

RENEGADE

ARTHUR O. FRIEL

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"King of Kearsarge," "Cat-O-Mountain," "Hard Wood," etc.



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Renegade

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RENEGADE

CHAPTER I

A FLOATING BOTTLE

ON the murky Orinoco, half-way down the forty-mile stretch of rocky river between the impassable rapids of Atures and Maipures, floated a small brown bottle.

Several miles upstream, strewn carelessly among the bushes growing in the water along the Colombian shore, lay a dozen tiny rafts.

Three miles below the bottle, a dugout canoe crawled up beside the Venezuelan bank.

The bottle drifted aimlessly, as all water-borne bottles do. Where submerged fangs of rock created choppy waves, it bobbed crazily about, flashing back glints of the glaring sunlight from its wet sides. Where other rocks protruded, dividing the flow, it slid smoothly away from them, swirled awhile in the eddies below, floated on downstream in the grip of a new cross-current. A mere speck on the waters, it would, in most parts of the world, be considered unworthy even a glance. But here in the wild hinterland of South America, where every empty bottle and every

tin can is eagerly seized and saved for future use by the lucky finder, it would arrest any human eye.

Slowly it traveled on down the eternal river, unharmed by the malignant denizens of the depths below or the bloodthirsty insects swarming in the air above. And slowly the hollowed-out log and its naked brown men journeyed up toward it. Heedless of sun-glare and mosquito-torment, the six paddlers thumped their short shafts rhythmically against the thick gunwales in the tireless *chunkswash*, *chunkswash* of the tropical canoeman. In the low barrel-shaped palm cabin behind them sprawled a deeply bronzed, hard-faced, shaggy-bearded white man, puffing at a cigarrillo and watching the monotonous water ahead.

At length the passenger emitted a short, harsh growl. Without a backward look, the coppery toilers shifted the angle of their blades; the Indian steersman in the stern swung his huge paddle a few times, then held it rigid. The dugout veered away from the steep clay wall and angled toward the Colombian side, seeking a stronger up-shore eddy. As the outer current caught the lumbering craft its men quickened their stroke to a rapid *chunkchunkchunk*, their muscular shoulders heaving in swift unison. The blunt, overhanging bow threw aside a yellow-white ripple.

Suddenly, with a muffled grunt, the bowman lurched sidewise and downward. Like a swooping hawk his left hand pounced on something. It swept inboard, slipped his find between two bare toes, and curled again

over the top of his paddle. His hand had missed only two of those rapidfire paddle-beats; and his semi-prehensile foot now grasped the little brown bottle.

Not until the canoe reached the easier waters of the west shore did he answer the inquiring grunts of his mates. Then, resting his paddle across the narrow bow, he triumphantly held aloft his treasure-trove. More grunts followed, eloquent of envy. The white man's eyes narrowed speculatively.

"Botellito, capitán!" gleefully called the bowman. "A little bottle, chief! The white travelers lost it!" The possibility that such a treasure could have been deliberately thrown away was beyond him.

The bearded man nodded.

"Nothing in it?" he casually asked in Spanish.

"Papelito. A little paper."

The hard gray eyes narrowed once more. The lean, sinewy frame arose to a sitting position.

"Aquí! Here!" ordered the harsh voice.

The bottle, carefully passed from hand to hand, came back to him. Scowling, he contemplated it. A portion of its watersoaked label still clung to one flat side. On it he read: "100 — Quin — Sulph — 2 grai —." The other letters were missing. But his mind supplied them, and more.

"A hundred two-grain quinine sulphate pills. All gone. Must be eating it like candy. Dosing themselves like babies before they've had a real chance to get fever. Bah! These lily-livered explorers!"

The sneer remained on his face as he pulled the cork and knocked out the little crumple of paper within. Straightening out the sheet, he growled: "Trying the old stunt of throwing out a bottle with name and address, of course, and 'Will finder please inform where this was picked up?' Clever stuff!"

But then the sneer faded into a look of puzzlement. On the thin page, evidently torn from a diary and jammed hastily into the glass, he read:

"—so many tributaries flowing in from each side that it becomes tedious to record their names. The next one, though, is worthy of note because, the guide says, it is the home of bad Indians—the Wah-hee-bos (so he pronounces it), who kill travelers. The men call it 'Tum,' but the geographical map shows its name is Tomo. (An odd name—*tomo* means 'I take.' Guide does not know why it is so called.) Ethnographical map (Caracas) shows Indian race of Gua-hibos there. The Indians live far up the river, the guide says, and so we have nothing to fear on the Orinoco. We are to stop and eat on a large rock at its mouth—if these terrible mosquitoes will let us.

"10:40 A.M. — Reached Tomo mouth. No life in sight. Fearfully hot."

All this was set down in a small, firm, vertical hand. And throughout its perusal the perplexity on the bearded face grew. Why cast adrift such a valueless and fragmentary record? It was not until he turned

the wrinkled page and saw the other side that sudden understanding dawned. There, in a swift, ragged scrawl, was written:

“Indios — todos matados — Socorro!”

His gaze fixed on these tragic words, he repeated:

“‘Indians — all killed — Help!’ By Judas, the Cuibas got ’em!”

A malicious glitter grew under his black brows. His beard parted in a snarling smile which abruptly became explosive mirth.

“Ho ho ho ho! My brave Indian-dodging explorers with your pretty little know-nothing maps, now you’ve learned what ‘Tomo’ means! Ah-ha-ha-ha! ‘I Take!’ You bet! It gobbled your whole outfit in one bite, hey? Hah! Ah-ha-ha!”

His jarring laughter jerked every Indian head around toward him. On the coppery faces gleamed responding grins — the quick smiles of Nature’s children, uncomprehending the joke but ready to laugh at whatever pleased their master.

“A funny thing from the white men, capitán?” called the bowman, with the easy familiarity of long acquaintance.

“Sí! A joke!” chuckled the white. But he did not tell the joke, and quickly his expression hardened again. With a gruff grunt he passed the empty bottle forward. The aborigines, after a keen glance at him, resumed their steady paddling with the incurious un-

concern of men long accustomed to sudden unexplained explosions of mirth or wrath from their singular chief. That unkempt worthy again perused the paper.

"So this is the end of your little jaunt up the Orinoco, my learned fellow citizens of the grand and glorious United States of America!" he jeered. "You poor fools! You come down here to prow! around after birds and bugs and tote home a lot of dead butterflies so that you can hitch new Latin names on 'em, and you let yourselves get smeared by a bunch of bow-and-arrow clout-wearers! You belong to all the high-and-mighty highbrow societies there are, I'll bet, — and yet you don't know any better than to bring a woman into this place! You only got what was coming to you, you idiots!"

A momentary lull followed. *Chunkswash, chunkswash*, sounded the paddles. The Indians now gave no attention to the white man's voice. Evidently they were accustomed to hearing him talk to himself in that strange un-Spanish language which they could not understand. Steadily the canoe slid along shore. Gradually the white man sprawled back against a small heap of dunnage. His mustache lifted again.

"It's an ill wind that blows nobody good," he rumbled. "There are loose tongues along this river, and there's no knowing what you snoopers might stumble onto up here. And it would be just about your size to spill all you knew when you went out again. But dead men tell no tales. Now you'll never

tip off the Venezuelan government to what's going to break loose up here in a couple of months."

Inhaling another mouthful of smoke, he slowly blew it out, his slitted eyes still glittering.

"And," he added, "you won't tell the world that El Tigre of the up-Orinoco country is a former officer of the United States Army. Pah!" He spat, as if the last words tasted sour.

Chunkswash, chunkswash, chunkswash. The passenger snapped his cigarette-butt outside, drew closer the dingy handkerchief protecting the back of his neck from the mosquitoes, and, flapping another rag before his face with the mechanical swing of long practice, resumed his monologue.

"Let's see," he ruminated. "There were ten of you, all told. Four sailors, one pilot, one guide-and-cook — six crewmen, all Venezuelans from down river. And one gray-haired American, two about thirty years old, and one young woman wearing khaki pants. Your launch went snorting past Puerto Carreño without stopping. Good thing for you! You'd have found a live-wire nest of human hornets camping behind the big rock if you'd nosed around there. You had to leave your gas-boat at Zamuro and hoof it around the rapids, and hired a poling piragua above Atures from Pablo Benito, who owns everything thereabouts. And Pablo spilled all he knew about you to me when I came along.

"And then you went along up here, with your sailors

poling. And yesterday — no, by thunder, today! This forenoon, it was, — you stopped at the river ‘I Take,’ where the murderous Guahibos live. Huh! My poor Guahibos have to take all the blame for the dirty work the Cuibas do, just because some fool mapmaker up in Caracas thinks the Tomo Cuibas are Guahibos. So much for science! And the Cuibas were on the job and smeared you good and plenty. Hm! How come the Cuibas on the Orinoco, though? ”

A thoughtful scowl creased his forehead. After a moment he called:

“Tomás! In what month do the Cuibas hunt in the Orinoco savanna? ”

“In this month,” answered the voice of the steersman.

“Uh-huh. That settles it,” he told himself. “They caught you people dead to rights, eating on that rock where there was ‘no sign of life.’ Killed all but one of you — the woman. Heaved your bodies into the river, where the caribe fish would chop ’em up. Looted your boat and sunk it in a deep hole. Took woman and vamosed. Regular Cuiba tactics. Nothing left to show what happened to you — except this scrap of paper. And now a Guahibo boy has your bottle, and as for this — ”

He reached overhead, drew a small matchbox from under the ridge-pole, struck a light, held the flame to the paper. The little call for help blazed up, burned swiftly. Its last fragment dropped to the pole flooring

and turned into black ash. A rough thumb crushed the ash into nothing. With a hard chuckle, the man resumed waving the mosquito-repelling rag.

Chunkswash, chunkswash. The bush-choked bank crept past. Somewhere back from the water, in the forest lining the river, sounded the yapping of toucans. Overhead rasped the harsh screams of flying macaws. Automatically the flapping cloth swung before the battered felt hat. Unwinkingly the steely eyes looked ahead.

"Shut up!" suddenly growled the bearded mouth. "What is it to you? She's nothing in your life! You didn't do it. Neither did the Guahibos. You've got no control over the Cuibas. If she was fool enough to come here — What's the matter with you? Turning soft? Shut up!"

But the tiny voice in his brain refused to be silenced. It nagged. It scolded. It swore. With a wrathful snort he sat up, one hand going instinctively to a heavy revolver on his thigh, as if that would stop the stinging tongue. Then, with equal abruptness, it left the gun and snatched a fresh cigarrillo. With the smoke rolling from a corner of his mouth, he scowled at the black smudge left on his thumb by the burned paper. Involuntarily he rubbed the thumb across his ragged breeches, as if wiping off blood.

"She's a nervy kid," he admitted grudgingly. "Kept her wits about her. Sneaked that note right under their noses. Wrote it in Spanish, knowing no-

body along here could read English. Chucked it adrift — Umph! How comes that bottle down here so soon? It hasn't had time to float from the Tomo today. But that attack was made at the Tomo, and made today, because they didn't have time to get there yesterday at ten-forty. How the — ”

“ Balsa! ”

The word broke from the bowman. A murmur ran among his fellows. For an instant the bearded man sat motionless. Then, as if the word had supplied the key to a riddle, he scrambled forward, ducked out from under the palm roof, shot up to full height. As he rose, the bowman added:

“ Otra! Another! ”

There, among the bushes, lay the little balsas, or rafts. To the eye of a stranger there could be nothing more prosaic, more meaningless. Each was nothing but three layers of short, small poles, fastened together by long transverse pins; a flat rectangle that looked like a boy's plaything. But to El Tigre and his Guahibos they spoke volumes. He knew, and they knew, that the wild savanna-tramping Cuibas were not boat-builders; that, therefore, whenever they journeyed afar to the Orinoco for hunting they floated down the Tomo on those light balsas, paddling with flattened sticks, and abandoning them forever when they started hunting back on a long westward sweep toward their homeland. They knew, too, that the flimsy-looking little craft were surprisingly buoyant,

and that on each of them could travel from four to six armed men.

"That bottle was thrown overboard here! The Cuibas cleaned up quick and came right along as per schedule," the Tiger told himself. "Haven't been ashore long, either. Now how big is their outfit?"

One by one the deserted floats passed in review as the dugout forged on. Then there were no more.

"An even dozen. Fifty to seventy men. Hm!"

Keenly he scanned the bank, knowing that the savages had not made their landing in the thick water-growing bush where the balsas were stranded; that the abandoned craft had floated down from above. Presently the bank receded and the bush died at a long slant of bare rock, rising from water to trees.

The white man growled. The canoe slowed, crept on, turned into a narrow recess in the stone.

"Seek signs," commanded the Tiger.

The brown men, lifting ready bows and arrows from the bottom, vaulted lithely onto the rock. Spreading out, they advanced up the slope. Their master stood where he was, face inscrutable.

He had not long to wait. Before they even reached the trees one of the scouts halted, grunted, stirred something with a tentative toe, stooped and rose. Then he returned.

"Under a little stone," he explained, handing his find to his chief. It was a strip torn from a thin but high-grade khaki shirt.

The Tiger's gray gaze hung for a long minute on that slash of cloth. Slowly one powerful hand closed, crumpling the fragment into a limp wad. It moved outward, opened, dropped the mute appeal into the water. His eyes lifted to the receding back of the Indian, who was again mounting the slope. His mouth opened to recall him and his mates and order them to resume paddling.

But the call died unborn. The mouth snapped shut. He whirled, squatted, reëntered the cabin. For the space of a dozen breaths he stayed there, motionless, his face twisted.

"You fool!" he snarled. "Haven't you had trouble enough over women? Haven't you learned anything yet? If a woman *will* go to the devil let her go alone, not drag you with her!"

But he still made no move to recall his men.

Minutes snailed away. Mosquitoes, unrepelled, attacked his toughened face and hands. Fixedly his eyes hung on his pile of duffle, atop which lay another holstered revolver, another cartridge-belt, and a big-bored magazine rifle. Then from the crest of the rock sounded the quiet voice of Tomás.

"Capitán! The Cuibas came and went. They are gone in the savanna. With them went a white. The boot heels of the white are small."

For one second longer the bearded man held his rigid pose. Then one hand shot out like a striking snake. It yanked toward him the extra belt, slung it savagely

around his hips, buckled it with an ugly jerk. Again it darted forward, seizing the rifle. And out from the cabin and up on the stone leaped El Tigre, bristling with cartridges, gunned with a six-shooter on each thigh and a repeater in his hands; a human tiger hunting war.

CHAPTER II

THE TRAIL OF THE BOA

IN the soft dawn-light of a new day, a file of eight men wound westward around a densely forested hill rising from the sunburned plain like a green island from a still, brown sea.

A little in the lead, carrying only a bow and a quiver of arrows, a Guahibo Indian slipped along with the easy sway of a native of the plains, head a trifle forward, quick eyes questing the stunted grass. Behind him strode a bare-ankled, alpargata-shod, loose-trousered white man, bushy of beard and bleak of eye, whose shapeless clothing masked but did not conceal the sinewy strength of his frame and the straight carriage of his shoulders. Following these two came other Guahibos, some armed with bows, some with hardwood javelins, and all bearing small basket-framed packs of cassava or dried fish. To an understanding eye, those packs would have signified determination to rove long, if necessary, through country where food might be hard to find.

Before them stretched unmeasured leagues of sun-tortured plain, broken up by green but dry rock-hills and stagnant morichales — swamps where grew the

water-loving moriche palm, and where the little deer of the tropics were hunted by merciless tiger-cat and savage man. Behind, in an endless north-and-south line, ran the water-edge forest of the Orinoco; and still farther east loomed the huge blue bulk of the Cerro Sipapo, unexplored mountain of mystery and home of the weird gods of the poison-making Piaroas. On either flank of the little moving file was nothing but savanna and knolls.

There was no talk this morning: no Indian levity, no harsh mirth from the white man. All eyes were ahead, all faces set, all mouths shut. Steadily the eight pairs of feet swished over the grass-tussocks, throwing aside a tiny haze of dust. With regular swing the black hilts of the Tiger's leg-guns tipped up and down in short arcs, and the rifle in his right fist stabbed forward with its grim muzzle and back with its steel-shod butt. The gait was unstrained, unhurried, but inexorable as the pulse of Time; the distance-eating pace with which a man can walk a mule to death.

Around the hillock passed the short column, and on toward a similar elevation a mile away. Behind them the sky turned lavender, then pink, then glaring red — the hot red of opening furnace doors; the blue Sipapo became almost black, then grew dim, shrouding itself in protective mist; an angry sun hurled itself, fiery-faced, over the rim of the world and wallowed up through the horizon mist. A wave of heat sped over the earth and the eight human atoms creeping along

its surface. None looked back. The flaming wonder of tropic daybreaks was monotonously ancient to these men, as were also the inevitable blaze and burn to follow.

Foot by foot, yard by yard, they trod along a dim trail snaking westward: a trail lightly laid on the hard-baked soil by a hundred bare feet and one small pair of boot-heels. Only at long intervals did a boot-print appear; almost all had been obliterated by unshod soles following after. Yet they did show at times, though so faintly that only the eye of a tracking Guahibo would ever have spied them. For that matter, the chance road of the entire Cuiba band would have been virtually invisible to any white or mestizo pursuer. But the piloting Indian slid along it as if it were an asphalt highway.

The blistering sun rolled high, and the file threaded its way on, wordless, treading on its own shadows. At length the shadows were between their feet, not ahead; and still the column advanced with never a pause. Half a day had gone, and nowhere was any sign of the quarry, except that almost indistinguishable trail.

Gradually the shadows began to grow out from behind their heels. They became a foot long. The Guahibos, who now had marched nearly eight hours without food or drink, began to look questioningly at El Tigre. Yet he gave no sign that he saw.

Not until the guide abruptly slowed and, without glancing back, spread a signaling hand, did the Tiger

halt. For the first time the trailer was at a loss. He inched his head from side to side, stepped as if among eggs, keenly studying every foot of ground. Then he, too, stopped uncertainly.

"The road is crazy," he complained.

"How?" demanded the Tiger.

"It runs around on itself. It steps on its face."

The Tiger scowled. Either intentionally or otherwise, the Cuibas had confused their trail by bunching and walking or running all about.

"The feet of the road must be found!" he rasped. "Then we eat."

The faces of the hungry men plainly said they would rather eat first. But they separated, spread out, circled in wavering arcs. Their white chief, squatting where he was, calmly smoked a cigarette.

At length the men clustered near a long, wide, rounded bare rock. They spoke briefly among themselves. One signaled.

"The road divides," explained a spokesman, as their chief approached. "All came to this rock. The feet left no mark on it. From the other side are two roads. One goes so," pointing northwest, "one so," with a westward gesture.

"On which are boots?"

"We find no boots."

"Until the boot-feet are found we do not eat."

Rebellion suddenly flared in the seven pairs of brown eyes. The one pair of gray ones grew a shade more

steely. For half a dozen breaths no man moved. Then the Guahibos sullenly divided and walked away, following both trails. The Tiger's unwinking gaze hung on their backs.

"One of these days you'll try to do me in, won't you?" he muttered. "Just as you Guahibos have killed other white men that tried living among you. But until you get me I'm boss, and don't you forget it!"

He made no move, though, to loosen a revolver or test his rifle lever. His hard gray eye was his best weapon, and he knew it. Grim as the rock beside him he stood, awaiting results. Soon they came.

The Indians tracing the westward trail halted all at once. They called to the others, now some distance away. All turned and loped back.

"The foot is found, and this!" reported one, grinning proudly. With the words he handed over a little brown rag. It was a strip torn from the same garment which had given the clue at the river.

"Bueno! Now we eat."

It was a short meal; a munching of dry cassava and a ration of Orinoco water from two quart rum-bottles carried in the packs. The Tiger himself measured each scant allowance in a little tin cup. Every eye watched jealously to see that no man got more than his share of that sickeningly warm and none-too-clean liquid. But there was no quarreling. Neither was there any sign of revolt from the white man's rule. He had said

what should be done, and it had been done, and their stomachs no longer complained, and so all was well.

"Tonight we must reach water," said the Tiger. Seven nods answered. The men arose and journeyed on. And only one of the eight knew what had become of the slim brown rag. Unlike its predecessor, it had not been crumpled up and thrown away. It was in a pocket of the capitán.

"Game little cuss! " he silently told himself. "Only one chance in a million of any man taking her trail, and only one in ten million of his being able to hold it, but she's gambling on that chance. Wonder why the Cuibas killed their track. On general principles, probably. Then they split because the hunting's been rotten and they've got to find meat. They'll swing together at some place agreed on. We might catch up with the westbound outfit tonight. They've got to have water, same as we have. Probably camp at a morichal."

Steadily their shadows lengthened behind. The down-sliding sun stabbed into their eyes. From the scattered hillocks which approached, crept past, and receded behind them came only the rasp of locusts and the harsh squawks of parrots. Under withered clumps of moriche palms, where water should have been, no moisture gleamed. The trail veered toward each of these dried-up morichales, but passed each without sign of pause. Nothing worth hunting could be found at such places. The devastating heat of the

dry season had long ago driven from them everything but lizards and snakes.

Then, rounding the base of another rocky hill, the guide stopped dead.

"Fuego!" he softly called.

The Tiger and his followers swung up to him and stopped. A few hundred yards farther west stood a wide cluster of palms and thick undergrowth which, by its healthy greenness, betokened a sizable pool. And from a point not far from its northern end rose a thin mist of smoke. There, as the scout had said, was fire. There must be the end of the trail.

Now, for the first time today, El Tigre laid hand on his holstered guns. He lifted each, found that the left one stuck in its sheath, shook it loose from the grip of the leather; then let it rest, undrawn. He squinted at the sun, still more than an hour above the horizon. He glanced around to right and left. Shortly he nodded.

A little to the north rose another bush-grown hill. Beyond it the scattered treelets of the dry plains seemed somewhat closer together than usual; close enough to give partial cover to their movements, though not to conceal them entirely from anyone who had already spied them. There was no indication that the Cuibas around that fire were aware of the proximity of the trailers; undoubtedly they felt absolutely secure and were keeping no lookout. So there was a chance for the Tiger to shift his line of approach and

appear to come from the north. This he determined to do.

A curt command, and his squad was heading to its right flank, traveling at the same unhurried pace. Soon the hill was on their left, hiding them from the swamp. Around its northern end they curved, and out once more into the savanna. Half hidden by the intervening tree dwarfs, they journeyed westward until the Tiger again turned south. Then all advanced toward the ascending haze of smoke.

They were only a few yards from the edge of the morichal, and in plain sight, when several savages emerged abruptly from its fringe of bush. Their instantaneous halt, their frozen rigidity, betrayed their surprise; more, it told the Tiger that his maneuvering had been unobserved. In the tense moment during which the astounded Cuibas stood motionless, the Guahibos drew apart, forming a short skirmish line and revealing more clearly their leader. At the same time that leader's right hand arose in the sign of amity.

"Hola!" he barked. "I am the Tiger. Who are you?"

No answer came. The silent savages, poised like hesitant jaguars for instant attack or a leap back into the bush, swiftly swept the approaching line with their eyes; saw that no other men followed; concentrated their gaze again on the rough-voiced, gun-armed white. El Tigre grunted again to his companions. All halted.

"Luis, speak to them," ordered the Tiger. One of

the Guahibos growled in monotone. The Cuiba faces showed a flicker of comprehension. Their tense muscles relaxed slightly. A pause ensued. After a short interval, one of them grunted in reply.

"Cuibas. They speak no Spanish. They ask what we want," said Luis.

The leader, who had listened closely, nodded.

"No Spanish, and rotten Guahibo. A wild lot, from away back," he told himself. Then, aloud: "Tell them who I am, and that I will talk to their capitán."

"This strong man of many guns," Luis informed the listeners, "is the Tiger. He is chief of our nation on the river Vichada. He will talk to your chief."

Another pause, while the Cuibas digested this information.

"Our chief shall hear," one of them answered. "You will wait."

"The Tiger waits for no man!" the Tiger himself rasped, in the Guahibo tongue. "I go to your commander now!"

And he walked straight at them. The Guahibos stepped forward with him, gimlet-eyed, treading with stiff spring, gripping ready weapons. The Cuibas tensed again—plumbed the steely stare of the Tiger—hung an instant in the balance—and gave way before the cold nerve of the hard-visaged white. Into the bush they turned, followed closely by the invaders.

"You'll make me wait, huh?" the Tiger sardonically thought. "Wait while you hide the woman,—

wait while your gang sneaks into the edge of the bush, — wait while you fill the whole batch of us with arrows and get my guns. Not much! ”

But, though he had dominated the situation in the open, he could not regulate the movements of the Cuibas in the green tangle now engulfing them. He and his men had to adopt the pace set by the preceding savages, which seemed unduly slow. And slow it was; a delaying drag of motion which gave the leading Cuiba time to dash ahead at top speed with the news for his chief. Before El Tigre reached the fire where the rest of the Tomo wild men presumably were, he heard an excited rumble of voices and rushing noises among the leaves.

Emerging into a little space comparatively free of undergrowth, the travelers from the Orinoco found a mere handful of men awaiting them. Perhaps fourteen of them were there, grouped near a crude roasting-frame beneath which burned a wide fire of almost smokeless dry wood, and above which broiled slabs of meat. Hides and entrails lay about the ground, and the bodies of the savages were spattered with blood, their hands and forearms reeking with it. In those red hands were man-length bows and half-drawn bone-tipped arrows. In the lowering, beady-eyed faces showed willingness, if not eagerness, to slaughter the newcomers as they had butchered the beasts of the morichal. And in the surrounding tangle sounded stealthy rustlings, hoarse breathings, telling of the

unseen cordon of murder encompassing the bold intruders. The rest of the Cuiba band, though invisible, was very close at hand.

But the Tiger's arrogant gaze never faltered. The seven Guahibos, standing in the jaws of death, gave no sign of uneasiness. The white man, left hand holding his rifle and right dangling loosely ready beside a holster, ran his glance among the hostile countenances, picked a heavy-shouldered brute in the center holding a stabbing-spear, and spoke in Guahibo.

"I am the Tiger of the Vichada. Who are you and from where?"

The snaky stare of the other held for half a dozen breaths. The threat of his attitude unchanging, he mumbled:

"The Boa of the Tomo. Why are you here?"

"I pass to my own river. I see your fire. I stop to talk of war."

The Boa looked at the few Guahibos attending this aggressive-voiced white. In his opaque eyes showed a derisive glint.

"War?" he jeered.

"War! War in which the cursed Spaniards kill one another. War through which the free Indian profits."

The glint of amusement died. Interest dawned; interest tempered by live suspicion.

"Say on."

"War comes. It comes in the north. I, the Tiger, pass now from north to south to make my men ready.

When Spaniards shoot Spaniards there will be many free cattle. The Tiger drinks the blood of Spanish cattle."

Greed grew in the faces of the Cuibas. Gradually the red hands relaxed; the bow-cords loosened; the arrow-heads sank.

"The Boa swallows whole bulls," boasted the Tomo leader. "Who does the Tiger fight for?"

"For the Tiger! Does the Boa know of the Tiger?"

"The Boa has heard."

"He has heard that the Tiger is no Spaniard?"

"It is so."

"That is well. The Tiger is a free man, chief of free men. While Spaniards fight to be chiefs of Spaniards, the Tiger and his free Guahibos carry off the cattle."

The repetition, the insistent hammering on the hereditary hatred of Indian for Spaniard and on the ages-old desire of primitive man for horned and hoofed wealth, inflamed the cupidity of the nomads, while the constant reminder that this man was the Tiger — a renegade — lulled their suspicions. Heads of hidden Cuibas appeared, greedily listening. The expression of the Cuiba leader himself became cunning instead of hostile.

"When does war come?" he demanded.

"When it is ready," was the tart retort. "The Tiger may tell — when he is ready. He is not ready when he is hungry. He is not ready while Cuiba

snakes hide behind trees. He will not be ready until he is made a friend of the Boa."

A silent pause. Then the Cuiba chief lightly drove the point of his javelin into the ground. He made a clucking sound. The bush all around rustled and the concealed "snakes" came out. Leaving his weapon standing in the soil, the Boa stepped toward the fire.

"Here," he sourly grunted, "is meat."

CHAPTER III

THE CAPTIVE

EACH with his own men at his back, the Tiger and the Boa squatted and gnawed broiled venison. Meanwhile the former used his eyes as well as his jaws. Casually he glanced at every stranger in sight — and saw no woman, white or brown. Neither did he see the usual signs of a camp, — hammocks or leaf-roofed shelters. Yet it was obvious that the game-yielding morichal would be the headquarters of this gang for some days; and, since the Cuibas were merely on a wandering hunt and not on the war-path, — though always ready for a murderous raid on any weak settlement encountered, — women must be with the male nomads. A camp must be somewhere in the vicinity, and to it the squaws had undoubtedly been banished at the first tidings of the newcomers.

The Boa, gorging himself like the reptile whose name he claimed, also used his eyes, trying to spy in the intruder's face some indication of what was passing in his mind. He failed. For all it revealed, that bearded countenance might have been a stone. The Tiger seemed to have no other interest in the Cuibas than that of devouring Cuiba food.

When he and his Guahibos had eaten their fill, El Tigre lit a cigarette, blew a lungful of smoke, and, with no thanks for the meal, spoke abruptly.

"Other men walk the savanna at the north. I crossed their road."

"Where does their road lead?"

"To the sinking sun."

A short nod. The Boa now was quite convinced that his visitor had come overland from the north.

"They are my men," he said. "From where do you come?"

"The river Meta."

"The war starts at the Meta?"

"It is so."

"The Meta is Cuiba country. The cattle of the Meta shall belong to Cuibas."

"If the Cuibas are strong enough to take them. The Spanish guns kill Cuibas wherever seen."

An ugly scowl admitted the truth of this; for, excepting the Guahibos, the marauding Cuibas have no friends on earth.

"And all land between the Meta and the Vichada is Guahibo land, whether Cuibas walk in it or not," asserted the white Guahibo chief. "The Cuiba country is westward, toward the mountains. The cattle of the plains are for Guahibos."

The scowl grew more ugly. The Tiger still was speaking truth.

"The Cuibas walk where they will. They take what

they like. No man can stop them," snarled the Cuiba commander.

"Spanish guns stop them," taunted the white.

"The Cuibas have no guns."

"The Boa has guns!" snapped the Tomo man.

"Is it so? From where?"

"From whites killed at the Tomo!"

"By the Boa?"

"By the Boa! The Boa killed whites. The Boa took their guns. The Boa took everything. The Boa is strong."

"The Boa must be the mightiest of the Cuiba chiefs," conceded El Tigre, looking as if he did not believe it. "He must be a true boa in attack — swift and silent."

The Boa swelled.

"The Boa strikes hard!" he bragged. "He waits. He watches. He jumps. He crushes."

The Tiger eyed him quizzically. When he spoke again an irritating note of disbelief was plain in his voice.

"If the Boa has guns and is so strong, he may join the Guahibos in the cattle hunt. Many cattle shall then be his. And he will not lose the friendship of the Guahibos, which is worth keeping."

The last words made the Tomo man consider. Though not overburdened with intelligence, he had plenty of reptilian cunning. Cattle might die, but Guahibo enmity, once incurred, would be undying. He

balanced matters in his mind: independence versus alliance. Which would profit him more?

"Tell me of the war," he urged.

"I have told you of the war. If you are as strong as you say, I may tell more. How many whites did you kill?"

The other slowly counted on his fingers; counted again, evidently remembering each slain man individually; then held up all eight fingers and one thumb.

"Nine," nodded the Tiger. "And you had how many men?"

The Boa looked about and pointed to his red-smeared gang.

"These, and as many more."

"And it took so many to kill so few? You are not strong. A strong man would have taken them alive and made them slaves."

The brute scowled again at being belittled. Then he grinned cruelly.

"The Boa took a slave. The Boa owns a white woman!"

"A white —" The Tiger seemed astounded. "A white *woman*!"

"It is so." The Cuiba swelled again, gloating in his superiority over the other. "The Tiger has no white woman," he twitted.

"Bah! The Tiger wants no woman!" came a harsh disclaimer. "The Boa talks big. But I see no guns. I see no slave. Brags will not win cattle."

Except that he did not exactly say so, his sneer was a plain declaration that the other chief was only a loud-mouthed liar. The Boa hissed between his teeth. But something in the glimmering gray eyes held him from violent retaliation. With an angry leer he arose. The Tiger, though keenly watchful, remained asquat.

"The Tiger shall see," the nomad sourly promised. "The Boa will return." Grunting to his crew, he turned away. Two of his men went with him. The rest, their attitudes none too friendly, remained fronting the little knot of adventurers.

The Tiger laughed sneeringly; arose, yawned, stretched himself. At his careless movement the Cuiba faces hardened a shade more; the filthy hands tightened on weapons. El Tigre appeared not to notice the menace of their postures. In the same apparently unseeing way he rapidly estimated their strength and his chance of victory by sudden attack.

It was not good. His force was outnumbered by at least three to one, and the advantage of his guns was more than offset by the readiness and nearness of the enemy. The half formed plan of downing the Boa on his return and fighting clear with the captive died unborn.

Time dragged past. Unseen life crept with vague rustling among the leaves and bush-roots. From the hillocks on the savanna sounded the sunset concert of locusts calling in unison, hundreds of them on one

knoll jingling fairy bells in a growing wave of sound which soon ebbed, to be answered by the insects of another. From some place off to the right broke the cough of an early prowling jaguar threading the swamp growth. But the waiting men gave no heed to any of these familiar noises. The Cuibas watched in undisguised alertness, and the others preserved postures of indifference.

Then came a slight rustle higher above the ground than that made by lizards and other reptiles. It approached, and with it a brute voice grunting at intervals. Into the opening then emerged a short procession at sight of which the stolid white man almost blinked.

It was headed by the Boa, who now had become an astonishing figure. On the back of his low-browed head hung a soiled white helmet, its green underbrim giving his prognathous face a poisonous hue. Down his torso dangled a cloth of wide alternate scarlet and white stripes, across which swayed three gold watches attached by their chains to his cat-claw necklace. From each hip, upheld by a cartridge-belt strapped tight around his middle, hung an empty pair of khaki breeches. And in each hand he carried a revolver.

Bang! He crashed a shot into the air. The Tiger's right-hand side-arm jumped into his fist, and its muzzle covered the Boa's stomach. But then it sank, as the Cuiba, keeping his guns elevated, emptied them

in a roar of explosions. The Boa was merely showing off.

"Guns!" triumphantly rumbled the Tomo leader. "Does the Tiger now see the guns?"

Dropping the revolvers, he turned and seized from his attendants two rifles, which he brandished aloft.

"Guns!" he grunted, and dropped them in turn. From the men behind, he grabbed two more.

"Guns!" he reiterated. This time he retained them in his hands. "Does the Tiger see guns?"

"The Tiger sees," admitted the other. "Are there more?"

"No more. But there are many other things. The Tiger sees the gold moons?" He dipped his jaw toward the watches.

The white man nodded, his eyes seeking something else.

"The Boa has proved his boast partly true," he conceded. "He has guns."

The grotesque murderer proved the rest of his words true. He growled over his shoulder, and with a sudden shove two squaws broke from the bush, propelling a captive.

El Tigre looked into a bruised, mosquito-swollen, tanned but pallid face from which desperate dark eyes stabbed at him. He saw a tight-set mouth, a resolute little jaw, a slender figure in torn, stained khaki. He saw, too, that the bruises were those of brutal blows,

and that the girl's hands were tied. Then a sudden flare of hope in her eyes, a quick intake of breath, centered his gaze again on her face.

"A white man!" she cried. "Oh — whoever you are — help me escape from these beasts! Are you American — do you understand?"

Not a muscle of the grim face above her changed. The harsh voice was even more harsh than usual when the Tiger answered.

"Shut up!"

He turned from her. The Boa, snakily watching, grinned at the roughness of his rival chief toward the woman; grinned even more widely as he saw the hope in her face fade into stunned misery. Then he grunted something. The squaws yanked the girl away. For a few seconds she struggled like a trapped wild thing. The brown women threw her toward the bush, one tugging cruelly at her hair. A stifled moan broke from her. The rustling receded. She was gone.

"The Boa has caught a cat," said the Tiger.

"The Boa can break the cat," was the malevolent reply.

"The Boa is strong," acknowledged the white, his tone more friendly than before. "He speaks true words. Now night comes. Let the Boa and the Tiger be friends and talk more of the war and the cattle."

The Cuiba hesitated a second, glancing at the fading day.

"Come," he said then, and turned back toward his camp.

The Tiger's jaws suddenly tightened. For a second he stood and stared, and under his bushy brows glittered a deadly light. He was looking again at the brilliantly striped cloth decking the dirty hide of the Boa, and with the turning of the Cuiba's back he saw a patch of blue, spattered with white stars.

The cloth was an American flag.

CHAPTER IV

THE WHITE MAN'S MOON

IN the flickering light of a night fire the Cuiba and the Guahibo chieftain squatted and talked of war.

Behind them, in a rough half-circle, squatted lesser men, listening with absorbed interest. As always, the followers of the Tiger were grouped at his back; and between them and the subjects of the Boa intervened a small gap. Friendly though the two brown nations might be in general, the individuals of the rivers Tomo and Vichada showed no disposition to fraternize, particularly in view of the none too cordial relations existing between their leaders.

Near at hand hung hammocks, slung at haphazard among the trees; some with a few broad leaves fixed above as protection against any unexpected shower, but most of them uncovered. Only one small clump of the net-woven beds was honored by real shelter, and this shelter consisted merely of a few poles thatched generously with plaintain. It was the regal palace of the Boa. Within its hammocks lay the Boa's five women — one of whom was white.

She had spoken no word, made no further struggle, since the unfeeling rebuff from the man of her

own race. Hope of aid from him was dead. But her fighting spirit still lived, and deep in the dark eyes, which now seemed closed, smouldered a burning flame. Under her lashes she watched the four heavy-handed squaws who formed her guard, and with recently assumed stoicism she waited. Her hands had been freed so that she might eat, and the rebinding had been careless.

The Tiger, speaking in the slow Guahibo which the Cuibas could follow, was telling the Boa the plain truth regarding the forthcoming revolution and his own interest in it, for the excellent reason that the truth happened to be most useful to him just then in blinding the Boa's eyes to the real reason for his presence.

"The war will start with the coming of the rains," he explained. "Now the savanna is too dry. Men would die from thirst, as men have died in other wars. So they wait until the moon after the next. Then the first rains will give enough water to keep armies alive. Then the Spaniards will strike.

"It will be like the wars before. The Venezuelan Spaniards who hate their great chief, Gomez, will strike the Gomez soldiers. The Colombian Spaniards who smell loot will strike with them. The men of Gomez and those not of Gomez will kill one another. Then the Colombians and the Venezuelans will quarrel and kill one another. It is always so. They are fools, fighting over names and gold money.

"While they fight, the Tiger and the Boa can come

from the south unseen. They will run the cattle south. The Spaniards cannot follow. They must stay and fight the other Spaniards.. If any do follow, we kill them. We take their horses and guns. So we are all the more rich."

The Boa's eyes glistened. Cattle, horses, guns, and Spanish blood! He gloated on the prospect.

"But that is not until the rains," he regretted.

"It is so. But the Boa is wise, like the great snake. He knows how to wait."

"The Boa does not like to wait so long."

"Does the Boa like to be shot? "

The Cuiba was silenced. He scratched himself reflectively. The Tiger continued his talk.

"The Spaniards wait. The Tiger waits. The Boa must wait.

"The Spaniards have met at Puerto Carreño, at the mouth of the Meta. I met with them. I know their plans. They think I will fight with them. They are fools. The Tiger is a tiger, not a monkey.

"They meet again at the same place in the moon after this. When the rains come they go north. They strike at San Fernando de Apure. The Tiger comes after them. Many cattle are in the Apure savanna. There will not be so many when the Tiger goes south again.

"Now, the Boa cannot wait here two moons. There is not enough meat. So let the Boa hunt toward home. There is nothing else to do now. I go on to my river.

In one moon I lead my warriors from the Vichada. I leave the Vichada at the place where the river Cumaure enters it. I walk straight north. When I reach the Tomo I cross on balsas and wait on this side. Let the Boa and his men join us there. Then the Cuibas and the Guahibos walk together to swallow cattle."

For the first time the Cuibas gave a sign of their thoughts. From the listening savages broke a deep grunt of unanimous approval. The shrewd proposal coincided in every way with their nomadic instincts: to wander, to hunt, to raid if raiding offered, to keep moving,—with the prospect of richer marauding later under the guidance of the white chief. The Boa himself grinned as he reviewed the idea.

"It is good," he declared. "At the Tomo, north of the Cumaure, we meet. In one moon."

"In one moon."

The Tiger yawned. The Boa scratched again, clicking the gold watches together on his chest. The Tiger frankly eyed them.

"The Boa has three gold moons," he remarked. "Will he trade one?"

The Cuiba considered, contemplating the shiny disks. Tentatively he fingered one.

"For what?" he asked.

"Matches."

The Boa's hand closed avariciously. To him matches were as precious as are diamonds to a civilized man.

"How many? "

"Let me see the moons."

One by one the Cuiba took them off. Gravely the Tiger scanned the dials and the cases. None of the timepieces gave a click. By an unnoticed turning of finger and thumb, however, the white man wound each far enough to start the mechanism. They had merely run down.

"For this one," he offered, holding up the smallest, "I will give so many boxes of matches." He held up three fingers.

"It is a trade," instantly accepted the savage. At a word from the Tiger, one of the Guahibos produced from his pack a carton of smokers' matches. His chief broke it and extracted three little boxes. The Boa, seizing them, squinted greedily at the carton retained.

"I trade these two moons for more matches," he bargained. "They are bigger than that one."

The Tiger shook his head. He had the best watch in the lot; and, though he had obtained a plentiful supply of matches while down the river, they were as valuable to him as to the average wilderness dweller.

"One moon is enough," he refused.

The Cuiba looked oddly at the two watches in his hands, lifted them closer, heard them tick, and grinned.

"These moons talk," he announced. "The moon of the Tiger is a dead moon."

"It is not so." The Tiger gave the stem of his watch another unseen turn and held it forward. "All

are white-man moons, and talk only for white men. Hear this! Those others talk because they were in my hands. Soon they will be dumb again, because you hold them. They will not tell Cuibas what is to come."

The other scowled down at the dials. Even as he looked, one of the watches ceased to tick.

"They tell what is to come?" he wondered.

"It is so. They are magic moons, made by white medicine men. They never lie."

"They did not tell the whites the Boa would kill them at the Tomo," disputed the Boa.

"That was because the white men did not listen to what their moons said. They were fools."

The Boa pondered.

"They were fools," he agreed. "They sat on a rock without searching the trees. They were not wise enough to look for the Cuibas."

"No. I knew it must be so."

The Tiger lifted his watch to his ear. Silence gripped the Cuibas. He seemed to be listening to an unwelcome prophecy. He scowled, and into his face came a look that troubled the Boa.

"What does the moon say?" demanded the Tomo chief.

"It says I shall not take the Boa north with me. Bad fortune is on the Boa. His hunting will be bad. And he will never again see the Tomo."

In the pause that followed, Cuiba heads slowly

turned and Cuiba eyes spoke dismay. Failure in hunting, — a chief accursed, — it was a dire prediction. The chief grew tense and leaned forward, balefully plumbing the bearded visage.

“How?” he rumbled.

“I will ask.”

Turning the watch over, the Tiger drummed a tattoo on the case with his nails. Lifting it again, he let it tick for twenty seconds.

“It is because of the white cat,” he solemnly asserted. “She is bad luck. The men on the Orinoco had made her go with them. She brought death to them. The Boa now makes her go with him. Unless he sends her away he will soon be killed and eaten by a hungry jaguar. His people will find no game. They will starve.”

A mutter passed among the Cuibas. From the Orinoco to this morichal the luck in hunting had been poor indeed, and even here it was none too good. Every man remembered, too, the cough of that jaguar in the near-by bush. The Tiger’s words rang true. The Boa, little more than a fierce animal, reacted as a fierce animal always does: his first instinct was to defend himself by attacking the danger.

“I will send her where she will do no harm!” he malevolently promised, starting up and reaching for his handy spear.

“Wait! The moon says —” Again the Tiger seemed to listen. “It says she is even more danger-

ous if killed. Then she will become a great bat. Every night she will settle on one of the Boa's people and drink his blood to pay for hers. Not until she has bled the last of the Tomo people to death will she leave them. It is better to let her live."

Another mutter. The Boa stood hesitant. He and his people knew all too well what the small blood-sucking vampire could do to a sleeper; and a bat as big as a woman — a vengeful demon exacting merciless retribution — was a horrid vision easy for their primitive minds to conceive.

"The moon says," the Tiger casually added, "that the only way to be safely rid of her is to take her back to the Tomo where she was found. Leave her on the rock and go. If she starves there, that is not the fault of the Boa."

A silence. To retrace their route to that rock would be a task repellent to these wanderers, whose minds all were set forward.

"I go to the Tomo," suggested El Tigre. "I do not want any bad-luck woman with me. But she can go to the Tomo with us. There I can put her on a balsa and let her float to her rock. So both the Boa and the Tiger will be rid of her."

The Cuibas murmured again, approvingly. But the Boa peered keenly at the Tiger. Suspicion crept through his mind. A nasty leer grew on his mouth.

"The Boa will keep the cat," he refused. "He will watch against jaguars. If bad luck walks with us we

drive the cat away. If she dies alone, that is her fault. The big bat then will not follow us."

The Tiger waved a careless hand. He slipped the watch into a pocket and refolded the torn paper over his remaining matches. Handing them back to his man, he spoke loudly, as if to his Guahibos. But he spoke English.

"You, white woman! Keep awake. Keep quiet. If you hear, cough."

The Guahibos, thinking him talking to himself again, showed no perplexity. From the hut of the Boa sounded a single cough.

The Cuiba chief, tired of talk, moved toward his quarters. As he did so, he lifted the dangling flag and mopped his greasy face on it.

The Tiger's eyes glittered again.

CHAPTER V

THE TIGER STRIKES

MEN slept. Some time had crept away since the Cuibas and the Guahibos had taken to their hammocks. The fire, though steadily burning, now gave little light; it had sunk to a smoulder which would last through the night, but which revealed nothing of either camp to the other. And from neither of the sleeping-places came any sound.

As the men had squatted by the fire, so they hung in their hammocks — with a gap between forces. The Tiger and his followers had placed their beds at a little distance from the others, yet near enough to be well within sight of the fire. Almost immediately after the slinging of those hammocks one of the Guahibos had mysteriously vanished; and now, though his net hung at the taut angle betokening a body within, it still was minus its owner. The weighty appearance was caused by the surreptitious substitution of several of the Guahibo packs for human bone and muscle. Since the fire had sunk so low, the look of that hammock did not matter; but it remained unchanged.

The Tiger lay motionless, in the posture of a sleeper. His eyes, though, watched intently toward the fire,

and his wide-awake ears interpreted every creep and swish and footfall in the surrounding woods. Animals, unseen, were reconnoitering the camp. He kept himself well informed of their movements and well assured that they were only animals.

From the hut of the Boa had come no noise indicating violence to the white woman, or to anyone else. A guttural voice had grunted there for a time, and since then all had been quiet. The vision of that dread bat-demon was too vivid in the Cuiba's mind to allow him to risk murder or other crime against the captive before daybreak.

Gradually, in the black undergrowth, an almost inaudible crawling sound approached the hammock of the Tiger. Very quietly, the white chief turned over. A black revolver covered the advancing thing. Presently the movement ceased. From the tangle sounded a tiny hiss.

The Tiger's gun drooped and his hand relaxed. The crawl recommenced. It came nearer, — nearer, — ended beside his hammock. A shadow lifted itself from the ground and squatted beside the waiting head of the Tiger. In an almost soundless whisper the missing Guahibo made his laconic report.

"Boa will strike," he breathed. "Told man come kill you. Says we then join Cuibas; or we be killed too. Then all cattle belong Cuibas. Man comes soon."

"Good," whispered the chief. "Spear him."

A shadowy grin answered.

"Wake the others," instructed El Tigre. "Tell them the Boa strikes. If I am killed the Guahibos get no cattle. They are to lie quiet but be ready."

The scout turned noiselessly, passed from hammock to hammock, breathed his orders in each aroused man's ear. Then he loomed again beside the Tiger.

Stealthily the white man left his bed. Moving deliberately, he took from his pocket the ticking watch and inserted it among the contents of a pack on the ground; reached to his rifle, leaning against a tree close at hand, and laid it on the pack. The Guahibo, watching cat-eyed, met his master's gaze with perfect understanding.

"Rest," commanded his chief, moving his head toward his hammock. "I go."

The Indian, loosely holding his hardwood spear, nonchalantly lay down in the net toward which Murder might even then be advancing. The white sank forward on his hands. Watched by unseen but all-seeing Guahibo eyes, he moved away. Soon he had merged into the impenetrable gloom.

"So, Mister Boa, you're just as snaky as your name," he thought. "And your head's so swelled that you think you'll rustle those cattle with no further assistance from me. Well, we'll see."

Slowly, very slowly, he picked his way in a half-circle toward the lair of the Boa. No prowling animal in the tangle around him moved with such care as he.

Every advance of a hand, every forward motion of a knee was accomplished with utter silence and followed by a pause. His dilated eyes scanned every stalk, every leaf, every vine immediately before them; his ears recorded every sound within their range. He kept his breathing under perfect control, balanced himself with absolute surety. For minutes at a time he remained totally inert, questing with every sense for indication of lurking danger.

He knew well that at any instant some invisible snake might strike its fangs into his flesh; that from the upper branches might drop a savage cat-creature which, mistaking him for peccary or tapir, — or perhaps in full knowledge of what he was, — would tear out his throat in one lightning slash of claws; that venomous scorpion or spider or centipede might attack his hands or ankles. But to these probabilities he gave little thought; they were everyday hazards. The creature against which he was on guard was that deadliest animal of all climes: man.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, he passed onward, guiding himself by occasional glimpses of the dull fire-glow at his left. He was halfway toward his objective, and no menace had revealed itself. Then, as he lifted a hand from the earth, he stopped it; held it rigid, silently set it back again. He had seen nothing new, — he was not sure he had heard anything, — but he felt that something was near. Motionless, he remained exactly where he was.

Unmeasured time snailed away. Something stepped along in an aimless manner, less than a rod to the right. Something else rasped on a high branch. A third thing muttered in a bass note at some unlocated point; a thing which sounded like a man. But the petrified Tiger knew that these three sounds were made by a wandering animal, a cricket, and a tree-toad. None of them had caused his halt. There was something else.

At last, hardly more than a man's length to the left, a faint slither began in the bush. Against the vague sheen of the fire-haze a tall plantain leaf trembled. A taut vine just beyond it snapped with a tiny dull cluck.

The plantain ceased quivering. But the almost inaudible scrape continued. It faded toward the Guahibo hammocks. It died out of the air.

The Tiger drew a deep breath. At the thought of the alert spearman playing possum in his hammock, his beard lifted in a hard smile. But he wasted no time in waiting and listening. His hand came up, reached ahead. Slowly he slid forward.

He moved no less carefully than before, but now he made faster progress; for he no longer paused after each reach. Steadily he worked through the maze. After a time he rose to his knees and peered ahead; sank again, changed direction sharply to the left, and moved on. A little later he paused under a tall fern and studied the hut of the Boa.

He had arrived from the rear. Against the ghost-light of the fire he made out the black silhouettes of the

six hammocks. Which of them held the girl? The Boa probably slept at the front, where his ingress or exit would be unhampered by the nets of the women. And the white girl probably was surrounded by the guarding squaws. Thus she would be in the center.

With no more hesitation, he glided to the hut. Along one edge of it he crept; then, flattening himself still more, headed inward. None of the hammocks showed any sign of wakefulness. But it was hardly likely that the Boa, waiting for the assassination of his guest, would be sound asleep. Toward the front hammock, therefore, the Tiger worked first.

Under two of the laden nets he passed, keenly appraising their huddled contents from below. Both were occupied by squaws. Beyond, the spear of the Boa stood stark on its earth-gripped point, ready to the chief's hand. As the Tiger had guessed, the Cuiba leader lay at the front.

Somebody moved. The Tiger froze. He saw one stockinged leg slide over the edge of a hammock, followed by the other. A shirted body and a tense white face —

From the Boa's bed rumbled a growl. His hand reached for his spear. Up rose his bullet head and thick neck; and, lying half-risen, he snarled at the slave who had dared to try getting up.

Then, from the Guahibo camp, sounded a sudden fierce grunt; a hoarse bubbling gasp; a soggy thump on the ground. The assassin had arrived — and died on the lurking Guahibo javelin.

The Boa leaped up. So did the Tiger.

The Cuiba's face now was turned toward the Gua-hibo camp. But, as the Tiger shot up from the earth, the white girl gave a startled, stifled cry. With snaky speed the Boa whirled.

A harsh hiss, a lightning lift of the spear, met the rush of the Tiger. But as the weapon stabbed for the white man's vitals one big hand struck it aside. The other darted at the Cuiba's stomach. A revolver muzzle buried itself in brown flesh.

A blunt, smothered thud sounded. The Cuiba doubled up and dropped; kicked, writhed, gasped, was still.

The Tiger, who was to have died by a reptilian attack, stood fierce and unharmed. The Boa, a black-rimmed bullet hole in his middle, lay dead.

"Come here!" snapped the Tiger.

With a flash of the eyes he swept the surroundings. Several Cuibas had sprung from bed and, weapons in hand, were peering undecidedly at the hut. The revolver-shot, muffled by the silencing of the muzzle with human flesh, had been only a dull thump. The fight and fall of the Boa had been so sudden, and the gloom within the hut was so dense, that the men now awake could not quite grasp the situation. While their brains groped for comprehension, the Tiger was swiftly acting.

On the jumbled pile of loot at the head of the Boa's hammock his eye had caught a dull gleam of blue steel. Stooping, he seized one of the revolvers so vain-gloriously emptied awhile ago by the Boa. An instant's

groping, and he had its mate and a cartridge-belt. Meanwhile the girl, obeying his imperious summons, had ducked under the intervening squaw's hammock, and now she stood beside him. Her hands were free from their bonds, — had been free for an hour, in fact, — and she was tensely ready for fight or flight.

“ Load it! ” he whispered, passing her a revolver and the belt. Instead, she turned like a wildcat and struck the weapon down on a Cuiba head. The nearest squaw had scrambled out and lunged at her. The brown body crumpled to the earth. The other squaws, now awake but stupidly staring, made no move to leave their hammocks. With nimble fingers the rescued prisoner loaded her gun and snapped its cylinder into place.

Something white, something striped, caught the Tiger's eye: a cloth in the Boa's hammock. It was the flag, which had last been used for bedding. He scowled at it; then swooped it up and stuffed it inside his shirt.

A rush in the farther gloom, and the Guahibos came bounding in a compact body to support their chief. The stifled thud of the shot, the fall of the body, the curt voice of the Tiger, all had reached their ears, and they knew exactly what had taken place. Now every man's pack was on his back, every man's weapons ready, every man's face a mask of menace. With the silence of attacking jaguars they hurled themselves on the standing Cuibas.

Those Cuibas had whirled toward them at the first slap of feet on the ground. They understood now, and with hoarse yells of fury they met the charge. An instant of savage stabbing, — a series of falls, — the Cuibas were down. So were two of the Guahibos, — thrust through by Cuiba spears.

Meanwhile the Tiger and the girl had sprung forth. Every man of the Tomo gang now was on his feet, roused by the hubbub and instantly alive to the fight. But so swiftly had the combat begun and ended, so indistinct were the brown shadows receding northward, that the Boa men blundered against one another in confusion until they glimpsed the clothed white chief and the woman slave. Then they flung themselves at the fleeing pair.

The Tiger halted. Flame crashed from both his fists. A roaring, ragged volley thundered into the leading Cuibas. They reeled, collapsed, some throwing spears even as they fell. Arrows and javelins swished past the fighting white. A few retaliatory shafts whirled back from the Guahibo bowmen who had paused with their chief. And vaguely the Tiger, though firing with concentrated ferocity, felt other gunshots merging with his own. He saw Cuibas fall at whom he had not shot, and from whose bodies protruded no arrows.

Before that blast of fire and lead the killers from the Tomo disappeared. Warriors unscathed, but shocked through with hereditary fear of white-man bullets,

threw themselves prone or dived headlong into concealing bush. Sudden silence dropped on the small battleground. The revolvers were shot out.

Wheeling, the Tiger collided with the girl. He had thought those other shots came from his rifle in the hands of his Guahibo scout. Now, staring for a fleeting second into the set white face so near his own, he knew better.

"Get out!" he jarringly commanded.

The dark eyes burned into his. Then she turned and ran, the hot revolver still clenched in one hand.

A dusky arm reached from the dark and seized her.

"Aquí!" prompted a Guahibo voice. The hand drew her swiftly ahead through the gloomy labyrinth, and she blindly followed its guidance. At her heels loped the Tiger, fumblingly reloading his guns as he moved, and growling something under his breath.

"You little fighting fool!" he was muttering. And his mumble held a grudging note of admiration.

Stumbling over snaky vines, colliding with unseen trees, tearing cloth and skin on spiky thorns, the escaping line forced its way southward. Behind it sounded crashing of bushes, yells of rage, grunts and calls, as the Cuibas recovered from their panic and swarmed to pursue. The Guahibos muttered and the Tiger glared back, but none paused. All fought toward the open savanna.

At length, bruised and bleeding and breathing hard, they emerged from the ensnaring morichal. Fresh air

struck their hot bodies; light and space opened around them. The light was only that of tropic stars and a waning moon, but it was enough to give vision and direction. Facing to the right, they drove themselves eastward at a run.

The Indian who had guided the girl released his hold. She ran free, the revolver still in one hand, the cartridge-belt swinging in the other. The Tiger, trailing behind, spoke gruffly.

"Give me that belt!"

"I'll carry it," she refused. With the words she tried to fling the belt around her and buckle it. Her speed lessened.

The Tiger jammed his guns into their holsters, sprinted, and tore the heavy strap from her.

"Keep running!" he snapped. His left hand closed on her right and twisted the revolver from it. She panted a protest, but sped on. He dropped behind, protecting her back. In a couple of strides he had the belt around his own body and her gun inside his waistband, where the other empty one had hung since he took it from the Boa's plunder.

Above the impacts of their speeding feet sounded a rumble of voices from the morichal. The Cuibas had emerged and sighted the dim moving blot to the eastward. The Tiger looked back and slowed his pace. The Guahibos also checked, drawing arrows from quivers.

"Run!" barked their chief, without looking at

them. Grudgingly they increased speed again. The Tiger still lagged.

Came a whispering sound in the air, and into the soil around them plunged long arrows. The Tiger halted. His guns leaped and spat. Against the vague bulk of the morichal he could not see any target, but he sprayed its northern end with lead. A wailing howl told of at least one hit.

"Ha!" he chuckled. He ran on again, reloading his own guns but leaving the others untouched. Two were all he could take care of just now.

Something whined viciously overhead. From the morichal cracked sharp reports. From the Guahibos broke startled grunts, and from their chief an explosive curse. The Cuibas had brought with them from the Boa's hut the four rifles captured in their massacre of the whites at the Tomo; and, having marked the revolver-flashes of the Tiger, they now were opening a counter-fire.

Clumsy riflemen though they were, shooting without sights and probably shutting their eyes before pulling triggers, they sent their first volley dangerously near. They had instinctively pointed straight, and the military crack of the reports told the Tiger that the guns were of such high power as to give an almost flat trajectory, holding the bullets low.

"To the left!" he ordered. "Juan! To me!"

The runners swerved and pelted northward — all but Juan, the scout who had brought to his chief the news of the murder plot, and who had been left in

charge of the Tiger's rifle. He still held that rifle, which had not spoken tonight. With it, he padded back to his lord.

"Go!" grunted the white, snatching the rifle. As the Indian obeyed, he faced back toward the morichal. And while his companions faded into the dimness at the left, his repeater flashed and roared in the same line of retreat which had hitherto been followed.

Whether any of his bullets stopped in a Cuiba body he did not know. He did know, though, that the terrifying reports held the Tomo men from starting pursuit. So he fired deliberately, aiming low, hoping to hit, and shifting the muzzle a trifle sidewise after each discharge. Not until the firing-pin clicked uselessly under the hammer did he cease.

"Guess that'll hold you a few minutes," he muttered. Turning his face northward, he found that the rest of his party had vanished.

"To the right!" he bellowed. No sound came back. But he was sure they had heard and heeded, and that they were once more heading for the Orinoco. Now to overtake them, to veer off behind the nearest hill, and —

Something struck him. Other things whined. Flashes had leaped from the edge of the morichal, and those spiteful high-velocity cracks snapped across the savanna.

The Tiger jerked half around. His rifle dropped. His body lurched sidewise and sprawled on the hard-baked earth.

CHAPTER VI

GHOSTS MARCH

FOR a few seconds the white chief of the Guahibos lay where he had fallen.

Flame-stars blazed again on the black loom of the morichal. Death whined once more, and the rifle-reports ripped over the silent open land. Again and again they winked and cracked. At the second volley the Tiger struggled up to a sit.

No sound came from him. He gripped his left arm at the elbow; then tore from it the rags of his thorn-slashed sleeve and peered close at the swiftly spreading stain darkening the skin; grasped his wrist, and worked the arm back and forth.

"Uh-huh. Gone for good," he muttered, as callously as if the arm were that of a Cuiba. "Oh, well."

Heedless of the hiss of high bullets and the venomous *rrrup* of low ones boring grass roots, he pulled from under his tattered shirt the flag. Biting one end of it, he swathed his wound with the cloth, looping and winding it tightly over itself; passed its loose end around the other, and, with fist and teeth, knotted it.

"There. Maybe you'll do me some good for once, you red-and-white rag!" he rumbled. "It'll be the first time. Now for rearguard action!"

One by one, using his knees to hold the weapons, he fumbled cartridges from his own belt into each of his revolvers; then, from the newly captured strap, into the guns of his murdered countrymen.

"Tenderfeet!" he sneered. "Bringing dinky little thirty-eight guns into a forty-four country. The best man in your outfit was the woman. Uses her head. Game as they make 'em. Well, let's go."

The ragged rifle fire had ceased. With all his revolvers loaded and one gripped in his good right hand, he stood a half-minute glowering at the morichal. He spied no advancing forms. So he sheathed the weapon, picked up his rifle, and took his bearings. Then, at a tired lope, he pushed east by a little north, heading for where his party might be.

Soon he had to slow down. His legs lacked drive; his shattered arm and his rifle impeded him. Nowhere, ahead or behind, could he see or hear men. Beside him stood one of the stunted dry trees, its gnarled branches snaky in the dusk. With a heave he flung the rifle upward among the limbs. Lightened by several pounds, he picked up speed.

But after another hundred yards or so he lagged again. A few strides more, and he stopped. Grasping his useless hand, he found it steadily dripping. The awkwardly fastened flag was not tight enough.

"Might have known it," was his bitter comment. "Too fat and clumsy, like the people that made you. A good stout string would be worth a hundred of you.

Got to shut off this leak somehow. It's leaving a plain trail."

He tried tearing a strip from the remnant of his trousers, but the thin old cloth gave altogether too readily. He threw the scrap down; then picked it up and stuffed it into a side pocket, safe from tracking eyes. His fingers became entangled in a snarl of other cloth. He drew it out.

"Ho! The little woman's trail-sign!" He shook out the strong little strip of brown. "By thunder, it's just the thing!"

Twisting the cloth by rolling it down one leg, he lifted and looped it above the elbow. Thin though it was, it was tough as rawhide; and, working with fist and teeth as before, he pulled it so tight that it sank deep into the muscles. Another minute's toil, and it was tied in an unyielding knot. Doubling the arm to increase the pressure, he shoved the hand within his shirt-front. Again he moved on, — this time at a walk.

Steadily, doggedly, he pushed ahead, lifting his eyes now and then to the stars to hold his course. Before long he heard, somewhat to his right, a few vague murmurs like voices of hunters; but he did not pause. His own men would hardly be at that point. If men were there at all — if the sound was not merely one of the mysterious noises of the wilderness — they were vengeful Cuibas attempting to find some trace of the vanished seven. Until daylight they could discover no

tangible mark except, perhaps, their own spent arrows. Therefore the wounded Tiger ignored them.

Where were his Guahibos? The question loomed larger at every step. He could not call to them, with that pack of human bloodhounds also within earshot. He could not be at all sure of where they were; whether they had stopped to wait, continued straight eastward, or veered off at a wrong slant. He knew all too well the South American Indian's dangerous tendency to travel on without a thought for the man behind — to take for granted that man's ability to follow. He realized that they carried all the food, that they did not know of his wound, and —

The thought struck him like a blow. There was no water!

They had drunk freely at the stagnant morichal, hours ago. But they had not filled bottles. No water nearer than the Orinoco, — all the men wearied by a blistering day's march, — a woman, probably on the point of collapse from her hardships, — himself wounded and astray! And another torrid day only a few hours off, — a day in which the Tomo killers would hunt them and the sun would torture their dried-out bodies, — a day which, unless they could reach that far-off river, would be their last. Already his throat was dry.

"Mister Boa," he muttered through his teeth, "*you* died easy! "

His eyes lifted again. He changed his course to

due east. Except when forced to detour for some hill, he would hold that course. And he would neither rest nor hunt longer for the others. With the stars and the moon for his guides, he must drive himself on unceasingly through the night. Before that red-hot sun could heave itself up and hurl its killing heat at him he must cover all the ground he could. So must the others, if they knew enough. Those who could not reach the river must die, as others had died on the baked plains. It was every man for himself now.

Plod, plod, plod. Ahead bulked a hill. It was small, and he was glad, for he need not waste steps in a long swing around it. Toward its southern end he deflected, and with mechanical stride he pegged along past it and on into the open.

One by one the little scattered trees crept past. One by one the occasional shadowy hills grew slowly larger, became solid, gradually slipped behind him, and were gone and forgotten. From them sometimes came weird sounds: voices of unseen, unknown beasts or birds or reptiles of the night, horrid, unhuman. If any of those creatures heeded his passage, if any moved to follow, he did not know it; they did not come far. Perhaps their instincts warned them that the lean thing shambling along out there was too deadly to be assailed.

The stars floated westward, new ones gliding up over the rim of the earth. The lopsided moon drifted farther and farther back and down. He never paused. His legs had become automatic machines, working away

without volition. His body was drugged, deadened with the toxic poisons generated by the past day's gruelling march and the sleepless night. His throat was aflame with thirst, his arm with pain, his brain with a growing fever. But his gaunt face was set eastward, his eyes fixed in a glazed stare, his will hard as stone. His feet swished on.

Plod, plod, plod. Swish, swish, swish. The swishing of those feet grew louder, louder, merged into a steady swing of other feet — many others. He was no longer alone. Behind him marched ghosts.

Rank after rank of them tramped there, — set-jawed, level-eyed men bearing packs and rifles, marching without music and without a flag: a grim machine forging ahead with measured cadence toward the front line. They were men who never again would walk in the body: men whose bodies long since, on another continent, had been mangled by shells, riddled by machine-gun bullets, poisoned by gas, charred by streams of flame; men who once had marched behind him to death, and who now had gathered from the dead past and from the empty dark to escort him through the Valley of the Shadow. Never a word said they. But their eyes were always on his back, and the inexorable swing of their shadowy feet pushed his own ahead without a break.

An intolerable weight grew on his waist. His one good hand fumbled at the double cartridge belts, at the two pairs of revolvers. He would throw them away.

He could not carry them farther. One of the guns came out — but he did not drop it. The chill eyes of those silent men behind bored into his soul. Throw away his guns, when they carried theirs — and packs too — without a whimper? Jamming the weapon back into its holster, cursing savagely, he swung ahead.

The moon was gone. The stars were a little pale. Feet were losing cadence. Men were straggling. It would not do! The forced night march must not fail of its objective. If they were not in position by dawn —

“Close up!” he rasped, his breath whistling in his throat. “Up on the line! What d’ye think this is — a practice march? Sergeants, give those yellow-bellied mess-hounds the boot! Give ’em the butt! Close ’em up!”

The feet swished in rhythm again. The east grew more pale. They *must* make it! They must — Somebody had a flag. That flag must be up before sunrise. Those were the orders. The shell-shattered town must be held by American troops at dawn. If only he could shake off that killing weight —

“Close up! What’s the matter with you men? You blasted horse-marines —”

The sun was coming! Noise was breaking loose: parrot-like squawks, queer croaks and hoots and howls, as if animals greeted day. Red, flaming red, was in the sky. The Germans had fired the town! And his men were not there.

“Company! Double-time — march!” he roared.

He broke into a reeling run. The flag — where was the flag? On his arm — he carried it himself! As he pounded onward he unwrapped it, wincing at the pain of his swollen arm, but shaking the flag free. Behind him the feet slithered louder, louder, in a scraping rush of worn soles. Before him swam a crazy-looking low tree, almost leafless. It would do. The flag should go up!

Somehow he fastened it to a crooked branch. In the dawn wind it flapped soggily, soaked through with a wet red stain. But it was up —

The tree grew huge. Its branches became writhing tentacles, reaching out for the vanished stars. It loomed higher, blacker, spreading across the red sky, blotting out everything. He was falling —

The sun, shooting up over the blue edge of the far-off Cerro Sipapo, found, among the little savanna trees, one from whose lowest limb slowly fluttered a crimsoned flag; and, motionless on the ground under it, a torn wreck of a white man belted with four guns.

CHAPTER VII

THE WAY OF THE INDIAN

THE ring of black, hump-shouldered, hideous-headed birds grew impatient. For hours they had waited, croaking evilly to one another, for the man to die. He was not yet dead. At times he seemed to be, and the ring narrowed; the ugly heads thrust forward, the talons took a preliminary grip on the earth, the long wings lifted for a scrambling lunge. But then he would twist and turn, and through his set teeth would come a half-conscious moan; and the cordon would widen with a sudden flopping of startled ungainly bodies. Now the fierce sun was almost at the zenith, and the repeated balking of their ravenous hunger exasperated them.

One of them flapped noisily aloft and again attacked the dry red flag dangling over the man. It was not food, but it was something on which to vent spite. Time and again, in the hours since sunrise had revealed the man to them, they had struck that cloth with beak and claw; and now it hung in rents. Vindictively the latest assailant raked it with crooked talons. For the first time, the flag retaliated.

It caught those claws in a couple of rips left by previous attackers. It snarled itself around them and

held like a snare. It threw the trapped vulture off balance and over on its back, where its terrified struggles only enmeshed its feet the more. Upside down, flapping furiously, croaking frenziedly, the bird fought to free itself. Its hammering wings pounded the quiet air in loud slaps. From its amazed companions burst a raucous *whoof* of alarm.

The man's eyes dragged open. Torture of sun, of fever, of gnawing thirst, now had overcome the stupor of utter exhaustion. The wing-blows pounding at his ear-drums had kicked his consciousness awake. Above, he beheld an uncouth fiend fighting the flag. Around, he glimpsed its fellow fiends.

He struggled up to a sit. His right hand dropped and rose. A shot roared. The vulture lengthened and hung limp.

Up to his feet he reeled. The black ring had broken and fled, tumbling crazily up into the air. But, his face contracted with rage, he emptied his weapon after them. He hit nothing. The veering shapes rushed upward until they were mere specks in the high blue.

With the barrel of the empty weapon he savagely pounded the dead thing which had defiled the flag with its loathsome touch. Sheathing the weapon, he clutched the body and tore it loose. In maniacal wrath he battered it against the tree-trunk. Then he flung it furiously on the ground.

His red eyes glared around him. He saw no living thing. A tiny breeze came and went, swaying the flag

gently against his hot head. He looked up, and nodded as if it had spoken.

"That's right," he mouthed. "We've got to go."

Again he glowered through the pink haze wavering before him. To go, — yes. But where?

"East," something prompted.

But which way was east? Nothing pointed the way. He had no compass. Heat-haze enveloped the horizon landmarks. The sun was almost at noon. Which way was it moving? Only the creeping shadows could tell him. He must wait until he knew.

Staggering to a branch-shadow, he laid at its edge a cartridge plucked from a belt. Beside it he slumped down, waiting. While he waited he somberly contemplated his smashed elbow and the tight brown strip which formed a ring of pain above it. After a minute or two he drew another cartridge, bit the bullet, worked it from its shell, dropped the shell, chewed on the lead. A little — very little — moisture gathered in his parched mouth. His thick tongue became a tongue, instead of a block of dry wood. But his thirst grew all the more keen.

The pain of the constricted arm was unbearable. He got out a knife and cut the binding strip. The wound, long dried by the air and sun, remained unwet. The pain, though, seemed redoubled as the pinched veins and arteries struggled to resume functioning. Clenching his teeth on the bullet, he lurched up.

The shadow had moved. Concentrating on it, he

located the east. Lifelessly he turned, and to the flag he dragged his feet. Fumbling, he unfastened it and took it down.

Ghosts were gathering around him again, — but not those of the men of the night. These were tormenting wraiths of another past. Faces swam in the red mist; voices spoke, pleading, deriding, reviling, weeping. With them came a cry from behind him, a hoarse call:

“ Capitán! ”

There, coming through the far-scattered thin trees, was a little knot of human figures. He heard the call, but did not heed it. Ghost voices, real voices, all were one to him. Something commanded: “ East! ” His feet began to move — east.

The men behind came a little faster. They did not run, — they could not run. The limit of their speed was a more rapid walk than his own, and this they held. Their hard brown faces hardened still more as they studied the infirm gait of the man ahead; their tight-lidded eyes glanced at one another; but they wasted no breath in talk.

The slender dark-haired woman who walked with them also studied the grim figure of the Tiger, but her set lips did not move. Her legs were even more weary than those of the men; her face was growing more and more pinched; her throat was aflame, her head aching frightfully from sun. Yet her hollow eyes were steady and her little jaw firm, and she came on at the same

pace as the others. Too, she saw more clearly than the Indians the helpless left arm and the stained flag drooping from the right fist. And while the Indian faces stayed hard, hers softened in mingled concern, wonder, and pity.

Swish, swish, swish. The following feet closed in on the Tiger. He did not look behind. At the same uncertain but unceasing gait he headed east. He did not see the woman come up beside him, scan his elbow critically, and shake her head. He did not see the Guahibos, watching both him and her, catch that little headshake and glance at one another again. He was seeing only phantoms. To the phantoms he muttered, his dry tongue working stiffly.

"Fine wife for an officer, you are!" he grated. "Fine wife for any man! Thought war-time was play-time, did you? Chance for you to play fast and loose while I was across the water! Hit the high spots with the stay-at-home heroes while your husband fought for you in mud and blood. If I lived to come back you'd tell me any old thing and I'd believe it. Didn't know I was being invalided home, did you? And now you're caught dead to rights. This finishes you. Pack and get out! Out! Not another word! Out!"

The silent woman beside him heard all. She studied him anew, — the strong-jawed profile, the burning eyes, the straight line across the shoulders. Into her wan face came comprehension.

Swish, swish, swish. On, and on, and on into the east.

"You'll marry her, Dixon!" rasped the parched voice. "She'll get her divorce, — I'll see to that. And I'll see that you make good, you white-livered pup! You're the one that started this thing after I went overseas. Don't think you can sidestep now. Your Washington pull kept you safe from the Heinies, but it doesn't make you bullet-proof. You'll go through with this thing like a man, even if you never were one. If you try to duck you're dead!"

The Guahibos, their swollen tongues protruding from cracked lips, stared queerly at him but gave no grunt of inquiry. The woman did not stare. Her look of understanding grew.

"Plucked! Canned!" rambled the voice, speaking with increasing difficulty. "Fired from the army of the U. S. A.! For what? 'Army being reduced — excellent record but — wounds incapacitate — be given a year's pay — trust you hold yourself ready train troops in case any further emergency — flag — ' Ha ha ha!" He cackled shrilly. "Eight years under the flag — overseas service — wounds — and now I'm plucked! And while I'm kicked out, Dixon's promoted! The soft-soaping swivel-chair rider! Ye gods! And I'll be ready to train troops for the flag, will I? To hell with the flag!"

Consciously or otherwise, he dropped the vulture-torn rag. A Guahibo made a wheezing grunt, but none stooped to pick up the discarded cloth. The woman looked, saw, moved aside, stopped and gathered the flag into her hands. Carefully she folded it.

Straightening up, she staggered. For a few steps she groped blindly, dazed by heat. Then, slipping the flag under her belt, she caught her short but dogged stride again. As her sight cleared, her mouth set in a thinner line. With one accord the wordless Guahibos had shaken off their packs and thrown them down. Now they were moving ahead a little faster, leaving their maimed chief behind.

She forced herself to a run. From the upper belt of the fever-blinded Tiger she jerked the pair of .38 guns.

"Halt!" she panted. The Indians looked back — into the muzzles of the twin thirty-eights.

"Aquí!" she commanded, gesturing to the abandoned packs.

They stopped. A mutter ran among them. They watched her in ugly fashion, reading her determined face. The Tiger lurched straight on.

Growling, the brown men slouched back. As they picked up the packs they eyed her narrowly, their bodies tense for a spring. But the guns and the resolute poise of their owner dominated them. They shouldered the burdens, faced forward, and adopted the pace of the white man. Once more the little band, led by the crazed Tiger and backed now by the armed woman, plodded on in its bitter march to the river.

Step, step, step, in staggering swing. The hot ground snailed beneath and behind mechanically moving feet, yet eternally stretched before. The murderous sun crept farther and farther back and down, yet

grew even more intolerable. Vision became blurred; brain and reason, bludgeoned almost into insensibility by heat and fatigue, virtually ceased to function. At length remained little but instinct and will; instinct of direction to the Indians, will to move and live to the whites, — and, to the girl, determination to retain control. When at last the Tiger, now long silent, wandered from the course and would have misled them all, she compelled the brown men still to follow him; then, gropingly grasping the situation, corrected her commands and gave to the Guahibos the guidance. But, as before, she held them to the gait of their stricken capitán.

Step, step, step; never ending, never to end, — yet, finally, ended. In the last light of sunset the Indians stumbled out on a sloping rock laved by the tawny Orinoco. Behind, the half-clothed whites reeled through the shore growth of trees; lurching, tripping, bumping into trunks and stones and each other, yet somehow carrying on.

With unhuman grunts the aborigines dropped packs, weapons, everything, and lunged down the rock to the water. Reaching it, they fell in — heedless of danger from the man-mutilating caribe fish and the ever dreaded sting-ray — and, clinging by finger-tips to the stone, drank hoggishly. Above them the man and the woman emerged from the green maze and, holding themselves upright only by will-power, came slipping and sliding down the slope.

In a moment they too were in the water, letting its wetness and comparative coolness seep into their pores. But, unlike the Indians, they swallowed little. Though their tortured tissues fiercely demanded that they drink and drink and drink, their trained brains warned them to combat the impulse; and, only half aware of what they were about, they heeded that caution.

The long march at last was done. The Cuibas had never sighted the little group. Perhaps they had not even tried, after finding that the trail of the fighting fugitives was heading steadily into the waterless east, to run them down. The Guahibos, who, with true Indian dislike of night travel, had slept somewhere on the open plain through the balance of the night while their chief marched with ghosts, now were in somewhat better condition than the wounded Tiger; but they soon would not be, if they continued to gorge on river water.

Soon the Tiger himself and the woman began to revive and look about with clearer eyes. After a half-observing survey of the surroundings the pair looked at each other.

"We're here," he mumbled. "How'd we make it?"

"The Indians," she answered, wearily. "I let them lead when we neared the river. They found their old track."

"Good boys," he nodded. "Faithful."

"Faithful?" She smiled wanly. "They tried to leave you."

"Uh? Tried to? Then why didn't they do it?"

"I told them not to."

He scowled in a puzzled way. He knew well that deserting Guahibos would hardly heed the request of any mere woman. She took another sip of water, shut her lips against more, and drew herself languidly up on the stone. As she moved he saw a revolver-butt protruding from each side pocket of her khaki breeches. His brows lifted, his face cleared, and he gave the Guahibos an unpleasant look of complete understanding.

With another gulp of water, he tried to lift himself back up the slope. His feet slipped on the slimy slant below, and his useless arm refused to aid him. She moved to him, grasped his left shoulder, and pulled. He struggled out.

His helplessness angered him. So did the expression on the visages of the Guahibos, who now had lifted their heads to watch. Those faces held a calculating look, as if the brains behind them were coldly estimating the vital force remaining in his weakened body.

"Out of that!" he snarled. "You fools! You hogs! Get out of that water!"

The brown eyes glinted. The brown faces deliberately dipped and guzzled more of the muddy liquid. But the eyes hung on him, watching, like those of fierce beasts testing the dominance of a master.

With a savage curse he lunged at them — and tottered, on the verge of falling. He was done. The cool-

ing immersion had not restored the strength consumed by the ravages of the past thirty-six hours. Bodily vigor and mental force were spent. His cold gray eye, now dull, had lost its power. These brown men were creatures of the tropic wilds; and the wilderness yields no obedience to the weak.

"Sit down," came the quiet voice of the woman. "You have fever, and you are starving. You'd better let the animals wallow and attend to yourself."

For a moment he glared and fought his weakness. Then he turned from the "animals," took a few uncertain steps upward, and sank on the stone.

"Got to eat," he acquiesced faintly. "All in."

Somehow she ascended the slope and slid a pack down to him. Sinking beside him, she gave him remnants of cassava-cakes and dry fish, and with other fragments in her hands she munched at the dry provender. He chewed tiredly awhile, then desisted.

"Can't eat this stuff now," he muttered. "Makes me sick. Got to sleep." With a shallow sigh he lay back and relaxed.

She continued eating, forcing down the crude fare without relish but with determination. The Indians, their appetites aroused by the sight, emerged and climbed over and down into the hidden canoe of their erstwhile commander. The whites might eat scraps if they wished, but they themselves would feed on the larger cakes and fish-slabs in the cabin. And they did.

The woman gave no attention to their movements.

She had seen the curved roof of the dugout, but brain and body now were too numb from fatigue to let her care what the brown men did. Crawling to the water, she drank again; then returned. Dully she felt that she must dress the Tiger's shattered elbow; but the power to concentrate any longer on anything was gone. Presently she swayed, nodded, tried to sit up again, and then slumped down.

When the Guahibos came out again, after gorging on food as they had on water, they found the man and the woman lying quiet on the stone, shadowy forms in the dusk. They gave them only an uninterested glance. Up the slope they crept sluggishly to the place where they had dropped their weapons. There they stayed. As all the hammocks had been abandoned at the Boa's camp, they now must sleep on either soil or rock. And, since the bare rock harbored none of the venomous things which might lurk in the green growth beyond, they chose that hard but warm surface for their bed.

Sleep had overpowered the pair of whites. Absolute unconsciousness should also have come upon the Indians, now that they had reached the end of their journey and stuffed themselves. But it did not. Before long they began to twist and groan. Their gorge had been too complete. They became violently sick.

The lopsided moon came up and found on the rock two still figures and five writhing ones. It was two hours high before the spasms of the sick men quieted. Then one of them began to talk in droning monotone

to his miserable mates. Low grunts of assent punctuated his speech.

The white-man moon which the Tiger had bought from the Boa had told the truth, he said. The white cat was evil luck. The men who brought her up this river all had died. The Boa had taken her, and he had been killed. As soon as the Guahibos rushed to help the Tiger take her from the Cuibas, two of them had been slain — two of their best: Tomás, the steersman, and Mateo, the bowman, who had found the little brown bottle holding the bit of paper. And the Tiger himself, halting to cover the escape of the woman, had been crippled by a bullet, — though everybody knew Cuibas could not shoot guns straight.

Then the evil spell of the woman had blinded the Tiger and made him mad, so that he abandoned them and walked east alone all night instead of coming to them. And now he was broken, and he would die; and the woman would stay with him to make sure he did die. And they themselves were horribly sick. Why? They had done nothing but drink plenty of water and eat the usual travel food. It was the woman! She would make them all die.

She ought to be killed. But the golden white-man moon had told the Tiger that if she was killed she would become worse than before; a terrible blood-sucking demon. So they must not kill her. But they could save themselves by leaving her there asleep. She was too tired to know they went, if they went now, under the moon.

El Tigre? They could leave him there too. There was no use in killing him before they went. He had been a hard chief in some ways, but he never had been cruel; indeed, he had been quite a good chief, and the Guahibos had prospered under him. But now he was no longer a chief. He was no longer a man. He was only a broken wreck, and soon he would be food for the black zamuros. He could do them no more good. So they must save themselves, and lose no time about it.

They agreed. Down the rock they dragged themselves. Into the canoe they wearily dropped. Out on the stone they laid some cassava and fish for their doomed capitán. Then, stealthily, they eased the boat out into the stream. Stroking quietly, they slid up past the unconscious couple. In a few more minutes they were gone.

And the moon, sailing on, watched them paddle with shaky arms and hanging heads into the south, deserting forever the man who had been their king and the woman who had destroyed him.

CHAPTER VIII

A HUNDRED PESOS

THE Tiger sat up, shivering.

The sun had risen, but the rock under him was cold from the long night. All through the twelve hours of equatorial darkness he had lain on it in his water-soaked rags, and now he was chilled to the marrow. It was not the frigidity of his tropic-thinned blood, however, that had waked him, but the vindictive attacks of myriad mosquitoes aroused by sunrise. The merciless hordes, which are at their fiendish worst in the Atures-Maipures section of the Orinoco, were stinging every inch of exposed skin.

He slapped a score of them to death and pitched to his feet. For a moment he peered down at the woman. She had rolled over and buried her face in her half-clad arms; but he saw her quiver and twitch at times, and knew she was partly awake and as cold as he.

His heavy eyes lifted and drifted around. All at once they narrowed, hardened, became more alert. He had discovered the absence of the Indians.

With a startled movement he faced toward the inlet where the canoe had lain. Stunned, he stared at the little pile of cassava and fish. His beard bristled; a red wave of wrath swept over his face. His gaze

ranged up and down the empty river. Presently his shoulders drooped, and he nodded apathetically.

" Might have known it," he muttered.

The woman's head lifted. She looked at his back; observed his dejected attitude; followed his gaze to the heap of food; glanced quickly around, and scrambled up, striking mosquitoes from her face.

" Gone? " she asked, vaguely.

" Gone," he echoed, turning with a crooked smile.

" We're stranded."

" And they — won't come back? "

" Never. I know 'em. They've ditched me for good."

Soberly she regarded him. Then, with a little lift of the chin, she laughed in a short, undaunted way.

" Life is just one thing after another, isn't it? What shall we do? "

" Eat, I guess. That's the only thing in sight."

Waving at mosquitoes, he moved to the food; looked closely at the pile; shook his head, fumbled at a pocket, and drew out a soggy little box.

" Hoped they'd had the decency to leave some matches, but they carried 'em all away; all but these in my clothes, and they're soaked. The rats! Damn their rotten souls! Not even my own countrymen would do me a dirtier trick! "

She searched his eyes an instant before answering. Then, in an even tone, she said: " There's nothing to cook, anyway. And you can dry out those you have."

"Don't I know it?" was his morose retort. "But a fire would smoke off these devilish bugs. Oh, well. Let's eat."

Listlessly he sank down. She stepped toward him, but halted as if struck by a sudden thought. Scanning the top of the rock, she spied an abandoned pack. Up the slope she went, and while he moodily picked at the cassava she walked about at the top. Presently she returned, bearing a green-papered package and something gleaming golden in the sun.

"Here are dry matches," she announced. "They were in a little pack — and this with them." Opening the other hand, she showed the watch bought from the Boa.

"Oh. Fine! That's my own pack, — *Ciro* carried it. That watch yours?"

"It was *Will's* — my brother's."

"Keep it. Eat. I'll get wood."

Up the incline he went in turn, stooping forward, legs trembling, face contorted with the pain of a splitting headache and his festering arm. Down again he came after a time, a bundle of dry sticks clutched at his breast. She arranged the sticks and ignited them. Watching, he nodded.

"You observe things," he said. "You make that fire in *Orinoco* style: wagon-wheel circle, with fire at the hub."

Her drawn face lightened in a real smile.

"It's my first attempt," she laughed, as delightedly

as if she had achieved a notable feat. "I've noticed how the cook did it, and it's really a sensible way when the wood's dry."

He seemed not to hear. He was looking down into the smiling face upturned to his as if he suddenly saw it for the first time; as if he had just perceived the dimpling girlishness of the curving mouth, the little tilted nose, the laughing eyes and the rumpled dark hair. Their gaze held steady while the flame grew and took hold of the wood. Then she let her head droop, a little flush stealing across her bruised cheeks.

"That's so," he said vaguely. "Move over into the smoke." And he squatted and resumed chewing the tasteless cassava. With a sidelong glance at him, she moved and began eating in her turn.

"The Indians must have been terribly sick before they went," she remarked. "You saw — up there?"

He gave a grim nod and a hard chuckle.

"Glad of it," was his vengeful comment. "The fools *would* drink. They kill themselves that way, but they never learn. Starve and stuff, thirst and bloat, blaming sickness and death on bad luck or some demon. Well, I'm through with 'em. This arm — " His teeth clicked shut.

"It is very bad," she told him gravely. "Just what did you do to it?"

"Got a bullet through the elbow. Cuibas nailed me with a chance shot. Had to tie it up tight to stop the leak. Got a touch of fever or something while I

walked — went to sleep on my feet, maybe; I don't remember much about it, and my head aches too hard now to try to think. Guess I got the cord too tight and left it on too long."

"When did you take it off?"

"I don't remember. Guess it was when I started on again after resting."

Her brows puckered. She had seen him starting on again, and she knew how long that had been after the fight at the morichal. But she kept her thoughts to herself. They ate, and, with some difficulty, drank long from the river. By this time their clothing was nearly dried on them by the hot sun and the fire. But the stained flag folded under her belt still was soggy. Saying nothing, she soaked it in the river, washed it out hastily, spread it on the stone to dry, and returned to the refuge of the smoke.

"I suppose you worship that thing, don't you?" he asked cynically.

A quick look and a tightening of the lips, as if she were repressing a pointed reply, followed his scoff. When she spoke her tone was quiet but firm.

"I respect the flag. All my family has served under it — and so have I."

"You? How?"

"With the Red Cross."

"Oh. Stayed at home and rolled bandages."

"No. We all were in France. I have assisted at operations and — other work of the sort."

He looked at her cornerwise. After a thoughtful interval he said:

"I see. Might have suspected it. There's a good bit of iron in your blood. By the way, who are you?"

"Jean Stuart. Father is — was — Doctor Leonard Stuart, the noted surgeon. He went over with the Medical Corps. Phil, my oldest brother, was in the air service. He was killed — fighting for the flag. Harley and Will both took to the medical branch, like father and me."

"They were your brothers, too?"

"Yes."

She looked up the man-killing Orinoco — southward, toward the invisible Tomo where father and brothers had died — and set her teeth into her lip.

"I see," he said, watching her. "Never mind telling me what happened up yonder. I know. Found your bottle. But why did you come to this Godforsaken place?"

"We — father didn't resume practice after the war. He didn't need to, and he had always wanted to travel into wild places; to explore and study customs, and so on. He and Harley went on one long trip — up into northern British Columbia — and after they got back he decided to come down here; he said this country had been very little explored, and there should be many interesting things here. So — we came. Harley was a very good amateur naturalist, and Will was a keen botanist, and father's hobby was anthropology,

and I wouldn't stay at home, so they appointed me as the recorder of the trip."

"A well rounded expedition. But a tough part of the world to adventure in."

She soberly pushed the fire-sticks nearer together. There was a little silence. Abruptly she asked:

"Are you the Tiger?"

"I am." His tone was brusque. "How do you know?"

"The Indians called you El Tigre. And our sailors spoke about you before — before we reached the Tomo."

"Uh-huh. Gave me a rough reputation, too. I've earned it."

"They said," she answered steadily, "that you were a 'renegado'; a North American gone bad, who lived among Indians and made them more fierce and dangerous than they would have been without you. But you don't seem so bad."

"I'm sick. That's why," was his morose retort. "Sick and busted, and nobody left to fight with — but you."

She looked straight into the fire. Another silence fell.

"Since you're a sort of assistant surgeon," he added after a time, "what's your idea about this arm?"

"Since you ask me," she quietly returned, "I will tell you there is no hope for it. You must lose it, or you will die."

His jaw set. Then he laughed harshly.

"All right. I'm used to losing things. While the other's still good, let's go."

"Go where? How?"

"Down river. You came down here on a Cuiba balsa, didn't you,—a little raft? Of course. The balsas are still here. I think we can make it to Atures — if we don't get dragged over the fall. If we live I'll get you over to Benito's place, and then you can go on down the river in your launch. If not, we'll pass out fighting, not quitting. Come on."

He clambered up the slope, moving now with purposeful steps. She stood a moment longer, looking dubiously at the rock-studded stream; then reached to the wet flag, folded it, slipped it under her belt, and followed him. Through the tangle they toiled northward until they reached the point where floated the first bush-caught raft. Wading in waist-deep, he held it for her, then drew himself aboard.

"Shouldn't we have paddles?" she questioned.

"Have to pick up a couple of the Cuiba sticks," he nodded. "Catch the bush-tips as we float, until you see some. Ever use a paddle?"

"Oh, yes. Many a time."

"Good. You'll have to do the work. I'll steer."

Borne along by the slow shore currents, they drifted. Soon she found, stranded amid water-growing brush, one of the flat-ended sticks thrown away by the Cuibas; then another. Wretched makeshifts, these, for

paddles. But they must suffice. Kneeling, Jean began wielding one of the crude things, while her companion, squatting astern, gripped the other with his right hand, steadying it under his useless left arm, its broader end under water. So they edged out from shore and into the push of the midstream flow.

Hours rolled past unheeded. Steadily the clumsy craft crept northward, threading its way among huge bowlders, veering to one side or another in the grip of conflicting currents, spinning about at times in small sucking eddies, but ever evading collision and capsize. No words were spoken. None were needed, for the girl proved herself waterwise, picking the best passages with few errors. The man, at first watching her as well as the ever-changing deflections of the water, nodded approvingly and thereafter gave all his vigilance to the new problems constantly arising.

At length, however, a low rumble crept into the air, and he gave curt commands.

“Work to the right! Paddle! Snappy!”

She redoubled her efforts. Jaw set, he bore hard on his crude helm, striving to force their craft to the eastern bank. Down ahead showed a cleared spot — the houseless “port” of Salvajito. The muffled growl sounding down-stream was the roar of the deadly Atures rapid.

For agonizing minutes they fought shoreward, their clumsy float obeying only sluggishly. With real paddles they might have driven it to the port. But the

current, now increasing in strength, seemed determined to drag them away and sweep them into the waiting welter below. They progressed toward land, but too slowly. Their raft was doomed.

Gauging the strength and trend of the flow, he sharply asked:

"Can you swim?"

"Yes," she panted.

"Drop your guns overboard. Swim!"

She hesitated, turning her face back to him.

"Hurry up! There are no crocodiles in here. Get going!"

"But — but you —"

"I'll get ashore. Go! Quick!"

The fierce intensity of his command compelled obedience. Drawing the revolvers, she dropped them into the water. In the same movement she threw herself shoreward and struck out with long overhand strokes.

For an instant he watched her, then nodded. Releasing his steering stick, he reached to his own left holster and partly drew the weapon from it. Then he jammed it back.

"She may need a gun," he muttered. "I'll carry it to — wherever I wind up."

And, still weighted by his two heavy guns, he lunged overboard on his right side.

Swimming with his good arm and both legs, he fought landward with all his strength. Time and

again he went under; but each time his gasping mouth came out again, and he wallowed on. At length, as he was once more going down, his reaching hand struck into clay. An instant later it was seized and pulled upward by Jean, who had reached shore minutes ago.

In a final floundering scramble he emerged and collapsed on the steep margin. She, too, lay back, recovering breath. For a little time neither moved.

"So far, so good," he panted. "Now a couple of miles of footwork — and Pablo's. And then I'm — going to — rest." His lids drooped, and he forced them open with an effort. "Come on."

Tiredly they mounted the bank. With lifeless steps they walked in the cartwheel ruts along which all men and their belongings must journey in passing the rapids. As ever, the mosquito swarms assailed them, but he seemed not to feel them. She drew her collar around her neck and waved ineffectual hands at the pests.

"Tie that flag around your head," he suggested dully. "That'll stop 'em."

She glanced down at the dripping flag, still suspended from her belt; pressed the water from it, and let it hang.

"That's not what it's meant for," she replied. "I'll take the bites."

His answering snort told her she was a fool, but he said no more. On, and on, and on they slowly traveled; past tremendous black rocks, sooty as slag

from the infernal Pit; past grotesque gray ant-hills hard as stone; past stunted trees almost naked, and clumps of tall bearded palms, following the snake-curving road.

High above them a black dot appeared in the brilliant blue. It dropped nearer, became larger, swung about in a floating circle. Others appeared here and there, each sailing in its own ring, far from one another, but all watching the shuffling Tiger lurch along the bullock-trail. After a time, as if he felt the unwinking stare of those cold eyes, the man lifted his head and glanced upward. His lips widened in a brief grimace.

"You know," he muttered, dropping his glance to his arm. "But you'll have to wait a little longer."

"What?" she questioned, giving him a puzzled look.

"Nothing." His eyes switched straight ahead. She decided that his mind was wandering.

At length they approached a few houses,—half a dozen ruined adobe hovels, of which only two were inhabited,—the "town" of Atures. Into the habitable shelters children fled at sight of them, and from one doorway a frowzy mestizo woman peered warily out. They passed without a word. A quarter-mile more, and they plodded past a corral into the yard of a rambling ranch-house—the place of Pablo Benito, owner of the crude transport service of Atures.

A child, playing before the door, shrieked and ran from the grisly figure of the Tiger. An alarmed chorus

of female voices, — then Pablo himself slid through the doorway, a short rifle hanging unobtrusive but ready beside his right leg. His leathery face lengthened as he stared.

“Ajo!” he swore. “El Tigre! What has happened, amigo? You have been wrecked? Your Indios are lost?”

“Sí,” sighed the Tiger. “I’m wrecked. They’re lost. Coffee!”

Without turning his head, Pablo bawled to his women to make coffee instantly. “Caramba! The señorita!” he exclaimed in the same breath. “Where are the Señores Stoo-art? But come — rest — you are tired. Come in from the sun and the accursed bugs.” He turned and led the way.

“He’s all right — as these fellows go,” mumbled the Tiger, as they followed. “He’ll get you down the river. Don’t tell him my Indians have ditched me, though. It won’t pay.”

Into the house they stepped, and into crude chairs beside a rough table they sank. Pablo’s voice sounded from another room, hurrying up the making of the coffee. The Tiger swayed against the table.

“Guess I’ll — rest,” he whispered. “Tell me — when — the coffee — ”

His head dropped suddenly on the board.

Quietly Jean arose and stepped to him, lifted the gun from his left holster, slid it under her belt. He did not stir. Softly she laid a hand on his rumpled hair, and

her eyes were very gentle. Then, hearing a movement in the next room, she stepped away. As she did so, she noted that his right hand was curled unconsciously around the butt of his remaining gun. In her mind echoed his warning not to reveal the completeness of his downfall. Thoughtfully she eyed the door beyond which was the owner of the house.

When Pablo reëntered, with terrifically strong coffee, she was sitting as before. She lifted a silencing hand.

"Do not rouse him yet," she said in a low tone. "Let me talk to you first.

"My party has been unfortunate. Your boat is lost. I am going back to Ciudad Bolívar. I have no money here, but as soon as I reach Bolívar I shall have plenty. Then I shall pay you for your boat, and also pay liberally for all help you give me now. And you have seen the official order from the governor, General Perez, commanding everyone along the river to assist my party in every possible way."

He watched her shrewdly. It was well known that all Americanos who traveled in Venezuela were very rich, — otherwise how could they afford to waste time and money so foolishly? He would get for his old boat the price of a new one, at the least. And he had seen the General's order. Also, he observed the revolver in her belt. He felt very friendly toward this capable young woman.

"Is El Tigre your friend?" she went on.

His foxy eyes flickered. Not knowing what was

coming, he did not know whether it was best to claim or disclaim such friendship. Besides, who knew who was one's friend in this lawless up-river region? The man who patted your shoulder today might steal your cattle tomorrow. The companions who slept side by side tonight might arise and shoot each other to death in the morning. Such things had happened repeatedly within Pablo's circle of experience. He answered only by a noncommittal shrug.

"Have you —" she leaned closer "— have you anything which makes a man sleep deeply?"

"No, señorita," he promptly denied. "This is not that kind of house."

"I am sorry. I had hoped — See, the Tiger is badly hurt. His arm must come off, or he will die. Alive, he would be valuable to — several people. Dead, he would be worth nothing."

The suggestive words, the secretive air with which they were spoken, struck the right chord. He stole a sly glance at the motionless Tiger.

"If he lives, when I reach Bolívar I will deposit for you in the Banco de Venezuela one hundred pesos," she added. "But if he is to live he must be made to sleep."

Softly he set the coffee on the table.

"A man must do what he can for his friends," he grinned. "It would be very sad if El Tigre should die. Now that I think of it, I have a powder which I got from some Indians — it is very strong with sleep. I will make weak coffee for him, put in the powder, —

he will fall asleep again and know nothing until tomorrow. Nothing at all, señorita, — not if he were burned alive.”

“Do it.”

Chuckling, he hastened out. One after the other she drank the two cups of black fluid he had left. Then she drew a deep breath and slowly rolled up her sleeves.

CHAPTER IX

A FADED FLAG

IN a cool, dark, quiet room of the Benito house, the Tiger opened his eyes and looked about.

He lay in a hammock. Near him stood a rickety little table, holding a small confusion of cups, gourds, an old rum-bottle supporting the remains of a candle, and a roll of cloth; and, beside it, a chair from whose back dangled his belt and one gun. On the wall fronting him hung a stained, washed-out American flag.

His left shoulder ached dully. He was very weak, and thirsty. But he was cool, his brain felt clear, and the grinding headache and burning fever which seemed to have been killing him for many hours was gone.

He hitched the painful shoulder; moved his body a little to ease his position; tried to lift the left arm. A sudden panicky shock darted through his whole body. No arm was there.

For a few seconds life seemed to stop while he stared dumbly at the bandaged stump. Then his heart hammered in a rapidfire recovery, soon slowing to its regular pulse. A long sigh and a slow nod, and he looked up again.

“Hm!” he muttered. “Who did that?”

In another hammock, slung across a corner behind him, someone moved. Feet softly struck the earth floor and approached. Above him stood Jean Stuart.

"You?" he asked, feebly moving his head toward the shoulder.

"Yes. How do you feel?"

"All right. Thirsty."

She nodded, moved aside, returned with a gourd of water; slipped an arm under his head, lifted him to where he could drink. He avidly emptied the gourd, spilling some of the water down his chin and on his chest. Lying back, he became aware that his body was clothed, but his chin was bare. His rags were gone, and in their place was a light new suit of white crash. His beard, too, was gone, and his scalp also felt curiously cool.

"How come?" he demanded, looking at his clothes and wagging his naked chin.

"The clothes are a present from — a friend. They were made by Señora Benito. You are thoroughly barbered, too, with the same scissors that cut your shirt and trousers. You have had fever, you see, so we clipped you." Smiling a little, she added: "You are not a rough jungle tiger now."

"A slicked-up house-cat, eh?" He essayed a faint grin. "You're considerably dolled yourself."

With a light laugh she glanced down at her own new clothing — a loose blouse and a skirt of the same material — and back at him. The change from masculine

khaki to the drapery of her own sex made her seem a new girl. The transformation, however, was not that of raiment alone. Her dark hair was tastefully arranged; her cheeks had rounded and lost the brutal bruises left by Cuiba squaws; her lips were soft and red; and her deep eyes, though underlined by tired rings betokening insufficient sleep, held a warm glow. He looked long at her. Then he sighed, and his face grew somber.

"I've been sewing," she said. "We both needed renewal, in more ways than one. So while the señora made your clothes I made mine. You've been quite a good patient, considering everything, so I've had time."

"I've been laid out quite a while, I guess," he said. She nodded. His eyes strayed to the flag. A swift scowl darkened his face.

"Take that thing out of here!" he growled.

Gravely she regarded him. Then she sank into the chair and, holding his eyes with hers, spoke with gentle firmness.

"No. One must never argue with a patient, of course, unless his condition demands it. But your temper shows you're convalescent, and your condition certainly requires plain talk. I have brought you out of danger, as far as your blood and your fever are concerned; but you must cure your own cancer, Captain Hart."

He started.

"Cancer!" was his involuntary exclamation. Then, roughly: "Hart? Where do you get that name?"

"You have been delirious and told things about yourself, captain." She stressed the title. "And you have a cancer — of the mind. You have suffered much for the flag, — and turned against it. You have been badly treated by your fellow Americans in more than one way, and turned against them too. All the time you have been down here you have been eaten by a cancer of bitterness; you have helped it grow, — forced it to grow, — because the good in you was still fighting against the bad, and you were trying to kill the good that remained. Don't deny it, sir! I have heard you talk, and I know."

She glanced up at the mute flag and back at him.

"And the reason why you don't want to look at that flag now is not because you hate it. You don't. It's because it hurts you. It makes you ashamed — as it ought to. You've tried to make yourself forget it and all it stands for. Yet you couldn't leave an American woman to worse than death at the hands of savages. You couldn't leave that flag in their hands, either. You had to bring it away. And here, in your delirium, you have fought for it — against men, and against vultures. I know now how it became torn. You lived that over again.

"And the flag has repaid you. Do you know that if we hadn't heard you shoot at those vultures, and hadn't seen the flag after we turned toward you, we

should have passed you? It is true. Those little trees are all alike. We were away to the south of you, and we were looking straight ahead; your Indians said you must have been killed by the savages shooting in the night, and none of us thought of finding you there. And if we had *not* found you there — you would never have reached the river. It was those Indians of yours that led us right when you tried to wander off later in the day, and it was the flag that brought those Indians to lead you.”

With that she arose.

“ Now, captain, I’m going to see about a little broth for you. You’d better sleep awhile. But just think a little bit first. And while you’re thinking, think about this, too:

“ You’ve tried to believe your countrymen the worst people alive. But have you found better men here? Your Indians tried to abandon you on the plains, and they did desert you at the river. And this man here — ” she moved a hand toward the farther Benito wall “ — thinks I intend to betray you, and he has sold you.”

He stiffened.

“ To whom? ”

“ To me.”

“ Oh.” He relaxed. “ How much? ”

“ A hundred pesos.”

“ Hm! You got stung. He’d have done it for fifty.”

She made no reply. Out through the door she passed, and he was left alone.

For a time he lay frowning. Once, his face vengeful, he tried to struggle up and buckle on his belt and gun; but he fell back, almost fainting. He was too weak.

When the hammock ceased to sway he lay with eyes fixed on the discolored flag; the flag which, though repeatedly washed, was permanently stained with his own blood. The room was very quiet. Yet after a time he was not alone. Silently, out of the shadows of the corners came other shadows: the ghosts which had tramped behind him on the night-shrouded savanna; the men who, years ago, had fought and died for the flag. Steady-eyed, stern-mouthed, soldierly and straight, they stood beside this old comrade of theirs and looked down into his naked soul.

Dusk grew in the room as the last light of day faded at its single shaded window. Still the ghosts stood there. Then all at once the man in the hammock feebly flung his one arm across his eyes, and the silence was broken by a pitiful sound. The hard-jawed, hard-hearted Tiger had become a little child, crying in the dark.

The ghosts smiled. Silently as they had come, they trooped back into their black corners and dissolved. Their work was done.

By and by the door reopened. Through it came the oldest of the numerous Benito children, lighting the way with a new bottle-set candle. Behind, carefully bearing a gourd of broth, glided Jean. The child set

the bottle on the table and retreated. The girl stood a minute looking down at Captain Hart. He had fallen asleep, his arm still across his face.

Balancing the gourd with care, she reached and clasped his hand in a firm grip. He awoke, blinked, nodded. For a moment before he moved, though, his hand clung to hers.

"You're right," he said.

"Of course." She gave the hand a swift pressure. Then she sank into the chair. With a battered spoon she fed him. After that she said:

"You know, captain, there's nothing to prevent your going down the river and home, if you will. The launch that brought us up from Bolívar is waiting at the port below here. And the Venezuelan authorities won't hinder you. On the contrary, they'll gladly help you on your way —"

"Huh! Yes, I guess so!" he scoffed. "They'll send me on a long journey — by way of the firing squad."

"No, oh no. Now listen! I know what you're going to say, — that before you went to the Indians you were a revolutionist. But that doesn't matter. General Perez himself told us before we left Bolívar — we dined with him several times — he told us that he would be very glad to have you leave the country. He said that if you stayed here you would inevitably be shot sooner or later, and the government didn't like to have Americans killed here, even when they were

known enemies; there was always a possibility of international complications; so, if you wanted to leave, — and if you would promise not to come back, — he would give you amnesty, safety, and free passage.”

There was a silence. He lay watching her oddly. Then:

“He gave you that message for me?” he asked.

“Why — ” She hesitated. “No, not exactly. We hardly expected to meet you, you know. But the point is that he made that statement before all of us — all Americans — and he’d hardly do that unless he meant it.”

His shaven head moved in a slight, involuntary nod, and his eyes wandered thoughtfully to the wall.

“Perez has the reputation of being a square shooter,” he mused, half to himself. Another little silence, broken only by the sputtering of the candle. Then his jaw tightened.

“No chance!” he said abruptly. “I can’t go out.”

Her lips opened for a swift reply, but she checked it. Steadily she looked down into his wan face, reading his feebleness. When she spoke her tone was soothing.

“Yes, you can, if you will. But we won’t discuss it any more now. It’s time for you to sleep again. In the morning everything will be brighter, and you can see more clearly in many ways. So now good night, captain.”

“’Night.”

Leaving the candle burning, she walked back to the

door. His gaze followed her. At the threshold she paused to throw him one more smile. Then she passed through.

Time passed. For awhile the pallid man lay with eyes fixed on the roof, a gloomy frown drawing down his brows. Once or twice his lids narrowed and his gaze sharpened, as if habitual wariness warned him against a trap; but each time an impatient twitch of the head disowned suspicion — at least, of the girl who had spoken so frankly. At length the black lashes drooped. The seams in the set face softened, and the somber expression gave way to the blankness of untroubled slumber.

CHAPTER X

LISTENING WALLS

IN the hot shade of the Benito veranda, the one-armed Tiger lay frowning through white sun-glare at a dusky mass of tropic trees. Before him stretched the littered Benito yard, and beyond, under the tree-tangle, glided the little black Rio Catañapo, soon to lose itself in the greater river. He saw none of these things — land, water, trees, or even the sky above them. His gaze was far away, his mind thousands of miles to the north, in the busy world between Caribbean and Canada. And as he contemplated that world his face grew wistful, yet remained hard and hopeless.

“Not a chance,” he said curtly, answering some inner question. “Forget it, you fool! You’re through up there. And you’ll soon be through here too. After the word gets around that El Tigre is smashed it won’t take long. Somebody’ll get you right. Taps, without bugles.”

“Quitter!” accused a calm voice behind him.

He started as if stung. His head jerked aside, and his steely eyes clashed with steady dark ones under curving black brows. They laughed at him, those

girlish eyes, yet seemed to search deep into his mind. After a silent moment his glare softened.

"Pussyfoot!" he countered. "How long since you set up a listening post here?"

"Only since you began to growl, Sir Tiger. When a patient begins to rave it's time for his nurse to look him over." Moving forward from the doorway through which she had come, she laid a hand lightly on his forehead.

He twitched his head impatiently; then lay motionless, with the slender fingers still on his brow. Their touch was soothing, cooling, although his only fever was in his thoughts, and he knew well that the professional gesture was a veiled reproof. Save for the vanished arm, his physical condition now was virtually what it had been before the random bullet found him. Long, slow days of rest and faithful care had brought steady healing of tissues and renewal of strength. True, the drained reservoir of inner vigor had not yet fully refilled; he still was thin, and found it more pleasant to rest than to move. But he was no longer an invalid.

The soft hand lifted to wave away attacking mosquitoes, but the dark eyes still dwelt on him.

"There's nothing the matter with you but bugbears, captain," she told him. "And the sure cure for them is a voyage home; the sooner the better. Let's start tomorrow."

His gaze switched again to the riverside trees. After a moment he replied in a tone of restraint.

"It's time *you* went. You've stayed too long already, wasting time on a worthless subject. Pablo and his peons will put you in Bolívar safe and sound, and you'll have no trouble after that. But unless you start soon the river may be risky."

"You've said that before, though I can't understand why there need be any greater risk in going down than in coming up. But still less can I understand why you're determined to stay here, when the way out is open."

"I've told you." He still held his eyes away from her. "Too much risk here, and nothing to gain hereafter. Maybe General Perez meant what he said when he said it, but —"

"You yourself said he was square," she interjected. "Is he less square today than yesterday? And as for risk — how long since El Tigre avoided risks?"

"Maybe I'm learning caution in my old age." He smiled thinly. "As for Perez — Conditions might change, and his mind with them. And this handsome head of mine is wanted by officials bigger than Perez, not to mention —" He halted short.

"Not to mention — whom?"

Had he glanced quickly at her then, he might have caught in her face a look of comprehension that might well have aroused to full flame the smouldering sus-

picion inbred in hunted men. But he only scowled at the shore growth, meanwhile swiftly covering his slip.

"Oh, some fellows who dislike me. I've had to shoot a man or two down here, and their friends are sore."

"Oh." A little pause. "I think General Perez spoke of that. I remember he said that although you never had any intention of helping the Venezuelan government, you really had done so by 'removing' certain outlaws who had been troublesome. It seems to me that, as far as the officials are concerned, that would count in your favor."

"Humph! Maybe it does, with Perez. But maybe not with others. And I'm asking no favors of any of 'em."

Another pause, while she regarded him soberly. Then, with a touch of scorn in her tone, she rejoined:

"So you're quitting without even trying. You're going to take what comes to you lying down. You're —"

"Halt right there!" He threw his feet to the floor and sat up, face aflame. "We've been over that ground before. What's the good of going over it again?"

"You haven't yet convinced me that you have any good reason to stay here, sir."

"Reasons enough! I've given this man's government too many swift kicks to be turned loose with a blessing. And even if I did get out, what's ahead?"

"Listen here: When I first blew into Venezuela I

joined up with the revolutionists. I wanted action. And I got it. I had the hardest boiled, hardest riding, hardest shooting outfit that ever rode the plains; a gang of tigers, nothing less. That's how we got our name. We went through the feds like tigers every time we hit 'em. And those feds have long memories. They'd like nothing better than to catch El Tigre in a trap, even now, and square up old scores. It's been three years since the gang busted up, — I got shot, and by the time I got well the revolution was smashed and I had to drift south into the Indian country, — but El Tigre hasn't been forgotten up north. Not much!

“And what's more, I've kept things moving — especially other fellows' cattle — since I've been down here among the Guahibos. We've raided all over the lot, and done a bit of border scrapping besides. And the feds know that, too. And now that I'm smashed, are they going to pat me on the back and send me home? Huh! I can see them do it. And I can see El Tigre sneaking in among them with his tail between his legs and asking them to do it. Oh yes!

“And up in the States — ” He checked abruptly. After a minute he added: “Up there I'm no good. I'm a busted down-and-out. And I know what I'd get if I crawled back in there, crippled and broke. The cold shoulder and the glassy eye, and a finish in the gutter! Not for mine, thanks.”

Steadily she regarded him as he talked; and at times,

far back in the depths of her eyes, showed an odd, faint light which seemed a gleam of unexplainable mirth. At the end his gaze evaded hers, coming to rest on the bullock corral. Then a smile twitched her lips.

"And you've no other reasons than those?" she questioned.

"Those are plenty."

She laughed softly, and her hand moved again to his short hair.

"Foolish!" she chided. "Those are nothing but bugbears, and you don't really believe in them yourself. A man who has done the things you've done isn't afraid of shadows. Right down in your heart you want to go home, and none of those things would hold you back. There's something else. And since you won't 'fess up, let me tell you —"

"Go inside!"

The interruption came incisive, imperative. For an instant she stared at him. His gaze still was fixed on the corral, and his expression had grown watchful, his poise rigid. Now his hand slid to the butt of the long revolver at his right thigh and moved the holster forward.

Swiftly her head moved, her glance following his. Then she understood.

Striding soft-footed along the overland trail and approaching the house, — almost entering the yard, in fact, — came half a dozen hard-faced, straw-sombre-roed, rifle-bearing men.

Hart sat stark and silent as the squad-column swung into the yard and obliques toward him. Among the newcomers, who were keenly scanning the sitting man and the standing girl, passed a mutter of words. Then the heavy-mustached leader grinned and spoke aloud.

"Es El Tigre," he said. "It is the Tiger. Good afternoon, friend! How are you?"

"Well," came the short answer.

The party slowed, bunched, stopped. Every man stared at the fair-skinned Northern girl, who stood impersonally regarding them. From her dark hair to her slippered feet they surveyed her, and back again to red lips and cool eyes. On every unshaven yellow face grew bold admiration. The squat-bodied commander belatedly lifted his sombrero. The others slouchily followed his example.

"Caramba! Que señorita tan hermosa! What a beautiful girl!" floridly complimented the heavy-mustached man. "It is a miracle to find here such an angel. I am dumb with rapture."

"So we observe," was Hart's dry retort. "Why are you here?"

As the girl's lip curved in amusement, the other's face became slightly unpleasant. The glance he gave the Tiger was more so. Then his eyes widened as they fixed on the maimed left arm.

"Diablo!" he ejaculated. "The arm — you have lost it?"

A sudden grunt went among his men as they, too,

discovered that El Tigre was a cripple. For an instant all gaped. Then over every visage flickered an evil light, gone almost as soon as seen. The eyes switched to the silent man's gun-arm and to the capable hand curled loosely around the black butt.

"I asked a question, Diego," the Tiger reminded, his voice hard-edged.

"Sí. It is true. I was shocked," Diego excused. "We go down the river with a rubber shipment. Where is Pablo? We must have the carts."

"Inside, taking siesta."

Diego and his followers stood a moment longer, looking at the man and the maid. The leader opened his mouth as if to say more, but, meeting the cold gaze of the Tiger, left it unsaid. Abruptly he stepped toward the main doorway, a little farther down the adobe wall. The rest of his gang moved after him. The man in the hammock turned to watch them. Not until they leaned their guns against the wall and entered the house did he lose sight of them.

"Where's my other six-gun?" he asked, looking back at her.

"Just inside the door. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Just wanted to know it was where none of those chaps could pick it up."

"Who are they?"

"Diego Lopez and his pack. From San Fernando de Atabapo."

"Oh." She looked thoughtful. "I've heard of that town. Is it as bad as they say?"

"It's worse than that," he returned, with a grim smile. "It's the only Orinoco town in the whole Territorio de Amazonas, you know, and so far back in the bush that no federal garrison is stationed there. Which means that any tough egg who finds other places too hot for him can be reasonably safe in the San Fernando section. It's supposed to be under federal control, of course, but — well, the last two governors were shot, and I hear that the present one is likely to go the same route soon. A sweet little town. This fellow Lopez lives there."

"He trades in rubber?"

"So he says. He trades in anything that may turn a peso for him, — rubber, rum, or revolution. Now run along in and shut out the bugs. I'll hang around here awhile longer."

She looked soberly at the worn rifles standing against the adobe. Then she went in and almost — but not quite — closed the crude plank door. Inside, she swiftly examined the long revolver, mate to the one in his hammock, and verified its readiness for service. Outside, the Tiger sprawled back in his net, watching the gun-flanked doorway and lazily flapping his mosquito-cloth.

Meanwhile Diego had unceremoniously aroused the dozing Benito and demanded rum. Now, with a stiff jolt of cane alcohol under his skin, he was softly demanding: "Who is the woman? Why is El Tigre here? Where are his Guahibos? What of his arm?"

The foxy face of Benito grew a shade more shrewd. He knew not only that it would be much to his financial interest that the young woman should safely reach the down-river steamship terminus, but also that unpleasant consequences might result if she did not arrive there. He knew Diego Lopez, and was under no illusions regarding him. Wherefore he dallied with his own drink a moment before answering.

"She is a señorita of Norte America," he guardedly explained. "The name is Chean Stoo-art. With her father and two brothers she went up the river to explore. At the Rio Tomo the Cuibas caught them and their crew — Simón Portano, Ray and Pepe Ruiz, José Rivero, and two others whose names I did not hear — eating on the big rock. Tchk!" He flicked an eloquent finger across his throat.

"Cra! All of them? Those Cuibas are fierce dogs!" Diego poured another drink.

"Sí. All of them except the señorita. Her they took away into the savanna. El Tigre followed and took her from them. I do not know how. He had only seven Guahibos."

"So? How is that?"

"He had been down the river on a trip —"

"To where?"

"I do not know. He does not talk of it —"

"But you must know. Where?" persisted Diego.

"I say I do not know," repeated Pablo, his voice rising in irritation. "Ask him. He is outside."

"Softly, softly!" The San Fernando man nodded sidewise toward the veranda. "Let it pass. Now you were saying —"

"They came here, the two. He was shot in the arm, and it was bad. She cut it off —"

"Santa Maria! That little señorita cut off an arm?"

"Sí. And do not make any mistake. She is a man under her skin. She would shoot like a man. And El Tigre — you know him."

Sour grunts agreed. They knew of more than one desperado who had made a mistake with El Tigre and had departed this life immediately afterward.

"All of those Norte Americanos are devils with a gun, cra!" one of Diego's followers muttered. "I have heard that they cut their teeth on a gun-barrel, and that they shoot before they can walk."

"It is a hard country," Benito agreed. "The cousin of my uncle knew a man who knew a man whose woman's brother had been there, and he said the North American women shot their husbands whenever they fancied a new man, and they never were punished. And all the men carry two guns, and in Nueva York are so many fights every night that wagons must clear away the dead in the morning before business can start. They cart the bodies up a river called the River of the East, and dump them in a place called Puerta del Infierno — Hell Gate."

A short silence followed. Several looked uneasily at the door beyond which lay El Tigre.

"But now where are his Guahibos?" pondered Diego. "He is alone — he and the woman —"

Pablo lifted his cup and drank. Large in his mind loomed the hundred pesos which would be his if the Tiger, as well as the woman, should reach Bolívar alive. Consequently he gave his inquisitor no encouragement.

"I think they are close by," he lied, "and that if he wanted them they would be here at once. If anything should happen to him here, I should not want to be the man who did it. Those Guahibos —" Again he made the throat gesture.

"They are as bad as the Cuibas," nodded a man. "And El Tigre never sleeps."

"And you do not know what he plans to do next?" pursued Diego.

"No."

"The señorita — is she his woman now?"

Benito considered his answer. The pause saved him from ever making it.

A gaunt white-clad figure loomed in the doorway. A harsh voice smote every man like a blow.

"The affairs of the señorita are none of your filthy business!" it rasped. "Get it into your head that she is under my protection. If you and your whole yellow-bellied gang want to know how good that protection is, come out here!"

Dead silence ensued. Only one man moved. That man was Pablo Benito, who lifted his lean frame from the chair and slipped back against the nearest wall.

For one lone man — even the Tiger — to talk in such fashion to Diego Lopez and his crowd was distinctly bad form, and Pablo was not disposed to obtrude his valuable self into the line of fire.

Yet nothing happened. Not even the powerful white rum sizzling in Diego's veins kicked him into action. Though he and all his men carried revolvers and knives, all sat like wooden statues, glowering at the one-armed figure which stood there with its hand dangling beside its loose trousers.

Diego licked his mustache, wondering how much the Tiger had overheard. Then he spoke, his voice oily.

"You mistake me, amigo. I feared some harm might come to the señorita. Now that I know you guard her, my mind is at rest."

"Keep it at rest — and your tongue too," was the tart rejoinder. "No harm will come to her, and any man who even speaks about her in the wrong tone will find a tigre on his neck. Is anything else worrying you?"

"Nothing at all, señor. Will you not come and have a drink?"

With a wordless growl, the Tiger backed away and was gone.

The gang from San Fernando drew a long breath. Diego reached mechanically for the bottle. Benito relaxed and began moving toward a rear door. On him the eyes of Diego fixed with an evil gleam.

"Fool!" he snarled. "It was your loud words that

brought him. I am of a mind to cut out your tongue."

Benito quickened his pace and faded from sight. Diego poured his drink and shoved the bottle along toward the nearest man. There was no more talk of the señorita.

In the next room, on the other side of the eight-foot mud partition which did not rise to the high palm roof, the señorita herself noiselessly stepped down from the box, placed in a chair, atop which she had stood and watched. In one hand she held the extra gun with which, unsuspected even by the Tiger, she had flanked the men whom he faced. Back into its battered holster she slipped it, and out through the crack in the doorway she peeped at Hart, who once more sat vigilant in his hammock.

"We North Americans, who cut our teeth on gun-barrels," she told herself, with suppressed mirth, "must stick together! "

In the mind of the man outside was forming a similar idea.

"Circumstances alter cases," he thought. "With this Lopez skunk loose around here, our young lady needs a gunman handy. And that means, Mister Tigre, that you've got to travel."

CHAPTER XI

IN THE DARK

OUT of the east, with giant strides, Night stalked athwart the equatorial waste.

Stars bloomed in the sky whence the sun had only just dived below the horizon. As if in answer, scattered lights appeared here and there about the yard of Pablo Benito; lights lacking the purity and steadiness of the high, clean solar spheres; weak, flickering man-lights in dirty oil lanterns. Four of them, there were; two on the porch where the Benito family usually slept, one in the corral where the bullocks rested, and one in an open-sided palm-roofed hut where the hammocks of Diego Lopez and his gang were to be slung.

With the passing of the sun the mosquito plague also had vanished, but only to give way to other and larger blood-hunters of the dark; the black zancudo insect whose bite leaves behind it a horrible infected sore, the vampire bat, and the marauding tigre, second only to the Asiatic tiger in size, and second to nothing in ferocity. From the zancudo there could be no defense except thick walls or hot mosquito-bar; but against the flame-hating bat and cat the lanterns might — or might not — give a puny protection to sleeping

man and domestic beast. So, from dusk to dawn, the four lights would stand guard.

Now, while the men of Diego arranged their hanging nets in their quarters, Diego himself came nonchalantly through the gloom toward the hammock of El Tigre. He noted that the hammock had been shifted from its previous place and now hung low across the open doorway of the room of the señorita, completely blocking all ingress; also, that the lounging Tiger was scowlingly watching his approach. But he affected complete disregard of both these things. With the utmost insouciance he planted himself before the resting man, stared boldly into the darkness beyond the doorway, and, with a confidential smirk, spoke.

"Is the señorita within?"

"Why?" countered the cold-eyed American.

"I wish to talk in private."

"About what?"

"About matters of interest to men alone."

Hart gave him a searching scrutiny.

"You can talk. She is with Señora Benito."

"Bueno!" Diego looked carefully about him. He leaned closer. Abruptly he fell back. Hart's hand had moved slightly, and the muzzle of his six-gun yawned at the pit of his visitor's stomach.

"Diablo!" sputtered the San Fernando man. "You are too suspicious, comrade! Are we not friends?"

"Perhaps." The hand remained steady. "But it

is not necessary to whisper. My hearing is good. Stand back a little."

Diego stood back, hooking his thumbs ostentatiously over his belt buckle, far from his revolver and knife. He shook his head sadly over such open distrust. The Tiger's gun dropped again.

"That is better. Well?"

"Well, what is the word from below?" Diego twisted his face into a huge wink.

"Meaning?" queried Hart, after another searching glance.

"Ha, ha! You know my meaning. You have been down the river, and you do not take so long a trip for pleasure."

"True. I went to get some matches."

"Matches! Ha ha ha! You are a sly one! But — what is the word at Puerto Carreño?"

The gray eyes narrowed. The brown ones glimmered, shrewdly noting that the shot had scored. But the reply was as noncommittal as before.

"Nothing of importance. Pascual Otero was drowned awhile ago. The woman of Antonio Azul died of fever. The fishing is poor, but the turtle-egg crop is big."

"Bah! That is not what I mean." Another stealthy look around. "Soon the rains will come. With the rains will come a new revolution. Puerto Carreño is the place of council. I know, you see. You

have been there more lately than I. What is the word? ”

This time it was Hart who glanced around; but he did it to mask his thoughts. The names mentioned by his fellow-conspirators at Puerto Carreño had not included that of Diego Lopez. The San Fernando man must be bluffing, boring for information. Why? To feather his own nest, of course. Whether he would feather it at the expense of federals or of rebels would depend entirely on which allegiance would profit him more.

“I have no word,” coldly asserted the Tiger, meeting the probing gaze with a steely stare. “You are going down the river. Stop at Puerto Carreño and ask there for news. Now I am sleepy. Good night.”

Diego scowled. His mouth opened and shut, opened again.

“You do not trust me. It is a pity. But I say no more. Yet — a moment. What of the señorita? She goes out to return to her country, yes? Then why do you not send her in my piragua, which goes straight to Bolívar with all speed? She shall have all protection — ”

A harsh laugh cut him short.

“Thanks! ” mocked Hart. “Let her travel with *you*? Humph! She will reach Bolívar long before your rotten piragua will, and as for protection — she travels under the protection of El Tigre! Now go to bed. You make me tired.”

Diego's thumbs jerked halfway out from his belt. Hart's hand tightened a mere trifle. The thumbs halted. Diego backed off, turned, faded into the dark, muttering a sour "Good night."

He did not stop or turn on his way to his own lantern, knowing that against its light his progress was visible to the man behind. But, as he walked, his hands slid back to his weapons and his tongue formed silent oaths.

"You one-handed whelp of the devil!" he raged. "You will tell me nothing, no? And your señorita will go without me, yes? And I make you tired? I may make you more weary before morning, por Dios! And we shall see how far your woman will go toward Bolívar!"

Straight to his hammock he went, without word or look at his men. As he disappeared, Hart relaxed in his own net. In a little while a candle-light entered the guarded room behind him, burned steadily a minute or two, and was blown out.

"Good night, Sir Tiger," a soft voice floated from the darkness.

"'Night, Lady Jean. Sleep tight. Nobody'll bother you."

"I'm not afraid."

"You needn't be. By the way, I've changed my mind. I'm going down the river with you."

"Good! I'm glad you've come to your senses."

He made no reply. But he smiled soberly. So far

as returning to the United States was concerned, he had not changed his mind. But to let her journey down the river with only such protection as Pablo and an Atures crew could give her — No, that was not permissible; not with Diego Lopez ahead. Hart must go as far as Puerto Carreño, — perhaps farther.

An hour or two of dozing slipped away. A few feet farther along the veranda, Pablo snored rhythmically in his own hammock, with his rifle under him. From the Lopez hut came no sound. A wan moon swam upward among the stars, dropping a spectral light on house, huts, corral. The lanterns burned on.

Another hour. The Tiger's eyes opened. Some instinct of the wild had nudged his consciousness. All was not well.

Motionless, he swung his gaze about. At the San Fernando camp no change was visible or audible. On the shadowy porch nothing moved. At the corral —

The corral lantern was out.

A short wick, perhaps, or a failure to replenish the oil, had let the little flame die. The bullocks were up. Uneasy movements were succeeded by nervous rumblings. And then, in the dim moonlight, something moved outside the bars: a long, stealthy, silent, earth-hugging, creeping thing —

"Ha!" breathed Hart. He swung his feet to the floor.

The creeping thing stopped. Blazing eyes glared at the man. Great fangs glimmered in a malignant grimace.

Hart arose. Quietly, with neither haste nor caution, he stepped off the veranda and walked toward the tense shape crouching beyond.

Between man and giant cat lay not more than twenty paces. Pace after pace, grim and steady as an inexorable machine of death, the man advanced. In his one hand, hanging at his side, dully glinted his long revolver.

Six — seven — eight paces. The malevolent beast poised motionless. Nine — ten — eleven — twelve. The eyes flamed more wickedly; the fangs gleamed more clearly as the lips writhed farther back. Thirteen — fourteen — fifteen. The man slowed to a stop. He had not yet raised his hand.

For a long minute the killers fronted each other. The hand began to rise. The only sound was the sinister swish-swish-swish of a lashing tail sweeping the short grass. Then —

With incredible speed a streak shot along the corral. It was gone.

Hart stood like a statue. Somewhere beyond sounded a faint pat of big paws, bounding with tremendous leaps into the dark. It died. From a spot many yards away broke the coughing, snarling, receding roar of a maddened but cowed jaguar.

The man turned. Quietly, as before, he returned to the veranda; slipped his gun within his waistband; lifted the nearest lantern from its peg. With it he strode to the corral. Over the bars he swung himself, and among the vicious horns of the half-wild bullocks

he walked. Setting down the light, he strode back; crossed the barrier, traversed the yard, lay down again in his hammock, in the dark.

Minutes later, among the shadows at the far end of the porch, a more solid shadow moved. It slid a long knife back into an invisible sheath. By degrees it drifted away, carrying its squat self with utmost caution toward the hut beyond. In the concealment of a bush it crept into the hut by the rear. It lay down in the empty hammock of Diego Lopez, and from its heavy-mustached face it mopped streams of cold sweat.

"Madre de Dios!" it breathed to itself. "Did you see that, Diego! A tigre — a very devil of a tigre — a killer of bulls — hungry and savage! And El Tigre walked to it — in the dark — with only his revolver! Diablo! He is not human! He is a demonio! And even the real tigre knew it and fled! Praise be to the saints, Diego, that you are safe back in your bed! It seemed so easy — Pablo would wilt when he knew El Tigre was dead — and then the señorita could be seized before she could awake — and we could be safely away before the Guahibos learned of it. But — Ajo! You devil-cat, you can keep your woman until I find a way more sure."

CHAPTER XII

A LOOTED CACHE

IN the comparative coolness of early morning, a straggling column wended its way along the three-mile cart-road meandering from the Rio Cataño to Zamuro, lower port of the Atures rapids.

Four stolid peons, unarmed save the inevitable machetes, shuffled in the lead, followed closely by their master, Pablo Benito. A few paces to the rear walked Captain Hart and Jean.

It was a slightly unusual procession for that road. First, there were no carts; the wrecked and deserted pair of North Americans possessed nothing with which to fill a cart. Second, Pablo himself traveled the trail instead of sending his drovers and remaining at his rancho to count and recount his customary toll. Third, the gun-bearing members of the party journeyed at the rear.

Benito carried his short but large-bored carbine, and the man and the girl behind him wore cartridge belts and holstered side-arms. Why the Venezuelan chose to follow his men, instead of leading them, was known only to himself. But the reason for the position of the Tiger was made plain when his fair companion com-

plained that the mosquitoes were more numerous there than in the van.

"The little pests come back to us from the men in front," she pointed out, drawing closer her neck-cloth and vigorously swinging the handkerchief before her eyes. "Why shouldn't we take the lead?"

"Because then we'd be breaking the First Commandment." His eyes twinkled at her. "'Thou shalt let no armed man walk behind thee.'"

A quick glance, a lifting of the brows, and she studied the shuffling figures ahead.

"But — but these men must be all right," she protested. "They have nothing to gain and much to lose by —" She left the sentence unfinished.

"So far as we know," he nodded. "But maybe we don't know everything. And it's never a mistake to obey the commandments down here. There are only two of them, you know. The other one is: 'Thou shalt never be caught with thy gun empty.'"

A smile of understanding answered. It quickly faded, though, and the little jaw grew a shade more resolute. They plodded onward for some distance before she spoke again.

"Oh, won't it be wonderful to be out of this!" she exclaimed impulsively. "Out on the deep blue sea, where there's never a mosquito — and up home in civilization, where you needn't watch everyone for fear of a stab in the back — or worse!"

He shrugged.

"The deep blue sea sounds good to me," he ad-

mitted. "But about the back-stabbing, I don't agree. There are quite a few folks in the noble U. S. A. who will knife you if they get a chance, and some who will go out of their way to make a chance. I've been stabbed in the back more than once up there, and by people who posed as my best friends; that's one reason why I drifted down here, where a man can fight back with a man's weapons. And don't run off with the idea that all Venezuelans are treacherous. Some of them are mighty square hombres, — though you don't often meet them in this rough up-river section."

"I stand corrected," she replied, with a mock bow. "Except for Ciudad Bolívar, of course, I've seen only this wild river. But —"

"But it's not your kind of country, and you're glad to be going out," he finished. "Of course. Well, it will soon be ended. By the way, when you left your launch at Zamuro did you have plenty of gas in reserve? And did you leave it in the boat?"

"Why — there wasn't much left. You see, we carried enough to bring us to Zamuro, where we knew we'd have to leave the launch until we came back; and dad had arranged to have more brought up by some sailing vessel. But we expected to spend months in the wilds far above here, so he told the agent not to send the gasoline for — I think it was three months. It must be still in Bolívar. There were two or three cans left when we arrived, — five-gallon tins, — and the crew hid them among some rocks, out of the sun."

"Know where they are?"

"Yes. Behind a queer crooked tree."

He frowned. That natural hiding-place behind the queer tree at Zamuro was known to more than one riverman of this part of the Orinoco.

"Did they hide the launch too?"

"Yes. Up a narrow inlet full of bushes. They covered it."

He nodded, and his face cleared. The only party known to have passed up or down this stretch of river recently was that of Diego Lopez, which had resumed its journey two days previously; and, with launch and gasoline both hidden from its eyes, that gang probably had remained ignorant of their existence.

"Fifteen gallons of gas, and the current behind us," he mused. "We ought to kick along pretty lively for awhile; get her down into safer country, anyhow, before the fuel gives out."

Steadily they marched along, the fast rising sun shooting fierce rays down on their peaked straw sombreros, the insect swarms thickening as the heat increased. The peons, wordless, moved with the bovine gait of the bullocks they were accustomed to drive. Pablo drifted on with catlike silence, pausing once to point at the fresh splay-hoofed track of a wandering tapir. The girl swung gracefully along, trim-booted, short-skirted, white-bloused, the grim belt and gun looking incongruous on her slender figure. The lean cripple beside her marched with long but languid strides, keenly watching everything ahead. At times

they passed little knots of palms which cast a fleeting shadow over their path; but elsewhere the bare knolls and the gravelly ground hurled at them the breathless heat of a furnace. And the really hot hours of the day had not yet arrived.

At length the peons stopped in the shade of a mass of bush. Pablo, too, sat down on a black stone and mopped his leathery face. Puzzled, Jean stared about at a jumble of grotesque sooty boulders, ragged clumps of brush, and a few warped trees.

"What are we stopping for?" she wondered.

"We've arrived," grinned Hart. "Don't you recognize the bustling port of Zamuro? There's a delegation of the citizens."

His pointing finger designated a dozen black vultures, resting in a withered tree and watching them with the ghoulish gaze of their kind.

"You're joking!"

"Not at all. This is it. Guess you didn't observe things closely when you left here. This is the port of Zamuro, inhabited only by zamuros — hence the name. Now where is your boat?"

Still incredulous, she moved forward a couple of rods; then stopped with a little cry. She stood now at the edge of a bank, and below her lay water, stretching away among inky stones to the left.

"Why, so it is! I'm no explorer, I'm afraid; I'm lost in a place where I've been before. The boat — the boat is over there." She pointed to her right front.

"Good enough. Pablo, the boat is up that arm yonder. Send the peons there."

"Sí, señor." Commands tumbled from his mouth. The peons moved away, swinging off in a circuit of other watery indentations. "And, Señor Tigre, there is gasoline for the engine?"

"Yes. It is hidden in the rocks. I think I know the place, but the señorita will show us without mistake. Come, Jean."

She turned and unhesitatingly led the way. They detoured a small chaos of bowlders, walked to the east, and slowed beside a rock-flanked tree so gnarled that it seemed a tortured demon of wood. There her face went blank.

"The rocks have been moved!" she cried. "There were small ones on top,—they are thrown down!"

It was true. One glance showed that the cache had been looted.

"Cra!" snapped Pablo. "The gasoline was left here? In a place known to half the boatmen of the river? It should have been hidden in the launch itself, or brought to my house, where it would be protected!"

Hart nodded. The Stuarts had blundered here.

"Gregorio!" bawled Pablo. "The launch—is it there? Answer me!"

A moment's silence. Then came the voice of one of the peons: "Sí."

"Ah! That is good!" Pablo sighed in relief. "But the gasoline—who could have taken it?"

"Who?" snorted Hart. "That sneak-thief of a Diego! Who else? Gas worth a peso a gallon, — fifteen pesos, for the taking. And —"

His teeth clicked shut. Was fifteen pesos all that actuated Diego to cripple the gas-boat? Was there not some other motive? He glanced at the señorita whom Diego had so boldly admired.

Then he switched his gaze and forced his mind to consider facts instead of suspicions. They had a boat, but no power. The nearest place where gasoline could be obtained was Caicara. The new revolution, with its accompanying lawlessness and rapine, was about to break out all along the river between here and Caicara. And Caicara was two hundred miles away.

CHAPTER XIII

DOWN BOUND

SLUGGISHLY, yet steadily, a launch with a dead engine cruised down the Orinoco.

Forward, just within the shadow of the low awning, Pablo Benito stood conning the treacherous stream. Aft, his hand resting on the little rear steering-wheel, Hart watched the pilot and the crew. Beside him, looking dreamily at something far away, sat the girl for whom all these men were making the journey down this wicked old river.

The motive power of the heavy craft was a double set of oars, cut and roughly shaped by the machetes of the peons who now wielded them. The river itself, rising and gaining force from the torrential rains already raging in the distant mountains (though the wet season had not yet advanced to the plains), was shoving the boat northward at a rate of four miles an hour. The oars added another mile or two, giving steerage-way. So, despite the theft of the cached cans, the man and the girl from beyond the Spanish Main were steadily creeping nearer to their own world.

The thoughts of three of the voyagers, however, far outstripped the speed of their actual progress. If the

peons possessed such things as thoughts, their expressionless faces gave no sign of them. But Pablo, even while concentrating his attention on the visible rocks and the surface boils betokening submerged ones, was visioning the Banco de Venezuela, in Ciudad Bolívar, and himself receiving there many pesos from the little señorita. The señorita herself was looking even farther away; seeing the sapphire waves of the Caribbean, the silvery flying-fish leaping athwart the ocean hollows, — and, perhaps, lounging beside her at the liner's rail, a tall tiger-man, clothed in the garments of civilization and at last divorced from his gun. But El Tigre, though his gaze and his thoughts were ahead, was still living in the lawless land of the bullet and the knife. And the narrowing of his eyes and the crease between them were not caused altogether by the sun-glare on the water.

The boat was nearing a section of the river whose safe passage would much lighten his heart. It now was some forty miles from Zamuro, and, aside from the ever-present risk of striking a submerged rock and perishing in the rending jaws of crocodiles, no danger had been encountered. But ahead waited the malevolent Raudal de San Borje, among whose grim black boulders, seething crosscurrents, and sucking whirlpools many a floating craft had been wrecked and many a man been gulped down into murderous depths; a spot where the slightest misjudgment by Pablo might hurl them to doom. And only a few miles below that

death-hole lay Puerto Carreño, — ordinarily an insignificant settlement comprising a few mean huts dominated by a great bare rock behind; yet now a menace merciless as the rapid, — the rendezvous not only of real revolutionists, embittered by governmental wrongs, but also of the deadly outcasts inevitably attracted to the standard of revolt by the prospect of license and loot.

There, awhile ago, Hart had been regarded with the respect and fear due a two-handed gunman who ruled a powerful force of Indians with reputations as sinister as his own. But now that he was merely a lone white man, with no power left but that of one gun, — it might be otherwise. For himself he had little concern; a fighting finish against odds would be a fitting end to his career. It was the thought of what might come to Jean afterward that bit the scowl deeper into his forehead.

“I’d give a gold double-eagle — if I had it — to know where that sneaking Lopez is now and what he’s up to,” he meditated. “If he went straight on downriver, well and good. I’ll meet him sometime and take the price of that gas out of his greasy hide — with interest. But if he stopped off at Puerto Carreño — well, we’ll see. Good thing he didn’t locate this boat, anyhow. He’d have taken it — or, more likely, ruined it, since he wouldn’t know how to operate the engine.”

Pablo, without glancing back, shoved a signaling

hand outward to the right. Hart responded with a turn of the wheel. The bow slowly swung north-eastward, and another lurking rock was evaded.

"And it's a mighty good thing that you, Pablo, don't know any revolution is brewing," the steersman silently added. "You'd never come down this river if you did, and we need your eye on these waters. You'll lose all your cattle while we're gone. If I didn't know you were a born double-crosser I might feel sorry for you, you poor fish."

Aloud he said: "We are nearing San Borje, Pablo. We need better speed for good steering."

"It is not quite time," the lookout declared. And the boat slid onward at the same rate, the midstream silence broken only by the recurrent squeak of the oars.

Another half-mile of uninhabited shore crawled away behind. The labyrinth of San Borje rocks loomed larger and larger ahead. Then Pablo's voice snapped in urgent command.

"Forward! Pull ahead! Fast!"

The peons heaved hard. The boat surged faster. With quickened strokes the clumsy oars swung, and with redoubled power they tugged at the water. The wheel began to fight the grip of the Tiger, who tensed, watching the pilot's every motion. Around the speeding craft the yellow surface was becoming a field of swirls and boils.

Jean came to herself with a start. One glance

around, another at the white-knuckled hand gripping the wheel, — then she closed both her hands beside his.

“Let go!” he commanded. “You’ll only hinder.”

“You’re not as strong as you were,” she quietly reminded. “I’ll follow your moves.”

His mouth hardened. This was the first time his disability had been so poignantly brought home to him; the first time he had had to meet a two-handed situation without the two hands. But there was no time to argue. They were in the raudal.

“Left!” shrieked Pablo. “To the left! Quick!”

The three hands forced the wheel over.

“Too much! A little right! Hold!”

A hissing snarl of water to the right, — a gruesome gurgle to the left, — the sounds dropped behind. An oar bumped and rebounded from something below the surface; its mate crashed against it; two peons staggered and stumbled. The boat yawed.

Benito screeched a curse. Hart heaved at the wheel. The bow swung again. The peons, their blank faces at last alive with excitement, caught their footing and their stroke. The craft steadied, rushing on.

“Cra, what clumsy fools —” began Pablo.

“Shut up!” roared the Tiger. “Watch your course!”

“Sí — to the right again — Hard! Hard!”

The two little hands proved their worth now, fighting the wheel down while the big fist reached for a new grip. A rock grazed the bottom with a ominous bump;

a series of roaring yellow-white waves snatched at the side and fell short. A foot farther to the left, and the boat would have been crushed and all aboard hurled into that raving maw.

Yelling, swearing, praying to God to spare him and to the Tiger to obey his commands, Benito continued to howl directions from the bow. Sweating and heaving, the peons dragged their oars fore and aft. Crouching as if fighting a human foe, Hart wrestled with the rudder. And Jean, watching the seamed face above her and moving as he moved, aided his combat as if one mind controlled all three of the guiding hands.

Rock after rock, wave after wave, current and eddy and hole, was dodged or met and mastered. At length Pablo threw both arms wide and turned, his pallid face split by a grin.

"Praise to the saints, it is over! We are through!" he exulted.

The rowers slumped forward, resting on their oars. Hart relaxed, and his iron jaw softened.

"You are a pilot, Pablo," he said.

"Cra, I think so!" cackled the cattleman, mopping his face.

"But without you, little woman," the Tiger added quietly in English, "I think we'd have been in the soup. You're right. I'm not as good as I used to be."

The small hands, still lingering on the big one, gave it a quick pressure.

"You're a much better man than you used to be,"

she contradicted. "Almost any man can use his strength when he has it, but it takes a real one to carry on without it."

With that she moved back to her previous place. He smiled a little, but his gaze went to the fingers curled loosely over the wheel, and his lips grew grave. It still was one of the most formidable gun-hands in Venezuela, that sinewy right fist; but it had almost failed him now in a fight with water; nothing but water. As he gazed once more along the river his eyes were unpleasant.

With smooth water once more around and no dangerous rocks immediately ahead, the boat drifted during a few minutes of rest. Then Benito, after squinting at the westering sun and spying a deserted hut some distance downstream, suggested:

"That house down yonder will be a good sleeping-place, señor."

Hart's eyes dwelt on his a moment; then roved past him to the hut, and beyond the hut to the next blind curve of the river.

"We camp tonight," he said deliberately, "below the Rio Meta."

"What! Ajo!" exclaimed the other, while even the peons stared in amazement. "Below the Meta? Below Puerto Carreño? But that is more than five leagues! In another hour it will be night, and we cannot travel in the night. It is not done."

"It will have to be done! "

Pablo stared again into the hard gray eyes; scratched his bristly chin; muttered to himself: "Diablo! He is crazy!" But he did not speak that thought aloud. Instead, he attempted politely to reason with the madman.

"But, señor, — of course you know best, but — it is already a day, and these peons must rest. And the señorita — it is not right to endanger her so. Below the Meta is the Raudal de Cariben, señor, as you know; and if we travel by dark — caramba, we cannot even find the Meta in the dark! We shall blunder into the raudal, and that is no place to travel by night. God bless me, no!"

The peons grunted agreement. Even Jean looked oddly at her countryman.

"It shall be done as I say!"

The fierce growl sent a chill up the spines of Benito and his men. So did the hovering of the deadly right hand near the holster. Hart now was El Tigre, before whom stronger men than these five had quailed.

"Sí — sí — as you will, capitán!" tumbled from Pablo's mouth. "We shall camp below the Meta. To work, you dogs!"

The goose-fleshed men began wearily dragging again at the oars. Benito turned his face forward, silently cursing El Tigre and heartily wishing he would fall dead. Jean still looked inquiringly at the menacing man-driver. His gaze strayed to her.

"It's this way," he explained. "We'd better pass

— a certain place down here — without being seen. Darkness will be all the better. We can hit the Meta all right, and tie up there until daybreak lets us shoot the rapid. I'm not ready to let these fellows know it yet, but there's going to be a rev — ”

He bit the word off short; for the English “ revolution ” and the Spanish “ revolución ” were too similar for either to be spoken just then.

“ — A rebellion,” he dodged. “ And just now this particular strip of river isn't a good place for us to be seen.”

She nodded, though she seemed undisturbed. Reaching under the seat, she lifted a small box; and from it she took the faded flag.

“ We might raise this,” she suggested. “ They wouldn't fire on the American flag, would they? ”

“ They might,” he answered shortly. “ Depends on who's there now. If certain men of my acquaintance — real revolutionists — were there with their forces, they'd be more like to salute it than to shoot it. And they'd treat you like a princess. But I think it's too early for them, and that the gangs there now are mostly scum — Colombian and Venezuelan riffraff who don't respect anything but lead.”

“ But you're known to them, aren't you? ”

“ Ha! Yes. Only too well. For once, I'm playing safe.”

Again she nodded, and this time her face showed concern. Soberly she studied the sullen rowers and

the back of the bowman, whose intent pose betrayed his straining effort to overhear some illuminating word from the stern.

"Are you sure these men don't know of what is coming?" she asked. "And shouldn't they be told now?"

"Yes and no. I'm positive they don't know yet, because that very point was taken up at the conference I attended awhile ago. Oh yes, I was in on the game, though I'm out of it now. Well, a couple of previous uprisings have been knocked in the head by too much talk beforehand; and since our noble pilot yonder has a loose tongue and sees everybody traveling beyond Zamuro, he's being carefully kept ignorant. As for telling him now — hardly! If we pass unchallenged I doubt if I'll tell him at all. He always looks out for his own hide. We'll look out for ours."

Slowly the boat crawled on. Shadows lengthened athwart the stream. From the shore trees rolled the raucous roar of a howling monkey, and in the nearer air squawked the harsh-voiced guacharaca birds, wheeling on fleet wings and watching the sluggish launch.

The abandoned house where Benito had meant to sleep was passed without a word. The next curve advanced slowly toward them, turned them in a new direction, and let them go. The last hot glare of the low sun broiled the left sides of boat and passengers. Then it was gone, and in the wondrously blue sky floated only fiery clouds at the west, rose-and-lavender ones

in the zenith, and dull blue-gray ones to eastward. Swiftly the glow faded, the blue deepened, and the first star twinkled out.

"Pablo," spoke Hart, who had been studying the watermarks along shore.

"Sí? "

"The water is high enough to pass around the island opposite Puerto Carreño? "

The unskilled pilot squinted at the nearest boulder, measuring the space between mud-streaks.

"I think so," he assented. "It is rising all the time. The shore channel now must be quite deep at that place."

"Bueno. We shall go behind the island. The stars will give enough light. Below the island we travel near the east bank."

Benito, still facing downstream, screwed up one eye as he probed this plan. Such a course was an obvious endeavor to avoid Puerto Carreño. Puerto Carreño was the nearest settlement to the Meta. The Meta was the great flowing highway from Colombia, down which traveled desperate characters: bandits, fleeing murderers, and, at times — revolutionists!

"Madre de Dios! " He jerked about as if kicked. "Is there a new — "

"Silence! " spat Hart. "Keep your mouth shut and obey! "

Pablo's mouth opened and closed twice. With a worried scowl he turned back to his lookout work, seeing the darkening river not at all. There was a new

revolution! And he was many miles from his rancho — below the Raudal de San Borje — in a dead boat — in the power of that demon of a Tigre! He would lose all his cattle! If the rebels met him he might even be shot! If he dared to oppose this diabolical Tigre he surely would be shot! Ah, Santa Maria, what a vile, tricky, infernal beast was this Tigre, to drag an honest man into such a trap!

The fact that he himself had recently sold the Tigre to the señorita, under the supposition that she intended to betray the gunman to the federals at Bolívar, did not recur to him. Besides, that was only a cute business matter. For that same Tigre to hoodwink Pablo Benito was a most villainous crime. Not even the golden vision of the waiting Banco de Venezuela cheered Pablo now. He might not live to arrive there!

But as the night thickened and the probability of passing the danger-point unseen grew larger in his mind, he became more calm. After all, the revolution had not yet broken out, — he would have heard of it. And if his cattle were lost he would find some way to make these Norte Americanos pay for them. They had taken him away from his rancho, — they must pay the damages, caramba!

So now the thing to do was to sneak himself and his men and his golden goose of a señorita past Puerto Carreño. Bueno! That was easy. Had he not brought the boat through that deadly San Borje? Even the Tiger had admitted his smartness. And now

he would run under the noses of the lurking rebels and laugh at them. He was too sly for them to catch.

At length the island loomed ahead. Pablo hissed orders to his peons; they must row silently now. To Hart, watching keenly, he gave no instructions; for the steersman already was swinging the boat. Under the stars, now faintly lighting the waterway, they floated behind the black island and stealthily slid down the curving by-channel.

No voice, no splash, no light came to them from the inky banks on either side. Gradually they traveled down the whole length of the island, and still the silence and the darkness were unbroken. The last trees on their left faded away, and they peered across the Orinoco at the lights of Puerto Carreño.

Those lights were too numerous for normal times. Fires blazed and lanterns moved. Men were camping there, — far too many men to be mere river travelers. But there seemed to be no boats out on the water, and those lights were nearly a mile away, casting no beams on the launch. The voyagers could pass easily, and by moonrise they would be —

“Alto!” barked a voice. “Quién vive?”

The military demand snapped from the east bank, only a few rods away. In the ensuing silence aboard the boat all heard movements of invisible men and the faint clicks of gun-locks.

“Halt!” rang the voice again. “Halt or die!”

“Sangre de Cristo!” hissed Pablo. “We are caught!”

CHAPTER XIV

THE TRAP

AT the sharp command from the darkness, the rowers had halted their strokes as if smitten by paralysis. The boat at once lost headway. Now a flash leaped from the black bush and the launch quivered from the impact of a heavy bullet.

"That for a warning!" called the voice. "The next ones will rake you. Back your oars!"

The scared peons obeyed in blundering haste. Their oars clashed against one another, splashed in blind back-strokes, rocking the boat and destroying control. Benito howled a medley of senseless orders and fragmentary prayers. Hart, struggling to maintain his balance in the reeling craft, exploded into wrath at the men afloat and those ashore.

"You, there, you misborn son of a jackass!" he yelled at the bush. "Fire again and I will blow your belly out through your back! I am El Tigre!"

"Sí?" The voice did not sound surprised. "Give the sign."

"Libertad."

"Libertad y justicia," acknowledged the other. "You should have spoken sooner. Hold your boat. We have a word for you."

Hart listened intently as commands were spoken. Men were ordered to move outward; others to hold their positions. Evidently the ambushed force was strong enough to make resistance hopeless. Moreover, it was absolutely invisible, while the launch was sufficiently plain to form an unmistakable target. Sourly he compelled the oarsmen to bring the boat about and hold her bow on to the current.

From the murk alongshore slid a canoe in which rifle-barrels glinted under the starlight.

"Who comes?" demanded the Tiger.

"Otón Polanco, lieutenant of Arebalo," was the cool answer from the dugout.

"Arebalo? He is here?"

"Sí. We came two days ago. Our camp is behind the big black rock, beyond Carreño. The general will talk with you. Go across the river. We shall escort you."

The canoe swung alongside, aligning itself with the launch, its men peering sharply across the few feet of intervening water. The Tiger peered as sharply back at them.

"How comes Arebalo here, lieutenant?" he queried dubiously. "He was not to operate at the Meta, but northward."

A grin gleamed across the indistinct face of the rebel in command.

"Ho! Have you not learned that our general always operates where he is not expected?" he rebuked.

"True enough." The Tiger relaxed. "So the movement in the north was only a blind. Bueno! I shall be much pleased to see the general."

"Sí," chimed in Pablo, his voice much relieved. "And I too. He is a good hombre, the General Arebalo. Vamos!"

The rowers gave way. The Tiger lifted his hand from his holster and resumed steering. The bow swung toward the upstream limit of the lights, and the launch forged slowly across the current, flanked by the dugout.

"You keep sharp watch," Hart called. "Did you stop Diego Lopez too?"

"Diego Lopez? Who is he?"

"Of San Fernando. In a piragua. Two days ago."

"Ah, two days ago. I have had this guard here only since one day ago. I know nothing of such a man."

"Hm! No chance of getting back our gas, then," Hart murmured to the tense girl beside him. "But we're in luck, at that. I used to know Arebalo, and he's all right. He may even give us an escort of rebels to take us to the federals. It would be just like him."

"Who is he?" she asked.

"Arebalo Diaz, the cleverest daredevil in the revolutionary game hereabouts, — and a gentleman. Used to be a big cattle-owner, I've heard, and was framed up and ruined by some governor up north about eight years ago. Since then he's fought the government from pure hatred; campaigned all over Venezuela, attacked

all kinds of federal forces, licked them to a frazzle half the time and scared them green in the face the other half. I helped him do some of the licking. He doesn't fight for loot, like most of these self-styled revolutionists; his only use for money is to buy arms or give it to the poor. When he captures a town he takes the weapons and the federal funds, boots out the officials, frees the poor devils in the jails, and moves on. You notice his men speak of him by his first name. They love the ground he walks on."

"He must be a sort of Robin Hood."

"Something like that. I'm surprised to find him here,— he fights mostly in the north, where there are more towns; but I'm glad to meet up with him again. For one thing, he has a great liking for the United States."

"Yes? That may be very useful." With a mischievous side-glance, she added: "What an interesting man he must be,— a man everyone loves! It's a shame that I look such a fright."

"Tough luck," he agreed dryly. "However, I think he'll bear up nobly under the infliction."

"You brute!" she laughed. "After that, it will be rather nice to hear a few flowery Spanish compliments from the general. Perhaps I'll fall in love with him like everyone else. Who knows?"

"Better not." His tone hardened. She laughed again.

"There's not much danger." She watched him a

moment longer, then turned smiling eyes toward the approaching lights. The swash of the oars, the dull thump of the paddle-shafts along the canoe gunwales, measured the gradual progress of the captured and the captors. The settlement grew larger, and against the fire-glow the black forms of men became distinct.

"Alerte! Who comes!" rang a hail from the Colombian shore.

"Otón and El Tigre," called the lieutenant. There was no further challenge.

At length, at the northernmost point of the settlement—for the current had borne them somewhat downward in the crossing—they grounded. Armed men, their faces shadowy against the lights, seized the boats and held them firm. Others, in disorderly groups, came swinging down the sloping shore. There was a reckless swagger in their gait, a rough timbre in their voices, that made Hart scowl and reach toward his holster.

"These are not your men, lieutenant?" he demanded.

"Ah, no," was the easy reply. "These are those who wait on the river side. Our camp is where I have told you. Come."

"Tell this gang to get back, then," growled the Tiger, eying the huge black rock looming vaguely behind the town. "Is Arebalo camping without fires? No light shows behind the rock."

"Without fires—after dark," assented the other.

He glanced toward the advancing men, but gave them no command to halt. The Tiger growled again as he stepped over the side. His gun now was loosened in its sheath and gripped in a tense hand.

"Halt!" he snapped. The newcomers slowed. Only one, a burly fellow carrying a lantern, came straight on. On him Hart's cold eyes fixed. Half crouching, he waited.

"Who are you?" he snapped. "Did you not hear me?"

Still the man gave no sign of hearing. Up to El Tigre he came defiantly before he stopped. Behind him another man edged forward. The lieutenant and those around the boats moved imperceptibly nearer.

The lantern was lifted. Its light illumined the faces of Hart and the other man. That face was red from sun and drink,—a hard-jawed, hard-eyed, stubbly-bearded, lowering countenance which now stretched in a menacing grin.

"Yeah, it's Hard Hart!" the newcomer raucously exulted. "Hard Hart, the cold-blooded slave-driver I been lookin' for ever since the armistice! Ha ha ha! Guess ye ain't forgot Bull Kelly, hey, Hart? Sergeant William Kelly o' B Company, damn ye! Ye broke me once, but it's my turn now, hey? Cap'n Hart! Blah-blah! Ye're a no-good down-an'-out now, hey? Ha ha ha *ho!*"

Hart, iron-featured, gazed slit-eyed at the malignant nemesis which had sprung from his past.

"So it's you, Kelly, you yellow-livered thief!" he

grated. "Hanging out now with the scum of South America, are you? You're in the right company at last, — among a pack of halfbreeds! You're no white man. You're a disgrace to the Irish father that gave you a name. I'm glad I broke you, and now I'll break you again so you'll stay broke! Draw, you sneak-thief! Draw! "

Kelly, with a grunt of rage, dropped the lantern and reached toward his own revolver. But behind him rose a sudden piercing yell in Spanish that slowed his hand.

"No! The señorita! You might kill her! Do not shoot — Santa Maria, not yet! She is mine! Wait until I take her, — then kill him! "

The creeping man behind Kelly was jumping forward. The Tiger's gun leaped out.

"Back, you snake! " he shouted. "Pablo — Jean — push out and away! It's a trap — I'll hold them — "

Kelly sprang at him. Yells — oaths — blows sounded at the launch. A sudden stunning shock smote the Tiger's head from behind. He staggered and nearly fell. His gun hand mechanically began firing.

In a whirling chaos of lights, men, stars and gunshots he reeled, snarling, gasping, fighting desperately against engulfing oblivion. His gun spat again — again — again — clicked uselessly. He was hurled down. A rifle-barrel fell again on his head. Then — blackness.

CHAPTER XV

THE TIGER AND THE BULL

FIRES and faces wavered before the returning vision of Hard Hart. They were unreal things which refused to remain in place: fires which whirled dizzily about him, faces which leered and blurred into new ones; sly faces, bold faces, venomous faces, but all alike in one feature—the reckless expression stamped on them by years of outlawry and wild living. From somewhere sounded a mocking voice relating a joke.

“And I said, ‘I am Otón Polanco, teniente of Arebalo.’ And the fool—that Tigre so wise and cunning—por Dios, he believed it! And he asked where was Arebalo, and I said our general—*our* general, ha ha ha!—was behind the rock yonder. And he said he would be glad to see Arebalo,—cra, yes, he did,—and he came like a sheep. And on the way he was telling the señorita what a great man was Arebalo,—he did not know that I understand English. Ha ha ha! And listen—this is too good—she said she would love Arebalo—sí, so she did—and the Tigre growled as if he would bite! Ah ha ha!”

A hoarse chorus of laughter made Hart writhe—but only mentally. His body seemed paralyzed, his

brain still only half clear. The fires were growing dim.

"And Arebalo four hundred miles away!" chuckled another voice. "Why should Arebalo come to the Meta when he can find good fighting in Guárico? The señorita must travel far if she would love him so that he will know it. And what is the good of loving at a distance?"

"That is not your way, Pancho," twitted a third. More rough mirth followed. "Tell me, what did you do with that last woman of yours when you tired of her?"

"I strangled her. She kept blubbering because I had shot her man —"

The dimness overpowered Hart. He slipped into nowhere.

After a time the fires reappeared. Now they stood steady. The swarthy faces, too, moved naturally or remained in one place, the eyes centering on something beyond. Another voice was speaking: a low, steady voice ice-edged with contempt: the voice of a woman.

"And you were born in America, I suppose," it said. "You went to American schools, grew up under the protection of the American flag, called yourself an American and a white man. And you went to France to fight for America — or didn't you? I guess you didn't. I guess you were kicked into the army, and went over because you weren't even man enough to be a real slacker! And yet you became a sergeant?"

I can't believe it — unless it was in a non-combatant unit of some kind. You hulking coward — ”

“ That'll be about all from you, me lady! ” an ugly growl broke in. “ Talk civil or shut up! Don't think because ye wear a skirt ye can pull that kind o' stuff! It don't go! ”

Hart rolled his head and looked toward the voices. He was lying on the hard-packed clay of the one street of Puerto Carreño. Campfires burned along the way, their flickering lights disclosing yellow palm walls of huts and yellow faces of lounging men. Beside the nearest fire, some four yards away, stood Kelly and Jean; the man's red visage glowering down at her, the girl's scornful gaze unswerving. Near them, on the ground, lay two motionless men. Beyond, Pablo Benito and his peons squatted glumly, backed and flanked by a disorderly array of human beasts of prey.

“ Coward! ” she taunted. “ A mouth-fighter — that's all you are! You have to have all your gang with you before you can capture one white man — and he a cripple! You have to disarm a white woman before you dare stand and talk to her! And then — *then*, with the crippled man struck down from behind, — then how brave you are! Ha ha ha ha! ”

Her laughter cut like a whiplash. Kelly's face bloated and blackened with rage. The men beyond — few able to understand her English words, but all reading her mocking voice and attitude — nudged one another and grinned slyly, appreciating the scene just

as they would have enjoyed the baiting of a bull. Hart reached for his belt — found himself weaponless — and lurched suddenly to his feet.

Instantly Kelly wheeled, thick fingers twitching, a sneering grin manifesting evident relief at having a man to pick on. Toward him walked Hart, dizzy again from the fierce blows which had downed him, swaying on uncertain feet.

“Yah! Come to life, did ye!” Kelly spoke in savage satisfaction. “About time! I got somethin’ for ye, — been savin’ it for years, — now come and git it!” His heavy fists rose. Head forward and jaw out, he strode vengefully at the groggy victim of his long-nourished hatred.

“So that’s it? Bare hands?” jeered Hart. “White-man style? Booze makes you almost human —”

Without the slightest preliminary movement of his hand, and in the middle of a word, he straightened toward the protruding jaw. Fist, arm, body and left leg formed one line, and the terrific punch came clear from his toes. It landed with a crack like that of a cleaver on a side of beef. Kelly lengthened backward and hit the ground with a thump.

But, as he fell, his own right fist crunched into Hart’s lower ribs with a sickening jolt. The Tiger, who had thrown every ounce of power into that one blow, reeled, gasped, and toppled aside. For a second both men lay still. The outlaws beyond stood petrified.

"Sangre de Cristo!" came an awed voice. "El Tigre still has his tricks! What a smash on the jaw of El Toro!"

El Toro — the Bull — evidently thought so himself, if capable of thinking just then. Feebly he struggled up to a sit, his right hand dropping instinctively to his revolver, his left pawing before his face as if to brush away a dense fog. His body swayed as if about to topple back. From his split chin dripped blood.

El Tigre, watching as he gasped for breath, grinned ferociously. He squirmed over, rose to hand and knees, shambled forward. Still on his knees, he threw himself at his enemy's right side, clutching at the revolver.

With a hoarse grunt Kelly acknowledged the attack and swung his groping left arm around the other's body. With both right fists clenched around the same gun, the two flopped about the ground, fighting with knees and feet.

The murderous band around them closed in.

"Kill the devil-cat!" yelled a rough voice.

"No! Do not spoil the fight!" shouted a dozen others. "It is too good! Wait!"

Jean, apparently frozen, suddenly flashed into life. With a bound she was at the nearest bandit, snatching for his rifle. She almost wrenched it from him. But the man's hard hand shut just in time. In the same instant another evil-featured brute tore her away and held her powerless.

"Not so fast, my beauty!" he grinned, leering at

her. "Perhaps you may shoot El Toro later — but not now. Be still!"

Straining, yanking, she found his grip unyielding as iron. Perforce she quieted and waited.

Under the stress of rough-and-tumble combat, Kelly's sight and strength came back to him. The fury of his resistance redoubled. He could not draw his gun — he had all he could do to keep the Tiger from breaking his hold on its butt, — but he could, and did, battle savagely with his left fist. His blows seemingly had no effect whatever. Then he gave up battering and tried for a throat grip.

The Tiger snapped like a fanged animal. The vindictive hand searching for his jugular jerked sharply back. Kelly, the Bull, roared with pain. The Tiger's teeth were buried in the base of his thumb.

Slowly, with terrible effort, they heaved each other over twice, grappling in a futile clinch. The two right hands still gripped the gun, neither able to wrest it from the other. Kelly's left hand was caught in jaws as rigid as those of a steel trap. Their legs were interlocked. Neither could further damage his opponent. Now was the time for the Bull to yell for help from the tense brutes around him.

But he did not. Panting, he spoke to his antagonist.

"Lay off, ye fightin' fool!" he grunted. "Ye can't git the gun. Leggo! Call it a draw — for now. These here gorillas will croak the both of us unless we break."

Still holding his grips, Hart flicked a glance around;

saw the death-lust in the vulpine faces; saw Jean in the hold of the ruffian who had seized her. For another instant he plumbed Kelly's bloodshot eyes for treacherous intent — and found none. Forthwith he loosed his jaws and tentatively relaxed his hand. At once Kelly's gun hand rose with his, leaving the weapon undrawn.

"Up together!" breathed Hart. With a simultaneous scramble and spring they shot to full height and fronted the swarthy pack, — two grisly warriors who seemed suddenly to have become partners united against an alien foe. So swift was the unexpected movement, so terrifying the aspect of the Tiger and the Bull, that the crowding figures involuntarily fell back.

El Tigre took one step toward the man holding the girl. That man hastily loosed her and retreated, defensively reaching for the hilt of his machete. Jean sprang toward Hart, who stopped, glowering at the fellow. At the same moment Kelly bellowed at the rest.

"Get back to your quarters!" he roared in bad Spanish, eying them balefully. "Who told you to crowd in here? Move, before I sent some of you to the devil!" His hand was again on his gun, and his bloodstained visage was frightful.

In all that godless gang not a man retorted or stood fast. The ragged figures drew away and shuffled off toward their respective fires, only a subdued hissing

of oaths bespeaking their resentment. There remained a half-score of heavily armed men who looked somewhat less criminal than the rest. They seemed to await further orders.

"Ye low-lived cutthroats, ye!" muttered Kelly. With this benediction on his followers he turned toward Hart. For a moment the two glared at each other. Then, though eye and voice spoke undiminished hostility, Kelly's tone held a grudging note of respect.

"Git into this here shack and stay there till mornin'. Don't try no monkey games, neither, or these here tough eggs'll drill ye. Git me? I'll tend to ye to-morrer. Right now I got somethin' else on me hands. And ye've done enough scrappin' for one night, ye hardboiled divil, with croakin' them two guys and knockin' down Bull Kelly."

As he concluded, he jerked a thumb toward the two still forms on the ground. Without another word he strode away. The armed men, unspeaking, moved toward the prisoners. With a shrug, Hart stepped wearily toward the hut designated by his captor.

On his way he paused and peered down at the bodies of the men whom, Kelly said, he had killed; men shot in his blind fight at the launch. Resuming his course, he smiled grimly. In coming to Puerto Carreño he had squared an account.

One of the dead — a lank, loose-lipped creature — he did not know. But the other was he who had

sneaked forward behind Kelly at the waterside; he who had yelled that the señorita was his, and whose presence here explained the setting of the trap across the river. With a hole in his breast and another in his forehead, Diego Lopez would steal no more gasoline.

CHAPTER XVI

OLD SCORES

IN the hut assigned as their prison for the night, Hart and Jean peered swiftly about in search for possible weapons; for the hammocks and other articles showed it to be in use. But no gun or knife remained in it. Glancing back at the doorway, Hart found a sardonic smile on the face of the man who seemed to be in command of the guards.

"No arms are there," the fellow said. "You must think we are fools. Go to sleep and try no tricks. We surround you."

"I looked for food and water, not arms," Hart denied. "We have hunger. Let them be brought!"

The other considered, his gaze going to the girl. Then he nodded.

"That is only fair," he conceded. "Arnaldo and Farruco, fetch food from the launch of these people, if there is any. If there is none, get something elsewhere. And water also."

"Thanks, comrade," Hart acknowledged. "And have you tobacco?"

"Sí." Warily watching him, the other deftly made a cigarette from tobacco shreds and tabarí bark, and

passed it over; rolled another for himself, lit it, and tendered the match—with his left hand. The right hovered near his belt.

“Do not fear,” said the Tiger, smiling grimly. “I fight no more tonight.”

“You had best not,” was the retort. “But you are too tricky to be trusted. I saw you hit El Toro,—cra, what a blow! If he were not as tough as a tapir it would have killed him. Tell me, what is between you two? You are old enemies, yes?”

“He is my enemy,” qualified Hart, blowing a smoke-ring. “I thought so little of him that I had forgotten him. We were in the American army, and he stole from French peasants. So I punished him.”

“Is that all?” The other looked incredulous. “He did nothing but steal? Por Dios, all the world steals!”

The gray-eyed man chuckled.

“In one way or another, most of the world does,” he assented. “But one must not be caught at it. Kelly—El Toro—was caught.”

“Ah, of course, that is different. Yet that must have been a queer army of yours, if men were not allowed to take what they could get.”

The listening bandits grouped near him profanely agreed. The Tiger laughed again. Then he took a turn at questioning.

“What is El Toro here? He seems to command. Are you all his men?”

“Ah, no. But we who fight with him are the strong-

est band now here, so the others walk wide of us. We are of Colombia, and have come down the Meta because we heard of the coming revolution. El Toro has led us for a year; he came east because he killed a town official in a duel in the gold country, and the greater officials sought his head. He is the very devil of a fighter, — no man has ever done to him what you did tonight. And with a gun — cra, he never misses! ”

“ That is nothing. We Norte Americanos always hit — unless we cannot see,” Hart casually informed him. “ Who was it that struck me on the head at the boat? ”

“ That was Otón, who brought you across. He is sharp, that Otón. He was once in the federal army of Colombia, and he now is second in command to El Toro. It was he who thought to make that trap for you across the river, so that you could be stopped if you tried to slip past in the night. He fooled you most neatly, yes? ”

Hart shrugged, his expressionless face giving no hint of his inward rage.

“ He spoiled my shooting,” was all the concession he would make. “ But not enough to preserve Diego Lopez and another.”

“ Sí,” quickly assented the outlaw, as if seizing a chance to speak of something lurking at the back of his mind. “ He was a snake, that Diego, — you shot most marvelously well, señor, — the fat fool thought to get this so-beautiful señorita. The pig! ” Then, leaning closer and lowering his tone, he added: “ And

now, Señor El Tigre, — this is a very bad position for the señorita, — one cannot tell what may happen to her. I can take her to a safe place, — I can see that she journeys onward with all protection. Later in the night, when it is more quiet, let her slip away from this house. I will take her away at once. She shall be altogether safe.”

The Tiger’s fist shut. The reason for the fellow’s friendliness was suddenly clear; and Hart knew exactly how “safe” the señorita would be under his “protection.” One second more, and the guard would have felt that formidable fist crash under his jaw. But in that one second he started and spun away, shocked by something even more dreaded, — his master’s voice.

“You slimy eel!” thundered the vulgar Spanish of Bull Kelly. “You plot with the prisoners, huh? You try to make an escape, huh? You lousy son of a dog!”

From beside the hut, where he had been spying for none knew how long, leaped the Bull. A blow thudded. The man fell and rolled. Nor did his punishment stop there. Kelly was after him with terrific kicks, fairly lifting his writhing body from the ground with each furious leg-drive. The victim made matters all the worse for himself by attempting defense, first with a revolver, then with a knife. Both were knocked spinning by the vicious feet, which finished their work with a kick in the midriff that left the plotter totally insensible.

The other outlaws watched with cruel grins. As El Toro completed his discipline and turned from the inert figure they chuckled harshly, even as they narrowly eyed Kelly's advance on them. Halting within arm's length, he swept them with a truculent glare.

"Julio, you take charge," he rumbled. "No talking to the prisoners! The next man to try it will be broken in small pieces. Understand?"

"Sí," one answered, easily. "El Tigre has ordered food and water brought. Is it allowed?"

"Sí. Let them eat. But nothing more."

With that he strode to the doorway and confronted Hart.

"Ye heard what I said," he rasped. "Eatin' and sleepin' is yer limit. Don't pull no clever stuff. And say, I want to tell ye somethin' that don't make no difference now, excep' to show ye where ye git off. That time ye busted me in France and gimme the name of a cheap crook — 'twas a frame-up. I never swiped the stuff. The guys that done the job hung it onto me, and they got away with it. Ye soaked me good, didn't ye? Never gimme a chanst, did ye? And now, before I'm done with ye, ye'll know nobody makes a goat o' Bull Kelly without payin' dear."

Hart studied him keenly. The hot eyes, the bitter tone, were those of a man wronged. And, under present circumstances, Kelly could have no object in lying about that bygone affair.

"You made no defense, Kelly," he reminded. "Worse than that, you were insubordinate and in-

solent. Why didn't you tell this stuff then and square yourself? Sounds pretty fishy."

"Whaddye think I am — a squealer?" flared Kelly. "I didn't have a chanst, and I knowed it. Ye had me judged guilty before I was brought in; I could see it in yer eyes. So I kep' me trap shut — excep' for tellin' ye all to go to hell. And I squared things with two o' them guys that framed me, — yeah, I'll say I did! They're in France yet, — under ground!"

"Oh." The Tiger's mouth curled. "Murdered them, eh?"

"Murder nothin'! I got to 'em at Brest, on the way home. Up an alley, it was, with our bayonits. I took 'em both to oncet, — two to one, git me? And I done 'em both in. Then I faded quick to alibi me-self, and when they was found the police guessed they fit each other to death like the Kilkenny cats. I pay me bills in me own way —"

"Corcoran and Heaslip!" the ex-captain broke in. "I remember that Brest incident."

"Corcoran and Heaslip they was. And the other two was Vitelli and Skinner. They croaked before I could git to 'em, so I had to let 'em slide. Vitelli got blowed to hash by a shell, and Skinner got his eyes shot out, went nuts, and et the end of his gun. That cleans up the whole lousy lot, all but Hard Hart. And tomorrer night I'll be square with *all* o' them that done me dirt."

The heavy mouth curved in a downward grin.

"Uh-huh," the one-armed man coolly replied. "Bring on any game you like. If you had any sense you'd know that on the showing you made in your trial you let yourself in for all you got. But if you want to take it out on me now, all right. What I want to know is this: Since when have you been picking on women — American women? "

Kelly scowled.

"When she gits some sense, and talks sense instead o' bawlin' me out, I'll listen to that li'l lady o' yours. Till then she can lay here."

Two men, approaching with lanterns, drew his eye aside. They were the pair who had gone after food.

They paused beside their commander, who, after surveying their light load of cassava, smoked pork, and water, nodded and grabbed the lantern from the nearer man. With it he stepped into the hut, shoving the Tiger roughly back and scanning the interior as if to reassure himself that it contained nothing likely to aid escape. The food-bearers followed.

For a moment Kelly gave no attention to the prisoners. Then, satisfied, he dropped his gaze to Jean. At once his eyes widened.

Calm, quiet, she sat in a hammock, looking at him. Down over her lap, its starry field uppermost and its faded red and discolored white stripes cascading to her boot-tips, lay the flag which had been with her ever since she left the States.

Kelly's right hand jerked upward, stopping abruptly

at his ribs. His neck straightened and stiffened. Dumb, he gaped at the mute symbol for which he and millions of comrades had fought and for which thousands had died. Slowly then his eyes lifted and dwelt on the deep dark orbs so steadfastly regarding him. For a long minute that silent gaze held. Then he looked again at the flag.

A deep breath lifted his thick shoulders. His rigid arm relaxed, his mouth closed, his eyes swerved. Wordless, he motioned to the staring Colombians to put down the food and go. And, without another look at American man, woman, or flag, he tramped out and was gone in the night.

CHAPTER XVII

COURT MARTIAL

THOUGHTFULLY the man and the maid moved about in preparation for their belated meal. By the aid of the lantern left by El Toro they found an Orinoco wash-basin (the upper shell of a turtle), and in this they freshened faces and hands. Then they downed their rude fare in silence.

Dinner over, and pork-smeared hands washed again, they glanced over the half-dozen hammocks. Hart picked up the lantern.

"Bed-time," he said. "Nothing to do but rest until tomorrow. We haven't a chance to break loose, so we may as well take it easy. I'm sorry I dragged you into this mess."

"You didn't," she denied. "It was that sneaking Lopez who made the trouble. And we'll come out all right, even yet. I'm sure of it."

"Of course." He nodded. "Kelly's a good deal of a man under his rough outside. He'll do the right thing. Well, good night."

Moving to the doorway, he set the lantern outside. An alert guard in front, and two more at the corners, watched him like cats; and he knew that others were

stationed at the rear. Giving them no attention, he stood awhile in the entrance, looking casually along the fire-studded street. The man kicked by El Toro had revived and disappeared. Pablo Benito and his peons also had vanished, and Kelly himself was not in sight.

"Poor little kid!" thought the lounging man. "You're clear grit, but I don't see your way out of this mess. You don't know how savage a white man becomes when he turns renegade. Kelly's gone to drink himself blood-mad on white rum, probably, and by tomorrow he'll be as merciless a brute as any of these mongrels. Oh, well, something may turn up. If there's a ghost of a chance I won't let it get past me."

Then from the darkness at the rear of the hut sounded a soft voice.

"Good night, Sir Tiger. Carry on!"

"'Night."

Wearily he stepped to the hammock beside the door. In it he curled up, facing the entrance.

"Wonder just what sort of finish Kelly's fixing up for me," he pondered. "Pretty rough, no doubt. An ingrown hate calls for a lot of revenge. Well, it's about time somebody got me. I fell for that slick Otón's trap like a kid for striped candy, and I potted only two men with six shots. I'm slipping. Thought so before. Now I know it."

Yet, with the fatalism of an old campaigner and the stoicism of the Indians whom he had recently ruled,

he soon fell asleep. Tomorrow was another day, and tomorrow had not yet come.

From time to time during the night his eyes opened to find Julio, the corporal of the guard, standing in the doorway and, with lantern held aloft, reassuring himself that the prisoners still were in their hammocks. Each inspection was only momentary, and at no time did any man advance beyond the threshold.

Toward morning Hart sat up suddenly, listening to a new sound. From the northern end of the village came the swift throb of a motor, its cadence quickening and slowing with a regularity which told of a repeated testing. Presently it settled into a steady hum which held for several minutes. Then it was cut off. A little later came a shuffle of feet and a question from Julio.

“What is that noise at the launch, hombre?”

“It is the work of El Toro himself,” replied a sleepy voice. “He is restless and ugly, and he plans a raid for today. He has put in the gasoline of Diego Lopez and has made the engine to work. We shall have a little ship of war.”

“Bueno! Where does he raid?”

“I do not know,” yawned the informant. “Who ever knew El Toro to say where he would strike? I am sleepy. Buen’ noche’.”

The footsteps passed on. Hart sank back, cursing Kelly under his breath.

Dawn came, and the noises of an awaking camp:

voices of men, whinnies of horses, rough jokes bawled from fires to huts and back again; the hiss and crackle of flames reviving under fresh fuel; a wailing tenor voice singing a ribald love-ditty. Hart sat up, stretched, stepped to the doorway, blocked the view of all outsiders while the girl behind him arose. Men straggling past eyed him in various moods; some with frank curiosity, some with lowering stares, a few with malevolent sneers. To all alike he gave only a bleak, contemptuous regard.

A new guard arrived, relieving Julio and his heavy-eyed night watch. To them the Tiger gave a nod and a perfunctory greeting. Muffled grunts were the only reply. He turned from them to greet Jean, now summoning him to breakfast.

The meal passed as silently as had the previous supper. There was nothing to say, nothing to do but await developments. When the coarse food palled they rested in neighboring hammocks, their eyes straying now and then to the flag, which she had hung from a low rafter.

The sun was more than an hour high when heavy steps outside, accompanied by the shuffle of many other feet converging on the hut, announced the arrival of Kelly. A moment later he bulked in the entrance, looking huge and sinister against the dayshine.

"Rafael, keep this crowd back," he snapped over one shoulder. Then he pushed in and halted, feet apart, fists on hips, eyes on the pair who had risen to confront him.

One keen look at him told Hart that he had not spent the night in rum-drinking, but that he was none the less deadly for that. He was cold sober, steady as a stone, grim and hard. Under his unwinking lids glimmered an unreadable light. Squarely in the face he looked at each of his prisoners, and straight at the flag beyond them he glanced without change of feature.

"Wal, what ye got to say?" he demanded. "This here is yer court-martial, Hart. I got me decision all ready now, same as ye had yourn that time in France. But I'll listen to yer pleadin'. Git busy."

"Pleading? To you?" Hart shot back. "The only plea I'll give you is the one you gave us years ago. Go to hell!"

The heavy mouth twitched in a fleeting grin. Then the stony jaw set harder than before.

"That's plenty. And that's all from you. Now, me lady, what's your argyment? If ye got anything to say besides the line o' talk ye spilt last night, shoot."

"Very well." Confidently she stepped forward. "You have put Pablo Benito through a sort of third degree, I suppose?"

"Oh, yeah. He coughed up all he knows. What about it?"

"Nothing, except that it's not necessary to tell you what you already know. But there are some things Benito doesn't know. He probably has led you to believe—as I led him to believe—that Captain Hart goes with me as a dupe, to be betrayed into the federal

prison at Ciudad Bolívar. That's not so. He is going home with me to the States, back to the land of white men.

"He rescued me from savage Indians — and lost his arm in doing it — because I was a white woman. He never had seen me, knew nothing about me; he did it only because I was an American in danger. And now he goes home with me because — because he has come to realize anew what the American flag means to him.

"Look at that flag, Sergeant Kelly! Does it mean anything to *you*? Look at these stains on it! Do you know what they are? They are Captain Hart's own blood! Clean American blood, shed in defense of an American who meant nothing to him. What kind of blood's in *your* veins, sergeant? "

The cold eyes under the heavy black brows did not flicker. The stony face did not change. The answer came in a growl.

"Black blood, if ye want to know! The blood o' the Black Irish that never forgit a raw deal. Ye want to know what that flag means to me, hey? It means nothin'! And this hero o' yourn is yellor as a Chink. He's goin' out — why? Because he's busted, and he's crawlin' behind the flag and behind yer skirt to save what's left of his low-down carcass! "

"That's a lie, Kelly, and you know it! Captain, one minute!" Her eyes flashed from man to man. Hart, poised to leap at his defamer, caught himself.

"And when you say the flag means nothing to you, that's another lie! I know better. And down in your heart you know better. And you're not going to murder —"

"Ah, cut it out! Ye've both had yer say. Now I'll have me own. Shut up, I tell ye! I'm talkin' now, and what I say goes!

"Hart, if ye had yer other arm I'd bust ye — with me hands. I'd smash ye to nothin'. But ye're no good no more, — ye caught me off guard last night, but ye couldn't do it a secont time, and breakin' ye would be too easy. So I'm goin' to turn ye loose."

Hart sank back on his heels, astounded.

"What!"

"Yeah. Ye can git into a canoe and beat it down-river. What comes of ye afterwards I don't care. The girl, here, stays with me. She's a spunky kid, and I like her. G'wan, now, before I change me mind and have ye shot —"

Simultaneously the two men sprang. The Tiger, his face livid, leaped like a flash. But the Bull was as quick as he. A shock of colliding bodies, a dizzy whirl of battling forms, — then three men jumped in at the door and flung themselves on Hart. In a few seconds the raging Tiger was overpowered and held fast.

"So ye won't have it that way," mocked Kelly, backing off. "I've give ye yer chance. Now — Leg-go that gun, girl!"

His fist shut on the darting hand of Jean, which had almost captured his revolver. Without apparent effort he squeezed that little hand numb and tossed it aside.

"You beast!" she breathed.

"Now," resumed Kelly, ignoring her, "here's where ye git off, Hart. Ye're goin' to be shot. And I'm goin' to do the job meself."

Hart heaved toward him. But the three outlaws hurled him back.

"Jest to make it interestin', though, and not so much like shootin' a rat," Kelly continued with taunting deliberation, "I'm goin' to give ye a gun. We stand back to back, with a gun apiece; walk ten paces, turn and fire. Twenty paces apart, see? Three shots apiece. I hear ye used to be good with a gun, but that don't worry me none. Ye're broke; ye're no good; ye're a one-armed crip; ye can't shoot no more. Ye only landed three bullets out o' six last night, and ye missed *me* clean. Ye'll miss again now. And Bull Kelly never misses. Never!

"Now git outside!"

CHAPTER XVIII

AT TWENTY PACES

BACK to back, in the clear ground before the short row of palm huts, stood Captain Hart and Sergeant Kelly, each with a long revolver in his right fist. Massed along the way on both sides, the lawless gangsters of prairie and jungle waited in tense expectation for the finest show in years — the duel in which either the swift-striking Tiger of the south or the man-breaking Bull of the west should die. At the door of the prison hut, white and silent, the señorita of the Tiger stood helpless in the grip of two wiry bandits.

Fires had been hastily quenched, killing all smoke. The sun shone straight across the dueling-ground, giving each opponent equal light. Kelly had loaded his antagonist's gun with three cartridges plucked from his belt, and had ejected three of the six bullets in his own weapon. Outwardly, at least, neither man had the slightest advantage. But inwardly — which was the better fighter?

Kelly never missed. He was absolutely self-confident. His hand was nerveless. And Hart had found himself lacking. He had needed a woman's help in the struggle with the waters of the rapids. He had been tricked into a trap; had wasted bullets in his latest

gun-fight; had told himself, and been sneeringly told by his enemy, that he was no good. All these things lay heavy on his mind. And now, in the last desperate show-down, had he a chance?

His eyes veered to the helpless girl. A red flame swept him. Yes, he had a chance — and he would take it! A foul chance, perhaps, but what did fair fighting mean now? Among murderers — against such a man as Kelly — with the last hope of Jean depending on his act —

“Ten paces!” rumbled Kelly, as if reading his thought. “Ten whole paces before we turn! Are ye set? For’ard — march!”

Automatically the pair swung away at marching cadence.

One — two — three — four — *three more and then shoot!* — five — six — *but could he turn yellow now, before a girl?* — seven — *No!* — eight — nine — ten!

Hart whirled in the gunman’s crouch, gun stabbing toward Kelly. For one fraction of a second he held his fire, — the fraction necessary for absolute surety of balance. In that infinitesimal interval Kelly’s revolver roared.

Then the Tiger’s gun spat. In a reverberating rip of concussions the two heavy weapons vomited their leaden death. Abrupt silence fell.

Hart still stood braced on rigid legs. So did Kelly. But Kelly’s red face had gone gray. His mouth was open, gasping. His left hand fumbled at his stomach.

Seconds dragged past, each hours long. Neither man fell. Neither moved from his stance. Kelly's pained breathing was the only sound in a void of utter stillness. And Hart was untouched. Kelly had missed every shot.

The Tiger's rigidity vanished. He straightened, stepped swiftly toward his foe. Other men began to edge forward, teeth gleaming in mirthless grins, toward the stricken Bull. And then the Bull, too, moved.

His jaws clicked shut. The fumbling left hand darted inside his buttonless shirt. It jerked out again, — gripping another revolver.

"Back, you snakes!" he snarled.

The stealthily moving men froze. The Tiger stiffened, but kept straight on.

"So that's it, Kelly?" he sneered. "Going to use a full gun now that mine's empty —"

"Shut up!" erupted Kelly. "Git to the girl! I'll handle these guys."

In his tone was a convincing earnestness that slowed Hart. Amazed, he saw Kelly sweep the ranks with ugly eyes and ready gun, heard him begin to curse in commanding tones. Then he spun about and advanced on the pair holding Jean.

"Away from her!" he barked. The men started, stared in bewilderment at him and at the Bull, gave way and left the girl free. She ran to him, her face aglow.

"You aren't hurt!" she rejoiced. "You're safe! And he — he —"

"I'm all right," he nodded. "There's something queer here. I'll swear I hit him. I can't understand — But wait."

Under the lash of Kelly's tongue and the threat of his weapon, the men who had thought to finish a fallen chief faded backward. The rest stood mute, their attitudes acknowledging his unbroken mastery.

"You creeping snakes!" thundered the jungle Spanish of El Toro. "How can a man shoot straight with your crooked eyes on his gun? You twisted my bullets in the air! You are snakes in the bodies of men, and you belong to El Diablo!"

The ragged bodies moved uneasily, and swarthy faces turned, seeking signs of guilt in one another's eyes. Hart chuckled softly.

"Indian stuff," he muttered to the girl. "Every Indian down here believes a snake can bewitch a gun, and these breeds are more superstitious than full-blood Indians. But what's Kelly's game?"

The answer came in the Bull's next bellow.

"Now I must shoot that Tiger over again, and, por Dios, I shall do it where your snake eyes shall not save him! This time I kill him dead! Otón — Antonio — Federico! Come here to me! You others, get away pronto!"

Backed by the three whom he had summoned, he tramped toward the prison hut. The rest drew away,

some furtively, some scowlingly, some with swaggers of bravado.

"Git to yer boat!" sounded a terse command.

"What's the idea now?" demanded Hart.

"Shut up! March to yer launch, I tell ye!"

Face and voice both were charged with ferocity. Yet — did the right eyelid flicker?

Jean turned, ran within, emerged with the hastily folded flag. Down to the water-side passed the six, followed at a safe distance by the entire outlaw pack. Beside the launch Kelly faced about.

"Pablo Benito!" he yelled. In a minute or two Pablo appeared from among the bandits and approached with a hangdog air.

"Otón, you will command here until I return," Kelly ordered. "Antonio and Federico go with me to watch at my back. Plant a sharp pole before my house. It shall hold the head of this cursed Tigre."

Otón, captor of the Tiger, grinned wickedly. From the men farther back sounded ugly laughter.

"Aboard!" snapped Kelly. "Up in the bow, Hart! Benito, loosen the rope and stand by. When the boat moves jump in, pronto."

As Jean and the Tiger mutely entered the bow, the Bull and his heavily armed men swung into the stern. Kelly himself, with sure movements, flipped over the switch, primed the sun-heated engine, and rocked the flywheel. With an explosive hiss the spark caught, and with a rapid purr the launch moved out backward,

Benito nimbly leaping aboard. A shift of gear, a forceful spin of the steering-wheel, a wild chorus of yells from the gangsters ashore, and the boat was arching out into midstream.

For several minutes not a word was said. Benito and the pair of guards, astounded by the dizzy speed of perhaps twelve miles an hour, gaped speechlessly and uselessly about them. Hart and Jean studied the expressionless face of Kelly, who seemed searching for something along the farther shore. Swiftly the boat surged toward the next bend and Puerto Carreño shrank away behind. Then the eyes of the two ex-soldiers met.

"Kelly, you're an engineer," Hart said, a twinkle under his brows.

"I am that, and I can ingeneer more things than one," was the gruff return. "Keep yer face straight."

The other's face went blank. The girl's turned forward to the river, away from Antonio and Federico. The bend swept nearer, nearer, swung between the boat and the receding village. Puerto Carreño was gone. Ahead, at the left, a long low rock jutted from the bank.

Toward that rock Kelly steered. To his two men he yelled:

"We stop at that rock. Step out now on the stern. Be ready to jump ashore when I stop the engine. Put down your guns. Out! Make ready!"

Gingerly they obeyed. Balancing on the stern,

holding to the stanchions, they poised for a leap. Rapidly the rock approached.

With a sudden whirl of the wheel Kelly sheered outward. As the boat careened he bellowed: "Jump!"

Involuntarily the pair loosened their tight holds. Like a flash their commander jerked about and hurled himself at them. One big hand smote each at the knees, knocking his legs from under him. Instantly Kelly was back at his wheel, wrenching the wild rudder back into place.

Two horrified screams — two yellow splashes — the bandits were gone and the boat rushing for the safe water in midstream. Then two heads broke water and frantically swimming hands splattered toward the rock. And as the launch once more headed down the river the unexpectedly baptized pair rose on the stone and howled futile curses after it.

Kelly's face stretched in a wide, wholesome grin.

"And that's that!" he announced. "And now, folks, set down and take it easy. We're on our way to the States!"

CHAPTER XIX

THICKER THAN WATER

NINETY miles below Puerto Carreño, in a small natural port beside a shelving stone, the launch lay resting in the last light of day. Whistling merrily to himself, Kelly tinkered with the engine which within a few hours had kicked Puerto Carreño and thirty leagues of the Orinoco back into the hazy land of Never-Again. Beyond him, grouped carelessly on a seat and watching his work with friendly eyes, sat Jean and Benito.

"Yeah, she's tuned up sweet and pretty, if I do say so meself," boasted Kelly, rubbing a grease-blackened thumb across his nose, with quaint decorative results. "I worked half the night on her before I knowed she was right. What bothered me was the bum old battery. Gas was O. K., but till I found yer spare battery in its sealed-up tin case under the seat I didn't see no way to git clear."

Jean leaned forward, searching his good-humored countenance.

"You worked half the night on the engine? You intended to do just what you have done?"

"Mebbe so. Mebbe not. I'm a bug on gas ingynes anyways, and — wal, it gimme somethin' to do with

me hands while me head was wrastlin' with somethin' else, see? " He scowled ferociously at the spark-plug and added another grease-streak to his sunburned nose.

"No, I don't see," persisted the girl. "I don't understand why you were so rough, if you meant to let us go. And since you threw those men overboard you've told us nothing. Now please explain."

"Awright." The Irish eyes lifted and fronted the dark ones squarely. "I'll shoot the works and be done with it."

"I been achin' for years to git me hands onto Hard Hart and bust him to flinders. I didn't know he was down here, — lost track of him intirely, — but I kep' him in mind. I'll say I did! 'Some day,' says I to meself, 'we'll run acrost each other somewheres. The world ain't big enough for the both of us. And oh boy, what I'll do to him then! He's yellor,' I says, 'and all that hard stuff he pulled in the war don't fool me none. And when I do git to him I'll make him crawl before I bust him.'"

"Where did you get that 'yellow' idea?" challenged Hart.

"I dunno. Mebbe 'twas because I hated ye so hard. If ye hate a guy bad enough ye can't give him no credit. Anyways, I'm over west a piece and runnin' this gang o' Malojo's, and —"

"Malojo! Evil-Eye! Is that gang of yours the Evil-Eye outfit?"

"It used to be hisn," Kelly corrected, with a hard grin. "Now it's the El Toro gang, — mine, ye understand. I drifted into it after I got in trouble in the gold diggin's. Then me and Malojo had words, and I beat him to the draw and blowed his evil eye out, along with his brains. Then I took control, ye see, and run things me own way."

El Tigre laughed appreciatively.

"Kelly, you're a wonder! Malojo's crowd is the worst one north of Brazil, if not in all South America."

"Yeah, they're hardboiled. I've had to treat 'em rough. But as I was sayin', I'm over west and I git a tip about this here revolution, with good pickin's for tough gangs like mine, so I come to Carreño. Then in blows this greasy Dago Lopez and uncorks his tale o' woe about the so-beautiful señorita and the tough Tigre which is holdin' her a prisoner. He describes this Tigre, and I git a hunch it's me old pet, Hard Hart. So I gather ye in.

"Wal, then things break different from what I thought. First off, Hart, it galls me that ye got only one fist now; it sours the taste o' the man-handlin' I aim to give ye. But that don't stop me. I'm hard-shelled anyways, and bossin' them gorillas of Malojo's ain't made me any more human, y'understand; and so I start to break ye while I'm good and sore about the bawlin' out the li'l lady gimme. And then ye knock me block off with one punch. Wow! "

With a wry grin he fingered his lacerated chin.

"D'ye know, Hart," he went on seriously, "that wallop done me good. It knocked some o' the rum out o' me head and some sense in. And then *you*, miss, — ye gimme a worse jolt than he did. When ye set in that hammick and looked me in the eye and showed me that flag — it — I — uh — I dunno jest what it done to me —"

"I know, Kelly," she interrupted. "It woke you up. It cut through that 'hard shell' of yours and stung your white-man blood to life. That was just what I was trying to do all the time."

"Yeah. Somethin' like that, I guess. Anyways, I didn't sleep none last night. I done a mighty lot o' thinkin'. It come hard, too, because I'm used to fightin' with other men but not with me own self — if ye know what I mean. But it come to me that all this hellin' around with a pack o' yeller cutthroats wasn't no game for a white man; and, more'n that, I got awful homesick. I was so sick for the States I dang near cried! Me! Bull Kelly!

"But I had it in for Hart all the same. When ye been hatin' a man so long and so hard ye can't drop it all to oncet. I swore he was yeller and I'd make him crawl, — even while I was tinkerin' with this here ingyne, gittin' ready to move if he wasn't yeller! And this mornin' I give him the works.

"Hart, ye wouldn't save yerself by quittin' the girl. And right here I want to say, if ye had quit her, she wouldn't have come to no harm. I ain't as low as all

that. I had it all fixed in me mind that I'd git her down the river safe, after ye quit. But ye didn't quit.

"So then I give ye the gun. If ye was yellor, ye'd turn before ye finished yer ten paces, to plug me in the back. And if ye had, I'd have killed ye like a rat! I had a man set jest at the end o' me own ten paces, watchin' ye like a hawk, and I was watchin' him the same way. If ye started to turn he'd gimme the sign and I'd sidestep and blow yer heart out. I wouldn't have lost out. I never miss."

"You missed three times today," disputed Hart.

"Nope. I put every bullet where I wanted it — over yer head! I lifted 'em in the air. When ye even took the time to git set before openin' fire, instead o' crashin' away in a flurry, it was all off with the 'yeller' stuff. Ye'd come clean, and I had to make good. At that, ye nearly done for me. Lookit here. Excuse me, miss."

Over his shaggy head he pulled his shirt, exposing his hairy torso to the waist. On his skin showed three bruises: two almost together, over the heart, and the third on the stomach.

"That's what yer bullits done, Hart. I doctored yer shells last night, — the three I give ye out o' me belt. Spilled some o' the powder, put in wads, and crimped the balls in again. Oh, I was playin' safe. Good thing I did! I'd be awful dead now if I hadn't. As it was, the balls jolted me but didn't go through. But this one here, in the plexus, knocked the wind out

o' me a minute. If I'd tumbled, them sneakin' gorillas would have finished me quick — and you too, Hart. They was right on their toes when I got me wind back and pulled the other gun. Mebbe ye noticed."

A slow nod answered him. Hart seemed to be thinking of something else.

"Wal, that's all," finished Kelly. "Excep' that now I'm gittin' out o' this here sector pronto. I'm goin' back to where I can look me own flag in the face and see *white* folks — and girls with clean eyes like yourn, miss. I can bull me way through all right. These Venezuelans ain't got nothin' on me, and what I done in Colombia don't count except in Colombia."

"I was thinking about that," Hart sighed. "You'll go through without trouble. It's different with me. Before it's too late, though, I want to say I'm sorry now about that thing in France. I was too hard. But I didn't know —"

"Aw, let it slide! Bygones is bygones. Ye've had a rough deal yerself, I guess likely. Let it go at that. Now come out onto the rock, where us hard guys has got to sleep, and let the li'l lady have the boat for her own boodwar. It's gittin' dark, and we got to move at daybreak. Benito! Vamos! "

But before the three debarked Jean extended a hand to Kelly; and she gave him another steady look, as on the previous night, — but not the same kind of look. That gaze had been an accusation. This was a benediction.

"Good night, Kelly," she said. "You're a man!"

Whereat Kelly, arrogant master of the worst gang north of Brazil, turned redder than ever and floundered hastily over the side.

Hart and Benito, moving more slowly, followed. With no bed but warm stone, no canopy but the high sky, they ranged themselves for sleep, weapons ready to hand. The Venezuelan dropped off to sleep at once. But for some time the oddly reunited pair of ex-soldiers lay looking absently at the myriad stars taking rapid shape in the great field of dusky blue. At length the Tiger spoke.

"Blood's thicker than water, isn't it, Kelly?"

"I'll say so!" responded the Bull. Then, sotto voce: "Did I git ye right, there in the boat? Ye ain't goin' home?"

"No."

"But the girl said —"

"I know. But she's mistaken. I can't go back."

"Oh." Kelly's tone was comprehensive. "Healthier for ye to stay where there ain't no extradition, mebbe?"

"Maybe."

"Uh-huh. Tough luck!"

After that there was silence.

CHAPTER XX

AN EMPTY RIVER

ANOTHER day blazed upon the wild, wide reaches of the Orinoco; another day of glare and heat and stabbing sun. Once more the brilliant god of the Incas, sailing high amid crested waves of foamy cloud, surveyed the activities of the mortals far below. On open river and on shaded side stream, in far-flung savanna and in huddled town, nothing was hidden from the search of that light-throwing sky-rider. But to the short vision of the earth-bound creatures moving about among trees or clay banks or man-made walls many things went unseen and unsuspected.

In the low, mud-walled houses and the crooked streets of the pueblo of Caicara proceeded the leisurely life of the townspeople: petty trading in dingy shops, with much converse and little cash; slow arrivals and departures of straw-sombreroed men and sleepy-eyed burros; giggling gossip among mestizo women in patios or at doorways; an occasional shrill squabble between scantily clad children; all the trivialities which went to make up an average equatorial day. Within only one set of walls did thought reach beyond the passing hour — in the official home of the jefe civil, or town

authority. There, grouped at a massive table, the half-dozen leading merchants held gloomy converse with the arbiter of the town's problems. At every sudden sound — even the abrupt yelp of a kicked dog — these men started as if at a volley of rifle-shots.

Thirty miles upstream, and three leagues up a nameless tributary of the Orinoco, a long serpent of dugout canoes floated toward the master river. Steadily, though slowly, it swam with a rhythmic dull cadence of pulsing paddles. Every hollowed segment of its loose-jointed back was crammed with men; men with stolid faces, peering slit-eyed through clouds of mosquitoes; men with visages saturnine, satirical, sinister; men with expressions reckless, humorous, vivacious, or coldly predacious, or heavily brutal. Between their feet lay rifles, ranging in make from clumsy single-shot bush guns to heavy-barreled repeaters, and from these to high-powered European military arms. Around their hips or over their chests looped belts or bandoleers of cartridges; and at their waists jutted hilts of poniards or machetes. No idly gliding snake was this, but one advancing with grim purpose. And, though traversing swamp lands inhabited only by smaller snakes, fierce beasts, silent birds, and skulking human outcasts, it moved with eyes alert and fangs ready to strike.

A few leagues farther up the great waterway, a dingy launch butted its prow through a rolling horde of waves and doggedly advanced in the teeth of the

northeast trade wind. Under its faded awning lounged three men and a girl, watching the endless echelon of yellow undulations and the monotonous banks topped by unvarying verdure. Save for the swash of divided water, the drone of the engine, the muffled panting of the exhaust, and an occasional grunt from the pilot, lazy silence reigned aboard. Shaded by the top and fanned by the lusty wind, the voyagers rode in quiescent comfort. Nowhere in all the broad vista beyond them rose any sail, any steamer-smoke, or even the low-riding dots betokening men in a canoe. All the river seemed their own. Yet all four watched constantly ahead.

At length the girl recalled her attention from the distances to her immediate environment. Her gaze dwelt for a moment on the rugged profile of the bronze Tiger, then roved back to the somewhat morose visage of the red-skinned man behind the engine, who sat with one huge hand on the small steering-wheel. On her curving lips grew a smile.

"Why so solemn, my bandit chiefs?" she bantered. "Everything's as peaceful as a Quaker meeting."

The set faces of the pair momentarily relaxed. But the response of the taller one was not reassuring.

"That's the trouble," he said. "It's all wrong. If things were normal there'd have been a piragua or two, — sailboats, you know, — somewhere in sight before now. When there's not even a canoe moving in this section something has broken loose on land."

"Jest what I was thinkin', Hart," agreed the engineer. "O' course I dunno this here river, but some way it don't look right or feel right to me. There's people livin' along here, ain't they?"

"Sure. Little plantations scattered all along. You can't see them from midstream because they're tucked away behind the shore timber, but they're there. Poor folks, mostly, who live in palm shacks and just manage to grow enough grub to keep alive."

"Yeah. And they're jest the kind that fall for this revolution stuff when some grafter out of a job stirs 'em up. They've got nothin' to lose but their lives, which ain't worth much, and they think the new guy will give 'em a square deal if he wins out. Poor simps! I bet if we coasted along shore now we wouldn't find an able-bodied man or a decent canoe at any o' them shacks. They're all gone down river somewheres to fight in General Mañana's so-noble army for liberty and justice. Mm-pah!" He spat over the side.

"General Mañana?" echoed Jean. "Is there such a man?"

Hart chuckled.

"Mañana's the middle name of most of these rebel leaders," he explained. "They're always going to reform things mañana — tomorrow — when they've licked the federals. Meanwhile they seize everything in sight and promise to pay for it mañana — when they get into office. If you're a rancher they kill your

cattle for campaign food and give you an I O U which you can collect mañana — only you never do. If you have anything else they want they grab that too. And by the same token they'd seize this launch and our guns if they could get — What's that, Pablo?"

"To the left," repeated the pilot. Kelly swung the boat to follow a new current.

"Kelly's right," resumed Hart. "This part of the river's quiet just now because it's unquiet somewhere else. We may bump into something rough almost any time. Don't want to alarm you, but you may as well know the facts."

Again he scowled at the sunlit expanse of waves. Kelly, too, swept a bleak look along both advancing shores. Then his heavy mouth quirked in a sardonic grin.

"And seein' we're a couple of innocent young fellers that ain't used to associatin' with rough guys, we don't want to meet up with no bad actors," he jested. "If anybody should speak cross to us I bet we'd bust right out cryin', hey, Hart?"

Hart grinned in response. Jean laughed, — a clear, ringing laugh that distracted the pilot's attention and made his mouth stretch in a thin smile, even while his probing glance vainly sought the cause of merriment.

"Yes, I can just imagine it!" she scoffed. "The very names of El Tigre and El Toro would make most of these Orinoco men dodge into cover."

"Perhaps so, — yesterday," conceded Hart. "Yes-

terday, when Bull and I had our gangs behind us. But this is another day, and we're just peaceable sailormen. How's the gas holding out, chief? "

" I dunno, cap'n. All we got is in the tank. In-gyne ain't showin' no signs o' missin' yet. We might make Caicara before she quits."

Silence again descended. Pablo faced forward, frowning in suspicion. Why could not these outlanders speak in Spanish, so that he could understand? Perhaps they were making some plot behind his back and laughing at him. He did not like it.

Another hour took its leisurely flight. From time to time the distant banks on either hand showed small, vaguely visible gaps where entered side streams, slipping smoothly into the river from the uplands at the right or the prairies at the left. Whatever lurked or swam beyond those unmarked gateways remained unseen by the voyagers.

Still another hour, and the erstwhile empty mouth of one of those creeks became clogged with floating life. The stealthy serpent of the swamplands had reached the broad highway where the waves rolled; and, at sight of those heaving hosts, had drawn back its head. Its body shortened and broadened on itself as the hollow sections jammed together. Among its riders passed the word that the big river was too rough to be crossed now by craft so low-riding and heavy-laden, and that the afternoon calm must be awaited. Wherefore lookouts were posted, and the rest of the

armed force devoted itself to loafing and gnawing at tough slabs of sun-cured beef.

To the eyes and ears of the sentries, the laboring motorboat was nonexistent. Miles downstream, following a near-shore current, it was lost to sight in the dazzling sun-glare and the thin heat-haze; and the soft drumming of its exhaust was deadened by the swash and slap of myriad rollers against the banks. So it passed away undetected, and behind it a curve of the shore presently crept out, blotting it from even the keenest vision up-river. For that matter, none of the guards even thought to look for such a craft; they peered in both directions for sail or smoke, saw neither, and thereafter stood in semi-somnolence.

Noonday, fiercely hot, held both river and land in its burning grip when all four of the launch-travelers leaned forward. Down ahead had appeared a yellow-gray block of low houses on a slanting shore, behind which rose a steep hill. Pablo turned with a grin and a single word: "Caicara!" Hart and Jean scanned the place narrowly; the man seeking any indication of disorder, the girl peering with interest through the intense sunlight. At the same moment Kelly, his forehead drawn into a scowl, announced:

"Ingyne's missin'!"

The even purr of the motor was breaking into fitful snores, halting as the bow dropped into a trough, spurting again as it tilted up a new wave. Hart, withdrawing his attention from the obviously peaceful

town, listened a moment and frowned. Kelly jockeyed with the spark, but the skipping continued. Soon he looked up with a gleam under his black brows.

"Miss, ye might git for'ard and cover up yer ears. There's jest two things that'll make a gas ingyne run — gas and cuss-words. The gas is about gone, and we've got to travel the nex' couple o' miles on swear-in'. Hart, come on back here and stand by to relieve me when I run shy on words. If ye've got half the steam in yer language ye had when me and you was bossin' that hardboiled B Company, we'll make port in a cloud o' blue smoke."

Hart, after another glance downstream and a quizzical look at his fair companion, smiled grimly, arose, and sauntered aft. Jean took one straight survey of the engineer's truculent physiognomy and walked forward. Whereafter Kelly, jaw out and baleful gaze fixed on the stuttering motor, spoke to this general effect:

"Now, ye dod-dashed double-jointed son of a blim-blammed cock-eyed cake-eater and a hop-headed blinkety blankety horse's neck, what the merry gehenna d'ye think ye're doin'? Snap into it, ye blither-in' blatherin' quitter, or by the jumpin' Judas Christopher Columbus I'll —"

The boat gave a nervous lurch and began to pick up speed.

CHAPTER XXI

A CHANGE OF ORDERS

IN the office of Jaime Gordo, jefe civil of Caicara, the glum conference still was going on. From the parched little plaza outside now came virtually no sound; midday heat and hunger had driven all within doors to dine and drowse. It was high time for Don Jaime and his visitors also to stop talking and eat, but the council showed little sign of breaking up. In fact, it was going over the same ground for the twentieth time, as if in wearisome repetition might at last be found the solution to a pressing problem.

"Válgame Dios!" groaned the heavy-paunched official, once more mopping his moist face. "Must I talk myself tongueless? The thing should be plain to blind men. There are no troops. I have asked and asked, and no soldiers have come. Perhaps a garrison is on its way to us, perhaps not. I have done all I can. I can do no more. We can only wait."

"You are the official of the government," obstinately reiterated a fat-cheeked trader, "and it is your duty—"

"To protect you and your money," snapped Don Jaime. "For the love of the saints, can you not even

change the words of that whine of yours? You repeat it like a parrot! When taxes are due, curse it, you have no money! None of you has a bolívar then, and the official of the government is a cold-hearted wretch who snatches the crusts from your starving children. But when rebellion sweeps the land and bandits shoot and loot, then you suddenly discover that you possess not only silver but gold. And then the inhuman beast of a government official must grow wings and miraculously save you,—carry you and your goods up to ride on the clouds, where no man may harm you,—or, by a greater miracle, create an army to defend you! Válgame! From where shall I make this army to come? Shall I spit on the ground and cause riflemen to leap from it, or sneeze into the air and turn the spray of my nose into cavalry? ”

“Nevertheless something must be done,” insisted an undersized merchant in not-too-recently laundered ducks, “before those raiders who attacked San Fernando de Apure can reach this city. They may be within a league of us even now — ”

“And the federal garrison which I have asked from Ciudad Bolívar may be landing at the port at this moment,” sarcastically retorted the chief. “One is as likely as the other. I tell you again, and for the last time, that we can do nothing at all but wait for whatever may come. If the soldiers of the President come it is well. If raiders come—then every man must do what he can for himself.”

A sour silence. Then a man sitting near an iron-grilled window cocked an ear toward the plaza.

"Something comes at this moment," he announced, "and in haste."

All tensed. In the stillness of the square sounded the rapid slip-slaps of a single pair of alpargatas speeding along the narrow flagstones forming a sidewalk. A man running at this broiling hour!

Slip-slap, slip-slap, slip-slap; hoarse breathing; then, at the Gordo door, a panting voice: "Don Jaime! Where is he? I have news —"

"Back, hombre!" sounded the growl of a Gordo peon posted on guard. "Don Jaime is not to be seen. Give your news to me."

"But they are coming! They have landed and even now are —"

With speed astonishing in so heavy a man, the jefe civil heaved himself erect. The merchants sprang up as if kicked, their eyes darting about in panic.

"Ramon!" sharply called the chief. "Pass the man in! At once!"

"Sí, señor! Go in, you!"

A slither of soles. Into the office popped a sinewy riverman, his sweaty face alive with excitement.

"Señor Don Jaime! I bring news from the river! I was down in the shade of a tree and mending a sail when I heard a strange noise, a noise one does not often hear upon this Orinoco, but I knew at once what it was, — I know all noises of all boats, crra! — and I

said to myself, 'Ajo, now here comes a boat of Bolívar, having in it an engine of gasoline, and I think it is the launch of — ' "

"Hold your tongue!" roared Gordo. "Who has landed?"

The garrulous newsmonger gulped, scowled, then responded:

"The North American señorita who with her father and a crew from Bolívar passed up the river in a launch not many days ago."

Vast relief overspread every countenance. Don Jaime, after a speechless moment, sank back in his chair.

"Bueno!" he muttered. "That is good. They have turned back and will be more safe — perhaps." Then, brow darkening and voice rising, he demanded: "And you come blundering in like a crazy bull and upset a conference of señores only to tell us that a young woman has arrived? You fish-mouthed fool! Get out!"

"But no, Don Jaime, no! There is more to tell. Of all those who went up with her, only she comes back! All the men are gone! And with her are new men with guns!"

At that the señores started. Sudden anxiety again contracted their faces.

"How many?" snapped the chief.

"Three. One of them is Pablo Benito, who has charge of the cart road around the rapids at Atures —"

The informer paused, eyes glistening as he watched relief dawn again upon these high and mighty gentlemen. Order him out, would they? Watch them jump when he dropped his bomb!

"And Pablo comes this way now with the señorita. Another man, big and ugly, with a rifle and a revolver, stays in the launch. I do not know that one. And the third man comes with Pablo and the woman. And he is —"

Another dramatic pause. He seemed listening toward the plaza.

"Sí, sí," prompted Gordo. "And he is —"

"He is a man I saw once on the river above the rapids and ran away from, as I shall run now. He is the desperado, the bandit, the killer of killers — El Tigre!"

Dead silence. Jaws dropped; cheeks paled; cold sweat seemed to ooze from every brow. Outside sounded soft footfalls coming nearer, growing more audible, treading with purposeful strides.

"Adios, señores!" breathed the riverman, with a mocking glint of teeth. And he fled into the patio at the rear, scrambled up a small sarrapia tree, swung to the top of a wall, and dropped outside the premises of Gordo.

"Ajo!" croaked one of the conferees. "So it has come! El Tigre has a new band and is upon us! All the raiders in all the world must be swarming together at the west, for never before has the Tiger struck in this region."

"But this man of the river said there were three men only —" began another.

"Idiot! More of them, many more, must be close behind these three. This Tigre has captured the señora and killed her men and seized her launch and come before the rest to —"

"Ssss! Silence!" warned Gordo. "They enter."

Outside sounded a curt, cold voice.

"Muchacho! Your master is within? Bien. Stand aside!"

A slight shuffle of feet, as the erstwhile arrogant peon betook himself hastily from the path of the dominant newcomer. In the doorway of the office loomed the tall Hart.

A moment he stood there, sweeping the uneasy assemblage with sardonic gaze; noting how swiftly they spied his maimed arm, and how speedily they also absorbed the fact that his other hand, hanging low, was ready for swift movement. A thin smile flitted over his lips. Coolly he advanced another pace or two, making room for his companions to follow. Beside him appeared the lady of the launch, glancing amusedly at the perturbed townsmen, and the unarmed Pablo, squinting shrewdly from under the drooping brim of his peaked sombrero.

Another short interval of silence, while the Caicaran physiognomies became a trifle perplexed. These two presumptive prisoners of the terrible Tigre did not exhibit such nervousness as should logically be ex-

pected. Their expressions were not strained, their attitudes not indicative of anxiety. On the contrary, the girl seemed entirely at ease; and Pablo Benito, although somewhat deferential in poise, did not appear worried. Inasmuch as Pablo was known to be far from bold or brave, his present serenity in the company of a noted outlaw was in itself mystifying.

"Good afternoon," spoke Gordo, assuming official formality. "In what way may I have the honor of serving you?"

"Gasoline," laconically replied Hart.

Gordo blinked. The first thing a raider should ask for was government gold.

"Gasoline?" he returned. "But — I have no gasoline, señor. I am not a merchant. Do you mean that you desire the usual government permit to purchase gasoline?"

"Hardly. I issue my own permits. You will give an order for gasoline, to be paid for at Bolívar."

Everyone blinked this time; everyone but the newcomers. To be paid for at Bolívar! Paid for! And at Bolívar — where federal forces would joyously stand this Tigre against a wall! Was the man loco?

The gray eyes watching them twinkled. Suddenly, but silently, the raider laughed; baring his teeth with the abruptness of a jaguar showing its fangs, but in mirth instead of menace. His gaze still held them, however, reading their changing expressions. All at once his merriment ceased.

"Who am I?" he demanded.

"El Tigre!" blurted someone.

"Ah. You know me. And how? I have not been here before."

"All the world knows the famous Tigre," flattered another trader. "Have we not heard for years of the mighty fighter who shot with both hands and —" He paused, involuntarily glancing at the useless left shoulder; then, as if fearful that his look might give offence, began to rattle on again. But Hart stopped him.

"And who still can shoot, if necessary," he crisply reminded. "But El Tigre now will shoot only if necessary. I escort this señorita down the river to safety, and we come and go in peace — unless someone wants trouble."

"Trouble? Válgame Dios, nobody here desires it!" ejaculated Gordo. "Too much trouble already rides abroad! And — and your men then will not molest our city, señor?"

"No danger. They are many miles from here. I have left them."

"Left them? Ah! You mean that you go to Bolívar to surrender yourself? And no other bandits — pardon, I mean no other revolutionists — come after you?"

Hart made no reply. He stood narrowly watching the official, into whose fat face had leaped an odd light. Then spoke the girl.

"Señor Hart, whom you call El Tigre, is no longer a revolutionist," she calmly declared. "He is a North American — like myself — who has seen enough of this country — like myself — and is leaving it — like myself. He has traveled with me from Atures as escort and bodyguard, and we go to Bolívar to take the steamer for Trinidad."

Every countenance before her betrayed amazed incredulity. Yet all seemed somewhat impressed by her cool composure. In the same quiet tone she went on:

"You remember me, of course, Señor Gordo, and my father and brothers. I now am the only one of our expedition left alive. All the others were killed by the Cuiba Indians at the Rio Tomo. Señor Hart rescued me. And now, because he had heard that disturbances might break out at this time, he has come with me to make sure that I travel safely. You remember also, of course, that I have the passport of your President and the order of General Perez, commanding all officials to assist my voyage. I now am in need of gasoline. I have no money here, but we left funds in bank at Bolívar, and when I arrive there I can pay well for the fuel and food obtained here. So I ask you to give us twenty gallons of gasoline and enough food to enable us to finish our journey."

For a moment after she ceased speaking no answer came. The merchants stared. Her story rang true enough, except that the explanation of the presence of El Tigre still seemed a bit improbable; and her re-

quest for assistance was altogether natural. It was her concise way of going straight to the point, her confident air, her direct gaze and assured tone, that made them watch her in wonder. In truth, this slim young woman was a man in speech! A fit companion for the straight-shooting Tigre!

Similar thoughts flitted through the mind of the jefe civil, to be instantly displaced by others more weighty. On occasion, his brain was far more nimble than his fat face would indicate; and this was such an occasion. After a barely perceptible hesitation he bowed with pompous dignity.

"Most assuredly, señorita," he acquiesced. "My services are entirely at your command. You shall be my guest—you and your companions—for as long as you care to honor my poor house. Even now dinner waits; and thereafter you shall rest. In the meantime—"

"In the meantime we are going," broke in Hart. "We eat on the river and rest in our boat. Let the gasoline be furnished pronto."

"So? You will not stay? It is a pity. But now—the gasoline. It is possible that some of it is in a locked room at the rear, held there for payment of taxes. I am not sure. But I shall look. A moment."

With another bow he excused himself, sidling out through a doorway into a dusky corridor.

"No tricks!" warned Hart.

"Tricks? Assuredly not, amigo! For what should I play tricks?"

His footsteps receded. El Tigre looked after him suspiciously; then, with a contemptuous smile, turned his attention back to the group of business men. Watching them, he spoke aside to Jean.

"If you'd like to eat dinner here it'll be all right, I guess. I'll wait and eat mine after we get to going. But your food wouldn't be doctored."

"Doctored?" Her eyes widened. "Do you think they'd poison yours? Oh, I don't believe it!"

"I hardly think so myself, but still — I've been in this country long enough to be superstitious about some things. And my appetite's not so good just now."

"Neither is mine. I think things would taste better in the open air."

He smiled slightly, but said no more. Minutes dragged away, each growing longer. Once more Hart began to look toward the corridor, his lids narrowing. But then came the sound of returning feet, and soon the jefe civil reappeared, perspiring profusely.

"I have made a sad blunder," he mourned. "The tins of gasoline are not of gasoline but of kerosene. But it does not matter. There is gasoline at the shop of Señor Morales, — is it not so, Morales? Then let your peons carry to the boat of the señorita the twenty gallons requested. I shall write the order later. And you, Señor Paez, shall send from your store the best food you have. You others, go! There is no more to be said regarding the matter we have discussed, and I wish to speak in private with these new guests."

A pudgy hand waved in imperious command. The mute group moved with alacrity doorward, glad of the opportunity to remove themselves from such close proximity to the erstwhile bandit. It might be true that he had reformed, but it was also possible that he might backslide without warning. So they shuffled ahead, and the Tiger and his companions stepped carelessly aside to let them pass, meanwhile watching them go.

Then, while Hart's head was momentarily turned away from Gordo, that worthy gentleman emitted a slight cough. Instantly a wiry young peon glided through the darksome doorway at the rear. His right hand swung up — back — shot forward with the speed of a striking catapult. Like a bullet a smooth stone darted through the air. And like a man shot down in his tracks El Tigre toppled, pitched sidewise, and lay senseless on the tiled floor.

With a triumphant squall Gordo threw himself forward; stooped, snatched the unconscious man's revolver from its holster, and arose grinning.

"The orders are changed," he gurgled. "Señores, the gasoline and food need not be sent to the port; at least, not yet. The señorita has decided to dine and rest here for a time. As for this so impatient bandit who now enjoys siesta on my floor — Ramon! Claudio! Remove this dog and throw him into the jail!"

CHAPTER XXII
THE HOSPITALITY OF JAIME

YOU snake! ”

Low-toned, but vibrant with anger and edged with contempt, the swift words cut like a knife through the chuckling complacency of the jefe civil. The grin vanished from his thick lips, and for a second he stood peering into the blazing eyes of Jean. The next instant he was dodging and ducking to retain his possession of the captured Colt. She had sprung at him like a fury, snatching for the revolver and at the same time beating his astonished face with a small but stinging fist.

Scrambling, stumbling, and awkwardly covering himself with his free hand, he wobbled about the place, managing somehow to keep his grip on the weapon until, by a clumsy stiff-armed shove, he sent her staggering back against the table. Thereupon he jabbed the gun inside his tight waistband at the back and stood ready to clutch her if she renewed the attack. Seeing the futility of further exertion, however, she held her distance.

“Válgame Dios! ” he panted. “It rains tiger-cats! ”

A snicker ran through the cluster of tradesmen at the door. It roused the dignitary to realization of the

fact that his dignity was tottering toward an ignominious fall. Gone was the heroic crown which he had just placed on his own head by the capture of the fearsome Tigre. Now the whole town would bubble with hilarity over the tale that Don Jaime Gordo had cavorted about his office like a dancing bear while a girl punched his nose. Worse yet, the story would travel all along the river, and for years to come he might be known as Oso Gordo — Fat Bear.

Wherefore he put down his foot with vindictive force. On all and sundry he bent a baleful glare: on the censorious señorita, on the maliciously grinning merchants, on his own staring retainers and on Pablo Benito, who had made no move to interfere. And on all of them he loosed a savage roar.

“You, young woman, stand where you are! You will attack the Venezuelan government, will you? We shall see! You grinning apes — you braying burros who were so noisy before the coming of El Tigre and so dumb afterward — get back to your miserable shops! Or get home and squawk to your women to protect you! Ramon — Claudio — you offspring of Indian she-dogs, obey my command and dump this carrion into the prison! You, Pablo Benito, you traitorous friend of rebels, are under arrest! Move one step without my permission and I will execute you with your master’s weapon!”

Pablo quaked. The peons hastily seized the prone

American. The tradesmen lost their mirth in a trice. Only the girl dared answer.

"You will go to jail yourself, you blustering coward! This man is my escort, and as soon as General Perez hears of this thing —"

"Silence! General Perez will shoot him and reward me for my bravery. The passport he granted your party was never meant to protect an outlaw, an enemy of the republic. That order was for your crew of Bolívar — honest men —"

A scornful laugh cut him short.

"Honest men — who stole from us at every opportunity! Honest men like you, who strike from behind! If you and they are honest men I prefer the society of outlaws!"

Gordo stuttered with rage. The revolver half rose to an aim. Then it sank again, and he swallowed hard. The taunt had pierced even more deeply than the girl knew, for a reason of which she was unaware. The others in the room, cognizant of matters beyond her ken, looked at the furious chief and the revolver, then began hastily moving outward, — all but Benito, who dared not move at all.

Borne by the peons, the long, limp form of Hart was hustled through the doorway and out toward the plaza and the waiting prison. The departing townsmen shuffled along beside him, not to scatter until they had seen the erstwhile terror securely locked behind

thick walls and iron bars. One of them, though, halted and called:

"Don Jaime! What shall be done with the other armed man in the launch?"

The chief blinked. He had temporarily forgotten that other man. A man large and ugly, with revolver and rifle! Most certainly, something must be done about that one. For the moment, however, he evaded the question.

"Let him sit and stew until I issue further orders," he temporized. "And let no man talk with him. Any man who does so, I promise you, shall rot in jail until his bones fall apart. I shall attend to the stranger when I am ready. First I will eat dinner."

Several chuckles sounded as the men proceeded. Don Jaime was a cool one, caramba! And he knew what he was about; no question of that. So they would leave matters in his hands, and most assuredly they would keep away from that ugly one in the launch.

The worthy Don Jaime, listening to their departure, felt that he had regained his grip. Once more he was the big man of the town, and he meant to remain so. Wherefore he turned on the young woman a heavy frown and on Pablo Benito a malevolent scowl.

"Now, traitor!" he rumbled. "Tell the truth of this thing, or you shall curse the day of your birth! The country is at war, and you know the fate of rebels."

"Señor — Don Jaime — I am no traitor, no, no!" protested the scared Pablo. "I knew nothing of war, — the news had not come to my rancho, — and I only sought to convey this unfortunate señorita in safety back to Bolívar. It is just as she has told you. And that accursed Tigre — ah, how nobly you overcame him, señor! — he forced himself on us, and —"

"Oh, what a lie!" flared Jean. "He came only because I urged him — because I felt you could not be trusted! You are another of those 'honest men'!"

"Silence!" boomed the jefe civil. "I am conducting this examination! And from where did this Tigre come, hombre?"

"From his land above the rapids, señor, where he and his Indios long have raided. They drove him from them — sí, his own men would have no more to do with him, the bloodthirsty one! And he came to my house wounded, and I — I had to take him in, because he had his gun and most certainly would have killed me most atrociously if I refused. The señorita came with him. And — sí, señor, she did ask him to come with us — it was not my fault. So then we came down the river; and I said to myself, 'Pablo, you shall see to it that the infamous bandit shall be caught by the government, — perhaps at Caicara.' And because you are a bold and resolute man, Don Jaime, he was caught even as I had planned. Do you not see that if I had not brought him to you, señor, you never

would have captured him? And — and is there perhaps a reward for him? I am a poor man, and — ”

“Humph! If there is a reward you get none of it, you fool! You have just said that you did not bring him willingly. I, Jaime Gordo, captured him! No more words! But now, who is the other one? ”

“The man in the launch? He also is a most infamous brigand, but of Colombia; and his name is Kay-lee, or so these Americanos call him; but here he is called El Toro, the Bull. This Toro and his band of wild ones were at the mouth of the Meta river, and they captured us. But it seems that both El Tigre and El Toro had been in the great war in France and remembered each other well, and after they had talked El Toro deserted his band and came with us. And he is most savage, señor, and one must be very careful toward him.”

The Gordo scowl became a frown of thought. Soon, however, his face lightened.

“The matter of his capture is easily arranged,” he declared, with a self-satisfied smirk. “It is as easy as that of El Tigre; as easy as it was to make sure that no army of revolutionists followed the launch. I had only to climb to the roof and see that the river was empty of all other boats, and then climb down and give an order to my peon Claudio, who is most clever at throwing a stone; and, presto! the thing was done. And I know how this shall be done as easily. But — You say this Toro is of Colombia, not of

Venezuela. That makes it a different matter. The government of Venezuela does not build prisons to accommodate criminals of Colombia."

Pablo stood mute for a moment, furtively probing the other's expression. Then he ventured:

"I heard it said, señor, while I was in the camp of that Toro, that he and his men had come to join in the revolution for the sake of plunder. And all of them are rascals and men without a country. So —"

He paused. Gordo grinned with satisfaction.

"Ah! That gives the matter still another face. He brought armed men to ravage our country. And he himself comes here with weapons in his hands — Sí, it is an act of war! Bien. Pablo, you are a faithful citizen. I am well pleased with you. Now you shall perform a small service for your country, — one which is not dangerous, Pablo, — and all shall be well with you hereafter. I shall tell you presently the thing to be done."

"Anything, señor, anything!" eagerly assented the pilot. "Anything not too risky. I have a family — a wife and little ones —"

"You shall see them again, hombre, — if you prove worthy." The chief's tone had suddenly become affable, and his threatening attitude was gone. Once more suave, he addressed the girl. "I regret, señorita, the necessity of being so brusque in this matter; but in time of rebellion one must do one's duty. Be assured that you shall not be inconvenienced by the loss

of these two men. Others shall take their places, and the boat shall proceed — ”

“ I refuse to travel with any other men.” Though her eyes still smouldered, her tone was coldly repressed. “ I choose my own crew. And I warn you that this high-handed action of yours will be reported to your President at Caracas and, if necessary, to the American Department of State. Both Señor Hart and Señor Kelly are American citizens and former soldiers. They have made no attack on your town or on you, and you have no right to attack them. Neither have you any right to interfere with my voyage or to put any other men in my boat. You will be — ”

“ The boat, señorita, is not yours. I recall that you leased it from Guillermo la Torre, of Ciudad Bolívar, who is a citizen of Venezuela. In time of disorder any Venezuelan boats useful to federal authorities can be summarily taken over for government use. I have in mind an exceedingly important use for that launch. But it will not interfere with your journey. The boat will proceed to Ciudad Bolívar very soon, and you shall have ample protection and all courtesy, for I myself shall ride with you. It is necessary to consult with General Perez regarding a question of troops, and — But first there is a more immediate matter. Pablo! Come here! ”

He stepped back toward the entrance, Pablo obediently following. A low mumble of words, with an undernote of threat, poured into the pilot's ear. The

latter looked uneasy, but gave a comprehending nod. As he accepted his instructions, outside sounded the slither of returning alpargatas.

"Ah, Ramon! The tigre is safe in his kennel?" asked Gordo. "Good. Now do this thing at once: Go to Señor Morales and give him my command to send to the launch several cans of gasoline and other things—it does not matter what they are. Several men must go, and also this man and Claudio. And at the launch—"

Another rapid mumble, followed by a stolid "Sí, señor." The peon once more departed, and with him went the trusty pilot. The stout gentleman chuckled and wiped his face, turning again to his unwilling guest. Then his jaw dropped. With a heavy lurch he threw himself toward the patio.

The señorita had vanished from the office. Out in the yard, she was drawing herself up into the sarrapia tree which formed an exit over the wall.

At his best speed Gordo pounded to the tree and clutched at an ascending ankle. It evaded him. As he staggered to recover balance the agile girl attained a footing on the first low branch and reached for a new hand-hold. A few seconds more, and she would be on the wall and beyond capture. Gritting his teeth, the chief jumped, seized the branch with both hands, and yanked with his whole weight.

The branch broke. The fugitive fell.

Gordo went down in an obese huddle, the overthrown

girl landing on him like a tumbling wildcat. Her fingers fastened in his thick black hair and her boots kicked furiously at his shins.

"Ow-wow!" groaned the dignitary of Caicara. "Santa Maria! Madre de Dios! Stop it!"

The response was a wrench at his overlong hair that brought tears drizzling down his cheeks. Then a hand darted to his belt, feeling for the gun jammed under it. Just in time he grabbed that hand, dragging it away. Thereafter he sank his fingers deep into the other girl's forearm, benumbing it and breaking her grip on his disheveled hair. Heaving himself up, he lifted her and held her helpless — although still fiery and unsubdued — in the inescapable grasp of both his arms, and hobbled painfully but purposefully toward a bolted door.

"You — you fathead!" she panted, vainly struggling. "Put me down!"

He plowed ahead without reply. Reaching the door, he managed to draw the bolt. Through the portal he thrust her into a small bare room, lighted only by an iron-grilled window opening on the patio. The door slammed shut and the bolt clattered home. At the window he peered in with a mirthless smile.

"As you say, señorita," he smirked. "I have put you down as you request. You will find this an excellent place in which to grow cool; it is not wise to become overheated. I regret that you will not join me at the table, but the best food in my poor house shall

come to you soon, — through this window, — and before long you shall be given a more comfortable room. No, oh no, you are not under arrest; you are only detained a short time as a measure of safety. Compose yourself and rest.”

With an ironic bow he moved away. Jean shoved at the door, shook the bars, gazed about at the blank walls — and suddenly sank beside the window and wept.

CHAPTER XXIII

PABLO — PATRIOT

PABLO BENITO, faithful citizen, having performed the small service for his country recently imposed on him as conclusive proof of loyalty, squatted in a dark corner and nervously washed his hands with perspiring palms.

The motion was involuntary, but incessant; prompted, perhaps, by a subconscious yearning to cleanse himself of participation in the trickery of the jefe civil. For the aforesaid jefe was not a noble, bold, resolute hero and an illustrious caballero, after all; he was a mean, sneaking, underhanded liar, an oily hypocrite, a slimy serpent, — in short, utterly despicable. He had permitted — indeed, must have surreptitiously commanded — that Pablo, the valiant patriot who at great risk to himself had performed a notable deed in capturing two dreaded rebels, be locked up in the same jail with those same desperadoes. And now, with the terrible Tigre and the man-slaying Toro likely to regain their senses at any moment — he fidgeted and squirmed, while, despite the oven-like heat of the mud pen, the sweat trickling down his back ran cold.

The scheme of the wily Gordo had worked out to perfection. Carrying the expected gasoline and several loads of cassava, a small procession of peons had gone to the port, accompanied by Pablo and Claudio the stone-thrower. In answer to Kelly's growling question as to the whereabouts of his two companions, Pablo had glibly declared that they still were selecting supplies, but would return pronto. After a sharp look at the weaponless, expressionless mestizos, El Toro had stood at ease, bossing the stowage of the cans and the leaf-wrapped bundles. Then Claudio had silently cast his stone. Thereafter there was nothing to do but to carry the supplies back to the shops and transport the fallen man to the jail.

Pablo, having no other burden to bear, had — by request — assisted Ramon and Claudio in their allotted task of portaging the heavy body. They had maneuvered him into entering the lock-up first. A sudden shove, a mocking laugh, a thud as the door shut; and Pablo had scrambled from under Kelly's dead weight to find himself imprisoned. Poundings and pleadings and promises had brought in response only guffaws and ribald jeers. Ah, what a vile, treacherous nest of snakes was this town of Caicara! And what a horrible hole was this in which to imprison an honest man!

The honest man now had been confined in the horrible hole for perhaps a quarter of an hour. In that time, however, he had lived at least half a day. The

first five minutes had gone in howls for release and in a futile search for any possible line of escape. The adobe walls were solid, the floor of immovable stone, the two high windows heavily barred and too small for even a child to squirm through. Wherefore the ensuing time had been devoted to miserable cogitation, the while his panicky gaze remained glued to the senseless Americanos. What would they do to him when they revived? Caramba, what would they not do? Although one was a cripple and both were disarmed, he felt that when they finished with him he would resemble nothing human.

All at once his hand-massage halted. A quick light flitted across his face. From his hunched position he started up as if jabbed by a scorpion. His glance darted to the hard wall, switched to the recumbent forms, returned to the adobe, hung there. He stepped away a couple of paces; clenched his fists in desperate resolution; and suddenly, with head lowered, launched himself against the unyielding barrier.

The shock stunned him, as he well knew it would. He crumpled to the dirty floor. For a few minutes he lay there motionless,—not totally unconscious, but dazed, and feeling but vaguely the burn of the resultant contusion. Then his brain cleared, and at once his hands rose to explore his scalp. As the fingers pressed his crown he winced; but into his recently troubled visage came a look of relief,—almost of

peace. Under his ebon hair was mushrooming a large bump.

Without rising, he waited with new-found serenity the recovery of his companions. At length the Tiger, lying flat on his back, opened his eyes and stared blankly at the roof; lifted his head, scowling as a stab of pain streaked through it, but swiftly surveying his surroundings; then started up to a sit, his hand sliding at once to his holster. A blacker scowl creased his brow as he found the leather scabbard empty. He fixed a dire gaze on the Venezuelean.

Thereupon Pablo, watching through his lashes, allowed his lids to rise; squinted with feigned amazement at El Tigre, El Toro, and the yellow walls; shoved himself up, groaned, and clasped his head.

“Cra! Where are we, señor!”

Hart made no answer. His narrow gaze bored into the pilot's eyes until the latter began to quake again. Then Kelly voiced a grunting groan, rolled over, reeled up and glowered about him. Pablo shrank back as the hard eyes of the Bull also fastened on him.

“Ah, the vile snakes — they have thrown us into prison!” he bleated, once more wincing as he rubbed his bruise. “My head is broken!” And with that, unable to meet that double glare, he sank back and wrapped both arms around his head.

A minute or two of ominous silence. Hart and Kelly looked at each other, both involuntarily passing hands

through their hair and feeling the huge swellings left there by the stone of Claudio. Abruptly Kelly strode across to the supine guide, stooped, wrenched his arms away, and clawed rough fingers over his scalp. Pablo yelped and strove to wriggle aside.

"Uh-huh," rumbled the Bull. "He got sluggish, all right. But there's somethin' fishy here, at that. Hart, did you send this guy down with gas and grub?"

"No. I got knocked out in the jefe's office. Somebody crowned me from behind." The hard jaw set harder, and El Tigre got to his feet. "And the only man within arm's length of me at that minute was this sneak! Pablo, you crooked —"

"Santisima Maria! It was not I who did it!" squealed Pablo, scrambling into a corner. "For what should I strike you — and with what should I strike? I had no weapon — you know it! The foul deed was done by that doubly foul Jaime Gordo! He had a treacherous scoundrel of a peon throw a stone, señor, — a wicked stone that flew from a doorway behind us. And the instant you fell he — Gordo — sprang upon you and snatched your revolver and thrust it into my face as I leaped to aid you! Sí! In another second I should have avenged you most bloodily! But the filthy wretch held me at the point of death while all the rest leaped upon me, and I could do nothing. All the world was against me, señor, and I with not so much as a stick in my hands! And so they carried you out, and the traitor still held me at bay, and —

what could I do against such a desperado as he? If he were a mere official from Caracas — But that bandit, that killer, that turncoat who shot his own brother — ”

He ran out of breath and paused an instant to gasp. Hart gave a snort.

“ Bandit? That fat toad? ”

“ But yes, comrade! Of a truth! He is fat now, fat of body as of name, but he was thin enough three years ago. Have you not heard? He is brother to Federico Gordo, the daring revolutionist,— the one who is called Veinte Cuatro. And with Veinte Cuatro and his fellows Jaime used to ride and fight the government. But the two quarreled over something, and Jaime sneaked off and gave himself up and told to the federals the plans of his brother for the next attack. And at that attack the revolutionists were beaten and many were killed and the rest must ride for their lives, and Veinte Cuatro himself was wounded almost to death, and it is said that the bullets which made those wounds were fired by Jaime! Sí! He is that kind of man, señores; he now would murder his own father if he thought it would please the higher officials. A fawning slave of the government, he is. So the government made him jefe civil at Mapire, and later he was sent here. Cra! We are lucky to be still living! ”

Hart and Kelly glanced again at each other. This part, at least, of Pablo's yarn rang true. Both had heard of the rebel leader Veinte Cuatro, who was so

called for two reasons: because he was big, black-eyed, and fierce in attack, thus bearing some resemblance to the huge black "veinte cuatro" ant; and because, in attacking a town, he invariably completed his operations and was gone within twenty-four hours.¹ They had heard also of a deadly hatred between him and a brother, but the identity of that brother had escaped them. As for the appointment of a former rebel to a minor government post, that was by no means a new thing in the Venezuelan hinterland; and, more often than not, such an official proved intensely loyal, just as a reformed profligate may become a zealous evangelist.

"And then, señores," Pablo rushed on, "some things were said between the misborn Gordo and the other men which I did not hear. And you will remember, Señor Tigre, that he had ordered gasoline to be taken to the launch. Do you not recall it?" Hart nodded. "And he said again, 'Let those things be carried to the port, and I myself shall escort this señorita to Bolívar. And you, Pablo, go with the peons, but say nothing, or you shall die a thousand times!' And so I went, thinking, 'I will warn the Señor Toro, and we shall free El Tigre.' But on the way a peon said to me, 'Hombre, open your mouth to that man in the boat and I will cut out your heart,' and he tapped a

¹ The veinte cuatro (twenty-four) ant is thus named in Venezuela because its venomous bite causes pain, and sometimes fever, lasting 24 hours.

long knife inside his breeches. So I could only speak as I did, Señor Toro, telling you the others would come soon; but I was watching for my chance to give you a signal or to seize that murderous peon and shout to you the truth. And then, caramba, we should have made these sons of dogs run howling to the wilderness! But all at once — *pam!* — you fell, and — *pam!* — something struck me also, and I knew nothing. Nothing, amigos, until I came awake and saw where we are now — in this horrible jail. Ah, diablo, my head! ”

Once more he wrapped his arms over his cranium, affecting a pain which he did not feel. Once more Hart and Kelly looked at each other, this time dubiously. How much of truth and how much of falsehood was in this tale? Neither of them believed the fellow's rant regarding his intention to fight for the fallen Tiger; and both were suspicious of the rest of his story. Yet the facts that he was imprisoned with them and that he bore indisputable evidence of a blow weighed heavily in his favor.

“Wal,” growled Kelly, “we’re here, and there ain’t no use in scrappin’ amongst ourselves. But lemme tell ye, Pablo, we’re goin’ to check up on your yarn, and if ye’ve been givin’ us a line o’ bunk ye’ll wish — ” He paused; then repeated in Spanish. The veracious pilot began to suffer new chills.

“Ajo! You would not believe the lies told you by these Caicarans, señor! ” he protested. “They would tell you most outrageous falsehoods! They are mis-

begotten creatures born in sin and bred in treachery — ”

“Never mind that!” broke in Hart. “What of the señorita? What did she do?”

“She? Do? Nothing! She is no strong man like us, amigo, — a frail woman, hardly more than a child, — and she could do nothing, of course. She was at the office as I left, saying nothing at all.”

“You lie! She’s not the kind that wilts. I’ll gamble that she had something to say — ”

“Ah! True, señor, — my head aches so hard that I was forgetting. She told Gordo that you were Americanos and he had no right to attack you, and he must not interfere with her voyage or her boat. He said it was not her boat, and he would use it himself to go to Bolívar, and she should go with him.”

“Huh! So that’s the lay!” Kelly nodded understandingly. “This guy Gordo is goin’ to beat it to safer country. He takes her along because he dasn’t treat her rough; he’d git himself in Dutch with the governor if he didn’t use her right. And us guys either go along in chains or stay here and rot in the calaboose. Must be somethin’ stirrin’ round here that he’s got wind of, and he wants to do a quick fade-out. But he’s S. O. L. The transport’s clean out o’ commission.”

“How?”

With a grim smile, the engineer drew from a trousers pocket a small section of greenish-yellow metal. Hart peered at it in puzzlement.

"The switch," enlightened the other. "It ain't been workin' right; all dirty, see? So while I was waitin' I disconnected the battery and took off this here little arm to scrape it clean. Then the gas parade showed up and I shoved this in my pocket for the time bein'. And until it's put back in place all the gas in the world'll never move that tub. No ignition. And there's only one guy can put it back right, and that's me. So Mister Jaime Gordo will stay right here in town till I git to talk to him — and a long time after that, too. Here's another little thing I've got that he don't know about."

His right hand slid inside his shirt and emerged gripping the short but heavy-calibered Colt with which he had held off his own gang at Puerto Carreño.

"A handy little tool that's got me out o' more than one hole," he grinned. "Half the time these guys down here don't frisk a feller clean; they take off his outside artillery and think they got it all. And betwixt this misplaced switch and this masked battery — Pablo, how would you like to be Jefe Gordo?"

The gun darted to an aim, gaping straight at Pablo's right eye. And that valiant warrior, who had understood only the last few words, arose with a wild yell.

"Dios mio! Do not shoot! Put away the gun, señor! Have mercy! I am a poor —"

"Aw, shut up!" Kelly scowled fiercely, sliding the weapon again within his shirt. "Ye howlin' hyena, d'ye want to tell the world about it? Shut yer mouth!"

The pallid rascal gulped, cowered, and was silent. His companions turned from him in disgust.

"Slobberin' pup! He's so yellor that if a rabbit kicked him he'd fall dead! Say, Hart, when we git out o' this we'll ditch him. Leave him right here. We don't need him from here on. River's so big now we ain't likely to run aground. What d'ye say?"

"I'm with you. He's crooked as a corkscrew. But when we do get loose, Bull, I want that gun of yours a few minutes. That Gordo sneak is *my* meat!"

"Yeah?" Kelly's eyes slid to his mate's profile, noting the ominous tightness of lips and lids. "Why, now, feller, ye ain't intendin' to git rude with him, are ye? Thought ye'd swore off on that rough stuff, same as me, and was goin' to be a perfect lady."

"I did, and I am — until I get loose."

"Uh-huh." El Toro chuckled softly. "Looks like we'd both backslid since we got religion. Wal, I was leery o' that soft stuff anyway, but I didn't want to argue with the kid. 'You boys are goin' straight now,' she says, 'and ye want to show the officials ye mean it. So don't ye go holdin' up anybody for the gas, but let's git it in the proper way.' And so we tried that proper way, and here we are. Proper ways are all right in their place, but this ain't the place. And as quick as somebody opens that door to slip us our bread and water, blooey goes the proper stuff."

"You said it."

They fell silent, scanning the whole miserable pen.

After convincing themselves of its invulnerability they sat down on either side of the single stout door, Hart frowningly pressing his aching head, Kelly glooming at nothing in particular. At the other end, Pablo, avoiding their gaze, alternately congratulated himself on his cleverness and worried over impending possibilities. All three could do nothing but wait.

And then, outside, a loitering listener stole silently away to inform Don Jaime Gordo that he had heard Pablo screaming for mercy and begging one of the desperadoes to put away a gun.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RAIDERS

MOONLIGHT, clear and cool, flooded the streets and the patios and the plaza of Caicara with a radiance well-nigh as brilliant as that of the vanished sun. It laved the reddish tile roofs of the low houses, cast sharp-edged shadows under the eaves, and, on eastern walls, traced in inky lines the irregular contours of cracks or spotted with darkness round dents made by forgotten shootings. It streamed through eastern windows, too, spying on sleep or wakefulness, comfort or wretchedness, smiles or scowls or tears. And out on the river it danced along the tops of slumberous little waves, hardly more than ripples, moving gently westward under the playful push of a soft breeze.

Outside the yellow walls, all was peace. Inside some of them, all was not so serene. Within the house of Jaime Gordo, for example, circled conflicting currents of plot and counterplot, none the less intense because of their silence and secrecy. In a hammock in a rear room, whence exit was blocked save by passage through other rooms, lay a girl apparently asleep, but wide awake and fixedly determined to arise and steal forth whenever opportunity should offer; and then,

having gained freedom, to open by some as yet unknown means the door of the jail. At his bare council table in his dim-lit office, with streetward shutters closed, a balked and morose official gnawed his fingers and groped mentally for a practicable scheme of flight. Schemes in plenty had wriggled through his brain, — snaky ones, all of them, — but each armed with fangs which might turn on him. The plan of action which should redound to his own credit stubbornly refused to take shape; and no other would do.

He knew now that the launch was useless. He knew something must have been done to it by one of those brigands now in the jail. He knew the brigands had a gun. He knew what they would do with it at the first opportunity. So he could not make use of them in starting the boat. He could not even make terms with them; he had tried this by having a note thrown through a window, only to receive in return most disgraceful reflections on his character. Nor could he give them food or drink with certain ingredients slyly mixed therein to render them helpless; for this would involve opening the door. He could do nothing whatever with them; and he could do virtually nothing without them.

Gone was his self-gratulation over his cleverness in trapping those two outlaws. It had seemed a heaven-sent chance to dodge danger and climb to fame at the same time: to speed down the river to the protection of troops, to pose before the governor as savior of

the hapless foreign señorita, to come back to his town with soldiers, deliver to their commander the terrible desperadoes, and see to it that a garrison remained in Caicara, — thus exhibiting to the townsmen his zeal for their protection. If by chance the pueblo should be raided in his absence, that could not be his fault; and he would be safe during the raiding. And El Presidente himself should know of the brave capture of El Tigre and El Toro (trust Jaime to attend to that!), and the doughty Gordo might rise in the world as the result. El Presidente liked bold fellows.

But now his ladder to the heights had fallen apart, for the Americans forming its rungs would not remain in place. Worse yet, its collapse seemed exceedingly likely to bring down unpleasant consequences on his head. For one thing, that spiteful señorita meant to make trouble for him at Bolívar; and in all probability she could do so. Now that he reflected, he felt that the powerful General Perez was likely to be wroth over his action in detaining her by force. And in this connection there was another disquieting angle to the affair. If a recent statement of hers was credible, General Perez had empowered her to inform El Tigre that if he would come in peaceably he could leave the country unharmed; and El Tigre was accompanying her under that guarantee of amnesty. In that case, the general would not exactly appreciate the patriotism of Jaime in assaulting and jailing this ex-outlaw. Angrily the thinker told himself that the young

woman's statement was untrue; but he could not entirely convince himself of its falsity. If it was true, he had blundered badly. And, true or not, he could not release his prisoners now without grave risk of dire results, both here and hereafter. Neither could he hold them indefinitely. Yet he must do something with them pronto. Moreover, he must take some action for the protection of the town — or, at least, of himself and the federal moneys — before some raiding rebel force struck. But what course would bring him triumphant through this tangle of complications?

At last he gave it up. A night's sleep would refresh his brain. Perhaps in the morning those rogues in the jail, still unfed and unwatered, would be more amenable to his persuasion. Extinguishing the light, he opened the shutter and peered out. All was quiet. Turning, he tiptoed across the patio and listened intently at a window of the room to which, that afternoon, he had transferred the recalcitrant señorita. Faint, regular breathing stole to his ears. He nodded and took his ponderous but noiseless way to his own room; yawned hugely, imbibed a generous nightcap of Maracaibo rum, and turned in.

The moon rolled on its way, widening the shadows of the eaves and narrowing those of the streets. Its beams, imperceptibly changing their slant, crept in at a tiny window of the prison and stole by hairbreadths along the stone floor until they touched the face of a fitfully sleeping Tiger. There they paused a little;

then glided on to the loose-jawed but still pugnacious physiognomy of the Bull, snoring on a rough bass note. Other beams, pouring into the patio of Gordo, illumined a face at the bars of Jean's room, where she now knelt to keep track of the moving hands of her little watch. With pulses pounding, but with nerves held under control, she awaited the time when she might venture toward the front of the house. Stillness now reigned; but she knew the wisdom of making certain sure.

At length she arose. More than an hour had passed since the bulky form of Gordo had vanished from her window. In all that time no further indication of wakefulness had come from any part of the place. Everybody must be buried in sleep. She turned to go. But then she halted short, listening. A moment, and she wheeled back to the window.

Into the quietude of the night had come movement; a vague, formless, virtually soundless movement, intangible, unnameable, felt rather than heard. Had it been louder, it might have been the tread of many soft-stepping feet on the earth; but now it seemed a mere disturbance of air, impacting without shock on alert senses, revealing nothing of its character. Its very strangeness made it weird and alarming. To the taut nerves of the lone girl it suggested a gathering of bodiless spirits—malevolent ghosts of murdered men, perhaps, flocking together for some diabolical purpose. She thrust the unnerving fancy from her, tried to think

that perhaps Hart and Kelly and Pablo had broken jail and were stealing to her aid. But something told her that this movement was sinister, deadly dangerous to her as well as to others. Tense, she poised seeking to grasp its meaning.

Steadily, rapidly, it became a trifle more distinguishable, though still only a faint rustling and padding. Now it seemed the purposeful advance of feet up-wind, the sound of their swing and thud swept away behind them by the increasing breeze. Those feet — if feet they were — had come from the direction of the river, bearing their masters in an uncadenced march. Now, somewhere outside the wall of the patio, sounded a low creak like that of a loose flagstone tilting under a weight; and hissing noises and half-heard mumbles, as of whispers and subdued voices, — ghost-sounds of ghost-men. These died. Came a long minute of utter silence. And then —

Crrrash! Crack-crack-crack — crrrrrash!

“YEEEE-AH! VEINTE CUATRO! VIVE VEINTE CUATRO! JAIME GORDO ABAJO! MUERT’ AL TRAIADOR!”¹

The crash of gunfire, the thundering roar of hundreds of voices, burst like a giant shell in the midnight calm. Before its nerve-shattering impact Jean recoiled. A moment later the empty wall became alive with figures scrambling over and dropping into the

¹ “Long live Veinte Cuatro! Down with Jaime Gordo! Death to the traitor!”

patio like buccaneers crossing the bulwarks of a captured galleon. And buccaneers they were in their attack,—roaring for death and blood, with guns and knives flashing under the moon and eyes and teeth gleaming like those of merciless beasts of prey. Rifles up, they swept the doors and windows with wolfish gaze as they came, ready to shoot down instantly anyone loosing a bullet at them. To the shocked vision of the defenceless girl standing back in the shadows they were an infernal brood devoid of all instincts save those of loot and lust. Frozen, she stood for a few seconds staring at their furious onslaught. Then she dropped to the floor. Swiftly she crept to the window, and under it she pressed herself against the wall.

Her door, she knew, was stoutly barred from the inside; she had seen to that before lying down. Through the outcurved iron grille at the window no human eye could detect her in the darkness immediately below. No bullets could penetrate the thick walls, and any fired through the window must pass over her. For the moment she was beyond harm.

Outside reigned bedlam. In the patio reverberated wanton shots, raucous yells, jarring thumps at closed doors. The score of men who had crossed the wall made the noise of a hundred. Farther out, all over the town, hundreds more created a cacophony worthy of a rioting army corps, the tumult of shots and shouts punctuated by the screams of terrified townspeople and the crash of shattering doors and blinds. A veri-

table hell had broken loose — a hell of noise and fire and fear. The worst of it centered about the house of Jaime Gordo, assaulted from every side by the vindictive force which he once had betrayed to disaster and death, but which now was stronger than ever and rabid for revenge. And Jaime Gordo, awaking to the blood-howl of that swarming horde, lay for long seconds unable to move; paralyzed, petrified, seeing in the darkness the grinning skull and the skeleton fingers of Death.

Yet he did not remain there until that spectre closed its freezing hand on him. Out in the plaza blared a bugle ordering a cessation of fire; and at once the shooting stopped. The command of that brazen voice also lifted Jaime out of his catalepsy and sent him diving for revolvers, — his own and that of El Tigre. The feel of their butts in his palms aroused once more the killing impulse of his bandit days. He crouched at bay, dangerous as a cornered jaguar. The corridor door of his room was open, but he made no move to close it. Instead, he faced the gloomy passage and waited.

The street door broke and swung back. Beyond it thundered a harsh voice:

“Way! Out of my path! Make room for the embrace of brothers!”

“Federico!” breathed Jaime.

A rumbling thud and a sharp crackle drew his darting glance to a shuttered window. It was yielding,

battered in by rifle-butts. Another blow — the wooden barrier splintered and a panel fell. Faces snarled beyond it. With his right-hand gun he opened fire.

Four times that gun spoke. Four heads slumped downward and were gone. Bullets flew back at him; but he had moved, and they missed in the dark. Now from the corridor banged a loud report, and against the moonlight at the ruined doorway loomed a great black figure. With a hiss Jaime turned loose his left-hand weapon. Streaks of flame slashed the dark. In the corridor blazed answering powder-flares, and the big form came on. Brother against brother, the Gordos were shooting to kill.

More faces had risen to the open window, and through the grille were leveled gun-barrels. But no bullets came. Their general himself now was inside, these men knew, and great was his hunger for vengeance by his own hand. If he killed Jaime, well. If Jaime killed him — adios, Jaime, in a volley of lead!

Jaime was a miserable marksman with his left hand, and he knew it. Ignoring his flankers, he now swung his right gun into line with that inexorably advancing figure. Then he staggered, and that revolver fell. Federico had scored in the right shoulder. Jaime gave back toward a corner, shooting again with his remaining weapon. At the answering flash he staggered again and nearly fell. With trembling hand he loosed his last bullet. Once more flame stabbed from the corridor. Jaime quivered under a third impact; reeled backward; was swallowed up in blackness.

At the doorway of the room, huge and terrible in the dimness, Federico Gordo halted, peering about. His own revolver was shot out. He did not reload. Jerking from his belt a long poniard, he waited a moment to locate that vanished betrayer. Was his prey dead? Dying? Lying silent and awaiting his approach? The gloom gave him no answer.

"In the corner, chief!" then called a window watcher. "At the left! It was there he last shot —"

"Fool! Do I not know it? Jaime! You slime, you spittle, you worm of a dunghill, crawl to me on your belly and lick my feet while I cut out your heart! To me! Crawl!"

Silence. With a furious oath the avenger hurled himself forward. Knocking down furniture, smashing an unseen lamp, tripping over a low stool, he lunged savagely into the corner. He kicked for a body and found none. He clutched for a cowering form — stabbed for an upright one — and failed again. His hated kinsman had disappeared.

"Lights!" he bellowed. "Lamps! Lanterns! At once!"

Feet trampled. Matches blazed. A naked candle appeared. From somewhere came an oil lantern.

"Ha!" snarled the leader, a vindictive flash passing over his black-browed, hook-nosed, gash-mouthed visage. On the wall, as well as on the tiled floor, were bloodstains. From the wall, too, projected a small knob, smeared with fresh red. Barely visible were the outlines of a low door. Seizing the knob, he

wrenched open the portal and raised his dagger. An instant he stood, peering blankly; then turned and snatched the lantern.

Beyond the door was a narrow stairway leading down. Light showed the stone steps to be streaked with blood. For perhaps twelve feet they descended—and there they ended at another door. A massive barrier was this, solid as stone, and as impregnable; of wood, to be sure, but one of those dense tropic woods which break axes. Of unknown thickness, and barred on the farther side, it blocked all pursuit.

For minutes Veinte Cuatro stood there and cursed, his face purple and his temples swollen with passion. On the stairs above, his own gang began to look at one another and quietly withdraw from him. Then, of a sudden, he broke into a wild laugh and remounted the steps.

“Let the rat lie in his hole,” he chuckled. “There are other things to be done. You, Sargento Salas, take two men and remain here on guard. If the door opens, kill!”

“Kill, my general,” acknowledged the stocky Salas, with a yellow-toothed grin.

His general strode back into the bedroom, where he volleyed commands.

“Capitanes! Take detachments and collect all moneys in the shops. Give the merchants the usual receipts. Tenientes! Seize all arms and ammunition to be found. All officers, see that order is preserved.

No more shooting is necessary. Allow no violence unless attacked. Open the prison, of course, and bring all victims of oppression found there to me. Libertad! ”

“ Libertad y justicia! ” rang a chorus. They flocked outward, and faces disappeared from corridor and window.

“ You others,” added the dictator to several who loitered, “ search this house from end to end, floor to roof. Break all doors found locked. Bring to me the rats of the house of Traitor Jaime. They shall squeak! ”

CHAPTER XXV

BROKEN DOORS

IN the gloom of the jail three men started from slumber. A few seconds of listening to the strident clamor outside, and two of them broke into joyous yells. The third remained silent, and on his shadowy face grew perturbation.

"Yeay!" shouted Kelly. "Here's where we eat! Sneaky Gordo's caught in a rat-trap, and us poor convicts are out of the pen—almost. Boy! Listen to 'em tearin' into the jefe's house, will ye! Veinte Cuatro's gang, with blood in their eye!"

"Quick curtain and a slow march for Jaime!" exulted Hart. "But Jean's in that house, and that mob sounds hardboiled. We've got to get over there, double time."

"Sure. Quick as we can. Give 'em the high sign and keep it up. Somebody'll hear it." With that he began bellowing: "Libertad! Libertad! Amigos! Libertad!"

Hart's yells joined in. Presently Pablo, too, took up the call. Their release was a foregone conclusion, since conquering rebels invariably liberate the prisoners of the overthrown federals, and usually gain recruits thereby; for such prisoners frequently are not

actual criminals but victims of official spite, and, naturally, embittered against all officialdom. However, the opening of the prison is likely to be an afterthought, and neither of these Americans was disposed to wait. Pablo, on the other hand, had little desire to emerge while shooting was in progress; but then it occurred to him that the sooner he slipped away from these fierce companions of his the better. Perhaps, too, he could turn a trick or two to his own advantage in the disorder.

So the three of them vociferated at the top of their lungs. For some time, however, no response came. The bugle rang, the uproar quieted, a series of shots indicated a duel at the official residence, and a virtual silence ensued. Then recommenced a noise of voices, of marchings, of sharp demands for opening of doors, and of splintering wood. At length came an abrupt thumping and creaking at the portal of the jail. The barrier swung back.

"Libertad!" exulted a hoarse voice outside. "Come forth, you in the trap! Liberty and justice are here!"

The Tiger and the Bull needed no second bidding. Out into the moonlight they lunged, almost colliding with several armed men. Pablo, wavering, hung back.

Without a word, the pair of Northerners shoved their liberators aside and started for the Gordo house. At once came clicks of rifle-hammers and an angry command.

"Halt! Stand there! Who are you, with your cursed arrogance?"

Kelly growled, and his right hand lifted to his shirt. But Hart spoke swiftly.

"Steady, Kelly! As you were!" He slowed, but did not halt. His voice snapped back over his shoulder: "El Tigre and El Toro, children! We go to Veinte Cuatro. Do you think it wise to stop us?"

A pause, filled with various noises from the town. The group began moving after them.

"El Tigre?" echoed a surprised voice. "El Tigre of the Vichada country? In the Caicara jail? It is impossible!"

"Impossible but true," retorted Hart, with a short laugh. "El Tigre, who came here in a boat and has starved since midday."

"Cra! I begin to believe you." The raiders closed in, their spokesman sharply scrutinizing the pair. "We have seen your boat. And you look much hungered. Cra! You are crippled. The arm is gone! Well, you shall see the general, never fear. It is his order."

"Bueno. Let us go."

They went, passing disorderly knots of roving marauders who, with no orders to fulfill, sought whatever they might find; meeting detachments moving as if under command and bound on definite missions; hearing rough talk, an occasional laugh, a smash of glass and a chorus of oaths as somebody dropped a bottle. The rum-shops already had been broken into.

To these details they gave little attention. Quietly, as they walked, Hart prompted:

"We don't know anything about the switch being out of the boat."

"Uh-huh. I got ye. We dunno where it's gone, so we can't fix it."

"What say?" suspiciously demanded their escort.

"I was saying I hoped we could find some food."

"Ah. Most certainly. When you have talked with the general."

They were striding fast now, Hart setting the pace with space-eating swings. Lights were shining in the office of the jefe civil, and the shutters stood half open. Along the front of the house was posted a line of men standing at rest, lounging on their rifles, swapping low-toned jests, but sharply watching all comers. As the two strangers approached, these straightened.

"Not so fast, there, hombres!" one warned. "What do you want?"

"These are from the prison," returned the leader of the liberators. "The general will see them."

A derisive grin flashed along the line, teeth glinting in the white moonlight.

"Ho! The illustrious birds of the jail will honor the general at once with their presence? What marvelous courtesy! But the distinguished visitors will wait here, sargento, until the general is at liberty to receive them."

"To the devil with your general, and the same to

you! ” erupted Kelly, in jungle Spanish. “Get out from under our feet! ”

An instant of amazed silence. Men stared at the truculent, harsh-voiced newcomer and his set-faced mate. Followed a mutter and the gleam of moonlight on rifle-barrels jerking upward.

“Steady, Kelly! ” Hart snapped again. But he did not slow down. Instead he threw a challenge beyond the bristling line. Sharp, biting, his voice sped through the windows of the office, where was visible a huddle of figures.

“Veinte Cuatro! Do you hide behind your men? El Tigre of the Vichada asks! ”

“Hah? ” jarred an angry shout from within. “What? Hide? Diablo! I? ”

A chair squeaked back on the tiled floor and fell over with a bang. The figures in the lamplight were thrown to both sides like flotsam before the prow of a dreadnought. Shutters were yanked open to their fullest width, and at a window bulked a belligerent form peering out.

“Where is this Tigre who squalls so loud? Make way, you, and let him come, and all his tigritos with him! ”

“Thanks! ” mocked El Tigre. “I come, and my whole army at my side.” And through the now yielding guard he and Kelly strode to the house. The squad which had followed them from the jail went no farther.

Within doors, the Northerners swung from the corridor into the office, where they halted. A motley group faced them: several under-officers, a number of scared peons and servants, a worried merchant or two, and, bulking over all, the thunder-faced Veinte Cuatro himself. For a few seconds all eyes focused on the insulting intruders, who swiftly scanned faces, vainly seeking that of Jean. Then the battered Bull and the crippled Tiger confronted the powerful Black Ant.

With sombrero thrown aside and ugly temper contracting his visage, Veinte Cuatro bore out his sobriquet. Black hair in a disordered shock, bushy black brows, threatening black eyes, huge black mustache, all combined with a steel-trap mouth and muscular jaws to suggest forcibly that giant insect with the dire bite. Now, with fist curled around the butt of his reloaded revolver, he glared at the impugnors of his courage. In the semi-quiet of the moment sounded a thumping, battering disturbance somewhere at the rear of the place.

"For your prompt invitation to join you I thank you," was Hart's sarcastic greeting. "I am El Tigre. This is my entire fighting force—at present." He nodded sidewise toward Kelly. "I want two persons immediately. One is a fat snake called Jaime Gordo. The other is the North American señorita."

Another pause, while the pounding at the rear continued. The hot gaze of the rebel commander burned

into the steely eyes of the pair who, disheveled, dirty, alone and apparently unarmed amid hundreds of dangerous men, bore themselves with such assurance. An explosion seemed imminent — and it was. But when it came it was of an unexpected sort. With the suddenness of a lightning flash the menacing face changed, and under the sweeping mustache opened a mouth belching laughter.

“Ho ho ho!” roared Veinte Cuatro. “El Tigre and all his band! A couple of crowing cockerels from the dung-heap, my faith! Yo ho ho ho! Have you two birdlets been pecking under a rum-shop, that you prance so boldly and sing of señoritas? Or have you —”

Through his loud ridicule broke a rumbling, rending crepitation, succeeded by exultant yells.

“Aha! A woman! The sweetheart of the fat betrayer! Come to us, pretty one! Come to lovers who —”

Hart and Kelly wheeled, knocked two men spinning, leaped into the corridor. Down it they dashed, into the room where it ended, on through a connecting room. As they entered a third chamber they saw at its farther side a wrecked door, beyond which several figures struggled amid laughing oaths.

“Jean!” shouted Hart.

“Ye-yes!” called a panting voice. “Here — these men —”

Then out came Kelly’s concealed gun. It darted to

an aim at the group beyond, whose grinning faces had turned doorward at Hart's hail; and with menacing mien its owner advanced on them. Hart's hand instinctively closed at the top of his empty holster. Finding the black butt gone from its accustomed place, it sank a little lower, concealing the lack of a weapon and simulating readiness for a fast draw. As the astonished gangsters halted motion and stared at the strangers, Kelly blared:

"Hands off! Leave her free! You sons of Indios, go and paw the half-breed women of the town! Guns down!" Then, in English: "Come on, Miss Jean. Duck low, so's I can shoot over ye. Make it snappy!"

He had halted now, and Hart with him. For a second it seemed that the reckless rebels would force him to shoot; but then, all at once, they became stolid, almost meek, as if in the presence of their commander. From their midst emerged Jean, running through the doorway without regard to Kelly's warning not to block his fire. She was breathing fast, her hair and clothing were disordered, and one hand was reddened at the knuckles; but she laughed as she came,—albeit with a note slightly hysterical. Her gaze lingered only an instant on her rescuers; then went beyond them with a questioning look.

Hart, following her glance, turned his head, then faced about. In the entrance through which they had just come stood a man who had pursued them so quietly that they had not heard him, and whose pres-

ence explained the sudden obedience of the girl's captors: Veinte Cuatro himself.

On his saturnine face now was a half-smile, which broadened a trifle as the girl stopped beside the crippled American and, with a movement half appealing, half protective, and wholly unconscious, laid a hand on his taut right arm. The glinting black eyes passed over her from top to toe and back again, then over the man to whom she clung. They switched to the broad back of Kelly, still holding his drop. The smile became a wide grin.

"It seems that you have found your *señorita*," whimsically conceded the conquerer. "And, *por Dios*, one well worth seeking! I did not know there was such a one. Now, General El Tigre, would you be so magnanimous as to order your artillery to cease threatening my poor soldiers? They are only obeying my orders to search this house and bring to me all persons found. This last door was most stubborn. Had I known who waited beyond it, matters would have been conducted differently."

With that he bowed low, — a movement as graceful as unexpected. And neither Hart nor Jean, watching him searchingly, found in his new manner anything sneering or sinister. Rather, it was that of a good-humored cavalier paying homage to beauty.

"What about it, Hart?" hoarsely asked Kelly, rigid from strain. "Is he holdin' a gun on me back, or —"

"No. Ease up. He's on the level."

"And," added Jean with a quick smile, "I think he's a gentleman."

"He better be," grunted Kelly, crusty as ever. But his weapon vanished, and he turned with relief. Veinte Cuatro chuckled, and, to the surprise of all, spoke in halting English.

"There have been — a time when todo el mundo — ev'reebodee — call Federico Gordo gentil-man. Perhaps he no have — have not — forget those day."

Jean blushed. Before she could reply Hart countered brusquely.

"Then prove it by ordering all your men to treat this lady with the consideration due her. And you can tell the world that anybody calling her the sweetheart of Jaime Gordo will have his head knocked off. And that reminds me. Where is that crocodile of a Jaime?"

The general's bushy brows drew down, and his eyes hardened.

"You are short in your ways, señor. Your demands are unnecessary and uncivil. I shall attend to those matters without instructions from you." He made an imperative gesture. The men still standing at the ruined doorway slouched forward, filed past, disappeared toward the front. "A guard shall be placed here, and all others kept out. When you have had time to compose yourself, señorita, I shall ask you a few questions. You men will come with me. That Jaime — he is not for you; he is mine, and I will —"

He stopped short. Somewhere outside sounded several shots, a screaming yell, two more reports; then shouts, queries, vague replies.

For a minute or two the room was very still. In the soft lamplight eye met eye, while Veinte Cuatro awaited an explanation. Came then a quick tread through the rooms beyond, and an under-officer appeared.

"My general," he cried, "the peon who was under your examination has found his tongue at last — with a little persuasion. My general, the place below this house where that Jaime fled is not only a room, says the peon, but a tunnel! It runs under the ground to some other house. So while we thought the betrayer to be penned beyond that door he has escaped! "

Veinte Cuatro bristled.

"Escaped! " he thundered. "Escaped? Sangre de Cristo, he does not escape from *me!* By the horned devil I will have him, if I tear to pieces every house! What was that shooting? "

"That? Ah, that was nothing, my general. It seems that two of the men have a little too much rum, and — ah — they became angered at a man said to be from up the river, and — ah — unfortunately shot him to death. He is nobody, — a common man who was in jail with these two señores. One of our troopers says his name was Pablo Benito."

CHAPTER XXVI

MAN TO MAN

ORDER, if not peace, had descended on the pueblo of Caicara. Gone was the turbulent confusion consequent on the midnight surprise and seizure. Now, although armed men moved in every street and busied themselves in many a house, every movement was under command, every invasion of dwelling or shop watched by officer or non-com. The reckless mob had become a military body; the turmoil had given way to martial law. Veinte Cuatro, the forceful Black Ant, had shut his jaws and clamped the town in an iron grip.

Within fifteen minutes after the shooting of Pablo Benito the transformation from lawless license to cold control was complete. Its swiftness and thoroughness spoke volumes for the strength of the mercurial commander. These men of his were restive, unruly individuals at best, many of them outlawed for good cause, and all of them hard-bitted; and with rum in their brains and a defenceless town in their power, they were hardly more amenable to discipline than a pack of wolves. Yet, when the commands of Veinte Cuatro sped among them on the tongues of sharp-voiced

officers, they came to heel like dogs, — growling, snarling, showing their teeth, perhaps, but obedient to the voice of the master.

Ordered to disarm and imprison their two mates who had shot down Pablo, they forthwith disarmed and imprisoned them. Told to surround the town, picket the river-bank, and search every house for Jaime Gordo, they surrounded, picketed, and searched. Warned that violence to noncombatants, looting of premises, or molestation of women would incur summary punishment, they refrained from commission of any such offenses. True, a few little articles which took the fancy of certain searchers may have disappeared from the possession of their owners; and it is quite possible that good-looking girls found in conveniently dark places by young soldiers were embraced with extreme ardor, — but they did not complain about it. All in all, the mandates of Federico Gordo were carried out with a promptness and precision almost incredible.

“Diablo and ten thousand diablillos!” he swore, on learning of the death of Pablo. “Is this an army fighting for liberty and justice, or a herd of drunken beasts? Shall it be said that Federico Gordo is a mere disorderly brawler and his men butchers? Order I demand, and order I will have!”

In thus demanding and enforcing order, he saw no incongruity in the facts that he had entered the town amid powder-flame and terror, that he had commanded

the seizure of its money and its arms, and that he himself had shot his blood brother. Had he been interrogated by the Recording Angel as to the basic difference between these acts and those of his followers, he might have answered — with some amazement and more resentment — that he had not been sure the place was ungarrisoned, and that therefore he had made his entry forceful in order to cow any resistance before it could start; that the commandeering of moneys and munitions was a matter of military necessity, and that the usual promissory notes had been given; and that the vengeance upon the traitorous Jaime was a duty of honor. But the slaying of a citizen by his men in a petty brawl was a flagrant violation of his orders, a crime against the peace and security of the people, and a reflection on his own ability to govern. Wherefore he would have no more of such insubordination.

Now, while the sobered pair of killers held gloomy converse in the jail and the body of their victim lay straight and still on the floor of the office of the vanished Jaime, the stern-browed leader conducted a brief examination. Farther back in the house, with shutters closed and a double guard stationed at the door, the three Americans sat exchanging experiences of the past twelve hours. Outside proceeded the persistent search for the hated jefe civil; a blind hunt, since the peon who had revealed the existence of the tunnel did not know whither it led. In all the town, the only one not engaged in some form of physical or mental activity

was Pablo Benito, whose work and worry were forever past.

Beside his lifeless form Veinte Cuatro straightened up, wiped his hands, and swept a smouldering gaze along the faces of several of his men. All others had been banished from the room.

"The bullets struck in the back," he declared. "The man was running away. He made no fight."

"None," agreed a short, alert-looking fellow. "But he was offensive and angered Luis and Rafael —"

"How?"

"Strutting, boasting, and acting tough. He had drunk rum. It flew to his head at once. He became loud and loose in his talk. He said he was a bad one; he had fought under El Tigre; he had done many things bold and desperate; now he would take whatever plunder he liked in this town; we had best walk wide of him; and such things. Luis and Rafael sneered and told him to get away from them. He did step away, but he called them dirty names. Then he turned and ran. Luis and Rafael are hot of head. They shot."

"Ah." The commander looked thoughtfully down at the dead face. "Do you know this man?"

The witness answered in the negative. Another man spoke up.

"I do. He was keeper of the cart road around the rapids at Atures. A scheming fellow of little courage but much conceit. He had not bravery enough to fight nor brains enough to keep his mouth shut. A poor bag of wind."

"Ah," repeated Federico, with a contemptuous inflection. "A sheep who would be a wolf. The old story. But he had a family?"

"Sí."

The black-lashed lids narrowed. For a moment the inky eyes glimmered as if peering afar, seeing in a masterless home a widow and fatherless children. The broad jaw tightened.

"Those two have given trouble before now," he said. "An example must be made." His glance darted to a silent captain. Curtly he added: "At sunrise!"

The officer saluted. The others lifted the body from the tiles. Except for a loitering orderly, all moved quietly outward. So passed Pablo Benito from the room where, a few hours ago, he had turned so readily against his companions at the behest of a man who struck from behind; a schemer who had out-schemed himself, earning for his final reward only a couple of slugs in the back, and leaving to his children a name signifying vacillation and vanity. From the lamplight to the moonlight he was borne; and in the moonlight his bearers paused, looked at each other, and turned their steps toward the river. Grave-digging is tedious and tiresome work, and in the Orinoco are plenty of crocodiles.

As these men left, others arrived, bringing various reports. Seated at his brother's council-table, the rebel leader listened, gave succinct instructions, sent them away. Thereafter he picked up the long Colt of El Tigre, found in the room where Jaime had fought.

With a grim smile he inspected it, weighed it in a big hand, fondled it as if it pleased him. Presently he shoved it under his belt; frowned again as if pondering; then jerked his head at the attentive orderly.

"Bring here my three guests."

The man departed down the corridor. At the door of the "guest" room the guards stepped aside to let him enter. Beyond, he found the three eating cold food and drinking hot coffee brought by some servant from the kitchen. Unspeaking, they eyed him questioningly.

"The general will talk with you at once."

"Good enough," approved Hart. "It's about time you got some sleep, Jean, and after this palaver you can turn in, perhaps. Let's go."

"I do feel a little fagged," she admitted.

Kelly made no comment. He emptied his coffee-cup and arose. They filed out, and, a moment later, were facing Veinte Cuatro. The orderly placed a chair for Jean, who sank into it, steadily regarding the new ruler of the town. Hart and Kelly stood on either side of her, their attitudes easy but their eyes watchful. The recent geniality of the revolutionist was not now in evidence; his pose was formal, his expression austere. When he spoke, it was in his native tongue.

"I regret, señorita, the necessity of keeping you longer from your rest, but after this conference you may sleep in perfect security; and I shall not detain

you here long. Do me the favor of telling me how you came here."

With an impersonality matching his own, she complied. Briefly she identified herself and sketched her voyage up the river; in more detail she narrated the events of her return trip, with particular reference to the things which had come about since arrival at Caicara. As she spoke of the duplicity of the jefe civil and of Pablo, resentment crept into her tone; but this changed to a mirthful note as she mentioned her fall from the sarrapia and her whirlwind combat with Jaime. As she finished, a slight smile flitted across the tight lips of Federico.

"Bueno," he approved. "You are a brave young woman. Now tell me what you know of these men."

"I think, señor, that they are quite able to speak for themselves," was her gentle reproof. "But I can tell you that they have been most valiant defenders, and that without their aid I could not have escaped from a very bad situation."

"Bien. You have named them Señores 'Art and Kay-lee. By what other names are they known?"

She glanced up at her stalwart guardians. Hart nodded carelessly.

"Tell him," he acquiesced.

"Very well. Señor Hart is also called El Tigre; Señor Kelly, El Toro."

With that she stood up, tacitly indicating her de-

cision to say no more. The interrogator bowed and also arose.

"Many thanks, señorita. You may retire. Rest without fear. It would be well for you to sleep while you can, for my troops will be withdrawn from this place before another sunset."

Another formal bow. After a momentary hesitation she walked confidently to the corridor, throwing a nod and a smile to El Tigre and El Toro as she went. The eyes of all three men followed her slender figure into the dimness beyond the door.

"Now," went on the raider, his tone becoming more brusque, "Señor El Tigre, explain to me one thing. That Tigre of whom I have heard was a fighter, a revolutionist with a strong hand and a strong band. If you are that one, how comes it that you desert the cause of liberty and justice when every good fighter is needed? You have not lost your gun hand. I find it hard to believe that courtesy to a young woman is your only motive for leaving us."

Hart's head snapped up angrily.

"Meaning that I am going over to the federals? Any man who says that is a liar!"

The Venezuelan's hands closed slightly, but he made no other move. His unwinking gaze bored steadily into the wrathful face of the American.

"You can blow all the federals in the country to the devil, and then blow the whole rotten country after them, as far as I am concerned!" the latter raged.

"I am sick of the whole mess. I am through with it. Call it desertion or what you like, — I don't give a damn for your opinion! And don't talk 'liberty and justice' to me! Feed that sort of pap to thick-headed peons!"

A pause, while eye continued to clash with eye. Then a faint grin seemed to flit under the heavy mustache. Without reply, the Southerner turned his attention to Kelly.

"And you? Who are you, and why are you here with this one?"

"El Toro of Colombia. I bossed the old Malojo gang until I was tired of it." The Spanish brows lifted. "I deserted them, if it is any of your business. I feel the same as Hart. Colombia and Venezuela can both go to the devil. I am leaving the country."

Kelly's voice, though rough, was not angry like that of his mate; it was coolly defiant and determined. His hard gaze met the black orbs without a flicker of feeling. Veinte Cuatro studied him for unmeasured seconds.

"The Malojo band? A bad one! And how came you to control it?"

"I shot old Malojo."

"Ho! So? A most laudable act, my faith!" The hairy lips stretched in a wolfish grin. "I had intended to shoot him myself at some good time. But, — You will raise your hands! High!"

The command came like the snap of a whip. At the same instant his own revolver sprang from its sheath and covered the self-confessed bandit. Kelly reddened and slowly obeyed.

"Within the shirt, Jorge," directed the captor. The orderly, gliding behind El Toro, passed an arm around him, extracted the concealed weapon from its sling, and stepped back. "You are too dangerous to be allowed to keep the weapon longer," grinned the raider. "You might decide to shoot me as you shot Malojo, and take control of my army! "

"Yeah. I might," retorted Kelly, with a glare. "So why not shoot us both? Then you need not be afraid of us."

"Afraid?" The black-fringed mouth tightened again. "Afraid! Ah, sí! Of one thing I am afraid, you fool, but it is not you! I fear that you may make me or my men shoot you because of your offensiveness; and I will have no more such shooting in this town. I took your weapon to prevent you from provoking disorder. Now go back to your quarters! "

The revolver-muzzle, which had sunk, jerked impatiently toward the rear. The unarmed pair complied, although with no abatement of their stiff-grained independence; moving deliberately, and exchanging comments not diplomatic. As they passed down the corridor, however, Kelly became philosophic.

"Wal, we come through without casualties, anyway," he vouchsafed, "and he's a squarer guy than his

brother, at that. Hits right out from the shoulder and lets another guy do the same. He was givin' us the works to see how we'd come back at him, I bet, and we handled him right. He's satisfied now that we're the guys we say we are. Because why? Because we give him the hard-boiled line o' talk he'd naturally expect from El Tigre and El Toro. If we'd squirmed around and acted worried he might have stood us up against a wall; I wouldn't put it past him. He's bitter as gall with anybody that tries puttin' anything over on him, I bet."

"Uh-huh. Naturally, after what his brother handed him."

"Yeah. Wal, he's got nothin' on us, and we're in the clear for a while, anyway. And there's some grub waitin' on the table. We could be a lot worse off. Might grab a wink o' sleep 'twixt now and reveille, too. Guess the kid's turned in already."

They returned to the room where they had been lunching, the guards passing them in without a word, then standing again to their vigil. Hart went on to the portal where the shattered door hung askew; listened, and came back, nodding to Kelly. Quietly they resumed eating. And beyond the splintered barrier Jean, lying with heavy eyes still open, let them close and swiftly dropped into peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER XXVII

AT SUNRISE

DAWN. A pale shroud filmed the sky, blotting from it the stars. A weak half-light crawled along the ground, giving a lifeless look to houses, a sickly appearance to slow-moving, weary men. Sentries and outposts nodded over their rifles or, concealed in various nooks, shamelessly slept. Glum, sour-speaking groups stood about or worked half-heartedly at the still fruitless search for Jaime Gordo. Frowning heavily, Federico Gordo sat again in the office, brooding over the failure to unearth his wounded brother. In the rooms at the rear slept the Americans: Jean in her hammock, her guardians hunched over at a table, heads resting on arms.

Rapidly the light brightened. Cocks began to crow. Men straightened, walked with a little more vim, though yawning long and often. As a pink blush dyed the eastern clouds, from somewhere came marching a squad of somber-faced men, eyes set stonily to the front, rifles rigid on their shoulders. Commanded by a sergeant, they trod in unison to one side of the plaza and halted a few yards from a blank wall. There they grounded arms and stood at rest. The non-com strode

away, halting again outside an open window of the office.

"Ready, my general," he announced in monotone.

The frown of Veinte Cuatro tightened perceptibly. To several officers standing about he spoke.

"Is a priest in this town?"

"None at present, the people say," answered one.

An instant of hesitation. Then he arose, grim and ruthless.

"Bugles," he ordered. "Summon all to the plaza. Lieutenant Compero—" His sidewise nod indicated another duty for that officer. The lieutenant and his fellows hastened out.

A couple of minutes later the bugles blared. Loud, imperious, unfeeling, they volleyed notes over the town, startling the heaviest sleeper into full wakefulness. Succeeded a medley of orders, a confused trampling of feet, as the forces of Veinte Cuatro gathered from all sides and took designated positions. Thereafter ensued shouts summoning to the plaza all citizens of Caicara.

At their table, Hart and Kelly started up, throwing blank looks around. The former strode to a window and threw its shutter wide. In rushed the cool, sweet breeze of early morning and the light of the new day. The sky now was becoming a fiery red.

Kelly, advancing to the door, found the guards alert but morose. They scanned him sourly.

"What is the assembly?" he asked.

"Two men are to be shot. And we shall not see it," grumbled one.

"Huh! Who are they?"

"Fools who disobeyed the general."

"Oh. Well, go and see the show. The night is done; so is your duty."

They looked quickly at each other, their sourness vanishing.

"You will not try an escape?"

"Huh? We are not prisoners, hombre; we are guests of the general. I will go with you."

"Bueno! Quickly, señor!"

"A moment." To Hart, with a wink and a thumb-jerk toward Jean's room, he added loudly: "Some guys are leavin' for the west, Hart, and the gang's givin' 'em a bump — a send-off. Want to take it in?"

"Guess not," came the casual reply. "I'll stick around. Go ahead."

"Quickly, señor!" besought the guards again. As he stepped forward they loped to the corridor, aglow with excited expectation. Kelly, with a blasé yawn, lounged along at an unhurried pace.

Reaching the open, they found the raiders drawn up in two long columns, standing at ease, their lines dressed toward the blank wall. At one end of the enclosed space waited the somber squad. At the other was massing the populace, asking no questions, — for any Venezuelan knows the meaning of a squad and a wall. In the midway, silent but dominating,

bulked the great black Veinte Cuatro, thumbs in belt and shoulders back. The rustle and jostle became a tense stillness. Overhead blazed the first rays of the fast-rising sun.

Against the wall now appeared several figures moving in from one side. Two of these were halted and swung about to face the assemblage. The others retreated. The pair stood alone, backs to the adobe. The armed squad facing them stiffened, watching the lieutenant who had taken position at one side. The two against the wall looked at the squad. That was the last look one of them gave to anything.

A heavily built, strong-looking man was this, seemingly rugged enough to meet any fate without flinching. Yet now, after one furtive glance at the knot of riflemen, he swayed on his feet; his visage contorted, his eyes shut tight, and his head drooped. In that position he froze, dumbly waiting, blindly holding his face toward the earth. The other, much slighter of frame, stood with chin in air and gaze roving defiantly along the columns, over the crowd of townsmen, and back to his executioners. In one hand he held a freshly lighted cigarette, from which he drew an occasional puff of smoke.

“ People of Caicara! ”

Grave, cold, measured, the deep chest-tones of Federico Gordo boomed across the plaza like the tolling of a bell. At its sonorous impact the heavier of the doomed pair started visibly, but did not look up.

His companion took a quick draw at his cigarette, then stood watching as if he were only a disinterested spectator.

"Citizens of a misruled town, victims of a tyrannical government! You know that I, Federico Gordo, fight against oppression; that I make war to free our country from the chains of slavery, to sweep away corruption, to restore to your lives the freedom and happiness of liberty and justice. You know that there can be no liberty without justice, no justice without impartiality. And you know there can be no safety without just law and just punishment for those who violate such law. You are called here to witness the fact that I not only speak these things but act them; that I do not lay upon you one law and upon my own men another; that I protect all who conduct themselves with peace and order, punish those who do not. I stand for order and justice in government, and order and justice I will have!

"Last night I commanded that no inhabitant of this town should be harmed unless he himself made violence. That is my rule in every town I take. Later a man was shot by two of my soldiers. He was not one of you, but a visitor. He provoked my men and brought his death on himself. Yet he was unarmed and harmless. The killing of him was unnecessary and unjustifiable; a disobedience of my command, a lawless violation of peace and order. Those men now pay the penalty."

His speech ceased as abruptly as it had begun. He turned, looking at the pair against the wall. The slim fellow looked straight back at him; lifted his cigarette once more, drew a last puff deep into his lungs, and deliberately tossed the butt away; slowly exhaled the smoke, lifted his head still higher, and gazed into the far sky.

Veinte Cuatro flung up a hand. The lieutenant voiced a curt command. Rifle-butts leaped to shoulders. Another order; the steel tubes froze into aim. A third bark — a thumping crash.

As they had stood, so the two fell. The heavy one pitched on his face, rigid as a toppling tree. The wiry one, head unbowed, dropped loosely on his back. Both lay motionless.

Veinte Cuatro turned again, his gaze sweeping along the lines of his own men and coming to rest on the crowded townsmen.

"You have seen," he said gruffly. "Let it not be forgotten."

Without another word he strode back to the house of his brother. Silently his forces broke ranks, and quietly the citizens melted away. At the foot of the wall six men lifted the lifeless figures and trudged down a side street toward the cemetery. The lesson in liberty and justice was over.

Kelly, expressionless, sauntered back to headquarters, his attendants, close behind, making great show of zeal in guarding him. As soon as they had passed

the doorway of the office without drawing a question from Veinte Cuatro, however, the guardian pair dropped their pretense. In low tones they fell to discussing the coolness of Rafael, the fear of Luis, the difference in their ways of falling, and kindred details. The American, ignoring them, reëntered the room where he and Hart had napped. He found the latter seated at the table with Jean, who, though sleepy-eyed, looked refreshed by her few hours of rest.

"Mornin', miss," he saluted. "How d'ye feel this glorious mornin'?"

"Just a little sleepy," she confessed, stifling a yawn, "and very much puzzled as to how we are to continue our journey. You said last night that the boat wouldn't run, and —"

"It'll run as quick as these guys move out," he assured her, lowering his tone. "And they ain't stayin' much longer. They must have picked this burg clean before now."

"But — they haven't found Gordo, have they? Or have they? What — what was that shooting just now?" Her face was suddenly serious.

"Aw, no. That wasn't nothin'. Jest a kind of a — a salute to Pablo Benito, to tell ye the truth. Uh — did ye hear the general's speech?"

"No. We heard a big voice talking, but I didn't catch the words."

"Wal, ye see, he made a kind of an oration about peace and order and liberty and justice, and how it

was tough that Pablo got knocked off, and there wouldn't be no more o' that rough stuff. And then they fired that salute. And some fellers that was goin' on a trip by the general's orders went as per schedule, so it was a kind of a send-off for them too. Funny time to pull a stunt like that, ye might say, but down here they like to git things done in the cool o' the mornin'."

She watched him dubiously as he talked; but his tone was so casual, his gaze so candid, that his deceptive explanation passed muster. Hart's eyes twinkled, but he preserved a poker face. In the same careless way Kelly added:

"This Jaime guy, he's made his gitaway, I guess, and it's a sore man I am; I wanted to give him some-thin' to take to the hospital with him. But about the boat, I'll put her in trim as soon as these ginks pull out, and I don't think they'll stick around on Jaime's account. They'll git him some other time."

Jean looked soberly out through a window.

"It's too bad about Pablo," she said. "He wasn't so good, but he might have been much worse, perhaps. He was all right except for — for being so weak that anybody could wind him around a finger. And his wife and children —"

"They'll make out all right," comforted Hart. "She's a capable woman, and I'll bet she knows where he hid many a good silver bolívar. He made money on his cartage and never spent it. Nobody will mourn

him long. Weaklings seldom live to old age in this country, anyway. Speaking of the boat, it seems queer that nobody's said anything about it yet. The revolutionist never lived who wouldn't seize a good boat — "

"Ssss! " warned Kelly. "Somebody comin'."

The somebody proved to be Veinte Cuatro himself, accompanied by a couple of subordinates. No sound had heralded his approach, but Kelly had noted that the lounging guards had suddenly stiffened to soldierly alertness. Now a brief sentence of dismissal was heard, and the sentinels gladly left their post. As they disappeared the others entered. At a glance it was evident that the mood of the leader had changed again.

"Good morning." He bowed. "Señorita, I trust that you have rested well. And I hope, Señor 'Art, that your temper is improved by food and sleep."

"A little," Hart conceded. "It would be still better if we had a good breakfast."

"That is good. You shall have it at once. It makes me most uncomfortable to have a hungry tigre so near me." The black-lashed lids twitched humorously. "Afterwards perhaps you will tell my engineer officer how to make your boat run. He says it does not operate."

Blank stares and unreadable expressions met this announcement. After a pause Hart queried: "Do we understand that you mean to take our boat from us?"

"Not precisely. And yet — yes. You men, as

men of experience, must understand what such a boat means to my forces: a swift scouting boat, going many miles in a day. But it is my wish that the señorita be carried as far as possible on her way. Therefore when it is in condition we shall speed down the river to some point where you three can easily find a piragua, in which you can continue safely to Bolívar. After that I shall leave you."

Another pause, while the trio appeared to consider the proposal.

"Oh, general, please do not take my boat!" pleaded Jean, looking doleful. "It is so comfortable and —"

"I am desolated, señorita, by the necessity. But I must have the boat. Be assured that you shall be well provided when it leaves you. And, if you will pardon me, it is not your boat. One of my men recognizes it as the property of a merchant of Bolívar. Thus the loss will be his, not yours. It is unavoidable."

His tone, though courteous, was final. Hart and Kelly looked at each other as if accepting the inevitable.

"Bien," said the former. "General, no gas boat will run without gas. That was why we stopped here."

Up spoke one of the officers in a tone of annoyance.

"Caramba! Do I not know enough to put in fuel? The tank is filled. But the engine will not start."

The Americans achieved another blank look. Then Kelly chuckled patronizingly.

"You do not understand the compression," he said.

"It is very simple. I will show you — after breakfast. General, when do we eat? "

"Now. At once. You will come then to the office? Bueno. Señorita, accept my apologies for intrusion."

More bows, and a dignified withdrawal. The three glanced at one another, and Kelly slyly touched the pocket wherein reposed the vital switch.

"I bet that spiffy engineer officer dunno his right hand from his left when it comes to marine ingynes," he muttered. "I'll soon find out."

"And if he doesn't?" breathed Jean.

"Remains to be seen, as the guy said at the morgue. Mebbe we can put one over on His Nibs yet."

"Have to make it slick and snappy," cautioned Hart. "If we make one fumble we're completely out of luck."

"And wouldn't it be rather a shame," laughed Jean, "to deceive our friend? He's such a gentlemanly sort of robber! "

"Robber?" Hart's brows lifted in mock reproof. "My dear girl, the fact that he seizes our guns and our launch, — and perhaps changes his mind about giving us a ride after the launch is back in commission, — that's not robbery. It's only 'liberty and justice.' "

"Yeah. Liberty and justice," echoed Kelly, his face hardening. His head lifted, and his eyes dwelt somberly on the door through which the volatile commander had gone. Despite his outward callousness, — which, in truth, was considerably more than skin deep,

— he kept seeing again the slim, dauntless fellow with the cigarette whose life had just been shot out in the names of “libertad y justicia.” That fellow, he felt, had been worth a hundred such as Pablo Benito. Where was the justice of executing a brave man for the death of a yellow dog?

“Bunk! Blah!” he growled aloud. “Grandstand play, that’s all ’twas! This guy’s a big cheese! He makes me sick!”

“What?” questioned Jean, wonderingly.

“Aw, nothin’.” He stood up. “I don’t want no breakfast, I guess. Got a sour taste in me mouth. I’ll go down and stall round the boat. If I don’t git back before long the two o’ ye might mosey down and see how I’m makin’ out.”

His eye held Hart’s for a second. Then he sauntered out.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A MATTER OF ENGINEERING

ATTENDED by the "engineer officer", Kelly took his deliberate way to the port, meanwhile sizing up men and affairs. To Veinte Cuatro, surprised by his prompt appearance, he had carelessly remarked that he desired a mouthful of air, and that, since the solving of the difficulty with the engine would take but a moment, it might as well be attended to now; a suggestion to which the raider had cordially assented. With the nimbleness which seemed characteristic of him, Gordo had already put his mind to other things; and now, feeding himself with one hand, — his appetite evidently unimpaired by the recent execution, — he was using the other to check up a list of commandeered funds and supplies. The table was loaded with canvas bags bulging with silver specie, — reluctant but inevitable contributions by the townsmen to "liberty and justice"; and men were toiling to lift the lid of a locked iron chest which undoubtedly formed the federal strongbox. Thus pleasantly engaged, the conqueror gave only a moment to the matter of the boat.

Outside it was breakfast time. Campfires burned in the plaza, and from every house came the varying

scents of cookery and the impatient tones of hungry men. The search for the hated jefe civil evidently was suspended, if not entirely given up; and, to all appearance, the spectacular shooting of a few minutes ago was already forgotten. Yet the observer knew that it was stamped deep on every mind, and that these men would be exceedingly slow to fire on anyone unless ordered to do so by an officer. With this thought in mind he covertly studied the officer walking beside him.

This gentleman, a head shorter than he, was a slick-looking rascal who obviously thought very well of himself, and whose attitude betokened decided unfriendliness toward the foreigner who had just belittled his knowledge. He walked with stiff back, unpleasant sidelong glances, and an occasional caress of the revolver and knife on his broad waist-belt. The bigger man felt an impulse to slap his face and kick him; but he restrained it. Unspeaking, they walked on to the bowldery waterfront.

There Kelly looked about with some surprise. He had expected to find the port choked with floating craft. Instead, it held only a few canoes and the launch. Near at hand slouched a couple of heavy-eyed sentries, posted to watch the river, but giving it scant attention.

"Teniente, when do we get relief?" growled one of these. "Do we never rest or eat?"

The slick lieutenant seemed to swell. Here was a chance to show authority.

"What! You were not relieved at daybreak? Go, you, at once, — at once, understand me! — to the sargento of the guard! Tell him that I — I, Teniente Mendez — command him to post new men here immediately!"

"I go," grinned the other. And he briskly departed. The second sentinel brightened up, took a few languid steps, then stopped and slouched again.

Kelly, turning his back on the loitering picket, let his gaze rove along the bank below. He saw no other watchers. A glint came into his eye and was gone. Yawning, he said: "You came here by land, I see. There are no boats."

"Plenty of boats," disputed the other, his tone superior. "They are above here. You did not suppose we made a blind landing at so open a spot as this?"

"I did think so. But I understand now."

The officer gave a supercilious smirk, plainly intimating that the American knew little of military strategy. Kelly bit back a grin and looked as stupid as he could. They straddled into the launch, which rode snugly at the edge of the mud bank. Kelly took a look at the fore deck and saw that it was marked with muddy tracks around the fuel intake; sniffed, and caught the reek of gasoline. The tank had been filled to overflowing by the men whose footmarks disfigured the drab paint. Inside, at the bow, stood several unopened five-gallon cans.

"You say the tank has been filled?" he asked,

as if too dense to deduce the meaning of the litter forward.

"Sí."

"Bien. Then the only trouble is that the engine is cold. One must open this cock, pour a little gasoline in this cup — see? — and push this heavy wheel over — so — to suck it in; then bring it back hard — see? Then comes the explosion. Oh, yes, there is another thing. One must first turn on the electricity from the battery over here, and — Cra!"

He stared as if astounded; took a couple of long steps, lifted the cover of the battery compartment, looked outside again at the wiring; turned an angry face on the Venezuelan.

"What have you done to the switch?"

"What? What have I — Ajo! What do you mean?"

The emptiness of the pretensions of the "engineer" was palpably evident. Quite likely he knew how to operate a cheap automobile (until it broke down), but of motorboats he had only the faintest comprehension. Staring at Kelly and following the pointing finger, he looked perturbed.

"The switch, hombre!" Kelly glared accusingly. "You have ruined the switch! Without it the boat will never run! What did you do with it?"

"Ah, the sweetch!" parroted Mendez, striving to conceal his ignorance. "Por Dios, I did nothing to it! I have disarranged nothing —"

"Then who did? You are in charge of this boat.

You have been in it since I left it. If you did not ruin it, who did? Caramba, the general shall hear of this at once! ”

The lieutenant paled. The lone sentinel, keenly interested in the loud accusations, came out of his slouch and glided closer. On him the officer's eyes fastened.

“You, hombre!” he barked. “Who has been in this boat?”

“Nobody. Nobody but you and those you brought here to work on it.” The man's response was prompt and certain.

“You are sure? Nobody in the night? You did not sleep?”

“No!” The answer came angrily. “Cra, I wish I had slept! Hours of useless walking and watching, and nothing to watch but crocodiles! And not even a crocodile touched the boat.”

“Aha,” sneered Kelly. “You cannot blame the men, teniente. It is for you to explain this damage. We shall go to the general at once — ”

“No, no! A moment! Sangre de Cristo, what a calamity! I have not injured anything — but he may not believe me. Is there not some way of repairing the cursed thing? I am — I am not familiar with this kind of arrangement, — it is different from all engineering I have known, — a very peculiar type, yes. But there must be a way of making repairs. And the general is most busy. I command you to make this boat ready to go!”

With difficulty Kelly swallowed a snicker. The mental scrambling of this coxcomb in an effort to save his face amused him hugely. Gritting his teeth, he frowned at the engine until his inward mirth passed.

"Your commands do not change the matter," he countered, roughly. "Can I take a new switch out of my ear, hombre, and fix it in place? You bray like a burro! That switch must be made right or the boat does not run! It is for you to make it right!"

The officer scowled portentously, but his eyes were distinctly scared. He must clear himself somehow — Ah! An idea! He would tell Veinte Cuatro that this American had slyly disabled the boat and —

"But wait," said Kelly, in a tone somewhat less harsh. "Possibly el capitán — the one-armed man — may know of some way of making a repair. He is the captain of this boat. It will do no harm to ask him. If the matter can be mended the general need not know of it. He only wants the boat to run."

"Sí!" Mendez snatched the bait like a hungry trout. "It is as you say. The general must not be troubled by small matters. Let us go."

"Huh!" A disgusted grunt. "Shall I walk up the hill only to walk down again? And can el capitán say what shall be done without seeing the boat? He must come here. Until he comes I shall test the other parts. The man who ruined the switch may have done other damage. You go."

An instant of hesitation; then came realization that,

in a dead boat and without his companions, the American would hardly take leave. There was the sentry, too, on guard. He hopped ashore, gave the rifleman a significant look, and hastened townward.

"And that's that," Kelly said to himself. "Now for the next step, as the guy said when he crep' upstairs with a jag on. Can I talk this guy over, I wonder?" He eyed the guard, who was watching with an air of grim readiness. Then he looked beyond and saw two men swinging sulkily down the hill. The self-important Mendez met them, stopped them, gave some snappish order, and went on. The pair resumed their approach.

"Not so good," amended Kelly. "This is the relief." Turning, he began fussing around the battery.

Meanwhile, up at headquarters, Hart had quietly said to Jean:

"Kelly's got something up his sleeve. We'd better stroll down by and by, as inconspicuously as possible; and maybe we'd better go separately. You'd be safe alone just now, because, for certain reasons, the gang's very much on its good behavior for the present — particularly toward anybody in the good graces of the Spanish cavalier."

She gave him a laughing look and a comprehending nod.

"I can invent a perfectly good excuse to go down there," she responded. "And I'm not afraid. Last night I was really scared for a little while, but now

I feel quite at ease in the lion's den — or the ant's nest. Do you suppose he really bites? ”

“ You bet! Deep, hard, and quick, if he feels like it.”

The arrival of servants with breakfast broke off their conversation. Both ate eagerly. Before they were half through, however, Mendez arrived.

“ Capitán,” he said hurriedly, “ I have discovered that the sweetch in your boat is in bad order. Your friend, the other man, says you can make a quick repair. I could do it myself, naturally,— I am engineer officer,— but you perhaps can manage it more quickly, as you know this particular boat better than I. Let us go immediately.”

Hart eyed him, noting signs of nervousness.

“ The switch is not in order? Hum! That is serious. You have notified the general? ”

“ I— no, capitán. It is not necessary, since the matter can be made right. Let us go— quietly, without disturbing him.”

“ Ah. Well, I shall see what can be done, after breakfast. You will join us? ”

“ No, no. I ate earlier. Let us waste no time. You shall finish your meal when the repair is made — ”

“ I finish one thing before starting another, hombre. Take a seat.”

Despite the impatience of the lieutenant, the meal proceeded with exasperating deliberation. Hart suspected Kelly had sent the fellow in order to get rid of

him; so he dawdled, meanwhile probing the other with questions and showing much concern over the mysterious ailment of the switch, until the snippy officer was in a nervous sweat. As a matter of fact, Kelly had not desired this delay. It served one good purpose, however; for, if Mendez had thought there might be any prearrangement in summoning the other American, the suspicion was banished by the latter's laziness in starting. When at length Hart deigned to arise, the lieutenant almost ran in his eagerness to be gone.

"Follow on," Hart muttered to Jean as he departed.

"Soon."

Taking his time, he passed out. At the door of the office he glanced in, finding Viente Cuatro absorbed in some discussion with several others. Outside, those who looked his way saw that he was escorted by Mendez and soon forgot him.

Down in the launch, Kelly had been making exceedingly good use of his time. First he had tinkered uselessly, making a show of activity, until the curiosity of the new sentries had worn off, meanwhile informing the world that some sanguinary son of abysmally degenerate denizens of unnamable resorts had ruined the motor in the night. His lurid language evoked appreciative grins from the outlaws and satisfied them that there was little need of intent vigilance on their part. Wherefore they looked longingly for some near-by shade, found none, and fell to growling. They had missed their breakfast, it seemed; and now they must

stand in the blazing sun (rapidly rolling higher and hotter) because of that sleek pup of a Mendez. They were exceedingly sour just then on the life of a revolutionist.

Kelly took this in and looked them over, dallying with the idea of making them allies. But he decided against it; they looked too treacherous. So he tinkered again. And, as he tinkered, he proceeded with cool audacity to replace the switch.

This work he masked by keeping his burly body between switch and watchmen, pretending meanwhile to be engrossed in fiddling with the battery. He fastened it firmly, connected up the battery, and even made a tentative test. At the responsive burr he instantly disengaged it; and as the sentries caught the sound and peered quickly toward him he straightened up and swore a blue streak at the boat in general and the battery in particular. The guards chuckled gruffly and looked away.

"And a good job done," muttered Kelly. "That teniente is such a simp he won't even know the switch is back; or if he does spot it I can kid him out of it. Wonder where Hart is. Ought to been here before now."

He got out his priming can and set it handy; laid a hand on the engine, finding it well warmed by the slanting sun; put the gear in reverse. Another burst of oratory for the benefit of the guards. Then he turned on them and, with manner purposely offensive,

ordered them to wash off the muck left on the fore deck by the feet of their fellows. The appropriate response was immediately forthcoming, to the effect that he could wash it himself or go to Hades with it. After a further interchange of compliments he took an empty can, crawled out, and went to washing the paint—with his right hand. His left rested on the prow to steady himself; and in it nestled a small pocket-knife with a keen open blade.

A stout piassava rope, running from the boat to a stump ashore, held it secure. The strength of this bond now became materially weakened, as the concealed blade stealthily cut through strand after strand close to the bow. When it had been bitten almost apart, Kelly desisted from his labors, returned inside, and fanned himself until Hart and Mendez arrived.

"At last we are here," announced the perspiring lieutenant. "Now the repair—at once! Capitán, what is it that must be done?"

"Took ye long enough to git him here, I'll say!" grumbled Kelly. "Did ye tell the big boss about this?"

Mendez squinted, saw that the question was meant for him, and scowled.

"Speak what I can understand!" he rebuked. "I do not comprehend English."

"That's what I wanted to know," retorted the other in the same scolding tone. Shifting to Spanish, he continued: "I asked why you did not bring me something to eat."

"Eat? Am I your servant? Eat! Cra! This capitán of yours has eaten enough for both of you. Now let this cursed boat be adjusted! "

Hart, after one sweeping survey of the interior, turned a quizzical eye on Kelly. In a rising tone, as if asking questions, he said:

"You've got your nerve. All set and ready to go, eh? "

"Yeah. This guy's so ignorant he don't know the diff." Kelly pointed accusingly at the engine. "Tank full o' gas — more cans in reserve — all connections made — I even tested the ignition. And the rope is cut; hangin' by a hair. If we can git Miss Jean aboard — "

Hart shook his head and wrinkled his brow as if confronted by a perplexing problem. But what he said was: "That's all fixed. She'll come down as soon as she can. Trust her to work it. Meanwhile we'll stall."

He moved over to the battery box and began fingering the wiring. And Mendez, self-styled expert engineer, looked straight at the ready switch and away again, unaware that he had seen anything at all. So far as matters electrical were concerned, his brain was as lifeless as the wires in the captain's hand.

CHAPTER XXIX

A. W. O. L.

JEAN waited exactly ten minutes by her watch. Meanwhile she roughed her hair into wispy disorder. When the moving pointer reached the proper point on the dial she walked composedly to the office.

As she entered, Veinte Cuatro happened to be staring straight at the doorway, his eyes blank with thought. They focused at once on her, however, and automatically he arose. She paused within the door-frame, giving him a hesitant smile.

"General," she said before he could speak, "I should like to go to the boat and get a few personal belongings. I know I look most unpresentable, and I do not like to remain so. But it would not be safe for me to walk alone among your men, would it?"

Cleverly phrased, that question. It aroused instantly his pride of control.

"Not safe? Señorita! You may walk unattended among the men of Federico Gordo without the slightest fear. Any man of mine who so much as speaks disrespectfully to you shall answer to me, and well they know it! Indeed you may go to the boat. But —" again gleamed the sudden twinkle under the bushy

brows "— if you make yourself look more charming than at present, señorita, I fear that you will devastate my army! "

A merry laugh acknowledged his gallantry. She blushed a little, too, and for an instant her gaze dropped before his bold regard. Then she recovered her nonchalance.

" Then I warn you, sir, to prepare for devastation. You have seen me only at my very worst, and I intend to make radical changes at once. When I return, beware! " With another little laugh she turned and walked out.

He stood a few seconds looking at the empty doorway, the smile still in his eyes. All at once those eyes sharpened, as if with half-born suspicion. In three long strides he was at the outer door, watching her. She was swinging lithely away with head high, ignoring the men who squatted, sat, or stood along the street; a proud, cool figure, showing neither haste nor concern, nor once looking back. The men, most of them now full-fed and jovial, eyed her ardently, and more than one of them arose or turned as if meditating advances. But not one of them spoke. They glanced warily toward the door whence she had emerged, spied there the tall form and ominous face of their master, and were dumb. After she turned the corner— still without a backward look— Veinte Cuatro slowly returned to his treasure table.

Even in the next street, beyond sight of the general,

no man directly addressed the young woman, though a number of them exchanged broadly admiring remarks which made her color deepen. Nor did anyone follow her. As Hart had predicted, the gang was temporarily on its best behavior. No man cared to have any complaint against him lodged with the ruthless general just then. So, unaccosted and unmolested, Jean passed to the boat.

"Just in time," Hart welcomed her. "Have any difficulty?"

"No." She glanced at the attentive Mendez. "He can't understand?"

"Not a word."

"Well, I'm supposed to be obtaining personal effects and dolling up to devastate our mutual friend. And I told him I couldn't pass safely among his men, so he sent me to prove that I could. Now what do we do? Anything?"

"I'll say so," affirmed Kelly. "We're goin' to devastate yer black gorilla quicker'n ye think, unless somethin' slips. Jest a li'l more flimflam work and we go A. W. O. L. But don't let on."

As he spoke he was opening a small compartment within which, as he had recently observed, she kept a few toilet accessories obtained from Señora Benito; and, as if she had asked him to do so, he handed them to her. Seating herself insouciantly at the bow, she propped up a little mirror and proceeded to arrange her hair. Mendez, hitherto watching faces and striving to interpret tones, smirked and relaxed, although

he did not at once withdraw his attention from her. In fact, it took a peremptory summons from Hart to bring his mind back to the supposedly refractory switch.

By this time the poker-faced partners had implanted in the brain of the spurious expert the idea that the mysterious switch was some sort of metal contraption belonging at the top of the battery, the function of which was to generate electricity; that without it the battery would remain dead unless, by some hook or crook, the current could be coaxed to life; but that if the choked power could be reinvigorated, even for a fraction of a second, all would run merrily thereafter. Ever since the arrival of the ostensible captain of the craft the pair had apparently been seeking some way of giving the necessary impulse to the circuit. Actually they had, while performing weird operations about the battery, been laying out their plan of ensuing action, meanwhile turning an occasional misleading Spanish phrase toward the lieutenant — who, looking wise, assented to everything, but ventured no suggestions from his own profound experience. Now, while Mendez's observations oscillated between the ugly battery and the attractive señorita, they kept up their pretense for a few minutes longer. The sentries, who had manifested extreme interest in the launch since the arrival of Jean, gradually relapsed into drowsiness.

All at once Hart straightened up, his face brightening as if a solution had suddenly come to him.

"The mirror, Jean," he demanded. She passed it

to him. Standing at the gunwale, he moved the glass until it shot a reflected sunbeam over the battery; then held it steady. While Mendez watched the spot of light, Kelly threw over the switch. At the responding buzz both voiced exultant exclamations.

"One of those simple things of which a man seldom thinks," Hart told the mystified Mendez. "No doubt you have heard of it, but forgotten it, as we did. The energy of the sun, transferred at the correct angle, vitalizes the electrical flow and restores contact."

"Wow!" breathed Kelly. "That's a hot one!"

"Uh — ah — why, yes, certainly, capitán! Stupid that we are! And now at last all is in order, yes? And the boat will run?"

"I think so. But we had better make sure. We shall make a test. Kelly, prime her."

Kelly worked with speed. Up the hill, men were beginning to come toward the port. Mendez, seeing the hurried priming of the engine, stiffened and slipped a hand to his revolver; then, recalling that the boat was roped to shore, hesitated. Up forward, with heart beating like a trip-hammer, Jean managed to look on with every appearance of unconcern. Hart, getting his hand on the steering-wheel, turned the rudder hard to starboard and held it so.

"You'll have to get this bird," he said quietly. "I have to hang tight to the wheel —"

"I'll nail him." With a grunt Kelly rocked the fly-

wheel. The spark caught. The boat bucked sternwise. The rope snapped. Mendez, caught unready for the backward motion, tottered. Kelly lunged into him headfirst, seizing each wrist, butting him in the body, knocking him down and falling on him with crushing force. The launch sheered away from the bank.

"Down, Jean!" snapped Hart. She slid from seat to floor.

"Kick this guy!" panted Kelly. "Make it snappy!"

Hart shot a hard toe under the ear of Mendez, who went limp. Kelly released his wrists, disarmed him, and scrambled up.

"Stop it!" he bawled in Spanish. "Stop the engine! It is running backward! The boat will blow up! Dios mio! We shall be killed!"

The yell was for the benefit of the astounded sentinels, whose rifles had automatically leaped up, but who stared along the barrels in indecision. They were so near that, if they did fire, they could hardly miss. Kelly, still bellowing, made show of yanking violently at the gear lever, without actually moving it at all. Jean, hugging the floor, took cue from his example and began screaming as if mortally afraid.

To the bewildered pickets, who had been unable to see the swift manhandling of their officer in the bottom of the boat, everything indicated an unexpected calamity. The big Americano had sprung away from the

engine in alarm and collided with the lieutenant, and both had lost their balance. The one-armed Americano was leaning helplessly on something. Everybody was scared, and the infernal boat was running crazily backward, going in a circle. All was happening so fast that they had no time to reason things out. The lieutenant was still aboard; he was armed, and was giving them no orders to shoot; and the execution of Luis and Rafael for shooting a stranger without orders was very vivid in their memories. Wherefore they stood as if petrified while the boat wheeled farther and farther outward.

Not until the launch had described a semicircle and was well away from shore did Kelly shift the gear or Hart alter the helm. Then, with her nose pointed seaward and the weight of the current on the stern, she darted away down the Orinoco, a speeding target hard for any rifleman to hit. And thereafter, while a mob came tearing down the hill and the paralyzed pickets still gaped, the three Americans gave their farewells in their varying ways.

Hart sat down comfortably and gave the town of Caicara a wide grin and a deep chuckle. Kelly put a thumb to his nose and wagged thick fingers at the running raiders. And Jean, arising and leaning over the side, blew a saucy kiss in the general direction of the headquarters of Federico Gordo, Spanish cavalier.

"Ta-ta, old dear!" she caroled. And then, lying

back with the wind rushing through her hair, she laughed in joyous abandon.

"Jest like takin' candy away from a kid, wasn't it, hey?" gurgled Kelly. "And all the kink's hosses and all the kink's men can't never catch up with us three again. Sure, I'm a pote. But what'll we do with this?" He nodded toward the supine Mendez. "It's kind of under foot, and we don't need it. Will we drop it overboard?"

"Oh, no," dissented Hart. "Why be ungrateful? It would be tough on our old college chum back there to lose his expert engineer. We'll chuck him ashore somewhere."

Kelly guffawed; then abruptly fell silent, squinting back. Across the swash of dividing waves thumped a ragged volley of rifle-shots. Silvery spurts of water leaped up here and there astern. Too late, the raiders had opened fire. Among the forms bounding down the hillside was distinguishable one bigger than the rest, furiously jerking its arms on high as it ran and roared. Veinte Cuatro, the Black Ant who had forborne to bite when he could, now was clashing his jaws in deadly rage.

The trio in the boat tensed and crouched; then, as more bullets skittered astern, relaxed. They were out of range.

"Jest another o' them salutes that these guys seem so fond of," grinned Kelly. "Too bad our rifles are

back there, or we might give 'em many happy returns o' the day. But all we've got is this guy's popgun, and — Aw, wal, we're through with all that kind o' rough stuff, ain't we, Hart? Peaceable sailormen, that's us."

With mocking flourishes of the hand they settled down to easy riding of the rollers. Steadily the town receded, soon to be blotted from sight by intervening trees. Mendez opened his eyes, stared, staggered to his feet, and gaped around him; then slumped down on a seat and almost wept. His fate was sealed! These treacherous schemers would hand him over to some federal garrison! To jump overboard would be only to commit suicide. He could not swim, and even if he could the crocodiles would get him. There could be no escape.

When at length the boat headed shoreward again, stopped at an uninhabited spot, and gave him access to freedom, he was astonished; but his exit was accomplished with agility and alacrity. Once aground, he straightened into a semblance of his former importance, and the look he gave his captors and liberators was anything but pleasant. But he spoke never a word.

"Tell the general," instructed Hart, "that we are desolated by the necessity of depriving him of his boat; but, as a man of experience, he must understand how important it is to our purpose. Tell him also that, because of our kindly feeling for him, we have removed

the señorita before she could devastate the forces of liberty and justice. We thank him for his hospitality, and wish him a fond reunion with his worthy brother. Adios! "

With a mirthful gurgle of the exhaust, the launch backed, swung, and sped away. Mendez hissed something under his breath and, red-faced, turned to his hot, hard tramp along the shore.

Hours later the engineer officer, still cursing, trudged wearily into Caicara. He did not report to his general. Instead, after reconnoitering from a corner of the plaza, he quietly lost himself among the troopers filling the last of a fleet of canoes. Soon those canoes, laden with men and spoils, lengthened into a great watersnake and began swimming northeastward, heading for an unraided town leagues down the river, on the other shore; a snake on whose nose rode a big, ugly-visaged veinte-cuatro ant, whose temper was so savage that none dared speak to him.

Though he had looted the town, the rebel leader had failed in his quest for something dearer to him than gold: revenge. His men had hunted near and far, low and high, but not quite high enough. To none of their tired minds had it occurred to climb to the highest point in the place—the bat-befouled belfry of the priestless town church.

Up there, quiet as the bats which hung asleep above them, lay two men; one pale, haggard, and hollow-eyed, with three severe bullet wounds roughly band-

aged; the other unwounded, wary, watchful, listening intently to every voice and other sound floating up from the streets. The one was the vanished Jaime Gordo; the other his faithful servant, the stone-throwing Claudio. By what route these two had reached their hiding place they alone knew. It was a cunningly chosen retreat, however, and the last spot in all the town likely to be suspected. Perhaps, if Veinte Cuatro had remained longer, even this odd corner might have failed to shelter the refugees. But it was not ordained that he should stay. Sunset was to find the stoic pair once more in their usual abode, fervently hoping never again to see either the implacable revolutionists or the intractable Americans.

Meanwhile, far down the rolling river, those three Americans cruised steadily seaward. Wide and free before them stretched the open road to Ciudad Bolívar, and nowhere along that flowing highway was visible any menace. So they lounged in wordless fellowship, already forgetful of the recent past and visioning the near future. Yet their visions were different — far different. In the broad visage of Kelly and the deep eyes of Jean shone a light of content and pleasurable anticipation; for now the city whence sailed the ocean-bound steamer — the gateway to Home — lay hardly more than a day's journey beyond. But in the face of El Tigre, rebel and renegade, was no such glow. To his companions, that port meant a new beginning; to him, an end.

CHAPTER XXX

JEAN PLAYS TRUMPS

THE lame old woodcutter, puttering around the stack of cordwood awaiting the next river boat, straightened up as far as possible and peered into the sunset glare. A moment of intent regard; then he hobbled hastily to his hut, before which stood a slender pole adorned with a soiled white rag. With a groan of effort he pulled up that pole and cast it behind the woodpile. This done, he turned again to face the launch surging toward him on the river.

Straight on came the boat, to swing suddenly at the shore and stop, bow upstream. Amidships a brawny hand reached to grasp a projecting snag. Forward, a tall man spoke.

"Why do you hide the flag of liberty, old one?"

"It — it was put up by men who have gone, señor," faltered the old fellow. "Is — is not that a scouting boat of the government?"

"No. A private boat. Have you anything to eat?"

"Sí, sí, señor!" Vast relief overspread the wrinkled countenance. "Poor fare, and not fit for such caballeros as yourselves; but to what I have you are most welcome."

“ Good. Also we want a rope.”

“ Rope? Sí, sí, there is rope in plenty.” He limped into his hut, to emerge again with a tangle of piassava. The man amidships caught an end and went forward. Soon the boat was moored to a tree, and its passengers debarked. The two men scanned the empty open land all about; the young woman with them looked at the rude house and its ancient owner; and the woodcutter shrewdly eyed all three in return. Reassured, he then moved back to his domicile and put upon a battered table his meagre provender.

“ Poor food,” he deprecated again. “ If my sons were here there would be fish and fruit, and perhaps turtle meat; but I am old and lame, as you see, and I can make only the pot of beans and rice — ”

“ Good enough, I’ll say, for vagabonds who haven’t fed since morning,” interrupted Kelly, in the river vernacular. “ We are hungry enough, dad, to crack your ribs and eat the marrow.”

“ Cra! Then it is well that I have the beans,” grinned the woodman. “ Eat at once, amigos, so that my poor bones may remain unharmed.”

Without further words, the three ate eagerly of the simple, but well cooked and nourishing mixture. Meanwhile their host studied them anew, noting the watchfulness of both men, the revolver protruding from the red one’s hip pocket, and kindred details. At length he ventured:

“ There are no other men about here now, señores,

nor any other thing to guard against. What news from up the river? ”

No answer came until all appetites were appeased. Then Hart replied:

“Veinte Cuatro captured Caicara last night. He shot Jaime Gordo. But the fat toad crawled away somewhere. There is fighting at Mapire. We heard the firing as we passed. All quiet elsewhere.”

“Ha! ” cried the old man, his face alight. “My boys are at Mapire. Was it a victory? ”

“Don’t know, you old rebel.” Kelly’s eyes twinkled. “We are peaceful sailors, and we avoid fights.”

“Ha! ” repeated the other, this time with a note of mirth. “Certainly, of a truth! Once I was such a sailor, too. I sailed on a horse. It was in the time of Castro. Ah, the peaceful times we had — until my horse was shot and fell on me! Then I could sail no more. But I recognize peaceful men when I see them. The breed does not change, señores.”

Kelly chuckled, and Hart smiled thinly. Then the latter asked:

“Who fights at Mapire? ”

“The horsemen of El Tigrito, señor,” was the ready response. “And the footmen — ”

“El Tigrito? Who is he? ” Hart’s face sharpened.

“You do not know? Cra! He is Luis Cardozo, who once was capitán under El Tigre. I never saw that Tigre, but you must have heard of him, señor. A bold and terrible fighter, that one! He was shot,

and men said he died, but instead he went south and made himself the chief of fierce Indians — ”

“ I remember. What of this Tigrito? ”

“ Why, señor, he is the Little Tiger, as El Tigre was The Tiger. And he has brought together all the men of El Tigre who still live, and many more with them, and they fight as they fought under El Tigre himself. But no, not quite the same, the old Tigres say. They say the Tigrito is not quite so bold and daring as was their old leader, not quite so strong in his control, and they wish El Tigre himself could lead them again. But yet he is a resolute fellow and — ”

“ How do you know they say this? ”

“ How? Cra! With my own ears I heard it. They were here but two days ago, coming from the north and waiting for the footmen of Valiente Valera to approach from the Anzoategui country. When the Valera men came in all moved on Mapire, all the young men here joining them as they went. So went my two boys. And this Valera, señor, if you do not know him either, is — ”

His tongue wagged on with the loquacity of age, but Hart grew inattentive. His gaze went to the river, now growing gray in the brief tropic twilight, and dwelt there as if seeing something not visible to the rest. Kelly watched him, his lids drawing into a shrewd squint. Jean, too, looked at him with increasing intentness, striving to read the thoughts behind his unchanging mask.

Abruptly El Tigre arose and walked out. The wood-cutter fell silent. Kelly looked after the tall form, then spoke quietly to the girl.

"Might as well say adios to him, miss. He's goin' to jump ship."

"You think so?" she swiftly responded.

"Sure. Not right now, mebbe, but in the mornin' anyways. He—uh—he can't go home, ye see; they've got somethin' on him up there. And we'll be in port tomorrer night, and he knows ye don't need him no more now, and he ain't keen on walkin' into the hands o' the federals. What would it git him? Nothin' he'd want. And jest a few miles up river is his old outfit wishin' he'd come back. All he's got to do is hoof it up there and fire this Tigrito guy off the job and take over the gang. Sure, he can do it; his gun hand is still workin'. And that's jest what he will do. He ain't got no other place to head in at. I'd do the same thing meself."

For a moment she sat looking at the lonely figure standing at the water-side with face turned toward Mapire. Then, to Kelly's surprise, she laughed. Rising, she walked out into the thickening dusk.

El Tigre, thinking hard, his fist unconsciously clenched, started as he felt a small hand close gently on his wrist. He turned to meet a gaze and a voice softly appealing.

"Captain, don't you really want to go home?"

His face contracted. Half angrily he retorted:

"Don't rub it in! I can't."

"Why can't you?"

An instant's silence, while eye searched eye.

"Killed a man, if you must know."

"I see." She showed no surprise. "Do you mind telling me about it?"

Another pause. Then he shrugged.

"Oh, all right. Killing a man isn't much. It all depends on where you do it and what people think of it. I killed some fellows in France; that was supposed to be heroic, because they were boche. Killed some more down here; that was all right, too; self defense, in a way. But up home I killed one measly crook, without really intending to. And for that little thing, if my law-worshipping countrymen catch me, I'll go to the chair.

"After I left the army I sold oil stocks awhile for a fellow. The stocks were all right, so far as I know; but he wasn't. He skinned me. I forced a showdown in his office and demanded money due me. He started to fight. I knocked him cold. Too cold. His head hit a radiator when he tumbled. Hit it so hard that his skull caved in.

"The safe was unlocked, so I grabbed a fistful of money and got out. And — That's all."

"I see. I — see. But couldn't you have proved —"

"Proved nothing. He was dead, and I'd killed him. He had political friends. I had vindictive enemies. The police were blaming all the crimes on returned

soldiers. I'd have been railroaded quick. And I had other things gnawing at my mind, too, and I was fed up on everything. I had to break loose, get away, tackle something rough somewhere else. I came to the right place."

His head turned again toward Mapire, and his hand lifted as if to free itself. But the small fingers clung tighter.

"Perhaps you did," agreed the soft voice. "Maybe it was for the best. But now you're fed up on everything here, and this place is no longer right."

"It'll have to do."

"No. It won't do at all, and it won't have to. Things up home are not as you think they are. I've — I've been holding out on you, captain, just as you have on me. Now listen:

"When General Perez told us he would be glad to assist you out of the country, he told us something else too. He said some people in New York had tried to get word to you — the letters are in Bolívar, and have been there a long time, — that a man named Wharton wasn't dead —"

"*What!*" He jumped as if shot. "Wharton? Not dead? Great guns! That was the fellow —"

"Yes. The name was D. H. Wharton —"

"But it's a lie! I broke his skull, I tell you!"

"Listen, listen! You broke his skull, yes. But he was taken to a hospital, and the fracture was trepanned, and he recovered. Then later on he was ar-

rested for stock swindling, — and convicted, too; his political friends didn't save him. He was sent to prison. So your fight with him isn't likely to cause any trouble now.

"It's not a lie, captain. I saw the letters myself, with newspaper clippings enclosed, and they're genuine. The Venezuelan secret service had opened them, because you were a known revolutionist; and the General looked them up for us. He said that if we happened to run across you we could use our judgment about telling you. And I — well, I was going to tell you anyway; I was just on the point of telling you, that day when Diego Lopez appeared at Pablo's place, — remember? But when you said you'd come down the river I thought I'd save it for a surprise later. I — I wanted to see just how far you'd come, Mister Rebel, without knowing it. Will you forgive me?"

He stood as if stunned, staring blankly at her. At length, in a queer, uncertain tone, he voiced fragmentary thoughts.

"Well, — I guess — maybe I'd better go back home, then. But still — I don't know." His eyes roved northward, and his left shoulder moved involuntarily. "Up there a cripple is — sort of useless to anybody, and —"

He was speaking to himself, rather than to her. But his self-depreciation did not pass without reply. Both the slender, capable hands now curled about his, and in the answering voice sounded a little quiver.

"Are you quite sure, captain, that you're useless to — anybody?"

Her upturned face now was very close to his, and in her eyes glowed a challenge and a call.

"You know," she breathed, "you have saved my life, and I've saved yours. And I've heard that some races believe that a life saved belongs to the one who saved it. I—I think that's a rather nice belief. Don't you?"

His gaze was not in the north now, nor his mind on the riding raiders at the west. In his eyes grew a gray flame. The big gun-hand of El Tigre suddenly opened and crushed both the small ones within it.

"Jean," he said hoarsely, "do you mean that?"

Only the compelling eyes answered him. But his hand opened as swiftly as it had closed, releasing hers; and the long arm swept around her.

Inside the hut, Kelly wheeled toward the old wood-cutter, who, like himself, had been peering intently out through the fast-falling darkness. Gruffly he cleared his throat, making the Venezuelan jump.

"It's too dark out there for us to see anything, old sailor," he asserted meaningly. "Tell me about the time your ship got shot and fell on you."

"Sí, sí, señor! He-he-hee!" snickered the ancient. "Well, now, we were riding for Gomez against the federals of Castro, and —"

CHAPTER XXXI

ADIOS

IN the spacious office of General Perez, governor of the State of Bolívar, four men and a young woman were clustered about the broad official desk. Behind that mahogany plane, his back to the wall, the square-built, square-jawed, keen-eyed governor himself sat with soldierly erectness. Across from him, with elbows resting lightly on the board, his secretary watched; a strong-shouldered, alert-looking fellow, this, whose appearance indicated ability to fight as well as to write. Grouped at one end were three metamorphosed travelers from the wilds; ex-Captain Hart and ex-Sergeant Kelly, garbed in new white drill of loose but semi-military cut, and Jean, doubly attractive in a linen traveling dress of unmistakable New York origin. A wardrobe trunk, left behind in storage at the hotel on her departure, had stood her in good stead on her return, while the big shops of the Paseo had reclad her companions.

Now, while the girl contemplated a huge oil painting of President Gomez and her one-armed escort rapidly perused letters and clippings, Kelly softly jingled sundry coins in a trousers pocket and, from time to

time, recrossed his broad knees. Catching the quizzical gaze of the secretary, he grinned and, in his best Spanish, explained his uneasy motions.

"My legs feel bare down here," he said, touching the top of one calf. "I've got used to carrying my money in pouches fastened back of my knees. Better than a belt, see? If you get knocked out some sneaking baboon is liable to steal your belt. But now I've taken off the pouches I feel undressed."

"Ah, sí," chuckled the secretary. "A clever device, that one. I must remember it."

"You are well supplied with money, señor?" inquired the governor.

"Plenty to take me and the captain back to the States, general, and then some. All Colombian gold, too. Not a sou markee of Venezuelan money."

"Bueno." The general smiled slightly at the cheerful bandit and turned his gaze back to Hart. The latter crumpled the papers into a loose ball and dropped them into a pocket.

"Much obliged to you, general, for keeping these so long," he said easily. "Speaking of Venezuelan money, I shall be glad to give the — er — profits of my labors here to the federal army. Several thousand bolívars in all."

"What!" ejaculated the amazed official. "You will give — Did I understand you?"

"Sí. Unfortunately I did not bring it with me. But all that is necessary is to travel some five hundred

miles up the Orinoco, and another hundred or so up the Vichada, and tell the Guahibos to find the spot where I buried it. They may find it, — perhaps, — and give it to your men, — perhaps — ”

A short laugh interrupted, accompanied by a decisive shake of the head.

“The army is too busy with other matters.”

“Oh, all right. It’s there, waiting, and I doubt if I shall ever come back for it.”

“No.” The governor’s tone now was brusque. “You know the penalty of ever reappearing in this country.”

“Quite well, thank you.” The gray-eyed man grinned and arose. The others came to their feet. “There is not much chance of my coming back to dig up a few thousand silver pieces,” he added. “I have found something much more valuable.”

“Ah, yes, of a certainty.” Perez smiled again, glancing at Jean. “You are a most fortunate man. To you, my congratulations. And to you, señorita, my sympathy. The taming of a tigre is most difficult.”

“I am not afraid of him, general,” she laughed.

From the direction of the river floated the sonorous bellow of a steamer whistle. As it died away Kelly’s voice, pitched in the same bass note, sounded like an echo.

“Ho-o-o-ome! Fall in! Right oblique, march! ”

Hart picked up his hat. Kelly turned toward the

door. Jean impulsively extended a hand to Perez, who bowed over it with Spanish courtliness.

"Many, many thanks to you, general, for all your kindness!" she said.

"It is nothing. A safe voyage to you, and much happiness."

With a nod to the secretary, she walked away. Hart, with a nonchalant "Adios," accompanied her. Automatically his feet adopted the cadence set by Kelly, who was leaving with no farewell. Across the tiles they passed, and out through the doorway into the columned portico. There, as they turned into the streetward corridor, a pair of casually conversing men unobtrusively stepped after them; quiet, watchful men in ordinary clothing, with nothing to reveal their true status: agents of the secret service.

Unhurried, but unhesitating, the trio swung down the steeply slanting sidewalk, passing burros plodding up the cobbled hill, yellow women lazing at windows, and idly drifting men. Behind, seemingly sauntering with no purpose, but holding an exact distance, trailed their watchers. All loungers and passers eyed the two stalwart, deep-tanned Americans and their fair convoy, but only with the curious interest accorded every alien visitor. Few in Bolívar, and none in the street, knew that this one-armed man was El Tigre, and fewer still had ever heard of El Toro. Otherwise they would soon have been followed by an avidly staring mob.

So they came to the open, breezy Paseo, its shops drowsing in the heat, its gnarled trees pitted by bullets fired in bygone revolutions, its river-edge peopled with loiterers awaiting the departure of the outbound steamer. From the single stack of that antiquated stern-wheeler was rolling smoke, and on her bridge an officer impatiently watched. As he descried the Americans he turned quickly and spoke to someone within.

"Ho-o-ome!" rumbled Kelly. "Ho-o-ome! Boy! That's the only note o' real music I've heard in this man's country!"

Involuntarily they quickened their pace. Men were standing by the gangplank, ready to haul. They crossed the narrow, teetery bridge at a half-lope, laughing like children embarking for a picnic. Hardly had they reached the deck when the plank was yanked in after them.

The pair of secret service agents, signaling to the bridge, waved hands seaward. A bell clanged. The steamer quivered, and the paddle-wheel began to thrash. By the time the last arrivals had reached the upper deck the water was rapidly widening between ship and shore.

"Ho-o-o-ome!" bellowed the whistle.

Wordless, the three walked back through the dining saloon to the stern. There they leaned on the star-board rail and watched the hill-built settlement recede. The riverside idlers dwarfed to dolls, to ants, to dots.

The yellow-walled, red-roofed houses became toys. The city itself shrank to a hazy line against tiny hills. Beyond it, the Orinoco narrowed to a tapering ribbon converging between bluff banks.

On that fading river behind them the gaze of El Tigre fixed for long minutes; on the mysterious watery road leading away to the west and the south, into the land of bullet and knife, of arrow and spear and poisoned dart, of wild riders and stealthy raiders and sinister superstitions. Half consciously his arm stole again around the girl who had led him forth from that dark country, resting on her gently, yet holding her with the strength of steel. She looked up at him, but said no word. At length, his eyes still fast on the distances, he spoke.

"Have you your watch — the one I bought from the Boa?"

"Yes."

"Give it here."

Unquestioning, she drew from her bosom the thin timepiece and put it in his hand. With a grave smile, he raised it to his ear. And then Jean, and Kelly too, stared at him in amazed concern; for from his lips came slow, monotonous sounds which seemed unintelligible mutterings of fever.

"The white-man moon says," he droned in the Guahibo tongue, "that the white cat is not a cat, but a good spirit from the land above the sky. For she leads the sick Tiger out of the hell where he has wan-

dered, and up into the hills where the air is cool;
where the flowers are sweet in the sun and the birds
sing in the twilight, and the dawn brings life and love
instead of hate and death. And the Tiger is glad
to go."



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