to run for shelter—this the explorers never learned. It was quite apparent, however, that they now had no weapons and that they were pounded nearly senseless. Sorry creatures, indeed, for five heavily armed men to hold at bay.

In the recurrent glare and dimness nothing else could be made of them. Against the flashes they were black; in the alternating dull light they seemed white; their proportions were those of tall men. That was all that could be discerned.

McKay, with rifle dangling beside him, muzzle down, walked toward them. Knowlton shot a glance backward, seeking other naked people who might be stealing out from the invisible interior; found none, and moved after the captain, as did his companions. As they approached, the pair straightened up, with evident effort, and fell back a pace.

McKay halted at once, giving them a slow smile. Then he passed his rifle to Portonio, ostentatiously spread his empty hands, walked toward and past them, then turned to face them. They watchfully followed his moves, but took no step toward or away from him. For a moment he stood quiet. Then a wicked flash shot across the rain-sheet, followed by a concussion like that

of an exploding shell. Every man staggered. But, as McKay walked inward again, an exultant smile quirked his mouth. He had seen what he sought.

"Blue!" he yelled, gesturing toward his own eyes.

The rest nodded dully. They felt little surprise or pleasure. Indeed, they were more numb than ever from the effects of that latest electrical discharge. McKay himself stepped stiffly, as if his feet dragged. All felt a desire to go farther in and evade some of the violence of that shocking bombardment. But to walk in blackness, unaware of what lurked beyond—no, that they would not do. The unknown fate of Frasco and his mates was still too well remembered.

Now León took a hand. Without attempting speech, he gave the newcomers a brief, eloquent talk by signs. First pointing inward, he made motions as if groping, squinted as if peering blindly about, and decisively shook his head. Then he raised a hand as if carrying a torch; held up his head confidently, moved his body as if walking boldly along, and nodded. His meaning was plain to all: that they would come in if lights were carried before them, but that otherwise they would not budge.

In return, one of the naked men motioned toward the Spaniard's rifle, then to the ground, indicating that guns must be left there. A curt negative was the reply. For a minute or two the pair stood motionless; then, slowly, began walking toward the rear of the place. The whites let them pass. They faded into the dark and were gone.

Another flash from without revealed them again for an instant, plodding steadily away along an apparently level and straight tunnel. When the glare was gone, the wanderers moved after them for a little distance; then, feeling their way to the wall at one side, sat down with their backs against it. The floor of the place was perfectly dry, indicating a slight upward slope from the water-swept threshold. And there, woefully hungry and dull-nerved from the electric shocks, they rested and awaited whatever might come.

Speech was impossible. Outside, the stupendous duel raged on with undiminished fury. At times a slight tremor in the solid rock was perceptible to the lounging quintet; the grim giant which had glowered at them across the waste land was quivering under the terrible blows of that other giant which had rushed westward to

assail it. Within, no repetition of that hollow voice came through the darkness. It, too, was overwhelmed by the elemental uproar.

Time dragged away. At length, seemingly far within the mountain, dawned a vague spot of light; a mere ghost of illumination, bodiless as an ignis fatuus; vanishing at each flare of lighting, but reappearing in the succeeding rush of black. Then appeared a dot of real flame, apparently descending a gradual slope, along which its sheen had preceded it. Steadily it grew into blazing torches advancing at good speed. The waiting men arose and walked to meet them.

The lights stopped, waiting, as the bearers made out the advancing forms against the cavern-mouth. They were two, and two only; the same men who had come from the storm. The outlanders, reaching them, gave them a quick survey, then glanced triumphantly at one another. No longer could there be any question in their minds as to the existence of such people as they sought. The bright lights revealed to all the blue eyes which McKay had already detected. In the bushy hair, still dark with water, they struck brownish glints. They showed, too, that the skins of these twain were, though tanned, lighter

even than those of the Maquiritaes of Uaunana. The blond men of Guayana were found.

Without a word, one of them turned and led the way. The other waited to follow the strangers. McKay unhesitatingly took up the step. The file moved inward, Portonio, walking near the end, first giving the final torch-bearer a look of warning against any tricks.

For some distance they walked in a straight line, the footing remaining so nearly level that no grade was perceptible. The walls, McKay observed, were uniformly smooth and concave, arching into a roof not far overhead; the tunnel looked as if hollowed out by the scouring action of water. Presently it began to pitch upward, gradually at first, then more steeply, until the booted Northerners found it hard to maintain a grip on the smooth path. Thereafter it veered in irregular turnings, ever ascending. As the line forged on, the crashing of the storm diminished to blunt buffetings, then to dull rumbles, and at length to virtual silence.

"Where do you lead us?" abruptly demanded McKay.

His voice broke into the vaulted hush with the suddenness of a gunshot. The leader jumped, head jerking over shoulder, startled eyes staring.

After a stumble, he recovered both equilibrium and equanimity. But he made no answer. Instead, he pressed on at an increased pace. McKay said no more.

Then the leader slowed, swinging his torch higher aloft. Before them rose a long ladder-like stair. The slope of ascent now had become so steep that even the habitants of the place could not maintain foot-holds without artificial aids. After giving the party a view of the work ahead, the pilot ascended at a pace which the others could not match. It took a wrathful yell to make him slow down.

"Wonder how the boneheads expected us to navigate this place in the dark," grumbled Knowlton. "It's bad enough with lights."

"That is the Indian way," replied León. "They know every inch of their road, and it never occurs to their minds that their visitors cannot follow it as easily as they. Caramba! My legs have no lifting power in them!"

His complaint evoked a chorus of concurring grunts. It now was more than eight hours since they had eaten; and the last meal had comprised only monkey-fragments and water. For that matter, they had tasted nothing but unbalanced, unsalted meat rations for the past three days,

while their vitality had been sapped by constant exposure to the murderous sun. Now their stamina was low. But they clamped their jaws and mounted the crude staircase—only to find that it went on and on. To the first length another was joined, and to that a third, the whole structure climbing like an inclined railway upside down—the ties above the rails. Up and up and up it led, until the knees of the ill-nourished five seemed powerless to make the one step more which always waited beyond. When at last they reached a level where the lifting ended, they stopped and leaned against the nearest wall.

A slow grin passed over the face of the blue-eyed mountain man as he paused to view them. In that grin was something cruel, in those azure orbs something cold and crafty, that made McKay and León regard him with faces hardening. Then he turned away and went on. Breathing hard, they resumed their way.

All at once they found themselves in a larger space where a vague light filtered in from the right. A few more steps, and the right wall vanished. The light became a trifle stronger, coming from what seemed another cavern at one side. From that direction, too, came a steady splash of water.

The leader extinguished his torch. His mate at the rear did the same. Both walked aside, leaving the gun-bearing party to itself. That little band looked rapidly around a low-roofed natural room, in the center of which squatted a single figure.

"Aquí!" spoke that hunched form.

The voice was husky, yet penetrating. The shape was nondescript, the creature being wrapped in some sort of garment. Toward it the outlanders walked, and before it they stopped. They met the unwinking gaze of a pair of keen blue eyes, peering at them from a face of myriad wrinkles: the visage of a man of great age, utterly hairless, huddled in a dingy, coarse-woven cotton cloth. With his bare skull, sharp nose, and humpy body, he looked vulturine.

"Quién es?" demanded the ancient.

"Loco León, of the Ventuari," answered León himself, speaking slowly. "And friends of Loco León from far away. We are friends to all people of Guayana. We come in peace to see the white ones who are white like ourselves."

As he concluded, he took off his sombrero, exhibiting his fair hair. Knowlton followed his cue, and, after a minute, Tim likewise exposed

his flaming mop. McKay and Portonio, the black-haired, kept their headgear in place.

The bald patriarch, motionless, studied the two blonds, his puckered visage unreadable. As his gaze fastened on Tim, a faintly puzzled expression dawned; and for some time he fixedly regarded the red hair. At length his eyes moved again, passing slowly over each of the strangers, noting all details of physique and dress. As he spied the two darts still sticking in the hats of the blond pair, a shadowy smile seemed to steal across his wizened visage. Then he appeared to recall the Spaniard's words. He voiced a single guttural. In response, the two who had led the way through the mountain came and stood beside him.

"To see white ones," he echoed. "You see them."

"You mean— There are no more?" asked McKay.

The bald head wagged from side to side.

"A woman. No others. All dead," he croaked.

A silence. The legend-hunters regarded him fixedly, then stared at the mute pair beside him, then once more looked around. The place was bare. Nowhere was visible any sign of other life.

No sound came, save the beat of water without.
The air seemed burdened with chill desolation.

"Wal, for the love o' Mike!" groaned Tim.
"We come all this ways and stand here starvin',
jest to look at two dummies and a mummy!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PEOPLE OF THE SHADOWS

"I THINK," quietly remarked Knowlton, "that this old buzzard is a cheerful liar. There must be more of these people. But the most pressing now before the house is: When do we eat?"

The old one's sharp eyes watched him as he spoke, striving to read his face. They shifted to León as the latter translated the need of the moment into language intelligible to him.

"Tenemos mucho hambre," declared the Spaniard. "We are very hungry."

"Eat your guns," sarcastically responded the ancient.

"Meaning that we'll get no grub until we act more friendly," surmised McKay. "Our manners are rather poor, at that. But still—" He paused, studying the trio before them. "I don't quite like their looks, and I'm giving no gun to them."

The faces turned toward him were not prepossessing. That of the oldster seemed more and more that of a cunning bird of prey. Those of

the younger men were heavy, blank, and flat; heavy and blank with a vacancy hinting at low mentality, flat with the features of Indians; hard-mouthed, too, and icy-eyed. White though these mountain people were, their blood manifestly was not Caucasian—at least, not that of Saxon or Norse men. Their type, indeed, was more brutish than that of the Maquiritares; and about them was an animal-like wildness reminiscent of the Caño Tamara nomads.

But this was no time to quarrel with their potential hosts. Wherefore León deftly put the burden of proof of friendship on them. Symbolically he laid his gun at his feet; then, with a straight look, declared:

“Our guns are for enemies, not for friends. But friends do not refuse food to the hungry.”

Slowly the figure stirred. From the enshrouding cloth rose a claw-like hand and a wasted arm. One of the tall fellows grasped the hand, lifted smoothly, and drew the old man erect. Once up, he stood and walked unassisted, though with dragging movements. He turned toward the light space whence came the dayshine and the sound of water; and, his tight-drawn garment outlining his skeleton legs, he tottered away, gaunt and ghostly. His satellites, unbidden,

strode ahead of him and passed beyond sight. His visitors, uninvited, moved after, León retrieving his rifle as he started.

Around a rough corner of the cavern they passed, entering a smaller room. Light darted to meet them; light pouring through a big gap in the farther wall, but subdued by a slanting, awning-like structure of palm outside, which cut off all view of what lay beyond. The lower edge of this screen was on a line with the floor-level of the rock cavity, but as the party moved inward they glimpsed sheets of rain below it. The reason for the watery noise became clear. While they were in the bowels of the mountain the thunderstorm had ceased as abruptly as it had begun, but the clouds still were belching rain.

After one glance, however, the hungry men gave no further attention to outer conditions, for their gaze riveted on something far more pertinent. On the floor at one side lay a veritable banquet—or so it appeared to them. Cooked meats; a basket of manioc; luscious, melon-like lechosa fruits; boiled sweet yuca; and, in a large bowl, a dark drink, with small gourds lying close at hand—these viands waited, on a spread of fresh plantain leaves, for the men who now eyed them in astonished delight. At sight of their sur-

prised faces, a chuckle shook the satiric old fellow whose inhospitable reception had led them to expect scant fare or none.

"Bastant'?" he snickered. "Enough?"

"Oh boy!" gurgled Tim. "Lookit the lay-out he's had waitin' while he kidded us! I'd hug the ol' mummy, only I know I'd crack him."

The wide grin he gave the host was mirrored in the drawn faces of his companions. The old man of the mountain chuckled again; moved to the wall beside the repast, and stiffly essayed to squat. Portonio, smiling, gave him a hand, easing him down. As the clutching fingers relaxed from his big palm, though, the riverman ceased smiling and involuntarily rubbed that hand on his breeches. Those wrinkled talons were cold and clammy as the grip of Death.

Dropping packs and standing guns and machetes along the wall, the guests squatted and fell to the welcome work of appeasing ravenous appetites. Having recently drunk of the rain-water, they gave no attention at first to the liquid. Nor did they eat much meat; their palates craved the other things, which would offset the uncompensated meat diet of thé overland traverse. While they busily masticated the fruit and starch, the wordless pair who had

brought them there stood immobile against the farther wall. The "mummy," too, remained motionless, eating nothing. Even his eyes remained fixed, dwelling for long periods on the pair of blonds or the red-headed foreigner. Toward the black-haired pair he manifested no interest.

At length, with their first avidity dulled, the Americans and the Spaniard paused. Only Portonio chewed indefatigably on. León distributed slips of his tabarí bark, and cigarettes were constructed. As the smoke drifted over the primitive banquet-table, the old man seemed to awake from a trance. He drew a long breath, inhaling the tobacco odor. Then he glanced at the bowl.

"Drink," he bade. "It is good."

"First we eat more," smiled León. "Drink comes later."

"Drink helps to eat," asserted the other. Again he sniffed the smoke.

The visitors contemplated the bowl. Its contents, dark and quiet, looked a pool of blood.

"Yucut' 'sehi," laconically enlightened León. His eyes rested a moment on the ancient. In the same casual tone he added, in English: "Do not drink it."

With that he began making another cigarette.

Up the backs of his companions crept a slow chill. Their thoughts darted back to the Oso camp, the gourd of cherry-like fruits—and the men of the Caño Cerbatana. None spoke. But across their faces swept a simultaneous repulsion. The piercing old eyes watching them narrowed by a hair's breadth.

León lit the new roll of tobacco—that frightfully strong black tobacco to which he was habituated—and extended it to their sinister host. He eyed it; slowly accepted it; squinted at it again; put it awkwardly to his lips, and puffed. After a moment he drew the smoke into his throat and exhaled, as he had seen his guests do. His lashless lids began to blink rapidly. He coughed.

"Ol' King Tut, gittin' his first smoke," muttered Tim. "And that tobaccer's strong enough to knock an elephant cock-eyed. Look out he don't fall in the soup."

The momentary tension vanished in sudden grins. Somewhat to their surprise, the aged novice grinned also: a toothless grin betokening enjoyment of a new sensation. He took another long puff, blew it out with gusto, and did not cough over it. But he swayed a little against the wall.

"Game old sport," chuckled McKay.

"Yeah. And in about two minutes he'll be seasick on our table. Send these two gorillas to fetch a bucket and a mop."

The pessimistic prediction, however, failed. The narcotic made the oldster unsteady, but seemed also to exhilarate him. His grin stayed on his face, and he stared at his guests as if comfortably and amiably intoxicated.

McKay, observing him shrewdly, shot a question that caught him off guard.

"Where are all the other blondos?"

"At the houses," came the unwary reply.

McKay nodded, as if the location of the houses were quite well known to him. Casually he suggested:

"Send for them and let us give them smoke."

The old brain, half drugged, seemed to struggle. Various vague expressions flitted across the hatchet face. Another inhalation, deep-drawn, visibly unsettled his mental processes still further.

"Smoke would make them more foolish," he giggled. "Their heads are weak."

McKay nodded again, in the same casual way.

"Bring them here," he repeated. "We would see them again."

Then the befogged mind awoke. The blurry

eyes focused sharply on the expressionless inquisitor, and the deceptive tongue sought to retrieve its slip.

"Others? There are none. An old man dreams. All are dead."

The captain smiled tolerantly; and, confident of his ground, took his turn at deception.

"You joke. We have seen them," he lied, his tone tranquil. "Our eyes are sharp. As you say, their brains are not so clever as yours, and when they thought themselves hidden—" He waved a hand, as if contemptuous of childish tricks. "Now let them stand before us."

The vulturine gaze bored into his steady eyes, then shifted rapidly over the other faces. All, following the Scot's canny lead, smiled as if enjoying a joke founded on certainty. For a moment the old trickster glowered; then sucked again at his cigarrillo. The tobacco, stronger than ever now that its nicotine was gathering at the butt, once more blunted his cunning.

"Bien," he hiccoughed. To the dull-faced pair beyond he muttered something. With noiseless steps one of them departed. The other remained.

León quietly went to making a third cigarette. As he rolled the inky shreds into their cylinder, he asked:

"How many years have you, father?"

"How many stars has the sky?" droned the ancient. "How many trees has the forest?"

"Ah. And so many years have brought much wisdom. No others here are as wise as you."

The bald flattery brought a tickled grin and a prompt assertion:

"None! All are fools. So they die."

"Fools must die," assented the Spaniard.

"Guayana is no land for fools. Yet why are so many fools here, and only one wise man?"

"Because the new ones are not born wise. Each young one is more of a fool. Fools cannot live long."

"Ah. And how did the older ones die—those not so foolish?"

"Guaharibos. Fever. Age."

"Sí? So the Guaharibos come here and fight you? They are bad. Why do you not go to some other place, where Guaharibos will not reach you?"

The other stared, as if he thought the questioner mad.

"This is our place," he said.

"Ah. And so you never leave it. But from where did the first blondos come to this place?"

"Guayana."

"Guayana. But this is Guayana. So you came from nowhere else? What is your nation?"

"Maquiritare."

There was a long pause. The Americans frowned in puzzlement. These blonds were Maquiritares? Impossible! León studied his new-made cigarette, giving it unnecessary care; then lit it and held it out.

"This is better, father. Drop the old one. You say you are Maquiritare? But I know many Maquiritares, and none like you. None are so white."

The claw-like hand wavered uncertainly as it reached for the new smoke, and the hairless lids drooped. But he did not lose his hold on the subject of conversation.

"None are pure white," he agreed. "None but us. We live apart. We first ones were born white from brown fathers. We do not know why. Our mothers were brown. Our brothers were brown. Mine were so. All the brown ones laughed. They called me 'Spañol. Ahk!' He spat the hated name as if "Spaniard" were a worse epithet than "snake"; and, among the aborigines who had exterminated the Spaniards of the Caura, perhaps it was. "So I left them. I came here. Here were others like myself. We

made all brown ones afraid. None come now to the Talking Mountain."

His head drooped, and he swayed a little forward from the wall. He essayed another inhalation; but the bark roll slipped from his fingers and fell. After a half-motion toward it he let it lie and settled himself back against the stone.

His auditors cast away their own charred stubs and resumed eating, meanwhile revolving in their minds the disjointed revelations which left so much unrevealed. Portonio, at last full-fed, picked up one of the small gourds and moved it toward the bowl. The low-voiced caution previously voiced by León apparently had escaped him. But Tim intervened—with his usual directness. He shot out a big hand, knocked the calabash from the riverman's grasp, and growled:

"Watch yerself, ye big boob! Cuidado!"

Portonio looked blank. A look at the others, however, gave him ample warning. Every eye backed the Irishman's command. Every eye, that is, except the old man's. The abrupt movement, the words, roused him from lethargy, and his gaze became keen and compelling.

"Drink!" he rasped. "It is good. It is strong. Drink it!"

"We do not like the sehi," quietly returned Knowlton. "We are not used to it. It makes us sick."

"Drink!" A shriveled hand pointed to the bowl. The cold eyes glittered.

"We drink what we like and when we please," snapped McKay. "Why do you try to make us drink this? What is in it?"

Slowly the hand sank. Over the blue orbs seemed to draw a snaky film. The bald head settled down on the wrinkled neck, huddling back into the dingy wrap. No answer came.

"M-hm," Knowlton murmured softly. "Looks as if your hunch was good, León. When we want a drink we'll catch some rain. Meanwhile let's eat everything in sight."

They attacked the remainder of the meal with new vigor; for every man of them felt that no further repasts would be forthcoming—at least, not at the bidding of that wizened creature who seemed to be master here. As they ate, they glanced now and then at the white savage behind them—who made no move—and listened for the shuffle of other feet. No such sound came to them. But, at length, another sound did: a muttering of subdued voices, drifting from the direction of the tunnel. Swiftly they arose.

More mutterings. Then around the corner strode the messenger who had gone to bring the rest of his people. He grunted something. The vulturine figure stirred, the head rising, the beak turning toward the outer room. In rasping tones, it spoke.

Slowly, from the shadows beyond, came a strange company. Man after man, each garbed in a short clout, each light of hair and blue of eye,—and each carrying some weapon in a half-defensive position—stepped in and sidled along the farther wall. None was as tall or as muscular as the two who first had come within the ken of the visitors, but all looked sinewy and strong. Then came women, and more women; a few wearing bead aprons like those of the girls of Uaunana, but more with mere squares of hand-woven, red-dyed cotton cloth; all with blond hair cut across at the back of the neck. Like a herd of sheep they pressed in and backed up against their men; and with sheep-like eyes and faces they stared at the bearded, travel-stained, sun-scorched foreigners clustered around the squatting patriarch and the sinister bowl.

When all had entered, the room held some two-score blue-eyed Indians, yellow-white of skin, yellow of hair, the great majority of whom were

women. Silent they stood, first running their eyes over each of the strangers, then concentrating their attention on the pair of blonds and the red-maned Tim. As they stared, their faces took on gaping expressions, devoid of any emotion save the most primitive wonder: a peculiarly blank look which recalled the old man's contemptuous summary of them. Physically strong, but mentally weak, if not actually defective—such was the story told by those vacuous visages. Mature or adolescent, all bore that stamp of inferiority, rendered the more palpable by the universal heaviness of feature. As for beauty, not even Tim's hopeful eye could discern any trace of it among the female faces fronting him.

"Huh! A herd o' half-wits!" he muttered. "How do they git that way?"

Knowlton, studying them as impersonally as if they were wax figures, answered:

"Inbreeding."

"Huh? What's that?"

"People in the same family mating, and their children mating—brother with sister—and so on. It always results in mental dullness. If it goes on long enough the children either die young or become idiots. It's common among isolated peoples. These people have been doing that.

Old King Tut, here, says they were here before he came, and he must be a hundred years old. Now they've about reached their limit. Kids are fools, he says, and don't live. What they need is fresh blood."

McKay nodded. León, too, after a moment's thought, murmured agreement.

"They are people of the shadows," he added. "The shadow of this demon-mountain is on their lives and the shadow of stale blood on their minds. Soon they will die out—unless new men come and mate with them."

Knowlton started.

"By George!" he ejaculated. "I wonder if *we* are—"

At that instant, as if reading his thought, the hunched figure at their feet broke in.

"Here are women for you." He leered up at them. "For you blondos and el rufo—the red man. We must have new life. You black ones—you shall have women also. But if your sons are black heads they die. We kill all such."

For an astounded moment the five stared down at him.

"So that's why we were escorted here," clipped McKay. "Not for mine, thanks!"

"Nor me neither," seconded Tim. "These dish-faced idjuts? Nix!"

The gimlet eyes below them, reading their faces in a flash, narrowed wickedly. Swift words rattled from the wrinkled lips.

The women sprang forward. Chattering, screaming, they threw themselves at the strangers who had refused them. Some laughed; others cried out as if enraged; all clutched at the recalcitrant bridegrooms, apparently determined to carry them off by force.

"Hot dog!" snorted Tim, hastily retreating. "This is bargain day and we're the bargains! Hey! Back up, ye squallin' she-cats!"

Half amused, half angered by the assault, he and his companions gave ground before the rushing females. The remnants of the meal were trodden under foot, the bowl upset, the old man trampled, the rifles knocked down. Resistance seemed only to fan the flame of feminine determination. They crowded in harder than ever. And behind them, unnoticed, their men shoved at their backs, pushing them on the outlanders. Before the united impetus of forty, the five were swept back to the opening beyond which fell the rain.

"Look out!" suddenly roared McKay. "It's

a frame-up! We're on the edge—they're shoving us over! Fight 'em! Hard!"

Too late, they began battling in earnest. The creatures swarming at them, women though they were by sex, were men now in their attack: strong, merciless, vindictive men. They had ceased the deceptive clutching; they were striking, butting, shoving. And through their mass now came boring the men who had pushed them on. These carried spears—and the white men's own rifles.

Braced on the very verge of the outer drop, the five fought furiously to win more foot-room. They attacked with bare hands only; no other weapons could be used under the circumstances; but with those fists they struck ruthlessly. It was useless. Against odds of eight to one, with no space for movement, they could not gain.

A spear-shaft, swung over the women's heads, struck solidly on Tim's crown. He staggered—and a woman kicked him over the edge. Other women, knocked down by fist-blows, clutched Knowlton and León by the ankles and yanked; others butted them in the body. Overbalanced, they pitched backward into nothingness. McKay battered his way into the jam, only to fall senseless from a blow by a rifle barrel. Portonio, grap-

pling with three antagonists—two virulent women and one of the tallest men—received a similar blow on his unprotected head and collapsed.

A shrill screech of triumph rang through the hollows of the mountain. The prostrate captain and the huddled riverman were shoved vindictively over the brink. Down they fell—and only the people of the shadows, battered and bloody, remained in the caverns.

Among the shattered fragments of the bowl and the red slop thrown from it, the human vulture crawled stiffly to his feet and laughed like a ghoul.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PIT

THROUGH three fathoms of rain-soaked air the overthrown fighters fell headlong. Then they hit earth: steep, slimy clay, slippery as wet soap, dropping at a precipitous grade for a hundred feet or more. Down this they slid and rolled, those still conscious clawing vainly for holds, those whose senses had fled tumbling like dead men. At the bottom they slewed out over a watery waste of the same greasy soil, coming at last to a jolting stop against a hummock.

Dazed, dizzied, gasping for breath and spitting out blobs of clay, Knowlton and Tim and León sat up and glowered at the slide down which they had sped. McKay and Portonio still were in motion, scooting lifelessly toward them. The captain's course ended in a rain-pool, where he lay face down; the riverman's in another puddle. With a simultaneous scrambling lunge, their comrades reached them and hauled them away from danger of drowning. Then they glared up through the rain at the projecting yellow hood whence they had been forced.

Dimly they saw, in the black-mouthed gap behind that awning, white figures flinging their arms about in exultation; and through the slash of the rain came taunting yells and screams. With smothered growls, Tim and Knowlton drew their pistols and opened a vengeful fire, hurling bullet after bullet at the treacherous gang. Whether any of those bullets found a mark they never knew, for no form pitched over the edge. With the rain beating into their eyes, the raging assailants probably missed their targets. But they put a stop to the jeering. The screams became a screech of fear, and the white figures vanished as by magic.

"Yah! Ye yeller-bellied hellions, that ain't so funny, hey?" howled Tim. "And as quick as this rain quits ye'll see us climbin' back at ye! Jest as quick as we can git a toe-hold on that toboggan-slide— Huh? What say, looey?"

"I said we'd better hunt cover before they start potting at us with our own guns." Knowlton fumbled another clip from his belt and jammed it into the butt of his side-arm; squinted upward again, then glanced around—and looked blank. There was no cover.

"Diablo! What hole are we in now?" muttered León, also staring about him.

They were in a hole indeed. For the first confused moments they had thought themselves again outside the mountain,—thrown from a cavern in some other face of the block, to which the tunnel had led. Instead, they still were within the stone walls. All around them soared great grim cliffs, encompassing a space perhaps half a square mile in extent, their more distant reaches looming vague but unmistakable through the rain. The bottom of the pit, where they now stood, was merely an uneven mass of slimy stones, clay hummocks, and ooze, wherein grew no trees or brush—not even a green weed. As for human habitation, there was none. The place was a ghastly dungeon.

The three looked all about, and at one another, without a word. They peered up again at the hole in the wall, seeing nobody. The retaliatory fire which they had half expected did not come. A narrow study of the spongy slide convinced them that it was unscalable until dry. So they did the only thing there was to do: set about resuscitating their prostrate fellows.

Then, if ever, the stony-hearted gods of Guayana must have laughed, looking down on the intrepid invaders of their domain whose long trail now ended in a slough of despond: prisoners

of a herd of mental degenerates; smeared from head to foot with yellow slime; soaked with rain, lacerated and contused from their fight and fall; working to prolong the life of companions who, perhaps, might find in continued existence only the torment of lingering death. It was a spectacle to make the merciless powers of that harsh hinterland roar with sardonic glee.

But the men themselves were by no means beaten yet. Even while the three toiled to restore consciousness to the two, their eyes glanced aside from time to time in search of some avenue of escape. These were no spiritless slaves of circumstance, drooping under the blows of malign Fate; they were tenacious fighters accustomed to overcoming evil chance and emerging unconquered from catastrophe. Nor were the hard-headed Scot and the brawny Venezuelan the men to succumb long to the shocks of fighting. Under the ministrations of their comrades and the battering of the cold rain they soon struggled back to knowledge of their surroundings. Their eyes opened; stared blankly a second; focused on the set faces above them, and rolled in a comprehensive survey of their environment. Then they sat up, scowling as pain

streaked through their stunned brains, but voicing no plaint.

As they did so, the rain—which, though heavy, was by no means the smothering deluge of the initial onset—dwindled to a dying shower. Then it ceased. The leaden sky lightened. The stark cliffs, no longer veiled, seemed to stride forward, closing in on the trapped adventurers. From them dripped the wash of their summits, spattering with a bleak sound on the sodden bottom of the pit. Unspeaking, McKay slowly scanned the whole cheerless cage, his gaze returning at length to the palm rainshed jutting above the slide. In all the encircling expanse, that was the only sign of an exit.

Now, as the eyes of all rested once more on that high hole, from it issued a croaking voice pronouncing their doom. It was the voice of the old vulture; yet now it was deeper, stronger, with a hollow tone reminiscent of the sepulchral command first heard issuing from the outer cave. And, peer as they might, the men below could see nothing beyond that awning save empty dark.

“Loco León!” it called. “You drink or you die. You, and the men you bring here, stay here. You have walked Guayana alone unharmed. Now you have walked with new men. You have

brought them to the forbidden place. From this place no white men go out.

"You will drink the sehi. You will be black. Then you can come up again. You will have women. Your sons will be strong. Drink or die. There is no escape."

The sentence of the unseen judge fell with pitiless finality. Minutes passed, the silence broken only by the spat of the cliff-drain. Then León answered.

"If we become black our children will be black—"

"No," broke in the voice. "The sons of blackened white men are white."

"Then why have you not given your women to El Blanco Negro—Black White?"

"He is mad. We want no crazed children."

"Will not the sehi make us mad also?"

"No. Your heads are strong. You will only be black."

Another silence. Then a final adjuration:

"Drink or die!"

McKay, now standing up and fixedly regarding that stony mouth of judgment, spoke curtly.

"We have no sehi to drink."

"It will come," was the grim promise.

"When?"

"At sunrise. Now there is none."

"Bueno. We shall be waiting."

There was an ominous undertone in the captain's rejoinder, and a hard glimmer in the gray eyes as he turned to his companions. They read his thought: to attack and capture the bearers of that blood-red drink and force them to lead the way to escape. Tim gave a subdued growl, Portonio an eloquent grunt. From above came no further sound.

As they once more looked around them, a sudden brilliancy lit up the place. The clouds had broken and vanished; the westering sun had shot into the dungeon. Its slanting rays did not strike the bedraggled little company, but the farther wall seemed to be wholly bathed in light. Moved by a simultaneous impulse, they began walking toward that hot flood, in which they might dry their clothing and drive from their bones the chill already settling there—a clammy cold born not alone of wet garments. That radiant sun, which so recently had been a murderous monster sucking their life, now seemed a friend and comforter amid dank horrors.

The ground before them rose in an irregular mound, whence protruded greasy-looking rocks. Slipping on the miry surface, they slowly

mounted it. They were half-way up when Knowlton halted, exclaiming:

"Say! There's a drain to this hole somewhere! Tons of water have been tumbling in here in the last hour, but there are only shallow puddles. If all that water can get out so fast—"

He left the sentence unfinished and began scrambling upward with sudden energy.

"Any way out of this place is guarded, Merry," was McKay's pessimistic prediction. But he, too, pushed on with lengthened paces. At the top of the mound, all looked eagerly about. They saw only more dirt, rock, and pools.

Down the next slope they slid; up another rise they labored; and so they passed to the end. There they found Knowlton's surmise correct—but unavailing. Near the cliff wall yawned a hole, into which mucky water still was draining; but its sides fell straight downward, and from somewhere far below came the gruesome gurgle of a subterranean stream. Through that exit they could pass only as corpses.

Near by, half hidden in the clay and befouled by spattered dirt, lay ghastly evidence of the futility of efforts to escape from this impregnable prison: human bones. A skull leered hollow-eyed; yellowed ribs and disjointed limbs pro-

truded. Not far off glistened something else, smoothly rounded and just visible above the soil, which looked to be the top of another skull, buried by water-borne sediment. The captives gave those grim relics one hard look; then turned from them, and began to strip off their soaked clothes.

Along the base of the wall was a slope already drying under the fierce sun, and on it they spread their few belongings and squatted in the heat. McKay's eyes roved along the heights, noting that, although unscalable, they were considerably lower than when seen from the sabana of the ghost-trees. After awhile he said, as casually as if they could leave at any time:

"This place used to be a lake. Water ate out those caves and the tunnel, working along weak strata. Finally this hole in the bottom opened up too, and that stream down below emptied the bowl."

"How come a lake up here?" scoffed Tim, in a half-interested tone.

"The whole country used to be as high as the top of this mountain, or higher. Scientists say this is one of the oldest parts of South America. Erosion wore it all down. Only the hard rock stayed put. In a few more million years this

will all be gone, too; eaten away, grain by grain, by rain and wind."

"And then we can walk out o' here, I s'pose."

"Sure. If we can hold out that long."

Grim smiles answered the stoic jest. They moved out of the sun, now becoming too hot. Then León said, thoughtfully:

"I do not believe we shall be here so long. I believe that my luck will show us some way out. One thing in which I firmly believe is the luck of Loco León. It has never yet failed me in a tight place."

"What's that? Do you carry a luck-piece—a talisman, or fetich, or medicine-bag, or something?" asked Knowlton.

"No. It is just luck," was the calm answer. "I have been near death many times, and always something saved me. And I believe my luck will hold good until I deliberately do a wrong to other men. If I had come here to harm these people my luck might fail. But I did not. Nor did you. So there will be a way out."

At this naive confession of faith in a vague deity of Luck, the others looked curiously at him. His tone, his self-possessed manner, told that he meant what he said. And, primitive though his belief might sound, it struck a responsive chord;

for every man there possessed an instinctive faith in natural justice, wholly dissociated from the creeds and dogmas which the civilized world calls religion. But then their glances strayed to the bones over yonder in the dirt. If those men had failed to find a way of escape, why should fortune favor the new captives?

"What do your omens say about our luck, Tim?" asked Knowlton, with a thin smile.

"They say we're clean out o' luck," was the morose rejoinder, "like they've been sayin' all along that we would be. Me, I don't see no good fairies roostin' in this hell-hole. And about doin' deliberate wrong to any guy—I'll tell the cock-eyed world the things I'm goin' to do to these gorillas if I git half a chance will be deliberate and cruel."

McKay, his head still grinding, lifted a hand to the big lump protruding above one ear, and his hard jaw boded no good for any white Indian who might fall into his grip. The others, saying nothing, glanced toward the distant yellow blotch with ominous eyes. Even León, despite his odd scruple against planning injury to any man, looked decidedly grim; for, now that he was the wronged one, retaliation was altogether in accordance with his code.

But the omens for repayment were, as Tim said, unpropitious. And now, as his words aroused memories of the foreboding occurrences along their way, each reviewed them and found bygone enigmas becoming clear in the light of retrospect.

There was the dying Curro, with his unintelligible gaspings about something pertaining to mountains, talk, and death. Now it was glaringly plain that his fragmentary words had been no mere crazy gibberish, but a desperate warning: "Do not go to the Mountain That Talks. It is death!"

Curro had known—and Frasco and the rest had known—that these señores, in order to reach the blond people, must go to that awful Talking Mountain; and that there waited some dire fate. Yet so deep-rooted was their dread of the "demons" abiding there that they had been unable to put into words the horrors which, in their minds, must be met at that ogre-like mountain. By what monstrous deeds had these white ones made themselves regarded as fiends by the other people of Guayana? Guayana alone knew. But their infernal reputation must have originated from a deliberate diabolism, planned

and practised by the ruthless vulture of the cavern and by others of his time.

And there was the demented Black White, with his ravings in the night: his command to go back or lose their faces and become living dead men—men like himself, blackened and lost forever in this trackless ghost-land. His meaning was clear now. And there was Juancito, with his pointblank refusal to help them travel the Periqueta, and his laconic "Maluc'!" Good old Juancito! And the mysterious appearance and disappearance of the blond messenger, delivering a command from the "demons," which the little chief dared not disobey; and the surveillance of the invisible attendants enroute up the demon-river and across the weird sabana—the guidance to food and water—the smoke-signals—all these were the work of the old man of the mountain, luring the adventurers on for his own fell purposes.

There had been a satiric significance, too, in the dyed darts affixed as guiding pointers along the overland trail: the red and black symbolizing either the crimson sehi and its infernal effect, or blood and death. And now, unless the Spaniard's faith in his luck proved well founded,

those two alternatives alone remained: blackness of life, or blackness of death.

Yes, many things were clear—looking backward. Looking ahead, however, all was formless, with only the vaguest possibilities taking semi-solid shape in their minds. So, as the sunlight crept to the wall and began inexorably rising to the heights where they could not follow it, they donned their still damp clothing and lay down in a row on the sloping surface of half-dried clay—awaiting a new day and whatever it might bring forth.

CHAPTER XX

M'KAY GAMBLES

DARKNESS, blank and dank, filled the ancient lake-bed to the rim when Portonio sat up. A full moon had passed over unseen and now was lost. But another light, faint but unmistakable to his experienced eyes, was beginning to steal across the high heavens.

"Señores!" he called. "Day comes."

The four who, like himself, had slept fitfully through twelve hours of clammy chill needed no second summons. Their heads lifted; their hunched forms straightened out; and, shivering, they pushed themselves up to a sit. As they moved, each set his teeth to repress groans of pain. Through their wrenched and battered muscles, stiffened by hours on damp ground, darted sharp twinges of protest against action.

For a few minutes each rubbed his various spots of injury, flexed arms and legs, bent backward, bowed and twisted his lame neck. None, as yet, tried to walk. The spot where yawned that deadly sink-hole was invisible, and nobody

was sure of its precise position. With clumsy fingers they tried making cigarettes—only to find that their pouches had not been altogether damp-proof, and that now their contents would not ignite.

"For the love o' Mike git the tobaccer dried out when the sun gits up," growled Tim. "A drag on a butt would do me a million dollars' worth o' good right now." He felt the pocket where reposed his air-tight match-safe, reassuring himself that it still was there.

Rapidly the sky brightened. More slowly, the gloom of the pit turned to a misty half-light. When the nearer ground became unmistakably plain, they stiffly arose and began picking their way toward the other end of the place. Sunrise was at hand—and the coming of the diabolical drink of blackness.

In silence they pushed through the mist, and in silence they stood presently at the foot of the slide. León, trying a few tentative steps up that slope, slid backward. Thereafter they waited, motionless, watching the hole which grew more visible as the thin fog crept upward; wondering, too, how the bearers of the sehi were to traverse that descent and return to the cave. A rope seemed the only possible means; and

they were alert to seize both rope and men—or women—even if covered meanwhile from above by their own rifles.

The people of the mountain seemed in no haste. At the mouth of the cavern appeared no figure. Sunlight blazed on the crest of the cliffs and began steadily creeping down one wall. Outside it must be broad day. Still no sign of life was discernible.

"Guess we pulled a bad boner yesterday in shooting up the place," confessed Knowlton. "If we hadn't, they'd probably have thought we were disarmed, and we'd have a better chance today."

"Just so, señor," agreed the Spaniard. "Pistols are little known in this land of Guayana, and I believe they are not known at all to these blondos. When they pushed us away from the guns and machetes they thought all our weapons gone, and if you had not fired — But it is done. And I doubt that we shall be able now to lay hand on one of these people. Ah! Look!"

At a corner of the cave-mouth something was slowly coming over the edge. They tensed. It paused a moment—a yellow-brown thing of indeterminate character, vague of outline, in the shadow of the palm hood. Then it slowly de-

scended. As its shape and identity became clear, the waiting five voiced a grunt of disappointment bordering on despair. As León had predicted, they were not to capture any blond Indian.

The moving thing was a huge gourd bottle, being lowered at the end of a line. It swung down the vertical drop to the beginning of the slope; there it slid slowly, cunningly maneuvered by the unseen holder of the cord, down the slick surface of the clay: rolling in short zigzags from side to side, but ever held in control, ever slipping nearer to the powerless captives. At length it was within their reach; a balloon-shaped container, its only opening at the neck, and that opening tightly closed with a wooden plug, above which the line was attached.

With a sudden spring Knowlton seized the line and yanked hard. The fierce tug met with no resistance. The cord flew loose from the cave and dropped. Instead of jerking someone above out over the edge, his wrench only unbalanced him, and he tumbled back among his comrades. From the cavern sounded a hollow chuckle, and then the voice of the vulture.

"Yucut' sehi!" it croaked. "Food and drink. Eat it—drink it—or die!"

"We'll see ye in hell first, ye lousy ol' snake!" blared Tim, aiming a savage kick at the bomb-like container. The kick missed, for his other foot slipped and he nearly fell. Before he could right himself a new and more dreadful voice broke from overhead.

"Yee-hee-hah-hah-hah!" it yelled. "Fools! Fools! Yah-hah-hah! I told you so! You idiots! You *would* come here, would you, you boobs? And now how do you like it? Have a drink on the house! Ya-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Urrgh!" shuddered Tim. "That bloody banshee again!"

He and the rest peered sharply upward, striving to fathom the dimness of the interior. They failed. If a black face was looking down at them, it was so merged with the farther gloom as to be indistinguishable.

"Drink hearty, Loco!" jeered the unseen madman. "A bucket of blood! Lap it up, boys! And then itch—and scratch—and watch yourselves turn black! Black! Black as the soot of hell! Nigger men like me! Dead men like me! We'll all walk together then! Six dead men without faces! Yah! Hah!"

From the farther wall, behind the trapped five, faintly echoed:

"Yah! Hah!"

León spoke, his voice calm, yet tinged with bitterness.

"Buen' dia', White. We thank you for your courtesy. Perhaps we shall drink. Perhaps not. But whether we do or not, you are no more my friend. In the past I have done whatever I could for you. This is your gratitude. You can walk alone hereafter—or with the devil; not with us."

A brief silence. Then an angry yell:

"Shut up! I warned you, hombre! You called me 'ugly-mug'! Now take your own ugly mug and keep it! You——"

McKay broke in, his tone chill as a sword-blade—and as cutting.

"You, White! Listen to me a minute. You think you used to be a white man, do you? And an American? You never were! If you'd ever had a spark of white-man decency you'd never see white men turned black. You'd give them a hand out of the hole. But you're worse than black—you're yellow! You always were yellow. You're a dirty, low-down traitor to the whole white race. You're a rottener specimen of humanity than these degenerates you associate with. They don't know any better. You do. You're no man. You're a rat! A sneaking, squeaking rat in

a hole, with all the instincts of a rat: a coward; a biter in the dark; a filthy animal. Your actions prove it. You'll never walk with us. We'd spit in your face if you ever came near us. And what's more, we're not drinking this stuff. We've got backbone enough to die clean. This for you!"

With the last words he kicked the gourd. His kick was surer, his footing firmer, than Tim's. His boot shattered the calabash. A wave of red gushed down the incline, the bloody-hued liquid and its clots of manioc sweeping around the feet of the five as if trying to contaminate them by contact. Involuntarily they backed out of it. And then from above them burst the torrent of a madman's rage.

Furious howls of vituperation, incoherent but vitriolic, replied to the Scot's denunciation. Blistering curses, unintelligible snarls, maniacal shrieks, tumbled in a cataract of horrible sound. Black White was raving in a paroxysm of wrath. Yet, despite his threats of instant death, he fired no shot. Whether no gun was near him at the moment, or whether some other circumstance prevented lethal retaliation, none but himself could know. But he wore out his fury and his voice in empty noise. And McKay, an inex-

plicable smile showing at the corners of his hard mouth, stood unmoved and listened to all of it.

At the end he spoke again: five words only, but in a tone of such searing contempt that those words stung worse than all the violence just hurled from above.

"A white man? You? Pah!"

He spat on the ground; turned his back, and walked away toward the sunlit wall. His companions followed in silence. And the man or men above watched them go—in silence. Not a word came now from the cavern.

At the base of the precipice on which the radiance was creeping down, the prisoners squatted and waited. For a long time nothing was said. McKay, cold-eyed, stared fixedly at the barren clay ahead of him. Knowlton and Tim, scowling, prodded absently at the dirt. Portonio, expressionless, remained immobile, only his brown eyes moving at times to one or another of his señores. León brooded.

"What is done is done," he said, at length. "Yet I wish you had not destroyed that gourd, capitán. It was in my mind that if all else failed we might pretend to drink that sehi, and, in some way or other, blacken ourselves to look as if the

poison had worked. So we might again reach the caves; and, once there——”

“No chance,” disagreed McKay. “I figured on that possibility in the night. There’s nothing to blacken ourselves with. Not even a lead-pencil. No wood to char. Only thing we could burn would be our clothes—if they’d dry out enough to take fire—and they’d see us do it and get wise. Besides, they’d never let us come up with our guns on. They’d make us send up everything first—clothes and all, probably—on a line. So we’d have nothing to fight with except our hands, and those aren’t enough against that gang. We can’t fake it. I’m gambling on another chance. It’s a hundred-to-one shot, but it may win. If not, we’re out of luck.”

“Ye mean climbin’ up there when the ground gits hard,” guessed Tim. “Tonight, in the dark. And then we’ll do one o’ them human ladder acts against the rock, with the top guy crawlin’ over the edge with a gun in each fist. That guy is goin’ to be me!”

“I did figure on that,” acknowledged the captain, “but it’s no good. It seemed possible until just now. An all-day sun hardening that clay—a careful climb after dark—and a five-man tower. But we can’t get up that clay, sun or no sun.

It'll never dry out enough. I saw an ooze of water from it. There's a seepage somewhere up the slope, and that slope is always wet. The rest of this ground is firmer than it was yesterday, but that place isn't."

Gloomy frowns ensued. León, who had experimented with the ascent, slowly nodded.

"True," he admitted. "It is like grease. Then what is the thing you gamble on, capitán?"

"A change of heart."

The others eyed him in perplexity.

"Ye mean them gorillas will git merciful?" scoffed Tim. "Fat chance!"

"Not merciful. But perhaps a bit ashamed or a bit sensible. I'm playing White for the shame and old Tut for the sense. You heard me roast White. Got his goat, didn't it? Burned him on his sorest spot. All right. That spot's going to ache for quite a while. He may try to ease it by doing something to prove that he's still a white man under the skin. If I get him right, he must have been a he-man once, and proud as the devil. It was his pride that made his brain crack. And, cracked as he is, he's still proud. No question of it. Wanted to fight us all at Monoblanco to show how good a man he was. Now, after the names I

called him, he'll want to prove that he's better than these half-wits. That's how I'm betting.

"As for the old mummy, he wants us alive. Everything proves that. He brought us here to put fresh blood into his gang. We're his last hope. No other white men are coming in here. If he starves us his pet scheme goes glimmering. I'm betting that in a day or two he'll offer to compromise somehow. Until that time comes we won't give an inch. It'll be tough for us in the meantime, but we've got to stick it out to the finish."

"Right!" assented Knowlton. "No surrender! Frankly, I'm not much enthused over either of your long shots, Rod. But I've seen dark horses make good more than once before now. Between your psychological hunches and the famous luck of Loco León we may break loose yet. How's your luck feeling just now, Loco?"

"Not so strong, at this moment," admitted the Spaniard. "Luck always has been with me when I could do something to help it. I have never had to sit and wait for it to come to me. But I still do not feel that it is dead, though it may be a little sick for the time."

"That's the spirit!" His fellow blond slapped him on the shoulder. "Luck and Nerve are

brothers. As long as a fellow hangs onto his nerve, luck's somewhere near him."

"Yeah. Ye said a mouthful that time," approved Tim. "The guy that's got no nerve is always out o' luck, and serves him right. Wal, there ain't a quitter in this gang, I'll tell the world. Lookit ol' Tonio, here; he dunno what we're sayin', but he knows we're up against it good, and he ain't battin' an eye."

As he said, the riverman's scant knowledge of English had given him only an inkling of the nature of the talk, but he understood the general situation thoroughly; and his quiet courage was unruffled. In fact, as the others looked at him he smiled—that slow, easy smile of his, betokening a heart unafraid. And when León put into Spanish the gist of the conversation, he merely answered:

"Sí. We shall be hungry. I have been hungry at other times."

"You would not drink the sehi?" probed McKay.

With his usual deliberation, Portonio spat toward the cavern. No further answer was needed.

Downward crept the sun. They drew out their soggy tobacco, and Tim spread his shirt as a drying-ground for the precious shreds. When the

hot light reached the dirt the men themselves sat for a time in it, then moved to shade; for not one of them now possessed a hat. Hungrily they watched the brown and black particles until they judged them dry enough for smoking; then made an experimental cigarette in one of Leon's bark sheets, and found that it would burn. A minute later all were puffing at hastily built brown cylinders.

Not until those little rolls had burned to the tiniest of stubs did anyone speak again. Then Knowlton, who had been speculatively eying the high hole where unseen men undoubtedly were watching their every move, turned a quizzical glance to his partners and announced:

"I'm going to back your play, Rod,—with a song. If White ever was a regular fellow he's sung this one himself many a time. See if we can get a rise out of him. Whether we do or not, we'll show 'em we're not running up any white flag. All together, now! Let's go!"

He hummed the first line. Both McKay and Tim suddenly grinned and nodded. And a few seconds later the bleak cliffs were echoing with a roaring, rollicking chorus: a rough old ditty devoid of true music, but a man-song charged

with defiance to disaster and despair, death and demons:

“Hail! Hail! The gang’s all here!
What the hell do we care?
What the hell do we care?
Hail! Hail! The gang’s all here!
What the hell do we care now?”

Over and over they sang it, Tim bawling it at the top of his raucous voice, Leon joining in lustily as he learned the words and air, and even Portonio adding an inarticulate bass when the tune became familiar from repetition. Whether it evoked any answer from the cave they did not know at first, for they roared away until their throats ached. But then, when they paused for breath, a response did come. From that hooded opening howled a voice like that of a man in pain.

“Shut up! For God’s sake shut up!”

“Huh!” Tim sneered loudly. “Listen to that yeller dog barkin’ at *men!*”

McKay chuckled again, keenly watching the hole and awaiting an outburst. None came.

“Let it go at that,” he said quietly. “I think it’s working. Now we’ll take it easy and see what results we get—if any.”

CHAPTER XXI

INFERNO

SLOWLY, silently, an interminable day snailed past: a day of glaring sun and grilling heat.

The pit, shut off from all breezes by its towering walls, became an oven. Down on its barren floor the luckless prisoners moved their positions hourly, following the patches of shade creeping along the base of the cliffs. Despite this partial shelter from the dazing rays, they roasted in the windless atmosphere. As the hours wore on and the full torridity of afternoon smote down into the rockbound dungeon, it turned into a veritable hellhole.

In the early hours it was not so bad, for then the combined coolness of the bygone rain, the long night, and the shadows of the tall crags still remained. In those hours the captives, heartened by their tobacco, moved all about the place or discussed their position from all angles. They plodded along the foot of the encompassing precipice, studying every yard of earth and stone, seeking any hitherto unseen opening alow or

aloft. The mute evidence of those unburied bones near the sink-hole was sufficient to prove that no line of escape existed, but these newcomers were overlooking no possibilities. When they had completed their circuit they were convinced that no possibilities existed. There was one way out, and only one: the natural tunnel by which they had come in.

Beyond the palm hood they still could discern no human face or figure; and when the sun struck that yellow shield the inner shadow became a pocket of blackness. Yet they felt the gaze of unseen eyes constantly watching, and knew well enough that one or more—perhaps all—of the people of the mountain were lurking there and following their every move. Wherefore, adhering to their policy of defiant contempt, they feigned complete indifference. As the pangs of increasing hunger became more acute they surreptitiously tightened their belts; and assuming positions of ease in a shady spot, they preserved an air of nonchalance which might or might not wear on the patience of their jailers.

"We now have nothing to do but rest, señores," remarked Portonio, with a philosophical grin.

"And it is the best thing we can do," added León. "To move about is only to make our-

selves more hungry and wear ourselves out more quickly."

So they lolled and half-drowsed, rousing up to talk whenever someone voiced a thought. At length Knowlton reflectively remarked:

"I wonder, since I've had a look at these people and sized up their mentality—I wonder where they ever dug up enough cleverness to play ghosts all the way across the savanna. Seems as if that would require a higher grade of intelligence than they have."

"Animal cunning, plus training and orders by the old man," surmised McKay. "They've been brought up that way. The old-timers worked out the ghost stuff, probably,—they took advantage of the echo and the acoustics of the tunnel mouth, and invented more or less hideous hocuspocus to make the whole region frightful. Or maybe this old croaker up yonder was the one who invented it all. He's certainly the brains of the whole outfit now. And he had our whole route mapped out for us, after that revengeful dog of a Black White eavesdropped on us at Monoblanco and let him know our plans. And he ——"

"One moment, capitán," interposed León. "I do not believe White did that thing. That

blondo who reached Uaunana so soon after we did—he was sent from this place before we even reached Monoblanco. He must have been. Perhaps he and White traveled together, although I am quite sure that White does not live at this place. At any rate, he could have lain at the Periqueta mouth to see whether we turned in there, and, finding that we did not, followed us to Uaunana, and there learned our intentions from Juancito. Then he could—and did—dash back to the Periqueta. The things which followed —” He paused, thinking.

“Were all worked out in advance by the old man,” McKay finished. “Maybe you’re right about White. I hope so. But this old buzzard had everything pretty thoroughly doped out beforehand, beyond a doubt. He coached his gang on what to do, and they followed orders throughout. They’re not imbeciles, even if they are fools compared to him; they can carry out orders all right. And at this end of the line he had everything ready, even to the woman decoy and the big feed. We were to arrive here half dead with thirst and drink up all his doctored sehi. But his plans skidded a bit when that unforeseen thunderstorm gave us a bath and a drink before we saw his

bowl; also when León's fierce tobacco made him wobble and overplay his hand."

"D'ye s'pose that smoke really hit him as hard as it looked, or was he fakin'?" suggested Tim. "Seems funny he never had a smoke, when tobaccer grows all over South Ameriky."

"Apparently it doesn't grow here. He wasn't faking. It nearly knocked him over. But he didn't quite lose his grip. He saw we were wise to the sehi stunt, so he pulled the harem mob scene. And we fell for it."

"Yeah. We sure fell for it." Tim sourly eyed the slide. "I've fell for women before, but not as fast or as hard as this time. Wonder where this gang lives. It ain't here in this hole, or up in the cave; they were all wet when they come in. Must be outside somewheres. Le's see, the ol' skate said 'At the houses,' didn't he? Then that big rat-hole must be his own private hang-out. They wouldn't put that big palm awnin' on there unless somebody lived there right along. And he ain't husky enough to walk up and down that tunnel."

"He may be stronger than he appeared," León demurred. "His weakness may have been assumed. I believe it was his voice that called us into the cave, and he must have been somewhere

near the outer end when he spoke. But still I think that he lives in the rock, as you say, and not outside. The others must have a place in the woods, where they can grow their food."

McKay nodded.

"Well," said Knowlton, "while we're explaining everything—and getting it all wrong, maybe—explain the origin of these highbinders. They're Indians in everything but color. How do they get that way?"

There was a silence. At length León ventured:

"Señores, to that question there is no answer. They themselves do not yow. Yet there is a tale in this land which may explain. As you know, the men of Guayana, many years ago, killed the Spanish soldiers of the Caura. I have heard—though I do not know it to be true—that a few of those soldiers were not killed; that they were spared because some of the Maquiritare women wanted them kept alive. Whether they were blond Spaniards—like myself—I do not know; nor do I know what became of them, except that they never were seen again outside these hills. If they were blonds, and mated with the light Maquiritare girls, blond children might be born. Is it not so? And in so light a race of people as the Maquiritares, might not blonds be

born in later generations, even though the fathers and mothers were not light of hair and blue of eye?"

"By George! That's a possibility!" exclaimed Knowlton. "Just a bare possibility, but still possible. Freaks of heredity. And, because they're freaks, virtually outcasts. And if blond mated with blond, it would perpetuate the type. Or would it? I'm no biologist. Let's see, old Tut said they killed dark children; so they've had dark ones. Specialization of a type. Now that the type is going to seed mentally, the old cock-of-the-rock demands fresh blond blood—ours. Chances are that he knows his own blood is partly white-man's, but he won't admit it. Well, that solves the mystery to my satisfaction."

"Me, I don't care where they come from, but I can tell 'em all where they can go to," rumbled Tim. "The mystery I want cleared up is, how do we git out o' here if cap's hunches and Loco's luck won't work?"

"We don't," was McKay's blunt response.

Talk languished again. They moved to a new patch of shadow. As they lay there, beginning to swelter in the increasing heat, each mentally faced a fact of which none spoke: that they could not exist long in that hole. Food they could do

without for a number of days, if needs must. Water they might find, in small sips, at the foot of that seeping slope, despite the daily evaporation. But soon the exposure, the inevitable weakness, would breed fever.

In all that day no voice sounded again from the cave. No further proffer of the red yucut'sehi was made. To all appearance, the stubborn intruders now were being left to lingering death. And, by the time the sun lifted out of the hole and a slight coolness began to steal in, death itself seemed almost preferable to continued existence. The five lay dull-eyed, half comatose, drawing labored breaths which failed to alleviate the smothering sensation born of motionless air.

For some time after sunset the surrounding rock threw off the heat stored up during the day, and the abyss remained insufferable. Then, at last, a gradual lowering of temperature set in, and the dazed victims began to revive. By the time they arose to their feet the ancient lake-bed was a lagoon of darkness. They were not far from the cavern, however, and knew their bearings well enough to walk surely and noiselessly; and toward that cavern and its slippery chute they moved. Despite McKay's earlier prediction, they hoped to find the surface of the ac-

clivity sufficiently dry to allow climbing; and now, before the baking effect of the sun had been overcome by the nightly ooze from within, was the time to make the attempt.

"Slow and easy does it, if it can be done," cautioned Knowlton, sotto voce. "No sudden moves. Gradual lifts. And no talking!"

A muttered chorus of agreement. All glanced at the sky, wondering whether the moonlight reflecting faintly downward from it would make their forms visible against the yellow clay to anyone at the cave above. The moon itself, though big and brilliant now, could not for some time rise high enough to shoot its direct beams into the abyss; but the sky-sheen might betray them to some keen eye. There was no indication, however, of any watch at the palm hood: no light or sound. As they stole onward they felt that the uneven floor had grown much harder. Hope began to lift its head.

But, at the foot of that slide, it drooped again. There the soil seemed almost as wet as before.

The pool which had been so big yesterday had shrunk to a shallow, warm puddle. But it still was there. Despite its stagnancy, they drank from it; drank it virtually dry, in fact, for it was the only water to be had. Then they stood a

moment peering up at the palm hood, a barely discernible spot of lighter darkness than the rock around it. Not the slightest indication of life could be detected up there.

Crouching, they began tentative ascent of the first grade—a comparatively easy slope leading to the stiff slant beyond. Their feet sank slightly, but held firm. As the angle increased, they leaned farther forward, bringing their hands into play on the earth. Slowly they made progress. Then they were against the slide itself—and budding hope wilted. Feet and hands alike slipped downward at each upward draw; they gouged out hunks of slimy soil instead of rising. A few minutes of dogged endeavor resulted only in smearing them with muck and forcing home the conviction that McKay's judgment had been only too sure. They ceased work and lay panting, conscious of a maddening weakness and despair, the offspring of heat and hunger.

Suddenly something thumped on the clay above them. Followed a slithering sound suggestive of a crawling snake. Then a serpentine shape seemed actually to take form on the soil—a dim, slender thing wriggling rapidly down at them. For a startled instant all started back from it. Then, with equal abruptness, Portonio threw himself

upward, snatching at it with both hands. One big fist clutched it, and the other grabbed again, securing a double hold.

"Cuerda!" he muttered. "Rope!"

"Oh, boy!" exulted Tim, his voice surging out with unguarded force. "Now we'll——"

"Ssst!" hissed León. "Quiet, por amor de Dios!"

And from the face of the cliff fell a hoarse, vehement whisper:

"Shut up!"

Silence. The prisoners clamped their jaws, repressing all impulse to speak. The rope, slender but strong, twitched again as if its thrower were making sure that it had reached them. Then it strained taut. From above came another subdued prompting:

"One at a time!"

Portonio began hauling himself up, digging in his feet in long lifts while his hands reached for new grips. The others held their places. As the loose end of the rope fell behind the climbing riverman, Tim seized it; but, heedful of the last command, waited for the Venezuelan to reach the top. With his lips close to McKay's ear, he whispered:

"You win, cap! White's come clean!"

The captain's teeth gleamed, but he made no reply. All eyes lifted again, watching the climbing figure above grow more and more indistinct. With difficulty they restrained a nagging urge to swarm up that rope in a body instead of awaiting their turns. Now that a line of exit was actually in their hands, the few minutes of enforced inaction seemed longer than all the blistering hours since morning.

Then, without warning, the rope fell slack. An alarmed grunt from Portonio—a sudden scuffling noise at the cave—a snarling gasp—the thud of a blow—all these blended. Almost instantly followed a heavier thump on the clay, succeeded by a sliding noise.

Out of the vagueness, rolling and bumping and slewing, came Portonio and another. At the sudden slackening of the line the Venezuelan had lost both his balance and his hold; and now, vainly clawing for a grip, he catapulted into his comrades, knocking them all to the bottom. Tim dropped the rope. Before they could right themselves, that rope jumped away, crawling swiftly back up the slide. And then the other tumbling body hit them.

They pounced on it. It lay inert—senseless or lifeless. Its face was indistinct, smeared with the

miry substance of the chute. But there could be little doubt as to the identity of the new victim. Disfigured by muck and darkened by a darkness deeper than that of the night, yet the features were, on close scrutiny, discernible as those of a man born white. And, as the men whom he had tried to help released him and looked speechlessly at one another, from above croaked a voice all too familiar, and more hateful than ever before.

"The black white one would be white again. Turn him white, strangers!"

A fiendish chuckle. Then silence.

CHAPTER XXII

BLACK WHITE

A LONG time passed before Black White recovered consciousness. During that time the other inmates of the dungeon remained beside him. There was no use in moving him, nor any means of reviving him. As for any further attempt to scale the acclivity, nobody even suggested it.

As the first burning disappointment of failure passed off, they sought solace in tobacco. By the brief light of their matches they snatched swift looks at the "dead man without a face." First, however, they had cleared that face of its mud and blood, scraping it with ungentle but not unkindly fingers; and now they found that its features were as good as any of their own. The mouth and jaw were masked by long, unkempt black beard, but the nose, eyes, brows, and ears were regular and the head well shaped. Like the long body—clad only in an Indian loin-cloth—the countenance was gaunt of contour and livid of hue. But, so far as the first cursory view showed, it was not mutilated. White's ghastly

description of himself had been but the hyperbole of dementia.

On the back of his head their searching fingers found a swollen wet gash—the wound left by a savage blow dealt from behind while, probably, he was struggling with some other assailant. What had taken place in the cave was quite apparent to the investigators. Goaded by the torturing “change of heart” on which McKay had gambled, White had lurked there until he saw the dogged attempt of the captives to ascend; then thrown out the coil of rope, braced himself, and acted as anchor for the first climber. But something (probably Tim’s outbreak) had brought others to discover what was going forward, and those others had sprung on the traitor. Whether they had deliberately thrown him into the pit after knocking him senseless, or whether he had toppled over the edge as the result of the blow, was not clear. It was plain, however, that, in either case, his downfall was gratifying to the vindictive old man of the mountain.

None of his bones was broken, nor did the skull seem fractured, as Knowlton ascertained by feeling over his head and his sinewy frame; and his heart still beat. So, with nothing to do but wait

and all night to wait in, they waited. Presently McKay remarked:

"Hope we don't have to fight the poor devil when he comes to life. Think he'll be violent, León?"

"I do not know," the Spaniard answered, slowly. "It is probable. He is a fighter, and he was fighting when he fell, so he may awake fighting. And, as I think I told you, his fixed idea is that no white man shall ever see his black face, and that any white man who does so must die. So now — I do not know what he may do. Be sure that he does not snatch one of your pistols."

"Mebbe," suggested Tim, "he'll wake up with his brains shook back in place. He sure took a fierce crack on the dome. And us fellers knowed a guy one time that got his sense back that way. He got a bullet bounced off his bean, and it made him cuckoo; and then we come along and looey, here, crowned him with the butt of a gun. The wallop knocked him cold, but when he come out of it he was as sensible as anybody. Begorry, I bet ye this guy —"

"No chance," interrupted Knowlton. "This fellow's mind broke inside, not from an injury to the skull. The only thing that could set him right

again would be to remove the cause of the break, and that can't be done. Even if he could be given a new white skin, I doubt if the insanity could be cured now. How long has he been like this, León?"

The Ventuari man thought a minute.

"Eight years," he figured.

"Poor beggar!" muttered McKay.

A long silence ensued. The Americans, in response to León's recent suggestion, hitched their belts around to make the holstered side-arms hang at their backs. All watched the motionless madman with unrelaxing vigilance. Finally León spoke again.

"I think, señores, that my luck is at work once more. You have won your gamble, capitán, and I believe that I shall win mine. Luck will come to us through this man—and his woman. She will not let him lie here long."

"His woman?" questioned McKay.

"Yes. The woman who made him what he is. She follows him wherever he goes, and she cannot be far away now. More than that, she is the daughter of a Maquiritare chief, and has a will of her own. Unless something has happened to her, she will soon know where her man is, and she will make trouble."

"Good!" exclaimed Knowlton. "But — Can a woman make any headway against that old highbinder up yonder? He's the big boss around here."

"There's many a better man than him been skidded into the ditch by women," asserted Tim.

"And that's no lie," agreed McKay.

Another long interval of waiting. Except for an occasional deep breath or the slight sounds caused by changes of position, absolute quiet ruled the well of darkness. The stars crept westward unheeded, and moonlight began to silver the western cliff-crests. All maintained their vigil beside the vague shape on the clay.

Then León leaned a little forward, and the others tensed. In the upturned dusky face now glimmered two whitish eyes reflecting the sky-shine. They seemed to blink several times, then to remain fixed in a stare.

"Buen' noche,' amigo," said León, speaking quietly. "Good evening, friend. You have had a bad fall. Yet perhaps it is not so bad, for by it you have fallen among friends. How do you feel?"

No answer. The eyes held their stare. In them seemed to grow a baleful force, and from the still figure seemed to emanate an impalpable,

yet tangible, menace of danger to these men ringing it around. León spoke again, more quickly.

"We all are your friends now, White. It is those men above—that cursed old vulture—who struck you from behind and threw you down here. We are ——"

White shot from the ground. Without the slightest discernible preliminary movement he was up—a black spectre towering over the still squatting men. His teeth gleamed like those of an attacking jaguar, and the hands uplifted against the stars were curved like huge talons.

With a simultaneous upward and backward spring, his guards leaped away from him, falling instantly into attitudes of defense and counter-attack. But the imminent assault did not come. The black figure, instead of hurling itself on them, staggered; its tense arms and rigid claw-hands sank and reached uncertainly aside as if grasping for support; through its clenched teeth sounded a hissing gasp. That sudden leap from quiescence to action had caused the dazed brain to whirl with dizziness, and, for the moment, he could hardly maintain equilibrium.

While he wavered helplessly, the voice of McKay came, crisp and incisive.

"Steady, White! Steady! Hold hard! Don't jump us. It would just tickle those sneaks up there to see us fight among ourselves. When we fight we'll fight *them*! You're one of us now. We're all white men together, and we'll stick together. Get me?"

His tone, even more than his words, seemed to exert a stabilizing influence. Though commanding and compelling, it was neither harsh nor imperious. Nor, on the other hand, was it patronizing. It was the direct, man-to-man tone he might have used toward any of his own comrades, and fraught with straightforward sincerity. White's response to it was visible. He ceased to sway and grope, standing steadily—though warily—and peering hard at the tall, gaunt man whose build was not unlike his own.

"I said some rotten things to you this morning, White," the Scot continued. "I take them all back. You're as good a man as any of us. I'd like to shake hands with you."

The blackened man stood motionless. Through the dimness each in turn felt his piercing gaze. He extended no hand of fellowship; rather, he poised as if alert for some indication of a trick concealed behind the amicable words; and McKay himself made no motion to put his proffer

into effect, sensing that any such move might be misinterpreted. Words, in this case, were likely to be more potent than deeds.

Then, in a twinkling, the boring eyes left them and darted to the cliff. For a few seconds the twisted mentality appeared to concentrate on the vague shape of the awning. Suddenly White exploded into volcanic rage.

Searing curses, blasting oaths, and hissing threats erupted from him in a sulphurous stream of jungle Spanish and Indian. Death—plain, ordinary death—was the least of his frenetic promises to someone up there. Mutilation, mangling, and dismemberment while still alive, and devouring of the victim's flesh and gnawing of his bones by vulture and wild dog afterward, were predicted with a virulence which chilled even his fellow-captives. Nor was his enmity confined to that nameless person alone. The whole race of the blondos should be exterminated, to the smallest babe; their settlement should be destroyed, and their name made a mock throughout the land of Guayana. When Black White and his men finished with them, he swore, they would be nothing but splintered bones and a stench.

His fury was truly that of a maniac. Yet the

listening quintet felt that it was not mere paranoid frenzy; that the bloodcurdling threats were not mere empty vaporings. Behind the venomous words they sensed a deadly purpose based on actual power to fulfill each and every one of those frightful promises. Too, they caught instantly at the reference to his men—his guerreros, as he called them—his fighters. León nodded, and his teeth glimmered through the dimness.

When the eruption ceased—as abruptly as it had begun—a silence ensued. No sneering answer dropped from the cliff. Apparently the hearers of that tirade had found in it food for thought. Presently León spoke in an easy conversational manner.

“Where is your gang now, White? I heard that it had left you.”

The dark shape faced about, fronting the questioner with a baleful glare.

“Huh?” it hoarsely demanded. “Where’d you hear that?”

“The word came down the Ventuari some time ago, friend. My Maquiritaires, you know, hear of such things. You had a fight with your men. Is it not so?”

A harsh, mirthless chuckle. Then —

"Sure I did. Fool of a Gaspar—know him?—got a swelled head and talked back. I beat him up—fists. Hit him too hard. Died. Rest of 'em got sore and quit me. But they came back after awhile. Sent 'em to British Guiana to get more cartridges. Been gone more than a moon. And what they'll do to these ——"

More blistering epithets in venomous Spanish, terminating in an inarticulate yell.

"Steady, White!" repeated McKay. "How soon do you expect your men?"

"Huh? Men? Whenever they get here! Tomorrow—next week—a fortnight—how do I know? Huh!"

"I see. And how are we to live in the meantime? We're starving."

A silence. Then—

"Don't know. They'll give you yucut' 'sehi if you'll eat it—ya ha ha ha! Otherwise—"

"White!" broke in León. "Where is your woman Juana?"

"Huh? Juana? Outside. At the houses."

"Bueno! Then she will soon learn of this matter. That is good. And where are our rifles?"

"Rifles. Rifles. Up in cave. No good. Huh huh huh! I unloaded 'em. Hid cartridges.

Skunks can't use 'em. Yuh huh huh huh huh!"
A hoarse chuckle.

"Good. But there is no way out of here?"

"Out? No, you fool! Don't you know it yet?"

Another pause. Then Knowlton remarked:

"Well, then I guess we might as well bed down for the night. Maybe tomorrow will bring developments. Come on, White. We'll have a smoke-talk—all good fellows together; then sleep awhile."

He moved casually away. As he did so, however, he hitched his pistol around in front of him, beyond reach of any sudden snatch from behind. Perhaps the wary White, who seemed to be cat-eyed, saw and misunderstood the motion. Perhaps, instead, it was the suggestion of a smoke-talk that aroused his distrust; for smoking inevitably involved the lighting of matches and the showing of his face, which he believed to be still unseen. At any rate, he made a swift leap and bounded away into the dark.

"Yah! Smart!" he jeered. "Smoke with Death! Sleep with Death! Keep away from me! Or I'll kill the whole pack of you with bare hands!"

His voice had turned savage. For a moment the others stood, staring at the enshrouding

shadows among which he had vanished. Then Knowlton answered:

"Oh, very well. Just as you like, old chap. Good night."

No reply. They moved quietly to a smooth mound and lay down, lost to his sight as he was lost to theirs.

"What's that gang of his, León?" quizzed McKay. "And what was that about British Guiana?"

"They are Maquiritares, capitán; a small band of them—but wicked fighters. He has armed them and trained them in the use of long rifles of thirty caliber. I have heard that the guns came from British Guiana, at the Rio Cuyuni, in the gold-fields; and the cartridges still come from that place. The Indians go there with bags of gold and trade it to certain men. Where they get that gold I do not know, for I never have learned of any in this Ventuari-Caura region; perhaps they dig it on the Rio Caroní, farther to the east. I have heard that some of the gold-hunters in British Guiana tried to follow those Indians and find their treasure-pocket, and that none of those men ever was seen again. Black White's guerreros are not good men to monkey with."

"Nor White neither, I'll say," added Tim. "That guy's one hard gorilla. Did ye git what he said about killin' one o' them lads with his fists? And them tough eggs let him git away with it, and come back to him again. Nut or no nut, he ain't nobody's fool, if he can handle a gang like that. Mebbe he's bringin' us luck, but the further off he keeps tonight the better I'm goin' to sleep."

Wherewith he unholstered his pistol and slid it well down under his waistband, whence no stealthy black hand could extract it without discovery. Knowlton and McKay followed his example. Thereafter all lay listening, thinking, conjecturing, until at length they dozed into fitful slumber shot with weird dreams.

It was Knowlton who had the most vivid nightmare of all. For no reason as yet apparent, he was queerly hot in the increasing coolness of the night; and now, drifting in a strange land of phantasms, he found himself lying on hard-baked clay whence radiated fearful heat. He could not rise. Above, circling near, wheeled a gaunt vulture with a wrinkled human face. All at once it dived to a squat on his body, where it tore at his stomach with long finger-like talons.

And then, from nowhere, a dingy black hand

darted to clutch the hideous man-bird by the throat. It lifted and whirled the creature in air, wringing its neck until the head parted from the body. That body ran about, fluttering and tumbling, until at last it stretched out and lay still. The black hand threw the head into a pit. And there that head stood up and stumped about on its neck, squawking horribly upward at the watching man, who now had risen high above it. And that head, that squawking voice, were those of the old man of the mountain.

The dreamer started awake; stared around; sank back. The moon now lit up the whole western wall. He still was hot. His head ached. Otherwise all was as before. Dimness, silence, stark walls towering to the sky: that was all. Black White was lost in the night; so was the old vulture of the rock. Nothing was real, save gnawing hunger and throbbing head. So he turned over and dozed again—unknowing that, amid these grim realities and unrealities, a dream was to prove a prophecy.

CHAPTER XXIII

VENGEANCE

IN the dank chill of daybreak the five shivered awake, sat up, and once more gazed around them. Of the latest addition to their wretched company nothing was to be seen. From force of habit, their eyes went then to the mocking hole in the cliff, and saw nothing there either. Last, they looked sidewise at one another—and speedily looked away again.

Hollow-cheeked, sunken-eyed, drawn of mouth and lined of face, gray-white under their tan, they were showing plainly the ravages of hunger and exposure. They had been thin when they arrived here from the savanna; now they were emaciated. As they essayed to make the morning cigarettes their fingers shook from combined cold and weakness; and when they succeeded in lighting the brown rolls they found no satisfaction in them. Doggedly they smoked them through. As they finished, Tim gagged.

"Wah! Tobaccer's rotten!" he growled.

The others said nothing. They felt the same

way; but all knew that the trouble was not with the tobacco but with their maltreated stomachs.

"That water that we drank last night—" mused León.

"Shut up!" Knowlton grimaced as if sickened by the memory. The Spaniard looked oddly at him, then glanced away without reply. The blond American's eyes were unnaturally bright.

Portonio dragged himself stiffly to his feet, stood on the crest of the mound, and surveyed the entire dungeon; then sank listlessly back.

"Nada," he vouchsafed. "Nothing."

To all minds came the same thought, to be dismissed unspoken. Had White, in the dark, fallen or thrown himself down the sink-hole to death in the subterranean stream? Not likely. He must know this place; and, had he been of suicidal bent, he would have destroyed himself years ago. There was no sense in expending energy to hunt for him.

"How's luck, León?" queried McKay, with the ghost of a smile.

"Good. We still live."

"Attaboy!" approved Tim, with an assumption of cheerfulness. "What's more, I got a good healthy appetite. Guess I'll have some ham and eggs—and then a deep-dish apple pie—"

"Shut up!"

So sharp was Knowlton's command this time that all started. McKay studied him with a frown of concern. Tim's eyes widened a trifle as he discerned that glassiness of the blue irises. Portonio and León exchanged significant glances. Not another word was spoken. They who had been five yesterday, and six last night, now were seven; and the name of the invisible seventh was Fever.

Presently the blond American lay back, one arm across his eyes, visible shivers running through his body. The faces of the others grew a shade more grim. Tim's erstwhile florid countenance began to redden again, this time with a boiling rage; and his fixed glare at the palm hood left no doubt as to the object of his wrath. His right hand slid to the butt of his gun, and stayed there. His intention was plain: if that old vulture came into view, to shoot him down in vengeance. The angle was fair, the distance not impossible, the air clear. And none made any effort to dissuade him from retribution.

A couple of hours passed. The sunlight reached the base of the western cliff. Still the five remained as they were, and still no sign of either Black White or the mountain people had come.

Knowlton had ceased to twitch, but now lay with both arms wrapped over his head. Tim had not once relaxed from his vengeful readiness.

Suddenly a hoarse grunt broke from him. His gun hand jerked out and up; his knees rose; his elbows settled on them, and the barrel of the .45 froze into aim. At the orifice which he had watched so long was visible a human figure.

But the hovering hammer of death did not fall. With finger already tightening in the trigger-pull that would have released it, Tim held his fire. More figures had sprung into view up above, and the first one was waving its arms and calling out. In an instant the cries were taken up by the others. Gesticulating, yelling, jostling one another, those crowding shapes poured out a flood of shouts—words incomprehensible to the white men, yet instinct with excitement and alarm.

The prisoners stared, various conjectures leaping to their minds. Tim, still holding his rigid pose, was first to speak.

"White's gorillas! They've got here!"

"No!" contradicted McKay. "That first one's a woman—darker than the rest. It's his woman! She's kicked up a row!"

León, listening intently, disagreed with both.

With a quick movement he was up, his face alight.

"The luck of Loco León!" he crowed. "Guaharibos! The place is attacked by the Guaharibos!"

And now, in the babel of vocal noises, the rest could distinguish that word repeated:

"Guaharibos! Guaharibos!"

A dread name was that, signifying merciless slaughter and rapine; yet one which caused the hard faces of the listeners to crack in grins—for in this exigency to their captors they scented liberation for themselves. Automatically their minds darted to their rifles up in the cavern; and instantly followed the remembrance of Black White's statement that he had removed and hidden the cartridges. Loaded, those weapons might save the blond people from extermination. Now they were useless.

Tim's gun hand dropped, jamming the side-arm into its holster as he got to his feet. The others, too, hastily shoved themselves erect. With answering shouts they started for the slide. And now, from a point some distance away at the base of the wall, broke fierce yells louder than their own. Bounding like a deer, a sinewy black

figure came racing over the swells of the undulating clay, howling commands as it sped.

All the frightful vengeance which he had vowed last night, all his deep-rooted aversion to allowing his face to be seen by white men, all else in his mind, seemingly had been knocked from the blackened man's memory by this abrupt crisis. He dashed toward the acclivity as if determined to hurl himself up it by his own momentum and attack the savage marauders with fists, feet, and teeth. And such was the speed and power of his stride that, although his starting point was much farther away, he reached the goal almost as his fellow-prisoners halted there.

Roaring, he demanded a rope. And, after a confused commotion at the top of the incline, a rope appeared. In the brief interim the five starvelings, keyed up by the sudden prospect of deliverance, stood tense and ready, shooting comprehensive glances at him and at the crowd above.

For the first time they saw Black White in the clear light of day—the first white men who ever thus scanned him, and the last. And they saw a face and body which now revealed the torture of his cankered mind. Into the sooty visage were graven deep furrows, harsh as the seams of

the stark rock walls: a gash-like scowl, and myriad lines at eyes and nose—the scars eaten into the flesh by the acid of bitterness. Nor were these the only marks. Face, chest, and arms were disfigured by long parallel cicatrices: old scars which looked as if inflicted by slashing blunt claws—or finger-nails—and which suggested that in some frenzy the madman had attempted to tear away his hated skin.

These things they noted in a flash. Too, they observed with a faint surprise that, though hair and beard were black, his eyes were a gray-blue. Those Celtic eyes now were ablaze with an uncanny greenish flame, and behind down-curved lips his teeth gleamed like the fangs of an infuriated jaguar. And the voice with which he spat orders and abuse at the people of the cave was ferocious as the coughing snarl of that deadly beast of prey.

Above, seconding his commands with sharp tones and active motions, the woman who had first appeared was hurrying the outward movement of the rope; a short, but strongly built and shapely woman of Maquiritare type—light-skinned, dark-eyed, deep-chested and firm-breasted, intelligent and decidedly comely, and adorned with an ornate bead apron. The others

all were blonds—boys and women—who fumbled in confusion, as if their shallow wits were benumbed by panic. They tangled the rope among themselves, fell over it, and babbled senseless retorts to the tongue-lashing of the woman Juana. But for her incisive upbraidings and actual physical assaults, they might have abandoned the simple task and gone to milling aimlessly and uselessly around the rock rooms.

Then, by jerks, the rope began to descend. As it snaked slowly down the slope in response to the maneuvering of Juana, McKay turned sharply on White.

"You'll go up last!" he asserted.

If the other heard, he gave no sign. His domineering yells continued without a break. Nearer squirmed the line—nearer—until it came within reach. Then all six made a dive for it.

"Up!" snapped McKay. "Every man for himself! You, White! Take your turn—last! Back up!"

"Get going, you fool!" snarled White. "Climb! Climb, you old woman—shut up—I'll tear your face off! Blood! Blood! Guaharibos to hell——"

They climbed, with his savage mouthings in their ears. Knowlton, Tim, Portonio, León, McKay—just as they had happened to grab

the rope, they clambered up, slipping, floundering, panting, hauling with the strength of desperation, while White raved and bullied and swore as if at his own warriors, and the people above strained back to counterbalance their weight. There were no stops for breath. It was a mad pull upward with the last energy of weakened bodies—a fierce scramble with teeth set, faces contorted, and hands reaching and closing in grips tenacious as those of drowning men. At last, disheveled and streaming with sweat, they cleared that slimy slope—only to lean exhausted against the twenty-foot wall of sheer stone which still blocked them.

"Make—loop," panted McKay. "Got to lift us—one at a time. Tim—you first."

Throwing a rough loop in the line, Tim got a foot in it and grasped the upper rope with both hands. The others clung like flies to projections on the stone, maintaining their footing on the treacherous dirt while the cable swung free. White volleyed more commands. Tim rose in air—scraped along the rock face—clutched the edge, and scrambled inward.

"Awright!" boomed his voice. "Send up looey! Lower away there, ye squallin' idjuts—arria el cabo!"

Again the rope descended. And again White, for all his cursing and gnashing, stood and let another go up before him. It was Knowlton who went, and White's fierce gaze followed him as if anxious lest he fall. The fevered man did sway dizzily, but held his grip until Tim's fists shot forth and yanked him bodily up over the brink. Then the others ascended in rapid succession—White last.

But if the queer, half-savage black-white man had controlled himself for the moment, he flung aside restraint the instant he was out of his prison. The lethal rage with which he had sworn retribution last night flamed again as he confronted the perfidious blonds. With a frothing yell he sprang at them, striking, kicking, tearing at woman and boy alike. Screams of terror and pain shrilled in the place. A confused, stumbling rush, and they fled from him in a worse panic than that which had driven them to rescue him. In a few seconds only his own woman—Juana—remained. The rest had bolted into the larger cave and thence into the tunnel.

Juana, viewing his attack with utmost coolness, now called to him sharply, pointing toward a shadowy recess near the juncture of the two rooms. He wheeled, rasping something in reply;

then, as she still pointed, voiced a feline yell and bounded into that narrow alcove. He vanished. From somewhere beyond sounded a croaking voice of mingled rage and fear.

"Ah!" ejaculated León. "The nest of the vulture!"

With dragging steps he shambled toward the fold in the stone, his mates pressing after. Juana herself followed, a coldly vengeful light playing across her brown eyes. They found the shadowy indentation to be really a curving entrance to a third cave-room—a small one, dim-lit by a little jagged aperture opening toward the day. And in it, as the Spaniard had guessed, the old demon of the demon-mountain was at bay.

Bolt upright against the farther wall he stood, his dingy mantle thrown aside, his gaunt body—mere bones and tendons—standing out white as a skeleton against the dark stone: naked and repulsive, gripping a naked and menacing machete. At sight of the doomed men who had risen from their dungeon to confront him he hissed like a snake. And at sight of him, Black White's growlings died in his throat. In ominous silence he slipped forward, quivering with concentrated ferocity and fury.

Curtly, composedly, Juana spoke in Spanish, her words loud in the tense quiet.

"He fought us when we came. I pushed his head against the stone. He fell and was like dead. But he lives again. He has lived too long. Kill him. Kill him dead."

With amazing quickness the ancient malefactor stabbed.

The long knife licked out like a striking serpent. But White leaped with the blurring speed of a jungle-cat. A sidewise twist—a pounce—an impact of flesh on flesh—a hissing gasp—a crunching crack, as of bones breaking—a low, hideous moan. The machete dropped. The bony frame crumpled up. The predacious face, its eyes bulging, seemed to bloat, and its tongue ran out. Then it blurred in a rapid back-and-forward movement, shaken in the throat-crushing grasp of the madman; and at each backward heave the bald head battered against the rock. Within ten seconds there could be no question that Juana's demand had been fulfilled. The hairless skull was shattered.

But White's lust for revenge was not so easily appeased. Still holding his terrific grip on the skinny throat, he thrashed the whole body against wall and floor, swinging it in air, pounding it

down with frightful impacts, crashing it about until hardly a whole bone could have remained.

"Arrrh! Arrrh!" he growled, his voice rasping gloatingly through clenched teeth, his eyes shining with an infernal light. "Arrrh! Arrrh!"

And at last, holding the crimson ruin aloft before him, he stalked out through the entrance. Knowlton, staring and staggering, followed—and saw his recent nightmare enacted to the finish. White strode to the verge and, with a final burst of violence, swung the dead vulture around him and heaved it far out into the void.

Save for the facts that the head still adhered limply to the torso and that it could not squawk from the pit, the blond Northerner's dream had come true. Now his fevered fancy somehow found the idea humorous; and, leaning against the wall, he began hysterically to laugh. At the sound, the bloodstained black man spun about, his face still contorted. For a second or two he stared. Then, he, too, suddenly burst into yells of mirth.

The caves rang with the awful cachinnations of the two—a madman and a man half mad.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RAIDERS

WITHIN the vulture's nest, the two Northerners and the two Southerners looked at one another and at the woman. That woman looked back at them calmly, a slight smile of ruthless satisfaction playing on her lips. With a slow tilt of the head, she said:

"There are food and water."

The simple words loosed ravenous hounds of desire. At another time, the thought of eating in this red-spattered death-chamber might have aroused only disgust; but now these men were too far gone to be squeamish. Avidly they scanned the room; and on the floor they spied meat, fruit, jars, and gourds. Down one wall, too, ran a silent trickle of fresh water, vanishing into a crack in the floor—the owner's unfailing spring, which had made this hole habitable for him.

"Merry!" barked McKay. "Grub! Water! Come and get it!"

The yammering hilarity outside ceased. They

surged at the food, finding the meat to be a partly eaten quarter of smoked wild hog, the fruit lechosa melons and small bananas, and the contents of a wide-mouthed jar to be manioc. Another clay vessel, of bottle shape, held clear, cool water taken from the vertical rivulet. This they attacked first, McKay and León drinking from gourds and Tim from the bottle, Portonio meanwhile striding to the wall and sucking noisily at the steady little stream. Knowlton, weaving in at the entrance, voiced a hoarse cry as he saw what they were doing and threw himself forward, snatching at the gourd which McKay extended.

Without words, all sank beside the food, slashing off meat with their knives, wolfing down fruit, or washing half-chewed manioc down with new draughts of the wondrously cool water. Then in their ears jarred the tones of Black White.

"Hurry up! Guaharibos outside! Got to kill 'em! Blow 'em to hell! Tear 'em! Gut 'em! Blood! Yah! Come on!"

"Aw, to the divil with 'em—and everybody else!" rumbled Tim. "We don't care if they massacre the whole layout. We're eatin'!"

"You said something," averred McKay. "But where are our guns, White? Not here."

White glowered; snapped something at Juana; got a reply; snarled oaths.

"Fools took 'em out!" he grated. "Down at entrance. Come on! I'll get cartridges. Know where they are. Hah! Yah-ha-ha-ha! Fooled 'em all! But shake a leg!"

"Go on and lick the world yourself," mumbled Knowlton through a mouthful of meat. "We're comfortable. Ha ha ha ha!" He began to laugh again.

The delirious timbre of that mirth held White motionless a minute, but he did not echo it. Instead, he leaned forward menacingly, rage reviving in his glaring eyes. Then he spun about and leaped away through the passage.

"White men! White hogs!" he sneered venomously. "Women and children dying—white men eat! Yah! *I'll* fight—Black White'll fight! And then I'll fight *you*, you yellow——"

His raucous voice died away toward the tunnel. Every jaw stopped, and eye met eye. Juana disappeared, following her man.

"Begorry, who's loony now?" muttered Tim. "Black gorilla turns white—crazy cuckoo's got sense—and us guys are yellor! Women and kids—Umph! He's right, at that. But they can run up the tunnel if they've got to—bring our guns

back, too. And I'm goin' to fill me tank before I start anywheres. I'm clean out o' gas and me self-starter's broke."

And he resumed cramming. So did the rest. If possible, however, they ate faster than before. Those parting words, though spoken by a crazed killer—who himself had violently attacked women and boys a few minutes ago—had stung.

They devoured everything edible in sight. Then they inspected another jar—a large one topped with leaves. From it, as Portonio tilted it, ran a red trickle which evoked growls and scowls. Tim kicked it against the wall. From its shattered fragments gushed a flood of the infernal sehi drink—prepared against the time when they should be so maddened by sun and suffering that they might drink it and so fulfill the malevolent old scoundrel's inexorable purpose.

A cold, destructive rage seized them. Other clay vessels lay about, and they smashed them all. From them tumbled uncanny things—dried spiders, mummified bats, snake-skins, unknown herbs, a green powder of pungently disagreeable smell, a mess of black paste. They kicked these things about and stamped on them. Not until every pot and jar was reduced to fragments and

its contents smeared into nothingness did they turn to leave the place.

And then, as they were going, León spied one more receptacle: a clay ball, nestling in a niche above. He yanked it forth—and found it sealed and heavy. Nowhere was any opening. But, as he turned it in his hands, within it rattled something hard.

He slammed it down. It flew apart, and from it rolled scores of large, dark pebbles.

“More junk!” Tim grunted scornfully. “Come on. Let’s quit this dump.”

But León and McKay both stooped and picked up several stones. While the Spaniard peered curiously at his, the captain started and held one to the light.

“Well—I’ll—be ——” he muttered. Then, in a vibrant drawl: “Yes, junk, Tim! Junk worth about five thousand a stone! Emeralds! The biggest I ever saw!”

“Huh—what? Emeralds! Cripes! Them things are worth more’n diamonds!”

“Exactly. This mess of junk will come to a good half-million dollars—maybe more.”

“Jumpin’ Judas!”

They stared at one another for dazzled minutes; then fell feverishly to picking up the

"junk." As they straightened again the Spaniard gave a happy little chuckle.

"Señores," he laughed, "I was born in the month of May, and the emerald is my birthstone. Do you now begin to believe in the luck of Loco León?"

"Lucky — Loco — León," echoed Knowlton, pressing a hand to his swimming head. "You'll be luckier—if you keep 'em long enough to cash 'em in. I'd trade the lot for a stiff shot of quinine."

His words and his self-evident sickness dashed the jubilation of his comrades. Precious though these stones might be in the marts of civilization, here they were worthless.

"Buck up!" admonished McKay. "We're starting out right away. You've got to stick it till we can get through to the Ventuari."

"And that ain't so soft, neither," reminded Tim, "with a bunch o' howlin' hellions to walk through before we git started. The sooner we git onto the firin' line and do our stuff the better chance we've got, I'm thinkin'."

McKay nodded, but swiftly searched the chamber for something which could be used as a jewel-bag. Their rucksacks were gone. On the floor, however, lay the dingy cotton robe of the

dead owner of the place. A few quick folds converted it into a reasonably strong little sack, into which the green treasure was tumbled; and cords cut from a near-by hammock tied it securely. Then, picking up a couple of machetes—the only weapons to be found—they marched out.

The outer caverns were vacant. Near the tunnel they found stubby torches, one of which they lit. Once more they glanced around. Then they filed away into the long passage-way, a bit sluggish from their feeding, yet with strength magically renewed; resurrected dead men who once more had become alive and formidable, faring forward to fight, leaving behind them the smashed hulk which had been the warlock of the weird mountain, and bearing with them in that wizard's robe a fortune.

Not until they had passed beyond the long stairway did they hear any sound save their own footsteps; and not until they came into the outer cave did they see anyone. Before arriving there, however, they made out an irregular cracking of gunshots, so dull and intermittent as to indicate that they were fired from a point outside by one man. Involuntarily they pressed on faster, hitching higher the heavy cartridge-belts to which they had clung through all vicissitudes,

loosening the pistols which once more swayed in the holsters, or tightening their grips on the machetes—these last forming the sole offensive armament of the Spanish pair until they could regain their repeaters and so put into play the contents of their bullet-bags.

Entering the larger space where the dayshine gave light, they found a small bevy of women and children huddling against one wall. As these refugees spied the white men advancing in the glow of their low-burned torch they voiced a moaning whimper, and their staring eyes glistened with animal fear. A few pointed urgently outward. The rest simply gaped and quaked. Among them were no men. The males of the tribe evidently were outside, warring against the savage assailants from the southern jungles.

Dropping the torch, the five loped to the threshold. As they did so, the ragged firing ceased. Between the guardian rocks outside now became visible blond men, armed with bows, falling back toward their last defense—the gloom of the cave itself. Following the cessation of the rifle-shots came impacts and splintering sounds on the stones beyond—the thuds of enemy arrows. A few whole shafts rattled in ricochet off the natural bulwarks and dropped at

the entrance. And now the semi-silence gave way to a rising wave of noise. Beyond and below, savage voices swelled into a dissonant chorus of hateful triumph.

In answer, a nearer voice howled defiance. Up on the crest of the tallest stone, where he had sniped the enemy until the cartridges failed, Black White hurled a stream of vocal vituperation and gesticular insults at the attacking horde. Arrows flitted around him and cracked viciously on the rock below him, and the increasing fury of the yells beyond proved how his taunts stung. With a final gesture of peculiarly primitive contempt, he ducked and came scrambling down the inner slope of his parapet.

"Yah! Hah!" he howled, as his flaming gaze struck the emerging white men. "War! Blood and guts! Load up and shoot! Plug 'em in the belly! Rip 'em ——"

"Guns!" thundered McKay. "Where are the guns? Guns!"

"Guns. Guns. Here, fools, here!" He stooped and arose, a rifle in each hand. Now they saw the other weapons on the ground, where he had thrown them backward one by one as he emptied the magazines. With a rush they snatched the pair he held and pounced on the others. Rapidly

they reloaded—the ex-soldiers jamming .30 clips into the open tops of their military-model arms, the Venezuelans thumbing .44 slugs into the side gates of their old-type repeaters. White himself demanded—and received—.30's for his own piece, a short but thick-breeched sporting gun. He got enough to fill his magazine, and no more.

Meanwhile the bowmen, their own arrows spent, picked up the few enemy shafts which had dropped inside and held them ready on taut cords. A side glance at those lethal missiles caused the faces of the Northerners to set harder, for they were the weapons of utterly merciless barbarians: barbed with saw-toothed bone, and smeared with poison. In combat with opponents using such instruments of death there could be no quarter.

In the brief time taken for the reloading, the ferocious mob-clamor mounted nearer. With the self-evident exhaustion of ammunition and retreat of the defenders, the wild men were charging from the tree-belt below the cave, closing in to revel in a carnival of butchery. Between the blonds and extinction intervened only the battery of their late prisoners; for, retreat into the bowels of the mountain though they might, their enemies could follow; and even if they

should wreck the ladders of ascent and thus block further pursuit, the Guaharibos could exterminate them ultimately by a counter-blockade, since within this barren rock-hole now remained no food. There could be little doubt that these savages, whom neither the awesome echoes of the Talking Mountain nor the bullets of Black White could turn back, would carry their siege through to the finish. So the defenders must make their fight short, sharp, and decisive.

"Lie low!" snapped McKay, his expert eye swiftly sizing up the surroundings, then sharply scrutinizing Knowlton—who, once more armed and facing battle, now was temporarily steady and sure-motivated. "Merry! You and Tim—right flank! León—Portonio—left flank! White—you and I hold the center! Hug the ground—hold your fire till I shoot! Then pour it into 'em! Let's go!"

Less than a minute had passed since they had emerged from the shadows; and not another second was lost. The two little flank divisions sprang for their stations to right and left of the high stones, whence they could rake the ravine of approach with oblique cross-fires. White, who had become suddenly silent and seemed

waiting to learn the captain's disposal of his forces, showed his teeth in a down-curved grin and nodded violently; then, still noiseless, glided beside the Scot to the boulder-bound spot whence the bowmen had retreated. As the two queerly mated tall men stole around the angles of the path they nearly stumbled over a couple of bodies—blond Indians struck down by plunging arrows, now lying stark and still. A moment later they were crouching in ambush at the side of a rock and peering down at the oncoming killers from the Orinoco.

Loping up the hollow which once had been a watercourse came a brown horde led by a huge, hideous embodiment of abysmal savagery: a primitive Samson with enormous shoulders, colossal arms and legs, bushy black hair hanging in an unkempt mop, great teeth bared in a cruel mouth whence poured jarring howls of exultation. In his flat chocolate face glinted beady eyes ruthless as those of a crocodile. From his pierced lower lip dangled a jaguar-tooth, and around his thick neck flapped a collar of peccary tusks. Otherwise he was stark naked, as were all his followers. His brawny right fist clutched a great hardwood stabbing-spear, which he brandished aloft as he strode. He looked to be not only a

savage murderer, but a cannibal; worse still, a cannibal who would devour his man-meat raw.

Nor were those behind him a whit less bestial in appearance. Although none equaled the chief in physique, the crowding bodies were hard and muscular, the lowering visages brutish, the fanged mouths inhuman as those of carnivorous beasts. Spears, bludgeons, stone axes, bows and arrows bristled above them as they came charging on to the grapple, and from every throat roared malevolent joy at the prospect of a saturnalia of murder. In numbers they might be about four-score. In ferocity they were a legion.

Already they had covered half the distance from the trees, and now they were a scant hundred yards distant. Their triumphant bawls, their evil expressions, proved too much for the madman lurking beside McKay. Before the captain was quite ready to give the signal shot, Black White leaped forth to face the whole horde, giving them back howl for howl.

McKay swore and slid his gun forward. For a second or two longer, however, he remained unseen. Every savage eye had centered on the black semi-savage confronting them—the lone gunman whom they had driven from his perch, and who now seemed about to assail them with

gun empty. The face of the chief stretched in a malignant grimace. With sinister suggestiveness he swept his free hand to his mouth, snapped his strong teeth repeatedly as if chewing, and then slapped his belly.

He bounded forward with fiercer speed, swinging his spear-hand higher and farther back. Suddenly, in mid-stride, he caved at the middle as from a violent blow. His foot came down uncertainly. For a second he wavered, a look of vast astonishment wiping out his grin. Then his spear dropped; his hands streaked to his midriff; and he plunged headlong, writhing and kicking in mortal agony.

White had thrown up his rifle and shot.

With a vindictive screech, he now fired again and again into the brown mass. McKay took quick sight and went into action behind him. And from beyond the flanking stone at the right broke other gunshots and a stentorian roar worse than that of any Guaharibo.

"Yippy-yeeow!" blared Tim Ryan. "Give 'em hell!"

CHAPTER XXV

WAR


A THUDDING roll of gunfire drummed a tattoo of death. A slashing storm of lead pounded the vanguard of the brown horde into oblivion. A score of the raiders toppled and fell in a welter of naked corpses and unflung weapons. A thin blue haze rose around the stone sentinels guarding the cave.

Stunned, shocked speechless and witless by this totally unexpected blast of destruction, the Guaharibos halted short and stood wavering, swept by confused and conflicting impulses. Like the savage tigre of their native jungle, which is most deadly when wounded, their first ferocious urge was to spring forward and annihilate their assailants; but through that vortex of crossfire no man could leap. And when, appalled by the continuous mowing down of their front, those facing the vomiting muzzles gave way and turned to retreat to cover, they found themselves blocked by those behind who still sought to surge forward. Thus, shot in breast or back, they fell

like stalks before a scythe—until the guns were emptied.

Then, in the hush while desperately working fingers among the rocks crammed fresh cartridges into the hot rifles, the horde swayed forward again. The first hesitant push became a concerted rush. Spears and arrows, hastily loosed, whizzed and clattered among the stones. Hoarse howls of hate rioted in a blood-chilling medley. The attack was once more under way—a confused, disorderly assault, hampered at first by stumbles over dying men who thrashed and rolled about, but a charge which could not again be stopped by nerve-shock. Bullets alone could blow it back.

Tim and Knowlton, first to refill their magazines, resumed their rapid but accurate rifle duet, planting every bullet with deadly effect. On the other flank, however, and in the center also, silence still held. The side-loading, long-tubed repeaters of the Spanish pair could not be recharged quite so quickly, and their owners were stubbornly—and wisely—withholding their fire until they could again turn loose full guns. In the pocket between the boulders a more serious contretemps had come about, and McKay was settling it with drastic directness.



Black White, his piece once more shot out, had bounded back just in time to evade the storm of missiles darting at him. Fiercely he demanded more cartridges. The captain, intensely busy with his own reloading, and withal angered by the other's self-willed action in leaping out too soon, gave him one glare and ignored him. Thereupon the madman, with an answering glare and a snarl, snatched the rifle and strove to wrest it from his grasp.

For a second or two they wrestled. Then the Scot let go. White, snarling again, staggered back a pace, his infuriated expression indicating as ready a willingness to fight his countryman as a Guaharibo. McKay's gray eyes went bleak, and he acted. His left fist crashed on the bearded chin; his right drove in a terrific uppercut to the corner of the jaw. The blackened man straightened backward—rebounded from a rock—collapsed in a senseless huddle.

McKay caught the rifle from him as he fell. With a grim smile lighting his iron face, he turned his back on the limp form and snapped the gun to his shoulder. An instant later it was kicking back at him in repeated recoils, and brown forms were dropping faster.

Now the big-bored bush-guns at the left began

again to belch their blunt slugs, but at slightly longer intervals than before. The foremost Guaharibos no longer came in a compact mass, but strung out irregularly, their pace of advance depending altogether on each man's fleetness and his luck in remaining unhit. So the gunmen must pick them off one by one, shifting aim sharply after every shot, losing time and wasting ammunition—for often two or three bullets, from different rifles, went to the killing of one foe. And, though the leaders kept dropping, other thick-thewed barbarians continued to throw themselves onward and became leaders in turn. The task of the riflemen was like that of shooting the heads off a hydra, only to find new ones instantly growing. And, despite its continuous decapitation, the body of the hydra kept closing in.

"Hot dog!" gritted Tim, between shots. "Ye got to hand it to these hellions—they're game! And they'll git to us yet!"

"Looks like it," conceded Knowlton, expertly drilling another coppery chest. "Have to execute a—" *crack!* "—strategic retreat on the hot foot if they—" *crack!* "—keep this up. Dammit! Missed him!"

On the other flank, León was voicing a similar prediction to Portonio as their thundering guns

leaped and spat. Although he was shooting coolly, the tenacious onslaught was cutting a frown of perturbation between his slitted eyes. The hitherto unexcitable river-pilot, on the other hand, was now aglow with a hot lust of battle and agrin with joy over each successful shot, and he answered only with a laughing oath. Each was running true to type—the former looking a little ahead as he fought, the latter living only each minute as it came.

Meanwhile McKay, ripping out his string of shots and downing a man with every one, was as swiftly formulating his next moves. In the face of that determined charge the defenders must give ground as soon as their guns again failed. Moreover, the savages now were spreading out, mounting both sides of the trough, to swing around either flank of the riflemen and, while thus scattering their fire, rush them from all sides. To attempt to retain the present positions meant to be overwhelmed. Wherefore, as the last empty shell flew from the ejector, he lost not a second in withdrawing.

Spinning about, he stooped, grabbed Black White, heaved him up across his shoulders; clutched his own gun and the black man's, and loped caveward. He spent no time in ascertain-

ing that the victim of his blows was still insensible—he knew it well enough. When the Scot's fists landed on a man as they had on this one, that man remained dead to the world for a considerable time.

"Fall back!" he thundered. "Close up! To the rear!"

His booming command, though muffled by the surrounding boulders, carried to the outlying flankers, three of whom obeyed at once. The fourth—Portonio—had to be jabbed violently by León's rifle-muzzle before he would give over his shooting; for his long magazine still held a bullet or two. When he did move, however, it was with speed, and three poisoned arrows missed him by inches.

Crossing the small space between stones and cave-mouth, they found the blond Indians thriftily collecting every arrow which had flown over the bulwarks. Of these there were quite a number, loosed so hastily by the attackers that they had darted high. Not one of these had been shot back again; the mountain men had let their erstwhile prisoners do all the fighting. Now those gleaners hastily withdrew and picked up their bows. But, armed again, they showed no inclination to hold the entrance while their allies

settled themselves in a new position. Rather, they watched the gun-fighters in a coldly calculating way, as if estimating their continued utility.

As the white men loped back into shadowy dimness, the blonds retreated with them. Outside an ululating howl foretold that the second stage of the combat would be fiercer than the first. Although half of the Guaharibo force now had been shot down, the rest, aflame with vindictive blood-lust, were converging to maim, mangle, and mutilate their cornered enemies.

"Load!" panted McKay. "And keep loaded! Change the firing combination. León and Knowlton pair up—Tim and Portonio ditto. Gives better continuity of fire. Take the walls—I'll hold the center. Save pistols for the finish. Halt! Far enough—take positions! Here, you! Aquí!" (This last to one of the biggest blonds.) "Take this black one farther in! Hurry!"

The fellow addressed did not obey. He and his mates had stopped with the white men, and now he simply stood and stared at the limp lunatic, then turned his head toward the outer rocks. Either he believed White to be dead or did not care what became of him, dead or alive. But from within now came one who did care—

Juana. As McKay dropped his burden she dashed forward, her face set.

"Muert'? Dead?" she demanded.

"No." McKay made a vague movement indicating that some flying object had hit her man; then, giving her no further attention, fell to reloading. With surprising strength she lifted her mad mate and hauled him away, heels dragging and head hanging, into the gloomy interior. White's gun did not go with him. McKay kept it for immediate use.

"What happened to him?" wondered León.

"Bumped his jaw on my knuckles," the Scot tersely explained.

Tim burst into a snort of mirth. Knowlton and León, glimpsing the skinned knuckles of that pile-driver right fist, snickered. No more was said. Every man of them was working fast to refill the guns to the limit. And, before the first Guaharibos came leaping between and around the boulders, every piece again was ready.

Meanwhile the blond men had resumed noiseless movements toward the rear, carrying with them the collected arrows. Their intention evidently was to let the whites bear the brunt of attack once more, while they themselves saved their shafts for a last emergency. But Portonio

spied the movement and blocked it. Jumping before them, he fronted them with gun cocked and mirthless grin—a baring of the teeth more menacing than the gaping muzzle. There was nothing easy-going about that stalwart fellow now; he was a Venezuelan driving Indians; and the ways of Venezuelans with Indians are drastic. León, too, as he caught the situation, lashed the deserters with a tongue like a whip. Sullenly, they faced forward once more, tensing for the inevitable clash.

Then through the little cañon sprang brown brutes, and from the sides bounded others—to fall dead or dying on the threshold. Their own arrows, speeding back at them from the bows of their quarry, struck them down as they came. Bullets from the ready rifles caught those whom the cane shafts missed. Where they had thought to find a brief grapple and quick victory, they met a stronger force than before; a force, too, which their sun-contracted eyes could hardly see in the dimness of the cave. Moreover, they now were slowed up and divided by the big bowlders, among and around which they must sift instead of combining into a cohesive mass. Where a solid rush might have brought them triumph through sheer momentum, they could not make

it, for they could not unite. The only unity now possible to them was that of a common fate; at least, so long as that withering blast of missiles poured into them from the thrumming bows of the blue-eyed lost race of Guayana.

However undependable those blond archers might have been heretofore, they now were steady and deadly as veteran troopers. They shot with marvelous speed and precision, and without flurry or waste. Every arrow that hissed forth buried itself in a burly brown body, and that body pitched forward or sidewise and stayed where it struck earth. While their ammunition lasted, they left little for the gunmen to do; and those gunmen, astonished and delighted by their dexterity, let them carry on the war almost unaided while they kept their own weapons full.

Meanwhile, the yells of the Guaharibos became downright demoniac with fury. Perhaps they recognized their own arrows protruding from the corpses of their stricken comrades; or perhaps they were maddened to find that, having fought their way thus far in the teeth of bullets, they now were being slaughtered contemptuously by mere jungle shafts snapped from strings. At any rate, their strident bass discord rose to an ear-splitting screech worthy of fiends.

All at once the arrows were gone. The archers stood with useless bows, yet leaning forward as if about to bound out and finish their fight with bare hands. Possibly they deemed themselves doomed, and, their blood now up, were determined to fall wreaking death with their last clutch. But this was not to be. Shouts of approval broke from the gun-fighters, and the white men's hands motioned them to the rear. For a second they stood—then bounded away and were gone in the dark. Outside, a grim monument to their prowess, lay a disorderly heap of transfixed raiders who would raid no more.

Now the dull twanging of the bow-cords was replaced by the crash of rifles, and the dimness by lightning-streaks of darting flame. Standing, crouching, or kneeling, according to individual preference, the soldiers of fortune hammered out their rolling drumfire in a final fight against a dwindling mob of veritable maniacs. The faces of the berserkers who now came scrambling over the slain were writhing, slaving visages flecked with froth, and their red eyes were those of mad dogs.

Shot down, they arose again—some of them—and struggled onward until fairly riddled. They threw arrows like javelins. They hurled axes like

tomahawks, bludgeons like knobkerries. They sent spears slithering along walls and floor. They dropped and ran on hands and knees to duck under the horizontal hail of lead. They bent every energy, every trick, to the reaching and rending of the men behind those spurting tongues of fire. And, but for the rapidity, intensity, and accuracy of the shooting, they would have battled through to grips.

McKay's new disposal of his little force proved its vital importance in this cyclonic finish. The long-magazined repeaters of León and Portonio held more than double the number of cartridges constituting a full load for the bolt-action arms; so that when Knowlton and Tim had to suspend firing for a few seconds their Spanish partners covered their reloading, and neither flank went dumb. McKay, kneeling alone, held the center as before, snatching up White's gun when his own was exhausted, and drawing his pistol when both rifles were shot out. To right and left the two North-South combinations battled with a continuity which left not a silent moment in which the storming savages could gain ground.

Before the rifle-fire ceased, Knowlton and Tim had gotten away three full loads, León and Portonio a load and a half—for the Spaniards lacked

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time to refill their tubes completely on the second round. In those few minutes nearly a hundred bullets flew from those guns. Yet Guaharibos still remained alive—for in such rapid shooting, against such tenacious and active foes, not every shot could kill; some had missed, others had failed to slay on impact. And now came the last of that fierce band.

Half a dozen unwounded savages, backed by as many bleeding but still formidable, plunged over the mound of the fallen and threw themselves at the hated whites.

Pistols roared. Machetes gleamed. Spears hissed. Clubs flew. Brown men flopped and lay still. So did one white man—McKay. Dodging a spear-point, he was stunned by a thrown bludgeon. Shots—snarls—blows—crunch of steel on bone—a scuffle of feet—a whirl and tumble of grappling bodies. Sudden silence.

Tim and Knowlton arose from under dead savages whom they had shot at arm's length but who had borne them down in their dying grapple and fall. León and Portonio, machetes dripping red, stood among three corpses—one of which lay headless, decapitated by the riverman. The last rush was over.

McKay moved slightly; sat up abruptly;

stared, got to his feet, blinked and scowled. Then, his words coming jerkily:

"Guess—that'll be—about all."

"Plenty for one mornin'," opined Tim. "Feel-in' O. K.?"

"Uh-huh."

They peered around, still tense for action. Nothing alive, except themselves, stood upright. The cave was dim with smoke, reeking with powder-gas. From their feet to the threshold stretched a litter of dead, rising beyond to a brown hillock splashed with red. At the rear, where the blonds had disappeared, nothing now was visible. They seemed alone in a slaughter-pen.

"Aquí, amigos!" called León.

From the darkness came no reply, no shuffle of feet, no sound even of breathing. Men, women, children, the senseless Black White and the Maquiritare girl who, long years ago, had broken his brain—all had departed into the recesses of the mountain.

The gaunt, unkempt band of fighters looked at one another and out at the blazing sunlight. With one accord they picked up their rifles; reloaded; searchingly scanned the human debris before them, detecting no movement; and lifted

their eyes once more to a patch of far blue sky between the outer boulders. McKay strode forward and lifted from the shadow at the foot of one wall—where he had thrown it just before going into action—the sack of green loot.

“Fall in!” quoth he. “March!”

CHAPTER XXVI

THE OUT TRAIL

HIGH in the limitless blue—so high as to be virtually invisible to any earth-bound creature—floated a king vulture. Circling, veering, planing easily on the upper breezes, he drifted gradually northwestward, his far-sighted eyes fixed in a ceaseless downward stare. Whence he had come only the bodiless gods of Guayana knew. But his rapacious bare head, his merciless watch, were remarkably like those of a human hawk which for decades had ruled this land, and which now lay smashed at the bottom of a rockbound abyss.

To the long-range vision of the air-king the rim of that mountain gulf was visible—though, perhaps, dimly—leagues away to the southeast. Far more plain was the mountain itself, a brute bulk squatting on the edge of a great yellow rhomboid dotted with stumpy trees. Yet the hovering ghoul had no interest in that place, even though it had recently been the scene of such events as should prove most interesting to one of his class. Nor was he contemplating the great

green carpet of jungle surrounding that barren expanse of yellow, nor thirstily eyeing a narrow stream winding northward a little way beyond the southern juncture of desert and forest. As for many hours past, his tireless attention was riveted on five dots creeping slowly, wearily along the surface of the heat-parched waste. One of those dots staggered and stumbled. Now and then it fell.

Four days ago those puny little figures had emerged from a hole at the base of that distant mountain. Down a slope strewn with many other man-shapes—brown ones, huddled or sprawled, and utterly still—they had gone, and into the belt of woods. There, after some search, they had found a path leading to the deserted habitations of yellow-haired people who now were hidden in the rock: a number of clay-walled, cone-roofed houses around an unfailing spring, among which lay several dead men, blond and brown. At these houses they had collected their stolen helmets and sombreros and hammocks and rucksacks; crammed the pack-bags with such food as they could carry; filled two large calabash water-bottles and slung them on the backs of the two tallest—a hard-faced Scot and a brawny Venezuelan. Then they had climbed

to the region of stunted trees and begun a dogged march to the northwest.

They did not know that in trekking north-westward they were following the longest diagonal across the natural quadrilateral, and thus taking fullest advantage of the comparatively open ground where they could make best progress. They did know, however—at least, one blue-eyed Spaniard knew—that somewhere in that direction should lie a certain Caño Tamara, and that the Tamara reached the Ventuari just below the raudal of Monoblanco, in fair proximity to their cache. This, then, was by far their best route. The road by which they had come in—the weird Periqueta—they had no desire to travel again; it was more roundabout, it had neither inhabitants nor canoes, and—by no means least—it was the way by which certain people behind them would expect them to return. After their experience with the ability of those people to become ghosts which snatched four strong Maquiritares and a canoe without a sound, they had no desire to sleep where those ghosts could as easily slip up by night and stab all to death in a twinkling. And they had little doubt that some such action might be projected. The passport which had brought them into this land had literally

expired: expired violently in the hands of a maniac. And as for gratitude for saving those cold-blooded blonds from becoming true ghosts—it might as well be expected from snakes.

Nor was their judgment a whit too harsh. Some time after they had vanished among the ghost-trees, leaving no tracks on the baked ground, the hole in the mountain began to spawn other figures: blond ones and a black one; and the black one, swollen at the jaw and carrying an empty rifle, ran about with the malignant fury of a mad dog, while the blond ones gathered up arrows and spears. Ensued a thorough searching of the woods, the light men flitting through the timber as soundlessly as shadows, the dusky one alternately growling fierce threats against the Northerner who had knocked him out and raving that no white men should live to go forth and tell the world of his blackness. Then the grim band went forth into the savanna, loping northward on the supposed out-trail of the vanished gunmen.

Whether the king vulture saw all these things is problematical. If so, he also saw that, hour by hour and day by day, hunters and hunted drew steadily away from each other, following divergent lines. He saw, too, perhaps, if he

glanced that way, that the face of the ogriish mountain became blurred by the smokes of cremation fires, to which the blond women, commanded by a brown one, dragged dead raiders who otherwise might have bred pestilence. Many a black vulture assisted those women in the work of demolition, but the varicolored king followed his own chosen prey: a helmeted, blond, glaze-eyed man staggering with fever, who walked at first with jaws clenched, later with mouth loose and fragmentary babblings of delirium, and finally without sense of anything save burning heat and indomitable will to arise when he fell.

Sometimes, it was true, that man did not arise; he lay insensible; and then the winged ghoul began to plane downward in wide swings. But the others would not abandon him, as was right and proper in this stony-hearted land. Someone always picked him up and carried him until he could walk again. So the five hung together on the ground, and the one hung alone in the sky; and day by day the six of them crept ever into the northwest.

In those bitter four days the dogged plodders found two water-holes; and at one a quick shot slew a little deer. By grace of this slim luck and

the precious gourds they retained the power to carry on. And now, at last, they had reached the very apex of the sharp angle where the rhomboid ended. To left and right and ahead rose the tree-wall, the shadows beyond looking wondrously cool. The bony-faced quintet stopped and stood a moment, scanning the trees with heat-blurred gaze.

In that moment the Spanish pair slowly turned their heads, Portonio sniffing the air, León listening hard. Then both spoke at once.

"Water," hoarsely announced León, tilting his head to the left.

"Smoke," asserted Portonio, sniffing again.

Faintly to ears and nostrils came the murmur of a stream and the tang of burning wood. They began to move along, searching for the best opening into the tangled forest. Then, for a brief quarter-minute, appeared a man.

At the border of the jungle he stood: an Indian hunter, carrying a bow and a single arrow. Petrified, he stared at the fearsome five who peered back at him. He knew them; and León, at least, knew him—one of the wild Tamara rovers who had carried a tale from the Caño Negro and thus prepared the way for the baiting of a remorseless trap. Now, beholding those

doomed men suddenly reappearing from the dread region of the Talking Mountain and advancing on him with wolfish gaze, the aborigine stood rooted to the ground—then whirled and fled as from demons.

With a hoarse growl, Portonio plunged after him. There was no path, but the woods proved fairly open at that point, and the jungle-wise veteran followed the fugitive by the noises of his headlong flight. Soon he heard a scared yell and a vague commotion. A few more strides brought him out on the shore of a rocky stream, where a small dugout floated and a crude pole hut stood empty of life. In the shelter hung four hammocks; before it burned a little fire, at which a monkey and a couple of fish were broiling on slanting sticks. The campers had snatched their weapons and dived into the bush.

The rest of the hard-bitten little band of wayfarers came in at the best speed remaining to them; scanned the encompassing forest; and, without compunction, commandeered the camp and all pertaining thereto. They wallowed in the stream, soaking up its cooling waters at every pore. They ate the abandoned fish and meat. They slept in the hammocks and the canoe—Portonio occupying the hollowed log. In the

morning they took the paddles and the dugout and drove away down the stony stream. And neither by dark nor by day did the makers of the camp remonstrate. In fact, for all that was seen or heard of them, they might have been mere transparent shadows of the shadow-thronged forest. Even had they known that two of the dreaded rifles were empty and the others almost out of cartridges, they would not have dared lift arrow or dart against those supermen whom the demonios of the Talking Mountain had failed to subjugate.

Of the supermen themselves, one now traveled as a log within a log. Knowlton had collapsed, and lay in coma. Breathing shallowly, protected from sun by a crude canopy of withes and plantain-leaves, he rested motionless amidships. For a day and a half his comrades fiercely pushed paddles and dodged through raudales, driving headlong for the Ventuari and their Monoblanc cache. Several snap shots at monkeys and birds gave them food of a sort, but none of this could the dying man eat. Their hard faces grew grimmer than ever before; and from time to time each of them glanced at the battered packsack wherein rested a robe-wrapped fortune in emeralds, hearing again a voice now silent, exclaiming:

"I'd trade the lot for a stiff shot of quinine."

Perhaps malicious old Guayana, reading their hearts, grinned again with all her dingy teeth. The green stones they had looted from her were only an added torment, mocking them with their worthlessness.

Far above, the king vulture still hung, watching and waiting.

At last the paddlers surged out into broader water. Their sombre expressions lightened. The Ventuari! A half-mile down, and then up another caño, waited their trunks—and tinned food—and quinine. With last-lap strength they spurred for that caño. They reached it—entered it—grounded at the port—eyed one another with startled gaze.

The canoe which they had left here was gone.

Smitten by an unnerving thought, they scrambled ashore and pounded heavily up to the hidden hillock. There they halted in sickening dismay.

The cache was looted.

There stood the pole table—bare. Beside it lay both the trunks—hacked to pieces. Around lay a few odds and ends of photographic supplies and such things. All else was gone.

The story was plain. Indians had come and carried off everything useful to them. To their

minds, the white men who had gone to the land of the blondos had gone to doom. They would never return. So why leave good food and other treasures to rot and rust, benefiting no man? Thus they had reasoned, and upon that reasoning had acted. And now—

Suddenly Portonio pointed. Under a fern glinted a small brown bottle, apparently whole. McKay strode across the macanilla thorns and swooped up the container.

"Thank God!" he exulted. "Quinine! Five hundred grains! Sealed!"

And he plunged down the slope to the canoe.

"Injuns were leery of it," guessed Tim. "Afraid 'twas poison or somethin'. The low-lived dog-robbers, I hope they et some o' looey's photo stuff and died with the belly-ache!"

Knowlton was too far gone to swallow pills. Wherefore his mates fell to work with stones and ground the white globules to powder; dissolved the powder in a little water; and thus forced down his throat a bitter dose of a hundred grains. It was a "stiff shot" indeed, but none too heroic.

This done, the paddlers reseated themselves, backed down the narrow stream, and reentered the Ventuari. Hours of daylight still remained; and the dismal Monoblanco region, with its

treacherous trails, its wandering ghost of a white man left to die by Indians, its ghastly memories of a black-white dead-alive madman, and its cache-robbers, held no inducements to linger.

The fierce old Ventuari, which, a scant three weeks ago, had sullenly and stubbornly fought these invaders of her forbidden fastness, now shoved them snarlingly out of it. Treacherous and cunning as ever, she sought time and again to smash their craft in her white waters, to drown them and obliterate them forever. But, with the hawk-eyed León conning at the bow and the water-wise Portonio steering astern, the malicious witch failed. They shot through one trap after another, touching a submerged rock at times, but never losing control. When they halted for the night, canoe and men still were unscathed. More, the silent, supine form amidships had regained fitful consciousness.

Another day, and the land of green shadows was behind them. They were out in the thin-fringed savanna, with its occasional far views, its clean breezes, and its great bowl of fleece-clouded blue sky. Sundown brought them to the mouth of the Caño Cerbatana—Creek of Blowguns. And there an odd thing came about.

As they crawled wearily ashore to make a per-

functory camp and seek game, down the creek came floating another canoe. It brought three black men: the outcasts who had journeyed for days behind the ascending adventurers and at this same spot had solemnly watched them go on to meet their fate. Now those three drifted deliberately down and silently scanned the battered, tattered, famished five, blackened by sun but not by *sehi*, whose eyes still were sane and whose souls were unbroken. Presently they came ashore, bringing two *paují* turkeys, a royal duck, two *agoutis*, and a wild hog—a veritable feast. They took machetes and cut firewood, poles, and leaves. They built a hut wherein the white men might sling their hammocks. Then they squatted around the fire and helped to cook the meat. And all the time they spoke never a word.

The starved white men ate like wolves. Even Knowlton—who that day had swallowed another terrific dose of quinine and now was fully conscious—managed to stow away the succulent flesh of an *agouti*. Then he fell into a deep sleep. When virtually nothing remained of the banquet, León evoked from the black Samaritans the only words spoken by them that night.

“The old man of the Talking Mountain,” he said, without preliminary, “is dead.”

A flash leaped across the dusky faces. They looked quickly at one another.

"Hechicero! Muert'!" marveled one. "The Sorcerer! Dead!"

"He is broken into small pieces and thrown into a hole, and rats gnaw his bones," amplified the Spaniard, with a gesture as if casting away something contemptible.

No more was said. The three continued squatting for some time, studying faces and marveling. At length they arose, walked to their canoe, and were gone in the night.

But at the crack of day they returned. Wordless, as before, they brought new meat. When camp was broken they silently entered their own boat again and, unasked and unasking, voyaged down the Ventuari with the indomitable whites. And they stayed with them until, on the next day, they reached the deserted camp at Oso.

There, while the white men rested, they went inland to hunt. Only one of the three came back, bearing game. Of the others he would say nothing. In fact, the only thing he did say was: "Wait."

The whites did wait, while the lone blackened man hung about like a shadow—except for fruitful hunting excursions—and while Knowlton

fought back toward a little strength. The wait lasted for a day and a half. Then, while all dozed in siesta, a slither of moving feet caused León to lift his head. An instant later he bounded out of his hammock with a joyous shout.

"Frasco! Gil!"

Grinning, glistening with sweat, the two faithful Maquiritaires who had vanished on the Rio Periqueta came striding to the hut. With them marched the missing black pair who, unbidden, had sped across the savanna and through the belts of forest to summon relief from León's headquarters.

For a time the hut was in a small tumult of welcome, questions, and exasperatingly uncommunicative answers by the light-skinned Maquiritaires. Then León missed the black ones. As he glanced about for them, Frasco pointed riverward. Out there, poling back toward their home caño, were the silent victims of the sehi. Their self-imposed mission completed, they were going without reward, thanks, or farewell. Shouts failed to make them even turn their heads. Steadily they forged up against the current until they passed from sight.

And then, high in the boundless blue, the winged ghouls which so long had hovered above

the retreating invaders of Guayana voiced one harsh croak of baffled malice and shot away eastward—returning, perhaps, to a crag-bound abyss wherein lay a splintered wreck with head and face strangely like that of the vulture king. Far-sighted and tenacious though he might be, he was beaten by something incomprehensible to his coldly calculating mind—the vagaries of human hearts and the loyalties of men.

CHAPTER XXVII

UNDER THE STARS

ONCE more night brooded upon the hut-studded clearing of Loco León. Once more, within the palm domicile of its master, five white men lounged lazily in hammocks. Spartan though the simplicity of that man-camp might be, its crude comforts now seemed palatial; and its owner and its visitors, lolling with cigarettes aglow, were completely content. Clean-shaven, newly clothed, full-fed, they bore little resemblance to the rawboned tatterdemalions who recently had emerged from the harsh mystery-land of the mountains. Only one of them—a blond Northerner, pinched and wan—still showed plainly the ravages of the gruelling retreat; and even he, though still convalescent, was strong enough to put up a fight if need be.

Down at the port, a graceful launch lay awaiting the impulse which would send her speeding away with all her masters. Just within the door rested a meagre pile of duffle, and against a wall near the hammocks leaned three rifles in a row.

On the little table lay a fourth—a walnut-stocked, bolt-action, .30-caliber weapon of beautifully refined design—and a flat military pistol of the latest type: parting gifts to their Spanish comrade by Knowlton and McKay. There, too, lay a heap of green stones: the loot from the vulture's cave, dumped on the hand-hewn boards for present inspection and forthcoming division. Another day would find the tacit partnership dissolved.

Now beside that table stood Frasco, once more wearing a shirt, and looking with far more interest at the guns than at the gems. It was of the emeralds, though, that his patron would have him speak.

"And you know of no place where more of such stones are?" the Spaniard was repeating.

"No. At Esmeralda are green stones. But they are not like these."

"I know. Those green stones which gave Esmeralda its name are only worthless crystals. Bien. Then from where could these have come?"

The Maquiritare was silent for a time. At length he ventured:

"There is a tale. Long ago came white men from the west. They had green stones. They wanted gold."

"Ah! And what became of those men?"

The Indian eyes narrowed, and the lips tightened. No reply came.

"Guess that's the explanation," Knowlton said. "Roving Conquistadores from over Colombia way. There are emeralds in Colombia. They got chased out of there, drifted over here to find El Dorado—and never drifted out."

"Probably that is it," agreed León. "So the emeralds are not of Guayana. That ends that. Now, Frasco, I ask you once more—for the last time—why you and Gil left us on the Periqueta. I have asked before, and you have not answered. If you cannot answer now it is because you are ashamed to tell the truth. If you are ashamed of the truth it is because you were not faithful. I cannot keep a man who is not faithful. You can answer or you can go. If you go, do not come back. Your name will be forever a stink to the nose of Loco León."

"Aw, have a heart, Loco!" remonstrated Tim. "He's a good guy. Don't fire him."

"I do not believe it will be necessary, señor. But I am determined to know the truth of that matter." The Spaniard's tone was obdurate.

Frasco wavered. Once his countenance hardened and he turned doorward; but then he turned

back, looking at his employer in a hurt way. Finally he seemed to swallow something locking his tongue—perhaps habit, perhaps pride.

"We slept," he said shortly. "A man woke us. He was a blondo. He made no sound. He touched us and made motions. We were to go out and talk. We went. We thought it would be only a step, and he was alone. So we took no arms. But he led us back into the forest. There were more blondos.

"We could not see them. We could feel them around us in the dark. We were afraid. They are bad. They are sons of a great demonio. One must do as they say. If he does not he dies very cruelly. But they did not say anything. While we waited for them to speak something hit us.

"When we saw again it was day. We were in a new place. It was in the forest. We were lost and sick from hurt heads—I and Gil. The two from Uaunana were dead. They were stabbed in the back. That must have been a mistake. The blondos killed the wrong men. They meant to kill us of Caño Negro and let those others live. That is what we believe.

"It took nearly a day to find the camp. We were in the woods, down the Periqueta, on the other side. When we found the camp you were

gone. The canoe was gone. There was no blood or sign of fight. We tracked you to a raudal and back again and out to a sabana. There was no more track.

"We went back to the camp and waited a day. Then we walked through the woods to the Ventuari. We did not go to Uaunana. We had no boat and we had quarreled with the men of Uaunana. We walked around Monoblanco and swam across below. Our canoe was there. The other things you had left were gone or broken. We took the canoe and came here to watch your goods. We hoped you would come back. And you did."

Thus he concluded his graphic recital, looking steadily at the Spaniard. And his patron, watching him as steadily, saw that he had told all he knew. What had become of the vanished canoe and its equipment he could never reveal. It was apparent, however, that those blonds, working in absolute silence, must have carried the four Maquiritaires to the canoe, loosed it, and somehow passed it through the lower rapids; transported the dead and senseless men back some distance into the jungle, and then gone on to conceal the dugout and its plunder elsewhere for a time. There was no other way whereby the Ventuari

men could have been landed downstream, on the wrong side of the river.

"Bueno!" approved León. "You have spoken straight at last. You and Gil are good men, and you shall stay with me. But do not fear those blondos hereafter. They are not demonios, but men, and few. They have been cunning as snakes, but only one man did their thinking, and that man is dead. If you meet one of them again, spit in his face and kick him. You can thrash any of them in a fight. Now go to your hammock. Buen' noche'."

Across the strong-jawed face of the son of the Caribs shot a joyous grin. Proudly he strode to the doorway, flung aside the burlap screen, and passed into the night.

"A good man," commented McKay. "Glad you didn't have to make good your threat."

"So am I, señor. But I must be master here. I have been a bit too gentle with the superstitions of my men. Hereafter I shall ride with a little tighter rein—and a touch of the spur when it is needed. But perhaps, now that we have broken the grip of that old sorcerer on this land, there will be no need for the spur."

They smoked thoughtfully. Then, with a

quizzical glance at his fellow blond, Knowlton laughed:

"Aren't we arrogating too much credit to ourselves, old chap? *We* didn't break that old necromancer. It was Black White who did that little job. Give the devil his due."

"And he sure did bust him right," recalled Tim. "And he done more'n that. If it hadn't been for him bumpin' off some o' them Guaharibo hellions before we got into action we might have got snowed under. D'ye mind that bunch o' stiffes we found down there by the trees when we started our long hike? Every one of 'em was put out o' business by that fightin' fool of a he-gorilla. I dunno how many there was, but I've figured up how many shots he turned loose with our guns, and 'twas forty-one; and I bet more'n half o' them bullets made good. Now if all o' them tough eggs had been alive and goin' strong at the finish instead o' knocked for a gool before they got started, where'd we be now? Not here, I'm thinkin'! We were about shot out, and that starvin' had about killed our pep for a hand-to-hand rough-house. Yeah, it wasn't us that won that war. The guy that deserves a medal is Mister White of the U. S. A. And the only decoration he gits is a slam in the jaw."

"I'm sorry about that," admitted McKay. "I had to do it. But now that it's over, I'd shake hands with him if I could. Crazy or not, he's a he-man and a white man. Wish there was something we could do for him."

"There is, capitán," León quickly rejoined. "There is one thing you can do which would mean more to him than anything else; and that is to forget him—to forget that you ever saw or heard of him, and to say nothing about him when you return to your own land."

A pause. Then said Knowlton:

"You're right. He wants to be dead. He doesn't want the world—and especially his own people, whoever they may be—to know his fate. And it would be downright cruel for us to go out and tell the truth about him. It would only torment his folks, and do him no good whatever. Better let his people keep right on believing he's dead and out of all his troubles. That's what I'd want if I were in his place. Well, I'm dumb. Right here and now I forget that I ever heard of him."

"Me too," seconded Tim. "Even if anybody could git him out o' here and back home—and that ain't likely, with that gang o' his to lick first—what could they do with him? Lock him

up in the cuckoo-house, that's all. I'd rather shoot a guy than send him to that place."

"Right," concurred McKay. "It's a go, then. Not a man of us squeals. And if you see him again, León, tell him so. And tell him we wish him luck. But I wonder— How will you make out with him hereafter? Think he'll have it in for you now?"

León shook his head, dropped his cigarette-butt, and yawned.

"I think not," he said. "There has been no enmity between us, and I believe there will be none. He may be angry now, but his anger will cool. I am the only white friend he has in all the world, and he knows that I wish him only good. I will give him your message. Now, amigos, shall we divide this little pile among us? It grows a little late, and I am sleepy."

"Yea, bo," assented Tim with alacrity. "Divvy up the swag and hit the hay. The transport's sailin' at sun-up."

Silence descended on the dim room. In the soft light of candles burning in bottle-necks, the gems were matched for size and assorted into four piles. Portonio, watching with lazy interest, took no hand in the division; for it had already been agreed that, in lieu of any share in the emer-

alds, he should receive from his señores a cash sum which to him meant astounding affluence.

With the partition completed, the three Northerners stowed their stones in wide soft money-belts and tossed them temporarily into their hammocks. The Southerner, yawning again, swept his share carelessly into an old tin can.

"And so it ends, as the movies say," smiled Knowlton. "We've gotten what we came for, and then some. We've run down the 'lost white race,' and found that they're only the light-skinned Maquiritares, plus a handful of biological freaks. We've had an interesting time and a rattling good scrap, and we've picked up a sweet little pocketful of plunder. Now I suppose that on our way out it would be a graceful act for us to call at San Fernando de Atabapo and present these little Irish tokens to Governor Ramirez, would it not?"

"Yeah, it would not!" erupted Tim. "If we halt at that there town the Irish tokens that greasy crook'll git won't be graceful—they'll be disgraceful. The first one will be a slam in the snoot and the next a boot in the belly, and after that—"

"Say it with flowers," chuckled McKay. "But we don't stop there. We have gas enough in the

cans to run us through to Maipures, and there we'll find our reserve supply. We'll leave the illustrious governor to chew his mustachio and wonder what happened. Now let's turn in."

Soon the candles were blown out. Darkness pounced on the room—darkness, and silence relieved only by the regular breathing of five comrades resting together for the last time.

Darkness and silence ruled also without the palm walls: a dusk wherein the only points of light were myriad stars trooping across a velvet sky, and a soundlessness which became sinister; for around the clearing spoke no night-trilling tree-toad or other natural thing. For some reason, the small creatures of the sunless hours were dumb, seemingly holding their breath. From the hut where rested Frasco and Gil came neither light nor sound; they were buried in unsuspecting slumber. Nowhere in all the shadow-bound sitio was visible or audible sign of menace, or even of life. Yet both were there.

Beside the palm wall of the master's house, hardly a dozen feet from the master himself, a long black shape lay along the dark ground. Masked in the gloom under the near-by trees lay a score of other shapes, not so dusky, yet now invisible: the forms of muscular, hard-faced

fighters whose eyes were riveted on that palm wall. The star-shine glinted faintly, coldly, on steel lying beside each of those motionless figures: on the naked blades of machetes and the barrels of powerful repeating rifles, full-loaded with cartridges just brought by a devious route from far British Guiana.

Slowly, noiselessly, the black form rose. For a moment it stood facing the wall, as if its wild eyes could see through the barrier as easily as its ears had just heard all that passed within. Then it turned and stalked through the dimness toward the others. In its right fist swayed a gun.

Up from the ground started the wolf-pack, weapons ready, heads forward, muscles tense. But they made no forward bound. The black wolf who was their king had given no signal. They waited.

Straight up to them he came. In a harsh whisper he spoke.

"We do not kill. Vamos!"

The wolfish eyes stared. None moved. The hard blue-gray irises of their master glittered. His left arm shot out, pointing eastward.

"Vamos!" he repeated, the low command striking like a bullet.

They obeyed. Unquestioning, they filed across the clearing, marching with pantherish tread. Into the eastern woods they passed, and on through the density to the savanna beyond. Behind, vigilant and dominant, swung the ferocious fighter who had brought them there.

"White men!" he muttered. "Yes, by God! White men! Won't squeal. Lucky for them—huh huh huh! Wish me luck. Fighting fool of a he-gorilla. Huh huh huh! That's me. Shake hands if they could. Crazy? Blah! Dead. Dead and out of all my troubles. Oh hell, yes! Hee hee ha ha ha!"

The Indians ahead gave no attention to his chuckles and mumbles. Stolidly they marched on—on—into the thin-treed savanna, under the starry void. And on into the wastes with them marched the killer who controlled them, leaving unharmed the five who, though their lives were forfeit because they had seen his blasted face, now were not to be killed. Branded in body and mind by the black blight of Guayana—a veritable dead man walking in the night—yet he was still a live man and a white man, with heart vaguely responsive to the kinship of men of his blood and breed. So he passed away into the

silence and the mystery and was gone: a man of the shadows, forever lost.

And the stars, looking down on the retreating file of unfired rifles, twinkled. For they were not mere cold glints of hard-hearted Guayana, but world-wise little elves of the high heavens, which recked nothing of skins, or even of minds, but which slyly peered into souls. And they knew, with the prescience born of a million years of watching, that in the slow-rolling months to come this lost one would ever and anon find peace in retrospect: dwelling again on the faces and the voices and the words of straight-speaking, straight-shooting men who had been his comrades for a day and then gone from him—but who kept his secret safe.

So they smiled, and swung on westward, as the grim band below them marched eastward; and around the clearing the night toads twittered cheerily once more; and within the houses men slept and dreamed.

In Guayana all was well.

THE END

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