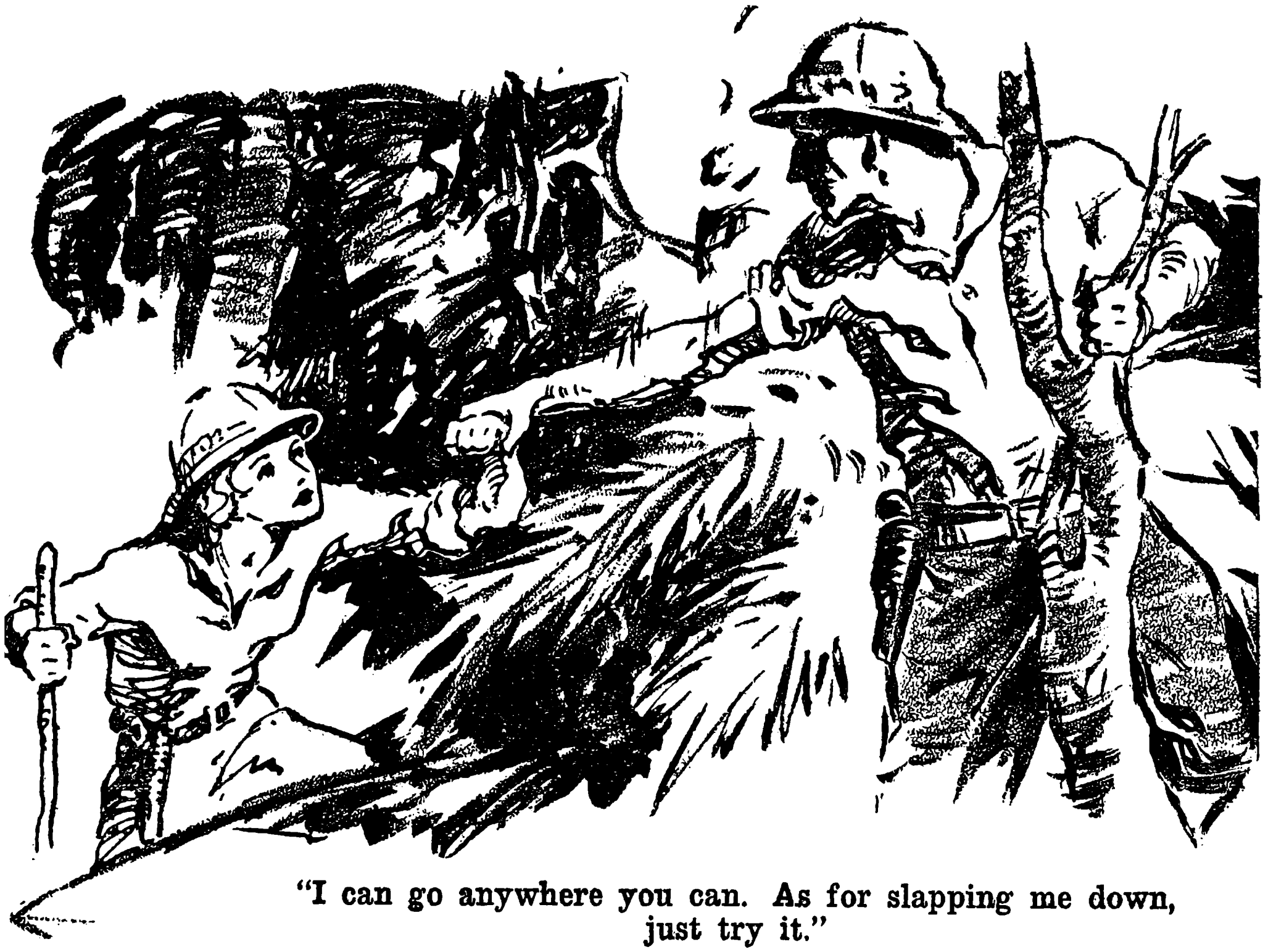

"I can go anywhere you can. As for slapping me down, just try it."

THE THUNDERBIRD

A burning devil falls over the Orinoco, and Corwin, explorer, already faced with hazards of blowgun and headhunter, finds that he has a young and beautiful aviatrix to help—or hinder—him in his terrific fight with the green jungle.

CHAPTER I

A NATIVE LEFT TO DIE

THE dugout canoe crawled up the hot river.

Forward, four leathery *mestizos* swung paddles with tired strokes. Aft, a fifth halfbreed dragged a broader paddle, steering. Amidships, under a curved sunhood of palm fronds, a white man sat on the flooring, long legs outstretched, back against a tier of travel supplies, right hand flapping a handkerchief to repel the mosquitos.

Day was dying, yet still hurling across the parched Colombian plains its grilling afternoon heat. Away to the east, leagues distant from the Venezuelan shore, massive mountains blocked off all wind. And here, midway up the tortuous Rio Orinoco, the air was stifling. So here *la plaga*, the plague of biting bugs, was at its infernal worst.

On the yellow-skinned, thinly clad natives the stinging bites seemingly had little effect. Yet even they, habituated since birth to such insects, occasionally interrupted their sway to slap off the torturers. The tanned explorer from North America struck more frequently, yet said nothing.

A NOVELETTE By ARTHUR O. FRIEL

Evading a strong current, the canoe swung close inshore. Along the steep bank it swam, following an eddy. The lone passenger perfunctorily scanned the dense tangle of waterside timber. Suddenly he sat up straight, then voiced a sharp command. At once the paddles halted.

Against a thick gray tree trunk was a brown human shape. Motionless, hardly noticeable amid the endless chaos of dull greens and drabs and shadows, it had been detected only by the idle traveler's random glance. Now the boatmen peered at it a second, then warily surveyed the adjacent belt of forest.

The white man drew himself out from the low cabin to stand erect. To the steersman he gestured shoreward. No response came. The pilot let the *curial* drift backward while he still contemplated the brown body.

"Pull in!" curtly commanded the white, speaking Spanish.

"A moment, *señor,*" demurred the man aft. "This may be a trap."

"A trap? Meaning what?"

"That fellow may be a decoy, *Señor* Corwin. This part of the river is Guahibo country. The Guahibos are bad *Indios.* More than one river traveler has died in this bush because he went ashore to look at something."

Corwin's gray gaze narrowed. Studying the verdure, listening intently, he discerned no menace. Somewhere downstream a pair of high flying macaws screeched raucously as they winged their way toward their home roost. Nearby not even a leaf rustled or a cricket chirped. The listener relaxed.

"A decoy?" he scoffed. "A decoy would be planted in plain sight, or would shout to attract attention. This man is like a dead one."

"Probably he is dead," quickly countered the other. "And he is only an *Indio,* anyway. Let us go on. Night is near, and—"

His objection died. The North Ameri-

can had stooped and seized a cartridge belt. Now he buckled it on, unsnapped a holster flap, and bleakly ordered—

"Put me ashore, Miguel!"

Without another word Miguel obeyed. The swash of his big paddle prompted the four ahead to use their own blades. The drifting shell resumed its forward creep, slid to shore, stopped as the *mestizos* grasped low bushes. Corwin stepped out and climbed the steep acclivity.

At the upper edge he paused, eyes again searching the silent woods. To snaky vines, to dense brush, to thickly leaved boughs he gave no attention. To stout trees he gave sharp scrutiny, seeking any peering head, any yellowish arrow or dark blowgun projecting past its side. Reassured, he strode to the brown man.

The immobile figure gave no sign of life. Naked, stiff-legged, stiff-armed, it stood clutching the tree, its bare back toward the newcomer, its black-haired head sunk on a shoulder. As Corwin eyed it he scowled.

"Devils!" he muttered.

From neck to knees the nude statue was streaked by puffy welts and open gashes. To it clung a horde of mosquitos, and up and down it crawled biting ants. Its frozen clasp on the tree was involuntary, for its hands were tied on the far side by strong vines. On the earth at its feet lay several sticks, broken or frayed. The story was plain: some man or men had bound the victim, whipped him unmercifully, gone and left him to suffer whatever form of death might come to him from the inhuman wilderness.

Up the bank now scrambled Miguel and a couple of paddlers, emboldened by the evident lack of danger. Contemplating the Indian, the steersman murmured understandingly through his nose:

"M-hm-hm! A bad fellow, that one. See how stiff are his knees. He refuses to bend them even to death. A creature most tough, most stubborn, most disobedient to his betters."

He spoke as callously as if mentioning a wooden image. The paddlers, wordless, showed even less feeling. Orinoco rivermen are a hard lot. Hardest of all toward real Indians are those whose blood is only part Indian.

THE WHITE man ignored them. Drawing a pocket knife, he reached past the tree and cut the bush handcuffs. The released captive fell backward, lay supine. As the liberator stooped he met the narrow gaze of hard brown eyes. The stubborn aborigine who had been abandoned to death was not dead.

Stiff, numb, the Indian peered inflexibly up at the stranger who had come from nowhere. Life sunk to low ebb, perceptions dulled by hopeless though tenacious stoicism, he had not detected the quiet footsteps and voices nearby. Now, shocked awake by his sudden fall, he mentally strove to read the character and intentions of the white man.

Into Corwin's answering look came a fleeting smile of encouragement. Stooping lower, he clutched an arm and a leg and lifted the helpless creature to rest across his shoulders; then, straightening, carried his burden to the canoe. There he unlocked a small trunk, produced medical supplies, and went to work on the lacerated back.

While he washed and salved and bandaged open cuts the patient remained motionless. The *mestizos*, afloat and ashore, watched sourly. One muttered—

"I hope we are not expected to carry that dog along."

"Shut your mouth!" grunted Miguel. "I will handle the matter."

Wherewith he descended to the waterside, squatted, and observed the efficient motions of the Northerner. With unobtrusive flattery he remarked—

"You are a doctor, *señor.*"

"Oh, no," briefly disclaimed the American. "Just able to patch simple hurts."

"A most deft patcher, then. But, *señor,* your work is wasted on this creature. He was not so punished without good cause, and—"

"What cause?" interrupted Corwin.

"Eh? *Cra,* how do I know? Who left him here, and why, is beyond my knowledge. But it is clear that he gave serious offense to his master. It is clear also that he is without feeling or understanding. A beast of evil temper, who knew no gratitude to the employer who fed him and will know none to us. One might as well be kind to a snake or crocodile as to such *Indios* as this. Your good heart is most admirable, *señor,* but—"

He paused discreetly. The paddlers glanced at one another with covert grins. Miguel knew how to say things, how to put over his point. But then their mouths lowered. The point had not gone over this time. Without reply or hesitation the *señor* completed his job, drew the prone sufferer into the cabin, spread over him a thin blanket, and himself squatted outside the hood.

"*Vamos!*" he ordered. "Let's go!"

Muttering briefly, the boatmen resumed their former places and their former work. Rested by the short halt, angered by the addition of extra weight, they threw new force into their strokes. Aft, Miguel mouthed silent curses at his obdurate employer's back. That employer coolly repacked his medical kit, then settled into his previous contemplation of the river. The dugout swam onward at double time.

CHAPTER II

THE NATIVE SLEEPS

AS THE last glare of sunlight faded from the wilderness the canoe crossed to the Venezuelan side and grounded in a watery depression in a wide, gently sloping rock. Dropping paddles inboard, the workers stepped ashore. Corwin drew from the cabin their *machetes,* which daily rode on the baggage pile, out of the way of bare feet. With these keen bush knives the natives quickly collected wood in the tree growth backing the stone; and, as brief twilight became darkness, a fire flickered up, to become steady flame. Over it was slung a large kettle of cool *sancocho* —stew. At the tree edge were hung the hammock and mosquito net of the *señor.*

The boatmen, following the river custom, were to sleep on the smooth stone, protected by the fire from night prowling jaguar or vampire, and able to act unimpeded if attacked by savages. The Northerner was to rest as usual in his *chinchorro.* The Indian still lay in the dugout. To a question concerning him Corwin curtly answered—

"Leave him alone."

And there, alone, he was left all night, huddled under the blanket which virtually repelled all insects and sheltered by the palm roof from heavy dew. For a short time after supper Corwin sat beside him, feeding him with heated stew, giving him water, feeling his forehead for fever, asking a few questions in bush Spanish. The queries evoked no response. Eating and drinking with minimum effort, the fellow remained otherwise wooden. As Miguel had asserted, he seemed without feeling or understanding.

So, leaving him to sleep, the white man went to his own bed, there to lie awhile thinking. The hardy indigene in the canoe would undoubtedly draw new vigor from complete rest throughout the twelve-hour tropic night; and tomorrow he might explain who and what he was and how he had incurred such cruelty. Although Miguel evidently thought him to be a rebellious peon, or debt slave, Corwin felt that he never had been subservient to any master. In either case, he must know much about other Indians of this region; much more than these halfbreed rivermen, townsmen, whatnot,

composing the present crew. And facts about the real Indians of this hinterland were what the Northerner most desired. To collect such facts was his chief mission.

Although skilled in several branches of exploration, Corwin was most interested in ethnology, the study of human races, basic reason for all other studies of this planet. Human life, with the effects on it of climate, environment, topography, alone makes geographic investigation worthwhile. And now Corwin, en route to investigate obscure lands far up the Orinoco, dallied with the idea of also learning more about the wild folk of this section near at hand.

His mind roved to the Colombian plains at the west, the Venezuelan mountains at the east, both of which were savage wildernesses inhabited only by savage tribes. Some of those tribes were named, and their habitats vaguely sketched, on decidedly imperfect ethnological maps composed by the two rival republics. If this Indian in the boat were a Guahibo, he could give valuable information concerning the prairie people; if a Piaroa, he could reveal even more interesting facts about the mountaineers who brewed weird poisons. And thus, without altering his predetermined course, the voyager might—

At that point the thinker halted imagination and silently ridiculed himself. That crude savage yonder in the canoe evidently did not even comprehend Spanish. He had given not the slightest sign of understanding any word spoken by his savior. And even if he did grasp his questioner's meaning, he was either too obtuse or too obdurate to formulate answer. From such a stony source would gush no spring of knowledge, now or later.

Thus concluding, Corwin shut his eyes and forgot everything. And everything remained unchanged until daybreak.

THEN, while beasts and birds clamored greetings to the new light, men quickly made ready to use the early coolness in traveling. The cook heated the depleted stew and broke up a broad sheet of cassava bread. The other *mestizos* took down and stowed away Corwin's hammock and net. The *señor* himself inspected the extra passenger. To his disappointment, he found the Indian unimproved.

Dull eyed, apathetic, the brown fellow lay sluggish on one side. Ordered to turn over and show his back, he did not obey. When moved by the white man he rolled like a log, neither resisting nor assisting. Examination of his visible injuries, however, indicated that they were healing at a normal rate. His skin was cool, his pulse steady, though slow. There seemed no apparent reason why, although naturally stiff and lame, he should not show more life. Miguel, standing close, watched with a suspicious scowl.

"He is shamming, the lazy dog!" asserted the pilot. "You had best leave him here, *señor*. He will rise and walk *muy pronto* when he smells no more free food."

For a moment the American's eyes also narrowed with suspicion. Then, without reply, he unlocked his trunk, drew forth his medical box, unlocked that in turn, and rapidly redressed the Indian's worst hurts with fresh ointments, bandages, and tape. While he worked, Miguel shrewdly studied the other contents of the thin trunk.

Neatly nested within it were other rectangular boxes like the one holding the medicines—steel cash boxes, each with sunken handle and slitted keyhole. Within them might or might not be cash, the hard silver or gold money needed in the back districts, where paper banknotes were distrusted. At any rate, the trunk was very heavy for its size. And this tight-mouthed *señor*, who traveled alone and gave out little information about himself, might or might not be, as he claimed, an explorer. He might

be a sly trader, revolutionary agent, or some other sort of undercover worker. In any case, he had some money. If all those boxes were full of it . . .

Into Miguel's close-set eyes came a glint which had been there several times since he first discovered the weight of that trunk. Then he turned quickly away. The *señor* had completed his job and was straightening up.

Ambling to the fire, the crew boss gave each of his dour-faced subordinates a narrow stare which conveyed two impressions: that he had in mind something which at present was not their business, and that they must carry on without question. Dumbly they squatted and ate fast. Corwin, joining them, downed his share with equal speed. Then, refilling his agate soup plate, he reentered the canoe and offered the food to the Indian.

The brown fellow looked at it hungrily. His chest swelled in a deep breath. But he made no move. His eyes turned up to those of the donor; and in them was the silent appeal of a helpless animal. When Corwin spooned the nourishment into his mouth he chewed slowly, swallowed hard, and soon stopped, although the dish was but half emptied. Given water, he drank with long gulps. Then he lay quiet. At no time had he moved any muscle below his neck.

"*Cra!* I was wrong," retracted Miguel. "The fellow is truly sick. Any *Indio* who will not guzzle everything given him is almost dead. He must have some very bad disease. And in our small canoe, *señor*, it is not well to—"

"He has no disease," contradicted Corwin. "He is probably badly poisoned by the bugs that bit him. Anyway, I'll not leave him here."

"Very well, *señor*." Miguel shrugged. "I speak only for your own good. But I must warn you that we shall be delayed by carrying him. I promised to put you in San Fernando, where my arrangement with you ends, on the last day of this month, which is the day after tomorrow. This *Indio* must weigh at least a hundred and sixty pounds; and in paddling upstream every extra pound uses up the strength of the paddlers. Since he is really sick, we do not mind the effort. But we do not like to fail in our promise to you."

"That's all right." Corwin's lips quirked in an appreciative smile. "An extra day or two doesn't matter. Nobody expects me at San Fernando. And for the overtime work I'll pay you fellows whatever seems reasonable. Any other objections?"

"None, *señor*." The crew boss grinned amicably. "Boys, to work!"

The stolid paddlers swiftly obeyed, their heavy faces brightened by the promise of overtime pay. Sliding their *machetes* into the cabin, they grinned momentarily at the *señor;* then took their usual seats. Half a minute later their shafts were thumping the thick gunwales in the short, rapid rhythm of all Orinoco canoemen.

BRIGHT sun, low but hot, now flooded land, water, and boat. Donning his tropical helmet, the Northerner settled himself outside the narrow cabin, giving the Indian full room to rest uncrowded. At the stern Miguel smiled sneeringly. This taciturn foreigner who had seemed so coldly capable was in fact pretty soft. Any white man who unnecessarily exposed himself to the sun was rather a fool; one who did so for the comfort of a mere *Indio* was a mawkish imbecile.

Steadily the smooth-bellied shell crept on up the tawny waterway, paddlers stroking vigorously, passenger lounging comfortably, all enjoying the freshness and comparative coolness of early day.

A lively breeze sported about, ruffling the water, dispelling mosquitos, fanning faces and bodies of the voyagers. In the trees and on the muddy margins moved and called odd birds: whistling *pajaros mineros,* flitting black-and-yellow ori-

oles, softly murmuring *curassows*, gobbling *corocoros*—tailless creatures with awl-like beaks which industriously hunted riverside worms. Overhead stretched brilliant blue sky wherein drifted fleecy clouds of purest white. And off at the left, towering far into that azure expanse, the chaotic highlands of Venezuelan Guayana loomed more darkly blue, straggling far into the misty south. Indomitable, virtually inaccessible, harshly hostile, they defied all invaders.

On those mysterious bulks Corwin's gaze rested oftener and longer. Back into his mind came last night's yearning to know more about those stony giants. And in his eyes grew a wistful glow, on his long face a recurrently responsive acceptance of the challenge, tempered by practical calculation of possibilities. Behind that mountain barrier lay the almost unknown country he had come to explore: a broad river basin which he was now gradually approaching by the circuitous route of the Orinoco. Several hundred miles of the Orinoco must still be laboriously traveled before he could reach the mouth of the tributary which formed the entrance to that land. If, instead, he could cut straight across from here, pass through these highlands, observe their Piaroa people, then march on into the farther basin, much could be gained.

CHAPTER III

MOUNTAINS UNCONQUERED

WITH a sigh, he again abandoned the dream. Obviously no stranger could consummate that arduous overland traverse without expert guidance. And Corwin knew from experience that no white man could amicably meet wild, suspicious Indians unless accompanied or preceded by some native whom they knew and trusted. Nobody here could or would act as guide and sponsor; not even the Indian, who, whatever, his tribe, was physically and mentally palsied. Shaking his head, Corwin turned his face from the alluring heights and again looked forward to fulfilment of his original plan.

Up ahead somewhere, at the point where the river turned eastward, was the last town in Venezuela, San Fernando de Atabapo, habitat of rubber dealers, tricky traders and various other shifty characters. There he would pay off his present crew, hire the next best one he could obtain, and carry on. To the problem of finding trustworthy men at such a notoriously treacherous village he gave scant thought now. Like other lone adventurers in the world's savage spots, he was rather a fatalist, taking reasonable precautions, but trusting largely to luck. Today was always today, and whatever might arise tomorrow could be dealt with at its own time.

Watching whatever came into sight, he spent hours in the rising, blazing sun, disregarding everything behind. And, behind, the sheltered savage lay unmoved, with eyelids almost—but not quite—shut. Whether or not the brown man's brain registered any impressions, the narrow eyes saw every little characteristic motion of the lean body, every varying expression of the tanned face which occasionally turned to observe things on the banks. Only once did the dark visage show life, and then only at gunshots.

Corwin, spying a pair of big *pauji* turkeys close together on a near shore, reached back for his small but powerful rifle, took swift aim, and shot both birds within two seconds. The paddlers yelled exultantly and raced to retrieve these replenishments of the stewpot. Laying back his gun, the marksman found the sick man's eyes wide open and momentarily alert. As the Northerner grinned, however, an opaque shade seemed to slide over the staring pupils; and as the boatment resumed work the brown lids closed sluggishly.

"Scared alive for a second," judged Corwin. "Not used to guns. Yes, he must be a wild one from away back. Indians who are even half civilized use guns themselves."

At the noon halt the birds were stripped and partly boiled while both crew and employer ate cassava and cheese. Offered the same coarse fare, the Indian grunted terse refusal. And for the rest of that day, while the canoe labored on through the intense afternoon heat, he lay entirely ignored. As before, the *señor* sat out in the grilling sun while the sick dog lay in shade. But now Miguel no longer sneered at his back. Soft fool though the self-styled explorer was, he was also lightning with a gun. In that recently demonstrated fact the pilot found food for much frowning thought.

Paddling along the deeps, poling along the shallows, hauling through labyrinths of enormous stones exposed by the dry season, the workers continued to progress. Observing them, the silent foreigner felt that they were delivering full effort, not shirking to draw the promised extra pay. So, when the night camp was made at a poor spot, he nodded when Miguel deferentially explained:

"It is unavoidable that we stop here, *señor*. That dead weight in your cabin has held us back. And night, as you know, waits for no man."

"I know," acquiesced Corwin. "And this place isn't too bad. I've slept in worse."

"*Cra!* And I too!" grinned Miguel. "*Pues*, let us make what comfort we may. Tomorrow night, I promise you, we shall rest at a cleaner port, Castillito. Do you know of it?"

"No."

"An island, *señor*, in the middle of the river. Clean sand. No mosquitos. And the next night we should be at San Fernando, only one day late."

"That sounds good. And I know you fellows are doing the best you can. Here, give the boys some cigarets."

Grinning anew, Miguel passed the packet of smokes among the paddlers, meanwhile abstracting three for himself. When supper was ready all ate companionably. When it was over, the Indian accepted a full plate of broth and meat and another long drink of water. But, as before, he moved only his head and neck; and, as before, he remained dumb.

Again night passed quietly. Again day was spent in monotonous travel. Again the human freight lay without motion. His back now looked nearly healed. His drawn face and muscular body seemed somewhat less angular, better nourished, more healthy. But his eyes remained almost shut, lethargic, unreadable. And when darkness once more arrived he stayed in the same place, disregarded after inspection and feeding.

"There must be a dislocated vertebra in that chap's back," surmised Corwin, "knocked out of joint by a paddle edge or a gun barrel. After we reach San Fernando I'll go over that spine and try to punch the kink back into place."

Thereafter he conversed genially with the camp-fire group. As Miguel had predicted, they were staying this night in midriver, on a sandy shore at the tail of a small bumpy island. Steep rock walls, rising sheer as those of any medieval stronghold, gave the islet its name of Castillito, Little Castle. Here at the downstream end was a clean beach, on which now blazed a big heap of driftwood. No mosquitos bit. No jaguar, no snake, no Indian would attack here. The broad river flowing past on each side was an effective barrier to all sneaky destroyers on the mainland, and the fire would hold off all crocodiles slyly swimming the black water.

And only a few leagues farther on waited the squalid village where the crew, paid off, could revel with white

rum and dark women. So the anticipative paddlers now made merry for awhile, and Corwin joined in their jesting mood. At length eyelids grew heavy, and by tacit consent the canoemates lay down.

The *mestizos* sprawled over with bare feet to the fire. The white man ambled to his rubber poncho, which lay spread open at the base of the cliff; removed his shoes, loosened his belt, yawned, and dozed into swift sleep. On the ground between him and the stone wall rested his rifle. In a trousers pocket was his revolver. From force of habit he always slept with his guns at hand. Weeks might pass without sudden need of them; but, since they were his only life insurance, he kept his policy ever in force.

THE rivermen, careless here, slumbered virtually defenseless. Beside the fire lay one *machete,* recently used to chop wood. At Miguel's belt snuggled a double-edged dagger, his habitual weapon. Otherwise all steel was inside the canoe cabin.

Two or three hours drifted away. Men quietly snored. The bright yellow fire burned down to a slow, steady red. At length a ghostly shape sat up on the sand, looked all about, and keenly studied the unconscious *señor* over at the edge of the rock. Then, moving with smooth stealth, it crept among the huddled paddlers, squeezing shoulders, meeting startled eyes as they snapped open, whispering softly down into suddenly alert ears. Soon, without sound, all the boatmen arose and stepped farther along the short beach, fading into a black pocket of the upright stone. Their leader was their boss, Miguel.

More whisperings ensued, deepening to mutters. Quick hissings of rebuke by Miguel kept those mutterings too low to wake the *señor.* But one subdued voice objected:

"We cannot do that, *patron.* We are very near San Fernando, and—"

"And what of that?" interrupted Miguel. "Nobody expects him at San Fernando. He himself said so. And at this time of year almost nobody travels. The rubber season is past. The traders have taken all their goods upstream. There is no other reason for any one of consequence to be abroad. By the time any one does come along he will have tried to swim ashore, and the crocodiles—"

His teeth gleamed in the dark. The others eyed the black river. Comprehensive grunts followed.

"But remember," muttered some one else, "he is a foreigner, a *Norte Americano.* And now that the *Norte Americanos* are making our *politicos* rich by drilling oil at Maracaibo it is a serious matter to kill one. And we are known to have agreed to deliver him safely at—"

"Fool, I know all that!" broke in the pilot. "We do not kill him, I have told you. We only leave him here. And who shall know we did so? Our tale is that we all were attacked in the night by *Indios* farther downstream, the *señor* disappeared somehow, the savages plundered the canoe—something of that sort, which often happens hereabouts. Leave that to me! I am good at such explanations, as you should know."

More grunts, signifying that all knew his cleverness. But a growling voice added:

"It would be much better to slit his throat and stomach and sink him. Then there could be no—"

"Did you happen to see what hit those two turkeys yesterday?" purred Miguel.

"Mmmm!" answered long, low murmurs, followed by one further demur—

"How are we to open the trunk and boxes without his keys?"

"Have we not *machetes?* Are there

not stones? Have you tender children no strength?"

Some one hoarsely chuckled. Again Miguel grinned.

"*Vamos!* But softly," he prompted. "Not a grunt when you lift the bow, not a scrape when you slide her off, not a splash when you step in. Very, very softly!"

Softly they moved outward. Then one halted, whispering:

"What of the *Indio?*"

Miguel scowled, then shrugged.

"I forgot him," he admitted. "But he can do nothing. He is almost dead. And as soon as we are out of sight, we will dump him overboard. Come!"

Soundless as phantoms they stole toward the dugout, which lay with heavy prow high on the sand. From beside the fire the owner of the *machete* picked his blade, and for an instant he eyed the sleeping employer he was leaving to death. Serenely unconscious, Corwin lay inert. Into the canoe the *mestizo* quietly lowered his weapon. Then, grouped at the overhanging bow, the crew stooped, braced themselves, and smoothly lifted. Without the least grinding noise, the ponderous craft gradually floated backward off the shore.

Muscles strained, breath held, teeth set, gaze fixed outward, the deserters inched their way along, avoiding the slightest splash of big feet in upward creeping water. Suddenly one gasped a harsh ejaculation. From another broke a startled grunt. Motion stopped short.

Inside the cabin something had risen. A long dark shape was sitting up, its eyes faintly glinting in the dull firelight. Silently menacing as a snake rearing its head, uncanny as a dead man revealing life, it faced the stealthy workers.

"*Diablo!*" squawked a boatman, losing his grip. "*El Indio!* He is —Beware!"

Other hands slipped. The tilted canoe fell, hitting water with a loud smack. In one more second the shadowy watcher under the hood struck with serpentine speed. And Corwin, aroused by the voice and the noise, sprang from his bed.

Ducking out from under the low roof, the Indian leaped to the bow. In each fist gleamed a *machete* snatched from the baggage pile. With powerful sweeps he chopped down at two *mestizo* heads. Both strokes were deadly. One boatman collapsed with skull split. The other, ducking, took the edge across the neck and fell headless.

With a tigerish scream the slayer again raised his thick blades and sprang anew. But one foot slipped, and he fell headlong into the shallow water. As he sprawled, the fellow who owned the *machete* in the bow yanked it forth and swung it up. Then he staggered, turned half around, pitched sidewise and was still. A bullet had hit him from behind.

CHAPTER IV

INDIO, RESCUER

CORWIN, comprehending the whole scene in one glance, had jumped forward with sidearm out. Now, as the *machete* man fell, the Northerner faced Miguel, ready, but holding his fire. Teeth gleaming in a downturned grin, the crew boss sidestepped and threw his dagger. A swift dodge evaded the missile. The revolver spat flame. Miguel doubled over on the sand, down to stay.

The fifth and last halfbreed gave his fallen boss one glance, then dived into the river. For a moment the tense Northerner held tight aim at the frantic splashes receding on the gloomy water. Then he let his gun sink. But he still watched. If that sneak should turn back. . . .

The fugitive never came back. Into the darkness he faded. Then sounded a sudden screech which ended in a gur-

gling gasp. One of the wary, watchful crocodiles out yonder had taken yellow meat instead of white.

Shoving his weapon back into a pocket, the white man sprang to catch the canoe. Almost free, the heavy shell now was being gradually drawn away by the sly river. Tugging, straining, lifting, he hauled it inward with desperate energy. All at once it grew light and moved forward with a rush. Gripping the opposite side, heaving with mighty force, worked the Indian.

With the dugout safely grounded, the savage coolly turned away and pounced on the halfbreeds. First he clutched Miguel, who, although practically dead, still twitched. With one powerful swing he heaved the yellow boss out into the river, prey to waiting reptiles. The other *mestizos* splashed to oblivion in rapid succession. As the last watery disturbance subsided into dull darkness the Indian loosed a ferocious yell. Then he turned again to the watchful white man. His brown face now was gashed by a hard grin.

The Northerner met his gaze with combined wariness and amazement. Such swift resurrection of a virtual corpse, such sudden strength in a broken-backed paralytic seemed incredible; and such naked ferocity needed keen analysis. Before he quite gauged the shining eyes he received another surprise. The dumb spoke. Moreover, the words were comprehensible. Although harsh, throaty, terse, they were bush Spanish.

"We friends, huh?" growled the Indian.

"*Cômo no?*" parried the white man. "Why not?"

The other chuckled, stepped to the fire, and squatted, mutely inviting conference. Corwin walked to the other side, added fresh fuel, and again scrutinized the dark visage. Then he prompted—

"You are well now."

"All well," agreed the other. "Been well all the time. Just little tired."

The Northerner frowned. Well all the time? Just lying down, being lazy? But then, understanding, he nodded. From this stiff-kneed, stiff-willed aborigine need be expected no confession of weakness at any time. And his concentrated resting had been inflexibly purposeful. His purpose had been not only to rebuild his strength but to use that strength on some predetermined object; an object which Corwin easily guessed. But, probing, he asked:

"What made you tired?"

The brown eyes chilled, slid sidewise, dwelt narrowly on the upstream darkness; the darkness where lay the cruel town of San Fernando. For a long moment there was no sound but the crackling of the newly burning wood. Then the vengeful gaze came back from the distance; and, shortly, the recent sufferer talked.

He had been made tired by yellow men from San Fernando. He, a free Indian—a pure Indian, untainted by mongrel blood, he proudly declared—had been caught with three others at the mouth of a tributary river by San Fernando traders bound upstream with a heavy boat and a small crew. His fellow Indians had been beaten into submissive service as boatmen. He himself had refused to submit. Tired of lashing him, the captors had left him to expire slowly on the Colombian side of the Orinoco; the Guahibo side, where perhaps the Guahibos might find him and amuse themselves in their turn.

"Guahibos beasts," he said. "Me man. Me Piaroa! Beasts hate men. Guahibos hate Piaroas."

The listener nodded again, knowing quite well what jungle Indians usually did to helpless enemies. The announcement that this fellow was a Piaroa, however, brought to his face a thoughtful look. The Piaroa saw that look, but

remained expressionless. Monotonously he completed his narrative.

Picked up by chance rescuers, he had lain still thereafter to rest, reach San Fernando, and avenge himself on his torturers. How he was to consummate that vengeance he did not know; but he meant to find some way to square his account after he arrived. These new men were going that way and would undoubtedly stop at that town. So he had just ridden along. Now the ride had unexpectedly ended. So that was all.

Corwin smiled, seeing much left unsaid. He knew that this rough, gruff savage had not stayed with him so long, lain so still, feigned stupidity so cannily, for the sole purpose of a rest and a ride to revenge. In the deep wild brain had been also a growing curiosity about the kindly white man, a fixed suspicion of all yellow men, which decided him to continue watching all of them, listening to all carelessly spoken words and making ready, if need arose, to defend his benefactor. This intention had been actuated by no conscious obligation or code of gratitude; it had been as instinctive and inevitable as his other determination to repay his debt of malevolence to the malefactors at San Fernando. Jungle men, like jungle animals, often had very decent instincts intermingled with their innate ferocities. And this fellow—

AT THAT point the jungle fellow shattered the thinker's mellow mood Bluntly he demanded—

"You got much money?"

Mouth tight, Corwin regarded him coldly. Then, rising, he strode to the canoe. From it he hauled the heavy trunk. At the edge of the fire he unlocked it, unpacked it, opened each box. Only one of them contained money, Venezuelan *bolivares*, silver coins worth about twenty cents each, aggregating about three hundred dollars.

The other contents were the small, delicately refined instruments of the expert explorer who must travel light; solar chronometer, aneroid barometer, and similar tools; concentrated photographic equipment; complete medical and surgical outfit; and plentiful cartridges. All of these, vital to the continued existence and ultimate success of the lone investigator, were packed into the smallest possible space and locked up in little steel vaults. Their combined weight was more than enough to turn avaricious minds to thoughts of the heaviest precious metal—gold. Thus they had turned the mind of Miguel. Now, demonstrating his lack of much money, Corwin sought anew to probe the enigmatic mind of the Indian.

Blankly regarding the unexplained scientific, photographic, and surgical supplies, the Piaroa showed no interest. At the money he looked with bleak hostility. Far from coveting coins, he evidently distrusted men who possessed or prized many pieces of silver. Turning his gaze to the compactly nested cartridges, he regarded them warily, yet with mounting approval. At length he once more grinned; and, straightening up, he extended one arm eastward.

"You want go there," he said. "We go. Tomorrow."

With that promise he swung to the canoe, lowered himself inside, lay down in his usual place. Corwin, face aglow, opened his lips to speak; then, repressing useless words, closed his boxes and re-stored them in the trunk. As he worked his eyes still shone.

Eastward into the hostile mountains which he had vainly wished to explore, he now could penetrate with this watchful Piaroa who had covertly read his desire. And he knew that the volunteer guide, once homeward bound, would not reverse his course in order to renew his vindictive journey to San Fernando. By killing halfbreeds here on this isle the Indian had appeased his hunger for ven-

geance on Orinocan *mestizos*, and now he would be content to leave this yellow river far behind.

Locking the trunk, the owner stood and smiled toward the heights now invisible in the night. Presently he walked back to his poncho. And, with the campfire cheerily burning between them, the strangely met, strangely mated partners resumed their sleep in mutual trust.

CHAPTER V

THE MOUNTAIN TRAIL

DOWN a black precipice plunged a white cataract, smashing into foam on jagged rocks. Spray, drifting along the forested ravine below, spread welcome coolness through the torrid air. In smooth water at the foot of brawling rapids a dark dugout canoe lay with heavy snout on shelving shore. Beside that blunt prow squatted two men, a white and an Indian.

Both were tired. For days past they had been poling their clumsy craft up this rocky tropic river, working through withering heat. Now Corwin, tall American explorer, deliberately scanned the roaring waterfall and the dense jungle at either side. Hokko, muscular Venezuelan Indian, drowsed with complete abandon, bare brown body lax, brown eyes closed, aboriginal mind torpid. Although this was the end of navigation, it was only a halt in a long journey.

At length, fully refreshed, the Indian arose and unloaded the canoe. On shore he piled meager food supplies, several duffle bags, a small but heavy trunk, a rifle, hammocks, *machetes*, paddles. Then he curtly spoke in bush Spanish.

"*Vamo'!*" he grunted. "Let's go!"

The roar of the fall drowned the word, but the lean Northerner nodded.

"*Bien,*" he assented. "All right."

And, picking up his rifle, he followed the guide.

Into the waterside forest they faded. Behind them the small cargo lay unguarded. Before them the matted jungle rose repellent. And beyond them, over the top of this steep slope, waited unexplored South American wilderness, too rough, too savage to have yet yielded its secrets to white men.

Up they toiled, treading a thread-like path, so damp that the booted Northerner repeatedly slipped. The barefoot Indian, spreading his broad toes, ascended as surely as a lizard. The roar of the cataract became a low monotone, muffled by intervening woods. At length the pair emerged upon bald rock—a smooth bump swelling above verdure which clothed a rambling ridge. On the crest of this protuberance the brown fellow laconically explained:

"My country. Piaroa."

Corwin's gray eyes shone as he contemplated the rugged domain of the Piaroa Indians. Northward, eastward, southward were mountains, a veritable horde of brutish bulks, shouldering one another in disorderly mass, receding into bluish heat haze, fading out into ghostly shapes thin as mist. Among them, a few leagues east, towered a huge block of sheer stone, monarch of all. It was, he knew, the Cerro Sipapo, never yet reached by scientists.

"Now I go," announced the taciturn guide. "You wait."

"All right," absently replied the other. "But first tell me, how can that Cerro Sipapo be climbed?"

A swift scowl creased the broad brown forehead. The brown eyes chilled. The hard mouth thinned, then snapped—

"No!"

"No!" drawled the inquirer. "Why not?"

"No! No man climb there. No man go near: On top live gods. Thunder gods. Man make them mad, they kill. You go there, gods kill you, me, my people. You no go!"

"Oh, I see." Corwin solemnly nodded. "All right, Hokko. I didn't understand."

"I know." The hard face loosened. 'Now I go. Make talk to my people ıbout you. Bring men carry your load. You wait."

Without further words the native ;trode down the rock and disappeared nto the eastward jungle. The lone for-:igner leisurely turned to look back vestward whence he had come.

THAT way there were no mountains. Down below expanded sun-browned :avanna, bumpy with scattered hill-)cks, dotted by green clumps of swamp-ıole *moriche* palms, crossed by waver-ng streaks of waterside woods marking :mall rivers or creeks. Much farther ıway, in endless line from north to outh, stretched the thick belt of timber ringing the master river, Orinoco, and ıt intervals gleamed short sections of he broad stream itself.

Toward that mosquito-plagued water-vay the tanned traveler grinned deri-ively, remembering myriad itchy bites. Jp here on the breezy ridge not one nsect attacked. The freedom from tiny orturers, the escape from the eternal :onfines of tree walls, the proximity of he big hills which he had toiled hard o reach, made this stony knob seem :elestial.

With that farewell grin he swung to tudy anew the forbidden Cerro Sipapo. After a long survey he sighed and aban-loned the last lingering hope of ever eaching its summit. Although some-vhat indistinct in bluish vapors, its pre-:ipitous front and ends were manifestly mpossible of ascent. And even if its arther side offered a practicable gra-lient, the recent instinctive antagonism of Hokko made plain the fact that no nan could thereby climb to the home of the gods.

Holy of holies to the fanatical tribes-nen scattered about its base, the moun-ain would be as furiously defended ıgainst profanation as would the most :acred Mohammedan mosque against a Christian. And for such deadly defense there was far better reason. No man-made church hurled thunderous death at its worshipers. This colossal block of rock, condensing clouds into torren-tial rain and free electricity into terri-fic explosions, was truly awful, domi-nating primitive minds with hereditary fear of devastating power.

So he turned from an unattainable dream to an accessible reality—the near cataract. Walking down the stone, working through woods, he presently reached the wet lip of the fall. There, in the comfortable shade of a spread-ing bush, he sat, laid aside rifle and hel-met, ran long fingers through his black hair, and then rested with hands loosely clasped around updrawn legs.

The plunging thunder of the water roared in changeless monotone. The bright, hard sunlight of midforenoon beat on the narrow river, the thin mist floating from below, the greenery round about. Otherwise nothing was audible or visible. Any lesser noises, made by birds or beasts, were overpowered by the deep rumble. Soon the inactive man drowsed, letting his thoughts drift, yet retaining subconscious touch with his surroundings.

After a time the smooth roar of the cataract became bumpy, as if heavy rocks or logs were falling over the brink. At length sounded a harder thump, so jarring that the dozer opened his eyes and glanced around. Everything near was unchanged. Rising, he looked far-ther abroad.

"O-ho!" he exclaimed. "So that's it!"

The eastern sky, partly visible through the verdure, had dulled from bright blue to deep black.

Grabbing gun and helmet, he loped away through the woods to the bare stone knob and up to its summit. There, panting, he laughed with eager interest.

The top of the god-mountain was en-veloped by a gigantic cloud. Its lower portion was almost invisible, swept by

sheets of rain. Across the face of the colossal blackness, and down into the terrified jungle, and up into the still sunlit zenith, flared streaks and streams of lightning. And, much louder than at the waterfall, recurrent thunder crashed.

For several minutes the lone spectator stood enjoying the aerial outburst, holding his watch in hand, timing duration of electrical explosions and length of sound waves, making mental notes, and admiring the display of elemental violence. Over here all was dry and quiet, and those fierce fireworks yonder were but a stupendous spectacle. But then suddenly his face lengthened.

Somewhere over there Hokko was trying to convince his people that this white stranger should be admitted to their land. But now the gods were exhibiting furious rage. The conjunction of events was most inauspicious. Bleakly Corwin contemplated the hostile cloud-giant. All at once his pupils contracted to peering pinpoints.

Against the aerial inferno showed a small grayish object which rapidly grew larger, nearer. A bird? A strangely rigid bird—a thunderbird—flying like a bat fleeing from Hades. What was the thing?

Nearer, nearer. . . . Then from the watcher broke an amazed exclamation—

"A plane!"

CHAPTER VI

THUNDERBIRD

AN AIRPLANE it was. Incredible, yet indisputable. A monoplane, its stiff wings now discernible, its whirring, rapid-fire racket now audible. In another moment it was almost overhead, free from the confusing backward blackness, etched against the azure zenith. And the man below voiced an inarticulate groan. He saw now that the thunderbird was afire.

From its tail streaked smoke. Whether struck by lightning or otherwise ignited, it was burning itself to death in the air. Its pilot, forcing it onward with utmost velocity, was keeping the flames behind him and heading for the savanna where he might possibly save himself. Not until he reached the open country could he hope to live—not even if he jumped. The hostile jungle would not only smash his plane to bits but tear apart his parachute, break his bones, kill him with shattering blows or with slower agony. Gamely he was carrying on to—

"Ah!" ejaculated the watcher.

The speeding fugitive had gone over the last hump and reached the almost treeless barrens. Now it swung, tipped, slowed. From it plunged a small dark shape. That diver fell—fell—checked, then floated on downward, dangling from a little snowball.

Corwin gave a gusty sigh of relief and glanced again at the doomed aircraft.

Instead of dropping in turn, it had leveled out and was darting again westward. For measureless seconds it stubbornly continued flight toward the Orinoco. Abruptly it swerved, tilted again, flopped over, then, gyrating, swooped earthward. A little distance from it fell a black dot.

"Two of them!" muttered Corwin. "Good boy! You tried— Open it, fellow! Pull your ring! Pull— O, God!"

Yelling in frenzy, he reached his own hands into air, fingers hooked. Then he sagged, sick. The far dot lengthened, spread tiny arms and legs, fought horribly. But over it bloomed no parachute. It became a thin streak, vanished. Seconds later the plane, now a mere meteor of flame, also smashed to earth. Behind distant treelets mushroomed a brief black cloud which quickly died out.

Gritting his teeth, Corwin straightened and again sought the snowball. For a second he glimpsed it near a belt of trees. Then it was gone behind them.

The first jumper had reached the ground alive. And that ground was close to the rambling river up which the canoe had recently toiled to the cataract.

Corwin took a long stride forward, then halted. From a shirt pocket he flipped a compass, took precise bearings. With expert eyes he also estimated distance. When he made a new start he knew just where to go, unconfused by dense bush or the winding of the waterway.

Down through the jungle growth he ran, slipping, sliding, falling on the slippery path, but unerringly rushing to the canoe. Reaching the dugout, he swiftly slid into it his rifle, paddles and poles, then shoved the heavy bow off shore. Aided by the current, he drove downstream.

Around smooth turns he paddled hard. Over rocky rapids he shot, shoved, struggled. Unaided by the canny judgment of Hokko, he hung the cumbersome boat several times on unnoticed stones and wrestled mightily to work it off. On either side arose always the thick wall of waterside trees, brush, vines, blocking all view of the open land beyond. Yet he never lost sense of direction or distance. And at length he suspended work to shout.

"He-e-e-ey!" he yelled. "Ye-a-a-ay! Where are you? *Donde 'stá uste'?*"

For a time no answer came. At his third call there sounded a dull growl in the sky, and the sunlight died out. Glancing up, he saw a sullen cloud crawling westward—the tired remnant of the Sipapo thunderstorm drifting to the Orinoco, muttering as it went. He again loosed strident hails.

SLOWLY the current bore him on. Woods and water remained unresponsive. Then sounded a short reply:

"Hello, there! I'm here."

Beside a thick tree trunk stood a figure in khaki clothes similar to his own. That tree was a rod behind him. He had looked at it in passing, but had seen nothing. The fallen flyer, ambushed, had scrutinized him as he passed. Now, emerging, the stranger continued the same penetrating watch. His right hand, hooked loosely on his belt, rested near the flat holster of an automatic pistol.

"Hullo yourself!" Corwin grinned, swinging his canoe to shore. "Hop in!"

The invitation went unaccepted. Coolly the flyer regarded the crude dugout and its solitary master.

That master's gray gaze chilled a little, and his lips opened for a curt command. But just then a louder voice spoke.

The broad cloud overhead emitted a hard rumble and a rolling thump. Weak lightning flickered. Impotent though the threat was, the man on shore flinched. Corwin's mouth quirked in sarcastic contempt. But as he again surveyed the newcomer his expression changed to amazed incredulity which swiftly became certainty.

Tall, slender, dark-haired but blue-eyed, the flyer had seemed a young man. But the rumpled hair, unconfined by any leather cap, was unusually thick and soft. The firm chin and jaw were smoothly beardless. The sloping shoulders were no wider than the hips. And the hand at the belt, although capably strong, was not masculine. Long, narrow, with slim fingers—indubitably it was the hand of a woman.

As the other regained outward composure Corwin suddenly became aware of his own appearance. For several days he had neglected to shave, and now his lean cheeks were covered by black stubble. His bush clothes were wet, stained, smeared with mud from his recent falls on the path. Altogether he looked tough. Lone North Americans found in the South American bush sometimes are tougher than they look—men guilty of many crimes, capable of many worse.

His brief antagonism vanished. Swinging off his helmet, he genially said:

"Let's introduce ourselves, Miss—er—Thunderbird. My name's Corwin. I'm doing a little exploring down here."

Her level brows lifted.

"Corwin?" she echoed. "What's the full name?"

"George Maynard Corwin, if it matters."

Evidently it did matter; for, with a quick smile, she stepped forward, right hand leaving her belt.

"I've heard of you, Corwin," she announced. "You've had articles in geographical magazines up home. And Governor Perez, over at Ciudad Bolivar, spoke of you only yesterday. But you're supposed to be away over in the Ventuari section by now."

"Changed my route," he explained, "to inspect this Sipapo region. And your name is—"

"Lee Burton. Christened Leona; but Lee for short. Got a cigaret?"

Her voice betrayed nervous strain. Danger fully past, her tense control was cracking in inevitable reaction. Hastily reaching for his rubber tobacco pouch, Corwin rolled a cigaret for her an another for himself.

Feet firmly braced, back straight, neck rigid, she smoked with long, slow draws, deliberately absorbing the full benefit of the soothing narcotic. When she tossed away the charred butt she was once more self-reliant.

Glancing downstream, she suggested—

"Well—"

Corwin shook his head.

"There's nothing worth looking for down there," he said. "It was an absolute smash. Perhaps you saw."

A tight nod answered. Even while falling she had watched.

"So we'll go the other way at present," he continued. "Upstream a few miles I have the necessities of life. By the time we can reach them we'll need to eat. That's the only sensible course."

"True," she admitted. "And after that, what?"

"We'll have to figure that out. You're a long, long way from any civilized place, and at the moment I don't know just what to do about it. You've dropped in so unexpectedly that you've caught me quite unprepared."

"Of course. Fools always do that."

Corwin chuckled. The terse bluntness of this sturdy girl was pleasing.

"Those are your words, not mine," he reminded. "However, you may be right. Only fools come nosing into this death hole. I'm one. But that's all I'm good for. Whatever brought a girl like you down here?"

A frown creased her forehead, then was gone. With a wry smile she declared:

"If you'll just forget that I'm a woman, Corwin, I'll appreciate it. Nature makes mistakes sometimes.

"Now I'm here because I'm just sick of being a girl! Dancing around with idiotic boys, listening to inane twaddle, doing silly society stuff— Oh, well, never mind!

"I had to hop off for somewhere, and the farther the better. I've always been interested in exploration. So I made a break for the Amazon, and perhaps farther. The plane was my own. But one needs a rest at times, so I brought along a professional pilot. His name doesn't matter now. A wonderful flyer, but—"

She paused, glancing downstream.

"But what?" prompted Corwin.

"Just too reckless and headstrong," she added, "in every way. I didn't want to buck that thunderstorm—we saw it gathering on the east side of that mountain—but he headed right at it, like a crazy kid in a roadster trying to beat an express train over a grade crossing. We got what the kid usually gets."

"It struck you?"

"Rather! We'd hardly crossed the eastern edge when that black cloud down below blew up at us like a volcanic erup-

tion. Perhaps our propeller vibration touched it off. Anyway, it was—it was just hell! There's no other word for it. It seemed to tear us all apart. By the time we broke out the other side of it I was half dead and the ship was burning. Well, that's about all."

"About enough for one morning's hop, I should say," he remarked. "But why were you flying this way from Ciudad Bolivar? To hit Manáos, Brazil, the only real town on the Amazon, you should have flown southeasterly, not southwest. That's the only sensible—"

"And that's why I didn't!" she broke in. "The sensible route has always been traveled before. I wanted to do something new. So I was flying for Iquitos, Peru. Nobody's flown there yet from this direction. And the air distance, if you don't know it, is only about three hundred miles more than to Manáos."

Corwin blinked. No, he hadn't known that. He worked on the ground, traveling slowly, meeting everything at close quarters, not speeding hundreds of miles daily far above the earth. His own past explorations up the Amazon had cost many weeks of travel and many months of studious observation; and so would his present investigations in this unexplored region off the Orinoco. Bee line air distances therefore were indistinct in his mind. This flying fool of a girl had given him a new fact. Moreover, she evidently had the intelligent intrepidity of a good explorer.

"I see," he said. "By the way, you didn't notice the height of that mountain, did you?"

"I did. By the altimeter it's just about six thousand. That's not absolutely accurate, of course. But it'll have to do."

"Yes, it'll do." He chuckled. "I've been aching to learn that little thing. So you've added something to scientific knowledge, if you care about that. And now suppose we start along upstream."

"All right."

Stepping in, she picked up a paddle.

"A pole," he corrected. "Going upstream paddles aren't so good."

Without a word, she changed tools. They pushed out and up the resistant waterway.

CHAPTER VII

WHITE WOMAN, TRAILMAKER

FORWARD, he conned the rough course, working hard, voicing occasional instructions. Aft, she toiled with movements at first awkward but soon skilled, swiftly learning the simple technique of poling. As the slow miles snailed away she observed his unconsciously expressive motions. Men's unguarded acts often reveal their real characters more truly than do their faces, voices, words. Corwin's every move manifested habitual steadiness and deliberate judgment, unlikely to be swayed, now or later, by any amorous fancies or self-conceit.

When at last the roar of the cataract became audible he swerved the dugout to shore, lodging it between rocks.

"Let's talk here," he said. "My stuff's up at those falls, and there we'd have to yell at each other. Have another cigaret?"

"No, thanks. What's on your mind?"

"This much. We'd better load this boat up yonder and come back down. We won't eat until night. It'll be safer to keep moving. In about two weeks we can probably reach a port down the Orinoco where you'll be safe until some boat—"

"What's particularly unsafe up here?" she cut in.

"Everything's unsafe here. Particularly Indians. These Piaroa Indians are quite unsociable toward outsiders. They use blowguns, poisoned darts and such things. That's known. What else they may do to intruders is unknown; nobody's come back to tell all their quaint

customs. I'm here because I happened to save the life of a Piaroa who'd been caught, tortured and left to die beside the Orinoco by some halfbreeds. He's over east now making palaver about me to his people. But since he left me the signs have turned very bad. So we might as well—"

"What signs?"

"That thunderstorm. The mountain you crossed is the castle of their thunder-gods. Those gods went crazy mad this morning and then sent their dirty cloud down this river, where we are. From which you can perhaps deduce what the Indians think of it and what they may do about it."

"Oh, I see." Her gaze ranged thoughtfully upstream. "I touched off trouble for you by blundering over this way, didn't I? I'm sorry. But—"

"Oh, the storm would have happened anyway," he interrupted. "But—"

"But, as I was saying," she continued, once more incisive, "can't you laugh it off somehow?"

"I might. But you can't. And besides, you have to go out."

"Why?"

The swift retort stopped him dead. While he stared she tossed back her hair and regarded him with cool daring.

"Listen, Corwin," she pursued, "I don't have to go out. There's no good reason why I should, if I don't want to. My parents are dead. I'm not married. I'm not taking this trip for publicity. Nobody cares if I never come back, and neither do I. I'm doing what I jolly well please just now, and I like it. So much for me.

"Now about you. If you leave here you lose everything you came in for. Just now you have a live contact with these Indians. Run away, and it's gone forever. And if you think you're going to quit on my account, think again. I've decided to trail along with you, and the only way you can take me out of here is to knock me out. And if you can do that, you're pretty good."

She paused, watching him with the ready, cool penetration of an experienced boxer. And, untold, he knew that this tomboy was not only a natural athlete but trained in physical defense. Girls' schools and girls' camps worked wonders these days for girls who would learn. The thought came and went in an instant, leaving him outwardly unimpressed. Dryly he countered:

"All of which is undoubtedly true. But nowadays I always work alone. I've learned that a partner proves undesirable."

"Why?"

"Because he soon gets disagreeable and tries to be the boss. And a woman would naturally be worse in that way than a man. So—"

"I won't do that, Corwin!"

Her tone now was hurt. Her eyes, too, had altered from audacity to reproach. And inside him something changed. Her look, her voice, her attitude were almost those of a high minded young man striving for achievement, but wounded by prejudiced antagonism.

FOR a moment he was silent. The distant waterfall growled menace, the leaves overhead flapped cheerlessly in random breeze, the muttering river tried to tug the canoe loose and wash it out and away. Then impulsively he responded:

"All right. But I warn you it'll be a long, tough game, lasting at least half a year. I can't do my work in less time. And meanwhile—or for awhile—you'll have to dress as a woman."

She frowned again. But her only objection was—

"How can I?"

"I'll show you."

He shoved the canoe out again. They forged on to the baggage heap below the cataract. There he unstrapped a

narrow clothing roll and drew out two white negligée shirts.

"My only dress gear, except a pair of white trousers," he shouted through the watery noise. "Can you figure what to do with them?"

"Easily." Her answering call held a note of laughter. "If you have a sewing kit—"

"Here." He produced a small roll of khaki. "But make it snappy."

She glanced around. A rod farther upstream stood a bulky rock, heavily screened by a thicket. Unspeaking, she walked to it and was gone. He set about making a meal from his small stock of pre-cooked provisions.

The crude refreshment had waited only a few minutes when she returned, transformed. By hasty tucks and a pleat, one of the shirts had shrunk to fit her snugly; by equally swift use of scissors and needle the other shirt had become a skirt, ill fitting but convincing. Nor were these the only changes. A rapid bath in the rushing waters beyond the stone had banished fatigue, brought fresh color to her skin and new glow to her eyes. And her talk, her every movement, even her straightforward but similing gaze, were entirely feminine.

"Will I do?" she demurely asked.

"You'll do," he bruskly answered. "Let's eat!"

Laughingly she dropped her bundle of mannish garments and complied. When the frugal meal ended with a drink of river water he eyed the woods. The slanting light and shadows of the sun were those of midafternoon. The deafening monotony of the cataract wore on his usually phlegmatic nerves. Abruptly he arose and grasped his rifle.

"Let's walk!" he said.

And he strode into the woods. For a second she eyed his back angrily. She had become a woman again at his behest, and since then he had been tersely rude. What.... But then, with a quick smile, she followed him. As she went, she seized from her flying clothes her pistol belt and buckled it on. But the precaution was not against him. Treading in his footsteps, she laughed; and to herself she said:

"Big boy, you're afraid of me! Well, you've brought it all on yourself!"

Up along the tiny path they clambered, neither speaking. The action gave them something to do; the height beyond would give them something to look at; the menacing bellow of the falls was almost stifled.

Corwin stopped short, rifle jerking forward, then sinking back.

"Company coming!"

Lifting his left hand, he held it high in imperious signal to halt.

CHAPTER VIII

A GIFT OF THE GODS

ONE second later a human brown avalanche halted. Skidding on bare heels, but drawing ready bows to full tension and leveling long blowguns with instantaneous precision, a file of almost naked savages choked the shadowy path. Hard-faced, they inimically regarded the white man. Hand still high, gun still low, he met their hostile gaze.

But then, despite himself, he moved aside. And savage eyes widened with blank amazement. Unbidden, unwanted just then, Lee Burton elbowed her tall protector and stood fully revealed, fearlessly facing the first wild Indians she had ever met. As they stared, Corwin barked—

"Hokko!"

From somewhere up the line Hokko, the messenger of peace, shouldered his way forward. The leader of the gang, a heavy-jawed brute, growled at him. But he doggedly continued his advance to his white friend.

"Hokko, what means this?" severely

asked Corwin, nodding toward the antagonistic array.

"Chief say," glumly explained the guide, glancing at the ugly-mouthed leader, "you bad, me bad. Gods mad. You get out or get kill."

"Tell your chief he is a fool!" tartly disputed the explorer. "The gods are not mad at us. They have brought me my woman. Are you blind?"

Hokko blinked at the miraculous white woman. His fellows still stood agape, evidently comprehending few or none of the aggressive Spanish words. Presently Hokko monotoned Corwin's contradiction in his own dialect. The sour chief voiced obstinate grunts.

"Chief says you lie," translated Hokko. "Gods very mad."

"Not at us!" insisted the white man. "Mad at a devil that stole my woman. Listen carefully. This is my woman. She grew lonely and came trying to find me. A big devil at the north—a big devil with wings—seized her and flew off with her. He flew this way to taunt me. But the gods of Sipapo were angered and struck him with much fire and made him fall and burn up. As he was falling my woman jumped free and fell into deep water and so was saved. The devil fell on earth away out yonder"—he swung an arm vaguely westward—"and if you search the savanna you will find his big burned bones."

Dramatically he paused. Hokko stood wide-eyed, digesting this colossal but, to primitively superstitious minds, credible lie. At the right moment Corwin concluded:

"The gods are friends to me and my woman. And if your people also are friends to us the gods will be friends to you all. Now tell your comrades what I have said."

With joyous quickness Hokko obeyed. While his sonorous gutturals sounded the white pair stood outwardly calm and confident. Whether or not the Piaroas had seen that burning devil flash overhead and fall somewhere beyond the forested ridge, the tale fitted all facts known to them.

As the translator concluded, a wondering mutter went among the auditors, whose weapons had sunk to rest with tips on the ground. Abruptly the chief stalked forward, stopped a pace before the girl and stared at her anew. His thick right hand moved as if to grasp her arm. Then it stopped short, halted by a bass growl from Corwin.

The two men looked at each other. The savage drew back, remembering his own crude code. Among South American Indians it is a serious offense to lay hand on another man's woman, even without evil intent. And this woman was most obviously this white man's private property. As the blunderer hesitated, slightly ashamed but more angered, the Northerner quietly said:

"He doesn't quite believe you're real, Lee. I'm not letting him paw you over. But you could say something. Anything will do."

"All right. I think he's a good old sport under his ugly hide."

With that she smiled straight at the chief, then at the others. At the sound of her clear voice every frozen beholder relaxed. And when Hokko translated Corwin's next words the head warrior turned to his men with a touch of swagger.

"My woman says your chief is a man of much strength and much intelligence," the white man exaggerated. "And now I say that if you will give us room we shall go on upward. We wish to look again at the great mountain which brought us together."

A harsh grunt from the flattered chief moved the whole gang off the path into the woods. Ignoring them all, the dominant white man resumed his interrupted climb. Behind him, gaze now demurely downcast, his woman dutifully followed. When they had passed, the

long file of brown men walked close behind, silent as a brown serpent.

UP OUT of the timber they all marched to the bald knob of stone. There Corwin drew a quick breath of satisfaction. Over west, the dirty gray cloud had vanished. Over east, the Cerro Sipapo loomed in air which, recently rain-washed, was unusually clear. Divested of its veil of haze, brilliantly illuminated by the sinking sun, it seemed miles nearer than ever before.

At that majestic highland, so magically close and serenely friendly to the strangers, the tribesmen looked long. At length the chief turned, squinted into the blazing west, and muttered.

"Chief ask," translated Hokko, "where fall that devil?"

Pointing, Corwin indicated the approximate place on the prairie where the flaming flyer had plunged from sight. After fixing in mind direction and distance the commander grunted and strode back down the rock, followed by all his subjects.

"Chief go see devil," explained Hokko. "Other men bring up your load, make good camp over there." One thumb twitched toward the eastern jungle. "Tomorrow we go on to my home."

With that he departed. Rapid, noiseless, the whole troop disappeared into the western woods.

Corwin drew another long breath and relaxed. To the silently attentive girl he said:

"We're all right now. We're practically prisoners until the chief verifies something I told him—something about the crash of your plane. But after that we'll be ace high. He may not come back for a day or so, and meanwhile you'll have to continue the woman act. Then you can be yourself again, pants and all. But don't forget one thing; I'm leader here, and you're not to shove me aside again as you did awhile ago, down yonder. Those fellows were all set to shoot if I made a move just then, and you should have waited for your cue. Hereafter, remember your place!"

"I will," she soberly promised. "At the moment I didn't quite realize what a tight pinch it was. But I played the game all right after that, didn't I?"

Eying her serious face sidelong, he suddenly smiled.

"And, as man to man, I'll tell you you've brought me good luck. And, partner to partner, we can go a long way together. You've got the right stuff to make a good partner."

"Thanks!"

The short word, the straight look, the quick grasp at his near hand, spoke the swift appreciation of comrade to comrade. Then, silent, smiling, both gazed again at the Cerro Sipapo.

CHAPTER IX

UP EAST OF THE ORINOCO

ALONG a green jungle trail meandered a human brown serpent tipped with white. Barebodied, barefooted, bareheaded, a score of stocky Venezuelan Indians trod the tiny path in close file. Behind these natives walked a pair of North Americans—a tall man in khaki and a slender woman in white blouse and skirt.

All were armed. The Indians bore bows, blowguns, quivers of arrows or of poisoned darts. The white man carried a short but powerful rifle. The white woman wore a holstered pistol. Yet none was on the alert for trouble. The savages were Piaroas, and this mountainous region east of the Rio Orinoco was their own territory. The civilized foreigners had been provisionally accepted as friends of the brown folk. And as they walked the white man faintly smiled.

Yesterday morning he had had no campanion but one Piaroa whose life he had saved at the Orinoco. Yesterday

noon he had been entirely alone while that guide told his suspicious tribesmen that the solitary explorer was a *buen' hombre*—a man of good heart. Yesterday afternoon he had seen this girl aviator boldly venturing an uncharted route over the jungle, bail out from a burning airplane. He had rescued her from starvation in the unknown wilderness. And now, preceded by the warlike escort and followed by the daring woman whose venturesome spirit coincided with his own, he was whimsically content with his present luck. At the same time his cool gray eyes kept habitual watch of all ahead. Long experience in tropical exploration had taught him that good luck might at any moment become bad.

Ceaselessly moving, the column wormed its way through the dewy forest. Along shaggy hillsides it curved; up abrupt slopes it clambered; down steep ravines it slid on greasy soil, to labor upward again beyond, climbing always higher into the massive heights of land never yet surveyed by scientists. The long legs of the lean white man swung without fatigue, and his deep lungs breathed without effort. The woman traveled less easily. As the endless track squirmed ever onward she slipped and stumbled. But, with firm jaw set, she voiced no complaint.

At length the tall man paused, leaned against a convenient tree and volunteered—

"I'm winded."

The woman halted with him. But she did not lean against anything. Feet braced, hands clenched, head erect, she stood breathing fast, yet combatively meeting his quizzical gaze.

"You're a cheerful liar, Corwin," she panted. "You're stopping to give me a rest. I don't need it. Go on!"

He grinned at her, unmoved.

"You're another, Miss Burton," he drawled. "You do need it. And you'll take it. No argument now, or maybe I'll slap you down."

Her blue eyes hardened and her knuckles whitened.

"I've told you before now that you're to treat me as a man, not as a weakling woman!" she flared. "I can go anywhere you can go. And as for slapping me down, just try it!"

"Think you can use your hands?" he teased.

"I don't have to think. I know."

Corwin chuckled.

"All right, you needn't demonstrate," he answered lazily. "You're a he-man. But you're also a green recruit in this man's army. I was a recruit in an army once, and I learned a lot. And, believe it or not, the rookie who walks himself to death his first day out is a fool. And the officer who lets him do it is a double fool. And any officer who expected an aviator to march like a hardened doughboy would be a quadruple fool. You're an aviator, just landed. I'm officer of my own single-handed expedition, and not quite idiotic. So if you insist on trailing me you'll have to show sense. There's no ambulance following this outfit to pick up the brave but dumb."

Lee Burton's flushed face grew a shade redder. Then, tossing back her dark hair, she answered:

"Quite right. But, if you haven't noticed it, your Indians are leaving you."

He glanced aside, then nodded, unperturbed. The aborigines, with minds set ahead, had continued with never a glance behind; and now they were gone amid the matted verdure. Their freshly beaten trail, however, was unmistakably plain to his skilled vision.

"We'll catch up eventually," he replied.

HOLDING his position, he lounged for several more minutes, idly contemplating the jungle. Silent, she resolutely overcame her fatigue. When at length he heard the slow, deep sigh be-

tokening full restoration of energy he turned from her and deliberately resumed his course.

On through the woods they ambled, unhurried by the previous short, quick pace natural to the forest Indian. Around them soft sunshine sifted through the creviced canopy of leaves. Somewhere *pajaro minero* birds whistled sweetly to one another in cheery converse. Damp odors of earth and fallen foliage and coy jungle flowers blended in elusive yet perceptible aroma. For the time the two aliens were alone together in the virgin solitude, free to absorb its every subtle influence. After a time Corwin asked:

"How d'you like this? As well as the racket of a motor and the smell of hot oil?"

"Don't mention that," she responded. "This is heavenly!"

"Glad you think so. It's real, anyway. But it's insidious. When it gets into your blood you're never again content with the artificialities of civilization."

She made no audible answer. But, glancing again at the sun spotted wilderness, inhaling again its untainted atmosphere, she soon nodded. In a few words he had explained his own presence in these wastes, and the motive actuating all other true explorers: disgust with the shams and greed of money-mad towns, unconquerable yearning for dangerous but genuine realities. Although she had met him but yesterday, she had already known him by reputation; known him to be a lone adventurer into far places, a man who occasionally published a monograph esteemed by scientists, then disappeared for another year or two. And, although she herself was but a self-willed, self-reliant girl who had impulsively flown from banal New York society to experience new thrills, she found her first taste of rough life to be something for which she long had hungered. As for future consequences—She recklessly smiled and swung along.

So they progressed for some time in wordless comradeship. All at once Corwin halted. His rifle lifted a little, hung half poised. On the trail ahead sounded a rapid beat of running bare feet.

Around a short curve sped a brawny Indian. At sight of the white pair he slowed abruptly, heels sliding on damp clay. Corwin's rifle sank. The native was Hokko, who had guided him here from the Orinoco.

"All right, Hokko," drawled Corwin in bush Spanish. "We're not lost."

Hokko scowled. His hard brown eyes fixed a moment on the white woman. His hard lips twisted, seeking words. His knowledge of the Venezuelan language was fragmentary at best, and now he was excited.

"*Maluo'!*" he then blurted, thrusting his jaw at Lee Burton. "Bad!"

Corwin eyed him. After willingly leading the girl thus far into his homeland the fellow now could hardly be asserting that she herself was bad.

"Meaning what?" countered Corwin.

The aborigine struggled mentally. Then he said:

"You come. Woman stop. No good!"

"Why not?" retorted the white man.

Silence. The brown eyes probed the narrow gray ones and the wide blue ones. Then over them dropped an opaque shadow, and the heavy brown jaw gripped tight. Without another word Hokko turned and strode stolidly back into his mysterious green maze.

Coolly Corwin resumed his own gait. As he did so, however, he glanced down at his rifle.

"What's up?" demanded the girl.

For several steps Corwin gave no reply. Then he admitted:

"I don't know yet. Indians are funny folks, and if they don't feel like explaining things they just won't. Apparently some objection had arisen to our coming on—"

"You mean to *my* coming on," she interrupted.

"But we're going on regardless." He ignored her remark. "It's against my principles, and a social error besides, to let any Indian stop me from going somewhere."

He swung ahead with a more determined stride. Hokko plodded with a touch of stiffness, hinting anger at something—perhaps at the obdurate white people, perhaps at the unexplained obstacle beyond. Lee Burton quietly drew her pistol and slyly tested its sliding action. As the three advanced the quiet friendliness of the forest was gone.

At length the half light suddenly brightened. A few more strides. and the damp coolness also was gone. Hot sun, hard as a club, beat down into a clearing. Studded by low stumps, the clear ground rose to a knoll crowned by a broad tribal house, clay walled, thatch roofed. Outside that yellow habitation stood two groups of brown men facing each other.

CHAPTER X

TRIBAL FEUDS

HOKKO halted. Corwin studied the Indians beyond. Lee Burton surveyed the whole primitive scene, then relaxed from her taut poise. In an amused tone she queried:

"What's wrong with this picture? I was looking for a fast movie, but it seems to be a rather dull play."

At sound of her bantering voice both men frowned. Hokko, glancing at both his white people, looked very unhappy. Corwin, still contemplating the separate groups, observed that one much outnumbered the other, which stood with backs to the wall. No women or children were in sight. The house doors were shut. The stillness which had reassured the American girl was not peace. Rather it betokened imminent violence.

"Hokko, what goes on here?" demanded Corwin.

For another moment Hokko's mouth remained tight. Then suddenly he confessed:

"Trouble. Men against wall our men, Piaroas. Other men Mapoyos, from north. Boy from here steal Mapoyo girl last moon. Now Mapoyos want three Piaroa woman to pay. We say no. They very mad—and very bad."

His grudging explanation came in mixed Spanish, Indian and dumb show. At the end he shoved a thick hand again toward the white girl as if to push her back into the concealment of the jungle.

Over Corwin's long visage flitted several quick expressions. Comprehension, appreciation, hesitance, all came and went in a flash, hardening into stony decision. He comprehended now the unwillingness of the stiff-necked savage to admit fault in his tribe. He appreciated the previous bidding to come on with his gun but to leave the woman behind. He hesitated to lead her farther into a bad situation, yet determined to do so. When he turned to her his voice was calm.

"Follow on," he prompted. "There's an argument up yonder, but maybe I can adjust it. Take things easy."

Giving Hokko a slight push, he resumed his unhurried gait. All three went on up the slope.

Nearing the antagonistic groups, Hokko adopted a bold swagger, inimically eyeing the threatening Mapoyos. His fellow tribesmen, hitherto standing stubbornly defensive, also stiffened. The arrival of their white ally with his rifle heartened them as if he alone counterbalanced the odds against them. And as Corwin stopped beside them a Piaroa rasped some sarcastic epithet at the Mapoyos.

The Mapoyos scowled. Slit-eyed, slit-mouthed, they had watched the short procession advance up the hillside. Now

their hostile gaze dwelt a moment on the rifleman, flitted over the apparently unarmed woman—whose pistol hung behind her loose elbow—and again met Corwin's unreadable regard. This time they sneered. Despite his gun, they were near enough and numerous enough to overwhelm him by one concerted leap; and they knew it. From the largest man among them came a jeering retort to the Piaroa taunt. From his mates sounded derisive snickers.

Outwardly nonchalant, Corwin stood with thumbs under belt, rifle sagging under his arm, helmet canted back, eyes drifting over the invaders. In one slow survey he saw that they were lower in the human scale than the Piaroas. The latter were crude savages, poisonous fighters, using envenomed arrows and darts; they were not very brainy, not very clean. Yet their steady eyes were more intelligent, their firm jaws more manly, their muscular frames more symmetrical than those of the Mapoyos. The intruders, streaked with clay pigment, were lower of brow, flatter of nose, heavier of chin, longer of arm and shorter of leg; their faces and physiques were more ape-like than man-like, and their coldly cruel gaze was that of wild beasts.

Through Corwin's mind flitted momentary wonder that any Piaroa—even a boy—should have stolen a girl from a tribe so manifestly inferior. The abduction must have been a wild stunt intended to prove the daring of the juvenile warrior. Or perhaps the girl happened to be really pretty, as young females of the lowest families sometimes are. At any rate, the demand for three grown Piaroa women in recompense was preposterous; a mere pretext for the raiding of this settlement by a numerically superior force which meant to conquer and annihilate it. And any effort by him to arbitrate the quarrel by logical reasoning, as he had sometimes done among other tribes, would here be futile. Apes could not—

At that point his swift thoughts stopped. The glimmering gaze of the Mapoyos had veered again to Lee Burton, the first white woman they had ever seen. Straight, slender, composed, she stood beside her partner, coldly motionless as a statue carved from ice. In the monkey-like eyes contemplating her flamed rapacious desire. Reading that look, the obstinate explorer inwardly admitted—

"Hokko was right."

As if in answer, the biggest Mapoyo, evidently the chief, spoke again. His harsh voice now held an arrogant tone, and his clay-smeared visage leered at the pure white form. His warriors chuckled nastily.

Hokko growled like an angered dog. Among the other Piaroas passed a mutter of inarticulate antagonism. But none made a move, and all looked sidewise at Corwin.

"Mapoyo chief say," slowly translated Hokko, "he take your woman too."

No answer came. The rifleman gave no indication that he had heard. Piaroas eyed him with puzzled frowns, Mapoyos with widening grins. Even Lee Burton flashed a glance at him. Although only he and Hokko knew the Venezuelan words used by the interpreter, every one understood the threat of the Mapoyo commander. Every one also knew Corwin had been told what the Mapoyo had said. From the white man's continued inaction could be drawn only one inference. As it sank in, the girl's lips tightened; Piaroa jaws hardened; Mapoyo mouths stretched farther in complete contempt. He was afraid!

Then slowly he spoke. In English he said:

"This is worse than I'd expected, Lee. Were you saying awhile ago that you could use your fists?"

"I can," she curtly retorted.

"Well, if anybody bothers you, maybe you'd better."

"I will!"

Her tone now was biting. Her blue yes, again confronting the savages, urned.

CHAPTER XI

A TRICK, BUT A KNOCKOUT

AMONG the ape-men ran another guttural chuckle. Their leader visily swelled. Very quietly, Corwin mutered several more words in another lanauge. Hokko, close by, stared sideong. Then the Mapoyo chief swaggered orward.

As tall as Corwin and twice as thick, e strode toward the white girl with an nsolent leer at her presumable mate. As e walked he ostentatiously tossed away huge bludgeon. Long arms swinging, eavy shoulders swaying, bandy legs trutting, he reached his goal. Meanhile the white man imperceptibly noved sidewise, gun still low and seemngly unready, but following the chief.

For one second the Mapoyo stood loating. His painted arms started forard, reaching. Then he jerked back, taggered, toppled, sprawled askew on he dirt.

The girl had moved. So quickly that taring eyes could not follow, she had hot one clenched hand to his thick chin. Now that hand was at her holster.

"Good boy!" grated Corwin. "Now old everything!"

Another flashing glance, and she beyed. Her whole arm was so numb rom that furious punch that she could ardly feel the pistol. And for the monent no gun was needed. Tense, she aited.

Indians of both forces stared dumbounded at the stunned chief. Fumbling lizzily on the ground, he forced himself p to new footing and stood swaying. His dazed eyes glared uncertainly and or a few seconds he made no new move.

Then Corwin laughed. Incisive, inulting, his ridicule cut deep into every amazed Indian brain. With slow motions even more offensive he leaned his rifle against the house wall; then he stepped forward, pointed a finger at the groggy chief and continued his taunting mirth.

The goaded Mapoyo leader sprang at him, big hands swooping, clawing fingers outspread to gouge or throttle. They missed their marks. The suddenly brave outlander stepped smoothly forward. The tearing hands closed on his wiry back. Then, with miraculous swiftness, the big assailant again fell. On his broad body lay the lanky white man.

The other Mapoyos surged forward; then stopped and stood eagerly watching. With a twisting heave their leader had thrown his lighter opponent aside and fastened on him anew. Obviously the warrior needed no help. Gloating, his followers awaited the crack of the outlander's bones and his futile yells for mercy.

Furiously grappling, the ferocious chief strove to fulfill their expectations and frightfully avenge his own humiliation. Magically knocked down by a mere woman, ridiculed and mysteriously overthrown again by an unarmed man, he now was not merely a savage but a demon.

The white man already was half under him. With another heave the burly brute forced his prey flat. But as one taloned brown hand pounced again at the tight gray eyes it was caught and swung aside; and with a convulsive wriggle the underdog was out from under. Spilled over, the Mapoyo instantly seized another grasp. Side by side the two struggled.

Again the heavy savage rolled on top. But again, somehow, he rolled a little too far and met earth. His thick brown knees jerked upward but struck nothing. His hands hooked at face and throat, but missed. His powerful arms squeezed, yanked, wrenched at the wiry torso, yet broke no bones. Instead of

resisting, the man he held seemed yielding, going with him, moving this way and that like a squirming eel, giving no sure hold. And again, gradually, the thin battler arose to the upper position.

Breathing fast, he glanced around. His lips twitched crookedly. Then, hurled over, he sank his face against the Indian's shoulder and resumed his odd writhings.

Bunched close, the Mapoyos stood very near. Still nearer stood Hokko, now clutching the war club tossed aside by the cocksure chief. Farther back was Lee Burton, pallid, motionless, hand still on gun. All else was lost in renewed combat.

Kicking, biting, gouging, clawing, twisting, the Mapoyo bully exerted every jungle trick to smash his antagonist. But somehow he could not quite succeed. His mouth and nose began to bleed. His befouled visage betrayed distress. Strong as a bull, he yet could not break the sinuous white man who clung around him like a snake. Over and over the two rolled, and every new view of the brown face revealed more pain. Pain? Agony! Invisibly the white man was doing ghastly things to him.

Then Corwin struck. Once more he came to the top. Once more he glanced around. His body swung sidewise, came back like a steel spring; his right fist cracked under his opponent's ear. Sitting back, he rested, sardonically eyeing the other Mapoyos.

For a long moment the invaders stared. Their chief lay limp, eyes closed, mouth half open, face slowly welling more blood. If not dead, he was utterly at the mercy of the white snake —who, of course, would show none. From them broke instinctive grunts of rage. Hostile bodies swayed forward, then halted short. Glaring eyes centered on Hokko, who had shouted.

Standing beside his white man with club defensively raised, the Piaroa pointed. Mapoyo heads jerked across shoulders, looked backward. And every Mapoyo froze.

Their situation had changed. Awhile ago they had held the Piaroas against a wall, confronted and outflanked. But, fascinated by the duel on the earth, the Mapoyos had unconsciously drawn together, losing formation, massing in a huddle. Meanwhile the Piaroas had stolen around them. And now, with arrows and blowguns leveled, the recent victims held the erstwhile victors close herded. By mere snaps of strings and puffs of breath they could instantly strike death into more than half of the Mapoyo force. By other swift missiles and by hand-to-hand fighting they then could undoubtedly destroy the momentary survivors.

CHAPTER XII

HEADWORK

IN ONE astounded glance the trapped intruders recognized their hopeless predicament. Instinctively their eyes darted back to their commander, only to realize anew his utter uselessness. Panicky, desperate, they wavered, each confused brain struggling to see a way out of annihilation. Then, slowly, the white man rose from his vanquished foe. Quietly he spoke to Hokko, who repeated in his own dialect. The other Piaroas held their position.

Through the dirt and blood on his lacerated face Corwin smiled contemptuously at the huddled Mapoyos. Shirt hanging in tatters, torso bruised and bitten, arms gashed by tearing nails, his whole body smeared with dark earth, he was no heroic figure. But, astride his senseless enemy, he was indisputable conqueror and, for the moment, lord of life and death. One word from him would loose a massacre.

While his mastery sank into every tense Mapoyo mind he kept silent. Then

once more he spoke to Hokko. This time he voiced several drawling sentences.

Hokko scowled, momentarily balked. His vengeful eyes glowered at the Mapoyos, and his captured bludgeon moved slightly forward. Then on his dour visage came a gradual grin. Lowering the club, he began talking in his turn.

To the Mapoyos he delivered a speech much longer than that of the white man. With every word his voice gained vigor and venom. The Mapoyos listened with helpless rage, the Piaroas with vindictive enjoyment. Evidently the impromptu orator was expressing, with virulent invective, the collective Piaroa opinion of the Mapoyos, their ancestry and their progeny. Ending, he turned and spat on the face of their unconscious chief.

Throughout the tirade Corwin stood at rest. Now he stepped back, yawned and muttered briefly. Hokko blinked and moved grandly aside, repeating what Corwin had muttered to him. Followed confused action.

One by one the Mapoyos grudgingly dropped their weapons. One by one the Piaroas drew back into two lines, opening an exit toward the jungle, but still holding their deadly dominance. Between these menacing ranks the disarmed aggressors hastily retreated, nervously eyeing the arrows and blowguns leveled at them. Last of all went their broken bully, still on his back. Feet grasped by two of his men, he was hauled roughly away, head wobbling helplessly over roots, arms trailing behind on the dirt.

As the crestfallen raiders reached open ground they broke into a headlong run. Their chief, bouncing off stumps, still dragged at their rear. From the Piaroas burst a resounding roar of derision, punctuated by one more howled epithet from Hokko. Lowering weapons, the victors doubled over in paroxysms of mirth, relieving strained nerves with impulsive clamor.

Corwin, leaning lazily against the wall of the tribe house, grinned. But through mud and blood his bronzed skin showed pallid; and his set jaw and sunken eyes were not merry.

For a second he stood thus alone. Then Lee Burton was close at his side.

"You're hurt!" she accused.

His gaze remained fixed on the uproarious Indians.

"You'll keep that quiet," he said.

Soon the Piaroas, straightening up, looked once more at the forest into which their enemies had disappeared and gloated over the scattered weapons surrendered by those fleeing foes. Then they swarmed to the tribe house, hammered at doors and, as bars slid, marched noisily in to meet their scared women and children. Even Hokko temporarily overlooked the quiet white pair to swagger inside with his stolen war club prominently displayed.

As the last strutter vanished the real victor visibly sagged. Around him slid a swift white arm. Lee Burton's anxious voice asked—

"Just how do you feel?"

"Pretty rotten," he admitted.

"So do I."

He gave her a wan smile.

"No reason why you should," he croaked. "You did your stuff perfectly. And—"

His voice trailed off. His eyes swung along the woods at the base of the hill. Then he said:

"I see water down there. And I surely need a wash. Come along and stand guard, will you?"

"Gladly."

Pushing away her supporting arm, he walked off unassisted. She reached aside, seized his rifle and followed.

A SMALL, slow creek, almost hidden by trees and brush, flowed past the east slope. There, behind a thick trunk, he stripped off his rags and slid into the cool water. While he deliberately bathed

she stood keenly watching the farther shore, while her ears registered the recurrent small splashes he made beyond the bushes. It did not occur to her that no Mapoyo, weaponless, would loiter here hoping for revenge, that no other danger could be near this habitation in daylight and that Corwin had given her this seemingly important post only to buoy up her self-assurance.

Presently he reappeared, clothed and refreshed. Clean, cool, he grinned at her and rolled a cigaret.

"Thanks, buddy," he said. "That helped a lot. Between ourselves, that brown plug ugly was bad medicine for my insides. Nothing's broken, but practically everything is considerably sprained. After I stiffen up I won't be active for several days. So you'll sort of carry on for me, won't you?"

"I certainly will! And I'm glad to be of some use."

Blowing smoke, he laughed.

"You're of considerable use," he told her. "That lightning uppercut of yours was worth about a million dollars to me."

"How so? It only let you into a horrible fight which—"

"Which was inevitable and worked out as per schedule," he cut in. "And the way you backed me on every play of the game was—"

"Oh, throw the soft soap overboard! I hit that roughneck because I thought you were yellow. And I did nothing afterward because I was too dumb to know what to do."

Again he laughed, much amused.

"Have it your own way. All the same, you followed my lead without question. You thought what I wanted you to think, acted as I wanted you to act, and thereby confounded the enemy. Which qualifies you, rookie, as a good soldier."

Drawing again at his cigaret, he let that assertion sink in. Observing her involuntary flush of pleasure, he continued:

"The only way out of that tight jam, of course, was to do unexpected things and draw those apes completely off guard. Your punch on the big ape's jaw did the trick. It knocked his brain cockeyed and dazed everybody else. After that he and his gang were just monkeys, blind while men closed around them. It was all just a matter of headwork. I had to use your head and the Piaroa heads to pull through. But they all worked. And so here we are."

She laughed shortly.

"Headwork—nothing else? I'd say there was some uncanny bodywork in it too, Corwin. How on earth did you hold your own with that gorilla?"

"Headwork," he dryly repeated, "plus experience. Once while I was in Asia I picked up some sneaky wrestling tricks. Hard pressure of a few fingers here and there, at just the right time, do extraordinary things to the other fellow. But to select the exact spot at the exact moment you have to use headwork. Otherwise you're just a clawing animal, like our recently departed Mapoyo playmate."

He drew one more slow puff of smoke.

"So, by headwork," he reiterated, "we're all alive and carrying on. Suppose, instead, we'd tried gunwork—what would have resulted? Death to us, to a few Mapoyos and to all our Piaroa friends. We'd have been swamped in no time. Or, even if we'd damaged somehow to outshoot those tough apes, everybody—even the Piaroas—would have credited the victory to our guns rather than our heads. And the logical inference from that idea is that if we're caught away from our guns we're helpless. Which, some time, might be just too bad for us.

"The Piaroas, of course, would never think of trying to do us in after this. This little tribe, and all other Piaroas throughout these mountains, are our eternal debtors. But I'm not confining my work to Piaroa territory; just pass-

ing through it to other lands and other Indians. Those other Indians will hear about us long before we reach them. And when we do reach them they'll respect us. We won't be just two ordinary white people, shooting our way through the poor brownies as the Spaniards down here have always done. We'll be extraordinary, superhuman, endowed with magical physical prowess and mental superiority, yet magnanimous toward our inferiors.

"You, a slim woman, can knock a big warrior to earth by a mysterious flash of one hand. I, a skinny man, can amuse myself with him and at the same time capture his whole horde. And then, instead of butchering them in a trap, we contemptuously let them all run, and make them the laughingstock of the jungle. And in the jungle it's death to any tribe to be despised. No tribe we'll meet will want to risk that fate by offending us.

"And although the Piaroas will try to hog the credit for this affair, they'll unconsciously give it to us by bragging about us, their marvelous, miraculous white friends. They'll tell the whole yarn with plenty of exaggeration, and the other Indians will deduce that we're the big brains of it all. By the time we move on we'll be demigods. In fact, we're demigods right now to the Piaroas, though they'll probably be too proud to admit it. You'll soon see."

THERE he stopped and flipped the cigaret butt into the stream. She watched it float gradually away. Soon she soberly said—

"I see now that you look a long way ahead."

"A fellow on a long trail has to, when he can," he rejoined. "Often he can't. But if he makes his head work fast in a pinch he can see far enough to keep himself going. And, speaking of going—"

He arose, moving with evident difficulty. She stepped forward, hand darting to aid him, then dropped that hand and stood quiet. His thin mouth and resolute jaw forbade assistance. Slowly but steadily he moved up the slope. At his heels she followed, vigilant but silent.

As they neared the hilltop the Piaroas flocked from their communal domicile. Men, women and children streamed out in belated welcome to their deliverers. But, after a straight look at the dignified white pair, they too suppressed a natural impulse to assist the exhausted fighter. Dividing into two irregular lines, they stood motionless and speechless, the men wooden-faced, the women and children gaping.

Along this hushed lane Corwin proceeded without change of gait or attitude until he reached Hokko. Pausing, he drawled:

"After the long walk this morning we are a little tired. Are hammocks ready?"

"*Si,*" answered Hokko in the same idle tone. "*Como no?* Why not?"

With a slight nod Corwin moved on. Indian eyes darted to Hokko, who muttered brief translation. Indian lips quirked in instinctive appreciation. The white man's tacit dismissal of the recent fight as totally insignificant, his casual admission that he was somewhat tired, made him even more superior, yet even more humanly likable. Neither then nor later did they realize that this slight halt was a subtle touch completing a continuous play of headwork.