

The  
**RED  
GODS  
CALL**

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SCOGGINS



# THE RED GODS CALL

*By*

C. E. SCOGGINS

*Author of*

THE PROUD OLD NAME

*He must go—go—go away from here!*

*On the other side of the world he's overdue.*

*'Send your road is clear before you when the old*

*Spring-fret comes o'er you*

*And the Red Gods call for you!*

—RUDYARD KIPLING: "The Feet of the Young Men."

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By C. E. SCOGGINS

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*To*

ALL BRAVE SOULS

WHO VOYAGE OUT IN DREAMS FROM MILG



THE RED GODS CALL





# THE RED GODS CALL

## BOOK ONE

### A SONG IN THE NIGHT

#### CHAPTER I

I WAS a caliph once. Yes, once in the very manner of the good Harun himself I befriended a homeless vagabond, fed him and clothed him and dazzled him with my wealth and kindness; but there must be some difference between ancient Bagdad and Milo, Indiana. It didn't work out just right.

It was June, I remember, because I was at the station to meet Martha, who was coming home from Vassar. It was June; out along Madison Avenue the elms were green, and people were beginning to sit on their porches in the evenings, and honeysuckle was in bloom. June, 1912, it must have been, because that year I was president of the Live Wire Club and we put up that big electric sign at the station—Milo Offers More.

No doubt you've seen it, passing through? It was new then, and that evening the station agent forgot to turn it on.

I remember Martha kissed me before the whole crowd, as calmly as if we were already married. It made me feel a little blank; I don't know why. Maybe I'd thought she'd be excited about it, or shy, or something; but she kissed her mother, and then me, and then

Andy her demon brother, and three or four of the girls, and got into her mother's car and drove off talking a mile a minute; and I stood there wishing something were different, I don't know what. Business was good and Martha was lovely, and I was one of Milo's rising young men; but it didn't seem so very much to cheer about, after all. I suppose caliphs often feel that way.

So I noticed that the sign wasn't lighted, and you may believe I spoke about it.

In those days people moved when Howard Pressley spoke. Far down the train the conductor was already wailing "Bo-o-o-oard!" when it blazed out, every bulb doing full duty. Having seen to this, I was turning away, when I became aware of an entirely illegal passenger who sat on the blind platform of the baggage-car, blinking and shrinking in the sudden glare of that splendid slogan.

"Well, greetings, Weary!" I said with my unflinching wit.

The train moved. He relaxed and grinned.

"Does it?" he murmured.

"Does what what?" I inquired intelligently.

"Offer more," he said, waving a bland farewell.

Yet not, alas, farewell. Jerry the station cop knew the unlawful uses of the blind-baggage platform; Jerry the lynx-eyed knew I was not given to conversing with empty space. Violently the hand of the law fell on the ankle of the transgressor. Violently they rolled across the concrete into the parking space, and for a minute you couldn't see the taxicabs for the dust.

The vagabond came out of it. Unfortunately I was in his way. "Oof!" said I, and "Whoa!" said Jerry; and the train departed.

"Ho, hum," sighed the vagabond. "Welcome to Milo, Gus!"

I felt a little to blame. No, I will tell the truth: I had never seen a hobo in high-laced boots and wide gray

hat; he looked like a character out of a Wild West movie; he was grimy, but he was lean and broad-shouldered, and he had a jaw.

Have I said that life seemed orderly and dull? I was diverted.

"Gus," I said, "you take the words out of my mouth! If we'd known you were coming, we'd have furnished a softer cop for you to fall on."

Jerry was not amused; a hobo by the railroad's brim a simple vagrant was to him. Said he vengefully, "Come along. Git goin', Gus!"

Selling real estate teaches you to think fast. I walked with them round the corner into the shadow; I spoke confidentially to Jerry and offered a certain soothing argument, and Jerry kept on walking.

Yes, ten dollars was all I thought I was going to pay for one Arabian Night's entertainment, Indiana edition!

"Here's my car," I said. "Hop in."

Now that I had my vagabond I didn't know just what to do with him. Feed him, I supposed, and learn the sad story of his life. "Hungry?" I asked him.

His voice, a leisurely barytone with a sort of western nasal quality, fitted his picturesque appearance, but his words were somewhat hackneyed.

"Old-timer," he said, "I take this mighty kind of you, but don't get me wrong. I ain't exactly a hobo."

"Of course not," I sighed. "I take it, though, you wouldn't refuse a meal?"

"I could eat a wolf," he admitted, "raw. But if it's all the same to you, let's go somewhere and shell out a few cinders first. Mamma! That engine burns lots of coal."

He seemed to find a certain humor in his grimy discomfort; maybe he was some special kind of hobo, after all. I drove round to the side entrance of the Park Hotel, prudently avoiding the lobby, and smuggled him up to my rooms.

“Gosh!” he murmured, gazing.

Right there, I can see it now, was where I got the caliph feeling—princely, you know, all generous and noble. Through his eyes I saw the true magnificence of my own bachelor quarters; by pleasing contrast I felt my own importance in the world. “There’s the bathroom,” I told him. “Go as far as you like.”

What is there about bathrooms that makes people sing? He hummed, this vagabond, disjointedly at first, sputtering and splashing; then you could follow an odd, foreign-sounding melody. It took hold of you; it made you somehow wistful; but I got to thinking about Martha, I don’t know why, and forgot to listen. Martha, and long summer evenings at the country club, where she and I would slip away alone. Down the fifth fairway where it drifts into the woods, our feet falling silent and our voices hushed, through a vale drowned in shadow to a velvet knoll under the moon. Martha, and the lights and laughter sweetly remote across the stillness. A new hot longing thrilled me. I had not meant to go to her this evening; she would prefer to rest after her trip. And yet —

I looked at my watch. The bathroom door opened.

“Say,” cried my vagabond, refreshed, “can I use a slug of this alcohol rub here on the shelf? This is the first time I been clean for a week, and I feel reckless!”

He was naked, and, by Jove, he was a powerful specimen! No wonder the burly Jerry had found him hard to hold. His shoulders were thick and round, with little bulging veins that showed not an ounce of fat; his flanks were spare and hard, and his skin as white as a baby’s. I had thought he was dark, but that was only soot and sunburn. He was indeed a special kind of hobo. From a sooty bundle he fished clean if rumpled underclothes, and he had a razor too.

“Old-timer,” he cried zestfully, “now this is some way for a white man to live! What do these diggings set you back—or do you own this dump?”

That was his manner of speaking—crude; forceful, but crude. I was moved to maintain my status as a caliph. I mentioned, not too conservatively, the sum I surrendered monthly to the management, and he whistled so respectfully that I was almost consoled for not owning the Park Hotel.

I had a sudden pleasing fancy. I almost laughed. "Wait a minute!" I said, getting up. "You're about my size. Wonder if you could wear my shoes?"

"Huh?" said he.

"Hobnailed boots," I explained tactfully, "while admirable for—er—general touring purposes, aren't exactly appropriate for dining."

He grinned. Even in his rumpled underclothes, I tell you, the fellow was picturesque, his white teeth showing boyishly in his lean brown face.

"For a fact," he observed, "I been missin' meals right regular lately. Maybe it's my boots."

Even as I opened my wardrobe door the idea grew on me. But I didn't laugh. Casually, in the true manner of a caliph, I tossed him my dinner jacket and its accessories; reserving for myself, as was fitting, the superior formality of tailed coat and white tie. Now that was all in order, wasn't it? Purple and fine linen, as I understand it, are part of a caliph's stock in trade. Very properly, too, the studs baffled him and the cut of the vest dazzled him.

"Oh, mamma!" he murmured. "Jerry, Jerry, pinch me quick!"

But I didn't laugh. I was kindly, tactful. I skilfully adjusted his tie and turned to put the finishing touches on my own.

Then quite suddenly it came to me that there was nothing much to laugh about. My face seemed more than usual—well, not fat, but roundish; and my brisk dignified carriage did make my—you know—my front stick out a little. I looked like what I was in those days,

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a prosperous young business man. But he! In my very own clothes, which fitted him badly enough, this fellow Hardy was distinguished. Yes, Hardy he said his name was; Gus Hardy. He had gone moody, pacing restlessly about the room; he carried his hands in his pockets and his wide shoulders loose; and his brown face, lighter across the forehead, gave him the look of one of those big-game hunters you see at banquets. I made mental note to wear a hat that summer, playing golf, so my forehead would stay white that way.

Yes, I perceived a difference between Bagdad and Milo, Indiana. In Bagdad everybody knows which is the caliph.

“Where did you get that sunburn?” I asked him.

He answered absently, gazing out the window, “Guatemala, I reckon.”

I give you my word I didn't know where Guatemala was, only had a vague notion that it was one of those hot countries. And he laid no emphasis on it; rather he seemed lost in some somber train of thought; yet when he spoke that word he wrapped it in glamour. He didn't, if you know what I mean, speak it in English at all. The syllables came clipped and liquid off his tongue, like the murmur of deep quiet water, and for a moment you saw a land far off and strange.

That, of course, was my cue to command him, “Now tell me the sad story of your life. Begin!”

I led him to the dining-room and planted him at a secluded table, and even then I couldn't think of a graceful way to get at it—looking across rose-lighted linen at that brown face and gentlemanly shirt-front. The New York-like elegance of the Park Hotel did not lend an atmosphere; all the modern caliphs I could recall seemed to have operated in quaint greasy chop-houses and saloons.

“Sorry I can't offer you a drink,” I said. “Local option, you know.”

He nodded absently, gazing about the room. It was a little late for diners; there were only the Andersons, and the Naylor with an out-of-town guest, and a few traveling men.

I tried again. "Pretty hot in Guatemala, eh?"

"Hot enough on the coast. In the mountains, no."

"You were in the mountains?"

"Quezaltenango. Railroading."

There it was again, the crisp liquid murmur of syllables that conjured up visions. "It doesn't sound like a place where there'd be a railroad," I said.

"There ain't, yet. Never will be, maybe. We're trying to find a way through."

And he seemed to think he had said it all.

"Jungle?" I prompted.

"Mountains. One of those places God forgot to finish—ten thousand feet up and no way to get down. The Indians say He had a lot of land left over and just dumped it there."

"Oh!" I said. "Indians. Hostile?"

He grinned absently, making a negative gesture with one forefinger—he was always doing something with his hands. "Mayas," he said, curling the word so quaintly that I had to ask him how it was spelled.

"Oh," I said, "Mayas!"

"Yeah. Ever see any of the Maya ruins? Quirigua, for instance?"

He asked it simply, as if you might walk down the street any day and see Maya ruins.

I repeated after him, "Keereegwah?" as if searching my memory; but the flatness of my own syllables humbled me.

"Old," said Gus Hardy. "Old when the Spaniards came; old when Christ was born; nobody knows how old. Ball courts, two hundred feet between walls, where they played a game like basket-ball. Platforms for sacrifice, where they cut men's hearts out so their crops

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would grow. Palaces and temples—empty these two thousand years and more.”

His eyes came back to mine, and I remember that they were intensely blue.

“Makes you feel queer,” he said. “Makes you feel like a man lived about a minute—like a fly. Here’s Quirigua, a station on the white man’s railroad. A United Fruit farm, with switch-engines shunting around, loading bananas for the States; and over here this place that was a city when Pilate washed his hands. Big sandstone pillars sticking up, carved all over—some kind of writing, they claim—and a Maya king at the top. With whiskers,” he said, looking at me.

“Flat faces and slant eyes. And whiskers; but no Maya, no Indian has a hair on his face to-day. Where did they come from, those fellows? Where did they go?”

I could see the Naylor and the Andersons watching us, wondering, no doubt, why we wore evening clothes—while Gus Hardy wondered what had happened when the world was young.

“Stone temples around a court—standing there, still solid after twenty centuries of jungle rot. They didn’t know how to build an arch; they had to make the rooms little and the walls thicker at the top so a slab of stone would reach; but they had mortar that’s better than any we know.

“And some of those slabs are granite—granite, half a ton to a slab, and no granite formation in a hundred miles! No trucks, no wheel roads; nothing but man-power. How did they do it—and why?”

I doubt if I knew, even then, what we ate. With short crude strokes he wiped out for me the Central America of O. Henry and Richard Harding Davis, its funny little republics and palms and revolutions; building instead a grim old empire, fixing me with the flame of imagination on his brown face.



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"Makes you feel queer," he said. "You go out through these banana groves, the light seeping sort of wet through those big flimsy leaves. Quiet, only a switch-engine clanking somewhere, and the lazy whack of some nigger's machete. Quieter and quieter, the jungle choking you, and no sound but your horse's hoofs squashing along the trail. And you come out on this place—this place where kings walked alive. Hot, you know, and still; so still you can hear the jungle growing to swallow it again, creeping up under your feet, crowding in, smothering you. Like something alive and wicked, waiting, eternally waiting to swallow the things men do. And you run into a big idol squatting in the brush, half frog, half tiger—grinning; and you hear a switch-engine whistle and you jump. I promise you, you jump."

His talk drifted. Chucho, Huehuetenango, Retalhuleu, I can remember yet the flavor of those names! Black beaches and the endless thunder of giant combers on the sand; steaming lowland, and plateaus in the sky where cloud seas flowed below you and the sun burned you through icy air. Distance and space and color, through which rode white men, laughing, conquering. The Mayas, survivors of an ancient race—you saw them trotting in from the hills on market day; the women with slant-eyed, flat-faced babies on their backs and burdens on their heads, the men loping along under loads that would try the strength of a mule. Dumb! Stupid! The life crushed out of them! Building nothing, knowing nothing of their fathers who set monuments to bearded kings.

Gus Hardy fell silent, and I looked with strangeness on the deserted dining-room of the Park Hotel. With strangeness I saw that it was not yet ten o'clock. It seemed that hours might have passed.

"You're going back?"

I remember yet the vicious little hiss of his cigarette

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drowning in his coffee-cup, the abrupt gesture of his lean brown hand.

“As fast as I can travel,” he said. “Let’s get out of here. I—oh, I don’t know. I get restless, sitting still.”

It’s odd, now, to think that I might have given him a dollar or so and directed him to some lodging-house. It’s odd. I give you my word I had forgotten that he was a hobo, that the very shirt that lent him dignity was mine. I saw a man like Kipling’s Findlayson, C. E., a heroic figure from the outposts of civilization—his blue eyes moody, oppressed by the small-town elegance of the Park Hotel. And ——

Can you see this? Once on a Saturday afternoon, playing up to the eighteenth green at the club, there was a sunset that made me forget the game. A flat purple cloud towering up and up, its ragged edges all afire, the sky vast and pale and stained with savage color; the dark woods and the house in that eerie light were lonely somber things; it took you like a wild and magnificent foreboding. And Martha came down from the veranda to wave to us, one sweet note of white in that sinister gorgeous picture. I remember how I hurried my long shot to the green, hurrying to be with her, to share it with her; and we lost the hole, and my partner was very sarcastic about it, and Martha didn’t care for the sunset, after all; said it made her shiver.

You know? A little bird swinging on a twig in the sunshine, a moment in a book where a man has written better than he knows, a great actress weeping—there is little you can say about it, but you must know that there is some one who sees. Here I had this Gus Hardy, full of strange talk—this blue-eyed, brown-faced painter of visions.

I looked at my watch. With an engaging air of aimlessness I said, “What say we take a little spin?”

## CHAPTER II

AND as I drove I forgot to point out the prosperity of our business section, our handsome residences, our well-kept lawns. The feeling of strangeness persisted; oddly I felt as if I were returning from far journeys to a quaint familiar place; returning, after loneliness and labor, to the soft welcome of a woman's eyes and hands. Have I said that it was June? Out along Madison Avenue the elms were green. The lighted windows looked very homelike through the trees; now and then some one sang out to me, neighbor fashion, from a veranda; the odor of honeysuckle trailed across our faces, and the sound of Rita Nelson's piano drifted out to us as we passed.

I forgot to tell Gus Hardy that the Nelsons were Milo's richest family. Oddly, in my official capacity as president of the Live Wire Club, I was thinking that we should make more of streets like this, and less of the smoke of our many factories. What is it, after all, that every man wants? A home.

I spoke of this to Gus Hardy, and he sighed.

"Yeah," he said, "that's so. But what you going to do when you get restless, and the sun goes down slow like it does up here, and you get homesick sitting on your own front porch?"

"Pretty tame, I guess," I admitted, "for fellows like you."

"It—oh, I don't know!" he said. "You feel like there ain't enough room outdoors, or enough stars in the sky. It's all so tight and settled, and the people all the same, and you don't fit. That's it; you don't

fit. And you get to thinking; and something happens, some little thing ——” He gestured dimly. “Always some little thing. You wouldn’t believe —— This time it was a woman singing.”

A woman singing! On this romantic note we came to Martha McAllister’s house; and I saw what I had hoped for, a light in the living-room. I checked the car.

With a masterly imitation of sudden impulse I said, “Want to drop in here a minute?”

“Huh?” said Gus Hardy, staring, and after a moment, “Here?”

The McAllister house did me credit. It was not so large as to be formidable, but it was wide and comfortable looking, with a veranda that seemed to invite and welcome you. Gus Hardy made no objection; he said nothing at all.

Wherefore I shouted cheerily, “Hello! Anybody home?”

Martha’s bright head bobbed up at the open window and her bright voice answered me. I think I forgot to notice whether Gus Hardy followed. She met me at the door, laughing, scolding me.

“This is a nice time of day! I thought you weren’t coming. I didn’t care if you never came,” she said, and wrinkled her small nose in the most entrancing impudence. “Sitting here in my very newest, nicest dress. Like it?”

That was Martha—quick, dancing you lightly out of your own mood into hers. I wondered why I had thought it was a rather solemn moment—following her into laughter, feeling a little slow and heavy and masculine. I did indeed like her dress; it looked like the stuff of misty moonbeams, caressing her. What should I say about it?

I became aware of Gus Hardy’s brown impassive face. I said, “Martha, let me present ——”

Her clear eyes widened and her dainty brows went

up. She had thought, of course, that I came alone; instantly I knew that I ought to have come alone. All at once I knew how a married man feels who cheerily produces an unexpected guest at dinner. It came to me that the business of being a lover was not so simple as selling real estate; I should have to put my mind to it.

Have I said that Martha was lovely? Dainty, the fine and fragrant product of tender care. And Gus Hardy, hobo! Instantly I knew that she could never understand the caliph feeling; that for her he must be not less than he seemed, with his grave brown face and the dignity of his borrowed clothes. Presto! Vanished the vagabond; appeared the distinguished naturalist and explorer.

“—— my old friend Hardy—Hardy Logan, you know, the great Hardy Logan you’ve heard me talk so much about. Just back from his expedition up the Amazon, bug hunting, you know. I didn’t tell you, did I, old man, that Miss McAllister came in on the same train with you? Or maybe you saw each other,” I said hysterically, thinking of Martha in her Pullman and Gus Hardy crouching in a swirl of cinders on the blind-baggage platform. “That’s how I happened to be at the station. Lucky, eh?”

Then I had to stop for breath—ready to break out again if Gus Hardy should fail me. Without a flicker his grave eyes accepted the nomination; he bowed, a stiff, foreign sort of bow; he looked at me and grinned, a slow easy grin.

“Lucky,” he said, “is the very word I was trying to think of.”

“The Hardy Logan? How nice! I’m dreadfully thrilled!” Not even Vassar could ever give Martha a vocabulary.

I remember I laughed a good deal. I made mental note to try grinning slow that way myself, after the golf season was advanced and I was properly sunburned.

Following Martha into the room I whispered in his ear, "Great! Keep it up. I'll explain later."

He murmured, "You don't hunt bugs up the Amazon, old-timer. They hunt you."

And I laughed again: "You've been there? Fine!"

I mean, I felt as if I had deftly mastered a delicate situation. Before Mrs. McAllister my vagabond clicked his heels and bowed again; even Andy, the demon brother, was so impressed that he forgot to be funny about the unusual splendor of our attire. In Milo, you understand, evening clothes are distinctly the mark of an occasion.

Well, I can see it now; distinctly that was one!

Mrs. McAllister was placidly sewing or embroidering or something; I said, "Andy, Mr. Logan knows all about Indians. Indians that cut men's hearts out!" and let nature take its course, which left me free to enjoy a little attention from Martha.

"It seems years and years since Easter," I murmured tenderly.

"Does it?" said Martha.

"Ah, don't be angry! I couldn't help it. Hadn't seen old Hardy for years and years ——"

"The same years?" said Martha.

"—— and anyway, I thought you'd be tired after your trip ——"

"—— so you brought him along to make sure you wouldn't be bored?"

And you'd have thought, to look at her, that we were having a sprightly and amusing bit of persiflage. She even smiled. Once, long ago, I had stupidly cut a dance with her, and she had smiled like that. Sweetly. Oh, much too sweetly. Why can't women be frank and straightforward—like a man?

But she was very gracious to Gus Hardy. "Do you know," she said, "I never met an entomologist before?"

"A who?" said Gus Hardy. "Oh," he said, and

looked at me and grinned. "No, ma'am, Buck's got that wrong. I'm an engineer."

"Who's Buck?" piped up Andy.

"Why, Buck," said Gus Hardy, and jerked his head at me.

I draped one arm over the back of my chair and tried to look like Buck. "Yeah," I said carelessly, "I doubt if Gus ever knew my given name. Always called me Buck."

"Gus who?" inquired the insatiable Andy.

"Hardy. I mean, Mr. Logan. Gus, we used to call him, Gloomy Gus, you know. By Jove," I said brightly, "it's like seeing a man returned from the dead! Here I thought old Gus was way up the Amazon somewhere, chasing bugs ——"

"No," said Gus firmly, "you got that wrong, Buck. I was going up there to work for a German company building a railroad. But in Rio I met a poor devil that had just come from there, all shot to pieces he was ——"

"Arrows or guns?" demanded the bloodthirsty Andy.

"Fever. And he gave me damned good advice."

"Here!" I protested. "Old man, remember you're in a civilized country now!" But nobody seemed to hear me.

"He told me about those Dutchmen. Offered good money, they did, and caught their suckers; but getting the money, or getting away after they got you, was something else again. Country no white man could live through, and they owned all the boats. They worked you till the fever picked your bones and shipped you out feet first. No, thanks! Not any for Gus Hardy," he said; adding serenely, "Logan."

"Can I call you Gus?" begged Andy.

"You bet!" said Gus Hardy, and took that freckled imp by the neck and shook him as if he were a puppy.

And Andy liked it! He wriggled and kicked and

rolled off the davenport and sat grinning up at Gus Hardy like a puppy adoring his master.

"Andrew," said Mrs. McAllister, "you mustn't annoy Mr. Hogan."

"Logan," I corrected.

"So that's why I didn't go far up the Amazon. I drifted over into Colombia and got a job with a mining company, and after that I hooked up with this outfit in Guatemala. That's how you lost track of me. Buck," he said critically, "you're living too soft. You're getting fat."

Now that wasn't tactful, was it? Or necessary. I was just thinking that he showed great presence of mind in shifting the scene of his adventures to familiar ground, but this was carrying realism too far.

Said Mrs. McAllister, "Oh, Mr. Hogan ——"

"Logan," I said, and then I had to breathe and let my front stick out again.

"—— do tell us about Central America! Every winter we look at folders, and last winter we almost went: Havana, and Puerto Barrios, and Puerto Limon, and the Canal," she said, making such heavy weather of the names that I, having heard Gus Hardy pronounce them, shuddered. "Tell me, are they as heavenly as they sound? Palms," she chanted, "and eternal summer, and maybe we'd run into a revolution."

Maybe that's where Andy got his bloodthirsty disposition. I, Howard Pressley, would have choked rather than laugh in Mrs. J. F. McAllister's face, but Gus Hardy openly grinned. She stopped talking and waited meekly for him to speak.

"No, ma'am. Not exactly heavenly. Havana's all right if you can stand high prices, but Barrios and Limon, they're hot and they're dirty and you'll see more beggars than revolutionists. Anyway, I hope so. A revolution ain't always as funny as it sounds."

"Oh, Mr. Hogan ——"



“Logan,” I said.

“—— have you been in one?”

“No longer than it took me to get out,” said Gus Hardy.

It was all wrong. I had brought him that he might show them visions; and there he sat, holding the center of the stage, his laconic phrases stripping every shred of glamour from the things that he had seen.

“No, ma’am,” he said; “fever and dirt and homesickness ain’t exactly my idea of heaven.”

I tried to put him on the track. “Tell them about the ruins at Quirigua,” I prompted, “and the old empire of the Mayas.”

I thought I spoke those exotic words with almost his own fluid curling crispness, conjuring up—before my own eyes, at least—the dank green shadows of banana groves with bronzed white men riding through them, a switch-engine clanking somewhere, and somewhere the lazy thwack of a machete. The jungle, blind and malignant and invincible; and here, steeped in the hot stillness of centuries, the ruins of a lost and forgotten civilization. Those great stone pillars, carved with grotesque symbols, meaning—what? And the images of kings. Huge idols crouching in the stealthily springing undergrowth, half frog, half tiger, grinning. The jungle, waiting to swallow the things men do.

But Gus Hardy, gazing moodily about the room, did not seem to hear.

### CHAPTER III

I PROTESTED again, "Surely there's more to the tropics than fever and dirt and homesickness!" And his eyes came with somber irony back to mine.

"Yes," he said, "there's work. And when work's done you can get drunk, or play poker with a gang of homesick hardshells. Romantic, ain't it?"

"The way you tell it," I said with biting sarcasm. "But the atmosphere, the background, man! The sense of immense antiquity, of space and color, of—of ——"

Mrs. McAllister said gently, addressing Gus Hardy, "Howard has the romantic mind."

Imagine that. The romantic mind—me! You'd have thought it was I who had spoken rhapsodically of palms and revolutions and eternal summer!

I said with dignity, "Well, I guess Hardy doesn't find it quite so bald as he makes it sound. He's been away a couple of months and he can't wait to get back. On his way back now—as fast as he can travel."

"Truly?" said Martha, looking at Gus Hardy.

He shrugged his shoulders. "'They all come back,'" he said. "That's what we say down there: 'They all come back.'"

"You like it?"

"I hate it," said Gus Hardy. "That is, I know I hate it. Homesick, every man jack of 'em, having pipe dreams about getting enough money to come home and live in the States. 'God's country,'" he murmured with a faint, one-sided, deprecatory grin.

There was something disarming and appealing about

the fellow. I had to remind myself that not three hours ago I had seen him thrown off a train.

“Quite a few of us manage to live here and make our money as we go along,” I said coldly.

“Oh, sure! That’s only the way we string ourselves. We know well enough we don’t fit. We don’t even try to keep money when we get it. Look at me—making good money, off and on, ever since I was eighteen; and ——”

He was inviting them to consider the case of Gus Hardy, hobo; not content with wrecking the character I had given him—what with unblushing profanity and references to the dissolute pastimes of his kind—now he had forgotten who he was supposed to be. I leaped in.

“By the way, old man ——”

“—— and what do I do with it? Play poker with it. Buy liquor with it. Spend it like a kid the minute I hit civilization. Why, I only meant to stop a few days in New York ——”

It was Andy who derailed the train of revelation, demanding: “Gus, will you teach me to play poker? Will you, Gus? I know the names of all the cards. I could learn easy. I ——”

“Andrew!” exclaimed his mother.

“Git out!” laughed Gus Hardy, and rumped Andy’s hair. “A young squirt like you talkin’ about poker! When you’re twenty-one I’ll teach you.”

“You goin’ to live here?” cried Andy eagerly.

“Well,” said Gus Hardy, “how old are you now? Eleven? I’ll be back in about ten years. You remind me, will you?”

“Andrew, bedtime!”

She was properly firm. Andy went out, dragging his feet, kicking a rug before him. In the hall he turned.

“Gus,” he appealed, “now that’s a promise!”

"It's a promise," affirmed Gus Hardy, and laughed, and quaintly crossed himself and kissed his thumb and blew the kiss heavenward; and suddenly was grave again, that moody, far-away look dropping like a shadow on his brown face.

"Buck," he said, "reckon we better drift?"

I give you my word that it seemed natural for him to call me Buck, natural for him to be here, like a wanderer returned, in Martha McAllister's house. Yes, my imaginary long-lost chum was too lifelike by half.

"Perhaps we'd better," I agreed, rising with alacrity.

Mrs. McAllister and Martha spoke in the same breath and were still talking when I got through. "But, my dear man, you've only just come!" and "Don't be silly! We've heard Hardy Logan, and Hardy Logan, and Hardy Logan for ages, and now we've got him you're not going to take him away so soon!"

I tried to hoist Gus Hardy with my eyes, but the scoundrel had taken up Martha's guitar and sat absently fingering the strings.

"It's late," I protested. "We only dropped in for a minute."

"You made a great impression on Andrew," said Mrs. McAllister, "Mr. Hogan."

"Logan," I corrected feebly.

"He's a fine kid," said Gus Hardy.

What could I do? I sat down again. "I see you still play the guitar, Gus," I said.

"I always thought," he said, "some day I'd have a kid like that. A regular young Gringo, freckled and pug-nosed and popping out all over with questions."

"Play something, Gus," I urged.

"And a house like this, on a street like this."

"Why not?" said Martha, too courteous.

He would have told her why not; I saw it in his eye and in the thoughtful tightening of one corner of his mouth.

With hectic heartiness I broke in, "Sell you one any time, old man. Got several on my list. But how long could you stand being tied to a house?"

He was lifting his hand from the strings and setting it down again, so that they whispered dolorously from chord to chord under his palm.

"Yeah," he said, nodding, "that's so."

"It gets in your blood—the tropics," I explained. "Gus was just saying a while ago that he could never stay put any more. Gets restless. Gets homesick sitting on his own front porch. Too dull, too tight and settled for him—after a country where you do as you please and nobody cares. Eh, old man?"

"Nobody," said Gus Hardy, that faint ironic grin tightening one corner of his mouth.

"Not enough room outdoors, nor enough stars in the sky. And the sun goes down too slow; and something happens, some little thing. Tell them about the woman singing," I said, remembering. "Beautiful, of course?"

"No," said Gus Hardy. "She was fat and greasy, but she could sing. They all can, those folks."

Absently he touched a light bass note, and then a deeper one; snapped a finger down on a fret, slurring it, and plucked the treble strings in an odd provocative rhythm.

Looking at Mrs. McAllister he said gravely, "This is a circus for me. I'll remember it, many's the time."

"We hope you will," said our hostess, "Mr. Hogan."

"Logan," I said mechanically. "Play something, Gus!"

"The woman sang," prompted Martha.

"I don't know if I can explain it," said Gus Hardy. "She was the cook in a Mexican restaurant, way out Broadway, you know. I got to hanging around there after my money gave out, because it was cheap. No, that ain't the truth. I was hungry for Spanish—everybody talking English all the time, and always in a hurry.

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Hungry for something that reminded me of the hot country.”

“You said you hated it,” said Martha.

“No, ma’am. I said I knew I hated it. But you can’t always remember what you know,” he said, and was silent, his eyes appealing to her for understanding. You’d have thought I was hardly among those present.

“You were telling us about the song of the cook,” I said.

“Well, I had a big time for a while. Lots of friends while I was spending, but after that I—got lonesome. Walking around trying to find a place that felt like outdoors, and I saw this Mexican joint. Got to hanging around there, spinning yarns with the owner—from Durango he was, and homesick too. A fat guy named Murgia. And this woman used to sing.

“One song she liked—I’ve heard it many a time out in the hills. At night, the stars burning four times as close as they do here, and the mountains big and dark, and off yonder the native women singing. Like this.”

He hummed, his brown fingers touching that staccato measure with the blurred bass. He hummed; and you felt the loneliness and heard, far off, the native women singing.

“Made me remember,” he said, looking at Martha. “The old gang’s out there now, plugging away, taming the country God forgot to finish. Mountains as far as you can see, the sun hot and the air thin and cold.” He stopped, groping for words; with irony he grinned and gave over the effort and set down the guitar. “So I hit out,” he said. “Reasonable, ain’t it?”

“Sing it!” said Martha.

Still I didn’t see what the fellow was doing. I only had an uncertain, childish wish to be disagreeable.

“Yes,” I said, “sing it! It must be wonderful.”

Simply, without reluctance or apology, he took up

## A SONG IN THE NIGHT

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the guitar again. He sang almost under his breath—looking at Martha.

Odd, how that melody took hold of you. It was pitched in a plaintive unfinished key—a minor I believe they call it—and it sounded wistful and hopeless. Somehow it told us things Gus Hardy had no words to say. Age-old, ineffable sadness; mountains heaped under a great star-sprinkled sky, and a strange, wild, simple people that lived on, bewildered, after their ancient world was dead. I wanted to be near to Martha, to take her hand; but she was looking at Gus Hardy. Her lips were parted and her eyes absorbed, listening.

Then, then I knew what he had done. I had brought him here that he might show them visions; and he had shown them instead, shamelessly and without reserve, himself—brown and hard and wistful and appealing, a vagabond with the glamour of far countries on him. I knew how sleek and dull I looked beside him. I, Howard Pressley, dealt in my little city lots; his were the jungles and the mountains and wide plateaus in the sky. His voice deepened and softened and died away on that strange unfinished note.

“Very nice!” I said, and myself was shocked at the harshness of the sound.

“Sh!” said Martha, for his fingers were still plucking at the strings, running up a little golden interlude.

## CHAPTER IV

YES, now I knew that sharp hot thing that twisted in me. It was rage. What right had she to look at him like that? And he sang to her. As if I were a stuffed figure, sitting there—as if he were alone with her in some star-shining stillness, he looked into her eyes and sang. It wasn't decent. Americans don't make love that way.

You saw a high-walled garden and a lover at his lady's window. A garden very far from Milo, Indiana; a lover who sang though he knew the night might well have eyes of death; sang as a bird sings, softly, but with a throb that was like tears in your throat. The red coal of rage melted within me. I wanted something, something great and sweet and wild and forever unattainable; and I had a crazy impulse to laugh—feeling the absurdity of great longings in that comfortable, well-furnished room.

I tell you, a fellow that can sing like that ought to be restrained by law. I was glad when he stopped. "Bravo!" I said.

You know the startled feeling you have when you speak aloud in an empty room? It was like that. Martha looked at me, a queer, vague, misty look; Gus Hardy sat with his brown hands listless on the guitar; Mrs. McAllister sighed and took up her sewing or knitting or embroidery or whatever it was, and nobody said a word.

Briskly, trying to break that inertia, I looked at my watch and rose, saying, "By Jove! I'd no idea it was so late," though I knew perfectly well.



Gus Hardy got up and stood looking about him, for his hat, I supposed, forgetting that we had come bare-headed. I reminded him; he only shook his head, smiling that faint one-sided smile.

"You'll come often while you're here," Martha commanded him.

Gus Hardy looked at me.

"He insists he has to hit the trail to-morrow," I said.

Gus Hardy bowed, murmured "Good night, ma'am. Good night, Miss Martha. Much pleasure," and marched out.

"Ha, ha," I said lightly, to cover the crude abruptness of his exit, "quaint fellow, old Gus. This sort of thing's a little out of his line."

But the atmosphere absorbed that effort like a sponge, leaving me futile and fat and dull, my actual presence less vivid than the knowledge that Gus Hardy had been there. Under the hall lamp I saw Martha's eyes still full of the mist of dreams.

"Martha ——"

"Yes?" she whispered, gazing into the darkness that had swallowed him.

"I think I'd better tell you."

Her eyes cleared and cooled and came to me.

"He's just a hobo. A vagabond. I picked him up when they kicked him off the train. Out of the gutter," I said, savagely glad to have it out and smash the glamour that incased him. "He seemed an amusing sort of fellow, so I dressed him up and fed him. I don't know why I brought him here. That's all."

I stood, you might say, with my head bared to the lightning, but nothing struck.

"I don't know the man from Adam," I said, sinking my teeth in the words. I had little practice being savage in those days and there was intoxication in it. "He's told us what he is. A waster. A gambler. A

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ne'er-do-well. But he's seen things and done things and the world's a big place to him. Big," I said, and borrowed a gesture from Gus Hardy, "do you understand? Big!"

"I don't care," said Martha; "I think he's nice. You can tell it by his eyes. He looks at you just like a sweet little boy, lost and homesick and so grateful."

"Eyes!" I raged. "My goodness, woman, didn't you hear a word I said?"

"Oh, yes. Ed Willis told me you—picked him up."

Imagine that! Knowing all the time, and pretending to remember all about a non-existent Hardy Logan. I don't know which enraged me more, the officiousness of Ed Willis or the duplicity of the woman.

"Oh!" I said; which hardly covered the case.

"It seemed a funny thing for you to do," she said with gentle, unflattering emphasis. "I thought at first he really was an old friend of yours. I couldn't imagine your doing it for a perfect stranger—and it didn't help to boom Milo a bit, did it?"

And while I struggled with that she spoke again, gazing into the darkness.

"Howard, imagine," she murmured, "living like that! Always alone and lonely, nothing to look forward to, nobody that cares. Homesick for a home that isn't anywhere, just drifting on and on—I never thought how it would be. It meant so much to him, being here in a nice American home. Did you see him, just looking and looking, storing up every little thing to remember?"

"He was looking for his hat," I muttered.

"Howard," she said, "must he really go away tomorrow? Can't you find something for him to do?"

Well, I mean, imagine that if you can.

The soft air of June came through the open door, a breath from wide starry spaces and the good smell of growing things, and showed me the feeble uselessness of rage. It had always been like this. It would always

be like this. She was a woman; she was like a lovely child, content to live between four walls. I had brought her visions and she had seen only a lean brown face and wistful eyes. Lonely! I laughed, not mirthfully. Even now the odor of honeysuckle can make me somehow sad.

"Lonely," I said, "lonely! The worst loneliness of all is to bring you my thoughts and feelings and see them flatten out and wither into nothing. Time after time. I never seem to learn."

"But you get excited about such funny things," said Martha. "Howard, I've been thinking ——"

Gus Hardy spoke only once on the way back to the hotel, to ask if we had no speed laws in Milo; and I saw then that I was ripping along Madison Avenue at fifty miles an hour—I, president of the Live Wire Club, that stood for law and order if it stood for anything.

Again, while he was divesting himself of his borrowed splendor, he rose briefly from the depths of moody silence:

"Sorry I had to run out on your bug-hunter yarn. Thought I'd better play safe. Oh, I could have talked like a bug hunter for a little while, but sooner or later I'd be sure to slip."

"It doesn't matter," I told him listlessly. "It didn't get over anyway. I had to tell them who you were."

After a time I became aware that he was sitting with his shirt half off, staring at one spot on the rug.

"Well," I inquired, "got any plans, old man?"

"Buck," he demanded, "is that your girl?"

Emptying my pockets, I dropped into a drawer a neat but expensive ring. "No," I said.

Silence, and yet more silence. I lighted a cigarette and yawned. Gus Hardy looked up, and then I saw how his blue eyes were shining with the light of dreams.

"Buck," he said softly, "old-timer, I like this town."

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Yes, it's a good little town, Milo. It is not Bagdad. No man is born a caliph, to thrust his hand untouched into the wheels of another's destiny. But it's a good town. It grows, already its dignity is beyond the use of slogans. You remember the electric sign at the station, that used to proclaim to the public that "Milo Offers More"? It just says "Milo" now.

I saw it afterward and had to laugh, remembering. I laughed again when I saw Gus Hardy. He's not so lean as he was, and his sunburn is lighter and runs clear up to his hair; he plays golf bareheaded, he tells me. It seemed odd to think that I myself used to take such chances with the sun.

I asked him if he remembered that song, and he said "What song?"

I hummed a few notes of it, and he remembered. While he was thumping the piano and trying to sing it Martha came into the room. She is still pretty, if you like that placid, fair, young-matronly type; and she introduced me to a pug-nosed, freckled young Hardy who swarmed all over me and buried me under an avalanche of questions, calling me Uncle Buck, while Gus beamed complacently over his shoulder and said "h'm, h'm" for the words he had forgotten.

I got restless listening. Milo's a good little town, but too—you know—too tight and settled. The people are too much the same and there isn't enough room outdoors. There's an old Spaniard on the western slope of the Andes, now, who knows the use of quiet days. His house is in a saddle of the seaward ridge. Westward the dim blue arch of the Pacific climbs; eastward the dark green chasm of the Zorro Valley fades into the blue of the great inland ranges, reaching away into the silver ageless peace of ice and snow. A man's country, that. They think in leagues instead of city blocks, and neighbors are not so many but that every stranger is a friend. Come weary to any man's door and his house is yours.

## A SONG IN THE NIGHT

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A rare old fellow is this Fernandez del Valle; and he has a daughter, and she sings.

The stars come very close about that hacienda in the hills; in the courtyard are flowers and a fountain that lulls you with soft monotony, and the girl sings. Her eyes are age-old mystery and the melting flame of youth; and her voice touches you with longing, great and sweet and wild and forever unattainable. Fancy Gus Hardy trying to sing that song!

BOOK TWO  
CAT'S PAW  
CHAPTER V

ONCE I, Howard Pressley, viewing the world from Milo, Indiana, U. S. A., thought it was something great to be an American. I remember when Gus Hardy used to talk about the tropics, its simple brown people and the riches they hadn't the energy or the brains to make use of, it seemed no trick at all for an intelligent young business man to step down there and cash in.

Oh, I was making money in Milo right enough; there was something else. It's hard to put a name to. Gus used to talk, his deep voice quiet and his eyes intensely blue, conjuring up for me black beaches and the thunder of giant seas, jungle and mountain and the sweep of wide horizons in the sun. Then a railroad began advertising winter excursions to Mexico. Winter's a slack time in Milo real estate, and I owed myself a vacation anyway—so I told myself. And—oh, I don't know! I was dissatisfied with Milo; call it that.

Let me get this clear: I never meant to stay down there. But one day in the American Club in Mexico City, after a game of bridge, a Light & Power Company man—I've even forgotten his name—half humorously offered me a job on the construction of a big dam in the hills. Half humorously I took him at his word. I never saw this man again; I found myself in high command of a dozen Naco Indians, and in low subor-

dination to every other white man on the job. Gang foremen do not play bridge with officials of the company.

Nothing humorous about the job, I assure you. I kept telling myself I was going to quit and go home, but I didn't; I don't know why. Maybe I wanted to prove I could live through it. That construction crew knocked the tender self-concern out of me, taught me to stand on my own two legs and not take up so much room doing it; practical men, those fellow-pioneers of mine. The war came on and stopped construction; that's how I happened to be hanging around the American Club waiting for things to pick up. And that was how my big chance came—the gambler's chance that every man hopes for—a fortune to win and nothing much to lose.

The fact is I forgot to count my life among my assets. I had heard vaguely of Anselmo Palomar, but I didn't even know that old Ben Murchison—shabby, thirsty old Ben Murchison—existed.

The American Club in Mexico City was a weary place in those days. There were few of us left; so few that I, less than two years in the country, was on even footing with the oldest and bitterest of the old-timers. One subject made us brothers: How long—how long, O Lord, would the State Department at Washington let these things be?

The letter-rack told the story—stuffed with letters that got smudged and dog-eared waiting for men who never came; men who had gone home, or to China or Patagonia, or to the last place of all, which has no forwarding address. I remember a whole sheaf of them for a man named Kimbrough, and finally one with this appeal on the envelope:

“Will any of his friends tell his wife what is known of him?”

And a grim old-timer sent it back with this notation: "Murdered at Xochinango, in 1913, and not a durned thing done about it yet."

And this was 1915. Oh, well, likely it never reached her, anyway. Such messages going out of the country had a way of getting lost.

Maybe the State Department knew how many Americans had gone that way; but if so, it didn't seem to care; wrote a note about it and called it square.

One day, after more drinks than either of us needed, Petersen took me into the deserted card room at the club for a talk. Petersen was an old-timer; had married an upper-class native, I believe, and seemed to stand well with the government. His business made money when everybody else was just hanging on. He was the local manager for an American lumber company with sawmills in Texas and Mexico; a lantern-jawed, narrow-eyed Swede; not handsome, now that I come to describe him. But he seemed to like me and I wasn't critical at the time. He began like a native, some distance from the point.

"Look here, Pressley, what's a foot-loose young man hanging around this God-forsaken place for? Why don't you go where there's something doing?"

Lighting my pipe, I said, "Oh, I don't know."

I did know; but a man doesn't come right out and talk about formless dreams. I thought he meant go back to the States; and I wasn't ready to do that.

"How'd you like to run down to Guatemala, with the chance of making a fortune?"

That was different. I cocked attentive ears. He brought an atlas and showed me Guatemala, the district of Peten lying northward between British Honduras and lower Mexico.

"Mahogany. A thousand square miles of it, practically untouched."

"Why?"



"Takes energy to go after it. Wilderness; population less than two per square mile; hot as the seven brass hinges of hell—a fever hole for men who don't know how to take care of themselves."

I wasn't afraid of fever, never having had it; the wilder he made it, the better it fitted that formless discontent of mine.

"All right," I said. "What do I do with this thousand miles of mahogany? Buy some of it for you?"

"Get a concession to cut timber from certain tracts. I've got the figures over at the office; I'll step over and get 'em if you're interested."

"I'll go with you," I offered, rising.

"No, no; keep your seat. Back in ten minutes."

Now that was odd, wasn't it? Preferring to talk business in the club rather than in his office. But I knew who he was, so never gave it a thought.

He brought back quite a bulk of documents: maps, plats of two tracts as big as several counties, even a detailed cruise of the standing timber. He had gone into it thoroughly, it seemed.

"Looks like a big thing," I told him. "I should think it would be worth while to go yourself."

"I wish I could," said Petersen. "But I'm responsible for our plants here, and the way things are I daren't turn my back. Of course, I don't know that you can swing it ——"

"Make your proposition, and I'll just gamble with you; my time and expenses against what you're willing to pay—if you make it worth going after."

I didn't notice, but I'll bet the narrowness of his eyes relaxed a little. He had me hooked.

"Good boy!" he said approvingly. "I've been sizing you up, and I think you can swing it if anybody can. Your Spanish is good, and you know how to get on with people. What were you in the States—traveling salesman?"

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“Real estate.”

“Better!” laughed Petersen.

His proposition sounded good: A percentage to me on every log they cut; a percentage I could offer the government; and half of anything I could save from the government's share would be added to mine. A fortune to win and nothing much to lose.

Yes, it sounded good. Too good! I can see it now. We signed a very formal and legal contract, calling in a notary to witness it. And I set out as happy as if I'd had good sense. At Manzanillo, learning that I'd have to wait ten days for a Pacific Mail boat, I took deck passage on a rusty Mexican freighter. The only other passengers were a band of gypsies camped on the forward deck.

At Acapulco, farther down the coast, a small, very handsome man with a huge servant came aboard.

## CHAPTER VI

IT ALL slides into one impression now: the hot ship smell of tar and bilge water, the gay dirty colors of that band of gypsies below us on the forward deck, the misty hills of Central America crawling by on the horizon and the sun soaking up what air there was—day after day; Palomar and I playing chess in the narrow shade of the captain's cabin, and that other one, the huge and silent Gabriel Zalas, stupidly looking on.

Soft womanish brown eyes had this Anselmo Palomar, and a short mustache that he stroked when he was thoughtful—hiding his mouth with his hand. I rarely did more than make him think; I could rarely beat him.

“You—how shall I say?—you detain your hand, Señor Pressley,” he used to say. “Your rook and bishop attack was brilliant for offense, but weak when you tried to withdraw after winning the pawn. Like your Mr. Wilson at Vera Cruz; eh, Gabriel?”

“It is so, Don Anselmo,” the giant Zalas would gravely agree—not really getting a word of it.

All Latin America was still laughing at us over that thing at Vera Cruz—dashing in and backing out again, accomplishing nothing but the downfall of one dictator who had insulted the American flag and the succession of another who thumbed his nose at it every day. Oh, I was bitter about that; we all were, down there. Before the Latins we had to pretend there was something behind it; something that didn't meet the eye; but among ourselves we were bitter, I won't deny.

“You could have had Mexico,” said Palomar; “all military men admit it.”

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"We don't want Mexico," I argued—wondering what, officially, we did want. Nobody at Washington seemed to have the faintest notion how the Latin mind worked.

"Then why take Vera Cruz? A pawn is worth nothing in itself. You Americans," Palomar used to say—"you Americans are not yet men. You are big strong boys with many ideas, much energy, but no serious resolution. You lose a game and you laugh; you lose an election and you laugh."

"To win next time."

"Perhaps!"

"At least we have peace and prosperity meanwhile."

"To play your game of business! Love, war, business, it is all a game to you! The day will come," said Palomar, "when a serious race shall govern you; under firm rule you will achieve strong destiny."

He was quite earnest about it; I grinned. In the foreign clubs in Mexico I had heard Germans drink openly to "The Day." It always tickled me. Palomar did not smile.

"We, the Latins, are men; we do not play at things. When we fight, we fight, and we die fighting rather than endure defeat."

And his eyes, too soft and liquid for a man, would begin to glow with exaltation at his own boasting. It was no use arguing with him.

One of the gypsies died the night before we made San José de Guatemala. It wasn't yellow fever he died of, but that made no difference to the port doctor. Blandly he condemned us to swelter in quarantine—hanging there at anchor, wallowing on those long slow swells, with thatched roofs in plain sight half a mile away; yonder the blessed coolness of the hills, so near and yet so far! The great twin peaks of the volcanoes Fire and Water rising stark from the green lowlands, blue, silver-headed, painted on the sky; the terraced

highlands, and the far misty line of the plateau that hid the capital and the northward slope into the vast, mysterious, hot forests of Peten—fortune waiting just beyond my finger tips! In English and Spanish and Romany we cursed our luck; even Gabriel Zalas, that patient whale of a man, grumbled deep in his throat.

Under a tarpaulin stretched across a derrick boom the dead gypsy lay sewed in canvas ready to feed the sharks, his woman sitting on her heels beside him, rocking, rocking in her bright dirty dress, chanting her song of mourning:

“Oh, oh, oh, oh!”

Four notes like that, a weird half melody of grief; and words in Romany and English: “Good-a-by, my John, my man! Oh, oh, oh, oh!”

Over and over, never stopping. Sun beating down on that dirty, weaving deck, naked children tumbling about like puppies, the elders of the tribe stolidly watching her, this woman grieving for her man; Palomar and I wearily beginning our hundredth game of chess.

Came the chief of the gypsies to exhort the captain, chattering in four languages to make himself understood. The captain knew only Spanish; I had to bring my English to his assistance.

The dead man was a son of kings. It was not fitting that his body should be thrown like garbage into the sea.

A son of kings! The old chieftain himself looked like the tail end of hard times; a withered, tattered mummy of a man; yet there was a hawk-nosed, hot-eyed dignity about him. It didn't seem funny to me. The captain, though, only snorted.

“When a man is dead he is dead. What matter whether he feeds the sharks at sea or the worms on land?”

Gabriel Zalas, his eyes on the distant beach, uttered a monosyllable. Even now a boat was putting off. I

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remembered afterward that Palomar stared very intently, hiding his mouth with his hand. Then his soft eyes returned to the captain and the gypsy.

"But, Captain," he put in, "no doubt these *bichos*"—creatures, dumb brutes, so he called the gypsies—"have feelings like people. Eh, *Capitan*? Perhaps it could be arranged if ——"

He rubbed thumb on finger, meaning gold.

"Well, if ——" said the captain, open to conviction.

With a gesture of resignation, that tattered old scarecrow produced a leather bag, amazingly fat and heavy.

"Eh, well, it is not legal, old one," said the captain; "but because I like you I will see what can be done."

I turned to remind Palomar that it was his move. He had made it, as you shall see. His chair was empty.

I didn't mind; I was very tired of chess. The boat came slowly, balancing on the rounded crest of a swell, sliding down and vanishing as if it had dived to the green bottom of the Pacific; heaving up and coming slowly on. It was no easy trick to catch the landing-stage, now submerged, now hanging high, the small boat rushing up and down like an elevator under the rusty wall of the ship's side; but one by one they made it and came aboard, a dozen barefooted fellows with rifles and one very fierce officer, gold braid all over him and white ropes looped grandly across his chest.

He addressed the captain in a stern, or military, manner; but his eyes were anxious and his hand never left the butt of his revolver.

"Summon all passengers!"

The gypsies, the crooning woman among them, were driven up like cattle from the forward deck. Afterward came Gabriel Zalas, very humble; but Palomar did not come.

"No others?"

"No others, my General. Only"—the captain

waved a casual hand at that canvas bundle on the forward deck—"only a poor *gitano* who has died. Very greatly his people wish to give him burial on ——"

"No others? Careful! I have seen the doctor."

"Eh—but wait!" The captain counted us most carefully. "My General, you are right. There was another. He sat here a moment ago!"

"Ah!" The general put his back against the rail, trying to look in all directions at once. "Summon the crew! Summon every soul!"

The crew came, looking guilty, every soul, doubtless with reason; but Palomar did not come.

"Now! Now, my brave ones! To the search! Hesitate not! Shoot anything that moves!"

"Your grace seeks some evil-doer?" I ventured politely.

"But a great one—that Mexican dog!"

Diplomatic relations with Mexico seemed a trifle strained; but the captain and Gabriel Zalas, both Mexicans, gave no sign of resentment, watching four or five black fins that cruised on the seaward side.

"This Don Palomar!" said the general, trying to look in all directions at once. It is a very great insult to use the title *don* with a surname alone—implying, you know, that it is really a given name; that the owner was born without any. He breathed more fiercely when he had done it and nothing happened.

Afterward I understood how important he felt, this mere infantry officer hunting Anselmo Palomar.

"The Butcher, he calls himself. But let me see him and I will show you how butchering is done! I am El Tiburon," said the general, twirling his mustache as the search proceeded and no sound of combat came; "The Shark, men call me. Your grace has heard of me?"

He did look something like a shark, at that, having a sharp nose and no chin to speak of; an apprehensive

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shark, if you can imagine such a thing. He was hunting Palomar; but gosh, how he dreaded to find him!

One of the soldiers, passing under the awning stretched on the forward deck, gave that canvas bundle a perfunctory jab with his bayonet. The gypsy woman moaned; the bundle did not move.

I admit that my sympathies were all with Palomar at the time. I had heard of the Mexican revolutionary called The Butcher, but I suppose I couldn't fit those hair-raising yarns to the undersized, gentlemanly, soft-eyed Palomar who played chess with me and argued politely about the United States. No doubt I had pictured an iron-faced monster about the size of Gabriel Zalas.

Well, he had courage, which was more than could be said for the man who hunted him. The bayonet that poked that canvas bundle was no joke.

The rifle squad returned.

"Nothing, my General. There is no other soul on board."

"Eh?" said the general. "You are sure?"

Casting an eye about for a swimming head, he saw the cruising fins. One of them rolled as he looked; a white belly flashed and for an instant a man's shoe broke the water.

"Ah!" said the general, expanding. "He thought to escape me! My little brothers have him now!"

"Eh, well," sighed the captain, crossing himself, "when a man is dead he is dead. A little drink for the heat, my General?"

They entered the cabin. Glasses clinked, oh, several times; gold no doubt clinked too. It was a mellowed military man who came out roaring to his squad, ordering them to bring that stiff canvas bundle and lower it into the boat. The woman stretched her arms after it, crooning, crooning.

"Good-a-by, my John, my man! Oh, oh, oh, oh!"



Hour after hour, never stopping. Sun beating down, the heavy wash of long swells running under us, idle and helpless after the weariness of days; this woman crooning, stretching her arms to land, while sharks cruised on the seaward side. You've no idea how a thing like that gets on your nerves.

Eh, well, when a man is dead he is dead! Our term of quarantine dragged by. When at last we reached the custom-house the lock of my trunk had somehow got broken, but nothing was missing that I could see. I had no trouble getting through. The customs officials, hardly noticing me, searched the huge and humble Zalas from head to foot.

## CHAPTER VII

THERE were plenty of Americans in the capital, but none of them looked me up at the Hotel Central to offer me a card to the American Club. The American minister was in Washington; his secretary, a languid Bostonian, considered the diplomatic service a sort of social career; it bored him even to speak of such crude things as lumber. The American consul gave me one audience and turned me over to a high-collared assistant who spoke his Spanish out of the book and knew less about the tropics than I did. I met transient Americans and an elderly windbag named Ben Murchison, who lived at the hotel, would sit with me in the dim stone-flagged barroom and talk as long as I would buy.

Plainly he had spotted me for a tenderfoot, but the entertainment was cheap at the price.

"I come out here peaceable as anybody," he said, "twenty-eight—no, twenty-nine years ago. Come out to run an engine on the first railroad ever built in Costa Rica, haulin' bananas. But a bunch of revolutionists captured my train and made me haul their army with a bayonet in the small of my back. And the gover'ment army laid for us, and the way them bullets whistled around was a caution.

"I was a peaceable feller in them days; but I got awful tired of bein' shot at, so I grabs me a rifle and a cartridge belt off a dead man and start snipin' from my cab. They waste lots of lead, all them fellers do. Pretty soon the gover'ment army notices that their men is droppin' too regular, and they edge off into the brush. I grabs me a couple more cartridge belts and we go after

'em, and they get backed up against a swamp and start throwin' down their guns.

"And the general of our army, he comes up and says I can be a captain. And he tries to kiss me. I wasn't used to that way of doin' in them days, so I slams him in the jaw, and he gets up and says I can be a colonel. Pretty soon after that we win the revolution and I get to be a general myself."

You see? Plainly he had been reading O. Henry or Richard Harding Davis. Many a weary evening he beguiled for me; and he rarely repeated, I'll say that for him. To hear him tell it, he remembered personally twenty or thirty wars.

"Yeah," he said, "I got a general's commission in pretty near every one of these durned republics. Time I got tired fightin' in one place, there was always a job waitin' somewheres else."

"Ever wounded?" I asked with a straight face.

"All over," said this shabby, thirsty Ben Murchison, who wasn't even lame. "Arms, legs, back, front, all over. The natives think I got a charmed life, the way I been shot and knifed and never killed."

But he didn't offer to show me.

"Yeah, they think I got some sort of magic. One night down in Nicaragua they shot up my house, which was stuck out on piles at the edge of a lake. Shot it up and set fire to it; and a bullet took me through the arm, so I tore up a piece of the floor and dropped into the lake and swum off under water, and they never seen me. And next day I walked in on this feller that done it, and he was so surprised I reckon he was half dead anyway before I shot him. But that time I almost died of malaria," said Ben Murchison, looking thirstily for the waiter, "bein' in the water so long with a hole in my arm. That lake was just rotten with malaria."

"Mosquitoes," I said, to show I knew.

He snorted.

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“Yeah, I know; bunch of American doctors that come down here every year, that’s what they claim. But you can’t tell me! One of ’em that was stationed here, he died just last week from the water he was foolin’ with.”

I knew about that—this American doctor dying of an intestinal infection he had been studying; this quiet soldier in the tremendous battle to tame the tropics. I had seen the funeral procession, block after block of the carriages of local dignitaries, to say nothing of the whole American colony; oh, yes, they did him honor when he was dead. I remember the curious emotion that took me by the throat; and for a little while I had been proud to be an American.

But you couldn’t make Ben Murchison see it. It was all foolishness to him.

“You can’t make the tropics healthy: you just got to be copper-riveted inside, that’s all. And you waste your time tryin’ to do anything for these people, anyway. Babyin’ ’em up! Even our consuls walk pigeon-toed these days, they’re so scared they’ll step on somebody’s feet. It makes me sick.”

“I can imagine you find it dull,” I said politely.

“Oh, well,” said Ben Murchison gloomily, “I’m gettin’ old. And the secretary of state, he done put me on notice I had to behave myself if I wanted to go on bein’ an American citizen. Though what good it does me I don’t know.”

I pretended to take it in—that about the secretary of state; and sincerely enough I agreed that it was nothing much to be an American, in these countries, anyway.

“Over in Mexico,” I fumed, “potting Americans is a sort of popular outdoor sport; perfectly safe so far as the State Department is concerned. More than a hundred murders so far and nobody caught, nor one cent of indemnity. They don’t kill many Britishers or

Germans, you bet! It's too expensive; but the open season on Americans goes the year round. More than one American has learned to hang out the British flag when trouble starts."

"It's the same down here," said Ben Murchison. "Let a Britisher get pinched, and his consul gallops right down and offers bail; and they take it, too, or a British gunboat'll be bulgin' in to find out why not. Let an American get pinched, and what happens?"

"Why, our consul writes a note, respectful, sayin' he hopes his man'll get a fair trial, and the judge says he will, and he does—maybe—after stayin' in jail six months. Yeah; lots of times I felt like claimin' to be a Britisher myself."

That tickled me—Ben Murchison claiming to be a Britisher, when even his Spanish was colored by the speech of his native Alabama. But solemnly, first pausing to look for the waiter, he went on to relate instances. He never lacked for instances of anything; he was a regular Sindbad for tales.

I listened just as solemnly. Not for worlds would I have hurt his feelings.

"I've heard of soldiers of fortune," I told him, "but I never expected to meet one."

"Oh, I never got no fortune out of it. Handled millions of pesos in my time, but all I got to show for it is a little sawmill down in Peten."

A sawmill in Peten! Now I was getting at something real.

"Mahogany?"

"Mostly."

"Shipping to the States?"

"I tried that, but there ain't no money in it. You got to have capital, or somebody to carry stock for you. Lumber freight eats you up, and if you don't exactly hit the market ——"

"Sawed lumber? Sure," I nodded wisely, quoting

now what I had learned from Petersen. "You ought to just square the logs and ship 'em that way. Log freight is cheap; you never miss the market with mahogany logs, and the American mills can cut it to better advantage than any mill down here."

"Oh, well," sighed Ben Murchison, "I just about quit tryin' to export. I got a little trade, enough to live on; can't get up much interest in it, anyway. I always feel like I'm askin' favors, tryin' to sell my stuff."

"You'd better come out of that," I said practically, "if you depend on lumber for a living. I don't know of anybody that's in the lumber trade for charity. They get what they pay for, you can bet on it; more if they can."

How much it would have saved me if I had taken those words of wisdom to myself!

"You in the lumber business?" Ben Murchison asked me.

"Well, I'm not a lumberman myself; a trader, rather. I'm connected"—a good safe word, "connected"—"with a big lumber company that has saw-mills in Texas and Mexico. Came out ahead to get a timber concession for them. Mahogany, too, by the way, right down in your district."

"Gover'ment timber?" He seemed impressed.

I nodded carelessly.

"Seen the pres'dent yet?"

And to keep from spoiling the impression, I had to look for the waiter myself. I had not seen the president.

I had seen the minister of hacienda, which shows how green I was. The matter was in his department, yes; but I ought to have known that these republics were one-man affairs. I should have called on the minister for politeness' sake, but at the same time I ought to have laid my plans to reach the boss—the president.

It dawned on me finally; but it was more easily said than done. The minister of hacienda promised to get me an interview and didn't. It was very difficult, he told me.

I found it so. Fretfully, one day, I said as much to Ben Murchison.

"Well," said he, "if you'd been shot at as often as the Old Man has, you'd be bashful about strangers too."

His mild eyes looked at me and then away, fixing, possibly from force of habit, on the waiter. Obliging, I hissed and ordered.

"One time," said Ben Murchison, "they tried to blow him up right here in front of the hotel. Had the street mined and touched it off while his carriage was goin' over. Killed the coachman all right, and the horses, and they found a piece of the carriage on top of the hotel; but come to find out, the Old Man was standin' on the sidewalk fifty feet back all the time. Five minutes he had the gang rounded up and shot. Found their battery in the very room you got now," he said solemnly, looking at me.

It was a realistic touch, that last detail; otherwise it was regulation stuff. I grinned and nodded. There are such tales about every president of any of those countries.

"Another time they was goin' to shoot him at his own inauguration. They dip the flag, you know, and they was goin' to shoot while his face was hid; some of his own guard. Didn't have the nerve to do it while he was lookin' at 'em. Well, that pretty near come off; only the flag bearer got rattled and dipped the flag too low and bumped the Old Man's head. So he knew somethin' was wrong and dropped flat on his face and let 'em empty their guns, and then he gets up and has the rest of the guard shoot them. He don't waste no time, the Old Man don't; he does a thing while he's in the humor.

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"But he never said a word about assassination; he's kind of touchy that way. He just had 'em executed for shootin' the flag full of holes."

Yes, the entertainment was cheap at the price. I hissed for the waiter again.

"Much obliged; the same," said Ben Murchison. "Well, another time his secretary loaded the Old Man's private telephone, the one that don't never ring unless the secretary says so. Well, it rung; but the Old Man sort of felt somethin' funny, the way the secretary looked or somethin', so he just jerks a thumb at it ——"

Realistically jerking his own thumb, he had to interrupt himself to stop the waiter, who thought it was a signal to take the glass away.

"Jerks a thumb at it and says to see who it is. The secretary tries to stall out of it, and then the Old Man knows there's somethin' funny, so he just sits and looks at him till he does it. Course, that feller knew it was all day with him, anyway."

"Must have a compelling eye."

"Yeah," said Ben Murchison. "Peaceable-lookin' feller too." He said it with such a convincingly casual air that I couldn't resist.

"You know him personally, I suppose?"

"Well," he muttered, not looking at me, "I used to. Why?"

"I was thinking you might introduce me," I said gravely.

Then I was ashamed. It wasn't sporting to ask for tales and then bait your Sindbad. He was so uncomfortable that he wouldn't look at me, only sat tracing circles on the bleached table top with a square forefinger; I remember the faded freckles on it, somehow a pathetic symbol of the man's fading, shabby years.

"Don't bother about it," I said kindly. "I'll get to him."



“Well, you know how it is. He’s the president of a country; you can’t just bulge in and see him like he was runnin’ an ice factory or somethin’. Fact is, I haven’t seen him myself, not to talk to, for—well, a long time. I like you all right, but ——”

“Thanks,” I said. “I quite understand.”

Then he looked up at me and grinned.

“Well, come right down to it,” he said, “how do I know you don’t want to take a shot at him yourself?”

“Fair enough,” I admitted. “Have a drink!”

Yes, it was regulation stuff, that about the president—the Old Man they called him; you rarely heard his name mentioned aloud. Walls had ears and all that sort of thing. Good advertising, though; as a practical man I had to admit that. You’ll note that every one of those tales had a moral attached: The Old Man was a sort of invisible, all-seeing, all-hearing power, very unhealthy to oppose. He certainly had them bluffed. From the bootblacks in the plaza to the mustachioed dandies in the cafés, to a man they looked scared if you spoke of him.

It didn’t awe me. I was a practical man here on important business, not only to make my fortune but to do the country a service, developing resources they hadn’t the energy or the brains to use. As a practical man I camped daily in the palace, but I did not see the president. I saw the secretary of the president’s secretary; I saw him many times.

“To-day it is impossible, señor. Perhaps tomorrow?”

## CHAPTER VIII

TO-MORROW! If I hadn't been a hardened and cynical old-timer it would have driven me crazy. It was like doing business with children; you couldn't pin them down. They wouldn't even take business seriously. Once, following too close on the heels of the buttoned flunky who announced me, a half-baked youth with a face the color of pale gingerbread, I heard him snicker:

“Here is that American again!”

And entering, I saw the secretary of the president's secretary straighten his face just in time.

They didn't laugh at Britishers or Germans—not in those days! The British and the Germans were at war; their consuls took no nonsense and their subjects walked boldly, conscious of strong policies behind them. Only American consuls walked pigeon-toed for fear they'd step on somebody's feet; only Americans were fair game for anybody who felt like laughing.

In Milo, Indiana, I had firmly believed that an American could go anywhere, protected and upheld by the greatest nation in the world. Bitterly, as instance followed instance, it came to me that there was a difference between bigness and greatness. In the soft hands of politicians the big stick had turned into a ridiculous stuffed club.

Bitterly, writing home, I spoke of these things to Gus Hardy. Also, as one hardened and cynical old-timer to another, I told him about that thirsty and diverting old liar Ben Murchison—expecting Gus to enjoy the joke.

His answer jarred me considerably:

*Dear Buck:* You are the luckiest guy I ever heard of. General Murchison can give you more dope on those countries than any man alive, only I read in the papers that he was dead. But he has been getting killed in the papers for twenty years. I might have known nothing would ever get that old war horse; he will just have to dry up and blow away.

Yes, that's right about our consuls; they are scared to do anything on account of the politicians they take orders from. Teddy Roosevelt was the boy. He was always looking for trouble and so he never got any back talk.

Tell General Murchison hello for me. He may remember me; I was with him in one mix-up in Honduras and he sure is one Foxy Grandpa in a scrap. If you can get him interested he can pull wires for you with anybody down there unless he happens to be fighting them at the time.

We are all well, and Martha says tell you hello.

Ben Murchison was real!

To show you how jarred I was, the matter of getting him to pull wires for me didn't even occur to me at the time. Humbly I looked for him in the bar of the Hotel Central, just to buy him a drink and get him to talk some more.

He wasn't there. Neither was he in the plaza, nor in any of the cafés along the Calle Central. Looking for him, slowly something came to me. It had been there all the time; I had seen it and heard it every day—with one eye shut and my tongue in my cheek, too wise, you know, too wise to be taken in! I was nearly thirty years old and I knew what was reasonable—in Milo, Indiana.

Grow up with a point of view and it takes a jolt to shake it off.

Now I felt it, an invisible, almost tangible something that meshed this ancient city on its sunlit hills, a mental

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something, none the less real. Mustachioed dandies who looked furtively over their shoulders; ragged, half-naked bootblacks in the plaza who dropped their voices and watched you from the corners of their eyes as you passed, a stranger; the uneasy silence that fell anywhere if you spoke irritably of the administration—that was fear! No man knew what careless word might reach the president, that mysterious Old Man who never appeared in public yet had eyes and ears everywhere—sitting invisible at the center of his web of espionage and power; himself afraid, knowing the fate of presidents.

The Mayas in the market place—strange remnant of America's most ancient race; unlike all other Indians; stunted, flat-faced, slant-eyed Orientals, here in the western world; before recorded time their fathers built monuments to bearded kings—what did a president mean to them? A vague, harsh demigod, perhaps; but in their history greater gods had died.

Insecurity, that was the word. A million sullen brown men, whose minds no white man ever reached; a few thousand white men, held in fear by one old man, himself unceasingly afraid.

I didn't think it out as I have set it down; I only felt the reality of it; felt it with something of Ben Murchison's own philosophical detachment. And that evening I looked for him in the dim, stone-flagged bar-room of the Hotel Central, to buy him a drink and get him to talk some more.

He hadn't come.

Two strangers sat at our usual table, a fat smooth one, very sluggish, and a scholarly one with eye-glasses and a cropped black beard; both natives of the upper class. I was turning away when the bearded one looked up.

Beards are common enough in that country where every man grows hair on the face if he can; a sign of

virility they call it, though probably the real reason is to deny their Indian blood. It changed this fellow more than you would think; made him look bigger somehow.

But I knew those eyes, too soft and liquid for a man. Just for an instant his hand went thoughtfully to his face—hiding his mouth in a gesture I had seen a thousand times.

“Señor Pressley! What pleasure!” cried Anselmo Palomar.

## CHAPTER IX

HE DIDN'T wait for me to speak. With flattering cordiality he jumped up and held out both his hands, his white teeth showing pleasantly through his new black beard.

"Your grace does not remember me? I am Antonio Pérez Verdia, who had the honor to know you in the City of Mexico."

Quickly and clearly he said it; rattling on about imaginary incidents in the City of Mexico, giving me a chance to get it—this soft-eyed fellow incredibly called The Butcher, who had come ashore in the canvas wrappings of a dead man. I had to laugh, seeing him there well groomed and smiling.

"Certainly I remember. Did you find the voyage—hot?"

But what iron nerve it must have taken, eh? to lie so long stiff and motionless, mastering the pain of that careless bayonet jab; stifling and helpless in the very hands of the soldiers who hunted him; wondering if he could escape before he was discovered or buried alive! Here was a romantic figure second only to Ben Murchison himself.

Yes, he had courage, that Butcher. Even afterward I had to admit that.

"I present my friend," said Palomar, alias Pérez Verdia, introducing me; and the fat man rose and bowed and murmured his own name, as the custom is.

Borrego he called himself. Borrego means sheep; maybe it was the name that suggested it; he was fat and he moved seldom, like a pale Buddha only half

alive; but he reminded me somehow of a sheep—a sluggish, wicked ram, deceptively mild. I didn't like him at first.

"We expect your friend Don Benjamin," said Palomar, urging me to a seat and hissing for the waiter.

And quietly, openly, he sat there in the crowded barroom, sipping his drink, saying polite nothings; men passing all about him, any one of whom might betray him to his death.

"How did you escape being buried?" I asked him guardedly.

He answered carelessly, lifting a well-groomed shoulder.

"Everywhere there are those who sleep with open eyes."

"And here? You are safe here?"

He shrugged again.

"The waiter with the scar on his chin is an agent of the government, but he does not know me. The rest are friends, or strangers—so far as I know."

"Was the bayonet wound serious?"

"Troublesome. It has delayed us, but I am quite cured now."

His eyes strayed often, impatiently rather than anxiously, to the door. He had said he expected Ben Murchison. And it came to me that it was too late to think of getting Ben Murchison to pull wires for me with the president. Gus Hardy had said it:

"Unless he happens to be fighting them at the time!"

A ruddy, middle-aged man with bleached mustaches, Norwegian he looked to be, came in and took a place at a neighboring table. As he sat down he glanced curiously from me to Palomar; and Palomar nodded almost imperceptibly, as if vouching for me.

The bar was unusually full and noisy. Cigarette smoke fogged the air; through the clatter of dice and

hubbub of voices nothing less than a shout was likely to be overheard. Afterward I understood this. Noise is a good screen for stealthy things; and if public violence becomes necessary, how can you cover it better than with a drunken riot?

Ben Murchison came in, unpicturesque as ever. He looked no part of the dashing adventurer, the stormy petrel of the tropics; he was only an elderly man in decent if shabby black, his stringy jaws clamped on a cigar and an elderly bulge under his belt. His mild eyes narrowed a little, surprised, I thought, to see me already thick as thieves with his fellow adventurers.

He shook hands with Palomar and Borrego and nodded to me, but did not sit with us; Palomar, murmuring an apology to me, rose and went with him to the table where the Norwegian sat. I didn't mind, being no adventurer myself. But Borrego seemed to think I might; surprisingly he roused himself to entertain me.

He was surprisingly well informed. Like most Latins in those days, he openly admired Germany.

"Of the greater nations," he said, "she alone has vision, is the only forward-looking one. England is decaying. You will not take offense, Señor Pressley?"

I grinned and told him he needn't apologize to me. I was American, and by proclamation of our own State Department we were neutral; you remember.

"American!" he echoed, a curious fire waking in those sluggish eyes of his. "Tell me, my friend, by what right do the Yanquis claim that name? Are we not all American?"

Many Latin-Americans are touchy on that point; indulgently I admitted it. Certainly there were other American nations, some of them having more or less united states. Borrego argued that we properly had no name at all.

"A name," he said fiercely, "no nation has a right to claim unless it reaches from Alaska to Patagonia,



frozen north to frozen south, taking in the whole world that is America!"

"Some of our neighbors," I reminded him, "seem to think our State Department means to do just that. Though on what signs they base their fear I have been unable to find out."

"Your State Department!" said this fat Borrego. "There is not a statesman in it. Merchants, preachers, petty lawyers and politicians; diplomats, no!" And then, abating his fierceness, he added, "You will not take offense?"

He got no argument out of me there.

It's odd how, thinking back, you can see where you missed things you ought to have noticed. I don't know just when I began to like Borrego better. We hissed often for the waiter and grew genial and friendly. At times he almost leaned on my shoulder, so confidential he became.

He knew my business in the country; no doubt Ben Murchison or Palomar had told him.

"And the Señor Petersen, you left him well?"

"You know Petersen?" I said, surprised.

"But yes; he was here two years ago."

Petersen hadn't told me that. Didn't want me to know he had tried for that concession himself, eh?

"He was here surveying certain timber tracts," said Borrego; "mahogany, I believe. Are those the same that interest him now?"

"No doubt," I said, and you may believe that I was thoughtful.

So that was how Petersen got his figures so complete. I had supposed he got them from the government, which shows again how green I was. Would any government carefully survey resources it hadn't the energy or the brains to use?

So that was why his proposition had been so liberal; he himself had tried and failed; he knew what chance I

had, that canny Swede! And I had played into his hands, betting my time and expenses on the chance of winning! If I won, he won; if I lost, I lost.

"But you," said Borrego, seeming to read my mind, "will succeed where he failed; I, Joaquin Borrego, promise it. This administration has been criminally stupid, discouraging foreign capital; but a change is coming—you have guessed it?—soon!"

I nodded, hissing for the waiter.

"And Don Anselmo esteems you very much."

It came to me that Gus Hardy was right. I was a lucky guy! In the future, when Ben Murchison was mentioned, or that other romantic figure, Anselmo Palomar, I would say casually, "Yes, I know him well. Was with him in one mix-up down in Guatemala. Got a timber concession out of it."

"In the district of Peten," inquired Borrego, "near the mountain Tsuncal?"

"There is a mountain," I said, "but it is Chimay, I think." And I took out the map and glanced at it. "Yes, Chimay."

"But here is Tsuncal. It is the same."

And he laughed at me because I had inside pockets in my vest.

"Your own invention, Señor Pressley?"

"Mothered by necessity," I grinned. "Your countrymen have light fingers, Señor Borrego!" And mocking his own anxious courtesy, I added, "You will not take offense?"

He laughed.

"On the contrary, my compliments. I have your permission to instruct my own tailor?"

Yes, we were genial. Revolution? It didn't shock me. It was only their way of changing administrations; one revolution had occurred while I was in Mexico, passed invisible and harmless like a noise off stage, merely tightening money and stopping trade. War?

Great nations were at war; this would be a trifle by comparison. Chiefly I felt curiosity to see how it worked.

The party at the next table was breaking up. Ben Murchison came over; I got the odd impression that Borrego was annoyed.

It passed quickly, though. Genially he clinked his glass on mine. Now I was fairly well hardened to the indoor sport of the tropics; but that last drink seemed one too many. Dimly I remember that Borrego embraced me at parting.

"I never can get used to men huggin' each other," observed Ben Murchison. "I never do it if I can help it without hurtin' a guy's feelin's. It makes me sick."

I wasn't drunk. I have been, I admit, but this was different; as if I, far inside myself, had to fight hard to know what happened outside.

"Hey!" said Ben Murchison. "Straighten up! You come on to bed."

"Wait minute," I insisted vaguely. "Somethin' show you."

I could see him, but I couldn't feel my own hands. For a moment I forgot what I was looking for—Gus Hardy's letter. Then I found it in a side pocket of my coat; I saw it in my hand and remembered. It was terrible labor to keep awake.

"Letter. Friend of yours." I gave it to him.

He seemed chiefly interested in the last line.

"Well, well, and so Gus has found him a nice girl and settled down! That's fine, that's fine! I never thought he would."

"Remember him, do you?" I managed the syllables one at a time.

"Sure, I remember him. Easy-goin' young feller, but hell on wheels when trouble catches up with him."

Dimly but wistfully, far inside the heavy body that was myself, I knew that nobody would ever call me hell

on wheels. I had a gift for buying and selling things and that was all. Here adventure was going on around me and it was all I could do just to keep straight in my chair. Couldn't even carry liquor like a man.

It didn't occur to me that I had been drugged. Why should anybody drug me? I set my numb jaw with the effort to keep awake.

"You come on to bed, Buck. Stand up! Walk!"

I made a prodigious effort, pleased to be called Buck. Nobody but Gus Hardy had ever called me Buck. In Milo, Indiana, people called me by my first name, Howard; in Mexico they called me—let me confess it now—Alice.

I remember that I undressed myself, refusing Ben Murchison's help; remember realizing that he was in my room, that as his host I should be sociable.

"Had to get back in ole game, huh? Good ole rev-lutionary game," I said, and was ashamed that words should sound so thick.

No amount of liquor ever seemed to affect Ben Murchison, except sometimes to make him gloomy. He was gloomy now.

"Oh, I don't know, Buck," said he, sitting gloomily on my bed. "I must be gettin' old. It makes me sick."

Something did that very thing for me, and I felt worse before I felt better. I could feel my hands then, tingling.

"Sorry," I mumbled, crawling into bed. "Must—been somethin' wrong that liquor."

"Yeah; the amount, likely," he grunted. "Say, Buck, don't talk if you don't feel like it; but who is this guy, Petersen?"

"Fellow hired me come here," I muttered, my eyes shut.

"Humph!" said Ben Murchison. "And Hartz?"

"Who?"

"Hartz. That fox-faced feller."

"Don't know him."

"How about this Portugee; what's his name? Barbas."

"Don't know any Portugee."

"The hell you don't! And him Petersen's own shadow!"

"Never saw much of Petersen," I explained laboriously. "Only around American Club."

It seemed after a disconnected time that I heard Ben Murchison snort, "What you tryin' to do, Buck! String me!"

"Huh?" I said vaguely.

"If you saw that guy in the American Club I'll eat my hat!"

"Why not? Old member. Big lumber man."

"I'd give four dollars if you was sober," said Ben Murchison, very gloomy. "There's some shenanigan about this, and I'll be durned if I can figure out how a nice young feller like you come to be mixed up in it. If you want to throw a bluff you ought to pick out somethin' you know somethin' about."

"Wha'd d'ye mean, bluff?"

"Petersen don't know no more about lumber than a hog does about salvation, and neither do you. I knew this gang was draggin' out awful big guns for the size game they claim they're fixin' to shoot. Too durned many cooks for one revolution! Listen, Buck ——"

I must have dozed. I heard his gloomy voice continuing some train of thought I must have missed.

"Yeah, Gus Hardy's got the right idea. Get you a nice girl and settle down and behave yourself, while you ——"

"Comes well from you," I muttered.

"—— while you still got a chance to fit in with folks that can think as fast as you can. I don't know what it is, Buck; a feller gets used to bein' a high-jumpin' frog in a mud puddle like this, and sooner or

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later he goes home where all the frogs jump quick and far, and he can't stand it. Makes him dizzy. Makes him feel rusty and slow in the head.

"Oh, I tried it, two-three times. First I used to get mad because reporters kept followin' me around takin' pictures of me and printin' all kinds of fool stuff about me; and then I got awful lonesome because nobody paid any attention to me at all. When you get to my time of life, Buck ——"

The sense of it reached me dimly and the steady sound of his voice put me to sleep. But I remember him sitting there, chewing a cigar stump and gazing at the plastered wall, looking more like a tired, broken-down storekeeper than a veteran of many wars—this soldier of fortune who had got no fortune out of it; this shabby, thirsty Ben Murchison, lonely and sad and old.

## CHAPTER X

WHEN you have been drugged with laudanum you may fight off sleep for a while, but your memory seems to slip a cog at the point where you began to go under. Like a man stunned by a blow on the head, you wake confused, wondering, "Where am I? What happened? How did I get here?"

Peaceful sounds of a chamberman mopping in the corridor, the wet slap-slap of his mop and the grating noise of his bucket dragged on the stone floor. Unhurried wheels and hoofs in the cobbled street; the distant musical cry of a street vender; the city going drowsily about its business. It seemed unreasonable somehow. What was this feeling of something about to happen?

I struggled out of bed. Regularity and punctuality were major virtues to me in those days, and trying to see the president had become an occupation in itself. By the high and placid sun at the barred window I was due at the palace for the daily "To-day it is impossible, señor. Perhaps to-morrow?"

What made my tongue and brain so fuzzy? Where had I been last night?

Ah! I remembered. The familiar stone-flagged bar-room fogged with cigarette smoke, loud with voices and the clatter of dice; the fat Borrego and I very genial, hissing often for the waiter; at the next table Ben Murchison and Anselmo Palomar and their fellow adventurers, plotting revolution!

And I grinned, thinking, "To-morrow, eh? How many to-morrows are left to you and the rest of the

small fry who ride on the coat tails of importance, O secretary of the president's secretary!"

It's odd. In Milo, Indiana, nothing could have got me even into the fringe of such a thing. I, Howard Pressley, was a plain and serious business man; I had come here with a plain business proposition, and in days and weeks of cooling my heels, something had happened to me. Impatience? Resentment? Yes, but there was something else.

It's hard to put a name to. Black beaches and the wash of giant seas, drowsy heat and wild and sudden storm; poisonous, creeping jungle, and mountains rising huge, blue, silver-headed, painted on the sky—plateaus where clouds roll vast below you and the sun burns you through icy air—something that lifts you from the things you knew. Great monuments sticking up through jungle rot, the bones of cities dead two thousand years; switch engines clanking past them with bananas for the States. Men fussing about their small affairs under the very nose of Nature immense and violent, blind and invincible; men living briefly and the green jungle creeping to swallow the things they do.

You know? A feeling that nothing matters much. Something that makes you different from the man you were.

Coffee cleared my head and I began to wonder why my memory of last night trailed off so queerly. I had been drinking, yes; but everything was clear up to a certain point: Borrego proposing one last drink; Borrego, strangely affectionate, embracing me at parting. After that—what?

Ben Murchison, soldier of fortune who had got no fortune out of it, gloomily giving me good advice. Hazy, disjointed bits of it came back to me out of that overpowering fog of sleep. Ben Murchison seemed to think I was mixed up in the revolution myself!



What was it he had said about Petersen?

"If you saw that guy in the American Club I'll eat my hat!"

But I had seen him there many times. Why not? Petersen's standing in Mexico City was of the best. Everybody knew him, the manager of an important American lumber company.

Then out of a vague resentment I remembered something else. According to Borrego, Petersen had been here in Guatemala two years ago; had tried to get this mahogany concession himself. Why had Petersen sent me here without telling me that? Had he done something scandalous here?

What were those other names Ben Murchison was asking about? I couldn't remember. Some shenanigan, he said; something about guns too big for the size of the game.

It needed explaining and Ben Murchison was the man to do it. I found him in a shady corner of the patio, his chair tilted comfortably back against the wall. Comfortably he greeted me.

"Mornin', Buck. Drag up a chair."

In the thin clear light of reflected sunshine he looked less than ever the dashing adventurer, the stormy petrel of the tropics. His faded, freckled hands, sleepily folded across that elderly bulge at his middle, were the hands of a mechanic, not a killer. The set of his stringy jaw, clamped as usual on a frayed cigar, was mild; his brows were sandy and unimpressive, his blue eyes kindly. He wore a belt and suspenders. There is something indescribably harmless-looking about an elderly man who wears a belt and suspenders too.

He seemed to have forgotten all about the revolution. We talked a little, idly, and for some reason I found myself calling him Uncle Ben; I don't know why. Maybe it was because of that fatherly lecture he had given me last night; maybe it was because he called me Buck.

“By the way,” I prompted him, a little sheepishly—still thinking, you know, that I had drunk too much last night, “I seem to remember you were asking something about Petersen.”

He smoked a while before replying.

“Buck,” he said, “I reckon I ought to tell you I ain’t made up my mind about this thing. I admit it gets awful dull, just settin’ around foolin’ with a little lumber business. I been wishin’ somethin’ would happen, I admit that. And when these fellers first come around with their war talk I let ’em talk, just for the sake of old times, all the time tellin’ myself I wasn’t goin’ to have nothin’ to do with it. Like I was tellin’ you, I promised the secretary up at Washington I was goin’ to behave myself from now on.”

Yes; he had told me and I hadn’t believed him.

“But the more I heard about it the funnier it smelled. So I let ’em keep on talkin’, and even yet I can’t figure out what it is. Maybe you know. But I just thought I’d tell you I ain’t made up my mind, so you wouldn’t spill nothin’ you didn’t want to.”

“About the revolution? I won’t,” I grinned, “for the simple reason that I don’t know a thing—except what I heard last night, and what anybody can feel in the air.”

He stopped in the act of relighting his cigar to look at me.

“Didn’t you say you was workin’ for Petersen?”

“Yes. What’s Petersen got to do with it?”

“That’s what I want to know,” he said, puffing. “Him and all these other fellers bobbin’ up.”

“Last night?” I stared at him. “Why, man, Petersen’s in Mexico City, a thousand miles from here!”

“He got there awful quick then. He was settin’ within fifteen feet of you.”

“Well,” I said practically, “you’re talking about some other Petersen then. That explains it.”

"Maybe so, maybe so," he grunted. "Say your Petersen's a lumber man, and sent you down here to get this mahogany concession?"

"At last!" I grinned. "You have guessed my secret!"

But Ben Murchison didn't smile.

"Buck, you know what that concession's worth?"

"Two or three million, I should say."

"And you mean to tell me they sent a green kid after it?"

I was still young enough to be a little sensitive on that point. I asked him, with dignity, how old he thought I was.

"You could be ninety," he grumbled, "and green." He looked at me very thoughtfully. "Or else you're a wonder at puttin' on. No, I don't believe nobody could be that innocent and live."

"Innocent?" I wasn't hurt. I really wanted to know.

"Bulgin' in here," said Ben Murchison, "makin' a play to see the president, with nobody to stand for you and not even a credential to your name."

I had to laugh.

"You've lived down here," I said, "so long that you suspect everybody that plays a lone hand, haven't you? I'm young, I admit, but I've handled some sizable deals; not as big as this one, but sizable. As far as credentials go ——"

I reached into the right-hand inside pocket of my vest, where I carried the papers I hoped to need any day at the palace; the map and the plats of the timber tracts, with the name of Petersen's company on them.

The pocket was empty!

"Any company that does business in Mexico," said Ben Murchison, going on, "ought to know better. Sendin' a green man down here, 'specially when Mexico and Guatemala are just about as friendly as a hawk and

a chicken. Yeah, it sure smells funny. I bet I have to buy me a stack of chips and take a hand in it yet, promise or no promise."

"Wait a minute!" I said, and bolted for my room.

My map and my timber plats were nowhere to be seen. I pawed through my trunk, hastily, then carefully. The bulky sheets of the timber cruise were gone too. Even my contract with Petersen was gone. Ben Murchison was right; I hadn't a credential to my name!

What were those papers worth to anybody but myself? Anybody could have robbed my trunk; Borrego could have picked my pocket—the fat and smooth Borrego, embracing me in the fog that came on me after that last drink. Was Borrego in the lumber business? Ben Murchison was.

But there were a thousand miles of mahogany in Peten. Why should he want mine?

Thoughtfully I started back to the patio. Rounding a turn in the corridor I came on a sudden commotion in the entryway; an officer with clanking saber, striding on very military heels; behind him a squad of sandal-footed soldiers whose crossed belts bristled with cartridges, their blue-denim legs flapping ridiculously in the German goose-step. The officer barked; with a final scissors swing of legs and a crash of rifle butts on the pavement the squad halted before Ben Murchison. Scissoring again, the officer faced him and saluted.

"General Benjamin Murchison!"

Ben Murchison, his mild face all at once bleak and grim, returned the salute.

"Speak, Captain!"

"It is my duty to place you under arrest."

Ben Murchison's hand at his side was warning me to keep back.

I hurried up.

"What have they got you for? What's the charge?"

He sighed.

“What do you think a revolution is, Buck? A picnic? I told those fellers they was makin’ a fool play, comin’ here. The Old Man’ll have the whole gang rounded up by night.”

“What’ll I do? Tell the consul?”

“Save your breath,” said Ben Murchison. . . .

“Well, good-by, Buck. You take my advice and don’t you know a durned thing about this.”

They marched out.

## CHAPTER XI

NATURALLY I did not save my breath. At the consulate I pushed that high-collared assistant out of the way and walked into the consul's office.

"Well!" said the consul. "You might at least take off your hat, young man."

"Ben Murchison has been arrested."

"I'm not surprised."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

I suppose I glared. He took off his glasses and wagged them at me.

"Ben Murchison's too old a bird not to know what he's doing. Personally, I like the old reprobate; but officially, my hat's off to the administration for grabbing him before he got started. When he goes on the war-path he's the most dangerous man unhung."

But I remembered that lonely old fellow talking wistfully of the United States, a strange country where reporters followed him about and nobody else paid any attention to him at all.

"There's a revolution cooking," said the consul, "and I'd bet my last dollar he's right in the middle of the kitchen. No doubt you know all about it; you've been with him pretty constantly since you came."

I was in a peculiar position, not knowing how much I had a right to say. Those fellows had trusted me. I said nothing; the consul didn't seem to notice my hesitation.

"Mind you, I'm not asking," he went on. "I keep strictly out of local politics and I advise you to do the

same. Personally, I hoped Ben Murchison was settling down in his old age. Not six months ago he made a trip to Washington to get his American citizenship straightened out; made all sorts of promises to be good, and on that condition the department confirmed it."

"Very kind of the department," I said bitterly, "only it doesn't mean anything!"

"No," said the consul. "He'd be about as happy in the States as a fish up a tree. After thirty years he suddenly takes a notion to find out whether he's still an American. Funny, eh?"

"'Funny,'" I said furiously, "is exactly the word! If it was a German that was in jail his consul would have him out of there in jig time, or there'd be a German gunboat bulging in to find out why not; but an American is a joke—in these countries, anyway!"

"Personally," said the consul, "I admit it."

He didn't lose his temper, I'll say that for him.

"If we were at Washington we'd do things differently, wouldn't we? You and I, living here, know that the Latins don't get our point of view at all. Bully or be bullied, dog eat dog, that's their notion. They respect nothing but a show of strength. That's why they're mostly pro-German; the loud voice and the swift kick are something they can understand.

"It's a fine ideal," he said gravely, "to treat all peoples alike. The trouble is that all peoples are positively not alike."

"And the weaker they are, the cockier they get when they think it's safe!"

"Oh, I admit it," said the consul, "personally. Many a time I've yearned to throw a scare into them for their souls' good; but I have my instructions, and if I don't follow them somebody else will." He sighed. "The Colossus of the North they call us, but I'm afraid they're getting the idea that the Colossus is stuffed with straw. They make faces at him and nothing hap-

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pens. They see Germany—and England, too, for that matter—kick his shins whenever they feel like it, and nothing happens.”

This consul was human. I decided to be frank myself.

“Look here! You understand I haven’t got a thing to do with it—personally,” I said, borrowing his word; “but I do happen to know there’s a revolution cooking. And I also happen to know that Ben Murchison’s trying to keep his word and stay out of it.”

“Well,” said the consul, “he’s out! The Old Man will see to that. No credit to Ben; to my certain knowledge he’s been dickering with the Palomar crowd for two months. I even took it on myself to warn him; but, of course, if he wants to get himself shot he has a perfect right to do it.”

“He thinks there’s some shenanigan about it,” I argued, “and he’s trying to find out what it is.”

“He’s kidding you,” snorted the consul, “or himself. I know Ben. Trouble is what he lives on. When this Palomar agitation started up again he hinted that we ought to put our foot down because Palomar was anti-American; plain case of sour grapes, that’s all; he couldn’t stand to see a fuss and not be in it. Hell!” said the consul. “If we knocked off all the anti-American presidents, these countries wouldn’t have any.”

“To show you how little I know about it,” I said thoughtfully, “I didn’t know Palomar was their man for president. Thought he was a Mexican, just free-lancing down here.”

“It’s the other way about. He ran against the Old Man in the election here three years ago, and skipped out when he got licked. Made quite a name for himself in Mexico, I understand.”

I knew that name: The Butcher. Still it didn’t make much impression on me, thinking of the soft-eyed,



gentlemanly Palomar who had played chess with me and argued politely about the United States.

"Seems to be coming back strong," added the consul. "I doubt if the Old Man can even depend on the army now. The administration's only chance is to grab 'em off before they get going. Between me and you, I wouldn't be surprised to see Mexican troops in it."

I could see now how the thing might have roots in Mexico; I didn't dream how much farther. Nobody could have guessed it then. How could little Guatemala be formidable?

Stubbornly I came back to the point.

"You're judging Ben Murchison on his reputation. Give him the benefit of the doubt," I pleaded. "If his own country lies down on him now he's done for. I've got a carriage outside; won't you come with me to see him—personally?"

"To ease your pain," said the consul, "I will. But you're an optimist. I know Ben."

The capital sits on a plateau at an elevation of several thousand feet. Northward the mountains tower tier on tier, volcanic cone and ridge of vast upheaval, a wilderness from which great storms slip down. On this day, I remember, chilly winds lurked in the shadowed cross-streets, whisking out, picking up twisting pillars of dust from the cobbled pavement, dancing high with them and letting them dissolve; coloring the thin clear sunshine with a threat of storm.

Though the consul rode with me, I felt singularly alone, depressed and grim.

At the police station they denied any knowledge of Ben Murchison. I spoke of the soldiers taking him, and they looked at one another with solemn significance.

"He's at the military prison then," said the consul. "Why didn't you say so before? The Old Man means business if he sent soldiers after him. Ben may be standing up against a wall by now."

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The military prison was grim, forbidding in that eerie light. Thick walls, the outer edges studded with broken glass, where sentries paced; an archway with ponderous iron-studded doors; bare, hard-packed earth; shadows and inner walls with small high windows, iron-barred. The wind made fitful noises about that gloomy place; I remembered weird tales of torture, and I believed them now.

An officer came and looked at us with cold black eyes. We stated our names and our errand. The consul's name did not impress him; he looked at me as if he meant to know me when he saw me again.

“‘Oward Pr-ressley?”

I bowed. He did not return the courtesy, but asked me to spell my name. Then he spoke to a sergeant who wore a pen over his ear.

“I have here for you. Entrance denied!”

What he had was a long official envelope, heavily sealed. I heard the consul grunt as I broke the seal. There was a printed form, my name, the date, even the hour written in flowing script. The signature was illegible, but the line under it was plain:

“Presidente de la Republica de Guatemala.”

I read: “Howard Pressley, American citizen—undesirable foreigner—report within thirty-six hours to the comandante of Puerto Barrios.”

Deported!

“What’ll I do?” I said, stunned.

“Of course,” said the consul, “if you want to get yourself shot, it’s your privilege. Personally I’m sorry; but officially I wish you’d fall down a nice deep hole and pull it in after you—all you fellows who think you can raise hell and then squeal for protection when you get pinched. If I were you I’d go, and call myself lucky. I thought you were too devilishly concerned about this thing!”

He was deeply disgusted. Wouldn’t even ride back to the city with me.

The sky had thickened, not with clouds; the sun glowed redly through a leaden sheet, the air was hard to breathe. I thought of Ben Murchison—shabby, thirsty old Ben Murchison—friendless behind thick walls. I spoke aloud, so that the driver turned and looked at me.

“Storm,” I said, “if you’re coming, come now!”

“*Mande, señor?*”

“Stop!” I said, and gave him what silver I could quickly get my hands on.

A big man in countryman’s clothes had turned just here into a side street. I leaped after him, calling his name. He did not turn his head, only lengthened his stride and ducked into a poor doorway of unplastered adobe. It was the huge and silent Gabriel Zalas.

## CHAPTER XII

“GABRIEL!”

“Señor?”

He was troubled, this huge, humble fellow. He wanted to shut the door in my face, but did not dare. Respect for the *gente fina*, fine people who wore white collars and shoes every day, was too deeply ingrained in him.

“Where is the master, Gabriel?”

He understood me right enough, and his broad face took on the stupid innocence those fellows wear when they are lying.

“I do not know, señor.”

“Take me to him!”

He loomed tremendous in that little room with its bare dirt floor and unplastered mud walls, holding his wide hat respectfully in his two hands. I am tall myself, but my head barely topped his great shoulders. It gave me a queer feeling to have to gaze up at him.

He shuffled, fidgeted and dropped his eyes.

“Enter, señor.”

But Palomar was not in that place of poverty. Through a tiny smoke-blackened kitchen we came out on a waste area in the middle of the block, completely enclosed, giving on the back doors of many houses. To one of these Gabriel fitted a clumsy key and we entered the back rooms of a mansion. It felt empty. My heels echoed on bare tiles; the windows were thickly curtained and shrouded furniture made weird shapes in the gloom.

A tall door jerked open and Anselmo Palomar,

shadowy against a blaze of light, confronted me. His right hand was advanced.

"Ah, Señor Pressley! What pleasure!"

The pleasure was more than doubtful. Automatically I offered my hand, and my fingers met cold steel, the butt of a knife-blade whose point was against my vest. I gave back an inch and my shoulders rested against the immovable chest of Gabriel Zalas.

"I come on behalf of Don Benjamin!" I explained.

Palomar seemed to hesitate. The room behind him was a library without books; at a heavy polished table sat the fat Borrego and other men, many papers before them, their heads turned toward us. You'd have thought it was some peaceful directors' meeting I had interrupted. They were annoyed rather than alarmed.

A hand moved to turn down a document; even at that distance I recognized it. Feeling the light on my face, I grinned.

"You find my papers useful?"

Palomar shrugged and moved aside. A voice boomed in English, "Come in, come in! Thunder and damnation, boy, you have led us a chase for these! Began to think we'd have to cut your throat in broad daylight. You carried them as if they were diamonds!"

"No man likes to have his pocket picked," I said, grinning, taking my cue from that loud and hearty voice.

"But damn a man," he rumbled genially, "who has no bad habits! You never went out nights as a young man should, only sat gabbing with old Murchison."

"You certainly turned out in force to get them," I told him, recognizing now more than one man who had been in the barroom of the Hotel Central last night. "Did you expect me to put up a fight? If those papers are useful to you, certainly they were of no use to me. Why didn't you let me know?"

This was the middle-aged, Norwegian-looking man with the bleached mustaches; he got up to greet me. His hand was wide and hard, his grip overaffectionate.

"We had other business, too," he chuckled, and introduced himself. "Name's Petersen, Captain Petersen. You know Borrego and Palomar, I believe. The human weasel over there is Mr. Hartz; not so simple as he looks, my boy; the smartest engineer this side of the Atlantic! His Excellency Don Martin Furriel. The Portuguese lubber at the end of the table is Pablo Barbas, so called because he couldn't raise a whisker if he tried. Sit down, Pressley! Smoke!"

"Any relation of the Petersen in Mexico City?"

"Ashamed to own it. My brother's a fool. Said you were simple-minded; haw, haw, haw!"

"Ha, ha!" I echoed as convincingly as I could. The knife had disappeared, but the shrinking at the pit of my stomach persisted.

I don't know which I disliked more, Petersen's false geniality or the soft and liquid eyes of Palomar fixed on me in a sort of watchful perplexity. Just so he used to look over some rashly advanced pawn of mine—wondering what was behind it.

"Don Benjamin has been arrested," I told him.

He knew it; he waited, eyebrows lifted.

"I went to the American consul, and he said if we wanted to get ourselves shot it was our own affair."

"We?" said the stately Don Martin Furriel.

"Don Benjamin and I." And I took out the deportation order and handed it to them.

"Ah!" they said politely. And handed it back.

Palomar's soft eyes still watchfully inquired; it made me flounder a little. I had thought the suggestion would come from him. I had thought, you see, that Ben Murchison was important to them—his prestige, his craft in war; this, I guessed, was the other business that had brought them to the hotel—to see him.

I had to go on talking.

"You need him? You have been trying to persuade him to join you? Well, if you have force for a revolution, surely you ——"

"We have invited," said Palomar, "not persuaded him."

And his soft, womanish brown eyes were completely indifferent to Ben Murchison's fate; watchfully they inquired, "What else?"

"Suppose," I urged desperately, "they make him tell what he knows?"

"No torture," said Palomar, "will make Benjamin Murchison speak one word he does not wish to speak. I have known him many years."

And his eyes, dismissing that, inquired, "What else?"

There was nothing else. I rose.

"Sit down, young Pressley," said Petersen. "I don't know how you got here, but this is no afternoon tea!"

And I knew how a pawn felt, sitting out in the middle of the board without a thing on earth behind it. The speculation in Palomar's eyes changed to certainty, a sort of amused contempt. He had gauged me now. I was simply a fool who had blundered in here, unarmed and uninvited, with no reason but the foolishly simple hope that they might save Ben Murchison.

Just so he used to smile over the chess-board, this Anselmo Palomar, learning that some rash move of mine did not bait any hidden trap; just so he used to look, saying, "You move brilliantly, Señor Pressley; but you hesitate before the end."

This woman-eyed Latin! A faint surge of red passed before my eyes. I grinned; I remember the feel of it, as if the muscles that worked my face were not my own.

"It occurs to me," I said flippantly, indicating my papers on the table, "that I have nothing to do now,

anyway. And by the terms of this little note from his excellency the president I leave the city to-morrow—unless I can be of further service to you!”

Their eyes would have been funny if I hadn't remembered the feel of that knife at the pit of my stomach. They had me, but they didn't know just what to do with me; I might be useful or I might be only a harmless fool.

Sheets of the timber cruise lay before me—columns of figures, you know, showing the standing timber on each hectare of land. Each sheet had a drawing attached; code translated into plans.

“Clever!” I said admiringly, addressing Petersen; he seemed the freest talker of the lot. “What are they? Surely you owe me that much for bringing them.”

I picked up one of them and examined it; I couldn't make out what it was. Petersen thrust out his underlip, watching me.

“Plans, specifications, bills of lading, you might call them.”

That told me nothing; that much was easy to see.

“Some sort of construction? What's it got to do with a revolution?”

There was a wait, a tension in that high muffled room. I found myself listening for the drive of rain, the roar of wind in the street. Why didn't it come? The feel of storm was everywhere.

Don Martin Furriel made a savage gesture. Already I had seen too much; I might as well know more.

“The revolution,” he said curtly, watching me, “is a detail; necessary, but a detail.”

But it was Borrego who gave me the key; Borrego, fat and smooth and sluggish like a pale Buddha only half alive, his dark eyes burning with that curious fire that I remembered.

“The United States of Pan-America!” he said sonorously.



A glance flickered between Petersen and the ferret-faced Hartz. More than one canoe was being paddled here!

"You are an American citizen," said Borrego; and they sat and watched me until I had to speak. I shrugged my shoulders.

"I was born in the United States, but nobody consulted me about it. Why?"

"What you can do is little, but your name may help at first if you care to lend it. And you shall name your own reward."

"*Guasa!*" cried Palomar. "Foolishness, I tell you! Washington will not interfere. Washington will not even believe. Why do you seek to lull suspicion where there is none? To trick a dummy, a blockhead, a man of straw?"

It seemed to open an old difference between them. Pablo Barbas spread his hands as if to say that he, for one, would argue no more; but his eyes inquired concerning me, "Then what shall we do with him?"

Palomar, his soft eyes contemptuous, made a slight significant gesture across his bearded throat.

"The United States of Pan-America?" I said, and marveled that my voice should come so cool and steady. "A great dream!"

Borrego's voice rolled out again, vibrant, fanatic; it came to me that the man was preaching his religion. If I were to set down an exact translation of his words they would sound florid and ridiculous—in Washington or in Milo, Indiana, where the Latin republics seem absurd, remote, comic-opera affairs. But make no mistake. Brazil alone is bigger than the United States; there are millions of Latins who talk that way, think that way. It sounds different when you are among them.

Already, he said, the grip of England was broken. The United States came next, the last great obstacle to

the aspirations of free and related peoples. Already there was power among the Latins to compel the enemies of Latin union; and afterward a greater union that should be truly of America, not of a smug part that was blind with money. Rather fantastic, eh?

"And the capital," he ended harshly, "will not be at Washington!"

He was an Argentino, this fat Borrego; probably, if you had asked him, he would have said the capital would be in the Argentine. Don Martin Furriel would have said Chile; Barbas, no doubt, Brazil. But it didn't seem funny at the time.

"Yes; probably you have guessed," said the genial Petersen, watching me with humorous eyes, "that the first detail is to cut the throat of your beloved Uncle Sam."

Nobody, you remember, knew the full power of Germany then; but for a moment I saw the figure that his words suggested—that tall, awkward old man in striped trousers and ancient top hat, an honest countryman among cutthroats; and in spite of all my effort to speak stupidly, my voice rang hard, derisive.

"Yes! How?"

"Across the neck!" said Palomar, and twitched a finger on the map, there at the narrow neck of the continent; he seemed to relish that gesture. "How did you think? Under the chin!"

"Naval bases?"

"Submarine bases," said Petersen.

In those days nobody knew what the submarines could do, working in the dark. To me it seemed a feeble threat. Yet something, their careless confidence, perhaps, carried a sinister conviction. Sitting there, stifling in that high muffled room, listening for the storm to break, for the first time the reality of it came to me—the storm of hatred raging over half a world; raging and spreading. These men were part of it.

"Blind as the State Department is," I said, "will not the American Navy destroy them?"

"If it can find them!" said Don Martin Furriel. "Has it destroyed those on the coast of Chile? Do you imagine the Pacific raiders work all the way from Germany?"

And by their eyes I knew they didn't even do me the honor to fear me. They had gauged me; I was only a fool who had blundered beyond my depth. Probably I would not live to talk.

The door opened silently behind me; it was only by the quick turning of eyes that I knew a man had entered, a slight, dark man with a keen and steady look. I never learned his name; but soon enough I learned his business.

"Benjamin Murchison has come," said this man.

## CHAPTER XIII

THEY were as thunderstruck as I was; no doubt about it. Their eyes went, not to Palomar, but to Petersen. Petersen's eyes narrowed and his geniality fell off him like a garment. And he did not say, "Let him in," or "Keep him out."

He said, "Remember!"

The man nodded and went out. Hartz, in green eye-shade and shirt-sleeves like some peaceful draftsman, was on his feet, swiftly gathering in the papers. Borrego, sitting across from me, briefly showed me a heavy silver-plated revolver and dropped it to his knee below the table-top; I could almost feel the impact of a bullet in my stomach.

This was what they hadn't told Ben Murchison! I had blundered on it because I was a fool; but if I let slip a word of it I would not live to speak another.

Ben Murchison came in, stolidly puffing a fresh cigar, as leisurely as if he were arriving at some peaceful conference. His mild eyes fixed hard on me for a fraction of a second.

"Howdy, Buck? Decided that this is your Petersen after all?"

But by the time he spoke his eyes had passed on to Palomar, and he went on in Spanish, "Is this your house, Anselmo? Very handsome."

"You were in prison," said Palomar, his soft eyes narrow.

"I have not served in the army without making friends," said Ben Murchison carelessly, his eyes tak-

ing in the room with admiration. "Have you approached Colonel Arrieta? No? I advise it."

And formally, in the Latin manner, he made the round of the table, shaking hands, so that each of them had to rise in turn. Only Hartz did not rise. Borrego had to make a hasty motion to dispose of the revolver, but as soon as he sat down his eyes warned me that he had it again.

Ben Murchison did not shake hands with me, only nodded and passed coolly on.

"Seat yourself," Palomar invited him in the form of hospitality.

He nodded his thanks, moving away from the table to gaze curiously about the room. I tried desperately to get something to his mind; desperately I tried to think of some way, some word that I dared say to warn him of the murder that filled the place.

Then in the space of perhaps two seconds I learned why Ben Murchison had lived through many wars. Those mild eyes of his saw what they looked at, and his mechanic's hands could act while other men were still thinking.

"I never sit down," he grunted, "where men keep their hands under the table."

Where he stood Petersen's wide bulk was between him and Borrego. Borrego's arm moved; Palomar, oddly turning to look at the wall, cried, "Now, fool!"

Fire streamed from Ben Murchison's right hand, not toward the table, but toward a curtain on the wall. A gun crashed, swung and crashed again. In the same instant I heard Ben Murchison's voice, incredibly calm, compelling my muscles almost before my mind took in the words.

"Heave that table, Buck!"

Only three of them directly faced him across the table—Borrego, drooping, a red spot on his face; Barbas half out of his chair; Don Martin Furriel swinging up

## THE RED GODS CALL

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his arm—in the act of rising I kicked sidewise at his long legs under the table. He lurched in his chair and then the heavy table bore them down.

I saw their legs kicking, Borrego's revolver on the floor; snatched it up and whirled and fired point-blank at a bulk that swung a chair over my head.

It was Petersen. I remember the clatter of the chair rolling from his collapsing shoulders, the sting of smoke in my nose, the calm voice of Ben Murchison snapping to my brain.

“Down on the floor, Buck! Get down! Get ——”

Smoke jetted from the curtain behind him. I saw him wilt as Borrego had wilted, curling forward, a big black revolver dropping from his hand. I saw the curtain bulging and the thing in my hand seemed to explode of its own accord; I even saw the curtain jerk where the bullet hit.

I was sharply conscious, as if I had eyes on all sides. A flicker in the air; I ducked and heard Palomar's knife go crashing into the glass front of a bookcase. I fired at him and missed.

Vaulting the table-top to get behind it, I collided with Don Martin Furriel in the act of rising, and smashed at his temple with the revolver in my open hand. A club seemed to hit me in the ribs; I saw Hartz, with his green eye-shade, coolly lift and drop his automatic for a second shot. I threw up my hands and sank behind the table-top. He peered coolly over it to finish me and I pulled the trigger with the muzzle an inch from his nose.

Somebody rounding the end of my barricade, smoke spitting from his hand. The thing in my hand spoke twice and Pablo Barbas fell clawing at my feet, one of his hands at the upturned face of Don Martin Furriel. Where was Palomar?

Through drifting, stinging smoke I saw him bending over the figure of Ben Murchison on the floor,

jumping away in a queer fantastic dance, leaping solemnly from side to side, ducking, leaping high, empty hands outstretched. I knew afterward that I had shouted hoarsely, "Uncle Ben! Uncle Ben!" charging out, thinking of Palomar's knife; but Palomar had only been trying to get Ben Murchison's revolver. He danced away. Ben Murchison did not move.

I reached the door and opened it. Gabriel Zalas, himself in the act of opening that door, enveloped me. I remember his great arms crushing my struggles, his deep voice rumbling, "What shall I do with him, señor?"

"Hold him!" said Anselmo Palomar.

Now I knew why they called him Butcher! I saw his face. While the arms of Gabriel, linked through mine at the elbows, pinned me helpless, he got his knife from the wrecked bookcase and came toward me, his white teeth showing pleasantly through his cropped black beard; stepped close and turned the blade to slash my throat—smiling!

I kicked at him. He stepped back. With all my strength I threw my arms out sidewise, catching Gabriel's close under the armpits, hugged them and plunged forward from the hips. His great weight toppled over me and we dived headlong at the tiled floor.

His head took the shock. I felt his weight sag, felt the agony of his linked left arm tearing at mine, but my right was free. Palomar's foot came close to my face as he bent over us to strike. I thrust up into his stomach and pulled the trigger—wondering if I had a cartridge left. I don't remember hearing anything.

Once, twice, lightning struck in my back; but slowly more weight settled on me and I felt only indefinite pain. Where I lay I could see Ben Murchison, his mild old face twisted sidewise on the floor, his broken cigar still smoldering under his cheek.

## THE RED GODS CALL

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“Are you dead, Uncle Ben?”

He did not answer. Beside him, at the foot of the curtain, lay the man who had shot him from behind; face up he lay, one outstretched hand slowly opening and closing, clutching at nothing. Then that, too, was still. I tried to tell Ben Murchison something.

“He says I hesitate—before the end!”

But I didn't hear anything. The light was going out, and nothing moved.



## CHAPTER XIV

By THE pain in my back, my ribs, my arm, I knew I wasn't dreaming; yet there by my bed sat old Ben Murchison, or his ghost, chewing a cigar stump and gazing gloomily at the plastered wall. It was some time before a thought occurred to me.

"You're hard to kill," I mumbled.

"Mornin', Buck." He looked oddly sheepish, touching his scalp. "I'm gettin' old, that's what. Can't move fast any more. I knew I never got that feller the first time, but I had to 'tend to Borrego, and the lookout plugged me while I was doin' it. Lucky for me those fellers never can learn to shoot a man in the middle; always try to hit his head, whether they can shoot or not. Just creased me."

"How did you know there was anybody behind that curtain?"

"Why, I looked at the house before I went in. Wasn't no window there." It seemed to him the simplest sort of precaution.

"How did you know they were after you at all?"

"Well, didn't you see Palomar look cross-eyed when I mentioned Arrieta? He's the guy that had me jailed; come to find out, the Old Man never give that order at all. Arrieta was in with 'em. They knew I smelled somethin' funny and they wanted me out of the way. I knew that the minute I walked in, the way they looked. You lookin' like you been scared out of a year's growth; Borrego shovin' somethin' in his hip pocket before he could shake hands; Hartz settin' on some papers and

wouldn't get up, and all lookin' sideways at that curtain. Why wouldn't I know it?

"But what I can't figure out," he said thoughtfully, "is why they had the gall to come to me in the first place, knowin' all the time I was an American."

"I can tell you that," I said bitterly. "Because you're an American! If I'd known anything about fighting I believe they'd have offered me the job."

"Too bad," sighed Ben Murchison, "too bad you don't know nothin' about fightin'! You let me know when you get all practised up."

Now I knew where I was. The military prison. I knew the shape of that small high window, iron-barred. Lifting my head I saw the other end of the narrow room, iron-grated like a wild animal's cage. My left arm was wrapped in white, but it seemed cased in iron; bandages bound my ribs; the feel of prison made it hard to breathe.

"Well," I said, "I guess they wouldn't have taken all this trouble with me if they were going to shoot me."

Ben Murchison's jaw tightened and he looked away from me, not answering. I shut my eyes, but had to open them again. It was too real; drifting, stinging smoke, and Palomar's white teeth grinning through his beard, that steel blade turning for a slash across my throat.

"Say," I said hoarsely, "you know what Palomar tried to do?"

"He come pretty near doin' it," said Ben Murchison. "He was layin' on top of you, and I judge he carved as long as he lasted. Yeah, carvin' was a kind of a hobby with that feller."

He seemed to hesitate over something, but finally got it out.

"Say, Buck, the Old Man's got a pretty good line on it now, but there's one or two things he don't know. If you feel like tellin' him what you know, maybe he'll be easy on you—account of your bein' an American."

Somehow that was the last straw. Rage took me by the throat.

"Oh, very likely!" I said through my teeth. "I killed five men—six," I said, remembering poor, stupid, obedient Gabriel Zalas; "but the Old Man'll be easy on me—because I'm an American! That's a good one! That's — Where's my coat?"

"You don't need no coat, Buck. You ain't goin' nowhere."

"I want to show you how much the Old Man thinks of my being an American! Ordered me out of the country! Nobody gives a damn for an American, but — You know what those crooks were up to? Swedes, Germans, Chileans, Mexicans —"

"Yeah," said Ben Murchison, "quite a bunch of them soldiers of fortune you was talkin' about."

"— each with his own ax to grind, but all set to cut Uncle Sam's throat! They didn't dare let you know what they were really up to, but I blundered into it because I was a fool."

"That's what I can't figure out," said Ben Murchison, very gloomy. "Buck, how come a nice young feller like you to get into it?"

"I wasn't in it, I tell you! I thought you were in jail! And the consul wouldn't do anything, and I didn't know what else to do, so I went to Palomar. And the damn crooks didn't care what happened to you—and they played me for a fool. Had my papers all over the table, translated into plans for submarine bases —"

"Whoa!" said Ben Murchison. "Back up! That's what I'm gettin' at. We know they was yours—them maps and timber cruise. How come?"

"Borrego stole 'em at the hotel!"

"How come you with 'em in the first place?"

I told him about that other Petersen, the lumberman in Mexico City.

"Don't ask me why they didn't send 'em by mail. I don't know."

"What you don't know," said Ben Murchison, "is the Old Man. He's kind of touchy about revolutions, and he's bound and be durned the Germans ain't goin' to work shenanigans here like they do in some of these countries; so his mail don't carry nothin' that smells like code. Didn't you know that timber cruise couldn't be on the level! Parts of the country no white man has been in yet?"

"I'm pretty green," I admitted wearily. "But why did they pick me to bring 'em? Why didn't one of 'em do it himself?"

"Anybody search you at the custom house? No! Well, that's why they picked you. You look respectable."

He grinned and got up, nodding to the guard in the corridor, and the door grated open.

"I don't mind tellin' you, Buck, I kind of hated to think you was startin' in the way I did. Durned if I see yet how anybody could be that innocent and live, but your yarn sounds straight to me. You take a nap and I'll see what I can do with the Old Man."

A peon brought coffee and I felt a little better; not much. It was some hours before Ben Murchison came back with a little, very neat old gentleman, who asked me in quaintly perfect English how I felt.

"The president. Tell him, Buck. Don't be scared."

Scared? He didn't look majestic or terrible. He looked tired.

"I killed them," I said, coming to the thing I dreaded most.

"Please to begin at the beginning, Mr. Pressley."

He offered cigarettes from a plain paper package and lighted one himself; sat on the wooden bench by my cot, seeming not so much to listen as to watch my face, his black eyes vivid under his white brows. I told him about Petersen, the lumberman, how he had filled me with glowing accounts of the wealth of mahogany

in Peten, growing and rotting for lack of energy and brains. I spoke with sarcasm for myself.

"But it is true," said the president gravely. "Fortune is there. Pity that energy should be spent instead in war and destruction! Yes, they are *sutiles*, shrewd, these Germans, using the aspirations of others for their own ends."

But he didn't seem to be thinking of my case at all.

"They are not alone to blame. Personal ambition, that is our own curse. Anselmo Palomar was rich and honored among us, but he could not endure defeat; and he is dead."

"I always thought Anselmo was kind of crazy myself," observed Ben Murchison. "Only feller I ever knew that enjoyed killin' people."

"Please to go on, Mr. Pressley," said the president.

I told him what I knew of Palomar, of the fat Borrego with his crazy dream of empire. His black eyes watched my face; and wistfully, sincerely, he echoed words that I had spoken in bitter irony.

"The United States of Pan-America—of All-America; I like the English word. Yes, some day it may come, God willing. But not through blood and violence, as that poor Borrego dreamed it.

"Your country," he said, and quaintly touched his forehead in salute, "leads to that day. You have power, yet you have patience with our struggles for self-government; yes, even when it hurts your interests, you are generous. Always to give the weaker ones the— the chance; that is your way."

Ben Murchison and I looked at each other and were ashamed. This earnest little man praising our national complacency, our smug shortsightedness, thinking it nobility!

"You send us your great doctors to teach us how to live in our own climate. You welcome us to your great schools, spreading a common language, a common

thought. That way, if ever, there shall be union among peoples. But most of all we learn from you—how do you say?—to play the games.

“Yes, you shall be surprised!” he said, smiling, uncertain of the phrase. “That is the greatest thing we learn from you—to play the games; to win without hurting; to lose without hating, to remember that tomorrow the—the tables shall be turned around! Our boys to-day play more and more the football, the baseball, the tennis; when they are men they shall feel honor in obeying the rules, they shall be good es-sports and better citizens.

“We learn slowly, we Latins. Our blood is hot; we anger if we can not win. Our rich are arrogant, proud of the wicked past. Our poor are ignorant; they can not read; they must believe what they are told. You Americans can not know the pity of that—to believe what you are told!”

He sighed, this tired little man, old in the service of his people; looked at me and smiled and indicated Ben Murchison with the wrinkled fingers that held the cigarette.

“Even courage we must learn from you. Oh, we are brave when we are angry; but my friend Benjamin was not angry when he went alone among the enemies of his country. He would not ask my help, would not even tell me what he suspected, fearing to betray a confidence more than to lose his life. Eh, Benjamin?”

“I wouldn’t ‘a’ lived this long,” grumbled Ben Murchison, “if I went around blabbin’ all I know.”

“No,” said the president. “Courage with honor; that was why I believed you when you gave me your word that you ——”

“Well, Diego,” said Ben Murchison restlessly, “that’s mighty nice of you; but how about this boy? His yarn sounds straight to you?”

“Mr. Pressley, you say you went to the house of

Palomar. But that was not the house of Palomar. It was thought to be unoccupied. My soldiers had not been able to find the rendezvous; how did you go there, if you were not of those men?"

"Gabriel Zalas took me."

"Zalas?"

"Palomar's servant. The big fellow."

"Ah," said the president, "there could be only one so big!"

He spoke to the guard in the corridor. Gabriel Zalas was brought in, not much the worse for wear, stoically resigned to any fate; stood shuffling, his eyes humble like the eyes of some huge dumb animal that does not know what is expected of him. He looked to me because I was the only one he knew.

"This is he?"

"Yes, sir. What are you going to do with him? Don't be too hard on him," I found myself pleading. "He's stupid, ignorant. The revolution means nothing to him."

The president nodded sadly.

"You know my people. The poor ignorant ones, they are many. From childhood they are taught obedience; obey, obey; if their leaders are good they obey; if their leaders are bad they obey." He sighed. "You know this man?"

"Yes, sir. He did only what he was told. Gabriel," I said, "what will you do if the *señor presidente* lets you go?"

"The *señor presidente*?"

"This is he."

The big man stared, half dumb with awe, muttering, "I am Gabriel Zalas, your servant, Excellency."

"What will you do if I let you go?"

Gabriel looked helplessly at me and back to the president. "I do not know, señor. I have nothing to do. My *patron* is dead."

“You know this young man?”

“Yes, señor. He is very strong. He threw me over his head.”

I explained that, adding, “But you can see for yourself that he held me only because his master told him to. He simply didn’t know anything else to do.”

“You Americans,” sighed the president, “there is no people like you! Now I know why your government is patient with us when we are stupid. It is because you are good es-sports; it is your nature to be generous with stupid ones. Eh, well, I can not be less generous. Gabriel, the young señor asks me to let you go.”

“Many thanks, señor.”

“You are free.”

“Yes, señor.” The big man shuffled his weight from foot to foot, looking expectantly at me. “Shall I go now, *patron?*”

“Yes! Get out!” I said, making it definite for him.

“Very well, *patron.*” He backed out.

“You done hired a man, Buck,” said Ben Murchison. “He’ll be hangin’ around like a stray dog, waitin’ for you to come and tell him what to do. Well, Diego, what about this boy?”

“Oh,” said the president, “I have no doubt that he has been only a—how do you say—paw of the cat.”

“Yeah,” said Ben Murchison. “I recollect how the monkey got the cat to rake the chestnuts out of the fire, and kitty scorched her paw. Yeah; and I always had a notion that somethin’ sudden happened to Mister Monkey after that.”

“Monkey?”

“Buck’s done busted a revolution for you, hasn’t he?”

“There has been no revolution,” said the president stiffly. “In eighteen years my country has had no revolution!”

“Not since yours,” said Ben Murchison. “Have it



your way, Diego; I will say you keep 'em pruned down pretty close. Anyway, Buck knocked off some mighty bad men that tried to beat him out of his timber papers. Or maybe you hadn't heard," he said solemnly, "that Buck was kind of interested in mahogany?"

The president's eyes twinkled in his venerable face.

"It should offer no difficulty. There is enough in Peten for a thousand young men."

There's irony for you. Here was the man I had come so far to see, casually offering what I had come for—now, when it didn't mean anything!

"I have no money," I told him sadly; "not enough. I never hoped to handle a concession for myself."

Ben Murchison grunted.

"Lost your nerve all of a sudden, Buck? Take him up on that. I got a sawmill."

"Get out!" I said huskily. "You offering to go partners with me? What for?"

"Well, somebody ought to keep an eye on you."

"But you can get timber as easy as I can!"

"Yeah," said Ben Murchison, "and what good would it do me? I can run a sawmill, but I hate to sell lumber. Always feel kind of meechin', like I was askin' favors or somethin'. You're different; you like it. I been wishin' I had a young feller to run around and do the dirty work outside, and I been thinkin' we could hit it off all right. What say?"

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. I grinned and held out my one good hand.

"You will excuse me?" said the president, getting up. "I know you; you are Americans; you will talk business on the bed of death. *Hasta luego*, Benjamin; *hasta luego*, Mr. Pressley. You will come to see me when you are well?"

Casually he said it, as if you might walk down the street any afternoon and see him. It hit me all at once.

"Something is funny, Mr. Pressley?"

"If there's any way I haven't tried to see you," I said, "I don't know what it is!"

"I am sorry. But your connections, as I knew them, did not speak well for you, eh? It is customary," he told me, smiling, "for a stranger to procure a responsible introduction."

"Like I was tellin' you," said Ben Murchison. "He's the president of a country, and you can't just bulge in and see him offhand."

"Of a small country," said the president; "but the smallest dignitary, you know, must wear the most of dignity. There is formality, yes. But not for my friends."

He shook hands with us and went out.

"There goes one fine little feller," said Ben Murchison reverently. "Ain't exactly anti-American, is he? The way he was handin' us bouquets, you'd think Americans was somebody come."

"I give you my word I didn't know where to look," I confessed. "Knowing all the time that our foreign policy was simply half bullheadedness and half cold feet!"

"Well, I don't know, Buck. Maybe it's like the Old Man says. Like you gettin' him to let that big feller off. You know—because they don't know no better."

"They'd soon learn better," I said bitterly, "if we'd plant a few swift kicks where they'd do the most good."

"But what I mean," said Ben Murchison, going on, "England and Germany, they know better, and we let 'em walk on our feet whenever the notion strikes 'em. Just go bulgin' along with our eyes shut, lettin' 'em hornswoggle us right and left."

"This is one time," I reminded him, "they didn't!"

"Well," said he, very gloomy, "they tried. They're always tryin', and nobody does a durned thing to stop it."

But there were brighter things to talk about. Malaria, for instance; sawmill supplies, and transportation in a district that had no railroads; the lumber markets of the States, waiting for mahogany from the vast hot forests of Peten.

And there was something else. In Milo, Indiana, I had dreamed of a world where men lived hard and dangerously; well, I was in it. The big chance was before me, a fortune to win and nothing much to lose. Yet it was something else that paid me for my battered frame; a simple thing, but hard to put a name to. Ben Murchison—shabby, thirsty, gallant old Ben Murchison—needed a man to do the dirty work outside.

## BOOK THREE

### THE COUNTRY OF OLD MEN

#### CHAPTER XV

I REMEMBER how foolish I felt when I first showed up in Guatemala as Ben Murchison's partner and found people taking me for an adventurer too. They soon learned better, of course, except now and then some newcomer like this traveling salesman I met in the American Club in Guatemala City that first rainy season. He sold typewriters or something, this fellow, but he had a romantic mind.

"You know," he confided, along about the third drink, "I always thought Ben Murchison was a sort of myth, like Nick Carter or Diamond Dick. I lived in New Orleans when I was a kid, and we used to hear about his running guns out of there. Buying gunboats from the navy and running them out right under the nose of secret-service men—that sort of thing. Setting up dictators and knocking them down—too many yarns for any one mortal."

I nodded. I used to feel that way about him too.

"But they tell me he lives right here in the city."

"In the rainy season," I nodded. "At the Hotel Central."

"You know him?"

"Yes," I said, a little amused, thinking how disappointed he'd be if he actually saw Ben Murchison.

"Say, I bet he's a character! They tell me he busted up this last revolution practically single-handed; walked

into their council and just wiped it out, him and a young hell-bender named—uh ——— Say,” said this traveling man, staring at me, “what did you say your name was? Well, I’ll be ——— Say, excuse me, but you certainly don’t look like a bad actor! I took you for a—a business man!”

“Lumber,” I nodded, hissing hastily for the waiter to bring the check. “Export mahogany.”

“But—uh—aren’t you Buck Pressley?”

“Howard Pressley,” I told him. “Buck’s my brother. Sort of a rounder, Buck is; always getting into trouble.”

And I escaped before some old-timer should come in and call me Buck. That thing was like a nightmare to me for a while. Many a time, those first few months, I woke fighting my blanket, imagining the great weight of Gabriel Zalas on me; feeling the sting of smoke in my nose, seeing the white teeth in Palomar’s bearded face as he turned his blade to cut my throat—smiling! Nothing romantic about it, I assure you.

It faded into unreality. Oh, I remembered vividly enough! But like a dream; it fitted nowhere into my experience. Ben Murchison’s, yes. That was one thing that didn’t fade—the picture of him lying on the floor, his mild old face twisted sidewise and his broken cigar still smoldering under his cheek; I thought they’d killed him then. I thought it was his own great calm that kept on fighting. Not mine, that queer cold rage in which time flitted by split seconds, crystal clear. I know how sick and scared I was in fact. I’m not ashamed. I’m not the stuff adventurers are made of, that’s all. I was born practical and I can’t help caring about my skin.

Well, there were practical things to think about. Selling mahogany, dickering with shipping agents, struggling with transportation in a district without railroads and cut off by thirty miles of jungle from the

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coast—I had to learn the lumber business from the ground up. In 1915, when I hooked up with Uncle Ben, I didn't know the difference between a wind shake and a growth ring.

One of us had to be practical, and he wasn't. He had one little sawmill and a little local trade—with a thousand miles of government timber at his elbow and a friendly president in the chair! Don Diego was practical, you may believe. He was willing to take money for mahogany that had been idly growing and rotting for two thousand years.

A rich district, Peten. It gave to Guatemala its ancient Maya name—Quauhtematlan, the Place of Trees.

An eerie place till you get used to it. Here, where the silent forest grows, a mighty empire flourished before Christ was born. It has vanished. Only these hummocks in the jungle, the lonely graves of palaces and temples; thousands on thousands of stone blocks, dug up by archæologists to gauge the spread of vanished cities, doorsills of homes that have gone utterly to dust; great monuments carved to the glory of forgotten kings, no man alive who can decipher them. You can ride there for days and never see a human shape. But human eyes see you. Mayas still live there; shy, stupid, docile people, huddled in tiny grass-thatched pueblos, building no more; knowing not even the names of those monstrous gods their fathers prayed to.

There is nothing to fear from them. I guess old races, like old men, want peace.

There is nothing to keep you from cutting and shipping mahogany; nothing, that is, but rain—five months a year; ten feet of rain; feet, not inches—and heat and isolation and the jungle that grows as fast as you can cut it, closing your roads as soon as you stop using them. That's why lumbermen have left Peten alone.

Imagine trying to make one little sawmill pay for  
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working in such a place! I sold mahogany and bought other mills—ground hogs, like his; it's cheaper to move your mills than to haul logs. I hired an engineer and cut a cart road out through the tip of British Honduras to the coast at Sabado, shortening the haul; I always meant to build a railroad there some day. Yes, I guess I had a few romantic thoughts myself. I saw the day when Murchison & Pressley should be known as the men who brought civilization again into that vast, mysterious, lonely place where America's oldest civilization was born and lost.

Eh, well! No matter now. I sold mahogany and built up our trade, nursing our New York bank account like a proud mother with a growing child. Ben Murchison should have his fortune yet before he died.

We were a good team, Uncle Ben and I, if I do say it. He knew the tropics; he was a born mechanic and he could handle men; but he hated selling. Made him feel humble, you know. He could never see that it was a science and a game, like chess or anything. If a purchasing agent got haughty with him, he couldn't help taking it personally. He never knew when to walk into a man's office with his hat on; if you're a salesman, you know what I mean.

I remember how miserable he was in 1917. He came up to the States—it was the rainy season in Peten, anyway—and I introduced him to the trade; but instead of plugging it, he hung gloomily around the training camp, giving me good advice. He had no heart for business in those days. He'd fought thirty years for other countries, yet here they claimed he was too old to fight for his own! A queer thing, patriotism; some of the most violent Americans I know are men like that, who, as the consul at Guatemala City said of Ben Murchison, would be about as happy in the States as a fish up a tree. Gloomily, saying good-by, he gave me a little hairless thing out of his pocket.

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“That’s my rabbit’s foot,” he said. “It’s a good one; been workin’ for me ever since I quit railroadin’. No, I want you to have it, Buck. Ain’t nothin’ goin’ to happen to me now.”

I never thought of anything happening to him. Maybe I can’t explain just why. For one thing, he was tough; he could tramp the legs off me with that relaxed, easy-going stride of his, and seem no tireder than when he started. He never had malaria; immune, I guess. And there was something else, something you felt but couldn’t put a name to.

You know, the natives thought his life was charmed. But of course that’s nonsense; a man may be lucky—God knows I’ve been—or he may have the eyes to see what he looks at and the brain to know what to do about it, as Ben Murchison had; yet shoot him in the back and he will die like any other man. I knew Ben Murchison was human. You can’t be partners with a man, work and eat and sweat and swear with him, off and on, nearly six years without learning that.

I knew he was old. Even in the tropics, in my time he was already passing into a sort of legend; in New York, where I went to sell our mahogany, once in a great while I’d meet some fellow who remembered having heard of him.

“General Murchison? Is that the same bird we used to read about every time the lid blew off down yonder? I thought he was dead long ago. Didn’t I hear he was assassinated or something?”

“He’s hard to kill,” I’d say. How else could I have put it?

“Well, well, so he has settled down and gone into the lumber business! I bet he finds it tame. But I guess the soldier-of-fortune game is not so good any more, eh? It’s a wise man that knows when to cash in and quit.”

And you could see how they imagined him, a hard-



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nosed, swashbuckling adventurer who had made his fortune out of it. I let them think so. It made the name of Murchison & Pressley, Mahogany, stick in their romantic minds.

How could I have made them see the man he was? This mild-eyed, talkative old fellow with his freckled hands, the hands of a mechanic rather than a killer, his decently shabby black civilian clothes, more like a worn-out storekeeper than a veteran of many wars; the always-frayed stump of a cigar clamped in his mild whimsical old jaw, his always-unbuttoned vest—he wore a vest in deference to native ideas of gentility, unbuttoned in defiance of the same—exposing the slight elderly bulge at his middle and the fact that he wore a belt and suspenders too. Oh, he was comfortably unimpressive to the eye! And yet the thought of him—I can see it now—stood like a background to my worthless life; steady, invulnerable, calm.

## CHAPTER XVI

SOLDIER of fortune! That's a funny phrase, anyway. Of course the palmy days were before my time, but I've met a few of the old-timers and I never saw one yet that had a fortune worth the name. Take Captain Ames of Salvador, stumping around this poor *meson* he calls, still hopefully, Gran Hotel Americano. Take Barrett the gun runner; he made big money in his time, but he's broke now, and broken; gray-haired and shaky, with hands that keep eternally brushing at his clothes—a habit he acquired in tropical prisons. Take Johnny Hecht, who was a doctor once; he collected eleven bullet holes and was in a fair way to make it an even dozen when a careless flivver bumped him off.

What led those fellows down the trail of violence? What did they get that paid them in the end? Certainly not fortune.

They're not practical, you know. Take old Ben Murchison. He had a genius for handling men; even the Mayas were not afraid of him, as they are of most white men. He was absolutely square; politicians trusted him, first and last, with millions of pesos; even his enemies knew he kept his word. And what did he have to show for it when he was old? The scars of battle and attempted murder; friends who forgot what they owed him, and enemies who did not forget.

It used to irk me a little, this comic-opera notion of the tropics—palm trees, you know, and dark-eyed señoritas, and revolutions as a sort of outdoor sport! It irks me now to find how much I've got to speak of revolutions. They have nothing to do with what I want

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to tell. Yet certainly Ben Murchison had been what is called a soldier of fortune. Certainly it was a revolution that made business dull in Mexico back in 1915 and sent me drifting on to Guatemala to stumble into the starting wheels of that Palomar affair; that's what convinced Ben Murchison that somebody ought to keep an eye on me. And it was another — But no matter now. I won't go into it any more than I have to. I am a trader, not a fighting man.

There was a dark-eyed lady, but I give you my word no palm tree shall appear.

## CHAPTER XVII

OF COURSE palm trees do grow there; you notice them at first. Revolutions do occur. Don Diego, twenty-three years president of Guatemala, had a theory that baseball and tennis and football would teach the Latins to abide by their elections, to win or lose and let it go at that; but I don't know. They're individualists. Even Don Diego, one of the finest, gentlest, most terrible old men I ever knew, could see no side of politics but his own.

"I sorrow," he said in that odd English of his—"I sorrow that I must to control the ma-chinnery of election. How can my people express the true will of them? The poor *indios*, they are so many and so es-stupid; they can not read; they only hear the voices of bad demagogues."

That's all there is to it. If you are in, you are a tyrant, good or bad; if you are out, you are a demagogue and always bad. If you are an optimistic demagogue, you may go through the form of being defeated at the polls—for publicity, you know—issue your *manifiesto* calling on the people to rise against the tyrant, and take hastily to the hills while your friends try the effect of popular sentiment on the army. That's the machinery. If you've guessed wrong, you'd better keep on going. The climate is bad for unsuccessful demagogues.

That's how Don Diego himself had come to power, long ago, when he and Ben Murchison were in their prime; and that's how he met his finish when he got old and lost his grip at last.

Well, no matter. The business needed the rabbit's

foot more than I did; but after the war, you remember, everybody was buying pianos and mahogany furniture. The market boomed. I lived at a high run between New York and Guatemala.

“Buck,” grumbled Uncle Ben, “what’s the sense of bein’ in a swivet all the time? It takes two men to see you around here, one to say ‘Here he comes,’ and another one to say ‘There he goes!’ Seems like we don’t never get a chance to chew the rag no more. All we get to talk about is business.”

He liked to talk, you know. Many a quaint yarn he spun for me, first and last, sitting there in front of his shack at Number 1 Mill—the one that had been his before I came to help him make his fortune. Many and many a time, afterward, I remembered. Stars burning red over that little clearing, or the high hard sun of the siesta hour, when the singing saws were still; only these fragmentary voices from the native quarters, hushed in the vast quiet breathing of the forest; only Gabriel Zalas, that stupid, patient whale of a man, squatting on the doorstep, silent but watchful in case we needed anything; and Ben Murchison talking. That’s how I always think of him. His rawhide chair tipped placidly against the wall, his blue gaze roving through the tops of the mahogany to the sky, seeing for me the things that he remembered.

You know how comfortable you feel with a man who makes you a free gift of his career and his personality? But one of us had to be practical, and he wasn’t.

“You’re gettin’ plumb peaked around the eyes,” he argued. “Ain’t no sense to it, boy. You don’t have to sell all the mahogany there is. You got your trade comin’ along in fine shape; why don’t you set back now and let it ride?”

But I knew where a good trade rode to when you stopped riding it. I was tired, yes; and I’d very

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promptly picked up my usual touch of malaria too. But I kept on plugging. Even in the rainy season of 1919, I remember I didn't loaf much around the Hotel Central in the city with Uncle Ben. I guess I felt a little virtuous about it. I was doing it for him.

That's what I told myself. But there was something else; I can see it now. The old restlessness was riding me again. When I got out of the army I was glad to get back to Guatemala; but it didn't last. It's a dull business, sawmilling, when you come right down to it. I was tired of struggling with transportation in a district where it rained five months a year. On the Pacific side, now, the rains are short and mild. Don't ask me why. It's so.

I was tired of the Hotel Central; tired of the American Club, where the same ill-assorted, homesick crowd eternally got on one another's nerves; tired of the Club Deportivo, that so-called sports club where the native young bloods pursued the gentlemanly sports of drinking, gambling, *esgrima*—fencing with foils, the time-honored accomplishment of gentlemen—and boasting about women. Concerning women I had little to boast of, and I couldn't get up much interest in fencing. It takes a graceful temperament, I guess.

Ben Murchison disapproved of my membership in the Deportivo.

"Buck," he said, "you ain't playin' politics, are you?"

He couldn't conceive any other reason for associating with natives. "Peon lovers" is the homely old-timers' phrase for Americans who do it from choice. Myself, I wasn't clear in my own mind about it—or anything. Drinking too much, gambling too much, working too much; but what else was there to do?

"I see some right nice gringo girls around here," he said, with a fine imitation of a casual air. "How come you never squire none of 'em around? You ain't

playin' bear to some señorita somewhere, are you, Buck?"

"No," I said, and let it go at that.

But we were making money; we were beginning to cash in at last. Our New York balance climbed. By 1920 we were shipping all the squared mahogany logs we could handle with mule trucks on jungle roads. Rather listlessly, I realized that a narrow-gauge railroad was possible for us now.

Uncle Ben, though, was uneasy about politics. He could read the signs as well as any man alive.

"Better not sink no money," he argued, "in nothin' we can't put in our pockets and run with. Our mills are portable and our shacks ain't worth worryin' about; but a railroad stays put. Better go easy, Buck. Diego's gettin' old. No tellin' what'll happen."

Don Diego was old—older than Ben Murchison. What of it? Any new administration, I figured cynically, would be glad to take our good American dollars for mahogany that nobody else had the energy to go after.

The truth is, I'd lived twenty-seven years in Milo, Indiana, before I ever saw the tropics, and I guess I judged things from that viewpoint yet. I knew Ben Murchison had enemies; I'd seen him make a few and he told me about plenty of others. But when I read in a New York paper that a man named Vereá had started a rebellion against Don Diego, I wasn't much concerned. I didn't know anything about Vereá. I'd never mixed in politics but once—involuntarily, and that was finished. Anselmo Palomar was dead. From the hospital windows, that time in 1915, I'd seen Don Diego's soldiers clean up a stray bit of that fiasco. Oh, nothing spectacular; it didn't look very violent, even; just a few half-armed civilians stumbling backward while the soldiers cut them down. They fell and lay quiet on the cobblestones until a cart came and hauled

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them away. Street cleaners scattered sand on the place and it was finished. Very thoroughly Don Diego had controlled the machinery in those days.

Now, five years afterward, I learned a thing: Nothing is finished so long as any man remembers.

"It's just about all day, Buck," said Ben Murchison soberly when I got home. "Diego's lost his grip. The same crowd that backed Anselmo Palomar is behind this man Vereas; and you know what that means, them hyenas havin' the nerve to stick their heads up. They ain't afraid of the Old Man no more."

"You think they're betting on a sure thing?"

"Well, Diego ain't dead yet. He'll put up a scrap. If the army just don't go back on him ——"

It came to me that he had a guilty look.

"Look here," I said, "what's on your mind? You flirting with the notion of taking a hand?"

"Well," he muttered, not looking at me, "Diego did send word I could have my commission back. Was a time when the army thought I was all right."

"And there was a time," I snapped, "when you kept your promises! I swear, I've got a notion to take an ax to you! Haven't you had enough trouble in your life? Can you keep Don Diego from being old? You want your American citizenship canceled—just for the sake of dying in the same dungeon with him? You've been warned. Uncle Ben," I begged, "have sense! I know Don Diego's a friend of yours. I know it gets dull, sawmilling. But ——"

"Well," he said doggedly, "what do you want to do then? You know well as I do, Buck, we ain't got a Chinaman's chance in this country if that crowd gets in. They ain't forgot who killed Anselmo Palomar. They'll cancel our concession so quick it'll make our heads swim."

"If they don't stand us up against a wall," I admitted.



Not really believing it, you know. It's odd how your mind insists on going by what seems reasonable instead of what is so. You talk like that because you hear men talk like that; but I'd never seen anybody actually, in cold blood, stood up against a wall for something that had happened five years before—something that wasn't quite real, anyway. The fact is my mind was instantly busy with a place far off and different. I was used to being practical for both of us.

"This isn't the only country that grows mahogany," I said. "We've got capital and equipment, and our trade's an asset nobody can touch as long as we get timber to supply it, no matter where."

He sighed, his gaze shifting again.

"Oh, I don't know, Buck," he said gloomily. "Far's I'm concerned, I—fact is I'm kind of tired of sawmillin'; tired of trouble too. I reckon I'm gettin' old myself. I can't get up no interest in a fight no more, nor worryin' about a new location, either. Why don't we just hang on here till they kick us out, and then quit? We got enough, boy. We don't need no million dollars. Why don't we buy us a little hacienda over in Honduras or somewhere, peaceable, and hire us a good bartender and prop our feet up and just chew the rag fifteen or twenty years?"

Many a time, afterward, I heard the wistful note in that mild garrulous old voice; afterward, when I heard his voice no more. It wasn't much he wanted. Just a quiet place to sit and time to talk—time to consider the pictures of old memory. It's hard to get old and have no roots fixed anywhere.

But I was used to his grumbling that way. Enough? It all depends on what you call enough. We had money in the bank; we had our equipment, none of it easily convertible into cash except our mules; we had our trade, worth nothing unless we had timber to supply it.

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Could we sit down and let it go—now, when we were just beginning to cash in? I tried to get him to take a vacation and run up to the States or something, but he only snorted absently and said he hadn't lost nothin' in the States. I tried to get him to come with me scouting for timber; our white foremen, I argued, could finish out the season and fill the orders we had on hand; but he only grunted mildly that he wouldn't trust them tenderfeet far as he could throw a bull by the tail—not if they was to get scared.

“Oh, I ain't runnin' out on you,” he said. “I can stand it long as you can. What timber did you have in mind?”

## CHAPTER XVIII

I REMEMBER when we had first heard talk of this timber in Vizcaya. During the war, it seems, an oil company had started operations there, developing an obscure port called Chunango, and the oil men started talk of a remarkable stand of virgin mahogany in the Zorro Valley there. Close to the coast, too, and on the Pacific side, where you can work right through the rainy season.

On my very first trip to Guatemala after I got my discharge, an oil man was on the boat as far as Havana. Uncle Ben met me in Puerto Barrios and we rode out to Number 1 Mill together; but he was so full of questions about my military career and my health and my general behavior that I forgot all about the oil man's talk until next day at noon, smoking drowsily in the narrow shade in front of his shack. I spoke of it then, idly, you know; at this time I had no idea we'd ever need that timber.

I'd never been to Vizcaya, but Ben Murchison had. I'll tell you as near as I can remember what he said, and you can judge if it seemed to have any practical importance.

Eh, well! I'm not so practical as I used to be. I've learned to sit aside sometimes, as I do now, remembering. Days, words, events—all happenings go by in single file, like random beads along the string of time, confused and unrelated; and most of them disappear and have no meaning. How can you tell which ones to seize and keep? You have no choice. Some that seemed beautiful are never seen again. Some that were dull

and blank have not yet shown their most important sides. Only in memory are they free to drift and slip into their destined places, showing the spreading pattern of the truth.

"Yeah, I remember," said Ben Murchison. "I didn't care then if it was mahogany or what, but I was right thankful for that timber once. I made it about three jumps ahead of a firin' squad."

He grinned, the look of reminiscence coming on him. I listened idly; I was too hot, too tired, too languid to talk business.

"Me and another young feller," he said, "played a kind of a joke on that country once. Been a long time since I thought about it. I forget his name; his papa was a regular Spanish grandee, a duke or a count or somethin', and claimed to be some kin to the king of Spain. In them days folks thought a king was quite somebody too. This was along about '90 or '91, I reckon, because I hadn't been in but about four revolutions then.

"Well, sir, the very night we took the capital, right in the middle of our celebration our candidate up and got himself killed about a woman. Bells ringin' all over the city, bands playin' in the palace and out in the plaza, the people all celebratin' and no more candidate than a goat! Nobody knew it but the insiders; they tried to keep it quiet till they could get together on who was goin' to be president after all. A dead man can't be, and our man for vice-president was only a friend of his, and you know how politicians are. Every man in the council thought only one man could save the country and he was him.

"There was some talk of shootin' this young feller that did the killin', but I refereed it myself and I could swear the fight was fair. I would have done the same. She was certainly a beautiful young lady."

He stopped, looking restlessly about. The watchful

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Gabriel unfolded his mighty bulk from the doorstep and brought out a bottle and the water jug and glasses, like toys in his tremendous hands. Gabriel knew what Don Benjamin wanted when he paused like that.

"Well, Buck, here's regards! Myself, I never had time to get married while I was young enough; you know, it ain't hardly right to marry a nice girl and then go out and get yourself killed. I had a girl once back in Alabama, and I always thought if—but she ——— Buck," he said thoughtfully, "don't you never aim to get married? You're a steady, peaceable young feller, and I never saw the like of you for makin' money. You could take care of a woman in fine shape. But you keep foolin' around and puttin' it off, and pretty soon ———"

"What was the joke?" I said, reminding him.

"Huh? Oh, yes; that time down in Vizcaya. The man that was puttin' up most of the money, he made a heap of fuss about the duel; I had to challenge him before he would shut up. 'Course, he got out of it by sayin' he was a gentleman and couldn't fight a mercenary, meanin' me, and I says well then, shut up. But it made me kind of sore. Suarez or Juarez, his name was; somethin' like that. I never had no use for politicians anyway.

"He was a rich man and the politicians thought he was the Great I Am. I reckon he was the man that got up the revolution in the first place, only he wasn't popular enough to run himself. He had plenty to say, anyway. He says we got to give our word as gentlemen not to let it out about the duel, but I was only a mercenary and I told him to go to thunder; and he couldn't have me arrested, because the army men thought I was all right. Me and this other young feller, we left 'em squabblin' and took the young lady and her mamma home. She was all out of the humor for dancin' by that time.

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“He was a popular young feller, handsome and rich and always up to some devilment; the army men all liked him. The crowd wouldn’t hardly let us back into the palace, cheerin’ and all. We went out in this other room where the army men and most of the licker was; you know how thirsty you feel after a duel; nervous, kind of. And in them days,” said old Ben Murchison, reaching absently for the bottle, “I was a young feller and had the fool notion I could drink it all.

“The politicians was still squabblin’. Bustin’ up in twos and threes and whisperin’ about each other; you know how politicians are. But finally somebody come out and said this man Suarez—Alvarez—no, that don’t sound hardly ——”

“Call it Suarez,” I suggested.

What difference did it make? The air of noon was stifling in that little clearing where the sun poured down. The thing he spoke of had happened very long ago; to me, at this time thirty-three years old, it seemed as ancient as the Trojan Wars. Finished and done with long ago; of no more present practical importance than the Maya ruins in those vast, mysterious, hot forests where we cut mahogany for the markets of the States.

You get my point? It was just idle talk. I only overlooked one little fact—Ben Murchison wasn’t the only man who could remember thirty years.

“Well, the army men was plumb disgusted; specially this young feller, account of Suarez tryin’ to get him shot; and Suarez would do it yet if he had his way about it.

“‘If he’s worthy to be president,’ he says, ‘I’m worthy to be king!’

“Just for a joke, you know. He felt kind of sour; he’d had a hard day, fightin’ and then dancin’ and then the duel and then this on top of it; and he had a few drinks in him too. I reckon we all did. The army men all laughed and yelled *viva* His Majesty till a fat

old general says be careful or the people will hear, because there was windows right out on the plaza.

“ ‘Why not?’ I says.

“ ‘We’ve give our word,’ says he, pompous.

“ ‘Not me!’ says I, and bulged out on a balcony. He come hoppin’ out to stop me, but I saw him comin’ and yelled *viva* for him, and the people yelled *viva* and he had to make a speech.

“You know how they can get worked up with language. Three-four thousand people listenin’ that way, his voice boomin’ grand against the cathedral, and him full of champagne to start with. . . . Buck,” said Ben Murchison, “seems to me you’re drinkin’ more than you used to. A little now and then won’t hurt you, but you don’t have to take a drink every time I do. I’m just an old feller and I ——”

“The fat general made a speech?” I said, reminding him.

“Yeah. You know the kind of talk they like; about the glorious history of the country and all; not that they know a durn thing about it—half of ’em can’t name the president before last, but they think it’s glorious on general principles, as big as the United States or anybody. Every one of these durn countries ——”

“Offhand,” I interrupted maliciously, “who was the president of the United States before, say, McKinley?”

“Teach your grandma how to milk ducks!” snorted Ben Murchison. “Grover Cleveland. But this was in Harrison’s time. Cold-blooded feller, Harrison was. Awful hard on Americans fightin’ for these countries, but first thing when he got out of office, he took a job as lawyer for Venezuela. Myself, I don’t see no difference.”

“Go on,” I said meekly. “The fat general made a speech.”

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“Yeah. He flew so high he plumb forgot he didn’t have nowhere to light; me and the other army men, we kept expectin’ the politicians to bust out on us. So I stepped up and touched him like I had some news, and he was feelin’ so good he says *viva* the gallant foreigner who has fought so noble for ’em, meanin’ me.

“But I held up my hand and told ’em their candidate was dead.

“Well, you can imagine! One revolution is all right, but it ain’t so funny to be celebratin’ one and see another one starin’ you in the face. That was what the politicians was countin’ on. ’Course, I didn’t say who killed him; you know how you do; duels ain’t legal. I says he has died by a sad accident, and what a great man he was and what a sorrow that God let it happen. We blame a lot of things on God that is our own durn fault. He was just drunk and feelin’ frisky or he wouldn’t ’a’ thought of actin’ that way to a nice girl.

“I could see how they felt about it. Yeah, I reckon we all forgot it was a joke. We’d got that far with it and we made one play for it, whole hog or none. And I still believe it would be better for ’em than all the graft and politics they have to put up with.

“‘A government must be,’ I says. ‘People of Vizcaya, let it be one that shall endure!’”

He got out of his chair, this shabby, thirsty old partner of mine, and the glass in his hand became a saber—pacing a little to and fro, living again a moment thirty years gone by. Old Spanish phrases rolled sonorous from his tongue; Gabriel Zalas, with no idea what it was all about, looked up respectfully from the doorstep.

“‘Are ye not tired of politics and war? Then let this night be named in history! There lives among ye one man born to rule. No politician he; his blood is noble blood and he has shed it for ye!’ And that was a fact,” said Ben Murchison, “though not much; not a sample to what he’d shed if Suarez had his way.



“ ‘Name ye this man to lead, and follow him and his sons’ sons in peace and glory before the nations!’

“All army men just naturally like the idea of a king. And he looked like one—this tall young feller standin’ there between these big square lanterns, a thousand torches dancin’ and these sabers glitterin’ over him. Yeah, I reckon we’re all kind of childish, inside. We like to see things glitter. We like to see a man look brave and fine. We like to think there is somebody we can just hand our troubles over to—somebody fit to be a king.

“The noise like to blew the palace down. The politicians all come runnin’ out, but it was too late to stop the band wagon then; and you know how politicians are. They got right on and rode. They waved their arms and yelled as big as anybody—all but Suarez; you ought to seen his face. I edged around and poked him in the ribs and grinned, and he thought it was a gun and started cheerin’ like a good feller.

“ ‘Viva Luis!’ Yeah, I remember now; that was his name; Luis. Luis de Somethin’ Somellera. I wore a fine new uniform at his coronation, I remember, and another one at his weddin’. She was certainly a beautiful young lady.”

He stood a moment fumbling vaguely for a match, his eyes far off on things that he remembered; sighed and sat down.

“Oh, well, this was a long time ago.”

“How long did King Luis last?” I asked him.

“About a minute,” he said gloomily. “ ‘Course, the United States wouldn’t recognize a king, so these other republics wouldn’t, and the politicians knifed him in no time. Took his papa’s property and ran his folks out of the country. Suarez, he had the last laugh after all. My horse got a bullet in him and I had to hoof it the last forty miles; hadn’t been plenty of timber to hide in, I never would ‘a’ got away.

## THE RED GODS CALL

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“Oh, well,” he sighed, “I reckon every young feller does fool things. I wouldn’t let him get shot for fightin’ for his girl, but I turned right around and got him executed for a joke. It don’t seem near as funny as it did once.”

He fell into gloomy silence. The siesta hour was over; peons went plodding by, flat-faced, sandal-footed Mayas, stupid survivors of a race that had been great when Rome was new; from the weather-beaten shed of Number 1 Mill the noise of saws wailed off into the forest that hid the bones of palaces and temples. He sighed and rose, this tired old soldier of fortune; his decent black working pants were shiny where he sat.

“*Sic transit gloria!*” I murmured.

“Huh?” said Ben Murchison. “You say somethin’, Buck?”

## CHAPTER XIX

So I WENT down the west coast on a flying trip—I meant it for a flying trip—to have a look at that mahogany. It took time; the world may be a little place, but it's slow crawling there around the bulge of it where trails are few. By horse to Puerto Barrios, by rail across to San José de Guatemala, by Pacific Mail to San Carlos, which is the principal seaport of Vizcaya; by rail to Ciudad Vizcaya, crossing the great chasm of the Zorro Valley, and by horse again back north into the Department of Toloba, where Chunango is.

At Ciudad Vizcaya I heard of Don Diego's sudden fall. It was something of a sensation even there; Don Diego had been a power in those countries for twenty years. He was in prison, himself a victim to the machinery he had controlled so long.

Ben Murchison cabled cheerfully: "All right so far."

I met no politician named Suarez or Juarez. How should it have occurred to me that he might be laughing yet? Strolling at night in the plaza, listening to the band, I looked at the long façade of the presidential palace and wondered idly which of those many balconies might be the one where young Ben Murchison had bulged out. But that had been thirty years ago; the timber was what interested me now. The minister of hacienda, a courteous old gentleman named Mora, knew nothing of mahogany, but expressed entire willingness to take money for it if I should find any on public land.

Vizcaya has no broad lowland such as Guatemala has; only a narrow ledge of jungle and this one low-swinging

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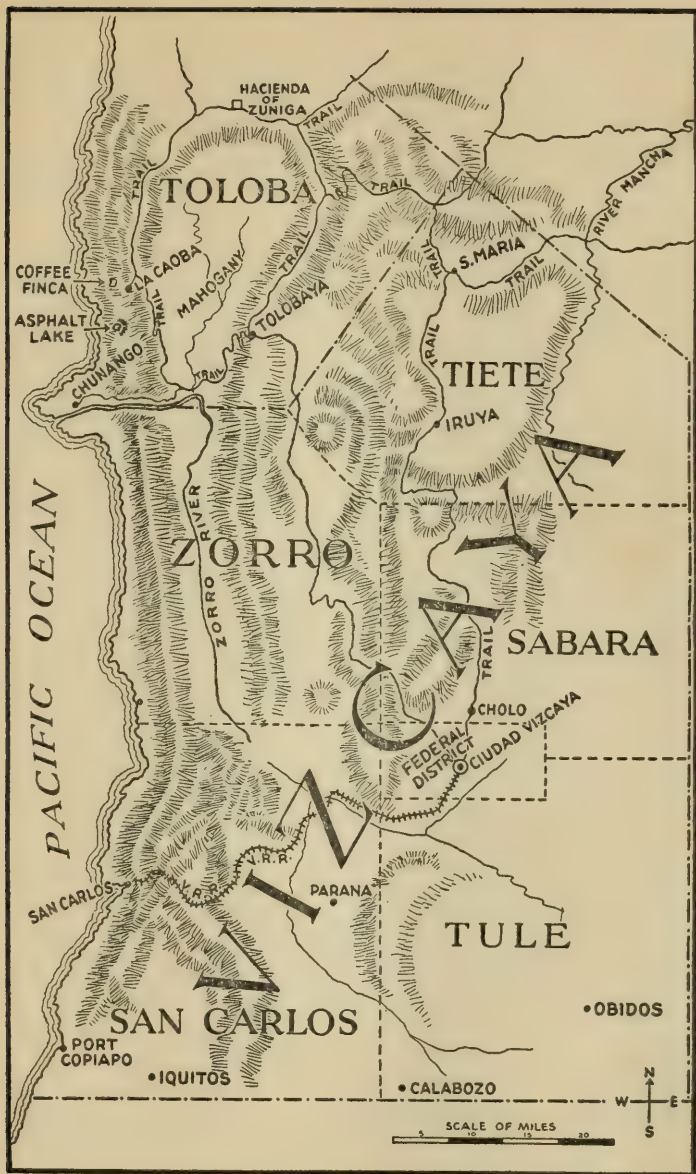
valley between the first line of hills and the great inland ranges. Once, a million or a billion years ago, the Zorro Valley must have been a lake of melted snow three thousand feet above the sea. It has no outlet but a giant fissure in the outer wall of hills, a steaming cañon five hundred yards wide at the bottom and a sheer half mile to the top. That's where the Zorro finds its way to the Pacific, building with black sand and mud the delta on which Chunango sits. It falls five hundred feet in those ten miles; it is not navigable.

North of the break the valley rises, broadening and flattening, a deep sheltered bowl rimmed by the upland mesa. That's where the mahogany is, at an elevation of about a thousand feet. Tolobaya, seat of the Department of Toloba, perches high above it on the inland side.

An ancient town. It is not flat-roofed like most tropical towns; there is no adobe; the houses are of stone, sharp-gabled, with wooden roofs, clinging to the mountainside. The cobbled streets curl crookedly up hill and down, so steeply that the same three-storied house may have street entrances on three sides, one for each floor. I remember that because of Henry Dowling and his daughter Alice.

The way of it was this. I reached Tolobaya just before sundown, shivering; if you've got malaria in you, that high thin air will bring it out. I washed in icy water and hurried into the bar of the *meson* to get a drink. It warmed me somewhat. Trying more of the same, I stood watching an unskilful billiard game three men were playing there. Cracked balls, you know, and one of those vast tables such as you find in towns like Tolobaya; the cues are seven feet long; they have to be. The players were two middle-class natives of the loafer type, and a stubby American in flannel shirt and battered boots and dirty, flat-brimmed gray hat.

He eyed me tentatively and finally asked me to have





a drink. As I was already having one, I asked him to have one with me. He'd had quite a few already. His eye was blurred and his speech was blurred, and he steadied himself unobtrusively with a cue a foot and a half taller than he was.

"Name's Dowl'n'. Well, here's a go! Newcomer?" I admitted it. "Miner?" I denied it. "You got a head, ol'-timer. Stay out of it. Crooks 'n' lawyers. I'm waitin' t' kill him now," he told me, his mind leaping a gap I didn't try to bridge. "You see that horse? You watch 'm for me, will you?"

So I disengaged myself—I saw his friends edging over—and strolled out to watch that horse. It was a handsome horse, sleek and black and richly saddled, stirrup and cantle and headstall shining, even in the swiftly gathering dusk, with silver. The *meson* fronts on the plaza, which is the market place and the civic center and the one comparatively level spot in Tolobaya. Immediately in front of the *meson* a row of street venders squatted over their mats on the cobblestones, most of them gathering up their little stocks of goods, about to shut up shop and go home. I shivered idly in the evening chill.

"Excuse me," said the man named Dowling, crowding past, "while I step out 'n' kill that ——"

What he said he was going to kill isn't printable. A man was getting on the sleek black horse, cantering across the plaza toward us, heading for the trail up to the northern mesa. Henry Dowling stepped out as advertised, his battered boots leaving a trail of scattered beans and garlic and profanity across the venders' mats.

"*Oyeme*, Ramon Zuñiga!"

That wasn't all he said; his opinion of Ramon Zuñiga was violently uncomplimentary and openly expressed. The man coolly drew rein and waited. An *hacendado*—a landed gentleman—by the look of him; a great one by his manner, which was high-headed and assured.

## THE RED GODS CALL

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Dowling launched a wide swing at his head with the butt of that seven-foot cue. The man caught it neatly in one hand—it must have hurt, at that—leaned swiftly in his stirrups and snatched Dowling's collar and dragged his head against the saddle horn and knocked his hat off and proceeded to pummel his unprotected skull with the barrel of a long silver-plated revolver.

It was none of my business, of course. Dowling had begun it too; but it isn't human to stand and see a man hammered like that after he is out. He was out; no doubt about it; at the first thump his knees buckled, only the grip on his collar holding him up, his head bobbing limp at every whack. I suppose I ran. I know I was panting when I protested that enough was enough.

The man paid no attention. I caught his arm; he wrenched it free and dropped Dowling and transferred his grip to my collar; my head bumped the saddle horn before I realized what was happening. He was quick and strong, that fellow. But I wasn't drunk. I ducked against him and caught him around the waist and heaved. His knees clung as if they were welded to the horse, then slipped; but instead of falling on his head he twisted catlike and fell on all fours; I stamped on the hand that held the revolver and snatched it up—I didn't want him to shoot me before I could get him to listen to reason.

He got up quietly enough. I snapped the cartridges out of the revolver and returned it to him.

"*Caballero*," I said, "deeply I regret. Perhaps you had not noticed that the man had fainted."

Myself, I thought he was dead, huddled there beside that splendid, patient horse. The *hacendado* didn't even glance at him, only stood breathing hard through nostrils that were tight with fury, his head up and his eyes fixed hard on mine. Brown eyes, hot and arrogant like a hawk's; it came to me that he was of the caste that doesn't have to worry about killing a shabby,



drunken plaza miner more or less. A great landowner can do about as he pleases.

Then I noticed what his hands were doing. Swiftly, methodically he was refilling the revolver with cartridges from his belt.

A question of ethics here. Is it unsportsmanlike to carry a gun where you can get it without the time-honored gesture of reaching back? Ben Murchison always thought so; most old-timers do. His argument was, a gun was to keep you out of trouble, and how could it if people didn't know you had it? But I think he felt it was unsportsmanlike. Well, my hand was never so fast as his; I never liked a weight in my hip pocket pulling my clothes out of shape, and I could never wear a gun belt without feeling like a swash-buckler. A holster strapped under the left arm is more comfortable and much less conspicuous, especially in cities; and it takes a very slight gesture.

"*Caballero*," I said, "mount and ride on."

His finger, just slipping through the trigger guard as he snapped the silver revolver shut, stopped, receded; the silver muzzle, half lifted, dropped and slid into the holster.

"I have the honor," he murmured, "to wish you a very good night. But not many of them, Señor Yanqui."

He picked up his magnificent silver-braided hat and without another glance at either Dowling or me, mounted and rode off. There wasn't much chance of his shooting from a distance in that fading light; besides, as he receded I became aware of spectators moving up. I could hear Dowling breathing.

"Somebody bring a medico," I said.

"There is none, señor."

"Only the barber, señor. He does bleeding."

Dowling was doing plenty of bleeding without the aid of the barber. I tried to find out how badly he was hurt, but the light was too dim.

“Who knows where this man lives?”

They all did, by the answering murmur. But nobody offered to do anything. I took his shoulders and told them to take his feet, and so we carried Henry Dowling home. We stumbled up a narrow curling street to a door at the top of a three-storied house. A little girl—eleven, she was at this time, but with skirts reaching to her thin ankles and a black *rebozo* clutched in native fashion around her head—dashed out at us, demanding, “*A quien traen?*”

“*Tu papa, chica.*”

She caught Dowling’s shoulder, shaking him, crying quaintly in English, “You hear me now, papa! Stand up now! You’re all right, old-timer. Get up and walk like a man!”

“Don’t do that,” I told her. “He’s hurt. Run tell your mother to fix a bed for him.”

She dived into the house. We followed her. In semi-darkness, we stumbled past what seemed to be a dining table to the room where she was lighting a smoky lamp and pulling back the covers of a sagging bed. A bystander’s voice suggested that we should muffle his head to keep the harmful air away from him. I countermanded that and there we stood.

“Where’s your mother?” I asked the child.

“Dead,” she said laconically.

Then, bringing the lamp, she saw the blood on Henry Dowling’s face and began suddenly to cry.

“*Que le ha pasa’o? Cual de Ustedes le ha pega’o a mi papa?*”

“None of us, *chica*. It was Don Ramon Zuñiga.”

“I told you so, papa! I told you so!” she wailed.

“This Señor Americano unhorsed Don Ramon and threw him in the street and kicked him,” said a woman solemnly.

The child almost stopped crying, staring at me. I took advantage of her attention to tell her to bring

water and a clean cloth. The good Lord knows I am no skilful nurse, but nobody else seemed to have any better idea what to do. I washed the blood from the cuts as best I could; it was only oozing now. I had no way of telling whether his skull was fractured. I asked the child if there was any disinfectant in the house.

“What’s disinfectant?”

“Bring all the medicine you’ve got.”

She brought it. Cough sirup and castor oil. The bystanders, bored, drifted out while I was clumsily bandaging Dowling’s head with strips torn from an old nightshirt. The child stood by me, not crying, but only watching me with heavy eyes.

“Is he hurt bad?”

“I hope not.”

Dowling breathed slowly, noisily; a horrible sound, I thought, for a child to hear.

“What’s your name?” I asked by way of diversion.

“Alice.” After a moment she asked politely, “What’s yours?”

“Buck,” I told her.

I finished my bandaging, and there was nothing to do but sit and listen to that horrible breathing.

“You know Alice in Wonderland?” I asked her awkwardly.

“Who’s she?”

“A little girl about your size,” I said. “One day she was sitting out under a tree with her sister, reading a book, and a white rabbit came by and looked at his watch ——”

“Whose watch?” said Alice.

“The rabbit’s. He took it out of his vest pocket and looked at it and said, ‘Oh, my ears and whiskers! I shall be late for tea!’ and popped down a rabbit hole. And Alice was so curious that she ran and popped down the rabbit hole too. . . . Sure you don’t know the story?”

## THE RED GODS CALL

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“You’re making it up,” said Alice. “Rabbits can’t talk, nor drink tea, nor tell what time it is, nor wear clothes.”

“This one could,” I said. “That’s what made her curious.”

“Well, she couldn’t get into a rabbit hole,” said Alice, “not if she was anywhere near as big as I am.”

“This was a big rabbit hole,” I maintained stoutly. “It went down and down and down, and it was full of shelves with jam and jelly. And, oh, yes, I forgot to say the rabbit wore white gloves.”

Lewis Carroll would have turned in his grave—if he is in his grave—to hear the patchwork I made of his immortal yarn, getting it wrong end to, inventing, improvising what I couldn’t remember; but this child called Alice liked it. She listened incredulously at first, but finally it dawned on her that it was just foolery, and she wriggled in her chair and grinned—sitting there at the foot of the bed, her feet failing by three inches to touch the floor, apparently not noticing that stertorous sound at all. And it came to me that she was used to it. That’s the way a man breathes when he is drunk.

When I finished, she sighed and slipped briskly to the floor.

“Well,” she said, “I guess I better get some supper. You like fried eggs?”

I can’t tell you how it hit me—this eleven-year-old woman doing the best she knew. Sunburned and rough-skinned, her green eyes big in her thin face, unnaturally mature. Of course she didn’t realize what she was up against; no child could; but she was standing up to it just the same. I told her to wait, and galloped own to the *meson* and told them to send up large quantities of food. And by the way they looked at me and hurried, I knew my encounter with Don Ramon Zuñiga had made me a personage.

"Who is Don Ramon Zuñiga?" I asked them.

"An *hacendado*, señor."

And that was all I could get out of them. The humble ones are too wary to speak unguardedly to strangers about the great men of their world. So I went back and asked Alice.

"Don't you know who Don Ramon Zuñiga is?" she marveled. "He's—why, he's Don Ramon Zuñiga! He's the man that took papa's mine away from him. He's—why, he's rich! Didn't you know it? Say," she said, a thought striking her, "you kicked him—and didn't know who he was? Say, you better make tracks out of this country quick!"

Supper came and we ate. Even in the cluttered dining-room I could hear Dowling's breathing.

"Did you ever hear," I asked her, "about the time Alice walked through the looking-glass?"

"No," she said mirthfully, "but I s'pose you did. Go ahead, old-timer. Spill it."

I spilled it. It tickled her at first, the idea of a place where everything worked backward; but most of the characters were too strange for her. She didn't know anything about chess, even when I translated the names into Spanish. Her eyelids drooped. I brought the story hastily to a close, and she yawned—curiously babylike, that yawn.

"Your bedtime, isn't it?" I asked.

"What about you? You got a place to sleep?"

"I'll just stick around," I said, "and see that your father gets along all right. You go on to bed."

"Oh, he'll sleep it off," said the child called Alice.

Dowling did seem to be breathing more quietly. But I honestly didn't believe any human skull could stand the pounding he'd got; I was afraid she'd wake and find him dead or something. So I made her go, and lighted my pipe and sat down by Dowling's bed. Dowling himself woke me, groaning.

The gray of dawn was in the air. Dowling sat on the edge of the bed, his head between his hands, groaning.

"How do you feel?" I asked him.

He stared at me. I guess he hadn't noticed I was there.

"Rotten," he said at length.

It seemed a perfectly normal answer. I uncramped my chilled frame and went to the window and opened it and got a lungful of keen fresh air. It was cold but bracing, very different from the sick, slack inner chill of malaria. Under the window the gabled roofs fell steeply away, mist curling upward from their peaks; yonder, far down, the vast green floor of the valley stretching away into the blue of seaward hills, half veiled with melting streamers of the morning mist. That was the timber I had come so far to see.

The sun popped out. Dowling came and stood unsteadily by me.

"Zuñiga beat me up, didn't he?"

"He certainly did," I agreed. "Feel all right—considering?"

He nodded, gazing out the window, his black-stubbed face cut into seams with dissipation and bitterness and pain. The child called Alice came into the room, barefooted and in her nightgown.

"Papa," she cried, "you missed it! You ought to hear this old-timer. He does make up the damnedest lies!"

"Go back to bed," growled Dowling, "or put on your clothes."

So I went on about my business. The timber, I learned from the local register of deeds, was not public domain. It belonged to various estates. He mentioned the names of the owners, including Don Ramon Zuñiga, cutting a thoughtful eye at me as he did so. But he didn't mention any politician named Suarez or Juarez.

## THE COUNTRY OF OLD MEN

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How should it have occurred to me that the name was not Suarez or Juarez—no more like these than Williams is like Wilson or Johnson? This Don Ramon Zuñiga, now, couldn't have been a day more than forty years old.

## CHAPTER XX

NO WONDER it doesn't rain much in that sheltered bowl of hills. It doesn't need to rain; the air is warm and wet like steam. Riding there, you must light one cigarette from the butt of another to keep off mosquitos; if they bite you, take quinine and hope for the best—hope it is malaria and not yellow fever. The Rockefeller Foundation has not yet educated the Indians of the Zorro Valley.

Nobody lives down there but Indians. Iquiques mostly, I guess. They know very little Spanish; my *mozo*, a half-breed I'd hired along with the horses in Ciudad Vizcaya—you mustn't travel without a servant if you are anybody—communicated with them by grunts and signs; but I don't believe they understood him any better than they did me. They didn't know whose land they lived on. They said vaguely that it belonged to "the master." Asked where he lived, they'd point vaguely toward the mesa and say "*Por to' la vere'a*"; which is to say, all the way up the trail.

The belt of elevation where mahogany can grow is narrow there. It seemed a small tract after the limitless forests of Peten; but there was certainly enough for my lifetime, to say nothing of Ben Murchison's. The oil men had not exaggerated. I never saw such trees or dreamed of mahogany in so dense a stand. If transportation to the coast proved feasible, and if the timber rights could be acquired at any reasonable figure, we could laugh at losing our concession in Peten.

That first day I only worked hastily across the valley, with side excursions where the ground was open enough. I knew better than to spend the night down



there. Sweating along the trail from Tolobaya to Chunango, skirting the jungle above the bend of the Zorro, two hours before sunset we came to a steep twisting trail that climbed the seaward hills. It had to go somewhere; and toiling *por to' la vere'a*, we came out again to high clean air and open sky.

These little feathered ink marks on the map will give you no hint of the majestic scale on which those hills are built; no hint of that great sudden spread of distances. A man can breathe. Westward the cool translucent arch of the Pacific hangs against the sky, like a dim planet rising, incredibly high. Eastward the blue-green chasm of the valley becomes a detail; it almost seems that you could throw a stone to Tolobaya, so far the mountains reach behind it, rising range on range into the silver, ageless peace of ice and snow. A man seems little, time itself is dwarfed in the magnificence of God's raw handiwork.

That's where the hacienda of Caoba lies. A simple place; thick weather-beaten walls, solid, eternally calm they seem to me in memory; great weather-beaten doors, tall for a man on horseback, thick for defense, but open to any man who comes in peace; old pavements and old houses, a people whose customs have the simple certainty of long use. They made us welcome. They sent my horses to the corral, my *mozo* to the servants' quarters; and the master of the place—Fernando Fernandez del Valle, gray-eyed, gray-bearded, scholarly—offered me the head of his own table.

"My house, such as it is," he said, "is yours."

I used to laugh at such exaggerated forms. True, he didn't expect me to take his place at the table or to sell his house; but the courtesy was real. Out there they think in leagues instead of city blocks, in journeys of a day instead of miles; neighbors are not so many but that every stranger is a friend. How can you welcome a stranger better than with established forms?

## THE RED GODS CALL

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A peaceful place, it seemed. I remember the massive old table, Fernando the patriarch, at its head; Rufo, the youngest son, beside me, trying manfully to hide his young curiosity about me and the world; the stout and motherly Doña Constanza, anxious only that I should have enough to eat; Aunt Trini, thin, gray-haired and aloof, very formal after the Spanish manner; and across from me, properly lowering her dark lashes when I looked at her, Rita—Margarita Constanza Ascension del Valle, not the youngest daughter, but the only unmarried one.

When she looked down demurely at her plate I could notice the clear beauty of her brow, the sheen of her black hair, the sober curve of her soft mouth; but when her eyes met mine for a second I forgot that she was beautiful. Strange eyes. You had to call them gray, yet they were almost black; disturbing eyes, with little amber lights that came and went; gray like the storm clouds on Vizcayan hills, lit with some hidden, sleeping flame of violence. I couldn't help wondering how that storm would be if it should break.

She was twenty years old. Twenty and not yet married! Does that seem shocking to you? It did to them.

Her advanced age gave her a little liberty. After supper she did not retire, but sat with us in the cool dimness of the colonnade about the patio, where starlight drifted through old arches and a fountain lulled you with its murmuring. She did not talk; a woman does not talk with strangers like myself. I only felt her sitting there, quiet, yet strangely, beautifully alive.

Her father seemed to be something of a philosopher.

"Young men are fools," he said. "Be not offended, *caballero*; but consider the case of yourself. You come, you say, in search of timber—to this distant and difficult place. Is there no timber in your own United States?"

“Mahogany, no,” I said. “Besides, there is more profit to be earned in difficult places.”

“Profit?” said Don Fernando dryly. “Ah, yes, I have heard it said that you *Yanquis* live for profit. You, admitting it, have turned your back on the richest country in the world; the young men of other races, accusing you, hurry thither to reap the dollar where it grows thickest. Do you not smell a lack of logic in it?”

“Some men,” I said, “are content to trade in dollars; others find satisfaction in creating wealth—seeking the hidden treasure, bringing to use the natural riches of the earth.”

“For profit? Bah!” said Don Fernando. “That is a lie we tell ourselves when we are young: ‘I shall be old some day and have much need of comfort; let me hurry to get money before my powers fail!’ Well, it is true, all men grow old. But no young man believes it. How can a young man know he will be old? He sees old men about him, yes. He sees elephants too, yet can he picture how it feels to be an elephant?”

“No, my friend; it is the old men who put those words into his mouth. He knows old men are wise—that is, the old men tell him so—and he gets money to save his face with them. But it will never buy the thing he truly seeks.”

“Love?” I said, not knowing yet the measure of his mind.

“Mystery,” said Don Fernando.

I half remember Rufo squirming as if he wished to speak but dared not. He was eighteen; but parental discipline is strong in families like that; an eighteen-year-old boy is still a boy and must be silent when his father speaks.

“A brute of the forest,” said Don Fernando, “is content with food for his stomach, his mate, shelter from storms, a familiar hunting ground. A brute knows what he hunts. He can see the horizon, but he does not

wonder what nameless things may lie beyond it. He feels no need for wonder. A brute is curious only about what threatens or may threaten, profits or may profit him.

“That is how man is different. When a man knows, or thinks he knows, all that lies near him, then he must go beyond. Let him be fed and warm and all secure; he will forsake all that he has to seek that which he does not know—seek things to wonder at. What holds no secret seems to him an empty place.”

“Then what he seeks recedes, is unattainable?”

“It is the penalty of being half divine, and only half.”

I said sardonically, “The old men tell us so!”

“Eh, well!” said Don Fernando. “I am no priest, only an old man with the memory of many follies. It may be so. Maybe we run like squirrels in a cage, going nowhere. Certainly all horizons are the same when one is old.”

“That is a sad philosophy,” I said.

“How so?” said Don Fernando. “If it is a cage, then there is something that is not a cage. And if this life be all—do not tell the padre I have said so—at least the sleep of weariness is grateful. The recompense of age is peace; to fill old nostrils with the memory of courage and illusion, being no longer tortured by it.”

“Little by little,” I said, “seeking they know not what, young fools are conquering this great world.”

“And when they shall have conquered it—what then?”

“The stars!” I said, for they come close about that hacienda in the hills, clear and alive and wonderful.

“Vainglorious youth!” said Don Fernando, laughing. “The stars? Even to-day, I hear, men learn them, weigh them, measure them. They are no more than other suns and other worlds.

“No, my friend, the answer is not there. Go, bump your seeking nose against the very wall of heaven, and then come back and turn your wonder on yourself, a man. What makes you seek? What gives you the power and the sleepless need to wonder? You name it; you do not discover it. Inward and inward lies a place of seeking greater than the darkness yonder; inward; there lies the limitless adventure! *Basta*,” he said, “enough! Answer me now, but honestly, and I will show you why I say young men are fools. When you lived in your father’s house, in your own pueblo, what color of the sunset used to call to you and say there was more room elsewhere to seek—for profit?”

I had almost forgotten. I had to laugh, surrendering.

“A song,” I said. “A vision without a name.”

Rita del Valle stirred in the dimness, hesitant.

“A—song, señor?”

“The song of a vagabond,” I told her. “Once in the night ——”

But how can you tell of a vision when you do not see it any more? In years and weariness I had forgotten it. Nothing remained but fact; the fact was not the truth. I had to finish flippantly.

“I loved a woman. That is usual, *verdad?* Also as usual, there came another man, a lean strong wanderer with the mark of far countries on him, strange words in his mouth. She saw his eyes of loneliness; I heard his talk. I was a mere *poblano*, a townsman, fat and dull ——”

“You are not fat,” said Rufo, wriggling in his chair.

I had to laugh. Eh, well! Nothing was lost. You can not sell a vision in the lumber market.

“Who, by the way,” I asked them, “is Don Ramon Zuñiga?”

Nobody answered. The fountain seemed suddenly louder. You know the quality of silence when you

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know you've made an awful blunder without knowing what it is? I made some inane remark to try to carry over, but the constraint was not eased. Don Fernando answered politely; politely, no more. Doña Trini rose, saying with cold formality, "I retire. With your permission, *caballero*."

"You have it, señora," I answered, wondering what it was all about.

We had all risen. Doña Constanza went to her.

"I accompany thee, sister. With permission, señor."

"You have it, señora."

"Good night, señor." That was Rita's hesitant soft voice; her little hand was warm and vital, like those strange dark eyes.

"Good night, señor!" That was Rufo, very stiff; he didn't offer his hand; his tone implied, "And good-by!"

Only Don Fernando offered any excuse.

"The day has been heavy. Is there anything you require, *caballero*? There are candles in your room, and water. May you sleep well."

"And you," I said mechanically.

The fountain kept on murmuring.

## CHAPTER XXI

THUS suddenly left alone, I hesitated and sat down again. It was pleasant there. In the dim patio I could see and smell the formal masses of flower beds radiating from the fountain. Faint crosses of light marked the four-shuttered windows, but no sounds came to me but the whisper of the night wind and the steady peaceful splash of water. Under the solid sweep of an arch and over the gray shadow of the opposite wall I saw the stars, clear, steady-burning lanterns in the silver sky.

Who was this Ramon Zuñiga, that his name should scatter this friendly family like a shell of poison gas? No friend of theirs, of course; well, he was no friend of mine either. Poor drunken Henry Dowling—what chance had he to buck a man like that? Zuñiga could have killed him and never a word said about it. Oddly enough, I didn't feel sorry for Alice; she was a better man than her father. Her clear childish voice scolding him because she thought he was drunk: "Stand up, papa! You're all right, old-timer. Get up on your legs and walk like a man!" Brave, holding the bloody basin while I washed his battered skull. Tricked into laughter by the idea of a rabbit having a watch or a vest pocket to take it out of. The practical way she'd started to get supper: "You like fried eggs, old-timer?" This baby who was hardly tall enough to see over a brazier—this brave little Alice who had never heard of Wonderland!

And somehow—I don't try to explain it—it all seemed good. This woman-child doing the best she knew, finding the courage to buck circumstances that

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were hard beyond her childish comprehension. Yes, and this unexplained hostility of the Del Valle family; it was a clew to another of those invisible, intangible, immeasurable currents that swirled about me as they swirl about every living soul. Dimly, sitting there, puffing my pipe and gazing at the changeless stars, I had a picture of human life as a vast interwoven network of those currents, courage and hate and love and hope and fear, weaving—what?

“*Caballero*, a word with you!”

That was Rufo, sudden and silent as a shadow cutting off the stars; his voice was a tense whisper.

“A hundred,” I said indulgently.

“Not here. Have the goodness to follow me.”

His feet went silently before me; he opened a door and let me in and shut it quickly. When my eyes had adjusted themselves to the bright light, I saw he had replaced his riding boots with rope-soled canvas slippers. The place was a sort of armory, stone-floored and lighted by four big oil lamps. There was a rack of rifles and shotguns and pistols. In another were the shining slender blades of rapiers and the square slender rods of foils.

“Señor,” demanded the boy, “what have you to do with—him?”

“With Ramon Zuñiga?”

“That name is not permitted in this house!”

I didn't grin at his dramatic manner; he would have been mortally offended. Myself, I was too practical to take these feuds very seriously, but he was a Latin and dramatic to the core. Besides, he was only a boy; only eighteen or so.

“So I observe,” I answered dryly. “Naturally, I did not know.”

“What have you to do with him?”

Briefly I told him what I knew of Ramon Zuñiga. The boy's hostility relaxed; his dark eyes glowed approval.



"You unhorsed and disarmed—him? You are a brave man!"

"Ignorant," I amended. "Is this man so terrible?"

"Next to the Galician beast who sired him, he is the greatest robber, thief, murderer in all Vizcaya!"

In Vizcaya, named for the proud highland province of Biscay in Spain, to call a man Galician is an insult in itself. *Gallego* is a common epithet; I took it as a figure of speech; but it seems that the Zuñigas were actually of Galician blood. It was days before I even heard the name of Teofilo Zuñiga, that venomous paralytic, the Galician father of Ramon; it was many a day before I learned how far the roots of this feud went back into the past. Thirty years? Yes, and three hundred more.

"Oh," I said, "an outlaw?"

"Not he! If the laws do not please him, he has them changed. He is the richest man in the country. And the lands that make them fat," cried the boy Rufo, gesticulating with a sinewy brown fist, "were ours—of us, *los Fernandez* and *los Somellera* and *los Del Valle*!"

But I didn't remember where I'd heard the name of Somellera. Doña Trini, Rufo's aunt, was a Somellera; Trinidad Fernandez del Valle, widow of Fernandez Somellera—that was the way she'd introduced herself; you know, they speak their own names, complete, when they meet a stranger. A sensible custom, too, when you come to think of it.

"H'm!" I said very thoughtfully indeed. I hadn't used very good judgment in picking a man to antagonize, it seemed. "Tell me, does this Zuñiga own much of the timber in the valley?"

"No. His claws have grasped at things of value—plantations, coffee *fincas*, mines."

I nodded; Alice had said he'd taken Dowling's mine. Very likely Dowling had neglected his assessment work or something.

“The timber is held to be of little value?”

“Value? It is there for any one who spends the sweat to cut it.”

That was reassuring. Maybe my path wouldn't cross Zuñiga's again. I hoped not. I hadn't come here to buck anybody. I liked the Del Valles and I felt sorry for Dowling, but timber was what I was after.

Rufo, pacing like a restless young panther, took down a rapier and started lunging with it at a leather button on the wall. I complimented him on his accuracy. It isn't so easy to strike a mark with the end of a three-foot needle as you might think—before you try it.

“You fence, señor?”

“Very badly. I had a few lessons in Guatemala.”

“You have seen many countries, *verdad?*”

His eyes were wistful. He put up the rapier and came and sat on the bench with me. Indulgently I named them for him: Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Salvador, a little of England, too much of France, a bit of Germany —

“Spain?” he said wistfully.

“No.”

“But the United States, of course?”

“Of course.”

“And I,” he said bitterly, “have seen Tolobaya, Ciudad Vizcaya, and San Carlos once in the bathing season!”

That was his world, a reach of ninety miles. He asked naïve questions: Were there actually cities so big that trains were needed for travel within their limits? How many thousand feet high was the tallest building in New York? Had I fought in the Great War? Fierce people, the Germans, *verdad?* There was a German coffee planter north of Tolobaya, and he always spoke very fiercely. Had I seen airplanes with my own eyes? The army was said to have two of them

at Ciudad Vizcaya, but nobody had seen them fly. Were Frenchwomen very beautiful? There had been a French family at San Carlos, but neither the señora nor her daughters had been beautiful. Did Frenchmen like skinny women?

And of course he asked about the scandalous reports concerning American women. Did they receive men alone at night? Did they go out with men unchaperoned? That always seems incredible to Latins. They treat sex as if it were a dangerous explosive. Well, maybe it is; but when you come to think of it, there's nothing much that can be done about it.

"Some day," he vowed, "I too shall travel and see the strange things over all the world!"

I give you my word I envied him, this handsome boy with his fresh young curiosity about the world; soberly, I borrowed a thought from Don Fernando's philosophy:

"And when you shall have seen them, they will not be strange."

He spoke no more of the forbidden name, except to ask me not to let his father know we had discussed it.

"*De chico*—when I was small," he said, "he made me swear never to speak that name, never to permit any one to speak of it in my presence, never to think of vengeance. He is my father, but he loves peace too much!"

"Your father is a very wise man."

"It is easy to be wise," cried the boy Rufo, "when you are old and have no longer any feelings—here!"

There were plenty of feelings in that proud young chest he struck so fiercely; you could see that. . . . All night the murmur of the fountain was confused with the soft hesitant sound of Rita's voice, and I woke wondering about her eyes. Gray, but without a hint of blue; gray, almost black, with little amber lights that came and went. Before coffee I saw her moving in the patio, her graceful figure like a note of music

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against the silver fountain and the blue-gray shadow of old walls. But when I dressed and went out she only answered my greeting and went away. . . . Eh, well! Ben Murchison—steady, patient old Ben Murchison—was waiting for my report about that timber.

## CHAPTER XXII

RUFO betrayed himself, I guess; or else my *mozo* talked. At coffee it was evident that nobody suspected me of undue friendship with Zuñiga. Doña Constanza spoke of the morning as if I deserved the credit for it; Rita's eyes rested on me sometimes as long as a second at a time; even Doña Trini was gracious. Afterward Don Fernando asked me to ride to the coffee *finca* with him. Latins, you know, have no conception of the value of time.

Well, it's easy to waste time out there. What's a day more or less in a place that hasn't changed much in a million years? The hills are never in a hurry. Ocean and sky and growing things follow their steady cycles, returning so surely that it never seems a change. The air, warmed by the sparkle of the rising sun behind us, was fresh and sweet; the feel of earth was great and deep and strong.

"Señor," said Don Fernando gravely, "we were at fault last night. We were rude, discourteous. I must explain to you."

"It is not necessary, sir."

"You have lived long in Latin countries?"

"Eight years."

"Then you know Latin hate, the fire of Latin blood. Myself, I have grown old and learned to be content with honor; but my family—Rufo my son, Constanza my wife, Trinidad my sister—still cherish the bitter thought of vengeance."

"And Doña Rita?" I asked; I don't know why;

maybe it was because of that strange sleeping violence in her eyes.

Don Fernando shrugged his shoulders, spread his hands.

“Who knows,” he said, “what a young woman thinks? You see them grow up, señor, and one day suddenly they have slipped beyond you. My other daughters I have understood in part; they have married and borne children as a woman should. But she—I do not try to compel her. The truth is, I am afraid. . . . My sister, señor, has much excuse for bitterness. You know the history of my country?”

“Of Vizcaya? No.” All I knew was what Ben Murchison had told me, this yarn of his about the politician named Suarez or Juarez, the beautiful young lady and the young feller who had been executed for a joke; you couldn’t call that history. Anyway, that had been thirty years ago.

“She—she has suffered, señor, all that a woman can suffer. The name you spoke will always bring it back to her.”

“I am most deeply sorry. Of course I did not know.”

“Naturally; you are a stranger. That is why I must explain to you. We are lonely people and a guest is a pleasant thing. You know my house is yours. Yet I must warn you. You will find—him a powerful enemy, and to be my guest will not help your case with him.”

The coffee *finca* lies seaward from the hacienda. The ground, here rough and barren, fell away steeply; I saw the terraced green of coffee trees, a cultivated tract surprisingly small by contrast with the bulk of hills and the blue sweep of the Pacific climbing far below. It seemed incredible that the curving white line I saw was the froth of mighty breakers crashing on the beach, their thunder silenced and their power dwarfed

to nothing by the greatness of the earth. They were miles away and three thousand feet down. The enmity of one man seemed nothing much to worry about.

“My case with Don Ramon Zuñiga,” I laughed, “is not so good that I need fear to damage it. I want nothing from him; only the timber that nobody else has wanted. Perhaps not even that. It may not prove possible to transport it to the coast. It will take several days to learn if it seems so; meanwhile, if I may have the honor ——”

“The honor will be for us, my friend.”

“Is much of the timber on your land?”

“Nothing of value,” said Don Fernando tranquilly, “is on my land. Poor as you see it, though, it gives me all I need—work for my days, food for my family, a little money, a roof always for my friends.”

It couldn't be denied, his land was poor. The seaward exposure was not so good for coffee as the fertile, sheltered valley side. And most of his estate was rocks. The saddle in which the hacienda sat grew nothing but hardy bushes; not even grass. To north and south the hills rose higher; south from the coffee *finca*, the mountainside fell into rocky palisades, a sheer drop of hundreds of feet to the tangled, wooded slope below. It had rugged majesty, that tremendous organ shape, but scarcely a market value—so I thought!

From the coffee *finca* a faint footpath strayed off in that direction; it never occurred to me to wonder where it went. I only watched the process of pulping coffee in vats whose seams were calked with pitch, and chatted idly with Don Fernando. I saw lumps of pitch whose edges showed that they had been chopped apart with pickaxes; brownish-black they were, and shiny where the ax had struck. But I didn't know anything then about conchoidal fractures.

It's odd how you can remember afterward things you ought to have noticed at the time.

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Rufo, for instance. Some days he rode with me in the valley below La Caoba; helped me, too; he knew the names of the owners of the timber that interested me, and none of them was Zuñiga. His questions about the world made me feel wise; I paid him back, evenings in the long stone-floored *sala de armas*, by letting him prove his mastery with the foils. I was no match for him; my height and reach didn't offset his fiery grace and speed. What little I knew of fencing, too, was confused with a little saber play Ben Murchison had taught me for the sport of it. I remember how Rita and Don Fernando used to smile at my big-boned awkwardness, the lithe and furious Rufo stamping and circling about me in the light of the big oil lamps, touching me almost at will. It wasn't sport to him; he fenced as he did everything—intensely. When he felt my wrist too strong for him, he almost cried with rage.

Yes, afterward I knew exactly what might have been expected of him. But at the time I only grinned indulgently.

And Rita. She no longer dropped her eyes when I spoke to her. Does that seem little to you? Then you have never felt the iron wall her race has built about its women. There is a reason for it, but no matter; you shall see.

I would have sworn I wasn't in love with her. How could I be? You could hardly say I knew the girl. I don't believe we had exchanged a hundred words. And for one thing, I had ideas about race. She was a Latin, of ancient if impoverished blood; proud, putting an emotional value on everything. I was an Anglo-Saxon—presumably; my pedigree ceases abruptly at the third generation; not that it ever made any difference to me. I'd been trained to be reasonable and practical, to think things out; she had, so far as I knew, no thoughts whatever—only feelings. No, I wasn't in love with her. I only felt her presence somehow. I only knew that she



was a woman and beautiful. And I know now that in all my foolish riding to and fro, in all my foolish seeking after peace, that dim, sweet, vital presence never did recede.

And Doña Trini. Even now the memory of her is vague. I saw her every day, a stiff-mannered, cold, elderly lady, and I hardly noticed her except to treat her with the formality she expected. It never occurred to me that she must have been beautiful thirty years ago. I suppose I thought of old Ben Murchison sometimes, wondering perhaps what trail he had taken down this wooded valley that time when he was a young feller and about three jumps ahead of a firin' squad; but it never took on reality for me. It was just one of the many yarns he'd spun for me first and last.

I only plugged away at the job I came to do, sweating in the valley below La Caoba, stumbling, sometimes on foot where a horse couldn't get through, swearing, smoking my mouth raw to keep off mosquitoes; climbing gratefully at night to Don Fernando's house.

Then we would sit in the patio and talk. Not Rita; to speak is not to talk. Sometimes she sang for us, her voice repressed and formal, her graceful hands plucking soft minor chords from the guitar. She knew the song a vagabond had sung, far off and long ago in Milo, Indiana. But there was no magic in it any more. I'd heard it sung too often in too many streets.

Gus Hardy, hobo! I had almost forgotten him. It seemed a slight thing to me now, the chance that once had brought his vagrant life into brief touch with mine. Indulgently, sometimes, I thought of him. Indulgently I saw myself, a rising young citizen of Milo, Rotarian and president of the Live Wire Club of the Chamber of Commerce, listening to him—this vagabond, his lean face brown with suns more burning than the suns I knew, his blue eyes somber, conjuring up visions. And Martha, Martha McAllister—she never saw the pictures

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that towered behind the man; she was a woman and she pitied him because he had no home. Do you remember? He sang—I made him do it, spitefully—a song out of the hills he spoke of; a strange, unfinished, foreign song, his brown hands plucking strange minor chords from the guitar. Looking at Martha; I, Howard Pressley, like a stuffed figure sitting there, a fat young man and vexed with formless dreams.

What dreams? I had forgotten. The song had grown familiar and the dreams were lost. Oh, something great and sweet and wild and unattainable, far off and different from anything I knew. . . . Eh, well! I would be satisfied with that mahogany.

## CHAPTER XXIII

THERE was plenty of mahogany. I sent my *mozo* to Chunango with a cable for Ben Murchison, saying: "Prospect promising if transportation possible. Hope to report definitely before rains. Cable any news Chunango," and told the man to wait there till some answer came. It would take some days; the cable would have to be relayed by way of Panama and Havana to Puerto Barrios, and it was a day's ride from Barrios to Number 1 Mill, even if the messenger started promptly—which wasn't likely.

No answer came. I wasn't worried about Uncle Ben, exactly; he was all right; he always was, and he'd lived through more trouble than I'd ever heard of. The new administration in Guatemala hadn't had time to show its hand yet anyway, I told myself. Likely there was nothing to report.

But I did wish I could get some word from him. About the seventh day—it must have been the seventh day, because I had a chill that morning, my first since Tolobaya; malaria, you know, runs in seven-day cycles—I left my examination of the ground above the Zorro and rode all the way to Chunango. Maybe the *mozo* was loafing on the job, and I had to examine the trail sooner or later. I'd had some hope of being able to raft the squared mahogany out through the cañon, buoyed with lighter logs. That hope soon vanished. The river here was swift but shallow, the rapids broken by tremendous rocks. The trail, hugging the cañon wall, was hardly more promising. A pack animal could make it, but never a log truck. And to cut a wheel road in that rocky wall would cost a fortune.

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The cañon is only five or six miles long. Beyond it there is the flat delta of jungle on which Chunango sits; some miles of trail hemmed in by vegetation so dense that only a machete or an ax will let you through. Chunango itself is not a port you touch on pleasure tours. It is for practical purposes only, a flat black beach with these iron mushrooms of oil tanks squatting on it like monsters of a mechanical age with men for slaves; rigid black pipe lines making communication with the gaunt sentinel shapes of derricks on the hills behind. A place of sun and sand, of heat and monotony that can warp the inner fiber of a man.

But Peter Brennan—Peter D. H. Brennan, manager for the Consolidated Oil Company there—was one of those men who seem able to defy any climate or environment. English, he was; or Irish, by his name; A handsome man, pink-skinned, his mustache faultlessly clipped, his white pith helmet and his white ducks spotless—in Chunango! A stalwart man, his bearing hinting at military training, his manner easy and pleasantly self-contained. He had one oddity, though, that was rather disconcerting till you got used to it. One of his eyes was blue and one was brown.

He said frankly, "I've heard of you, Mr. Pressley. You're the man who killed Anselmo Palomar. A good job, sir. I had the doubtful pleasure of meeting the gentleman in his Mexican days; it cost me—my company, rather—thirty thousand dollars and sixteen men. Murdered, you know. Comrade Palomar rather went in for that sort of thing."

Somehow I didn't mind the way Brennan spoke of it; not making romance of it at all, only mentioning it as a fact. But it surprised me that he should have remembered my name. Chunango is a long way from Guatemala and it had been five years and more.

"I've just been reminded," he explained. "The *Salvador* touched here yesterday on her way south. My

friend Captain Sisler tells me that Comrade Palomar has acquired a posthumous halo in Guatemala. Martyr in the cause of freedom and all that. I fancy you'd not be in favor there just now."

"That's why I'm here," I told him. "It seemed about time to seek fresh fields and pastures new."

"You've a good weather eye," said Brennan.

"My partner has. General Murchison, you know."

"Oh?" said Brennan, his brown eye suddenly inquiring.

"Lumber," I explained. "Mahogany."

"Oh!" said Brennan.

It always tickled me, that British "Oh!" He made two syllables of it, sometimes inquiring, sometimes affirmative, sometimes merely encouraging you to go on. I liked Brennan. He put me up at his house that night, and after dinner, over long cool drinks—no ice, of course—we talked. He'd served with the British in Palestine. Outside of that, he'd been in the tropics many years for the Consolidated. He'd met Ben Murchison in Honduras once.

"Stout old bean," he observed. "Militant American and all that—though I doubt if he'd seen the good old U. S. A. twice in twenty years. Queer fellow, eh?"

"In spots," I admitted. "All wool, though, and a yard wide."

"Oh, quite! You say he walks in paths of virtue now?"

"He's getting old."

"It comes to all of us," said Brennan, his brown eye sober.

He knew Don Fernando too. He'd tried to buy oil leases on Don Fernando's land; the formation, he said, suggested oil under its barren surface. But Don Fernando had not been interested in any offer.

"Offish old gentleman," said Brennan.

I said idly, "He's a philosopher."

“Dashed pretty girl, the daughter, eh? I must see him again.”

His blue eye was cheery and inoffensive; I don't know why I looked at his brown one instead. If he hadn't been so handsome, I might have thought of him as entirely blue-eyed. I'm not handsome at all; my nose is too big and my jawbone is too heavy, especially when my face is sweated down as it was then. If I were a woman, I'd fancy a fellow like Brennan in spite of his mismated eyes.

There was a tanker in port, due to sail next day; the captain promised to mail a letter to Ben Murchison for me at Panama. I cabled him again: “Transportation very difficult. Writing. What news?” Brennan promised to see that my *mozo* started promptly with any message that might come, and next morning I rode slowly back along the trail into the valley, studying the ground again.

Toward the inner end of the cañon, where the trail was a mere shelf above the river bed, a thing happened. Even over the rushing noise of the rapids I heard a slight hiss under my horse's hoofs; you learn to hear such things.

But I never saw the snake. The horse reared, trying to whirl on his hind feet, facing inward of course. I felt the saddle slipping and saw the rocks thirty feet below me, caught his mane and threw myself toward the trail. Maybe that slight thrust did it. I saw his tall bulk topple over me as my chest hit the shelf, and heard the heavy impact on the rocks below.

The horse was done for. I scrambled down and shot the poor struggling brute; and there I was, afoot, ten or twelve miles from Chunango and farther—by trail, at least—from La Caoba.

Nothing desperate about it. I could easily walk to either place. Well, not easily; it was infernally hot down there, though the sun was only two or three hours high.

Wistfully I craned my neck at the rugged slope of the cañon wall. It didn't look hard to climb, nor very far, considering how fresh and cool the higher air would be by contrast.

The trail went east into the valley, north from the bend of the Zorro, west up the mountain; yes, and then a little south again. In a straight line, La Caoba wasn't more than five miles away. The more I thought about it the closer it seemed. The climb? I'd never tried to climb that far; I didn't realize. Only three or four thousand feet in a scorching sun. I started as cheerfully as might be. La Caoba, it seemed to me, was up there just over the top. Practically nothing to it but the climb.

Well, that was plenty. The sweat rolled out of my skin. In an hour I knew what a fool I'd been; but I toiled stubbornly on, hoisting myself by sheer strength and awkwardness. Nothing dangerous about it, only toilsome. The Zorro, dwindling below, looked like a clear sweet brook; I wished I'd thought to take a drink before I started. I had to remind myself that the water was warm and dirty and probably full of germs.

When I reached a slope where I could lie down without rolling, I sprawled in the shade of a bush and waited half an hour for my heart to stop pounding. When I got up I ached in every muscle.

The Zorro had disappeared. That was good; I was thirsty enough without being tantalized by the sight of water. I trudged on up the slope. The top at last! . . . That's when I learned that a mountain has no top. When you're on one ridge, another ridge looks higher. You go stumbling and slipping down, and toiling and panting up, and still you haven't got anywhere. La Caoba wasn't in sight. Nothing was in sight but bushes and ridges and ravines and sky.

The nearly vertical sun seemed a bit too far south. I had perfect confidence in my sense of direction,

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though; I wheezed ahead, chewing my pipestem to moisten my mouth. I had stopped sweating.

About two o'clock I came out over the valley again, and saw the blue sweet ribbon of the Zorro crooking away. I was about half a mile from where I'd started. I sat down and wheezed and wished I had a drink. Oh, nothing desperate about it; I could go without water quite a few hours yet. And at least I knew where I was. Across ten miles of air, I saw the roofs of Tolobaya; I even fancied I could pick out Henry Dowling's house. I thought of little Alice Dowling—cheerfully. "You're all right, old-timer. Get up on your legs and walk like a man!"

La Caoba should be just over there. I picked a ravine that tended in that direction and trudged off. When I thought I was getting too far east, I started laboring across ridges again. Toward sunset I came out in sight of the Pacific.

Had I passed La Caoba? No, I had crossed no trails. And there were the palisades—those mighty organ shapes of rock I'd seen from the coffee *finca*.

I came to them and found no way to get by. Must I go round them—climb to the top again? A smell came to me. I knew that smell; like the stink of sulphur springs, it was, only worse. I'd smelled it often along the Zorro. It came from oily veins of pitch, and there was always water with it. Water! Pushing out on the edge of a cliff where the smell was strong, I saw water a hundred feet below.

The palisades here made a semicircle, wider than it looked in those tall walls. The floor was level, six or eight hundred feet across, spotted with bushes and queerly patterned with star-shaped silver pools. Not that I cared about their shape! I scrambled back and went leaping and stumbling down the seaward slope, came out below it and climbed smooth brownish rock and reached the plain and sprawled happily at the near-



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est pool. Water, limpid water—wet. Like liquid, crystal gold and silver, trickling down. Wet! Do you know what that means?

When I could drink no more, I lit my pipe and waited till I could drink more. I had water; I was all right now.

Curious, that almost circular arena in the palisades. Paved with great convex bulbs of brown-black rock; that was what made those star-shaped pools between them. Well, I was no geologist. It must have been twenty minutes before I noticed that my hobnailed heels were sticking to the rock where I sat, coming loose with little clicking sounds. It wasn't rock. It was hard, but it was sticky.

Asphalt!

Into my mind rushed the things I'd heard vaguely, of the asphalt lake at Trinidad. A great vein of it, filling a great bowl at the rate of ten feet a year, flowing up—how long?—forever! In the dim light, at the seaward edge of the crater, I saw the same brown-black stuff sloping seaward, bushes growing in it, the smooth dark apron of it disappearing in the woods down there. Solid and still it looked, and yet it flowed forever—wasting into the bottomless Pacific such treasure as few men even dream of; immeasurable, inexhaustible, unguarded and unheeded under the open sky. And here I'd been worrying about a trifle like mahogany!

## CHAPTER XXIV

THE terrible thing about such a moment is to have nobody to tell it to. I know now why lone prospectors go crazy. It came to me that I was acting like a fool—skimming my hat out over that black, gas-filled crater, galloping after it, splashing through water, falling hip-deep into a crevice where gas bubbles broke lazily; hauling myself out, dripping and laughing. This wouldn't do, I told myself severely. I must be practical. How much was this thing worth?

Millions! Billions! There was no way to measure such a thing. It depended only on how fast you worked it. At this time I'd never heard of Richardson tests; I didn't know anything about the physical or chemical requirements of asphalt; but I was practical. Yes, very soberly, there in the starlit gloom of the palisades, I paced the circumference of that crater—to check its measurements in case it should try to cheat me by shrinking before I got back! Eight hundred and twenty-six paces, I remember; long ones, I guess; I was a little drunk with exultation and fatigue. But I didn't feel tired. I felt strong.

I had deep thoughts about the ways of Providence. Wise old Providence, arranging every little thing! Leading me out from Milo, Indiana; leading me on from Mexico to Guatemala; leading me into partnership with Ben Murchison so that he might get his fortune after all; bringing on a revolution in Guatemala to drive me on to Vizcaya; setting that snake by the trail to scare my horse and make him fall and break his back, setting me afoot to climb and find—this!

Sorry I can't explain how Providence was supposed

to have rewarded the horse. Maybe I had some theory at the time; a good many things about that night have slipped my mind.

But I remember the mood of tired peace that came over me when I trudged finally up the trail and saw the dim lights of La Caoba. I'd done a good day's work and they'd be glad.

Was that crater on Don Fernando's land? No matter. There was enough for all of us. Don Fernando was no trader, no practical man.

The *portero* at the outer gate inquired sleepily concerning my horse; I answered lightly that I had lost him. The *portero* of Don Fernando's house let me in without comment; the comings and goings of a guest were no concern of his. The house was dark. I tried to slip in quietly; it was at least ten o'clock, which is practically midnight at La Caoba. But over the murmur of the fountain I heard the whisper of guitar strings and a woman's voice. Rita was singing in the patio alone. I'd never heard her sing like that—her soft voice throbbing, the way a woman sings not to be heard but to let out something in her heart. She sat on a bench by the fountain, out there where no roof shut away the stars.

She heard my hobnails on the cobblestones; the song broke off.

"Don Howar-r"! You are quite well? No evil has befallen you? You did not come and did not come. We have been worried for you!"

"No evil," I laughed; "but a great good. Where is your father? Has he gone to bed already?"

"All the family have gone to bed. It is late."

She stood looking up at me uncertainly, hovering, I thought, on the edge of flight. I saw her wide dark eyes, her soft and sober mouth, and the fragrance of her hair came to me; somewhere inside myself I was still drunk with exultation. With a gesture I begged her to sit down and let me sit with her.

## THE RED GODS CALL

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“Eh, well!” I sighed. “There is much time to-morrow. You were singing. Please go on. I am very tired and it will rest me before sleep.”

To-morrow! A good word, standing for all the inexhaustible future and the treasure of inexhaustible earth. No more far off somewhere and unattainable; only to-morrow. A day was done and it was good to rest. . . . A great, a beautiful, a terrible word—to-morrow!

She sang the song I always thought of as Gus Hardy’s song. It took me back to the night when I had heard it first; it touched deep sober thoughts in me. The stars come close about that hacienda in the hills. In the patio are flowers, and a fountain that lulls you with soft monotony, and the night wind whispers from great mountains to eternal sea. . . . There was no flame in my desire for her; I only wanted to sink into her deep vitality and rest. Guitar strings throbbing in a minor key, the vibrant glory of a girl’s voice singing. It ended on that strange unfinished note, aching, unsatisfied; the strings throbbed on a moment and were still.

It did itself. I swear it. I knew her mouth was sweet, but I didn’t know I had touched her till I felt her fighting me—a wild and sudden and unmeasured fury like the fury of a wild thing caught. I crushed her to me, but that kiss was not the same. It was shameful. I had to let her go.

I hadn’t heard the crash of the guitar falling. Only now I heard the humming of the strings, fainter and fainter, like the dying of that sudden madness in my veins. Yes, even then, God help me, I was practical. I didn’t say I loved her. I didn’t, you know. I hadn’t thought of loving her—or any woman; especially a Latin. Somewhere inside myself I’d always meant to go back some day, go home to Milo, Indiana. Oh, I can see it now! She was utterly lovely, standing there poised for instant flight, but I neither moved nor spoke.

“You!” she panted. “And they say Americans are different!”

“Different?” I said heavily.

“Would I have dared to sit here with a man of us? You know I would not. To a *latino*, a woman—any woman—is an—an occasion. But you seemed different. You never tried to touch my hand in passing, or whispered hidden words as our men do. Your eyes looked straightly. Oh, I have watched them! They seemed so blue and clean, and sometimes I have thought they could see visions. I have wished ——”

Visions? What could I say? How can you name the beauty of a song, the nameless ache of chords in a minor key?

“To my father you have spoken with the wisdom of old men. I have wished that you might talk with me—you, who have seen so much ——”

“And understood so little! Rita ——”

“I am a woman; I know nothing. But, oh, I am so tired of being a woman! My parents think I am undutiful because I hate men, because I will not be mated like a—a mare! I am twenty years old; do you hear that? Soon no man will desire me, and I will be glad!”

I didn't laugh; twenty was old to her. And I was nearly thirty-five—old and very tired. There was no other feeling in me. But I saw her shaken out of the still repression in which she lived, and I thought that after this we might be friends.

“Rita,” I said, “forgive me now. To-morrow we will talk.”

And Yankee-like, I offered my hand to bind the bargain. After a moment she gave me hers, both of them; and I smiled down at her paternally and whispered, “Until to-morrow!”

Out of the darkness of the corridor a fury catapulted at me, snatching, clawing, striking me across the face.

## THE RED GODS CALL

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My tired brain was jarred, I guess. Starlight exploded into dull pulsing red; the first I actually knew was that I had Rufo by the shoulders, shaking him with insane resentment. I was six inches taller than he and forty pounds heavier; he was helpless.

Of course he'd heard the crash of that guitar. He struggled and sobbed and snarled vile words at me; in his eyes his sister was hopelessly compromised.

"Crazy boy," I snapped, "be still! Your sister is not harmed."

He was still. He was barefooted, but decently covered with trousers and crookedly buttoned coat, a tail of his nightshirt showing crookedly below it; it didn't seem funny at the time. I bowed and turned away and plodded wearily to my room.

Almost immediately, while I still hazily contemplated undressing, he knocked at my door—quietly enough; I opened it and he beckoned with a slight jerk of his head, his hot eyes steadily on mine. Warily I followed, too tired even to wonder what he wanted.

He'd lighted one of the big lamps in the *sala de armas*. Over his arm, punctiliously, he was offering the choice of two hilts.

"This is no hour for fencing," I said stupidly.

It wasn't a foil. The hilt was different—heavier; the Del Valle coat of arms engraved in silver; the ancient boast of the Del Valle family in curling script around it. I didn't have to read it. "*Hombre que mas vale no vale tanto como Valle vale.*" Stupidly I protested, "Rufo! You are crazy!"

"I know it. But I can not fight thee like an animal; thou art too big. I must permit thee to fight like a gentleman. Guard thee!"

An expressive language, Spanish. "Thou" is a form of infinite respect, used to address God or by a child to its parents. It is a form of intimacy, used between friends and lovers. It is a form of condescension,

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used to servants and children. But to a comparative stranger, it is arrogance and insult in the last degree. "The man of most worth is not worth so much as Del Valle is!" I saw his fierce dark eyes, the thin blades whipping together as if I had nothing to do with it—needle-pointed and six inches longer than the blades of foils. I didn't even see the point that slipped through my shoulder muscle just under the skin.

"You have touched me," I told him.

"Thou are not dead yet!"

It was the pain in my shoulder that made me realize. He did mean to kill me; he could do it, too, if I tried to fence with him. It came to me that I must take advantage of my reach. As he recovered after a lunge, I straightened up, my right side to him and point held stiffly at him. He slashed and twisted at it, but my wrist was stronger than his; when he removed the pressure, the slender steel sprang back and confronted him before he could thrust.

He couldn't reach me without impaling himself. I paid no attention to his feints; I didn't try to watch his point; I couldn't see my own. My blurred consciousness had narrowed to his grim dark face and burning eyes, his shadow sweeping now and then fantastically past him. All my will was bent on keeping up my arm that dragged so painfully at my throbbing shoulder.

"What clownery is this?" he snarled at me. "Fight, fool!"

"I do not wish to kill you and I will not let you kill me."

Words had no effect on him. I don't remember any sound; he was barefooted and I only moved, heavily, enough to face him as he circled. But there was sudden commotion in the patio, running feet and voices crying out. I must have turned my head; new pain shot through my shoulder; I saw his thin steel buckle against the bone. All calculation went out of me. Insanely I

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was beating at his head and shoulders. He had no defense against this unusual attack; he threw up his blade, but mine beat it down. My arm didn't seem to strike where I aimed. I saw red marks leap out across his face, red stains creep down his forehead. A rapier has no cutting edge to speak of, but any whip of steel will cut skin against bone.

I didn't hear Don Fernando's voice roaring at us until his arms pinned me from behind. Then I saw Rufo stumbling blindly to his knees, his sister and his mother and his aunt running to him. I remember the single glance that Rita threw at me, and in dull bitterness I let my rapier clatter to the floor. I realize now that he looked much the worse hurt of the two, his handsome face ugly with blood and fury, shouting wild accusations at me. My own blood was all inside my waterproof khaki coat. I felt it trickling down my arm, and with dim bitter pride I caught my wrist with my left hand to keep it from showing at the cuff.

Doña Trini whirled at me, her lips working, her thin fists quivering over her head as if to strike me in the face; but Don Fernando thrust her away, saying quietly, "Nothing is to be gained by anger. Take the boy to his room."

He was still master in his own house. The women led Rufo out; Rita did not even look at me again. Only Doña Trini turned back to cry at me, "Thou—*Yanqui!* Thou—male animal!" She was somehow pitiful, robbed of her armor of formality by her shapeless wrapper and the curl papers in her graying hair.

"Don Fernando," I said heavily, "please assure her that—your daughter has no blame. I would not have her think—Doña Rita ——"

"For Trinidad," said Don Fernando, "all men are beasts, especially Americans. She is a little ——" He tapped his forehead.

"Then you believe me?"



“I believe you. My friend, how has this happened?”

His voice was gentle. I went heavily to a bench and sat down, clutching my right wrist in my left hand. Trying to explain how I had come so late into the house, I remembered what else I had to say.

“Is the volcano of asphalt on your land?”

He didn't answer. I could see him standing there, but not clearly. I thought he didn't know the word *asfalto*; I fumbled for one that would be familiar.

“*Alquitrán; betún; brea*—tar, pitch.”

His voice cried sharply, “What of it?”

“I have seen it. I believe it is worth millions.”

Silence. After what seemed a long time, he sat down beside me, asking oddly, “Señor, have I deserved fairness at your hands?”

“You have deserved—anything you ask.”

“Then answer truly. Are you sent by the oil company?”

“Oil company?” I echoed foggily. “No. Why?”

“They offered me much money for my land. I fear they had discovered the lake of asphalt.”

“But how can so great a thing be hidden?”

“Pitch has no value here. It is to be found in small springs anywhere in the valley. The Indians have always known of the great lake, but it is too distant and too difficult for their small needs. It is you Americans whom I have feared; for you no difficulty is too great if there is profit in it. When the oil men came ——”

It didn't make sense. My head would not clear.

“But why have you wished to hide it? You have said your land was poor. That lake of asphalt is the wealth of kings!”

“And does it seem to you,” he said quietly, “that kings are to be envied? My cousin was a king, and he died miserably before a firing squad. And my sister, his queen—you see what she has become.”

## THE RED GODS CALL

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Dimly something came back to me. Ben Murchison's yarn of the politician named Suarez or Juarez, the beautiful young lady and —

"Your cousin!" I cried. "Was he Luis —"

"Luis Fernandez Somellera, King of Vizcaya! You have read of that unhappy boy? Surely it was before you were born."

"I have not read it. I have heard the story from Benjamin Murchison himself!"

"Mor-chison?"

"General Murchison, the soldier of fortune who made your cousin king! He is my partner to-day."

Don Fernando said slowly, "Yes, that was his name. Mor-chison. I had forgotten; it has been so long. And he lives yet?"

"He is my partner, my closest friend!"

"Then there is no room in this house for you!"

"Because of him? Don Fernando, I do not understand."

"Do you not see us as we are? Know, then, that our family once was great and rich and happy. In all Vizcaya there was no greater. But this adventurer with his ambition led my cousin into the farce of power, rose to brief power with him—and saved his own skin when the downfall came!"

Dimly, desperately, I knew it was all wrong. Ben Murchison had no ambition. For him it had been adventure, nothing more. He had defended a young feller for fightin' for his girl. He had outwitted a powerful politician—a politician named Suarez or Juarez. He had worn a fine new uniform at the young feller's coronation, and another one at his weddin'. And in the final disaster, his horse shot under him, he had gained the shelter of this timbered valley about three jumps ahead of a firin' squad—and lived to tell the yarn thirty years afterward, whimsically, to me. Just one of many yarns he told me first and last.

But for those left behind there had been no shelter. For them it had been the door to bitter years.

“My cousin and my uncle and my father murdered, my brothers killed in battle, our estates confiscated and ourselves exiled, and my poor sister — Señor,” he said grimly, “she was a young woman then, and beautiful. And Teofilo Zuñiga desired her—may he rot in his wheeled chair!”

Dimly I saw it. This was the other side of that same picture Ben Murchison had showed me. At the time I barely heard the name of that politician whose name was not Suarez or Juarez, but Zuñiga—Teofilo Zuñiga, the paralytic father of Ramon. Afterward I remembered. At the time I only stared dimly at Don Fernando, on his feet before me, blurred, gigantic; he looked nine feet tall.

“You see us now, reduced to the last and poorest of our estates. You will not understand—you, who have left your country of your own will. When I was in exile, when my body was in Spain, my soul lived here! These are my hills. They give me peace, even though I live under amnesty from my enemies. Now it is in your power to take from me even the little that I have. You have only to go and tell them that it is worth the taking.

“*Caballero*, may your dreams be sweet!”

It was only afterward that I knew clearly what he had said—in the long weeks I had to think about it. I struggled to my feet. I said laboriously, “My partner is—an honorable man, a brave and loyal man. He never knew ——”

“What he is I know not; only what he did.”

How could I deny it? It was true. Both were true sides of the selfsame picture. I didn't bow; I was afraid to.

“Don Fernando, I am—sorry for everything. Truly I—thank you for your hospitality. I ——”

That was all. There was nothing more to be said.

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I only tried to hold my head up and walk steadily. The man he spoke of was not Ben Murchison—lonely, patient, steady old Ben Murchison, through whose old eyes I saw long trains of memories, not terrible but somehow softened into beauty. Why was that? He had suffered, too, yet the pictures in his memory were somehow good.

Going by the door of Rufo's room, I saw the women standing by the bed; Rita glanced round at the sound of my hobnails on the stone; I tried to speak her name, but she had looked away. I didn't blame her. He was her only brother and the baby of the family. I had brought nothing but trouble into this house. So I went out of it. The porter unbarred the *zaguan* hastily; I guess he was neither deaf nor blind. The porter at the outer gate, getting up sleepily from his pallet, asked no questions. Maybe he thought I was going to hunt my horse—bareheaded, at midnight.

Plodding, one foot after another. My legs had got used to it; there was no feeling in them. My head was all right too. No thoughts to worry me any more; nothing inside my skull but sky and stars. There were no eyes that hated me out here. . . . If I only had a drink of water!

Down in the valley there would be water, a whole river full of it. And after that? I didn't know. Not Tolobaya; little Alice Dowling had trouble enough already.

"Stand up, papa! You're all right, old-timer. Get up on your legs and walk like a man!"

Scolding her father because she thought he was drunk. Well, he was drunk; hurt too. Blood on his face, his eyes glaring at me. . . . No, those were Rufo's eyes, hating me because I wouldn't die. Why wouldn't I? There was some reason, but I couldn't remember what it was. The eyes of Ramon Zuñiga, brown like Rufo's, hot and arrogant, hating me while his

hands filled his revolver with cartridges from his belt. Quick!

But my right arm didn't move. Where was it? Oh, yes; carried in my left hand. Mustn't drop it. Right arm valuable somehow.

Unfairly the trail pitched down. It was terribly hard to know when I was properly upright; I had to lift my eyes to the horizon, and then my feet fell where the trail was not. It didn't hurt me. Crawling up out of the bushes, though, I felt I had forgotten something. It was my right arm I was looking for. But it came trailing along by itself; so I didn't carry it any more.

"Stand up, papa! You're all right, old-timer. Get up on your legs and walk like a man."

I had to laugh. I wasn't anybody's papa. But why wasn't I walking? Mustn't quit with that stout-hearted baby making you ashamed. Get up! Walk like a man! . . . Must tell Ben Murchison about Alice—this brave little thing doing the best she knew. "You like fried eggs, old-timer?" No, I wasn't hungry; only thirsty. . . . Ben Murchison would say Alice was all right. . . . That was why I couldn't die. Not here. Ben Murchison—steady old Ben Murchison—was waiting somewhere for me to come and chew the rag with him.

Plodding. It wasn't very hard. Friendly, steady, mild old eyes ahead of me; eyes behind that hated me. My legs had very little to do with it. That was lucky, because they kept buckling and pitching me into the bushes.

Warmer down here where the wind didn't hit. I laughed at the mosquitoes; they couldn't sting me and they were very angry about it, roaring and shrieking in my ears. Why wasn't I walking?

While I lay there in the bushes considering the tremendous distance of five feet to the trail above me, something seemed to happen. A thundering of hoofs.

## THE RED GODS CALL

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Not a real horse, though; no horse of flesh and blood could sweep down that steep grade so fast. Not a real horseman; no human ever had a head like that—snow white, like a monstrous egg. I seemed to hear Rufo's voice shouting, calling to me to stop and fight. Stop! That was silly. I was just lying there.

The thudding hoofs passed close above me. The horse seemed to leap sidewise at the sight of me; but he vanished and I forgot all about him. Then, at some disconnected time—I choose this out of the many unreasonable things I saw because it was the only one that I had cause to remember afterward—the horse reappeared, galloping back up the trail this time. I saw the saddle quite clearly against the sky; there was no rider in it. But I could still hear him shouting just the same.

Fainter and fainter. You're all right, old-timer. Get up on your legs and walk like a man.

## CHAPTER XXV

THE phantom rider faded from my memory—the horseman whose head was snow white and featureless and whose voice seemed the voice of Rufo del Valle, shouting from an empty saddle against the stars.

Where did that sun come from? Leaping up over the valley, dodging here and there to scorch me through the trees. When I lay still sometimes it couldn't find me; but it hung motionless, printing its glaring pattern of hard light and heat around me, waiting. And phantoms passed; horsemen who spoke my name with hate.

Sun glaring, motionless, printing hard patterns of light and shade. But those were only shadows, without meaning. The world was full of human lives, weaving invisible currents of love and hate, and hope and fear, and courage and desire; these were reality, weaving a pattern that would never fade and never would be finished. . . . Get up, old-timer. Get up and walk like a man.

The sun leaped on me, pouring fire on my hatless scalp. Not that it hurt me much otherwise. My body was only a clumsy weight I had to carry with me. Water. I stumbled and crawled through the undergrowth and sprawled in the muddy edge of the Zorro River; lay there so long that the sun forgot me and went on. I got up and stumbled after it, shouting defiance. I was a man. A man could always go a little farther if he would not quit.

I couldn't quit, you know. Ben Murchison, steady, calm, dependable old Ben Murchison, was waiting for me somewhere.

## THE RED GODS CALL

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The stars wove patterns between dim cañon walls. A blue sliver of a moon went reeling by. Jungle closed in, black and suffocating, buffeting me between impenetrable walls, sucking at my heavy feet. Something roared about my head; mosquitoes, I guess. The noise faded into dull intermittent thunder and I saw the dark ugly houses of Chunango, and the open sea, great oil tanks squatting over it like monsters of a mechanical age with men for slaves. At Peter Brennan's door I kicked and shouted, for Peter Brennan was a man.

The door jerked open and I stumbled in. Brennan's voice, oddly whispering, commanded fiercely, "Be still, you fool!"

But I forgot to wonder why I must be still; I was grateful and let it go at that. Brennan took charge of me. He gave me water and put cold things on my head. He disinfected those red dots in my shoulder—queer that such tiny things could hurt so deep—gave me whisky and quinine and put me to bed. He sat by me while I slept. He was sitting there when I woke, his brown eye fixed on me. His brown eye, mind you, not his blue one. Nowadays when I think of Peter Brennan I make a very definite distinction.

Nowadays, thinking back, I see many things that I never noticed at the time. But I was sick, exhausted; all my memory of the days that followed is colored by malaria and lassitude; and quinine can make you drunker than whisky. When I saw Brennan sitting there I wasn't even sure that he was real. My brain throbbed dizzily.

"Hello!" said Brennan. "Better now?"

Better than what? Sun glaring in the window, hot, suffocating, throbbing with dull intermittent thunder. Breakers. I knew this room. I'd slept here once. Last night?

"Lord, what a nightmare!"

"I can believe it," said Brennan.



But when I tried to grin I felt my burned, mosquito-bitten face, my bursting brain. What was the matter with my right arm? It wouldn't work. It looked all right, only a brown stain on the rim of my undershirt and insignificant red dots on the bare skin.

So that was how rapier wounds looked! So I hadn't dreamed it!

"Here, have a go at this."

Liquor burned my cracked lips and spread fire down my throat; the room steadied and Brennan grew real again—pink skin, clipped virile mustache, mismated eyes and all.

"How'd I get there?"

"Strong," said Brennan, his blue eye cheery now. "Dragging your blanket and shouting at me to get up and walk like a man."

"Blanket?" I didn't remember any blanket.

"I suppose you salvaged it when your horse was shot. One of my men found your oilskin in the trail."

"Horse?" I croaked. "Oh, that was yesterday. A—snake scared him. He fell into the cañon and broke his back."

"Did I say shot?" murmured Brennan. "I should have said, when your horse fell and broke his back."

"I remember now. I shot him."

"Oh, quite so! Ran yourself through the shoulder too?"

He was grinning at me. I let my eyes go shut. I didn't care what he imagined. No use to try to explain. It was too much for me; went back too far. I was too weak to think and too tired to stop thinking. With queer intensity I needed somebody—Rita del Valle; not because her hair was fragrant and her mouth was sweet, but because of her deep strong vitality. My own was gone. . . . Why did I need her when she hated me?

"Could you do with a bit of breakfast now?" said Brennan, rising.

## THE RED GODS CALL

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“Eh? Should say I could! Nothing to eat since—breakfast.”

Which breakfast? I didn't know, but Brennan ought to; I'd eaten it with him. Competent fellow, Brennan. The smell of coffee woke me; strong, fragrant coffee with hot, fragrant goat's milk. . . . Goat's milk smells something like a goat, but I give you my word that this was fragrant. I ate ravenously, clumsily, left-handed. Then I slept.

Yes, quite a fellow, Brennan. He didn't try to make me explain. He didn't let anybody but his house *mozo* come near me. I just lay there. Rita del Valle, a woman. Rufo, whose proud young chest was full of wild young feelings. Don Fernando, a man who knew the use of quiet days. Doña Trini, who had been beautiful thirty years ago. Ramon Zuñiga—no, that must have been his father; this one wasn't more than forty now. But he would take the lake of asphalt if he knew. The greatest robber, thief, murderer in all Vizcaya. He was the one who'd taken Dowling's mine. Poor drunken Henry Dowling. Poor little Alice Dowling. Ben Murchison would say she was all right—this stout-hearted baby doing the best she knew.

Courage and fear and love and hate all tangled up, swirling and whirling through my throbbing brain. I had to go back to Guatemala, to Peten, and tell Ben Murchison that everything was all wrong.

He'd say it was all right. The pictures in his memory were not terrible. He wouldn't care if I was too tired to worry any more about mahogany. He wouldn't care about the lake of asphalt—worth millions, billions, but not mine. Ben Murchison wasn't practical, you know. We had money in the bank—I would have called it quite a fortune once; he'd say it was enough. We'd just buy us a little hacienda over in Honduras or somewhere, he and I, and hire us a good bartender and prop our feet up and chew the rag fifteen or twenty years.

## THE COUNTRY OF OLD MEN

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He liked to talk, you know. The years of battle had left scars on his tough old body, but not in his memory. The pictures there were somehow beautiful.

The *Salvador* put in, northbound. Now that was luck, wasn't it? She had touched Chunango on her way south; a tanker had sailed north the day before I came. I might have had to wait weeks for another boat. There's very little cargo at Chunango except oil. I don't remember that I saw the *Salvador* loading or unloading any, even so. I only remember the hoarse music of her whistle and how sweet her lights looked, sliding into the river. She meant release. I called it luck and let it go at that.

Luck! What is luck? Something that happens seemingly by chance. And what is chance? The result of unknown or unconsidered forces.

Well, there were plenty of things I didn't know or consider. Brennan asked me no questions and it never occurred to me to ask him any. I didn't care what he and his friend Captain Sisler of the *Salvador* talked so long about. Brennan helped me into my clothes, neatly washed and mended—they must have needed it—gave me my watch and gun and money belt and letter of credit, escorted me aboard and told me cordially good-by. I thanked him and answered definitely, good-by.

It's odd. A man thinks his own will guides his own life. But the world is full of human lives; a man is bound to blunder into some of them, weave his own with them indissolubly, or touch and drift away and touch again, or narrowly miss touching and maybe never know. The pattern is on the loom. And sometimes, looking back, you see a part of it. A thread weaves in and out and disappears; it is not broken but still weaving somewhere. Is it coincidence when it appears again? Unknown or unconsidered forces. . . .

Call it chance. The ports crawled by through swel-

## THE RED GODS CALL

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tering days. Captain Sisler was kind; he kept warning me to stay out of the sun; I'd narrowly escaped a stroke, you know. He gave me the sofa in the chart room, cooler than any cabin. He discouraged my going ashore. Punta Arenas, Corinto, Amapala; we should make San José de Guatemala, he promised me, within thirty-six hours now.

But I never went to San José. It was at Amapala that I heard Ben Murchison was dead.

## CHAPTER XXVI

THE way of it was this. The good captain had no cargo for Amapala, it seemed; he only dropped anchor inside those tall conical islands and went ashore on some business—none of mine, you know—saying he'd be back in an hour. But while I waited, sweltering, the boat heaving monotonously on the swells that come like tide rips through those narrow channels, a motor launch bumped alongside and a man in white riding breeches scrambled aboard and appeared in the chart-room door.

“Captain Sisler?”

“Gone ashore. Ought to be back in a few minutes now.”

I guessed who this man was. There couldn't be two such figures in Central America. A small, boyish-looking man, pale-haired, his eyes almost colorless, as if the sun that burned his skin to mahogany had bleached them; a big black revolver picturesquely strapped to either leg. Now a good many men carry revolvers, riding. But not many carry two. This was Johnny Hecht, almost as well known as old Ben Murchison himself, though for a very different reason. This man was a killer, and looked it. His pale lashes made his eyes look lidless. He had curiously long hands with flattened thumbs.

“Aren't you Doctor Hecht?” I asked him.

By his eyes I knew he didn't like to be reminded that he'd been a doctor once. With such men, if you're wise, you notice.

“My name's Pressley,” I added.

He nodded, climbing on the captain's stool, his pale eyes regarding me with some new interest.

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"Not Buck Pressley—Ben Murchison's partner?"

"Yes."

"Heading for Vizcaya, are you?"

But I didn't wonder why he asked. I only answered listlessly that I'd just come from there.

"By the look of you," he grinned, "Vizcaya must have blown up in your face. What's doing down there anyway?"

"Far's I'm concerned," I said, "it's all done."

"Not going back?"

"Never!" I said. "Never, *jamás*, not any more forever!"

"You interest me," said Johnny Hecht. But I didn't wonder why. After a moment, conversation languishing, I asked if he'd heard anything from Guatemala lately—anything about Ben Murchison.

"Only that he was killed," said Johnny Hecht.

Maybe it was the casual air with which he said it. If I hadn't been feeling so rotten I would have laughed.

"That's nothing new," I said, "for Uncle Ben. He's been killed a good many times if you believe all you hear."

"Yeah," said Johnny Hecht. "Charmed life and everything. But I guess they got the old boy this time."

"I don't believe it," I said stupidly.

"I'm superstitious myself," said Hecht. "Got eleven bullet holes already, and I'm superstitious about the twelfth one. So I don't let anybody give it to me—not with a 30-30 at point-blank range."

"What have you heard," I begged, "exactly? When was this? I — He was all right the last news I had."

"Couple of weeks ago. How long you been away?"

"A month."

"Then you know about the new administration in Guatemala? They had a mark against him for bumping off Anselmo Palomar and knocking down their play-house five years ago. You with him then?"

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I nodded. No need to say I was the one; to him it would have sounded like a boast.

"That's the trouble," said he thoughtfully, "with turning peaceable. In the old days they wouldn't have tackled Ben Murchison at any price. But I hear he surrendered like a lamb."

"Go on!" I begged.

"That's all," said Johnny Hecht. "They sent a young army out to get him—order of deportation, you know. Chased your peons off and rounded up your white men. Turned your mules out and smashed your mills with sledge hammers and set fire to everything that would burn. Marched the general and his friends toward Puerto Barrios till they came to an appropriate spot for a murder, and shot him in the back—'trying to escape'—just regulation stuff. Marched the others into Barrios and told 'em to take the next boat for God's country unless they wanted to say good morning to Him personally.

"Outside of that," said Johnny Hecht, yawning, "I judge you'll find everything all right. . . . Where the devil is that captain? I can't sit here all day."

It seems to me now that I took it calmly; stupidly, I suppose.

"Who told you about it?" I asked him.

"Your shipping clerk," he answered, nodding toward the shore. "Half-breed named Simpson. Just got a job with the Fruit Company. Like to talk to him? Come on. If the captain wants to see me he can chase me a while."

But I didn't wonder why Captain Sisler might want to see Johnny Hecht, soldier of fortune. I went ashore and talked to Eduardo Simpson, and he confirmed what Hecht had said. He was a badly scared Eduardo. Guatemala was no place for a white man now, he said.

He hadn't been with Ben Murchison, though. He'd been at Sabado, our shipping point, clear across the tip

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of British Honduras. His account was hearsay too. Oh, I believed it, right enough; all but one thing. Eduardo wasn't sure of that himself.

"Do you believe, sair," he asked me—"do you believe the zheneral is—dead?"

"No," I said. "No, Eduardo, I don't."

And even now I don't know why. It had nothing to do with reason. You know, the natives used to think his life was charmed; but of course that's nonsense. This wasn't superstition. I knew it, that's all. Ben Murchison never had been dead and Ben Murchison never changed. I don't know how else to put it.

That's how it happened that the *Salvador* went on—if it went on—without me. By the time Johnny Hecht had found Captain Sisler—if he found him, and I guess he did—I was on my way north by automobile to Tegucigalpa. My entrance to Honduras was illegal, but simple. I had no baggage and I had plenty of money.

I didn't believe Ben Murchison was dead, but I wasn't fool enough to land in San José and expect the present authorities to let me run loose across Guatemala hunting for him. Yet I had to get into Guatemala. Certainly they had tried to kill him. He'd be hiding somewhere, badly wounded, waiting for me to come. He knew I'd come.

From Amapala, on the Pacific coast of Honduras, it's only about two hundred miles straight north to Puerto Barrios, just across the Guatemalan border on the Atlantic side. But beyond Tegucigalpa there are no roads for anything but the sure feet of mules. Crossing the high backbone of the Isthmus, there are places where you climb stair steps cut in solid rock, places where you ride along a shelf and look straight down at tree tops half a mile below. We slept in mountain villages whose names I can only guess at on the map; I only sat doggedly in the saddle and followed my guide

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plodding on ahead, ate where I could and slept where he told me. I had no energy for more.

Once the scenic grandeur of the Cordilleras would have meant something to me. But compared to the mountains of Vizcaya they are not very high. The jungles of the Atlantic slope of Honduras are not different from the jungles of Peten. Nothing new about it; nothing hazardous; nothing romantic either. It was only a labor to be endured. Two days across the mountains. A day and a half across a scorching plain where the air burned your skin and the saddle was too hot to lay your hand on. Not that I suffered, exactly. Oddly enough, it was the uselessness of my right arm that made me almost cry with rage sometimes. You never know how much you need two hands until you try to get along with only one. You can't fill your pipe or button your clothes or even wash your good hand properly without another hand to work against.

The doctor at Santa Barbara said my shoulder was infected; said I'd have to give him at least a week to work on it. A week! It was already May. I had to find Ben Murchison before the rains came on.

Two hundred miles. Not far on the map; not far as the crow flies; a short leap for an anxious mind, but a heavy, heavy trail for a sick and weary body. Often, in the States, I've motored that far between meals. I made it in six days—the last few miles on the only bit of railroad in Honduras, to Puerto Cortes. From Cortes, as illegally as I had entered, I hired a fishing boat and rounded the border and the estuary of the Motagua River and landed at night on the beach below the American consul's house at Puerto Barrios.

The consul didn't know me when I stumbled in—raw-whiskered, sun-blackened and sweated to skin and bone. He gave me whisky and quinine and told me what a fool I was.

“You've gone to a lot of trouble to get yourself de-

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ported. All you can hope for is an indemnity for your outfit, and that's a lawyer's job."

"I hear they shot Ben Murchison. Is that right?"

"I wouldn't go so far," said the consul, "as to call it right exactly. Technically, the worst they could do was deport him as an undesirable alien. But you know how scared they were. Ben Murchison was never a man to take chances with. They had him where they wanted him and they took the opportunity. That's the plain truth; but how are you going to prove it? Officially, he tried to escape."

"Who saw it?"

"Nobody, I guess," admitted the consul. "They took pains to march McArthur and Stevenson and Hurlley on ahead. They heard the shot and saw the general fall. Then this big Indian of yours—what's his name?"

"Zalas—Gabriel Zalas. What about him? Dead too?"

"Not so you could notice it," said the consul. "They hadn't bothered to arrest him, it seems, or any of your peons; but he was trailing along like a lost dog, and when they shot the general he grabbed a rifle from a soldier and started smashing right and left. Laid out quite a few of them before they could get a shot at him. Then he took to the woods and got away. For a big fellow, the boys say, that *mozo* could certainly step. If you could find him," said the consul, "he might be an eye-witness for you. The police will be glad to see him too. You'll find his description pasted upon any wall, labeled Dangerous Criminal—Reward."

Poor Gabriel Zalas! He was not a dangerous anything; only a child mind in a giant body, obedient, bewildered when there was nobody to tell him what to do. Hunted and masterless now. Unless ——

Gabriel had got away. If Ben Murchison was alive, Gabriel would be with him.

After a while I noticed the consul was still talking.

“—— exceeded their authority in wrecking your outfit—if you can prove they did it; but the administration is perfectly within its rights in canceling any concession and ordering the deportation of any alien it finds undesirable.

“And Ben Murchison was certainly an alien. Yes,” said the consul, smiling, “at least he had his wish in that respect. He died an American citizen in good standing.”

I don't know why it should have hit me so hard—this reference to Ben Murchison's curious brand of patriotism. I tried to keep my mouth shut; but my left hand, trying to pour whisky, spilled it.

“I've been here three years,” said the consul, “and he was the only American in this district that took the trouble to register more than once. Regular as clock-work, once a year. And about the only one who never asked me to do a thing for him. Just ——”

“Yes,” I said, shaking, “and a fat lot of good it would have done him! Who are you to laugh at him? You just finished telling me that he was murdered; but will you say so officially? Not you! You're afraid you can't prove it. You're afraid you'll antagonize somebody and risk your precious job. Play safe, that's you! What do you know about a man like him, that played his chances straight across the board and asked no favors of any man? You ——”

Crazily I cursed the consul of the United States of America. But he'd been cursed by abler men than me; he only rose and took the whisky bottle and locked it up, and looked at me shaking in my chair.

“You're a sick man,” he said. “You take my advice and go home to the States and get the fever out of you. What's the matter with your arm? Find some more trouble in Vizcaya, did you?”

I told him what he could do with the United States.

“You'd better let me put you up to-night,” he said.

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“Better stay here till the police find out you’re in town so I can swear you didn’t try to escape. There’s a boat to-morrow.”

“Thanks,” I snarled, “for the implication that I, too, am a citizen in good standing. But Ben Murchison stood on his own legs without any chair-warmer to hold him up, and so will I. Good night, Mr. Consul!”

“Good night, Buck,” said the consul gravely. “Go on to bed and get a grip on yourself. Damn it, man, I know how you feel! I liked the old catamount. Want me to walk to the hotel with you?”

“No,” I said, “thanks. I ——”

“Don’t do anything foolish,” said the consul.

I did not go to the hotel. Puerto Barrios has no streets to speak of; but such as they were, I walked openly through them, my feeble right hand on the butt of my revolver. It was a good thing I didn’t have to use it. With my left hand I couldn’t have hit the broadside of the Fruit Company store, much less a man; and one recoil would have jarred my right arm loose at the shoulder—so I felt.

That’s all I did—just felt. I couldn’t think. I walked to the house of the *arriero* who kept my own horse for me. The *arriero* wasn’t glad to see me. Very likely he’d figured that he had inherited a good horse. I paid him three times what I owed him, to keep him from running to the police with the news that I was here. Then I rode north into the vast, mysterious, hot forests of Peten.

Somewhere in there Ben Murchison was waiting. He knew I’d come.

## CHAPTER XXVII

AN EERIE place, Peten. Once it was populous; not now. Along the whole trail from Puerto Barrios to Number 1 Mill there are only three Maya *pueblos*. At each one of them I asked, "White man, hurt?" and "Very big man, Indian, San Martin tribe?" Gabriel Zalas was of San Martin, a highlander.

They only answered stupidly, "I do not know."

Those are the first Spanish words they learn: "*No sé*—I do not know." And it's the truth. They don't. To a white man they seem not very different from dumb animals. Their grass huts are not much more elaborate than the nests of birds. They live like animals. I slept with the body smells and breathing of a whole family around me, and crawling things rattling across the mat I slept on. This was perfectly normal to them.

From their dull minds the ancient light is gone. When Christ was born, they were a mighty race. Their cities spread from Costa Rica to Peten. They had artists and artisans, mathematicians and astronomers, priests and kings; yes, even professional athletes. Archaeologists to-day have dug great ball courts out of the jungle, with walls forty feet high, where they played a game like basketball. Scholars have deciphered their calendar, so accurate that it identifies positively any day within a quarter of a million years; it was fifteen centuries before white men equaled that knowledge of the stars.

Nobody knows where they came from, those flat-faced men with Oriental eyes. Nobody knows how many thousand years they fought the jungle; there is only the dead stone record of their defeat. The jungle waited till the race grew old, and then closed in, choking their

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farms, starving their cities, driving them through slow centuries northward to Chichen-Itza in the arid plains of Yucatan. That was their last great place of building and their Mecca for a thousand years. The younger Toltecs drove them south again. The still younger Aztecs wiped the Toltecs out. The jungle took Chichen-Itza five hundred years before ignorant white men came and thought this was the coast of India.

Spaniards, those were. To-day the power of Spain has passed. The Aztecs are fading into legend. The Toltecs are forgotten. The ancient glory of the Mayas is forever lost, gone from the minds of men who live like animals in that silent Place of Trees. Explorers come, spectacled white men of this new mongrel race we call American, trying to read the story of the past; but the Mayas only stare at them and answer stupidly, "I do not know."

The jungle does not care. It keeps on growing.

Silent and hot and still—this vast, eternal breeding place of life that has no meaning. A leaden haze blanketed the sky; the air was heavy, muffling sounds as soon as they were made. Only the dull plodding of my horse's hoofs, hour after hour. Somewhere the harsh nerve-racking shout of a chachalaca—"Cha-cha-cha-cha cha!"—soulless, insensate, like the jungle jeering at you; then silence, and the breathing of the trees.

An eerie place, Peten; but I was used to it. Once I had wondered at those ruined cities. Not much to look at now. The scattered, broken pillars of a colonnade. Stone palaces and temples, their cornices partly restored for study—crude enough they seem; with all their brilliance, the Mayas never learned how to build an arch. Only the heart of a city has been rescued from the jungle; the spread of it is not worth digging up; nothing is there but the stone doorsills of houses that have vanished. Only a little space walled in by living vegetation; only big sandstone monuments sticking out of the

bushes, curiously carved, toppling through centuries, carrying to dust the glory of forgotten kings; here a huge idol lying on its back, its grotesque face upturned to empty centuries of sky.

Once I had wondered; now I only rode. Many a time I'd ridden here to find Ben Murchison waiting.

But in the clearing at Number 1 Mill nothing was familiar. No memory of ringing steel was there. Charred sheds and wrecked machinery, a few log carts tilted, motionless, their tall heavy wheels already sinking in the soft ground, green things already springing up to swallow them. It didn't matter. They were only things.

Ben Murchison's shack, built of drier lumber than the rest, was more completely ashes. Not much ashes, at that. It didn't seem possible that his house had been so small. But the foundation posts were there, and the solid block of mahogany that had been the doorstep. And here was the shallow trench the hind legs of his chair had made, the times he'd sat there tilted back against the wall.

Talking, you know. His mild garrulous old voice running on. The stump of a cigar clamped in his mild whimsical old jaw. His freckled hands placidly clasped across his middle, his blue gaze roving through the tops of the mahogany, seeing for me the things that he remembered. Where were those pictures now?

What—what became of a man's memories when he died?

“Uncle Ben! Where are you?”

Oh, not aloud. This was no place to shout. Nothing was there; nothing but things. Only the stealthy breathing of the forest. Only the jungle growing. Creeping up underfoot, closing in—the jungle, eternally waiting to swallow the things men do. The rains would come and beat these ashes into dust. Charred boards would rot, the iron machinery would rust and melt. The jun-

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gle would take back this place and never know that men had been here.

“Damn you!”

There was no answer. Stillness, and time piled so deep that it was time no longer, only a tideless ocean into which things sank and ceased to be. Only the jungle creeping, a vast soulless thing, blind and malignant and invincible, closing in, choking you. Vaguely I'd meant to sleep here, but I couldn't stand it. I couldn't breathe. I dragged my heavy body into the saddle and rode on.

Somewhere in the haze the sun went down; daylight faded. But I knew our cart road to the coast, to Sabado in British Honduras. The jungle had not choked it yet. Ben Murchison might have gone that way.

I knew where a path turned off. Somewhere in there, I knew, men lived—or what had been men a thousand years ago. This path was never cut for horsemen; the crowding brush dragged at my legs, vines groped for me and looped themselves and tried to drag me out of the saddle, branches struck heavily at my bursting shoulder. I clutched the horse's mane with my left hand and put my head down and hung on. Why does the courage go out of a man when his head is down? Spurring my tired horse on through the smothering dark, the fingers of panic clawing and whipping me. Just hanging on.

The clawing fingers fell away. Dogs barked; faint candlelight showed in the chinks of woven huts, like hollow toadstools in the gloom of trees. I yelled, “*Hola! It is I, a friend!*”

“*Señor! Patron! Vaya, but I am glad!*”

I knew that deep voice roaring. I knew that big humble shape dwarfing the hut out of which it bounded, almost tearing the grass door from its leather hinges. It was Gabriel Zalas in the large and solid flesh. I laughed and cursed him, he was so comfortably human.

“Gabriel, thou blockhead! What dost thou here? Does it go well with thee? Where is Don Benjamin?”



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He answered my questions simply and in order. To Gabriel all things were simple; he did as he was told.

“I sleep here. Every day I go to the mill to see if Your Excellency has come. But it is lonely there. I did not know what else to do. I am well, thanks. Don Benjamin is dead. The soldiers killed him. He is buried by the trail beyond the *campamento*.”

I'd ridden by the place and had not seen it.

Gabriel went on to tell me about it, but I wasn't listening; only sitting there. Gabriel had fought the soldiers until a bayonet cut his leg; then he had run. He'd got away. But I knew all that.

Ben Murchison was dead. The jungle had him.

“I hid and watched, and that night I made a cross and went and marked the place.”

With a cross. The gods of his fathers were nothing to Gabriel. He was a good Christian and said his prayers to the wooden figure of the Virgin. What difference did it make? A man died and the jungle took him.

“To-morrow, if Your Excellency wishes ——”

“It does not matter.”

Why should I see the place where Ben Murchison was said to lie? He wasn't there. Nothing was there. Only a place where green things would grow richer for the loosened mold.

What—what had become of all he did and was? Nothing.

Kings passing by, and women in the market place, and soldiers marching—where were they now? Gone, and the jungle had no memory of them. The gods they carved in their vain groping for a thing that should not die—where were they now? Thrown down by swelling roots and lost in rotting vegetation. Just blocks of stone. Glory and pain, courage and hope and memory—the wonder of the human soul could blaze and pass; a man died and he was nothing. Only the jungle was eternal, growing forever out of its own decay.

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I don't know how long I sat there, sagging in the saddle. Only one thing had driven me and it was gone.

"Señor," said the patient Gabriel.

"Eh?"

"The rain comes."

I don't know how he knew. The gloom had not thickened, the breathing of the forest had not changed. Not that it mattered. The mills of Murchison & Pressley were already—shut down.

"Will you not dismount, señor?"

"Eh? I don't know."

Gabriel shuffled uneasily. This was all wrong. I was the *patron*; responsibility was mine. I envied him. I was tired, sick, bewildered, and there was nobody to tell me what to do.

Why must a man eternally decide, do something, drive his heavy body when he had no will and no desire? This green life had no will and no desire. It only grew and crept and waited till you ceased to struggle and blotted you out and never knew or cared.

Gabriel was distressed. I had never failed before to make things definite for him.

"What shall we do, señor? This is a poor place; there are only mats. But the roofs will not leak much, and ——"

"No!"

I couldn't stand it. I couldn't breathe. Something still drove me—fear, fear of this green thing crowding down on me, creeping up, closing in, choking me. No use to scream at it to stand back. It had no ears.

"I ride to Sabado, Gabriel; to the sea."

"But that is far! And the rain comes! Listen!"

I heard it then. You couldn't say it came. It just began. It was everywhere, a vast slow whispering as if the drops merely let go and fell. The smell of vegetation was intensified.

But there was no sense in me, only the last instinct

of all, to crawl as far as I could toward refuge. There was a place where this thing couldn't reach, where a man could be, do nothing, and be safe; a place where nothing ever happened. Home! Steve and Joe and Hurley had already gone there. I didn't know what names were home to them, but I remembered mine.

"I go to Sabado, Gabriel. And from there ——"

It was no use to tell him Milo, Indiana; he'd never heard of that far-off peaceful town. And in Spanish you can say house, you can say residence, you can say domicile; but you can not say home. There is no word for it exactly.

I had no house, no residence, no domicile. I had to say the very thing that had least meaning to me.

"—— to my own country. I do not return. Stay thou here with thy people. Here is money. Good-by, Gabriel; may it go well with thee."

"They are not my people, señor! They are stupid lowlanders. Look how they stare like animals! They know nothing. I call them animals and they do not understand. I—I do nothing here. I have only waited for Your Excellency!"

And it came to me that I meant something to him. I won't deny that I was grateful; a man can't help being grateful even for a dog that needs him and will go with him through the night. I had no worth to anybody else.

"Get thy hat and blanket," I said, making it definite for him. "Here, pay these people for thy lodging. Unlash my blanket roll and get out my slicker. Take both blankets for thy covering."

He obeyed; shouted cheerful good-bys to the villagers and strode off. The jungle swallowed him. I clutched the horse's mane and put my head down and hung on. The clawing fingers fell again—not that it mattered now. I had no need for courage any more. Louder and louder swelled the rustle of beginning rain.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

MILO, INDIANA. A blessed, peaceful, one-horse Middle Western town. Oh, not literally; even on Saturdays you will not see a horse; for blocks around the courthouse square the curbs are packed with flivvers and limousines, sport roadsters and sedans, representing so many farmers and shoppers and factory hands and prosperous business men. Oh, a busy city, Milo; but behind the smoke of all its factories, inside the spreading settlements of its industries, the heart of Milo is a village yet. If your father was born there, back in the days before the gas boom, you belong. Mine was. But his house is gone. I had sold it in 1906 to make room for a big department store.

A live town, Milo; it grows, though not so fast as the Chamber of Commerce would have you think. It had not grown away from memory. From the train I saw a new residence addition reaching nearly to the country club, but among the golfers on the fourteenth fairway there was one who used the unmistakable choppy swing of Dave Henshaw—Henshaw & Bennett, Real Estate! There were factories almost solid to Tenth Street Bridge, but the station was the same. A little smaller and smokier, maybe; or maybe the concrete platform was wider than the one Gus Hardy had rolled across in the embrace of Jerry, the station cop.

Gus Hardy, hobo! I had to laugh, remembering. And I looked for the sign that had betrayed him to Jerry's eagle eye—the proud electric sign the Live Wire Club put up in 1912, proclaiming to the passing world that Milo Offers More. A sign was there, but it was

different. Maybe you've noticed, passing through? It just says Milo now.

I laughed again, not mirthfully, when I realized what else I was looking for. A fat prosperous young man, Rotarian and president of the Live Wire Club and ex-officio member of all greeting committees. Not that I thought my coming was important to Milo; but it did seem that he might have come to meet me just for old-times' sake. He was the man I used to be.

He wouldn't think much of the man I had become. Not old, not young; tired out at thirty-five; a sick man, sunburned, fever-yellowed and hard-faced with memories. Only one thing that youth would have approved. I had a hundred thousand dollars in the bank.

Ben Murchison had earned it and Ben Murchison was dead.

The marble elegance of the Park Hotel had shrunk; or maybe the dark tremendous bulk of Gabriel Zalas dwarfed it. Of course, the lobby loungers stared. Not that he minded; he only stared placidly back, so that they fidgeted and looked away; even in American clothes and shoes, which he wore with proud discomfort, Gabriel was rather formidable to the unaccustomed eye. But he never knew it. Gabriel liked the United States because everybody was kind to him. In New Orleans, where I'd been too sick to look after him, I'd given him my card and turned him loose, and he'd gone out and promptly got himself arrested—bulged excitedly through a fire line and then got scared and resisted a policeman. But they didn't shoot him. They only put him in jail. That cost me twenty-seven dollars and seventy-five cents, but his account of the kind policeman was worth the money.

Why not? I had plenty of money and nothing to spend it for; nothing I wanted, no one dependent on me but this tremendous child.

The clerk of the Park Hotel was very dubious until

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I explained that the big fellow was not a negro but an Indian. That made it all right with the clerk. I suppose he thought I ran a medicine show or something. I didn't refer to Gabriel as my valet; he wasn't, you know; and I doubt if the Park Hotel had ever provided for such a thing as a stirrup servant.

"One of the 16's if possible," I requested, "with an extra bedroom for my—my friend."

"Yes, sir; just like you had before, sir?" The clerk, bluffing, was baffled by the shaky scrawl that was supposed to be my signature. "Front! Show Mr. — Mr. Plah to Suite 416. Put Mr. — the other gentleman"— Gabriel would have enjoyed that—"in 417. You haven't been with us for quite some time, have you, Mr.—uh—Pomfluh?"

"Quite," I admitted listlessly. Eight years ago, when I'd had bachelor quarters in Suite 516, this suave young man had been a bicycle messenger for Henry Niehaus, Florist. I hadn't the heart to remind him of all the dimes I'd tipped him for carrying flowers to Martha McAllister.

Gabriel surrendered my baggage importantly. He liked bell boys because they grinned at him. He liked to ride in elevators; he thought it was very kind of the operators to let him.

It was a warm June day. A warm tarry smell came through the open windows; workmen were doing something to the pavement in the street below. But the place that rose in my memory was far from any city street. . . . The great blue arch of the Pacific rising, incredibly high. Far down, their thunder lost in distance, the thin white line of breakers. Hills bulking huge around me, and a flat black plain rimmed in a towering palisade of stone—a black arena starred with little silver pools. Asphalt, flowing forever out of the inexhaustible earth and wasting forever into the heedless sea!

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Inexhaustible treasure, wasting. . . . Let it go.

While the bell boy was fiddling importantly with the windows, Gabriel helped me out of my coat—my right arm still wasn't much good—and unbuckled my shoulder holster. The bell boy turned; and it came to me that it was a bit unusual for guests to arrive at the Park Hotel with revolvers strapped under their arms. No need for it, you know. This was Milo, Indiana, where a man could be, do nothing, and be safe.

Home, a place where nothing ever happened.

Why couldn't I realize it? This room, this furniture; the street where traffic moved so moderately, the currents of safe and moderate lives; the park, the post office, the crowding roofs of Milo—everything was the same that I remembered. But who was that grim bony figure in the full-length mirror of the bathroom door?

Perfectly safe, I lay there in the Park Hotel, remembering. Not sick exactly; only tired. The doctor said the infection was out of my shoulder now, and he'd have the malaria out of me in no time. Malaria was nothing much to him. He'd never met the mosquitoes of the Zorro Valley. He'd never felt the sun between La Caoba and Chunango. Run-down, he said I was. That's how I felt; the way a clock must feel when its mainspring has gone slack forever.

The doctor permitted himself a romantic grin at the nature of the wounds, a facetious guess concerning a woman in the case. He felt privileged because he'd been my father's doctor too. He gave me stuff to make me sleep, but he had no stuff to keep me from remembering.

Into a room like this, one night in June, I'd brought a homeless vagabond. Gus Hardy, hobo! Well, to be fair, Gus never was a hobo; not exactly. Only a stray from tropical railroad camps, down on his luck and beating his way back. Tired of his wandering, yet hearing still the Red Gods of the Hunting call far off

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behind the hills. The roll of breakers on a thousand miles of beach; great mountains marching down the world, to dwarf a man and shake his faith in human destiny; the jungle, a vast soulless beauty and a trap for men. Hated the tropics, so he said; but he was going back. That's what they say down there: "They all come back!"

Do you remember? In those days when I felt a thing I tried to show it to Martha McAllister. She seldom saw it, but I tried. I took him to her—this blue-eyed, brown-faced painter of visions; but a change came over him. With somber eyes he took in the comfort of the McAllister living-room. With irony he stripped every shred of glamour from the things that he had seen. With irony, when I tried to put him on the track, he grinned—looking at Martha. Made me feel ridiculous, you know. She thought it must be terrible to live like that. She couldn't hear the Red Gods calling, calling. . . . June had come through the open windows, the great feel of earth and the good smell of growing things; but Martha never knew. The only glamour she could see was on Gus Hardy, vagabond.

It was June now, but not the same. Never the same again. A good town, Milo; but it is not Bagdad. No man is born a caliph, to thrust his hands untouched into the wheels of another's destiny.

Gus Hardy came to see me and we laughed, remembering. He's not so lean as he used to be, and his sunburn is lighter and runs clear up to his hair. That's from playing golf bareheaded. It seemed odd to think that I myself used to take such chances with the sun.

"Many's the time," he said, "I've thought of it. Me, a hard-shell not worth the powder to blow me from here to yonder, riding the blind baggage into Milo and not even knowing there was such a place—till that fancy sign blazed out and showed me up." He grinned.



“I was one guy that voted to tone it down! Noticed, did you? It don’t take near so many lights to spell plain Milo!”

“I should think,” I said, “you’d have been the last to want to change it. Hasn’t Milo ‘offerred more’ for you?”

“Oh,” he said, “sure! I’m sittin’ on the world. Good job, good home, good friends—you know how Milo is; I’m on the inside because Martha was born there. Horseshoes all over me; I know it. Only —— Oh, I don’t know! Sometimes I get to thinking.”

He didn’t mean thinking. He meant remembering. He wanted to talk about the tropics; but the pictures in his memory were dim, overlaid with fat and comfortable years. Prosperous, Gus was; a good Rotarian now, head of the engineering department of Milo Bridge and Steel. Milo had improved his grammar and sharpened the leisurely resonance of his voice; but talking to me he fell into the old laconic phrases.

“Going back, are you, Buck?”

“Never!” I said. “Never, *jamás*, not any more forever!”

Gus Hardy grinned. “That’s what they all say.”

“You haven’t.”

“That’s different. I’m married now.”

But he sighed, lighting a cigarette, and sat looking out the window. I tried to get him to talk about Milo, to give me something to get hold of; he answered absently that there was nothing new. I asked him about Martha and the baby, but he only snorted and reminded me that Augustus McAllister Hardy was nearly seven years old.

“How about you, old-timer?” he asked me. “You got a señorita staked out somewhere?”

“No,” I said, and let it go at that.

Oh, it was true enough. There was no woman whom I loved. Only a few stray pictures that came to me in

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tired hours. The feel of morning at La Caoba, the air fresh and keen, the new sun breaking the fountain spray into cool brilliance against the blue-gray shadow of old walls; and Rita moving there, beautifully alive. The way her dark eyes lifted sometimes, stirring you like sudden chords in a minor key. The warm curve of her cheek. Her soft sober mouth. Her hands, slim vital hands that could so rest a man if she would let them. . . . "No more," I said; "please, God, not any more forever!"

What is the use of coming home if you live always in a place you leave behind? Gus Hardy went on to speak of old Ben Murchison; Gus had been with him in Honduras once before my time. I didn't want to talk about Ben Murchison. I only lay there lighting cigarettes and throwing them out the window.

"By the way," said Gus, "I see one of the old-timers is still on deck. Soldiers of fortune, I mean. Did you happen to run across a man named Hecht while you were in Vizcaya, a sawed-off runt about the size and general disposition of a half-pint of dynamite—Johnny Hecht? Maybe he was passing as a doctor."

"Not in Vizcaya. Met him at Ampala."

"I see by the papers," said Gus, unconsciously betraying what obscure sections of the New York news he followed, "he took a shot at the president the other day, during the parade celebrating the president's birthday. Must have been pretty well ——"

"The president of Vizcaya?"

"Yeah."

I didn't wonder what Johnny Hecht was doing in Vizcaya. None of my business, you know. I said listlessly, "That so?"

It's odd, now, looking back. Once I had felt it—the swirl of living forces, courage and hate and love and fear, weaving a pattern wide as all the world and long as time; yet I thought a man could step aside and quit.

## CHAPTER XXIX

“YEAH,” said Gus Hardy. “Missed him, but practically ruined the police force of Vizcaya making his get-away. Johnny Hecht must be a hot customer to hold.”

Zestfully he said it—this safe and prosperous citizen of Milo, Indiana. It had happened during a parade on the president’s birthday, he said; and it must have been pretty well organized—carriages parked in a side street, the horses stampeding and blocking the cavalry while Johnny Hecht, a gun in each hand, shot his way through bystanders and police and got away.

I said sourly, “Ever see Johnny Hecht?”

“No. Why?”

“He’s a killer, and looks it.”

“Well,” said Gus, “you got to hand it to him. Outlawed in a dozen countries, yet he goes where he durn well pleases, with no passport but the ones he wears on his hips. He’s got nerve.”

“So has a tarantula.”

“Well,” said Gus, grinning, “if I was fixing to start a revolution, I wouldn’t mind having a few tarantulas on my pay-roll.”

But I hadn’t come home to talk about revolution, murder, violence. I tried to get Gus to talk about Milo, to give me something to get hold of, and he answered me with statistics. So many new factories coming in, bringing so much new labor, requiring so many new houses and making so much more business for the merchants, and attracting more merchants to handle the business.

A live town, Milo; bigger and better every year!

That is—certainly it was bigger. Sixteen hours a

day the tides of traffic washed around the Park Hotel; street cars whining and rumbling, automobiles panting, pedestrians hurrying, hurrying. The roofs of Milo crowded on you day and night.

Anybody could see that it was bigger. How was it better?

Why, it had more miles of paved streets and sewers and gas mains. It had bigger public utilities of every kind to take care of the increased population. It was better organized; besides the Chamber of Commerce and its junior branch, the Live Wire Club, there were now five civic clubs—Rotary, Kiwanis, Optimist, Lions and Exchange—all working together; at this moment putting on a concerted drive to advertise Milo, boost Milo, get more population!

I said listlessly, "What for?"

Gus snorted indulgently.

"Why, you poor nut, more population means more business!"

"And attracts more merchants?"

"You bet!"

"You keep coming out the same hole you went in," I said. "Put it this way: You think Milo's a good size to live in? Better than Chicago?"

"You bet I do!"

"Better than any big city?"

"Every time!"

"Then why eternally sweat to make it bigger?"

"Come right down to it," retorted Gus, "what's the use of doing anything at all?"

"I'll bite," I said wearily. "What is?"

But I had to grin to show I wasn't serious. In Milo, Indiana, you can wonder whether Mars is inhabited, or why Chicago has so many murders; but you mustn't question Milo's destiny or the worth of work and dreams—not seriously. They'll think the tropics have made you a little queer.

“You must have made your pile since you been gone,” grinned Gus, “talking that way! Maybe it ain’t any use, but my wife wears clothes and my young son has a husky appetite.”

No, I wasn’t serious; only listless. Other friends came to see me; I was grateful, but I soon learned what would happen. They’d come in the door shouting, “Hello, there, loafer! How’s every little thing? What d’ye mean, playing sick? That’s a good alibi! Glad to—uh—Hello, Howard. Glad to see you.”

Tapering off. I wasn’t the man they expected to see.

They, too, answered my questions with statistics. So-and-So married, So-and-So dead, So-and-So gone away. They spoke of the problems of increasing population; chiefly political, centering in the district west of the railroad—the factory district. It grew four times as fast as the older Milo, the village about which the city had grown up. It furnished few members to the civic clubs, but it had a strong majority in the city hall. It numbered few owners of real estate but plenty of voters who knew what they wanted—a city administration that would let them find their own diversions when their work was done. They advertised Milo, too—in their own way: Gambling houses, police-court cases, a few crimes of violence. Already—this was 1920, the first year of prohibition—Federal officers had discovered a strong liquor ring centering there.

Where was the drowsy, peaceful town that I remembered?

My friends expected me to talk about the tropics; but the plain truth disappointed them. They colored everything you said with what they had imagined. Speak of the mahogany forests of Guatemala and they saw a sinister gloom of tortured roots and stinking water and bottomless black mud—though mahogany is not a swamp growth, but the cleanest and most beau-

tiful of trees. Mention the Maya Indians and they thought of savages like the head-hunters of the Upper Amazon—a difference of two thousand miles and nobody knows how many thousand years.

Always they asked about Ben Murchison; but not the Ben Murchison I knew—a shabby, thirsty, talkative old man with whimsical blue eyes and freckled hands. No; these safe and moderate men—they wanted to hear about a soldier of fortune, a reckless, bold, swashbuckling adventurer.

Romance was what they were after. You could see them wondering what was the matter with my arm. What could I say? A duel with rapiers! You can imagine what a scene they would have pictured; nothing like the dull and bitter truth.

You could see them wondering about Gabriel. Could I tell them the big fellow simply had to have a master? In Milo, servants don't have masters, only employers; yet it couldn't be said that I employed Gabriel. He was about as useful in the Park Hotel as a bass drum. No, I only felt responsible for him, grateful to him. He tickled me; it was worth the money to watch him discovering Milo, Indiana.

He embarrassed the management of the Park Hotel by squatting in the sun at the main entrance, marveling at the number and richness of the automobiles that went by. He vexed the maids by tearing his bed to pieces; he couldn't believe that he, Gabriel Zalas, was supposed to sleep between those beautiful white sheets; he took them off and folded them carefully, wrapped himself in his own blanket and slept with his feet sticking grandly through the rails. It seems he'd been doing it for days before the maids found courage to protest. But they got used to him and scolded him—laughed at him, too, as women do at huge and clumsy males.

He was delighted. He'd blunder around, getting

in their way, touching things and asking "Haow you sayee?" He'd show them a plate off my breakfast tray, announcing with honest pride, "Plet!" He'd show a spoon and say "Naff!" He'd brandish a knife and rumble ferociously, "Spoon!"

But this was a blunt table knife; he knew better than to show his own sheath knife in any city. And, of course, the maids didn't notice the instinctive gesture he made with his left arm, the quick swing of wrapping an imaginary blanket around it for a shield. They'd never seen anybody fight with knives. They laughed.

They knew by now that Gabriel was harmless. He never knew that they had been afraid of him.

"Nobody," he marveled, "is afraid of anybody here! None of the windows have iron bars. The gardens are all outside the houses. The children play outside with no nurse to watch them—not only the black little ones but white ones, too, the children of fine families! Truly I have seen them, señor!"

Gabriel liked children; I learned it finally from an indignant mother. It seems he used to wander around until he saw children playing, and he'd stand and grin from a respectful distance—patient, he was, with a patience that passes a white man's understanding—till they got used to his swarthy bulk and made friends with him. But the mothers, uneasy, scolded him. He was abashed. He had no idea what the scolding was about, but he could tell they were displeased. So he went off to another neighborhood and found more children, marvelously playing where anybody could approach.

Now and then somebody did ask me in so many words why on earth I kept him. I had to say, "Oh, he's worked for me for several years, and he had a notion he wanted to come to the States."

Could I tell them what it had meant to me, that night of unreasoning panic, to have one human soul I could get hold of?

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His own explanation would have jarred them more. He'd have given it to them, too, if they'd known enough Spanish or he enough English. I remember how he had put it, long ago, by way of apology for having tried to hold me for Palomar to cut my throat. To him it was simple.

"That Don Anselmo," he said, "liked blood. Only crazy men like blood. I do not like to serve a crazy man. I am glad Your Excellency killed him."

That was all there was to it. All his life he had served Anselmo Palomar; he had not loved him. But he had loved Ben Murchison. He had snatched a rifle and smashed right and left among the murderers who had shot Ben Murchison in the back. He had set a cross above the place where Ben Murchison was said to lie. . . . Not that it mattered. Nothing was there. Only green things that grew and crept on unused trails and empty clearings, on wrecked machinery and ruined shacks where no man lived. Rot and the jungle and the rain. . . . It left no scar in Gabriel's memory. Quite simply he would have talked about Don Benjamin if I had let him.



## CHAPTER XXX

WHAT was the use of courage? Ben Murchison had been brave. Johnny Hecht was fearless—that cold-eyed, deadly little man; yet somewhere along the trail of violence his dozenth bullet hole was waiting. Peter Brennan had moral stamina—Peter D. H. Brennan, who could be a gentleman even in Chunango; and what did it get him? The chance to live in places like Chunango till he was unfit for anything else. Alice Dowling was brave—little Alice of Tolobaya, who had never heard of Wonderland; and what would become of her? She'd grow up in Tolobaya, or some place like it, and go to pieces as her father had already gone to pieces. Grow slack and slatternly, marry a native—lower class; who else would notice the daughter of a drunken miner?—bear children and disintegrate. The jungle got you sometimes even before you died.

In Milo, Indiana, there was no need for courage. If you had money you were safe. The police would protect you from violence. The Park Hotel would feed you, shelter you from sun and rain. Oh, very moderate sun and rain; the heat is seldom dangerous and storms are a matter of minutes, not of weeks. And in July, when the thermometer begins to hover in the nineties, everybody who can get away from business goes for comfort to the lakes.

No need to stiffen your backbone and endure it. It will pass.

There was no need to do anything. I had money—enough to live on, if I wanted to, for years. I wanted nothing; but I got restless doing it. The Park Hotel

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grew unendurable. A man may envy a vegetable, but he can't be one.

Gus Hardy's house was one of the first I visited—I don't know why; there were many people who were friends of longer standing, some of them more or less related to me; in a town like Milo, the real Milo, you can trace relationship by blood or marriage to almost anybody. Maybe it was because Gus had no romantic ideas about the tropics. He'd lived there once. He knew. In fact he spoke of this himself.

"Buck," he said thoughtfully, "what is it that a man wants, anyway? Take me. One way of looking at it, I'm sittin' on the world. Once I'd have given a leg to be fixed like I am right here. And yet — Oh, I don't know! Sometimes I get to thinking."

"Hankering," I said sardonically, "for the wild free life of your younger days, when you could blow your month's wages on liquor and poker with a gang of home-sick hard-shells and shake the scorpions out of your blankets before you went to bed?"

"No-o," said Gus, "not exactly. It ain't the tropics. I know too much about it; God's country has got it beat forty ways from the jack. This is a darn good town. Only—sometimes it does get —"

"— tame?"

"Yeah," said Gus Hardy. "A man gets soft. Oh, I work hard enough; and I get plenty of exercise, golf in the summer and the Y in the winter —"

I had to laugh. Gus Hardy, one of those engineers who had tried to find a route through the trackless hills from Quezaltenango to Tehuantepec—ten thousand feet up and no way to get down—doing his sweating now in the Y. M. C. A.!

Gus lived now in the old McAllister house on Madison Avenue; Mrs. J. F. McAllister was dead. Andy McAllister, a lanky nineteen-year-old, came out of the house and greeted me with dignity, calling me Mr. Press-

ley, and went down the street; he had a date. Yet the honeysuckle smelled exactly the same as it used to when he had greeted me far otherwise—a grinning, freckled imp with no proper respect for sister's beau.

Why are smells linked so close with memory? That drifting fragrance hurt somehow. Made you feel lost—it's hard to put a name to. As if time didn't pass but only was—sitting there, seeing things now and things that used to be.

Gus Hardy's guest—I, who had brought him here a vagabond!

Out along Madison Avenue the elms were green, and people were sitting on the porches, the lighted windows very homelike through the trees. Somebody sang out, neighbor fashion, to Gus Hardy; not to me. Automobiles rolled leisurely in the long Indiana twilight. Odd how it gets you when the sun goes down and night doesn't seem to come. It's like a gap, an interval in the vast slow march of time; you feel suspended, waiting. The smells of earth come closer. Sounds are subdued. The sky takes on queer savage colors and a savage loneliness creeps even into city streets. Maybe that's why people are so friendly in the dusk. Like something scared and little, hiding in houses.

I spoke of this to Gus Hardy, and he sighed.

"Yeah," he said. "Took me a long time to get used to it. Even in Texas it don't drag out this way; and farther south ——"

There is a place where Nature is not moderate. The hills are big and the sun is dangerous, and the dark comes bang on the heels of day. Houses can't shut away the feel of earth. It is too much alive, too great and deep and strong.

"By the way," said Gus, "I told you so! I see by the papers where revolution has broke out in Vizcaya. A man named Mora has declared himself. Know anything about him?"

"No," I said listlessly. "Seems to me the minister of hacienda was named Mora; but he wouldn't be the one. Doddering old fossil—he didn't know whether the state owned any mahogany or not."

"Fossils make good figureheads," said Gus wisely. "No enemies?"

"Not enough force to make enemies."

"He'd be just the one. I see they haven't caught Johnny Hecht yet," said Gus with relish. "The little son of a gun has been tearing up their railroads, the paper says."

"He can't tear up much," I said. "Only forty miles of it in the whole country—from Ciudad Vizcaya to San Carlos."

But I wasn't interested. You know how memories are—just pictures, static and unchanging. The reality of that place had stopped; what Gus was talking about was only an obscure item in the New York news. Gus went on to wonder what big business was behind this revolution—pulling the strings, you know, and paying the bills. Men like Johnny Hecht don't work for nothing.

"Oil?"

"There is oil in Vizcaya," I said. "The Consolidated operates wells behind Chunango. On private leases, though, mostly. Revolution wouldn't affect those."

"Short of confiscation," Gus agreed.

Confiscation! It reminded me of Ramon Zuñiga; the greatest robber, thief, murderer in all Vizcaya, Rufo had called him. Zuñiga had taken Dowling's mine. He'd take Don Fernando's lake of asphalt if he knew it was worth taking; Don Fernando was politically helpless, subject to exile at any moment. Wouldn't need a revolution for that. Zuñiga controlled most of the legal machinery already.

But even Zuñiga would hardly tackle a victim the

size of the Consolidated. Zuñiga wouldn't need to hire foreigners like Johnny Hecht; he had plenty of assassins of his own—Rufo had said.

I didn't know anything about it, and I didn't care.

Inside, the McAllister house was not familiar. It had been refinished and refurnished; even the old stuffed davenport was gone, the one where Martha used to sit with me—the one where Gus had sat the night I brought him here, a lean brown fellow with the mark of far countries on him, moodily plucking strange minor chords from Martha's guitar. I looked at A. C. Hardy and I had to laugh.

I asked Gus if he remembered that song, and he said "What song?"

I hummed a few notes of it and he remembered. While he was thumping the piano and trying to sing it, Martha came into the room. Martha's still pretty, if you like that placid, fair, young-matronly type. Eight years had made no very deep change in her; her enthusiasms bubbled as easily as ever and evaporated just as soon. She'd made Gus Hardy—comfortable; you could see that. She introduced me to a freckled young Hardy who swarmed all over me and buried me with questions, calling me Uncle Buck, while Gus beamed complacently over his shoulder and said "H'm-h'm," for the words he had forgotten.

Oddly, now that I didn't care, I seemed to know just how to take Martha—be facetious and let her do the talking. No use trying to share a mood with her; she never kept one long enough. Intensity isn't good form in Milo anyway.

"You're so brown, Howard! And thin! I don't think the tropics have agreed with you. Why are men so crazy about it? Gus keeps talking about going there some winter, but I can't see spending all that money just to be hot and dirty. I think he'd leave me a widow if they had good golf courses down there. Did Gus tell

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you he almost won the club championship last year! You'll never know the clubhouse now. We've built a new wing, a spiffy ballroom and a darling sun parlor. We've got the sweetest steward this year. He's so obliging, and he gets up the most thrilling menus. . . . Did you make a perfectly grand fortune?"

Gus, explaining that he hadn't sung a Spanish song for years, thumped the piano and struggled manfully—grinning; you know, the words are rather florid if you think them in English.

That's all it was to him. Only so many half-remembered words in a foreign tongue, a half-remembered melody, its intervals a little strange to Anglo-Saxon ears. You know? We want our tunes to fall squarely on the major harmonies, to end on major chords, complete and satisfying. We want no sense of lack, no nameless need left over when a song is done. When we tackle a job we finish it.

We're practical. We're successful—this new dynamic breed who call ourselves American. But there are older races who have failed, and in the long twilight of their glory they feel the earth again. In their deep hearts they are resigned and sad, yet passionately they know that there is something—something not thought of much in Milo, Indiana. The aching loneliness of stars. The night wind whispering from great mountains to eternal sea. The nameless call of minor harmonies, unfinished and unsatisfied. The quiet glory of a girl's voice singing, not to be heard but to let out something aching in her heart—passionately, with an intensity that would be shameful here.

A hacienda far off in the hills. Rita del Valle, a woman —

"Sit down, Buck!" said Gus Hardy. "Give me the willies, mooning around that way. Too hot. What say we take a little spin?"

And as we drove he pointed out with pride a big new

factory, new jerry-built houses clustering thick around it. A live town, Milo! A good many other people found the night too warm to stay indoors; the pikes were alive with cars. Dusty too. Gus, squinting against the glare of headlights, turned for refuge into a narrow road along the river. It climbed a long slope, and for a minute I hoped for the peace of open ground and sky; but there were the sliding lights of another highway just ahead.

There was a road that wandered off into the river bottom. Gus flashed the spotlight down it and saw nothing but crooked ruts that disappeared in darkness and tangled brush and trees.

“Wonder where that goes?”

“Let’s go and see,” I suggested.

“Oh, let’s!” said Martha, thrilled. “I just love to go where I don’t know where I’m going. It looks grand and ooey!”

“Yeah,” said Gus, “too ooey. Looks pretty rough to me; likely it doesn’t go anywhere, anyway. How’d you like to get stuck down there?”

“Maybe we’d better not,” said Martha.

So we drove safely on broad smooth pikes against a procession of lights, moving with special moderation because of a watchful motorcycle cop. Gus, blinded by one powerful pair of lamps, said profanely that he’d like to give that driver a poke in the jaw. But he wouldn’t have done it. Even if the driver had stood before him, he wouldn’t have done it. A poke in the jaw is violence; it simply isn’t done. Sardonicly, I said so. He sighed, admitting it.

The young Augustus, stimulated by this talk of battle, climbed on my knees and commanded me to fight him. I fought him and he squealed with glee. . . . A good town, Milo; but the houses crowd you, scattering into farms only to gather into villages and towns again. There is no room outdoors. No place to feel alone;

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you can't go into solitude without coming out on the other side. People, people, people, crowding together and yet struggling for privacy and peace!

Of course Gus was right about that wandering road. It wouldn't have been smooth driving. There was nothing to go down it for—nothing but darkness and damp grass and trees, a quiet river and the smell of earth. Not worth the chance of getting stuck. . . . This was the same Gus Hardy who had toiled on hobnailed feet over unknown mountain passes, ten thousand feet up and no way to get down. . . . Martha chatted placidly. The young Augustus, asleep, burrowed his warm little face against my shoulder. Made you feel queer, that limp trustful little body.

What is it that a man wants, anyway?

Oddly I thought of Alice Dowling, little Alice of Tolobaya, eleven years old and already the woman of her father's house. Had she ever gone to sleep in anybody's arms? Likely not since her mother died. A better man than her father, Alice was. Nobody took care of her. She didn't even know she needed anybody to take care of her. She went ahead and did the best she knew.

Sleeping to-night in Tolobaya. Her father snoring, drunk—if he hadn't got himself killed yet, bucking Ramon Zuñiga. . . . The roofs of Tolobaya standing chill and sharp under the mountain stars. The ten-mile chasm of the Zorro Valley, full of the night mist, warm and wet like steam. The high clean air of seaward hills again; the peace of La Caoba, and a woman—sleeping.



## CHAPTER XXXI

IN THE Park Hotel, where the Lions and Optimists and the Rotary Club held their weekly luncheons, there was talk of city zoning, a belated effort to save the residence districts from the steady infiltration of stores and factories. Michael Nelson, Milo's richest citizen—Nelson Boilers, you know; maybe you use one in your own factory—said his youngest daughter's house was now practically downtown. He said this to me, I thought, because I was the one who'd sold him the house to give his daughter when she'd been married ten years ago; but from that he passed rapidly on to talk about the tropics.

Why do people always want to tell what they know about a place to a man who has been there? Once in his youth Michael Nelson had visited Mexico, and he wanted to take that memory out and look at it again. Unexpectedly, I was able to embellish it a little.

"Once in Mexico City," he chuckled, "me and a good-for-nothing kid named Billy Ames got tight and cleaned out a café. I don't remember what started it, but it took all the gendarmes from four blocks around to pacify us. That Billy Ames was certainly a scrapper; didn't look it, either—he was a human string bean. He didn't have any money and I didn't have enough to pay both our fines, so we spent two weeks playing cribbage in the lockup. I wonder what ever became of him? He owed me," said Michael Nelson, chuckling, "about four million dollars by the time we got out."

"You'll never get it," I said soberly. "He's starving to death running a sort of a hotel in Salvador."

“Well, wha’ d’ ye know!” beamed Michael Nelson. “Do you suppose it’s the same one?”

“His name’s Guillermo—William,” I said, “and he’s tall and thin, and he’s from Mexico. Soldier of fortune, he was; but he’s all through now. Crippled.”

I told him about old Captain Ames, dragging one leg around this poor *meson* he calls, pathetically, Gran Hotel Americano; and Michael Nelson, leading citizen of Milo, Indiana, glowed to think he had been drunk once with a real adventurer. Drunk and disorderly—that’s romance if it happened far off or long ago.

He insisted on my going in to lunch with the Rotary Club so he could tell it again; and Gus Hardy, listening—the way a man listens when he’s waiting to talk himself—remarked how seldom a soldier of fortune seemed to get a fortune out of it.

“Take General Murchison,” said Gus, “Buck’s partner—he was the great-granddaddy of ’em all. Thirty years he was mixed up in everything that happened. Charmed life, they said he had; but what he had was brains—brains, and the nerve to think straight when most men would be just fighting the air. He could figure his way out of any fix—and turn right around and walk into more trouble! Once in ——”

Two of the men at our table had fought in France. That memory was still terrible to them; they didn’t like to talk about it; yet they were the very ones who listened most eagerly to yarns of old Ben Murchison, fighting man. That was romance. Why?

Outside the Park Hotel, the crowding roofs reached away in the summer sunshine; but it was still the rainy season in the forests of Peten. Week after week the rain was falling. Lead-colored, smothering sky, and rain, and vast green life that had no memory of anything. Ben Murchison had been a man.

“And what did he get out of it?” said Gus, concluding. “He ——”

“ ‘He died,’ ” I said with bitter flippancy, quoting the consul at Puerto Barrios, “ ‘an American citizen in good standing!’ ”

Gus knew the irony of that; he'd lived in Latin countries and he knew what it got you to be an American citizen. He'd known Ben Murchison, that lonely old warrior, self-exiled, yet clinging stoutly to an empty name. But when he tried to explain it they missed the point entirely. They got positively sentimental.

“Patriotism,” said Michael Nelson, “is a wonderful thing!”

“ ‘Wonderful,’ ” I said bleakly, “is just the word.”

The smell of hot asphalt came through the open windows. Yonder, far down over the horizon, there was a place where asphalt was not used for streets. It only flowed forever out of the earth, stood in a black lake starred with silver pools, wasted forever down a long mountain side into the sea. Breakers three thousand feet below, dwarfed, silenced in cool majestic distances. The great blue arch of the Pacific, climbing incredibly high; the bulk of mighty hills, changeless and deep and strong—the hills that Don Fernando loved.

“When I was in exile my soul lived here. These are my hills. They give me peace, though . . .”

The Rotary Club ate sociably, without attention. Had they ever been really hungry, or thirsty past the point of mild discomfort? Or feared, or hated, or spent the last ounce of their courage or their strength on anything?

Look at their faces. Oddly, they seemed all of one type. Fat or thin, old or young, one mark was on them all. Not dullness; not exactly; these were successful men. The keenest of them showed the mark most plainly. Moderation—the keying down of all spiritual force to the general level. No deep calm lines of single purpose, no steady driving set of jaw, no eyes of meditation. Rather a harassed and a scattered look, the mark

of a thousand small habitual restraints, the price of living comfortably with neighbors. The petty lines of worry—moderate fear.

What did they care about the feel of earth? They shut it out, fenced themselves in with houses and played safe.

But Don Fernando played safe too. He was afraid to take a chance with the treasure of that asphalt lake. Peaceful it looked, yet it was meshed in the intangible, invisible web of hate and fear, of swirling currents flowing out of events long ago. You couldn't touch it without harming people who deserved no harm.

It was worth millions—billions! It was power, yet Don Fernando was content with peace, the shameful peace his enemies allowed him.

Old Ben Murchison never had played safe. What would he have done if he'd been in my place the night those swirling currents had engulfed me? He would have grinned. He would have seen it—how Don Fernando might have used the thing he feared to beat the men he hated. He would have stood his ground, kept his brain clear from bitterness, and grinned—and won the confidence of those who hated him.

If I'd been man enough to grin, tired as I was —

“Beginning at the table on our left,” said the president of the Rotary Club, rapping for order, “let's have the introduction of guests. Visiting Rotarians please introduce themselves.”

Polite applause welcomed the guests. Shouts greeted the visiting Rotarians by their first names, strangers though they were; such is the custom in the civic clubs. You're everybody's friend.

“I have as my guest,” said Michael Nelson, “a man who needs no introduction except to you younger fellows. He was a charter member of this club. He left us some years ago for larger fields; for the past five years, except his time in France, he has been engaged

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in developing a tract of Guatemalan mahogany bigger than Milo County. Before that ——”

Big! That got fresh attention. The mention of Ben Murchison got more—that blithe adventurer, knocking down presidents and making kings; that reckless man who took his chances as they came.

“The general was killed in the revolution that cost them their concession. Howard claims to have missed this particular trouble, but you’ll remember he showed up here with his arm in a sling. At an early meeting I hope he will give us some account of the romance of business in the tropics.

“Our old friend, Howard Pressley—Buck Pressley, of Mexico, Gautemala, and Milo, Indiana!”

What could they do but rise to the occasion? “Speech, Buck! Yea, Buck! Speech! Speech!” None of them but Gus Hardy had ever called me Buck. I did not make a speech; I was grateful, but I knew that mild enthusiasm was not for me. It was for the man they thought they saw, who’d gone away soft and fat and come home lean, burned with hot suns, hard-drawn with grim unguessed romantic things—a man who’d had the nerve to take a chance.

Oh, I had taken chances; so had they; but how? Driven by circumstance, always hedging, playing safe as far as I could. Never once stepping out to meet them, going all the way—grinning.

## CHAPTER XXXII

THERE are no hills near Milo. The land is gentle, moderately rolling, good for farms. There's nothing rugged or abrupt about it. There's no place where you can see far. A man's not very tall when you come to think of it; he stands on his hind legs to get his eyes up as far as he can, yet a hedge, a cornfield, a slight roll in the ground can narrow the visible world and shut him in. Then his memory tricks him. He forgets the feel of distances, the greatness of the earth. Remembered places seem to lie just over the horizon.

Maybe that's why we need the hills. Restlessly, tramping around, I felt that need like hunger. There were no hills to climb.

When I was a kid the river seemed a long way out from town. But somebody had moved it. There were no open intervening fields, only poor houses straggling out. Maple Street was paved all the way and a bridge across the river was under construction; you could already walk across if you didn't interfere with the workmen. Beyond the river the pleasant slopes of Frisbee's farm were grass-grown behind a glistening white signboard:

### GROVE HILL

THE ADDITION BEAUTIFUL

LOTS ON EASY TERMS. NO PAYMENTS IN CASE OF  
SICKNESS

See Henshaw & Bennett, Real Estate

Beautiful they called it—while they prepared to destroy its beauty. Did the projected streets curve up the

slopes? They did not. Square with the road they ran, square with the bridge and Maple Street, which ran square across the railroad a mile and a half away. "The railroad"—everybody knows which one you mean. Did drives wind through the woods, sparing fine old trees and leading the eye to visions of spacious, restful homes? They did not. The lots were small, rectangular, using every available inch of ground. That was Dave Henshaw's style. He'd pack the people in. He'd sell the lots—lots of lots—at small prices and on easy terms. He'd have a picnic and an auction with a brass band the day the bridge was opened. And crowded people, tricked by the illusion of an eternal picnic, would buy, build their cheap houses and find themselves packed like sardines in a can.

Eh, well! There was no stir of building yet. The wooded knoll behind Frisbee's abandoned house was quiet, restful with shade and the whisper of old trees. It wasn't high enough to see across the wooded river bottom. There was no sign of Milo but the distant smoke.

One day Dave Henshaw and his partner came with an axman to mark trees for destruction. By way of professional courtesy—we'd been competitors once—they asked my opinion of the proposition. I gave it to them, bluntly; and Joe Bennett grinned.

"A millionaire's colony, huh? That would be fine! But millionaires generally want boulevards and sidewalks and gas and sewers and electric lights and ——"

"Generally," I said, "they'll pay for 'em."

"Yes, but somebody else has got to pay for 'em first. Can't assess 'em against the lots; not in this state; it's out of the city limits. You've got to put up cold cash or use your personal credit; the banks won't take a gamble like this and the finance companies will eat you up."

"We had to pay six thousand, cash in advance, for

city water," said Dave ruefully. "Only way we could get it. Got to give 'em water."

Oh, they wouldn't promise anything but water; square men, Henshaw & Bennett; they would be genuinely distressed at the percentage of purchasers who would lose their small equities through discouragement after the band stopped playing.

"We've got nearly sixty thousand tied up here this minute," said Dave. "It would take thirty or forty thousand more for the kind of development you're talking about. We'd have to raise it on our personal credit and wait three or four years to cash in; and then if it didn't go over we'd be sunk."

"Incorporate," I said, "and sell preferred stock. Or get a few good people to pay in advance for the choice of lots, and give you the money to work with."

"Who'd take the chance?"

"Plenty of people," I said, "if you showed the courage of your convictions and built here yourselves."

They grinned. They both had houses on Madison Avenue.

"Tell you what," said Joe humorously, "since you're so interested, you put up thirty thousand to work with, and we'll give you a third interest in the development and let you promote it. Huh, Dave?"

"That would be slick," said Dave.

"Fair enough," I said. "Call off that fellow with the ax."

They didn't get it. They thought I was joking. Well, I was; it was worth the money to give those careful men a little jolt. They had the Hoosier conscience about money and they wouldn't have been so abrupt with thirty thousand dollars—not seriously—unless they had a million behind it. So then, of course, they thought I had the million. You could never have made them understand that a man might be careless because he didn't care.



In the excitement of the moment their vision expanded. Likely they woke up that night and wondered how they'd been tricked into a decision without long and prayerful meditation; but it was too late then.

Oh, it was safe enough. Michael Nelson was the first man I tackled with the new plans, and plainly it caught his fancy. His married daughter was dissatisfied with her present residence and he saw what could be done with Grove Hill. His eye lighted especially on the very lots I would have chosen.

“What do you ask for these?”

“If you'll pay cash,” I said, “now, so we can have your money for the improvements—fourteen thousand flat.”

Michael Nelson frowned.

“You've got your nerve!” he said. “That's downtown prices!”

“For people,” I laughed, “who are not satisfied downtown! You see what we can give them here, and it takes ——”

He had put on his business face; not the Mike Nelson of the Rotary Club, a genial old fellow who chuckled over the time he'd been locked up for disorderly conduct, but Michael Nelson, who knew what it would be worth to us to have his name to conjure with. I had to jar him loose from that.

“It takes money,” I said, “to make a place where your daughter would want to live. But I'll be fair with you. I won't ask you to take a chance I wouldn't take myself. I'll pay fourteen thousand for these lots, and match you, one flop, to see whether you pay double or nothing.”

And I took out a half dollar and looked at him and grinned. I give you my word he made a motion toward his pocket; but he checked it.

“Never mind,” he sighed—and grinned. “I see now why they call you Buck; but I'm an old man and

my heart's weak. Want a check now, or can you wait till I get back to the office?"

After that, somehow, the interest went out of it again. The class of the place was established. I kept on working; a man's got to do something, even if there's nothing especially he wants. But it was only detail, flat and featureless. There was no chance to lose.

Let me get this straight. It wasn't gambling I was after; not exactly, though that was what Milo called it. No, it was something else. I sat in a few times with the poker-playing crowd, and made myself rather unpopular by tilting the bet at every reasonable opportunity. Not bluffing; not exactly; only backing my cards a little more grimly than most of them did. There are always certain players you can beat that way. But it spoiled their customary moderate game. My cousin, George Pressley—Pressley & Fetler, Dry Goods—remonstrated with me.

"Money's gone to your head," he said severely.

George, if he had known it, could have matched my little capital twice over. The difference was in what we wanted to buy. I admit I went about it wrong; I was a fool; I offer no excuse. But I was groping for something. It's hard to put a name to.

Restless—call it that. Summer life in Milo, the Milo I'd grown up in, centers about the country club. But west of the railroad there is another Milo. It has clubs, too—they call them clubs; you'd never guess it. One of them was operated by a man from Chicago. Woodrow, they called him; maybe that was his name, but he was tall and lean and lantern-jawed. His house looked like any other house in that not very fashionable neighborhood. From the street you saw a badly lighted parlor with a carved center table and a piano and a plaster angel peering eternally out the window. But there was another lookout that you didn't see. If he was satisfied with what he saw, you were admitted, not to the parlor,

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but to Woodrow's place of business. You took a drink if you wanted to. You kept your hat on. You gave Woodrow a hundred or five hundred dollars, took what he gave you and sat down and tried to keep it from drifting away across a big green table.

Quiet, it looked. Seldom a voice was raised; only sometimes a man cleared his throat, or a smiling face went white, or a hand shook. You couldn't see the intangible currents that tugged at those celluloid chips. You had to read them by the involuntary flicker of an eye, the tone of a voice, the fixity of a grin. You had to keep your eyes open.

The game was not moderate. There was no need to worry about spoiling it for anybody. They were after your money and you took theirs if you could—dog eat dog; no pretense about it.

Of course I lost. Even in a straight game, very few amateurs can hold their own with professionals. But it was worth the money to have an hour now and then when you could go at it hammer and tongs, finish all out—get up from the table utterly spent, go back in weary peace to the Park Hotel and sleep without remembering.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

ONE night—it was August 27, 1920; I have reason to be sure—there was a dance at the country club. The crowd was small because so many people hadn't returned yet from the lakes, yet even so there were too many people. I couldn't keep my attention on the scattering, disjointed, aimless talk; they'd lived eight years I didn't know anything about. I offended my partners, not by my clumsiness but by forgetting who they were. Girls I'd grown up with—oddly alike they seemed. Dark or fair, fat or slim, plain or pretty, no one of them was vividly herself. Their hair against my shoulder was fragrant, but not with the fragrance that meant one woman out of all the world.

They all played the same system, if you know what I mean. A sort of virginal frankness, a man-to-man attitude subtly modified by the consciousness of sex and pretty clothes; virtue as conscious as the delicate paint on their lips. Their eyes said, "Aren't we good friends? But I do hope you're not going to be bold and notice that I'm a woman!"

Then they thought I was dull because I didn't.

Well, I was dull. It all seemed false, flat, superficial. This orchestra of sleek, pale, bold-eyed youths braying out music whose sensuous rhythm was borrowed from the jungle; these moderate, respectable people toying with instincts that were not strong enough to be unsafe. I wandered off and sat on a tee bench under the dim pale stars, lighting cigarettes and throwing them away, staring down a dim fairway into the woods and seeing a place far off and different—a place of grim

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reality; Nature immense and violent, people who loved and feared and hated with an intensity that would seem shameful here.

“Oh, there you are! I’ve been looking all through the gas pipes for you.”

It was Nola Nelson, Mike Nelson’s second daughter, fair-haired, beautifully groomed, cool, boyish; thirty-two years old—she looked twenty-five—and unmarried; a million dollars is a handicap for a maiden in Milo. I jumped up and threw away my cigarette. She sat down and asked for one herself.

She crossed her slim legs comfortably. Below one knee a pretty garter was visible. It was the sort that is meant to be.

“Howard, I’m going to lecture you.”

“I love to be lectured,” I said mechanically.

“You’ve changed,” said Nola Nelson. “I’m not sure I like you as well as I used to; but you’re more —— Yes, I do. In some ways I like you better. Father says you’ve got more—more force that you used to have. He says you’ll make a million or go broke.”

“This uncertainty is dreadful.”

“It’s not at all important. The point is, a million dollars won’t make people forgive you for the way you’re acting. You can’t get away with it, Howard. Not in Milo.” Man to man—like that. “Hanging around those low dives west of the railroad,” said Nola. “Openly; that’s what people can’t understand. Going through the streets at all hours with that monstrous thug of yours.”

In Milo there were not two such figures as Gabriel Zalas; but west of the railroad, if you’re wise, you don’t walk alone at night—not if you look as if you had money; and Gabriel was an escort a footpad would think twice about. Of course people recognized him as far as they could see him. Why not? I wasn’t hiding anything. I didn’t care that much about it.

“They’re saying you’re mixed up in this liquor business. You’re so careless about money, about so many things you used to ——”

There was nothing I could say in self-defense. But it was odd to think somebody cared. The music whanged and thudded in its sensuous, mocking parody of violence. Nola sat relaxed, thoughtfully smoking; the curves of her slim body were sweet, alluring. Presently I kissed her. You know—it seemed the thing to do. She returned the kiss accurately, with—well, virginal frankness. Quite under control. When we went in to dance her face wasn’t even flushed. Of course that was my fault. Haven’t I said I was dull?

She whispered, “Think you’ll go back to the tropics?”

I said mechanically, “Never.”

Go back? To what? Great mountains marching down the world, to dwarf a man and shake his faith in human destiny; the jungle, blind and malignant and invincible; distance and space and color, a vast soulless beauty and a trap for men. Loneliness and hardship and foolish dreams of home—of Milo, Indiana, this very place that seemed so empty now.

West of the railroad, intensity is not shameful. Housewives scream curses at one another with more than virginal frankness, and knife their husbands if they seem to need it; you read about it in the papers and you think “How crude!” If you’re respectable that’s all you ever know about it. But you have to care about something, be sure of something, to be respectable. I wasn’t sure of anything, not even the name of that wild bitter ache that wouldn’t let me sleep.

The game at Woodrow’s place was dull that night. I played savagely, without attention; lost, took a drink of Woodrow’s liquor and bought another stack; lost and repeated the operation in the order named. The money I’d brought with me didn’t last an hour.

Woodrow said cordially that my check was good—"Make it to cash." He wasn't playing; he'd given up his chair on my left to a boyish-looking fellow in a plaid cap, whom he introduced as Mr. McGuire. Mr. McGuire dealt clumsily and played his cards badly and lost cheerfully. You couldn't help thinking he had no business to be there.

But by an odd coincidence, my heaviest losses came on his deal. I had a pat full house beaten by a straight flush filled on a two-card draw; filled a high flush and lost to an improbable full house. It got so I didn't know what to go by. First one man and then another—one of three—beat good hands for me. Tough luck, eh? Yes. Call it luck. I did. But I called for new cards—which Woodrow furnished cheerfully—and watched Mr. McGuire's hands.

Eh, well! Truly the hand is quicker than the eye. It was my own fingers, not my eyes, that gave me something to pin suspicion to. The boyish Mr. McGuire clumsily shuffled the new deck and passed it for the cut just as Woodrow passed me a drink. I swallowed the drink; but I kept my finger tips carefully in place until my eyes could verify what I felt there—a tiny rift in the deck, a crimp—half the deck curled ever so slightly away from the other half. I lifted the top half to see what cards were planted for the bottom of the deck. Just four kings, that's all!

It came to me that only two of the players were at all uncertain as to what was up. The other four, including Mr. McGuire, sat oddly still. I had to laugh. Woodrow spoke behind me.

"'Smatter, Mr. Pressley?"

"I'm just wondering," I said, "which one of these birds was due to beat me on a four-card draw. That's getting pretty raw."

The eyes under the visor of Mr. McGuire's boyish cap were not boyish. They were oddly wide, inhuman.

His right hand moved swiftly toward his chest as he cried, "Wha' d' ye mean, you ——"

I grinned—"You got me the first time"—and put my hand firmly against his right elbow, stopping whatever he was jerking from under his left arm. But I didn't try to stop him from leaping out of his chair away from me; I helped him, so vigorously that he stumbled on the legs of the next chair and went down; spun my own chair against Woodrow's long legs and leaped on the boyish Mr. McGuire in time to tear a blocky automatic out of his hand.

Woodrow yelled, "Jack! That guy's from Mexico! He'll knife you!" Mr. McGuire flipped convulsively under the table. Woodrow was covering me with a revolver, not dramatically, but in the most simple and effective manner, waist-high. No use rushing him. There was an opaque window by me; it gave only on an alley. I tossed the automatic through the glass and grinned.

"Worrying about my knife? Here it is." Moving carefully, not to startle Woodrow's trigger finger, I took it out of my vest pocket, opened its two-inch blade and snapped it off and tossed it through the broken pane. "I give you my word that's the only weapon on me."

Woodrow half lowered the revolver, wondering, I guess, just what I meant to do. I couldn't have told him. But oddly, for the first time since I'd been home, I felt alert, in full command of all my faculties; as if the liquor I'd drunk had just begun to stimulate my dull brain; as if time had slowed suddenly into split seconds, crystal clear. Likely the whole thing didn't take a minute.

"You can keep the money," I granted; "it ought to cost me that. But I'll just have those checks back."

"Will you?" said Woodrow. "Oh, will you! Go ahead! Stop payment on 'em. I won't sue you. But you'll wish I had."



“Oh, well,” I said, and walked over to the sideboard to take a drink. But I didn’t take it. Behind my back I snatched at the revolver, twined a leg round his knees and threw my weight back, yelling with all my lung power, “Gabriel! Come!”

Something whacked my skull as we went down. I wrenched the revolver free and whacked savagely at Woodrow’s; I couldn’t wait to see if he was out; savagely I fought to my feet, butting faces, stamping on feet, striking with my free hand, hanging desperately to the revolver. Nothing hurt much. The room was full of the relief of violence, of joyous unrestraint. Cut loose with everything you had!

Gabriel came. He came by the simplest route—through the window. I heard his huge foot splinter through the sash, his deep voice crying, “Here I am, señor!” A man lifted off me and thudded against the wall. The table crashed. Another man wilted even as I struck at him. Whack! The door was open. There was nobody in the room but Gabriel and four men on the floor.

Hardly panting, a leg of the table in his hand, Gabriel explained, “They got away, señor.”

I had to laugh. It seemed a good example, at that; hastily I retrieved my checks from Woodrow’s pocket and climbed out into the alley. But as we reached the farther street a police whistle shrilled somewhere and sickening sanity rolled back on me.

Was I crazy? This was Milo—Milo—Milo, Indiana, where such things simply didn’t happen! Just what had happened anyway? How hard had I struck? Or Gabriel? What would the police find in the disordered room? Dead men? Even one?

Go back and see? No need. They couldn’t all be dead. The police would find me if they needed me.

The lethargy of dawn was over Milo. A policeman eyed me with sluggish recognition; I spoke to him cor-

dially—already trying to be respectable again! The sleepy night clerk of the Park Hotel handed me three letters with my key; I took them and plodded dully to the elevator, got to my room and tossed them on a table. I was half undressed when one of them caught my eye—a foreign stamp, a flimsy envelope of foreign texture, the postmark of Vizcaya! The handwriting was cramped, old-fashioned, wavering. The pages blurred.

Then words leaped out and spoke to me. Mild, whimsical words, the calm and steady voice of old Ben Murchison—Ben Murchison—alive!

“*Dear Buck:* I have been in jail. They nabbed me the minute I landed in Vizcaya, because a Revolution is on and they thought sure I was mixed up in it. They did not know about me giving my word not to do any more fighting except in Personal matters. I told them, but they did not believe it. Give a Dog a bad name, etc. Buck, I do not know if I have ever told you, but if you ever get locked up *incomunicado*, do not get mad and Worry, just take it easy and think of all the funny things you can remember. It is the way to keep from going crazy.

“But finally they put me with some other prisoners and I got word to the American Minister. Do you know him, Buck? Mr. Barbee. He is a nice fellow. He did not remember whether you came to see him or not. So many people do. He did not know about my Promise, but he knew I was not fighting any more so finally they let me out.

“That is why it took me so long to find out you were gone. I got to Tolobaya but they did not know what had become of you, but I could not do any more riding for a few days because I am still kind of weak and my back bothered me some. Then I got over to Chunango and Mr. Brennan told me you had gone Home.

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“I am glad to hear it, Buck. I am not blaming you for killing that Del Valle boy. They tell it here that you fought him about his sister, but I know how Natives are, hot-headed. I know you did not treat her anything but right. I know you killed him fair. They have got you charged with Murder, but this country has not got any extradition treaty with the States, so you are all right as long as you ——”

## CHAPTER XXXIV

SO FAR I read in a sort of trance. It would have been easier to grasp if he had written like a man who had been terribly wounded, terribly imprisoned in a solitary dungeon where you had to think of all the funny things you could remember to keep from going crazy. But he didn't. Not he! You could hurt that gallant old body, but you couldn't make him sorry for himself. You couldn't shake the deep calm courage of him. Ben Murchison was a man.

Murder! That was the word that jarred me back to a realization of the present—sitting there on my untouched bed in the Park Hotel, seeing slow dawn come gray across the crowding, sleeping roofs of Milo, Indiana. I had not killed Rufo del Valle, far off down the world; but maybe one of those men in Woodrow's place was dead. Maybe more than one. It made no difference whether Gabriel or I had struck the blow—I was the one responsible for whatever had happened.

But who had killed Rufo del Valle?

Like a clock that had stopped four months ago, the memory of Vizcaya took on reality and moved again—slowly at first, my brain still drugged with the violence of the last twenty minutes. Ben Murchison was in Vizcaya! Following my trail, he had gone Tolobaya, to Chunango, where he had learned —

How did Peter Brennan know I had come home?

Who had killed Rufo? And when?

That phantom rider must have been he—that horseman who had come thundering down from La Caoba while I lay hazily in the bushes below the trail. His head snow white and featureless against the stars—bandaged, of course; likely his face and scalp were cut to

ribbons by the crazy slashing of my rapier. But he certainly wasn't dead. Not then. Shouting like that. Not even badly hurt; it takes strength to stride a horse at full speed down a twisting mountain trail.

His horse galloping back riderless; that would be after a stumble, a fall—and no wonder. But his voice had kept on shouting vengefully. Receding into the valley, pursuing me on foot. Fading, forgotten in the delirium of exhaustion and fever and the incandescence of that merciless sun.

Had I met and killed him in the hours I didn't remember? But how? Hardly able to drag one foot after another, my right arm helpless —

Well, I'd been strong enough to climb down into the cañon and take the blanket roll off my dead horse and drag a heavy blanket, crazily, all the way to Chunango. No telling what a man can do when the restraint of reason is removed. And I'd been armed. Was that why Peter Brennan had told me so earnestly to be quiet, kept me indoors until the boat came—hiding me? . . . I leaped up and rummaged in my trunk for my revolver, which hadn't been fired since then.

There were three empty shells.

Gave you a frantic helpless feeling, sitting there, needing so desperately to know what was hidden in the blank, unanswering fog of time and distance. Only these flimsy sheets of foreign paper, scrawled with mild whimsical words that could speak with the voice of old Ben Murchison yet could not answer any single question. Only stray glimpses of interweavings in a hidden pattern. . . . Ben Murchison had fought in Vizcaya when I was no more than a baby here in Milo, knowing no more of warriors and kings than I might hear in fairy tales. Yet it was the thread of my own footless blundering that had drawn him back there after thirty years—even now he spoke of Ramon Zuñiga, but seemed to have no notion who he was:

“I am boarding with a fellow named Dowling. He says he knows you; you took up for him in a scrap with a fellow named Zuñiga. That is, I am staying at his house. He seems to be off somewhere on a Spree. He was hanging around the *meson* drunk while I was laid up, and the night before I left for Chunango his little girl came down there hunting him. She is all the time afraid he will tackle Zuñiga and get himself killed. Zuñiga seems to be quite somebody around here. I reckon he would not make any bones about killing him if he Felt like it.

“That is how I happen to be staying here. I felt kind of bad to think of that little trick worrying about her Papa, so I came back to see if he had showed up. No. I did not think she ought to stay in the house by herself, she is not much more than a baby but you know how natives are. Some of them. But she would not stay at the *meson*. She is scared her Papa will come home drunk and nobody to take care of him. So I moved up here. She can not cook anything much but fried eggs, so I tole her down to the *meson* to eat sometimes and we get along fine. I am afraid something has happened. He has been gone four days but I will wait. I have not got anything to do and I might as well.

“She says you are the finest Liar she ever saw, making up Yarns about rabbits with watches in their pockets, etc. She is a cute trick and Spunky as they make them but I am worried. The police will not do anything but Promise. They would not tackle Zuñiga anyway if he killed him right under their Nose.

“I reckon you heard about me getting shot. I am getting all right now but I was pretty sick by the time I found a pueblo where I could give up, you know how scattered they are in Peten, and besides I am getting old. I do not come Back after getting Hurt like I used to. But I am getting all right. I am sure sorry things broke like they did, Buck. I could not see any way to help it.

They sure made a Mess of our outfit. But you are a young fellow and you have got a good head for business. You will make a new start and be rich in no time.

“Mind what I tell you now, Buck. You stay in the States this time. That is the place. This is no country for a young fellow. I have been here nearly forty years and I know. You will get Restless but you stay with it, Buck. You will get used to it. I never had the Guts to stick it out myself. I always got restless and had to Hit the trail again. But you are a peaceable young fellow and you know how to get along with People.

“When you start getting Tired of it, you just remember how you got tired of it down here. I could see you getting tired ever since the War and I was glad to hear you had gone home. You stay there, Buck. You would only keep fooling around and wind up like I did, get old and be no use to anybody.

“Many a time I will sit and think of when we were partners, what a Hustling young fellow you were and what good times we used to have sitting and chewing the Rag etc. Huh, Buck? Let me know how you are getting along. Please sent c/o de Srta. Alice Dowling, Tolobaya, Vizcaya. You can depend on her better than her Papa even if he shows up but I am uneasy about him.

“I will send this General Delivery, from all you say Milo is a little town and I reckon it will get to you all right. Best regards, Buck. Take care of yourself.

“Yours truly,

“BENJ. MURCHISON.”

That was all. Not a word of how he had escaped from his grave in the jungles of Peten; to him it was only a matter of course to keep on trying as long as the breath of life was in him. Not a word about his share of our money in the bank—I was young and had my start to make; he was an old fellow and wouldn't need it long.

I can't tell you how it hit me. I didn't know I was swearing aloud until Gabriel poked his great tousled head in to ask anxiously what was the matter; he thought I must be swearing at somebody. Well, I was. I was cursing the man I'd been, to let Ben Murchison get such an idea of me; the fool I'd been, to think you could buy peace with money; the weakling I'd been, to quit because I'd been a little tired and sick. Cursing my helplessness to tell him that I knew it now.

"Gabriel," I cried, "he lives! Don Benjamin is alive!"

Gabriel said simply, "*Deveras*, señor? Truly?" But his broad face lighted with gladness that would have burst a smaller man. He was human, you know; a thousand years of failure and defeat can wipe out subtle and complex emotions, but never the basic ones of loyalty and gratitude and love. Ben Murchison had been always kind to him.

"He is in Vizcaya."

"Do they speak Spanish there, señor?"

"Eh?" I said. "Yes. Why?"

"I am glad," said Gabriel. "This is a beautiful city and the people are very kind, but English is very hard to learn."

I give you my word it had never occurred to me how lonely he must have been. I'd been too busy feeling sorry for myself; I'd taken him for granted, like a dog or the bed I slept on. And of course he'd never presumed to tell me how he felt. On the other hand, he never questioned my responsibility. He had smashed those men in Woodrow's place because I'd told him to, which made it right for him. He wasn't worrying about any consequences. More than once, in Guatemala and in New Orleans, I'd kept him out of jail by giving money to the police. If they made any trouble here, I'd give them money and we'd be on our way. What could be simpler?



## CHAPTER XXXV

EH, WELL! A man can try. Through empty streets of sunrise I galloped to a telegraph office and cabled Uncle Ben:

“Stay put till you hear from me. Thought you were dead. Love to Alice and plenty for yourself, you darned old phoenix.”

The girl at the desk reminded me sleepily that I hadn't signed it. I had to say, “Oh, he'll know who it's from.” Could I say it was not to advertise myself to authorities who had me charged with murder? The message had to go via San Carlos and Ciudad Vizcaya and the telegraph to Tolobaya; somewhere along the line they'd spot the name of Howard Pressley—or even Buck, in a message addressed to him.

No use to wonder yet how I could get in myself. I had to get out of Milo first. I rushed to a taxi office and drove to the house of Harry Willis, the county prosecutor, and got him to the door in a bathrobe and a fine morning frown.

“Come out of it,” I said. “Get on some clothes and come down to the hotel for breakfast. Got to have a talk with you.”

“My gosh, man! What time is it?”

“Six o'clock. But I've got to take the 10:47 to New York and I've got forty-seven things to do between now and then. Just think of all the mornings I've let you sleep, and forgive me. I mean it, Harry! I'm sorry, but I've got to impose on you this once.”

“You must have been killing somebody,” he said sarcastically.

But I waited till coffee and food had soothed him, and even then I began carefully distant from the point. I told him about Ben Murchison’s latest resurrection. That beguiled him out of a too judicial attitude. Harry Willis made a living putting people in jail for adventuring in Milo, but when they did it like Ben Murchison, a picturesque, swashbuckling soldier of fortune, far off in the tropics—that was romantic. See?

“He must have more lives than a cat,” grinned Harry Willis.

“He certainly hangs on to the one he’s got,” I agreed. “Now he’s in Vizcaya, in the very district where I was working when—when fever got me down. Harry, there’s a lake of asphalt in those hills, richer than Bermudez, nearly as rich as Trinidad—a million-dollar proposition, lying there idle, wide open for the man that can grab it loose from politics. Not very many people know about it. I stumbled on it by an accident. I was a sick man when I—I quit; but now, with Ben Murchison to ——”

That was the line I took. A man can’t come right out and talk about the need to feel the hills again, to hear a mild garrulous old voice, to come again into a starlit garden full of memories that will not fade. I didn’t say that I was charged with murder there. I talked about politics and Ben Murchison and a million dollars—romantic things like that—and Harry grinned.

“Go to it, boy! If I wasn’t a married man —— But what was it you wanted to see me about?”

I told him then; told him exactly what had happened in that joint west of the railroad, making no excuse for having been there. No use to make excuses; I knew what Milo would think of me—rounder, gambler, dam-fool generally. Odd that it should hurt so much to realize. Yesterday I hadn’t cared what Milo thought.

But it wasn't the county prosecutor who listened. It was just Harry Willis, a fellow I'd known all my life. He was shocked; personally, you know. Our kind of people didn't do that sort of thing. He reached for the telephone—we were in my room—and asked for the police station.

"Who's talking? . . . Oh, hello, Sergeant. This is Harry Willis. What's this trouble at Woodrow's joint? . . . I see. Who are they? . . . Just drifters, huh? . . . Any of 'em hurt much? . . . Has he had medical attention? . . . Fractured? Does the doc seem to think it's serious? . . . Any of 'em know his name? . . . Yes, hold 'em all. Yes, Woodrow too. I've warned him. Who's Minnis? . . . Right. Any reporters been in yet? Well, give it to 'em as a raid. Say they were after Minnis. Don't mention anybody's name except the men they took in. No use stirring up a stink. Yes, let it go that way."

Hanging up, he said with sorrowful humor, "I guess you're willing to let the police have the credit, eh, Howard?"

"The—what?"

"Your Mr. McGuire happens to be Mr. Minnis of Chicago, wanted for killing a policeman, which is about the only crime," said Harry, "that makes a man really unpopular—in Chicago. There's a reward. That's the trouble with fellows like Woodrow," he said bitterly. "They turn their places into stations on the underground. Give 'em an inch and they take a mile. Gives Milo a bad name. I'd give a leg to be able to run 'em all out."

He seemed to have forgotten my case in his grievance against politics. Vaguely I knew that even honest politicians had to compromise with the forces west of the railroad; but it seemed no time for general conversation.

"You say one of 'em's—hurt?"

"Skull fractured," said Harry soberly. "Uniden-

tified; still unconscious and the others claim they don't know who he is. Not a Milo man. Tough bird, likely. Howard, how in the name of common sense did you ever get mixed up with a gang like that?"

"Common sense!" I said. "What does a fool know about common sense? I've got no excuse. You know the facts. Now what ——"

"If he dies," said Harry, "I'll probably have to charge you with manslaughter. I—I can't ——"

"You won't have to take any action till he ——"

"No. The police didn't catch you gaming, and those birds won't have the nerve to try to make any ordinary assault charge stick against you—not in this town."

You get it? I belonged in Milo. They didn't.

"That's all I could hope for," I said gratefully. "And I'll be back to take my medicine—whatever it is. That's what I wanted to say to you. I'm not running away. But I simply got to go."

"I'm a little deaf," snapped Harry. "I didn't hear what you said about leaving the country. I'd have to order you held if ——"

"I'll put up any bond you say. I own a third interest in the Grove Hill development, and if that isn't enough ——"

"You talk too much!" said the county prosecutor. "How can you put up a bond when there's no charge against you yet? If it comes to that, I'll remember that you reported to me. That's all I can do. Did you say you had an engagement this morning? Well, good luck, boy!"

That's what it is to grow up in a little town and deal with men who've known you all your life. I went to Dave Henshaw and told him how sorry I was to leave the Grove Hill job so suddenly on his hands. He said emotionally, "Forget it, old man! Joe and I'll take care of it. You've got enough on your mind."

Safe, moderate, reliable Dave Henshaw! He was

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deeply shocked at the mess I'd got myself into—genuinely shocked, and something else. He was as excited at the news of Ben Murchison as if that old adventurer had been his own personal friend—that reckless, bold, swashbuckling soldier of fortune he imagined. Queer, eh? Dave, who would have died of shame if he'd been mixed up in a brawl himself, was a steady ring-side customer at the prize fights staged by the local Elks' Club. Enjoyed the science of boxing, so he said; but knockouts were what he talked about next day—bloody ones.

He gripped my hand emotionally when I left. You know. He thought I went adventuring. That's the romantic name for trouble when it happens to some other fellow, far enough from home.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

EH, WELL! What is reality, anyway? I know that I was worried and afraid. It had been a month since Uncle Ben's letter was written; anything can happen in a month. He was old and had been lately wounded. He had no money that I knew of; no drafts of his had reached the bank when I came through New York. And he had enemies even in Vizcaya—one that I knew of, and that one rich and powerful and vindictive—Teofilo Zuñiga, political boss of Vizcaya for thirty years. Did Zuñiga know Ben Murchison was in the country now?

Had I killed Rufo del Valle in the hours that were lost out of my memory? How should I learn the truth? How should I even get into Vizcaya? What would happen if I landed openly in San Carlos or Chunango? You can't do much from the inside of a jail.

Now, looking back, I know those fears and worries rode me; yet those are not the things that I remember. Pictures remain, and they mean something to me. Havana, in a purple night hung thick with stars, strung with that lovely sweep of lights along the Malecon—familiar with the clipped liquid sound of Spanish and the good homely smells of saffron and burnt coffee and red wine. Slow days down summer seas. A night of velvet blackness out of which the sea flamed into splendor, such fireworks as the hand of man has never yet unrolled—the boat's wash and the swift wakes of playing dolphins burning gold and blue, every splash bursting into an inverted plume of ghost fire under the invisible surface, flying fish rocketing away like living comets into the dark. A dawn when violence threw

you out of the your bunk, such violence as can sweep the Caribbean in September—all day and all night the white ship stood at bay, fighting up green steeps of racing water, plunging down and fighting up again, facing the screaming battalions of the wind.

Then Panama. The awe-inspiring machinery of the locks, hoisting great ships to sail among the sad gray bones of the drowned forests of Gatun—drowned to make crossroads for the ships of all the world. Balboa on the Pacific side. The Tivoli, and lean sunburned men, panama-hatted or pith-helmeted against the sun—hard men, incurious of eye, laconic and usually a little drunk.

A wider code of manners and of ethics too. Out there a man stands on his own feet, and sees to it that nobody else does. It seemed good to be back, I won't deny.

In Panama I heard reports of the revolution in Vizcaya. The rebels had captured Chunango; it wasn't worth much as a port, because the only trail inland was through the great cañon into the valley of the Zorro, which the federals could block at one end as easily as the rebels from the other. By the same token, they couldn't be dislodged except from the sea; and they were getting money out of the Consolidated by threatening to burn their wells. Oil's the most vulnerable form of money in the world I guess.

Not that I cared, except for Peter Brennan's sake. I liked Brennan and he had done me a great service, and it's no joke to have a gang of bandits camping on you. But let me make this clear; I didn't care a thing about Vizcayan politics. Not then.

We rode into Vizcaya from behind, Gabriel and I. A hot and toilsome route, but the safest one—we didn't even know when we crossed the border, maybe on the same mountain trail where young Ben Murchison had escaped thirty years ago, "three jumps ahead of a firin'

squad." Up into the hills where the sun was hot and the air was thin, where you sweated by day and shivered under double blankets by night, out through a lonely pass above the great upland mesa that rims the northern end of the Zorro Valley.

That's one of the pictures that remain. The blue line of the seaward ridge that runs to La Caoba and Chunango. Wide rolling plain, patched with dark green of coffee and yellow of sesame, softened to beauty in the slanting sun; white specks of central haciendas, a tiny ox wain that did not seem to move, and tiny cattle grazing, and a toy horseman galloping where there was nothing to gauge his progress by. Far purple glimpses of the Zorro Valley; and the hills—the hills, the mighty surf roll of a continent, immense and calm, not restless like the sea.

Gabriel didn't look ridiculous out there. Bulky he was, and proudly he clung to his incongruous Yankee clothes; proudly, when we stopped to ask our way at some isolated farm where peons straightened up to stare at us, he spoke to me in what he hoped was English, cocking a lordly eye at those humble, *calzon*-clad, sandal-footed fellows. How could they tell that his imposing shoes hid calloused marks of sandal thongs, or that *calzones* even now served him for underwear?

Funny he was, but not ridiculous. A man can be as big as he likes, as simple as he likes, out there. There's plenty of room.

Peaceful it seemed. Suddenly up over a roll in the mesa came a swift caravan, mounted men galloping before a carriage whose horses galloped too. Probably, I thought, the wife of some rich landowner, returning from a shopping trip to the capital; in those countries, you know, few women ride horseback where wheels can go.

But it was not a woman. Surprisingly, the horsemen struck spurs to their horses and came charging down.



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“Halt! What are you doing here?”

That was unusual. Back-country men are usually most courteous; these men were plainly looking for trouble. I was in no position to oblige them. I answered mildly, “Passing by.”

“Whence do you come, and on what business?”

“Who,” I demanded mildly, “wants to know?”

“Teofilo Zuñiga!”

You may believe I turned anxious eyes on that carriage then. Not that I had anything especially to fear from Teofilo Zuñiga; likely—or so I thought—he’d never heard of me, at least by name. It was his son Ramon I was afraid of. Ramon would recognize me. Remembering the stare of those hot hawklike eyes in the plaza at Tolobaya, I had no delusions about that.

But the carriage rocked swiftly by, and neither of its passengers was Ramon. One was a servant, who braced in his arms another—well, call it a man. A withered frame swathed in a rich shawl whose colors cruelly emphasized the yellow pallor of a face on which the flesh seemed horribly to have melted and run down, sagging like dead wax into malignant seams and folds. I caught one glance from its venomous yellow eyes as it went by. It was enough. Even to-day, looking back, I firmly believe Teofilo Zuñiga hated every living soul—but one.

Now, looking back, I partly understand the man. He came to Vizcaya sixty years ago, an unknown immigrant from Spain, a Galician in a country whose aristocracy is of Biscayan stock; where the word *gallego* is a word of scorn. He grew rich, but he was still Galician. He grew powerful—climbed by the only means he knew, shrewd, ruthless and aggressive—climbed to be feared and sneered at, a *gallego* to the last. Maybe—who knows?—hate was the driving force within him. Certainly it was strong, to have molded a human face into that mask of hate and cruelty.

But it was the mouth that made you sick, wiped out

all pity for his age and his infirmity. Impotent and yet lecherous, as if it savored unclean memories. That was the man who had desired Fernando's sister—poor Doña Trini, that proud, cold, bitter lady, Queen of Vizcaya once. All I could think of was the way she had looked that night in Don Fernando's house, robbed of all dignity by her shapeless wrapper and the curl papers in her graying hair, her thin hands shaking and her shaking voice crying at me the hate she felt for all male animals—that pitiful old woman who had once been beautiful and young.

The carriage went by; but these guards of his—that old man feared assassination more than any president, and with cause—showed no intention of letting us go.

“Answer me, Yankee!”

I said mildly, “Are you Teofilo Zuñiga?”

“I speak for him!”

“Then say for me,” I said, “that I have passed.”

And I tried to. But the spokesman snatched the bridle, threw my tired horse back on his haunches. He reared and trembled; while I soothed him I fought down the surge of red before my eyes until I could speak calmly. I had to. I couldn't let them take me in; could neither fight nor run. Grimly I kept my voice down—bluffing.

“Your master,” I said quietly, “shall answer for this insolence. Gabriel, take this fellow out of my way.”

You see, they had no idea who I was. And Gabriel didn't fail me. Quite simply he put out a huge hand and pulled the man's horse aside, saying, “Excuse, friend. You must not annoy the *patron*.”

And I rode straight ahead, not even glancing at them again. I didn't dare. There was the whole wide mesa in which to have ridden around them, but I didn't dare yield an inch. Gabriel rumbled a matter-of-fact *adios*—it would have tickled me if I'd been somewhere else. That is the manner of servants of great men.

It was a mile before the uneasiness went out of my spine. The trail dipped over the edge of the mesa. The floor of the valley, far below, seemed carpeted with dark gray moss; yet those were trees. The mountains rose immense, ethereal, beautiful. They faded swiftly when the sun went down, faded from the bottom upward, their snow caps floating in strange iridescence. Gone! Blue stars came out; the flattened circle of the moon was blue. The night seemed infinite. Yet it was only the shadowed side of one small planet in the radiance of one minor star, a little world where men crawled in the tangle of their groping lives—self-centered, blind, unclean.

The lights of Tolobaya huddled insignificant and lonely over the misty darkness of the valley. We rode up warily. There wasn't much danger of being recognized and arrested—not immediately; all Yankees look more or less alike to them. But you never know.

Suddenly, for a moment, I forgot where I was. I thought I heard an automobile back-firing. But no automobile ever back-fired in Tolobaya—those were rifle shots. Then I heard music in the plaza, and wild whoops and yells. Hilarious, you know.

“Halt!”

We halted; we were getting used to it. This was a military—more or less military—sentry who barred our way with rifle held unsteadily at port. He was not in uniform and he was drunk. Your nose told you that much. It needed no great acuteness to guess the rest.

“Shout ‘Down with the revolution!’”

“I will not,” I refused heroically. “I am a friend of the revolution. Your brave men have taken this place recently?”

“Last night.” He turned ferociously to Gabriel. “And you? What do you shout, carcass of a bull?”

Gabriel turned placidly to me. “What do I shout, señor?”

“Shout ‘*Viva la revolucion.*’ ”

Gabriel shouted. Literally; and windows jarred in their frames, and voices whooped in answer from the plaza four blocks away, and the sentry cried admiringly, “Have a drink, little one! Keep the bottle; I have many more. Pass, friends!”

And he went dragging his rifle back into the shadows, yodeling cheerfully, “Mariquita! Where are thou, female offspring of a goat?”

All very harmless and hilarious—unless you recognized the smell that came through broken windows and smashed doors, or heard a woman crying helplessly in the dark. You didn’t see any women abroad—not if they could help it. That’s how romantic a revolution is. You’ll never know what a load rolled off my chest when I pounded with the butt of my quirt at the door of Henry Dowling’s house—no light was showing—and heard Ben Murchison’s calm voice demand in Spanish, “Who?”

The lock grated cautiously. He didn’t stow away his revolver until he saw Gabriel and me alone. He didn’t carry a lamp; he was too wise for that. His hand felt thin, a little cold. He didn’t seem especially glad to see me. He said dryly, “You just can’t take advice no time, can you, Buck?”

## CHAPTER XXXVII

HE SHOOK hands with Gabriel and told him to take the horses to the corral of the *meson*.

“Tell the *corralero* to stable them with mine. If questions are asked, thou knowest nothing. Is it understood?”

Gabriel said placidly that it was understood. Placidly he ambled off. Revolutionists were no novelty to him; he'd been with Palomar in Mexico. He was big enough to take care of himself, and knowing nothing was the easiest thing he did. The fact is, I frequently forgot that Gabriel was human.

Alice Dowling greeted me with shy formality. The child was even smaller and skinnier than I remembered; I don't know why I bowed—not more than half humorously. Maybe it was the courage, the unspoken disappointment in those grave green eyes of hers—over her head I flashed a question to Ben Murchison and his eyes answered gravely in the negative. Or maybe it was something else; something that hadn't been there five months ago—a new shy femininity, though she was not yet twelve years old. In those latitudes, you know, all flowering comes soon.

She said formally, “Hello, old-timer. I know you. The general said you was comin'. Had any more D. T.'s?”

“Huh?” I said.

“Don't you remember all those damn lies you was ——”

“Hey, kid,” said Ben Murchison reproachfully, “how many times I told you not to say damn! Say durn.”

“—— lies you was tellin’ about little girls and rabbits and lizards that turned into a deck of cards? D. T.’s—that’s what my papa said you’d been havin’. Damn ——”

“Durn,” said the guardian of young morals.

“My papa’s gone,” said Alice wistfully. “The general tell you? He’s been—gone quite a while. Off on a—a trip or somethin’.”

“You run along to bed now,” said Ben Murchison. “Me and Buck ——”

“I thought you was him,” said Alice. “I thought you might be.”

“Git!” said Ben Murchison. “Me and Buck has got to ——”

“Did you come to join the revolution?”

“No.”

“Why don’t you?” urged Alice. “I been tryin’ to get the general to. Then you could get even with Don Ramon Zuñiga. If my papa was ——”

“Scat!” said Ben Murchison. “You hear me?”

“First I thought,” said Alice—“I thought papa might be off somewhere fightin’ already. But Mr. Hecht said ——”

“You want me to paddle you?” cried the martinet.

“Yeah,” said Alice, grinning. “You talk plenty, but you never do it. I dare you—just once!”

“Johnny Hecht been here?” I inquired.

“Be a good kid, now,” wheedled the general.

“Honest, Alice; me and Buck has got to talk business. Won’t you?”

“Oh, all right,” said Alice, and gave me her hard little paw, native fashion. “Good night, old-timer. Good night, General.”

“Sleep tight, kid,” said Ben Murchison, and sighed.

“But I ain’t a bit sleepy.”

When she had gone, he brought out a bottle, glancing cautiously at her door—this stickler for the proprieties—

poured drinks and sighed, "I had a time with her to-day. She couldn't see no reason why she couldn't go runnin' around like she always does; said the revolutionists didn't have nothin' against her. And what could I tell her? I ain't never had no practice raisin' girls. Gets me so I don't know where to look."

"You think Dowling's gone for good?"

"Dead, sure, or run off and left her. I wouldn't put it past him. Wasn't worth shucks, from all I hear. Think of that shiftless runt havin' a kid like her! Ain't she a caution?"

He produced the disreputable remnant of a cigar and puffed it alight at the top of the lamp; said "Well, Buck, here's regards," sighed and sat down. I had to laugh, he looked so natural doing it. Unchanged. A little thinner, maybe; the wrinkles in his face a little grim; but his blue gaze was mild, calm, whimsical as ever. It seemed no miracle to see him there, alive. Nothing terrible seemed to have happened. Nothing great about him. He was just a shabby, thirsty, comfortable old man.

He asked me, "Where'd you pick up Gabriel?"

"In Peten," I told him—"mourning on your grave, you durned old fraud! Don't you know you're supposed to be dead?"

"Was a time," he grinned absently, "when I'd 'a' took anybody's word for it. . . . Well, how did your home town look to you?"

"Who was it they buried then?"

"Oh," he said, "that was me, all right. But you know how natives are. Lazy. They never had nothin' but bayonets to dig with, I reckon, so they just scooped a hole and covered me up and called it a Christian burial. First thing, when I started wigglin', my hand pushed right out in the air.

"I ever tell you? I always been scared of bein' buried alive; I reckon it's because I'm so hard to kill,

I'd 'a' been scared to death if I'd realized it was dirt in my face. But all I knew was I couldn't get my breath. Like I was in bed or somethin' and blankets over my head. You know how a feller will wiggle before he knows what for. Lucky, huh? I never even knew I was shot till I got my head out and realized that my left arm was gone."

"Gone?" I echoed, seeing it apparently all there.

"Shoulder blade bust all to thunder. Won't never be able to move it any more—only from the elbow down."

But he didn't offer to show me. Not he! If you ever saw his scars or disabilities, it was because he couldn't help it.

"Then I was scared, all right. Seem like I kept hearin' soldiers behind every bush. Scared to get up till it got dark. Just laid there pushin' the dirt back so they wouldn't notice I was gone and ——"

"Refilled the grave," I cried, "smashed up like that?"

"Wasn't much of a grave. And I didn't know then how bad I was hurt; you know how you feel when you first get shot like that; just sick. Didn't know much of anything, tell you the truth. Tried to get back to the mill, but I forgot where I was goin' and went blunderin' around like a chicken with its head off. Two-three times I thought I heard you hollerin' somewhere, and I'd start off that way, yellin' to you to wait. That was how these Mayas found me. And I pretty near worried 'em to death tellin' 'em to go and bring you in."

"You"—I said huskily—"you thought I'd come?"

"Most of the time I just forgot you wasn't there." He looked at me and grinned—unflatteringly. "Yeah, I was right worried when it started in to rain. Couldn't die easy, thinkin' who'd tell you when it was time to come in out of it."

"I don't see," I snorted, "that you've showed a hell



of a lot of intelligence yourself! What have you done for money?"

"Oh," he said, "there was about six hundred dollars left in the Banco Nacional; you know, the pay-roll account. When I finally made it to Sabado, I got Enrique Mendez to cash a draft for that. Dated it back so they wouldn't notice I was alive. I didn't feel like any more trouble for a while."

"Didn't anybody tell you I'd been through Sabado?"

"Didn't see nobody but Enrique. Got him to smuggle me on a schooner goin' south, and stayed on her all the way to Trinidad."

"On six hundred dollars?"

"Sure. I still got some of it."

"And when that's gone," I asked politely, "you'll step out and get a job or something? Did it slip your dodgasted memory that we had an account in New York—something like a hundred thousand dollars? Or isn't that enough to interest you?"

"Oh," he said, "sure, I'd 'a' called on you if I needed to. But I been all right. Livin's cheap in this town."

"I get you," I said grimly. "The outfit we lost was your share, and the money in the bank was mine. What could be fairer? You don't need money. You don't expect to live more than thirty or forty years, and I'm a young feller with my start to make. Simple-minded, too!"

"Well, you needn't swell up and bust," he grinned, "just because I ain't had to draw no money yet. I would if I needed to, wouldn't I?"

"Try it!" I snarled. "I've got your letter to prove that you crawfished out of our partnership. You try to draw any of my money and I'll sue you! Gimme a match."

You know how comfortable you feel with a man who

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thinks you haven't got sense enough to come in out of the rain; especially if you know he needs a practical nurse himself. A couple of hours we sat talking there, and it never once occurred to me to wonder what Gabriel was doing.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE revolution, Uncle Ben said, was petering out. Not enough money to buck the administration, with Zuñiga's millions behind it. In thirty years only three revolutions had succeeded, and Zuñiga himself had paid for those. Oh, of course, all revolutions raise the shout of liberty; but the mainspring of them all, when you come down to it, is money. That was why the rebels had taken Chunango, which had no real strategic value—to get money out of the Consolidated.

“I told Johnny Hecht he was a fool,” said Uncle Ben, “to go and get a big oil company riled up. They got too big a pull at Washin'ton. All the administration had to do was to send word they couldn't protect the wells and get Uncle Sam to send a boatload of marines to save American property.

“Brennan worked it pretty slick, too. He had the marines on top of the rebels before they had a chance to blow up anything.”

“By the way,” I said, “what do the rebels want with this town? What good does it do 'em?”

“A spree, I reckon. More licker and women here than in Chunango. This is the same gang that was there.”

“Is Johnny Hecht with 'em?”

“No. Left the country, likely. Ain't a chance to win now. This outfit'll skedaddle into the hills the minute the federals make a motion at 'em.

“And then,” he demanded gloomily, “what are you goin' to do? Likely nobody'll pay much attention to you while the rebels have got things upside down; but they can't hang on but a day or two. And then what?”

He couldn't tell me much about the charge against me—only what I already knew. Rufo had followed me that night, so people said, to finish our interrupted fight; his horse had returned riderless to La Caoba, but nobody had seen Rufo from that day to this.

“You mean they haven't found any—body?”

“Plenty of bodies,” said Ben Murchison, “these days—or what the buzzards leave of 'em. Been quite a bit of fightin' back of Chunango. No, they can't swear none of 'em's his.”

“Can they prove murder unless they can produce the victim?”

“Well,” he said, “they can keep you in jail till you turn gray. And you'll make a mighty bad witness for yourself. You admit you saw him huntin' you. You admit you had three empty shells in your gun when you come to, and only used one to shoot your horse. Brennan noticed that too.

“Yeah, Brennan'll make another bad witness for you. He thinks you did it all right. He says your story didn't gee, and then you got scared and wouldn't talk at all.”

“Why did he help me out of the country then?”

“Because you was a white man, I reckon. He says you wouldn't 'a' lived to be hung if they'd found you that day. The boy's papa was just crazy. Nice feller, Brennan seems to be,” mused Uncle Ben. “Ever notice his eyes?”

“Huh?” I said. “Eyes? Yes. One blue and one brown. Why?”

“Like he was two different fellers.”

“What are you driving at?”

“Nothin'. Only I knew a feller once that had different-colored eyes, and sometimes he was nice and sometimes he was cold-blooded as a fish. Brennan helped you once, but like as not, if they make him testify against you, he'll do it and never turn a hair.”

“How’ll he explain his helping me to escape?”

“Well, the Consolidated pays a lot of taxes, and Brennan seems to be pretty solid with Zuñiga. Them two don’t have to explain much.”

Ben Murchison did know that the elder Zuñiga was the same politician who had run him out of the country thirty years ago—the one who had caused the execution of Luis, King of Vizcaya. He didn’t know Don Fernando was related to Luis; but he wasn’t surprised.

“All these high-class natives,” he said, “marry each other till they got more cousins than a cat. And they all stick together; that’s why they all got exiled. Is Fernando the only one that came back?”

“His sister, Doña Trini, the widow of Luis ——”

“Was she the one? I always wondered what become of her.”

“She lives with Don Fernando now.”

“Not now,” said old Ben Murchison. “She died. Grieved herself to death, they say, about the boy.”

Maybe I can’t explain how hard that hit me. Not that Doña Trini herself meant anything to me; even now the memory of her is vague. It only showed me reality still going on—the steady, relentless dissolution of a family. Poverty and political oppression hadn’t been enough. I, Howard Pressley, blunderer, had done my bit.

“Well,” said Ben Murchison gloomily, “what do you aim to do?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“What did you come back here for? I tried to get you not to. Why couldn’t you leave well enough alone?”

Well enough, he meant, for me. And he? Oh, he was old and not much use to anybody. He had just drifted aground in Tolobaya. Somebody had to look after Henry Dowling’s kid, and he had nothing else to do. He might as well.

What had I come here for? Looking at him, gloomy and old and very tired of trouble, I knew I'd been a fool. In Milo, Indiana, that lake of asphalt had glowed powerfully in my imagination; now, when it lay only fifteen miles away across the valley, it seemed far off. What did he care about a million dollars? It wouldn't buy the only thing he wanted—peace.

And Don Fernando, too, was old. Even if I could prove I hadn't killed his son, what right had I to bring more trouble on him?

And Rita del Valle—could I say I loved her? I didn't, you know. Not exactly. I only remembered her in every nerve. You can't come out and talk of things like that. Not to a stubborn Nordic like Ben Murchison, to whom no Latin was exactly white.

Seeing how old and tired he looked, I tried to cheer him up. Lightly, humorously I spoke of Milo, Indiana. What a cautious, hidebound town it was; what comic-opera notions people had about the tropics; what a romantic character he, General Ben Murchison, soldier of fortune, seemed to them. Oh, I made excuses for them! Good neighbors; I admitted that; safe, moderate people, but they stood by you when you needed friends. I spoke of Dave Henshaw. But I didn't speak of Harry Willis, county prosecutor, my lifelong friend, who might have indicted me for manslaughter by now. That wouldn't have amused Ben Murchison.

Humorously, indulgently I spoke of the Rotary Club—these safe, successful men, virtuously meeting once a week to uplift Milo; men of all trades and ages and assorted social standings, self-consciously calling one another by their first names to prove what good fellows they were, getting a glow of self-approval out of their hour of unselfishness. Oh, earnest men; I admitted that; a little ridiculous in spots, but honestly trying to do something.

Ben Murchison looked at me, his jaw tightening.

"Yeah," he said somberly. "I know, Buck. I come from a little town like that myself once. A darn good town, and the best people in the world. And I know why you couldn't stand it. I tried, two-three times. . . . Well, where do you aim to sleep? The *meson*'ll be full of drunks. Better bring your bed roll up here and sleep on the floor."

So I went down the steep curling street to the *meson*. The clamor in the plaza had subsided; only one melancholy group, under one of the few lamps that hadn't served as targets for festive bullets, sang to the dismal plunk of a guitar. But the bar of the *meson* was still crowded and hilarious. Prudently I went down a side street to the corral behind, and found my horses duly stabled with Uncle Ben's own.

Gabriel's blankets were still lashed across his saddlebags. Where was Gabriel? A swift misgiving smote me. That was his deep voice roaring from the bar—drunk, drunk as a lord and expansive as three lords rolled into one.

Talking. Poor Gabriel! The relief of a familiar atmosphere had been too much for him. I saw his tousled black head sticking up like a buoy in a sea of hats, and with shoulder and elbow I went in after him. Too late, of course—I never thought of that. He beamed affectionately on me.

"*Hola, patron!* Tell them. They do not believe me. They do not believe any man is strong enough to throw me over his head. But you have done it—is it not true? This is he, señores! It is as I tell you. I tried to hold him—he was not my *patron* then; that was when I served Don Anselmo Palomar, whom they called Butcher—and he threw me over his head. Bum! And I knew nothing. And he killed Don Anselmo—he had already killed the others, he and Don Benjamin, the same General Murchison whom you know. They ——"

"Gabriel!" I shouted. "Fool! Come out of here!"

But he was conscious of no wrong.

“These friends,” he explained, beaming, “tell me how Your Grace unhorsed the terrible Don Ramon Zuñiga and trampled him in the plaza here, and how you killed the young Señor del Valle for love of his sister—excuse that I speak of her. I tell them such things are trifles to you. Am I not bigger, stronger than two Zuñigas? Yet ——”

“Blockhead! Shut up!”

Absently he brushed my hands away; I doubt if he noticed them.

“But it is not true, señores, that all Americans are tall. I have lived there. Shall I speak English for you? Even in his own country my *patron* is tall. And rich! Why should he fear your Zuñigas? Even to-day, as we approached this place, we met the men of ——”

Desperately, I smacked him over the ear with my revolver held in the flat of my hand; he sagged so suddenly that I couldn't hold him up. Then I was conscious of his audience, shocked and indignant.

“Gentlemen,” I cried, “excuse that my servant has thrust himself among you! Let me offer a toast to the revolution, and then if some of you will carry him out for me ——”

That was different. We drank, gentlemen all, while my low-bred servant slumbered unheeded in our midst. Nobly they forgave his tactless intrusion. They complimented me on my strength, to have felled so large a man with one slap of the open hand; no wonder Americans were said to fight with bare hands if we could hit like that! They gave me *vivas* for the United States, and lugged him out and dumped him in a room already littered with snoring drunks.

But the beans were already spilled. At any moment now the federals would come, and it would no longer serve me to be a friend of the revolution—stared at and identified by every eye that saw me, an enemy of the



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Zuñigas and a fugitive from the law. Very thoughtfully I lugged my kit to Henry Dowling's house. Thoughtfully, when Uncle Ben had gone to bed, I shaved.

Remarkable how a shave refreshes you. I found myself whistling softly, not to keep old Ben Murchison awake.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

HORSES are cheap in that country. Uncle Ben's was a good one; better than mine, and fresh. He stepped out eagerly. The first few miles, going down into the valley, I had to hold him by main strength to save his legs; but when we reached the valley floor I let him go. I don't know anything more soothing and exhilarating than to feel a good horse under you that wants to go. It gets into your blood—the gallant surge of living bone and muscle, the deep and steady breathing, the steady powerful beat of flying hoofs. He seems an eager friend who helps you, and perplexities seem simpler when you ride straight at them.

His trail instinct was better than my eyes. Headlong he plunged through lakes of the night fog, warm and wet like steam. The moon, low now on the seaward hills, was red through thicker air. It peopled the jungle shadows with ghostly, vague, slow-stirring vapor shapes; but there is nothing to be afraid of in the Zorro Valley at midnight. Nobody lives down there but Indians, shy, stupid people—so they seem to us—who have no interest in the hurried passing of white men. They do not hurry. Their time is on a vaster scale than ours, measured by suns and moons and generations, not by minutes.

The shadow of the seaward hills came suddenly, an hour before the inland side went dark. Through the fringe of jungle the broad sluggish Zorro spread like a dim plain above the rapids. The trail branched; this way to the cañon and the outer delta of Chunango, this way to La Caoba and the northern mesa. The horse, his first exuberance worn out, climbed steadily. The night thinned as the starlight widened. I almost thought I

knew the very place where I had tumbled off into the bushes—was it five months ago!—to lie there foggily and see that phantom rider pass against the sky.

Rufo—his proud young chest so full of wild young feelings—and where was he now?

In the high saddle of the hills the trail branched again, north to the fertile uplands of the Zuñigas, south by a shoulder of the mountain into the saddle where the hacienda of La Caoba lay. There was the long low line of the stone aqueduct sweeping down; yonder the walls of La Caoba, silent and dark, asleep under friendly stars.

Daylight was still an hour away. I got down and anchored the horse with trailing reins, filled my pipe, paced a little, restlessly, stretching my legs; climbed a knoll where the aqueduct passed at ground level, saw the long curve of it go in across the wall to Don Fernando's house. That was where Rita slept; Rita del Valle, a woman. No more dim and far-off memory, but just yonder. Sleeping. Slim vital hands that could so rest a man. . . . Peaceful it looked. Only the sweet slow wind of dawn was stirring. Only the stars watched, clear, steady-burning lanterns in the silver sky. My feet, when I let myself down inside the wall and dropped, fell soundless in the soft ground of a garden.

There was a sudden paralyzing uproar. Dogs rushed out, barking. No use to run; I stood quite still against the garden wall and spoke to them softly when they came near enough. Few dogs will bite you if you neither threaten them nor run. They sniffed my legs. Anxiously, whispering reassurance to them, I patted their heads, wooled their ears for them. A man's voice shouted from the horse corral; they answered in the only way they knew, yapping about me as if to say, "False alarm! It's a friend of the family. Look, here he is!"

Maybe they remembered the smell of me, at that; or maybe they welcomed human diversion in the long dull

hours of the night. I had to scold them to get rid of them. They were surprised and hurt.

Rita must have been awake. When I whispered at her window her soft voice cried instantly, "Who speaks?"

"Quiet," I pleaded. "Loved one, it is I."

A voice in the darkness saying "It is I"—what does that mean? Nothing, of course. Yet to a Latin it is the same as saying "I come in peace." Rita del Valle was twenty years old and beautiful; more than one masculine voice had whispered hopefully to her. Her voice was not afraid now, only listless, infinitely tired.

"Who is 'I'?"

"Howard Pressley."

Silence. Suddenly I saw her close against the bars, one hand clutching some wrap at her throat, the other thrust out to me—or so I thought; but it evaded me, thrust me away. There was no welcome in her wide dark eyes, her frantic whispering.

"You! Don Howar'! Pity of God, what evil fortune brings you back here—now? Go away! Run! Oh, go quickly, quickly!"

"I would have come long ago if I had known. It has but lately come to me that your father blames me for your brother's death. I ——"

"Blames you! It drives him mad! He has not slept since those poor bones were brought here. He only walks ——"

"What do you say?" I cried. "Then they have found—him?"

"Day before yesterday."

After five months—you can imagine what would be left of him. In pity I caught that frantic hand, made it be still. It was cold. The tenseness went out of her and she sank down, limp, on the wide ledge inside the iron bars. The fragrance of her hair came to me, faint and yet poignant. Maybe there is some woman in the world whose grief can tear your heart like that.

“Who found him? Where?”

“The Señor Hecht, the soldier of fortune. He who commanded the rebels at Chunango. The American soldiers drove them into the jungle and they came upon the skeleton of ——”

“How can they know that it is he?”

“By the ring that was our grandfather’s. Howar’—the Virgin hears you—tell me you did not ——”

All my eyes, my ears, my heart, yearned through those iron bars; but what snatched suddenly at my nerves was not inside the room.

Queer, nerves are. I’ve read somewhere that different men react instinctively at different speeds, and I believe it. Ben Murchison, for instance, even when he was old, could sense a thing and act on it quicker than any man I ever saw. To him, other men were a little hesitant, vacillating, slow in the head. I know my brain works slow. That has been lucky for me more than once; when there is time to think, I’m scared, and when I’m scared I’m paralyzed. I know how my knees used to turn to water when a push was on in France. I’m not ashamed. I never claimed to be a fighting man. But sometimes a man’s nerves and muscles seem to act without waiting for his sluggish brain. That’s how I happen to be alive to-day, to sit here as I do, remembering.

It didn’t seem to happen very swiftly. As if time had slowed into split seconds, each one expanding to abnormal length. I can’t tell you what I saw or heard or smelled. Maybe a thickening of the starlight that was already paling toward sunrise; maybe the faint metallic click of a safety lever; maybe the faint gun smell of oil and powder. All I know is my nerves cried “Drop! Get down!” The stone sill of Rita’s window went upward past my face, brilliantly lighted by twin flashes at close range, and twin cracks of thunder smashed like hammers out of the graying dawn.

## CHAPTER XL

THEN Rita screamed. Maybe the warning had come from her somehow; but the memory of that stifled cry comes afterward; it jerked me upright with some dazed notion that it was she who was in danger. That's, how stunned I was. Confusedly, then, I saw the dim flapping shape that rushed at me, struck at me with what looked like a slim black club against the paling stars. The first I really knew was that I grappled face to face with Don Fernando, my hand still numb from the intercepted blow and my muscles still savage from the wrench with which I tore that double-barreled shotgun out of his hands and threw it.

And my first thought was shame, feeling through the fabric of his dressing-gown how thin and frail he was. Even the insanity of fury could not give him strength. His spine bent and he staggered in my arms. As gently as I could I held him pinned, roaring earnestly into his ear, "Don Fernando! Stop it! *Me rindo!* I surrender!"

But there was nothing funny about it at the time. This sick old man who thought I'd killed his son; men running out, armed with machetes, clubs, revolvers—I had to let him go. I leaped back and put my hands up, crying "I surrender!" He flew at me, clawing and slapping with his open hands; you know, it never seems to occur to a Latin to close his fist before he strikes. Like an infuriated woman. But there was nothing funny about it; not then.

Rita cried, "Father! Shame! He does not defend himself!"

His hands clenched then; he turned his back and panted to his men, "Secure him!"

"Don Fernando," I begged, "hear me! I have come ——"

He wouldn't look at me again. He went slowly off around the house; a dozen weapons prevented me from following. Now I could feel a burn across my forehead, blood seeping down into one eye. One of those flying bits of lead had raked the bone. I hadn't felt it; I thought those clawing nails had done it, and turned my back for fear Rita would see.

It brought me face to face with Johnny Hecht; I recognized him even in the dusk of dawn—that pale-eyed, pale-haired, deadly little man, his riding breeches hanging unlaced about his short bowed legs. Half dressed; but he had stopped to buckle on his guns.

I said ruefully, "Hello, Doctor. What brings you here?"

He stared at me a moment, and then grinned.

"Why," he said, "my young friend Buck, as ever was! I didn't know you for a minute. You been feedin' yourself up."

It was on my tongue to ask him to get word to old Ben Murchison. But there was nothing friendly about Johnny Hecht; cold as a snake, he was; he asked no friendship and he had none to give. Besides, what was the use of worrying Uncle Ben? What could he do?

"This is a real treat," grinned Johnny Hecht. "I never expected to see you again. Must be somethin' in it—about murderers returnin' to the scene of the crime."

I said sourly, "You ought to know."

His eyes narrowed. Not that he resented the reference to the men he'd killed first and last; only the tone of it. He said, "Son, you're a hog for trouble. It's a good thing you got your hands up," and turned on his heel and went away.

Somebody brought a rope and tied my hands behind

me, and they marched me to the horse corral. In places like La Caoba, remote from towns, there's usually a makeshift lockup. At La Caoba it was in the stables, serving regularly as a corner crib and in emergencies as a jail. I remember that because the corral man hastily shoveled out corn while they went through my pockets for weapons. They took nothing but my pocketknife. It didn't occur to them to pat my coat under my left arm. The heavy bulk of my revolver there was comforting, though I couldn't possibly have reached it. The sun, popping up, was almost cheerful. You know—the worst had happened and I was still alive. I guess nobody can imagine himself not living through anything. He only thinks, "How am I going to get out of this?"

They didn't untie my hands when they thrust me in. The blood seeping into my right eye worried me. I could get my handkerchief out of my hip pocket, but I couldn't get it to my face; I had to drop it on a pile of corn and rub my eye against it. You've no idea how unsatisfactory it was.

Oh, yes, I see some humor in it now. I remember how I tried to smoke; I could get my pipe and stuff tobacco in it, lay it down and pick it up between my teeth, but my match box was in my breast pocket. I bent double and tried to shake it out, cursing my tidy habit of keeping the flap buttoned. A timid snicker caught my ear. There were faces at the small barred window—children who stared at my strange contortions. I grinned and went toward them with some idea of asking them to strike a match for me. They tumbled down from whatever they were standing on and fled. No doubt my blood-smearred face was rather shocking. I couldn't coax them back.

Nobody came. You've no idea how time drags when all you can do is wait. Patiently at first, I worked my wrists against the rope, but whoever had tied those knots knew his business. It was not cruelly tight, but it sim-



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ply wouldn't give; and my hands are too big and bony to slip through loops the size of my wrists. I tugged till the skin broke and my teeth snapped through the stem of my pipe. I had one moment of sheer animal panic at that aching, maddening constraint, rolling on the floor like some senseless creature in a trap.

That moment passed. I thought of old Ben Murchison's advice: "Do not get mad and worry, but take it easy and think of all the funny things you can remember. It is the way to keep from going crazy."

So I sat down and made myself as comfortable as I could. Once I heard voices in the corral and shouted through the heavy door of hewed mahogany, "Water, please!" And a voice answered, "Did you give my young master water before you killed him?"

Weariness overcame me finally, and I slept.

## CHAPTER XLI

It's odd now, looking back, seeing the things I accepted as coincidence. Well, what is chance? The result of unknown or unconsidered forces. Who knows or can consider all of them? To every man, I guess, time seems a thread on which events go by like random beads, confused and unrelated—so strangely, afterward, to slip and drift into a spreading pattern. For every man it seems one single pattern, a train of pictures woven on the groping strand of his own life; yet everywhere it spreads and merges into the memories of other men.

Take old Ben Murchison. Many a yarn he spun for me out of his long and colorful career. Pictures—I saw them where his blue gaze wandered in the telling; in the sky, unreal, adrift in time and space. When he first told me of Luis, King of Vizcaya once, it was no more than any other of those tales. Yet now, seeing the way I blundered into its far aftermath, it has grown real to me.

Take Zuñiga, the politician of that ancient yarn; that venomous old paralytic, the Galician father of Ramon. At this time he must have been past eighty. The day his carriage passed me out there on the mesa was the first time I ever saw him; the second was the last. Yet in a measure, now, I see the years that made him what he was.

Take Peter Brennan, who was no more an adventurer than I. A practical man; he had worked many years for the Consolidated Oil Company, in Mexico and Honduras and Vizcaya. To me he was only one of those gallant old-timers who hold the lonely outposts of trade;

a white man and a gentleman, who had befriended me because I was a white man too.

Chance—call it that. Courage and hate and hope and love and fear, weaving. . . . It had been April when I saw Vizcaya first, quarreled with Ramon Zuñiga, explored the mahogany in the valley, came to La Caoba and stumbled on that lake of asphalt in the hills. It was in May that I'd met Johnny Hecht in Honduras and heard that old Ben Murchison was dead. It was in June that I'd gone home to Milo, Indiana, sick and discouraged, and heard from Gus Hardy that there was a revolution in Vizcaya. It was September when the rebels seized Chunango in the desperate attempt to get money out of the Consolidated; and that same month, while I was riding toward Vizcaya from behind, American marines had come to Brennan's rescue and saved the oil wells for which he was responsible.

And Johnny Hecht, soldier of fortune, retreating with his bandit army into the jungle, had found all that was left of Rufo del Valle—so it seemed—a pitiful heap of bones and rotten rags and a ring bearing the Del Valle coat of arms. After five months of hoping against hope, Fernando del Valle knew his missing son was dead.

Call it coincidence—these knots in the web of human lives, self-centered, groping, able to see only what lies behind.

That's what makes helpless waiting hard to bear, the way time comes out of the blank and soundless future that may bring anything—or nothing. That's the hardest—nothing.

The aching of my shoulders woke me. When I started tugging at the rope again I couldn't even feel my chafed wrists until the pains of returning circulation had subsided. If I could only get my hands in front of me—over my head—anywhere for a change! Or if I only had a drink! Of course a man protected from the sun can live a long time without water; but

the sound of horses drinking—drinking from a great troughful of water, noisily, freely, wasting it—was maddening. Why didn't something happen? Why didn't somebody come?

You would have thought the hacienda was deserted.

That's how I heard the far-off sound of guns, faint and yet heavy, like the muffled thud of drums. Artillery. Was it the American gunboat at Chunango? What were they firing at? Or were the federals attacking Tolobaya? Surely they didn't need artillery for that! The rebels had had their final spree. They'd melt into the hills at the first gun. They were already disorganized, beaten. After that business at Chunango, the United States would never recognize them.

The drumming didn't last long. Now and then a horse stamped restlessly—or drank. A silver cloud flake drifted slowly across my iron-barred patch of sky. The smell of charcoal smoke came to me, and the faint smell of food; but it was near sundown when men rode into the corral. The clank of spurs and the noises of unsaddling. Voices came toward my jail. I got up eagerly. The door opened. A man with a shotgun pushed me back.

“Water!” I said. “Give me water!”

They didn't take the trouble to answer. They only came to shovel out more corn. I moved grimly toward the door.

“Get back or I shoot!”

“Shoot if you wish. I am going to get water.”

Feeble defiance, that. He didn't shoot, only put the shotgun muzzle against my chest and pushed. Odd how clumsy a man is with his hands tied behind him. I outweighed the fellow by thirty pounds, but I staggered and slipped on a rolling ear of corn and hit the floor with a jar that drove the breath out of me.

“Any man,” I said hoarsely, “deserves water.”

“What you deserve,” said the man with the shot-

gun, "you will get—to-morrow. The federals have returned to Tolobaya."

At least they didn't mean to let me die of thirst; they were going to deliver me to the law. To-morrow! Not so good, that word; yet the thought of a long night of waiting was hard to bear.

"Untie my hands. I give my word that I will not ——"

They finished shoveling out the corn. The door closed.

Day faded and a clear moon crept after the departed sun. The world outside was lovely with its soft light and its purple shadows, but inside the cornerib was pitch dark. I didn't know I slept. I thought I dreamed that moonlight was streaming through the open door, and I heaved myself up and struggled toward it to get out before I came awake.

"Wait!"

That voice could wake me. I croaked loudly, "Rita!"

"Quiet! The *corralero* sleeps just yonder."

Her hands tugged at my numb wrists. The knots were jammed; she cried, "Andrea! Bring a machete. Quick!" Another woman, a servant, came from the shed where saddles hung. It's odd how you can sense things when your nerves are all on edge. Andrea obeyed her mistress without a word, without a sound except the slither of the long blade out of its leather scabbard, but I knew how gladly she would have seen me hanged.

My arms were free at last. They felt wooden, curiously weak. I said huskily, "Thanks. One—one moment," and stumbled out to the water trough, almost pitched into it before my arms would prop me.

"Poor one! Have they not given you even water? Andrea, run! Bring something to eat. Hurry, but be careful!"

Of course I drank too fast; I was a little sick. It was a minute before I could go back, humbly, to where she waited by the stables.

“Hurry, catch your horse! He is here; the men brought him in. Take any saddle if you can not find your own. And go! Go, for ——”

“Rita,” I said, “why do you do this for me? Do you believe I killed your brother?”

The light was on her face; I saw her eyes, dark, dull, their fires burnt out, black shadows under them.

“What does it matter?” she said wearily. “No suffering of yours will give him life again. He was my brother, but I know he forced the quarrel on you. There is blood on your face. Are you hurt much? My father is not a savage; he is sick, half mad. I thought he would never sleep again. I have been locked in my room all day; Andrea could not get the key till now. Oh, hurry! Some one may come. You can ride out this gate. I will wait and bolt it after you.”

“Will they not blame you for my escape?”

“What does it matter? They blame me for everything already.”

They would, you know. It was because of her that Rufo had attacked me. And by dying—can you see this?—he had made his furious suspicion forever unanswerable. Even Don Fernando, now, believed what Rufo had believed. Rufo, defending his sister according to his code, had destroyed her in the eyes of all her world. She didn't mean to tell me that; being a woman and long overwrought, she talked without knowing that she talked.

“My father is not to blame. He is sick. . . . His only son—if you had seen those poor bones—scraped like carrion. . . . How can your blood pay for Rufo's? I am to blame—I, because I am a woman. Did I choose to be a woman? You will not understand; you are not a Latin. You Saxons trust your women. You are gener-

ous. My father told the Englishman I was unworthy, and he laughed. He does not believe ——”

I cried, “What Englishman?”

“The Señor Brennan. He of Chunango. He of the mismated eyes.”

And the reality of Vizcaya, that had stopped five months ago, jerked forward another notch. Five months ago Peter Brennan had known nothing of La Caoba except that Don Fernando was an offish old gentleman who refused to sell oil leases, and that Don Fernando’s daughter was a dashed pretty girl. Yet Don Fernando had told him his daughter was unworthy—and Brennan had laughed. Yes, Peter Brennan was a gentleman; he had known exactly the right thing to do. I envied him—that virile, handsome, easy-mannered man.

I said, “He is a gentleman.”

“Yes. But my father hates me because I —— Un- dutiful because I would not be married as my sisters are. Unnatural. And now I have brought shame and sorrow ——”

Maybe you’ve loved a woman. Maybe you’ve seen her broken by some blundering of yours, racked by the fine-nerved frailty that is her greatest strength, her power to feel, to suffer, to endure. Five months of it! Her face too white, too thin in the clear moonlight, her hair too heavy for her slender throat, her eyes black-shadowed and her voice dull with exhaustion. And yet I had no right to touch her hands—her slender hands that moved incessantly, tortured by nerves that trembled at the breaking point. Maybe you’ll understand the helpless rage that made my jawbones crack.

I said, “I have to see your father.”

“No! You shall not! I can endure no more. He is old and sick. He is mad, I tell you! Only go. This house has known enough of hate. For your mother, Howar’, for any one you love ——”

“For thee,” I said, “I can not go. I have come far to learn the truth. Hear me! I do not hate your father. I did not hate your brother. Even when his sword had wounded me I had no wish — It is true that I saw him afterward on the trail. I hid from him. After that—I was delirious. I do not know. Tell me, where was the—body found?”

“Near Chunango; in the jungle—mud.”

“Could the manner of his death be known?”

“The skull,” she said faintly, “was shattered by two bullets.”

Two bullets! Three empty shells in my gun, only one of which I could account for. One from three leaves two. . . . One bullet in the skull will drop a man instantly. He had been shot after he was down.

Stupidly, groping for something else to speak of, I said, “This Hecht—the soldier of fortune—what does he here?”

“He came to bring the ring, to tell my father where the—the bones — Oh, I can see them yet! Nothing of my brother but the ring—even the gold all blackened. . . . God knows why Hecht stays on. All day he sits there in the patio, staring with those pale eyes. . . . Why do you stand there talking? For God’s sake, go! Only go, and never —”

Her hands fought me and her voice rose sharply toward hysteria. Andrea, running, thrust food into my hands, caught at her mistress, begging her to be quiet; whirled on me, her black eyes blazing hate. What could I do? I said I’d go. I saddled old Ben Murchison’s horse and rode, heartsick and helpless, mocked by the peace of moonlight on eternal hills. Self-centered and afraid. Yes, even then I was concerned for my own skin. Going down the mountainside into the valley, suddenly my nerves jerked at the sound of hoofs below me on the trail.

Somebody was coming up. I whirled my horse and



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rode back to a place where he could slide down into the bushes; got down, crouching, gun in hand, my eyes glued on that bit of trail against the sky.

The sound of hoofs had stopped. Yet that other horseman had not turned back; in that still valley any clatter would have reached me. There was no sound at all. Only the moon, a dreaming loveliness; the stars, blue overhead, brightening and yellowing against the deeper night of the horizon; the night fog rolling out below you, muffling the world and cutting you off from men. Alone on a mountainside, waiting. Minute by minute. . . . A calm voice spoke behind me in the bushes.

“That you, Buck? I been right worried about you. Who you layin’ for? Must think he’s deaf. Don’t ever try to hide close to a horse. You can hold your own breath, maybe, but you can’t hold his.”

## CHAPTER XLII

A SCARED man is infinitely more dangerous than a brave one. If I could have seen him instantly, I might have shot him before I knew what I was doing. But his mild voice let down the tension of my nerves. I had to laugh—shakily, I won't deny.

"Uncle Ben! What are you doing here?"

"Huntin' you." He came out of the bushes afoot, calmly dropping his own gun into its holster. You can hardly carry a gun in your hip pocket in the saddle; he wore his gun belt now, old-timer fashion, the holster slung at hand-level on his thigh and tied down with a thong around his leg. That's practical. "I had a notion you'd head this way. You been to La Caoba? Find out anything?"

"Plenty," I said. "Let's go!"

"Go where? You can't show up in Tolobaya now. I hear Gabriel advertised you plenty. They're so scared of you now they're liable to shoot on sight."

"How's Gabriel? Hurt much?"

"Got a headache, but likely that's the licker. Must take a couple of gallons to get him drunk. Don't be too hard on him; he feels pretty sheepish already."

"Where is he?"

"I left him to look after the kid. She'll be all right, I reckon. The federals showed up to-day. You ought to been there," he said, grinning. "It was a turrible battle—on one side. The federals had a couple of field guns up on the hill, and they shelled the town half an hour before they found out the rebels had done took to the woods. We had to climb up and take a chance

on stoppin' a cannon ball to flag 'em down. Well, le's go get my horse, anyway. I mean the crow bait you left me in place of mine. What's that on your face? You look like you run into a door."

Briefly, trudging down the trail, I told him what had happened.

"Huh?" he said. "Johnny Hecht at La Caoba? What's he doin' there?"

"He's the one that found Rufo's body. Bones, I mean."

"He'll get 'em into a peck of trouble, harborin' a rebel."

"Fat lot he cares," I said bitterly. "With all the grief they've got already—if he had the decency of a snake he'd know they don't want anybody, no matter who he is."

"Well," said Uncle Ben, "Johnny's had a hard life, last fifteen or twenty years. Dog eat dog. A feller kind of forgets his company manners."

Making allowances. Maybe that was why Ben Murchison so seldom did a stupid thing; he always figured on the other fellow's point of view. Maybe that was why he was so easy to talk to. He always understood a good deal more than you could put into words.

We found his horse in the bushes, but instead of mounting he sat down on a ledge of rock and fumbled for a match.

"Buck," he said, "if it's any of my business, is that the same young lady you had the trouble with the boy about?"

"Yes."

"She have anything to do with you comin' back here?"

"Yes."

"Send for you?"

"No."

"How do you feel about her now?"

“Feel?” I said, and made a savage helpless gesture.

“Put it this way: You been home since then. You had five months to think it over, and you’ve seen her again. It ain’t but twenty-five or thirty miles to the border, and no telegraph north of Tolobaya. With any luck, you could make it. Would you be satisfied to get away?”

“Go on,” I said. “What’s on your mind?”

“Two-three things. You say the boy was shot twice—in the head. That’s a native trick. A white man’s got more sense. A white man shoots at a man’s middle, where he’s easier to hit. Next place, the way I get it, your right arm was out of commission at the time. You think you could hit a man twice in the head with just two shots—left-handed?”

“Not unless it was close range—in a clinch.”

“Yeah. And which arm did you hold him with while you was shootin’? The first shot would drop him. And you can’t make me believe you shot him while he was down. You ain’t that kind of a skunk. Next place, I’ve seen men dead a heap longer than five months, and I never saw a gold ring burn black. Not if it was good gold. And I judge it was, if it belonged to his grandpa. Rain and sun won’t —”

“Sulphur will,” I said, remembering high-school laboratory days. “And there’s plenty of sulphur in these hills. Haven’t you smelled the gas around the pitch springs—around the oil wells too?”

“Yeah,” said Ben Murchison. “Gas veins in the rock. But there ain’t none out there in the flats behind Chunango. That’s just river mud. And if he was close to Chunango all the time, why didn’t nobody notice the buzzards while they was huntin’ him?”

“Next place, how come Johnny Hecht to care whose bones they was? First time I ever heard of that little sucker gettin’ excited about a dead man more or less. What I know about him, he’d just stuck the ring in his pocket and gone on.”

“Maybe he used it to get Don Fernando to take him in.”

“What for? He’s licked and he knows it. He was licked the minute Uncle Sam decided to take a hand. All he’s got to wait for now is to get stood up against a wall. And he ain’t got no hankerin’ for that. I know him.

“Why didn’t he keep hittin’ for the border? Yeah,” he said thoughtfully, “Johnny’s the man we got to begin with. That is, if you want to play it out.”

“Come on,” I said, “before he gets away!”

He yawned, gazing off across the moonlit valley.

“Set down, Buck. Take it easy. It’s a long time till daylight. We can’t go bulgin’ in there in the middle of the night; not the way things are. You got plenty of chances to get shot without that. I wish you felt like makin’ for the border. But ——”

No, there was nothing great about him—this shabby, garrulous, matter-of-fact old man. Nothing romantic, either, in spite of the legends that have gathered on his name. No, it was something else; a simple thing, but hard to put a name to. He never got excited—call it that. Mild, easy-going. He could make anything seem commonplace. He steadied you like solid ground under your feet, eased you with something of his own invulnerable calm.

“I kind of hoped,” he said, “you’d find yourself a girl back home; one that remembered the same kind of things that you grew up with. But I don’t know, Buck. You been around these countries quite a while. You know the difference between native and white folks well as I do; and if you feel like ——”

“Uncle Ben,” I said, “Rita del Valle is no half-Indian squaw. She’s as white as I am. Whiter, for all I know. Her father was married in Spain, while he was in exile. She knows her blood for generations. Lord knows what mine is—Scotch-Irish, Danish-Dutch ——”

“Well,” he said dryly, “you’d pass for white, all right. You know your own mind and I ain’t tryin’ to talk you out of it. The older I get, the less I think of this idea about young fellers bein’ fools. Full of life, always wishin’ for somethin’, goin’ after somethin’, even if they don’t know what; but old ones get gray-headed just tryin’ to hold their own.

“That’s when a man gets old—when he quits reachin’ and just sets around rememberin’. Like me. . . . I had a girl once back in Alabama. She wanted to come down here with me—I was railroadin’ then. She had the nerve, but her papa talked her out of it. It was all foolishness to him, this wantin’ to see what the world was like out yonder. Well, say I was a fool. But I couldn’t help it. She said she’d wait for me, but she—never.

“Married a real nice feller, she did. Good, careful feller; he worked up to be the cashier in the bank. But I saw her three-four times after that, and I couldn’t help thinkin’ — I don’t believe she — Her old man ought to kept his mouth shut. Nobody knows it all. Tell young folks what they’re liable to run into, yes. That’s fair. But when it comes to makin’ up their minds for them, you’re bitin’ off more than any man can chew.

“Tell young folks to be careful, yes. But not too careful. No sense in bein’ scared to try, and thinkin’ all your life what if —”

The moon slid over the mountain rim behind us. The valley purpled, bottomless; the stars came close and friendly, and we talked. A man’s a groping creature when you come to think of it. Currents flow through him, threads in a pattern he can dimly see sometimes; yet he can name them only in terms of outward things. Infinity—that is the space behind the stars. Beauty and formless dreams, and nameless longing, and the wild aching call of minor harmonies—there are no words

for those; but a man can hear the slow night wind go whispering. A man can see the greatness, the beauty, the danger of God's tameless hills.

Of course I didn't say this to Ben Murchison. Not exactly. I only tried to tell him what Rita del Valle meant to me. Remembering the night I heard her singing in the patio alone, her voice the voice of something in her woman's heart—greater than pain, more lovely than her hands, older than the age-old, vibrant mystery in her eyes. Groping for words, trying to tell him how that one short hour was burned into my memory.

"I was tired," I said, "that night; too tired to think; so tired I hardly knew what I was doing. And yet I knew—better than I ever knew anything in all my life — There was always something about her. Just feeling her somewhere near—could rest me."

"A certain woman — Yeah," said old Ben Murchison.

"I'd been lost all day up yonder in the hills. Afoot —"

"How come? Ain't no mahogany up there."

"That was the day I told you about—the day my horse fell into the cañon. And like a fool I tried to find a short cut over the hills. Tramping in circles —"

"Many a tenderfoot," said Uncle Ben, "has scared himself to death that way. A man ain't never lost till he loses his head. Next time you don't know which way to go, sit down and take it easy till you get yourself together. Find water and then take your time."

And that was how I came to mention the lake of asphalt to him. Not because it was worth millions, but because it had given me water when my blood was thick with sun and weariness.

"Huh?" said Ben Murchison. "Asphalt lake? How big?"

"Eight hundred and twenty-six paces in circumference," I said; and had to grin, remembering how I knew.

But there was nothing funny in the memory of Don Fernando's fear. "There's irony for you," I said. "They let him keep this land because it was considered worthless; but that lake is worth a million if it's worth a cent. In those days nobody paid much attention to asphalt around here; there are several small springs of it in the valley. This was a long way back from civilization then. That suited him. All he wanted was to be left alone. He has lived in fear and trembling ever since the oil company opened up Chunango. He knows what'll happen if Zuñiga ever ——"

"Reckon there's two lakes like it in this country?"

"There are not three like it," I said, "in the world! Trinidad is bigger. Bermudez isn't a lake; it's a swamp. If this lake wasn't tucked away like it is —— You couldn't ship the asphalt out by land. But a few miles of aerial tram would drop it into boats offshore. In these days any engineer ——"

"Yeah," said Ben Murchison. "That's what Johnny said. But he never told me it belonged to anybody. He said it was on gover'nment land, clear down the other end of the country. I reckon he was scared I might suspicion you was mixed up in it if he mentioned Del Valle."

And that's when it dawned on me what Johnny Hecht, soldier of fortune, had been fighting for. I had wondered—idly, you know; I wasn't interested in Vizcayan politics. Neither was old Ben Murchison. He hadn't even asked Johnny Hecht who was behind him.

"Long as I wouldn't listen to a proposition," he said, "it wasn't any of my business. And I don't give a darn. Politics is one thing, and I promised to keep out of it. But the durned little runt lied to me. And they're tryin' to hang a murder on you. That's personal. Yeah," he said grimly, "Johnny's the man I want to see, if I have to chase him from here to Jericho.

"Le's get some sleep. To-morrow's another day."



## THE COUNTRY OF OLD MEN

He had waited for many to-morrows in his time. He settled himself calmly and went to sleep; but I had never learned the trick of saving energy. . . . Poor Don Fernando, who had known the use of quiet days, but had the misfortune to own a bit of earth that was worth millions. Politically helpless, subject to exile on any excuse—and politicians could always find excuses. . . . Who was behind Johnny Hecht? He was no trader, only a fighting man. . . . Disjointed thoughts and flitting memories merged into hectic dreams. Sudden sunlight woke me; but Ben Murchison snored gently on.

Why does the world seem sweet and innocent when a day is young? The sky was cool. The inland peaks were flushed with lovely tints. The melting mist unveiled the fresh dark green of the low-swinging valley, the tiny roofs of Tolobaya like a doll village clinging to the mountainside, the thin gray ribbon of the trail below it, curling and twisting down; and something moving there. You couldn't see it move exactly, but while you watched it disappeared and showed again lower down. Too tiny to be sinister—a bit of blue, and now and then a tiny twinkle in the sun.

“Cavalry,” said Ben Murchison. “Well, Buck, le's go!”

He had to make two efforts to throw the saddle on his horse's back. I had to look away, seeing how his crippled left arm would hamper him forever; but I knew better than to offer any help.

The cavalry had disappeared into the green. At this point the valley is not more than ten miles wide, but to the north it spreads and flattens into a bowl of forest rimmed by the upland mesa. Along this rim, as we climbed into the nick of the seaward hills, a plume of dust lifted against the sky.

## CHAPTER XLIII

THE shoulder of the mountain hid it from us. At the old stone aqueduct I washed the dried blood off my face, drank and gave Uncle Ben water in his hat. He rode in silence, gloomy as any elderly man is apt to be in early morning, but unhurried, his mild old face showing no sign of strain. You would have thought he was on some casual journey, his destination somewhere far off. And like any casual traveler he rode up to the gates of La Caoba, lifting a hand in greeting to the *portero* who squatted there.

“Good morning, friend. Can we get coffee here?”

And the *portero*, rising, took off his hat to this courteous, mild-eyed old stranger—odd how often the world looks back at you with the same face you show it, answers with the same voice in which you speak—saying, “Good morning, Excellencies. But surely! Travelers are always welcome here.”

That’s custom. Never was any peaceful stranger turned hungry from those gates. He’d never seen Ben Murchison, and it had been five months since I had entered by this way; he didn’t recognize me. Likely it didn’t occur to him that a man who had escaped from the corral at midnight would ride up to the front gates in the morning. Because we were white men, he directed us to the master’s house, saying, “The master is ill, but the household will attend you.”

And so I came again into that house where I was hated. In the dim entryway I kept my face averted and my hat pulled down while the porter unlocked the iron-barred inner door. But it was Ben Murchison he looked at, spoke to.

“Please have seats, señores. The master has not risen. I go to tell him you are here. Have you had coffee?”

He led us to the dining-room. Here was the hospitable table I remembered, the very chair I used to sit in. Outside the low cool sun threw pleasant shadows of old arches into the stone-floored colonnade. Yonder I used to sit, evenings, hearing a wise old man spin out long peaceful thoughts in words; Rufo beside me, wriggling with impatience, eager with young curiosity about the world; the stout and motherly Doña Constanza; Rita, a dim vital presence; Doña Trini, a proud, cold, bitter lady. . . . The house was silent now. Only hushed noises from the kitchen, the empty meaningless babble of the fountain in the patio. Grief lay heavy here.

A woman servant came in, silent and perfunctory, bringing coffee; the way to the kitchen was behind me, and when she came to my side I bent my head as if in thanks. Well, I was grateful. A heavy heart is none the better for an empty stomach. Coffee was good.

The sound of boot heels echoed in the corridor, sudden and loud. Ben Murchison shifted in his chair. The boyish figure of Johnny Hecht swung through the door—Johnny Hecht, soldier of fortune, making himself quite at home. He was inside before he saw that we were there. Naturally he was startled; and when Johnny Hecht was startled he acted first and investigated afterward. That’s prudent when you’ve collected eleven bullet holes and are superstitious about the twelfth.

His hands clutched at his guns; but Uncle Ben was speaking.

“Steady, Johnny! Don’t start nothin’ you can’t finish. Set down. I want to talk to you.”

Uncle Ben’s own gun already rested calmly on his knee. They knew each other, those two. Johnny Hecht

grinned, shrugged his shoulders and sat down. He didn't need to be told to keep his hands on the table.

"Well, General, this is quite a pleasure."

"Maybe," said Ben Murchison, and sat and looked at him.

You never would have spotted them for fighting men. This under-sized, pale-haired, pale-eyed, boyish-looking fellow, his oddly long fingers fidgeting a little; and this old man in decent, shabby black, like a worn-out storekeeper or something, his blue gaze thoughtful, giving no hint of the threat that rested on his knee.

"Where's that girl with the coffee?" demanded the little man, unable to keep still; and that showed you the difference between them.

"Never mind just now," said Uncle Ben. "Maybe you won't need any."

"What's on your mind?"

"Two-three things," said Uncle Ben. "How come you told me that asphalt was on gover'ment land?"

The little man's pale lashes made his eyes look lidless. They flicked involuntarily at me before he answered.

"What's the difference?"

"That's what I want to know. I never asked you to come to me with a proposition; but next time you do it, you tell me the truth. I don't trust no man that don't trust me." His mild old eyes were rather grieved than angry; but his voice hardened as he snapped out a question: "What's Buck got to do with it?"

"Huh?" said Johnny Hecht, and grinned—unflatteringly. "Our friend? Not a thing, General. If that's what's sticking in your craw—not a thing in the world. He can go take a running jump for all of me."

"Then how come you all of a sudden to find the man they say he killed—just before he showed up here again?"

"Put it this way," said Johnny Hecht humorously:

“How come he showed up here right after I found the man he killed?”

And that was the truth. These happenings were not a series of coincidences; only one. I know it now. The one uncalculated factor was the chance that brought me back. Call it chance—the way men grope and turn and cross each other, spinning out memories very different from their dreams.

You could tell he spoke the truth. Johnny Hecht had no conscience to speak of, but he had nerves; and a man who speaks the truth is relieved of any strain on his ingenuity. It seemed to satisfy Ben Murchison. He spoke in a more friendly tone.

“Just where did you find these bones, anyway?”

“Not half a mile from Chunango.”

“How far off the trail?”

“About a hundred yards.”

“Any springs close to it, or runnin’ water?”

“No. Why?”

“What was you doin’ there?”

“Getting off the trail. The doughboys made it pretty hot to travel on; they cut us off with a searchlight from the gunboat.”

“How could you see anything in the jungle at night?”

“Couldn’t. Hid out and did our traveling next day.”

“That when you found the bones?”

“Yeah.”

“How’d you know who it was?”

“Had a ring with the Del Valle coat of arms.”

“Who told you it was?”

“Huh?”

“Did you ever see a Del Valle coat of arms before?”

“Oh,” said Johnny Hecht, “some of my men knew it.”

“Must have been pretty black by this time.”

"Yeah," said Johnny Hecht. "Pretty hard to make out."

"Then you came and told Del Valle?"

"Yeah."

"What for?"

"That," said Johnny Hecht reasonably, "is my business. Nothing to do with you or your young friend. The first I knew he was in the country was when the old man tried to blow his head off yesterday morning. That's his hard luck," said Johnny Hecht, "not mine. He's got his nerve to walk in here and ask for it again."

"By the way, Johnny," said Ben Murchison, "I forgot to tell you. You better make tracks. We saw cavalry headin' this way."

"Huh?" said the little man sharply. "When?"

He was disturbed. Oddly, this seemed to disappoint Ben Murchison.

"This mornin'. Saw 'em ridin' down from Tolobaya."

"Oh," said Johnny Hecht, relaxing, "they'll be on their way to relieve the doughboys at Chunango. Thanks for your — Ah!"

Don Fernando, moving wearily, appeared in the door. Coming out of the sunlight, he didn't see us clearly; very likely he didn't even try. He bowed and said, "Your pardon, gentlemen, that I have been so slow in giving you welcome. I am not well. It is a sad house that you honor with your presence."

We had risen. Johnny Hecht grinned flippantly.

"I present my friend," he said, "the great General Benjamin Murchison. The other gentleman you know. He was our guest yesterday."

Then Don Fernando saw me. I guess that's why he didn't catch Uncle Ben's name. His thin hands twisted and his somber eyes seemed slowly to recede, staring at me. I doubt if he noticed Ben Murchison at all until he spoke—this steady, easy-going, gentle-voiced old man.

“Señor del Valle,” he said gravely, “we intrude, but not without necessity. This young man did not kill your son.”

Quietly, positively, as if it were a proved fact; as if he had all kinds of evidence behind it; so firmly that the bare assertion carried weight.

Don Fernando cried, “How do you know?”

“I will tell you,” said Ben Murchison, “presently. Let the *mesera* bring your coffee; afterward we will talk.”

“I have had my coffee. Speak!”

“I have not finished mine,” said Uncle Ben. “Have I your permission? I am older than you and feel the need.”

Habit is strong. In all his life Fernando del Valle had not failed in courtesy to a stranger in his house, and to a Latin of his class all hurry is ill-bred. Ben Murchison knew this and figured on it—I can see it now; but at the time I was dazed to find myself sitting down at the invitation of the man who had tried to blow my head off.

“Yes,” said Ben Murchison, “I am older than you. I recall you now; you are the young Fernando whom your Cousin Luis used to call El Sabio—the student, the philosopher.”

Don Fernando stared at him. “You knew Luis? Your name is ——”

“I am Benjamin Murchison, your servant.” He grinned. “Do you remember the day of outing at the painted cliff outside the capital? I remember how Luis laughed at you because you sat apart and read. He could not understand a man who could prefer his books to lovely ladies. A gallant youth, Luis.”

“You—you are Murchison—the soldier of fortune? He who ——”

“—— served your cousin while he lived. Yes.”

“And abandoned him to the firing squad!”

“No,” said Ben Murchison. “You should remember, Fernando. I saw you fight that day until we knew that he was dead. That was the end.”

“That was the beginning! You forget that there were others of us left to die—and others not so happy! Even my sister ——”

“I have heard,” said Uncle Ben; and gravely, with a forefinger on which the faded freckles stood like symbols of his faded years, he made the reverent gesture of the cross. He had no fixed religion so far as I ever knew, but some faith he must have had; plainer than words his eyes said, “Now she has peace.”

Queerly uncertain, Don Fernando was. Staring at him, trying, I guess, to fit this gentle, unassuming old fellow into the picture he'd been thirty years building in his mind—the picture of a bold, ambitious, swash-buckling adventurer.

Gently, Ben Murchison said, “How well I remember her as a girl! And yet I knew her very slightly. One night while we were besieging the capital we slipped into the city, Luis and I, to learn the disposition of the federal forces. But Luis ——”

He grinned, the look of reminiscence coming on him.

“A brave lover, Luis. When we had got into the city he led me by a long way into a street called Corones ——”

“Colones,” corrected Don Fernando.

“—— and left me abandoned on a corner while he made his adorations a long time under your sister's balcony. And when I scolded him he laughed and said he was not such a blockhead as to volunteer for such dangerous service without a reason. Then he presented me to your sister and I knew how good his reason was. And I remember ——”

Presently Don Fernando said, “And do you remember ——”

That's one of the crossroads in the trail I see now,



looking back—a place where the pattern merges into the memories of other men; a glimpse down the ways these two old men had come. Old, I mean, to me; not to each other. Their minds had slipped back thirty years, and one was a youth who loved his books and one was more mature, a foreigner whose name had lately flamed into renown. It was curious to see Don Fernando render the deference of youth to maturity.

They talked; and the *portero* came running from the patio.

“Master! The cavalry! The soldiers!”

They were already dismounting with jangling spurs and clanking sabers before the house, their lathered horses showing how fast they had come to get here before — But how could I have known?

While things are happening, a man can see only with his own eyes. I saw a lieutenant of cavalry come striding in; but it was only a squad he led; the main body we had seen was not with him.

Doña Constanza appeared from somewhere; she stopped short, crying out my name, flapping her dimpled hands in vague distress—for all the world like a motherly, frightened hen; but there was nothing funny about it at the time.

The lieutenant said loudly, “You are under arrest!”

I had no time to be arrested then; for Rita del Valle came flying across the patio, her gray eyes lit with amber fires, her hair loose on her shoulders, a sable, shining glory in the sun. I caught her hands and said, “Rita, remember! While I live I love you.”

Violent hands clutched me from behind. Not on the shoulder, where you’d expect the hand of the law to fall, but about the waist, catching me off balance so that I whirled and stumbled full into the arms of the charging lieutenant. And while he reeled, a gun exploded at my elbow and he fell.

Johnny Hecht, dodging from pillar to pillar and

firing as he ran, gained the rear passage toward the horse corral. The air was full of detonations now. A soldier clutched his stomach and pitched down into a flower bed. Others ducked down behind the fountain. A bullet whacked the wall beside the front entryway; another clanged on the iron grating and went whining out past the sweating, patient horses.

Then quiet fell, bewildering. The soldier in the flower bed, struggling up on one elbow, said plaintively, "I am hit," and fell back on his face into the dirt. His comrades edged out cautiously from behind the fountain. Nothing happened. They ran toward the rear passage and disappeared.

Uncle Ben asked me, "Can he get out through the corral?"

Still dazed, I said mechanically, "I did."

"Well, Johnny can get through a heap smaller hole than you can."

The soldiers came running back; dashed out through the entryway, mounted and dashed round the house toward the corral. Johnny Hecht had got away.

So we looked after the men who had been hit. The lieutenant was quite dead. The man in the flower bed wasn't, but he was so near it that we were afraid we'd kill him if we picked him up; we did what we could for him where he lay. Another, near the rear passage, had a bullet through the hip; we carried him to a bed, mechanically. There was still a sense of unreality about it.

"Buck," said Ben Murchison, "there's some she-nanigan about this. Johnny wasn't expectin' to be arrested."

But I didn't even wonder what he meant. I told him, "I was."

He grinned and said, "Yeah; I noticed."

There was a commotion at the front gates; but it was not the cavalry returning. Uncle Ben looking out

through the grating of the *cancel*, called to me, "Buck, this ain't your lucky day after all. Those boys didn't know you by sight; but here's one that does." Then he said, "Keep your shirt on, but make sure your gun's loose. These fellers ain't after no picnic. The *portero* is down."

He meant the man who kept the outer gates. Maybe he'd tried to stop those horsemen who came crowding in; nobody saw him then; they found him afterward with a fractured skull. I guess Ramon Zuñiga did that; it seems to have been a specialty of his—that trick of jerking a man against the saddle horn and whacking his head with his revolver, the way he'd done with Henry Dowling in the plaza at Tolobaya. He'd used the barrel on Dowling; this time he must have used the butt—the way that gateman's head was cracked.

It was Ramon Zuñiga whom Uncle Ben had recognized. I didn't; not at once; it had been five months since I had seen him. My eye didn't single him out from the other men who rode before a carriage, a glossy carriage such as you'd expect in city streets. There was only one man who used a carriage on those steep rough trails. He had to. That was the grim old paralytic Zuñiga, boss of Vizcaya, the Galician father of Ramon.

But the man who got out of it, threaded his way among the shifting horses, entered the *zaguan* and came to the inner door, was Peter Brennan of Chunango.

He took off his white pith helmet, a handsome, virile figure with his clean pink skin and short well-clipped mustache, and opened his mouth to speak to Don Fernando. He left it open, staring at me as if he saw a ghost—with his brown eye. Nowadays, thinking of Peter Brennan, I make a very definite distinction. His other eye, you may recall, was blue.

## CHAPTER XLIV

THEN he said "Oh!" in that crisp British drawl of his, making two syllables of it, and his blue eye twinkled in a smile at his own expense. "Hel-lo, Pressley! Fancy your bobbing up! How are you?"

Swiftly but not hastily he bowed to Doña Constanza, kissed Rita's hand—gracefully; it didn't seem at all effusive—nodded to Ben Murchison and shook hands with Don Fernando, saying, "I must talk with you quickly. If the ladies will permit us?" and took Don Fernando's arm and disappeared with him while I was still waiting to tell him how I was. Yes, quite a fellow, Brennan. He had poise.

And behind him, for the first time in thirty years a Zuñiga walked, insolent and unhindered, into the house of a Del Valle.

The porter knew him, right enough. All Vizcaya knew the figure of Ramon Zuñiga—tall for a Latin, his width of shoulder and slenderness of hip admirably set off by the short jacket and tight trousers of a horseman; he had the lithe grace of a bullfighter and the arrogance of a hawk. Oh, the porter knew who he was; but the peon does not live who dares to shut a door in a rich man's face without orders from his master.

Don Fernando had seen him coming; why had he let himself be led away like that? Afterward I knew. He was tired and sick, worn out with grief and hate; he didn't know what to do; he let Brennan guide him like a bewildered child. He trusted Brennan.

But not far enough.

Ben Murchison said mildly, "Good morning, Señor Zuñiga."

Zuñiga paid no attention to him—staring at me; his arrogant eyes narrowed and glowed. To this day I'm not sure he knew who Uncle Ben was. No doubt he'd seen him puttering around Tolobaya—this shabby, mild-eyed, unspectacular old man—and never once connected him with the bold, swashbuckling General Murchison of popular legend. He seemed to think me the more formidable of the two. Certainly I was the taller, younger, stronger; I was the one who had assaulted him—him, Ramon Zuñiga—pulled him off his horse and thrown him in the dirty plaza and stamped on his hand and disarmed him. He remembered that. Staring at me with those hot hawklike eyes of his, he rubbed his right hand with his left as if he still could feel my hobnails.

He said softly, "So we meet again!"

Now, looking back, I can think of any number of cool retorts I might have made. But I wasn't cool; that's the plain unromantic truth. I was hot and scared.

Ben Murchison murmured, "Keep your shirt on, Buck!"

Other men crowded in, two of them with their hands locked to make a chair; you've seen children do it; and the man they carried couldn't have weighed much more than a child. Shriveled so that his head seemed inhumanly large—he seemed all face, if you know what I mean. One man could easily have carried him. But Teofilo Zuñiga clung to the shreds of dignity with a determination that would have been pitiful in another man. He hated being carried. The instant he came through the door his yellow eyes rolled past Rita and her mother to the chairs beyond them, and he shouted, "Out of my way, female dogs!" His voice startled you—loud, with the hoarse masculine reverberance of the Basque or the Galician; very strange to hear out of that wasted frame.

Rita del Valle and her mother stood as if stunned.

Men moved to enforce the order. Doña Constanza shrank aside, but Rita turned on her heel and went away—unable to tolerate or prevent the thing that happened. The cripple bawled, “Come back here!” She went on as if she had heard nothing. He yelled, “Bring her!”

“One moment,” I begged, and hurried after her. “Rita, *por Dios!* We are too few to fight them. Give them no excuse to put their hands on you. I could not endure ——”

And I remember yet the white-faced look she gave me—proud, helpless and ashamed. Her brother dead, her father broken—and I, who claimed I loved her, was too practical to fight.

But she went back. It has the fantastic quality of a nightmare in my memory, that scene. Sweet sunlight slanting into the patio where a dead man and a dying sprawled among the flowers, the fountain murmuring with the soft monotony of peaceful days; these professional assassins of Zuñiga’s watching, grinning; and that senile crippled thing enthroned in Don Fernando’s favorite chair, the gracious sweep of its high woven back framing his waxen face—yellow, half dead, a face on which the flesh seemed horribly to have melted and run down. Only one side of it could move. Only the eyes seemed alive, jaundiced and poisonous with infirmity and eighty years of hate. His utter helplessness made him more terrible. He could command any violence, yet he was safe from violence himself.

His eyes looked Rita up and down, profaned her. Suddenly, rolling his eyes from her to me and back again, he whickered, like a spiteful, senile stallion.

“So this is your Yankee lover, eh, *Vizcaina?*”

Sneering; he didn’t mean merely Vizcayan; the Del Valles are of Biscay in Spain, from which Vizcaya takes its name—that proud highland province that always has looked down upon Galicia. That was how far the roots

of hate went back. The Zuñigas were Galician in a country where the word "Galician" is an epithet.

"Congratulations, meester! How do you do it?"

Stiff-lipped, trying to keep my shirt on, I echoed, "Do?"

"When I was young I could tame women too; but I never found their fathers so complacent. This Don del Valle ——"

That was an insult too; the title "don" is used with given names; to use it with a surname alone is to imply that a man was born nameless.

"—— this *Vizcaino* who is too good to speak the name of a Galician! Is it not true, meester? You have not heard him speak the name of Zuñiga? Yet every day and every night he knows the *gallego* is his master! Eh, meester? Is it not true?"

I kept my shirt on and my mouth shut. Where was Uncle Ben?

"You are clever, meester; you seem to have daddled him properly. You enjoyed his hospitality and his daughter ——"

That was when my shirt began to slip.

"—— killed the only son he ever had the virility to beget ——"

"Señor Zuñiga," I said hoarsely, "I make allowances for your age and your infirmity. But you ——"

"—— yet here I find you as his guest again! I confess I do not understand aristocrats; I am a mere *gallego*; does the Don del Valle ——"

The Latin mind, when it turns foul, begins where the Saxon mind leaves off. Maybe I tried to shut him up by force; I don't know; all I remember is the way Rita cried out at the thing he said, and a red storm of violence out of which I thudded backward against a pillar. Hands held me, faces grinned at me. But they didn't try to kill me, didn't even hurt me much; I wondered why.

Where was Ben Murchison?

Doña Constanza batted with futile dimpled hands at a man who held Rita; he grinned and tramped humorously on her slippered instep. Doña Constanza collapsed, clutching her foot and crying. They laughed. Well, maybe it was funny—from their point of view.

The face in the chair was grinning, grotesque and terrible.

“Does he seem strong, my boys? Good! Meester, they tell me you unhorsed my son Ramon. Of course it was a *chanza*, a mere fluke. Yet you may well be proud. You are the only man who ever has unhorsed him. He is *muy hombre*, very much a man—my son Ramon. Eh, meester? Is it not true? With all your beef you are not taller. Your limbs are thicker, but that is your clumsy Saxon bone. His bones are steel—the bone and sinew of a gentleman!”

Afterward I understood it. Their word for gentleman is *caballero*, horseman; to unhorse a man is to humiliate him, humble him. But there was more to it than that. With all his wealth and power, Teofilo Zuñiga could never make his world forget his humble birth. The poorest aristocrat could call him the *gallego* and smile behind his back. The invisible, unbreakable barrier of caste—to us it hardly seems a thing to fret about; for him it turned all his success to gall. Now, looking back, I firmly believe he hated every living soul—but one; his son Ramon, strong, handsome, arrogant, in whom he saw his ideals of a gentleman fulfilled.

“He shall prove to me that you took him unaware. I have blamed him; now he shall prove to me that he is your better!”

On that point he was crazy; there’s no doubt about it. And like a dutiful son, Ramon stepped up and slapped me across the face.

“So much a gentleman,” I wheezed, “that he has courage to strike a man whose arms are held!”



"You will fight him? You challenge him?"

Fantastic, eh? For the moment they forgot the practical errand on which they came. There was a stir of pleasurable anticipation. Eh, well! Better one man than a dozen. Better anything than helplessness. Past a certain point there's no use being scared.

"Is there one here who will act as your second?"

I looked for Ben Murchison and said "No." Dimly I hoped Uncle Ben had got away.

"Then Ramon shall have none. How will you fight him, son?"

Ramon cut his glowing eyes at his father as if they shared some hidden joke. "He fought the young Del Valle with rapiers."

I said, "I would prefer pistols."

"No doubt. But my father does not wish you killed too quickly. Let us see how much blood your Saxon beef contains." He turned, smiling, to pat Rita's frozen cheek and ask her, "Is there a *sala de armas* in this pigsty, pretty one?"

"And a place to bury peasants," said Rita del Valle.

They took up the cripple's chair. Peter Brennan came out of the room where he had disappeared with Don Fernando. Rita cried out to him, "Where is my father?"

"A sudden indisposition. He is lying down." Brennan looked at me and asked in English, "What's up?"

"I seem to be hooked for a duel. Have you seen the general?"

"No."

"Will you act as my second?"

"Sorry," said Brennan with a regretful smile.

Rita, looking from me to him, needed no English to guess what I asked. She cried, "You are a man of his own race, and you refuse?"

But she did Brennan an injustice. He was not a

## THE RED GODS CALL

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coward; he was merely practical. He had been under a great strain these past few months; his clean pink skin showed haggard worried lines; but his composure was unshaken. A resourceful fellow, Brennan. He had many strings to his bow, and one after another he had tried them all. Now, steadily, he twanged the last one that remained to him.

He walked out.

## CHAPTER XLV

WELL, there was nothing practical about Rita del Valle. She had seen me fence with Rufo; she knew I was a clumsy swordsman. She knew that Ramon Zuñiga, trained in the arts of a Latin gentleman, was a skilled fencer and had fought successful duels. She knew I had no reasonable chance; knew, too, that her own case would be worse if I were killed. True, there were a few men about the place, and others at the coffee *finca* on the seaward slope—laborers, humble fellows like the porter there. Even if they came in time, they wouldn't last long against Zuñiga's professionals.

Yet did she beg me not to fight? She did not. She walked beside me to the *sala de armas*, and when I begged her to go back, she touched my hand and stood a moment looking up at me. Without a word.

Words are no use sometimes. That moment is one of the clearest and most vivid in my memory, yet there is nothing I can say about it. Maybe the sense of life grows keener near the boundaries of the mystery that envelops life. Something like that; it's hard to put a name to. The man who lives too safely, moderately, practically, will never see pure courage in a woman's eyes.

Then she went back.

They placed Teofilo Zuñiga by a wide barred window where the light was good; ranged themselves on the rest benches like spectators at a cockfight—a bullfight, rather, with myself in the title rôle. Ramon peeled off his jacket, took a rapier from the rack and loosened his shoulders with swift easy lunges at a target on the wall,

testing his eye. I only stood heavily and waited. I couldn't limber up a skill I didn't have, and I had a good reason for not taking off my coat. My gun was under it.

He was a beautiful animal, I won't deny. Heavily, watching him, I knew the farce would last exactly as long as he wished. I couldn't hold him off as I had held Rufo off, with rigidly presented point. His wrist was as strong, his reach as long as mine. He would wear down my arm and get me as he pleased. Yet it was the only defense an unskilled man could use.

He said with mocking politeness, "Will you not take off your coat? You may grow warm before you grow cold."

"Thanks," I said stolidly. "I intend to finish with you before the sweat rises. I have no curiosity about Latin blood."

It isn't hard to bluff when there is nothing else you can do. You may as well. He knew it was a bluff; he grinned and tossed his rapier to the man who was to carry the farce of judging. This happened to be the spokesman of the guard who had halted Gabriel and me before Zuñiga's carriage on the mesa. He murmured humorously, "So my master was to pay you for my insolence, Señor High-and-Mighty?"

I said, "His son shall be the price."

They laughed. And Ramon Zuñiga said, "Have no hope that I shall run on your point and spit myself for you. I am not a boy."

It was a moment before the significance of that remark hit me. That was the joke! He knew; he knew the clumsy defense I had used against Rufo del Valle. Yet there had been no witnesses! And Rufo had vanished that night, and I had told no living soul but Uncle Ben!

I cried, "Did Rufo tell you that before you killed him?"

He only laughed and offered me first choice of swords. I moved sluggishly, uncertainly, thinking, "He knows! Who told him?" I saw his handsome eyes, glowing, mocking and assured. With a third rapier the judge held up our blades, said, "Guard, señores!" and slipped his own blade down.

Subconsciously, I guess, I knew it was no use to try to defend myself. Vaguely I had meant to taunt him, try to make him lunge before he could wear down my rigid arm. No use! He'd take his time; he meant to play with me, make a joke of me before he killed me. He could do it, too. Subconsciously I knew it; with my nerves, I mean. All my brain had to do with it was to remember—afterward.

No use to defend myself. My hand felt the blade free and my nerves cried "Now!" Not a single feint or parry; only the light, instant slither of steel on steel, a light jar of the pommel as the needle point glanced on bone. Queerly his eyeballs quivered and their luster dimmed. Queerly his blade was on my shoulder and my hand was at his chest. There was no shock to speak of; it seemed a long time before his poised left arm began to fall.

As if time had slowed into split seconds, lagging behind a swift unreasoning consciousness. That desperate unexpected lunge had run him through; but there was still no sound or motion in the room.

Slowly, it seemed, his loose rapier began to topple from my shoulder. There was a hoarse inhuman scream—not from Ramon; he never made a sound; but from his father. I think he was the first among us all to grasp the appalling truth. The loose rapier fell clattering on the floor. Then all at once Ramon fell toward me. My hand ripped my coat open and snatched for my gun as I leaped for the open door. His body struck my heels and tripped me. A sharp report burst in the room as I went down.

## THE RED GODS CALL

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Like an echo another answered from the door. Then into deafening silence whipped the voice of old Ben Murchison, not mild and leisurely as I was used to it, but ringing cold and hard. That tone was strange to me; his military days were long before my time. And his words, when I had time to think of them, were queerer still.

“Get out of my house!”

## CHAPTER XLVI

ROLLING to my feet I saw the men on the benches like a moving picture halted in midaction—half on their feet, one of them toppling forward, a motionless puff of smoke above his lifted hand. I saw their gun points begin to swing and spit; I never knew when I began to fire; the room was roaring like the inside of a monstrous drum. All my memory is of the way their hands moved—I must have been skipping like a flea on a hot stove. I must have fired as fast as I could pull the trigger; I felt the hammer clicking on empty shells as I flew out the door. Where was Uncle Ben?

The heavy door banged shut. I saw him fall against it and thought he was hit—until I saw the way he stopped, crouching low, a knee and shoulder braced against it. You know? Men who fire through a door will aim waist high or higher.

The latch was outside. I saw it lift and tried to hold it down.

“Get away from there!” snapped Uncle Ben, feeding cartridges from his belt into his gun. “Want to get shot? You run get the feller that’s holdin’ their horses. Don’t let him get away!”

The door was opening against his pressure, but I ran. You never stopped to argue with Ben Murchison—not when he spoke like that. His voice gave you the feeling that he knew what he was doing. He did, too. Kneeling there, forced backward inch by inch, he finished loading, lifted his gun to a height that would suggest a man standing, set the muzzle to the crack and fired.

The door went shut.

## THE RED GODS CALL

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Watching him as I ran, I almost banged into Don Fernando coming out a door with his shotgun; and I remember how I blamed him for being so slow to take a hand. Even a sick man, I thought, might have risen more quickly to such an emergency. It seemed a long time to me; this must have been about fifteen seconds after the racket started. And I wronged him, even so. He had been busy—I know now—and he had stayed on the job till he finished it, in case he might not live to come back to it. That's what I call a man.

Whirling out into the entryway, grabbing a bar of the iron grating to help me turn, I saw Rita coming and yelled to her, "Get back!" The man who held the horses wasn't holding them; he was coming in. I snapped my gun uselessly at him. That's one argument against the underarm holster; it carries no spare cartridges. I saw his arm go up—lucky for me that natives nearly always aim at a man's head—ducked and dived at him. The entryway boomed to a noise like a Big Bertha going off; or maybe that was my head hitting the cobblestones outside the door as we went down.

It knocked me cold. I remember sitting up, wondering vaguely what that fellow was doing in my lap. As a matter of fact he wasn't doing anything. He was just lying there.

"He was going to shoot you!" said Rita del Valle, panting.

She stood over us with my empty gun held grimly by the barrel. Horses danced all about the open space. Men rounded the corner of the house at a high run, and suddenly I remembered. It's a good thing I had nothing to shoot with, groggy as I was. They were Don Fernando's own men just coming from the corral.

I shoved Rita's victim out of my lap, shouted "Guard this man!" picked up his gun and galloped back into the patio.

Nothing was happening. Ben Murchison and Don



Fernando weren't even braced against the door; they only watched it, talking in low tones. And the men inside knew they were watching it. You could hear one of them groaning close against it now. That was the one who had been next to it when they had pushed it open.

Uncle Ben asked me, "How many'd you get?"

"Get?" I said groggily, my head still addled.

"Besides Ramon."

"Oh," I said. "I don't know. If any."

"I never saw you drop but one. And I missed," he said ruefully, "twice that I know of; maybe three. Gettin' old, that's what. I got excited. Come pretty near hittin' you, the way you bounced around. But I hit three of 'em pretty solid. Count one you got, and Ramon, and the feller that pushed the door, and another one maybe—can't be more'n five or six of 'em in any shape to fight. Did you catch the feller outside all right?"

"I caught him all right," I admitted, "and Rita took him off me. Don Fernando's men have got him."

"That's good. Don't want him bringin' another bunch in here on us. We got plenty on our hands already."

It seemed a conservative estimate.

Nothing held that door shut but a bronze latch, useful only to warn us if they tried to open it by stealth; any sudden impact from the inside would break it off.

The wood was marred, breast high, with little splintered places. That door was thick; their bullets didn't quite come through; but three or four in the same place, if they should think of it, would drill a loophole. And what if that squad of cavalry should give up the chase of Johnny Hecht—or catch him—and come back? They'd rescue Zuñiga, not us. They knew which side their bread was buttered on. Had they been near enough to hear the firing in that room?

There was nothing for it but to wait and see.

Don Fernando's men were edging into the patio, cautiously; all their lives they'd feared the name of Zuñiga. Of course they congregated exactly where they'd catch the first volley from the door if it burst open. Ben Murchison told them so, and they almost leaped out of their sandals in their stampede. You couldn't blame them; they were just laborers, not fighting men.

You could hear the hoarse voice of that pitiful, terrible old paralytic howling. Like a maniac. Well, maybe he was. He said he'd have me crucified. He said he'd have Don Fernando stripped naked and flogged and given to his dogs alive. And he kept talking to his son. As if he could hear, telling him how his death should be avenged. He said Rita and Doña Constanza should be —— Things no sane man could have thought of. You thought he didn't know what he was saying. But I've heard a few things about Teofilo Zuñiga since then.

I can't tell you how a thing like that gets on your nerves. To me, who had grown up in Milo, Indiana, it was grotesque, unreal. Yet in a general way I knew his power. For thirty years nobody had successfully opposed him; not since Ben Murchison himself had done it—for a minute.

No help could come to us; only to him.

It was Ben Murchison who stood against him now. Not I; I had no idea what to do. Not Don Fernando, master of the house. Curious how Don Fernando's eyes depended on him—this shabby, steady, unspectacular old stranger. Well, not quite a stranger; he remembered Don Fernando as a bookish youth, a cousin of the gallant Luis, King of Vizcaya once. And Don Fernando knew him as the bold, quick-witted soldier of fortune who had seized the moment for Luis on that night of flaming memory. A tragic memory, yes; but there was splendor in it too.

## THE COUNTRY OF OLD MEN

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That was when I had time to remember.

“Wha’d d’ye mean,” I said to Uncle Ben—“your house?”

He set his gun hand on the latch, putting the sense of touch on guard before his blue gaze came to me—mild, showing the strain a little, but faintly whimsical even then.

“That’s right, Buck. I bought it.”

## CHAPTER XLVII

IT ISN'T easy to be practical when your blood is drugged with violence. I heard what he said, but it didn't make sense. With his left hand, after a struggle because of his crippled shoulder, he reached his pocket and gave me a folded paper; and that didn't make sense either. Oh, it was legible enough, its Latin script a little shaky, but quite clear except toward the end; here the pen had jerked and the lines gone ragged; but you could read it at a glance. Maybe that was it—the words too few, too simple for the thing it said:

“I, Fernando Fernandez del Valle, of the hacienda of La Caoba, Department of Toloba, Republic of Vizcaya, this day and hour bargain, sell and convey to Benjamin Murchison, North American citizen ——”

“I never had time to tell him Murchison & Pressley,” said Uncle Ben. “The girl was just hoppin' up and down for fear Ramon would kill you before I got there.”

“—— all lands and properties of my estate known as La Caoba, for the following consideration: Fifty thousand dollars of the United States of North America, receipt of which is hereby acknowledged ——”

“I had him put in the price,” said Uncle Ben, “so we could prove it was bona-fide business and not just a shenanigan.”

“—— and a like sum to be paid me on this date of each year until ——”

That's where the lines began to jerk, the letters sharpening under pressure of a driving will.

“—— a total of five hundred thousand dollars shall have been paid.”

The signature, to the last loop and flourish with which a Latin envelops his legal signature, was clear and firm.

But it didn't make sense, that's all. Ben Murchison, who was no business man, who had lived five months on six hundred dollars, engaging to pay half a million—when a fifth as much had cost us six years of hardship and heartbreak in Peten. You know, he wasn't practical. He glanced at me and grinned.

“You been kickin' because I hadn't spent no money,” he said dryly. “I reckon that ought to keep you satisfied.”

“You ——” I said, and had to try again. “Is this—uh—legal?”

“I hope so. We're in an awful fix if it ain't.”

“And if it is?”

“Well, if it is,” said Uncle Ben, “we got a right to throw these fellers out. Did you notice if any of 'em was left-handed?”

“Huh?” I said. “Uh—left-handed?”

“Yeah. The way this door opens, they got to shoot left-handed, comin' out, or show their heads before they can get at us.” He was calmly figuring the possibilities. “Might as well give 'em a chance to make a break,” he said, “before we get wore out.”

Calmly he raised his voice.

“*Hola*, within! Do you hear me? Answer!”

They answered—no matter how. Calmly he continued:

“It is I, Benjamin Murchison, owner of this house, who speak.”

Even Zuñiga fell silent then. Crazy he may have been, but he had not come to power in politics by shutting his ears.

“I warned you to get out of it and you fired on me. I told you I would kill the first who showed himself; but now I say you may surrender. I shall open the door one foot. Come one at a time and show your hands first, empty.”

“He who does so,” howled Zuñiga, “shall die under the lash!”

And his voice broke into obscene squalling, cursing them because they did not rush the door. Uncle Ben whispered instructions to Don Fernando and me, crossed to the hinge side of the door and sat on the floor, set his feet in position and nodded to me. I slipped the latch and gave the heavy door a slight pull. There was the noise of Don Fernando’s men retreating.

Then a man catapulted into view, showing his hand first, but not empty; he swung his arm and fired the instant his eyes cleared the door. But Uncle Ben had jammed the door against him with his feet; I knocked his hand up, so that the bullet hit an arch of the colonnade; and Don Fernando’s poised shotgun fell earnestly on his skull. He collapsed so suddenly that he hung head down, his legs wedged in the door, before the falling plaster hit the floor.

I leaped to drag him out. Uncle Ben cried, “Get back there, Buck! You’re the ——”

Flame burned my wrist before his voice could catch me.

“—— durnedest fool I ever saw!”

“They’re right against the door,” I told him sheepishly.

“Where’d you think they’d be? Lookin’ out the window?”

But he had no time to be exasperated with me. A hand flicked out—a left hand; his gun flashed and a

revolver fell spinning before it could curl toward us. It fell between the unconscious man and the wall. A right hand snatched for it and he smashed that one too. No more hands appeared. Through the opening they commanded nothing but an empty colonnade and the door of the empty dining-room. You could hear them muttering in there, planning a rush, I thought; Zuñiga seemed to be giving them instructions.

After a long time, unexpectedly, a man called, "We surrender!"

"Look out for shenanigans," said Uncle Ben.

But there was no immediate sign of any. Obediently they pushed the man out of the door, came out one at a time with empty hands and submitted to search while Don Fernando's men, ferocious now, stood guard. It was a relief to be able to let down, I won't deny, even though we knew it was only for the moment. There was no safety for us in Vizcaya now.

Only three of them were entirely unhurt. Taking no chances, we sent one of them back to drag out the ones who couldn't walk—all but Ramon. We knew he was accounted for.

Ramon lay on his face in the center of the room, the slender blade protruding from his back. Zuñiga's chair had been turned squarely from it—in my innocence I thought it was to spare him the pain of seeing his son lie there dead. My humming blood had slowed, my nerves gone slack; dull pity hit me.

You know, danger's a drug, a tremendous stimulant and a powerful narcotic; a provision of Nature, I guess, to keep a man from realizing more than he can bear. It keys your nerves up, makes your heart beat strong—pity and fear shut off; a man's no more than any fighting animal. But afterward the reaction comes. It always comes. I saw Ramon Zuñiga lying there, so harmless now, and I forgot that he had confidently meant to kill me. I saw his stricken father, terribly

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old and terribly afflicted, huddled there, so shrunken that you had to step close to the chair before you could be sure that he was in it; the pallor of his awful face, in the full light of noon from the barred window, cruelly emphasized by the rich colors of his shawl—and I forgot that he would crucify me if he could.

Nothing romantic about it, I assure you. I heard his hollow voice; dully, I was aware that Uncle Ben was talking to him. I saw his eyes, fixed in a stare through iron bars at the blank chapel wall.

Why should we move him? What could he do? We left him there—just as he knew we would.



## CHAPTER XLVIII

NOTHING romantic about caring for men whose bodies have been cruelly hurt, disposing of bodies that never will be hurt again; but it's got to be done.

"Buck," said Ben Murchison, "I hate to leave you here with all this mess, but somebody's got to stay; and me and Fernando's got to get this deed recorded quick. To-morrow'll be too late."

"Look here," I said heavily; "how come? Are you crazy, or am I?"

"That ain't a fair question. Maybe we all are. But somebody's goin' to cash in on that lake of asphalt; did you forget that?"

Oh, I hadn't forgotten. Somewhere inside myself I was still practical, I won't deny. That great black crater starred with silver pools, black treasure welling up out of the earth, wasting forever down a long mountainside into the sea—it was still vivid in my memory; the vision of it and the roar of wild ambitious dreams. But I saw now its price in blood and hate. Rufo dead, Doña Trini dead, Ramon Zuñiga dead; this place of peaceful memories, a slaughterhouse; and the price only beginning to be paid. I said I wished the asphalt was in hell.

"Now that ain't reasonable," said Uncle Ben. "Have you done anything to be ashamed of? Sorry, yes; a feller's always sorry for the other feller after he's dead—or licked. Oh, I know how you feel. But a feller's got to take things as they come."

"And Zuñiga ain't licked yet; not by a long shot. We can't kill him and he knows it. Soon as he can get word out, we're done for."

“Why don’t we beat it for Chunango, then,” I said, “while the marines are there?”

“And leave Fernando and his folks to face the music?”

“They’ve got to get out too. Vizcaya’ll be too hot to hold them now; the marines are their only chance—the way I see it. At least they won’t let them be murdered.”

“Some sense to that,” he admitted. “But first place, this land’s all Fernando’s got; no ready money—not enough to shake a stick at; and he’s too old to learn a business now. And by to-morrow it will be confiscated. He’s give ’em the excuse by harborin’ a rebel. Don’t seem hardly right to quit on him when we’re his last chance.

“Next place, we can’t go off and leave Dowlin’s kid. All by herself in Tolobaya—you can imagine what’d become of her. Nobody to look after her but Gabriel, and like as not he’d leave her and come traipsin’ after us. You know how much sense he’s got. So I got to go to Tolobaya anyway, to get her.”

That shows you. I, Howard Pressley, hadn’t given a thought to Henry Dowling’s kid. Oh, she amused me, yes; and I liked her spunk—this ridiculous, brave, skinny little woman-child doing the best she knew. But I didn’t feel responsible for her—until Ben Murchison shamed me into remembering. That’s the plain truth. I was too busy feeling responsible for myself.

“Yeah,” he said, not noticing. “We’ve got our feet wet anyway; we might as well wade through. If we can get that deed recorded, then they can confiscate till they’re black in the face. They can’t take it away from Fernando if it ain’t his.”

“They can take it away from us.”

“How?” said Ben Murchison. “We’re American citizens; Uncle Sam’ll have somethin’ to say about that. We ain’t done a thing but put up a scrap with a gang of roughnecks that tried to murder us in our own house.”

There's irony for you—this old expatriate still clinging to the hocus-pocus of patriotism. Like every old-timer, many a time he'd grumbled bitterly at the timid half measures of the State Department at Washington—lawyers and politicians who had no idea how the Latin mind worked, but kept a canny eye on the votes at home. Low as I felt, I almost had to laugh. Sardonicly I asked him where he got his faith in Uncle Sam's protection, and he sighed.

"Well," he said, "come right down to it, I ain't never give him much chance to protect me; or reason for it, either. I ain't claimin' I got anything comin' to me. But it's our only chance."

"Look here," I said again; "how come? And how did you get a man like Don Fernando to make up his mind in such a hurry?"

"Wasn't so durn sudden. Seems Brennan's been workin' on him quite a while. He give me the idea."

"Brennan?"

"Yeah. Said the gover'ment was goin' to confiscate it, but if he sold it first, all they could confiscate would be the money—if they could catch it. You can hide money, but you can't hide land."

"Brennan?" I said. "He told me he hadn't seen you!"

"He never," said Uncle Ben. "He had his back to the door when I walked in, and he was talkin' at Fernando like a good feller. Tellin' him how much happier he'd be in Spain, away from the sad memories of his murdered son. But he never said how Fernando was goin' to get there. He never offered to get rid of Zuñiga."

"Oh!" I said. "Trying to buy it himself?"

"Yeah. And that wasn't none of my business; I only went in there to ask him what Zuñiga was up to, comin' here; you know, he come with him. I pretty near backed out before I realized that he was talkin' about

you murderin' Rufo. That made it my business; so I squinched down behind a big chair and listened to see what I could find out.

"Fernando saw me all right, but I motioned him not to let on. You could see Fernando didn't want to sell. You know, this place belonged to his folks in the old days, and he's lived here twenty years himself—ever since he got back from exile. These hills feel like home to him, and he don't give a darn for money. He's a—a kind of hermit."

"A philosopher," I said.

"Yeah. And I kind of know how he feels about it," said Ben Murchison wistfully. "I'd give four dollars if there was some place, anywhere on earth, that felt like that to me. I felt real sorry for him. It don't make so much difference to a young feller, but when a man gets old ——"

"You squatted down behind a chair," I said, "and listened?"

"Yeah. And you could see he was at the end of his string. So every time Brennan give him a chance to say he'd sell, I motioned to say no."

"And he did it?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Well," said Uncle Ben, "first place, I never did feel easy in my mind about a feller that looks at you first with one eye and then with the other. I kept smellin' a shenanigan, and I could see Fernando was just about wore out."

"I mean," I said, "why should he take your word against Brennan?"

"Maybe it's because both my eyes are the same color."

But there was more to it than that. Something you felt but couldn't put a name to. Ben Murchison was the same color all the way through.

“Yeah,” he said thoughtfully, “two-three shenanigans, come right down to it. Did you see Johnny’s face when they said he was under arrest? Like he’d been double-crossed. What made him think he wouldn’t get arrested? What was he hangin’ around here for, when he’d had three-four days to make his get-away?”

“And did you notice, Brennan never paid no attention to those dead soldiers when he walked in? Neither did Ramon or his papa. They wasn’t surprised. But Johnny was. You think it over. A dead rebel is just as good evidence as a live one, ain’t he? And safer.

“Next place, how come Brennan to know what Zuñiga aimed to do? If Zuñiga told him, then he was double-crossin’ Zuñiga. Yeah,” he said thoughtfully, “I’d like to talk to Johnny just once more. I bet I could get it out of him now.”

“You think Brennan ——”

“I don’t know,” said Uncle Ben. “I ain’t had much time to think about it. I could hear Zuñiga hectorin’ you out here, and I was scared you’d lose your temper and get killed. So I motioned Fernando to keel over like he was sick, to get rid of Brennan. Didn’t take much actin’; he felt sick. I tried to get him to come out here and tell Zuñiga to get out, but he said it wasn’t no use. Nothin’ was any use, the way he felt. He was licked.

“Then the girl come runnin’ in and said you was goin’ to fight a duel with Ramon. Beggin’ her papa to do somethin’; but he just sat there with his eyes like burnt holes in a blanket and says what can he do? So then I made up my mind. I said I’d buy the place myself, and run that gang out or break a leg tryin’. Brennan, he had a provisional deed all made out, ready to sign, only he offered ten thousand a year for fifty years, and Fernando ain’t goin’ to live that long. I said I’d give him fifty thousand a year for ten years, and let him live here whenever he could fix it with the

gover'ment. Brennan never seemed to think of that; he was after the asphalt and that was all his sympathy amounted to."

"Oh," I said, "that's how you fixed a price?"

"Yeah. I judge Brennan knew what he was doin'; he had a man down from the States to look it over, Fernando says. So I told the girl to get me paper and ink, and wrote Fernando a draft for fifty thousand to help him make up his mind."

"How'd he know it was good?"

"Well," said Uncle Ben dryly, "he knows you're my partner, and you look like money all right." Pointedly his mild eyes roved over my unbrushed hair, my blood-streaked forehead, my wrinkled clothes, my black unshaven jaw; he added, "As a rule, I mean!"

"You win," I said. "Go on."

"That's all. I told him to put it in the deed about him havin' the right to live here, but I reckon the racket drove it out of his mind. We'll tend to it in Tolobaya."

It seemed more likely that Don Fernando never wanted to see the place again. Peace? A hospital and a slaughterhouse and a jail. The cornerrib lockup crowded with men who wanted only a chance to cut our throats; the *sala de armas* abandoned to the paralytic and his son; and somewhere the noise of crowbars digging graves in rocky ground.

"With any luck," said Uncle Ben, "we ought to be back by sundown or soon after. Zuñiga's folks ain't liable to start worryin' about him before then. But if we don't show up by nine o'clock, you take the women and make for Chunango as fast as you can go. Tell the peons to scatter. It ain't goin' to be healthy tomorrow around here."

There was nothing especially for me to do; the hours dragged. Toward sundown Rita came out and sat beside me in the colonnade, pale, somber-eyed, staring out into the patio. Almost immediately the woman Andrea ap-

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peared from somewhere and planted herself grimly in the middle distance. We might all be murdered presently, but it should not be said that her mistress had held converse with a man alone—not if Andrea knew it.

Rita took this espionage as a matter of course. She was used to it, expected it; she only pitched her soft voice so that it might not reach Andrea's ears. Oh, not that we said anything worth listening to. Trying to take her mind off, I found myself talking about Milo—Milo, Indiana, a far-off, peaceful, one-horse Middle Western town.

## CHAPTER XLIX

A TOWN where windows had no iron bars, nor needed any; where the gardens were all outside the houses, and children played outdoors and needed no nurse to watch them; where security depended not on thick walls but on the safe and reasonable temper of the people; where nobody was afraid of anybody. Oddly, trying to make her see it, I saw it through the eyes of Gabriel Zalas—externally, you know. It's queer to look at your own home town externally. Gives you a queer new sense of the reality behind appearances; makes you see things you've always known but never thought of much.

A good town, Milo. Dull, yes—if safety's dull. Ridiculous, yes—the Rotary and the Kiwanis and the other civic clubs making a business of good-fellowship and trying to put good-fellowship into business; ridiculous, that is, if you only heard them talk and didn't watch them try.

"Is it," said Rita, hesitant—"is it true that American women have *centros*—clubs—like men, and meet to talk of things of wide importance?"

Likely I grinned, admitting it. I had my own ideas of the wide importance of women's clubs; have yet, for that matter. But presently I realized that she was trying to get at something.

"You call it," she said, "a *pueblecito*, a little town. But as you talk, it seems a city to me."

"It has some forty thousand people."

"Forty thousand!" said Rita del Valle.

"In size it is a city now. But in my father's life it was a village; even I can remember when it was a town. Yes, it is still a town. Its people are still neighbors."



“Neighbors,” she murmured, as if it were a word to conjure with.

“It grows, but does not change. I found my friends still living, thinking, acting in the same monotony of habit. It was I who had changed; I could not find my place again.”

“That is a sad thing,” said Rita; “to have known friends once, and lost them. In all my life I never had a friend.”

An expressive language, Spanish. She said *amiga*, woman friend. I had said *amigos*, man friends. All their relations are colored by the consciousness of sex.

“The fault is mine,” she went on wistfully. “There are families who dare be known as friends of Del Valle; who are, indeed, friends of my sisters. But even among my sisters I never had a place, even when we were little. Their dreams were all of lovers then; their talk now is of their husbands and their children and their—their friends who are said to have lovers. They are satisfied to be women. Even my Aunt Trini spent her poor life remembering her husband—because he was her husband. It was nothing to her that he achieved a kingdom, might have won greatness in the world if he had lived.

“Do you know what my sisters call me? La Loca—Crazy One. Because I think of things I do not understand. Because I dream ——”

Her voice trailed into hesitancy and silence. I had to ask, “What things?” Her eyes came to me, gray, somber, dark like the storm clouds on Vizcayan hills, and in their depths the little amber fires began to burn.

“How can I know? I am a woman! I see the sun go down beyond the ocean, but all my life is shut in walls. I hear my father speculate about the stars, but not to me; wisdom is not for women. I hear the thunder roll across the hills and see the blinding doors of heaven crack, and I feel—something—here; yet dare not even let the rain fall on my head. It would give

me a cold, and a woman with a cold in the head is not beautiful. That is a woman's duty—to be beautiful; to be desired; to live sheltered, shut in the prison of a woman's body, and to serve a man!"

And I remembered Rufo pacing in my room, thumping his proud young chest that was so full of wild young feelings, raging against the narrowness of his life.

"You are in truth," I said, "your brother's sister."

"I should have been my brother's brother! There was a time when he would talk with me, dream with me of the world beyond the world we knew. But he grew up, and knew I was a woman, and left me—shut in."

"Are we not all," I said, "shut in ourselves? Do we not all feel things we can not say?"

"A man can dare experience," said Rita del Valle. "You told my father how a vision called you out from your own town—a song ——"

Her eyes were tired, their fires burnt out, black shadows under them. She said, "When you first came ——"

Trying to tell me something, groping for unaccustomed words.

"Your eyes—your Saxon eyes—were kind. Blue, thoughtful, passionless, without desire. You looked at me as if—as if you listened. As if you wished to know what I —— As if I were not a woman. And yet you too ——"

"—— desire," I said. "Your lovely body and your nameless dreams. All that is you. And all that I might be if you —— I will not lie to you. I love you, and I am not different from other men."

Not making love to her; only telling her; only being honest with her. I didn't even try to touch her hands. It was no time for that. I only sat and looked at her and told the truth. The language helped; in Spanish you can say "thou" and so draw closer without a single gesture that might be perceptible to an Andrea watch-

ing thirty feet away. You can say things that would sound florid, overdrawn. What things? Eh, well! Maybe you've loved a woman and tried to tell the truth about the need that shakes you—more than desire; more than a thing you do; more, even, than a woman is.

Something beyond you. Great and sweet and wild and unattainable, kin to the feel of earth itself, and immortality. Something no man can put a name to, though a million men have tried. Rita del Valle, twenty years old and beautiful, had heard men try who had a gift for it—whose eyes could burn, whose words could flame with the poetic ardor of their Latin blood. I only told the truth, not ardently; not asking anything; I had no right—a foreigner and a stranger, charged with her brother's death. I saw her shrink from me, and didn't blame her. She was distressed, perplexed, that's all.

“Don Howar’—I do not—can not ——”

“No,” I admitted.

The sun went down, and Uncle Ben and Don Fernando did not come.

The men on guard at the front gate reported nothing new. A few curious ones lingered before the window of the *sala de armas*, staring with awe at the huddled shape of Teofilo Zuñiga behind those iron bars. It was quite safe to stare now; no bullets could come out; the paralytic was chained in a prison narrower than any ever made by man—the prison of his own impotent body. I drove them away and asked him if he wanted anything. He answered with hoarse implacable obscenity.

So I went on to the corral. The cornerib jail still held its prisoners; the men on guard, when I asked them, said they had given no trouble.

“Nothing has happened, Excellency. Only the man you sent with the message to Don Fernando—we gave him a fast horse as you commanded.”

## THE RED GODS CALL

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“Eh?” I said. “Message?”

“Si, señor. Did you not send Tomas Goya—El Tuerto, the one we call Cross-Eyes? One of us could have ridden faster; El Tuerto is no rider. He is a stupid fellow. He works at the coffee ——”

“Eh?” I said heavily. “When was this?”

“About an hour after Don Fernando left.”

And he'd been gone four hours—nearly five.

That was the one thing Zuñiga could do. He could still talk. He could still buy—or intimidate—the humble soul of a peon. Poor Tomas Goya! I hope he got his thirty pieces of silver.

Too late even to curse my own stupidity. I took the blame, but I tried to do it calmly, tried to avert a panic—you know how the very act of fleeing can let loose the insanity of fear. We dared not wait till nine o'clock. In Tolobaya, only two hours' ride away across the valley—if a man rode hard—there were men who would take any orders from Teofilo Zuñiga; even the police, humble fellows who knew their unofficial master. There had been time, too, for the message to have been relayed to his great central hacienda at the head of the valley. Already his own men might be coming down the seaward ridge.

## CHAPTER L

I REMEMBER poor, stout, motherly Doña Constanza stumbling blindly about in her riding habit, stunned—she'd had all afternoon to get it through her head that she must go, but she couldn't. She tried to tell her people to obey me, but her voice broke soundlessly. I had to get Rita to take her to her room and keep her there before she got them all into a panic. Nothing romantic about it, I assure you. Children crying, and women screaming at them, and men trying to carry everything they owned. Senseless, you know. They only needed blankets and food for a day or so, until the fury of Zuñiga's men should have passed.

They could take refuge with their kinsmen, the Indians of the Zorro Valley. I remember yet the dumb submissiveness that fell on them finally, plodding before us in the blue moonlight, straggling down out of that saddle of the hills, driven before us as they'd been driven by white men for four hundred years; helpless, caught in the swirl of currents beyond their comprehension.

That lake of asphalt was nothing to them but a great deal of pitch, more pitch than anybody needed for mending leaks—especially when you could easily get pitch from the little veins along the river. Wealth, power, politics—maybe they understood these things a thousand years ago. Not now.

We kept one of the overseers behind with us; I meant to plant him down there in the valley where the trails joined to hide and wait for Don Fernando and Ben Murchison—if they ever came—and tell them to follow us to Chunango.

But we never got so far. Out of those mist-filled depths there came a sudden muffled stuttering, for all the world like a distant motor car back-firing; but there are no automobiles in the Zorro Valley. Gunfire—how far away? It sounded as if it might be at the very junction of the trails. Ahead and below, where zigzag bits of the trail were visible, men and women and children melted like scared rabbits into the brush. I stopped, straining my eyes. And behind me, trying to turn on that steep narrow trail, Doña Constanza fell off her horse.

A sidesaddle's a silly thing, anyway, especially for the hills. Fortunately she fell backward, on the uphill side; and fortunately her pointed shoe slipped out of the stirrup. She wasn't hurt much. But it was a terrible job getting her back into the saddle.

The gunfire had stopped. But faint and clear above our horses' breathing came the sound of clattering hoofs below. I held my breath and watched where riders must first show in the moonlight against a patch of trail, far down. One—two—three! The first two might have been anybody, at that distance; but the third! Not many men could dwarf a horse like that!

My breath went in an echoing yell of relief: "Gabriel!"

His cheerful bellow rolled up to me: "Coming, *patron!*"

And after it, faint and clear by contrast—odd how Ben Murchison's voice could carry: "Go back, Buck! Turn around and keep goin' till we catch up with you! They're right behind us!"

Go where? There were only two trails out from La Caoba—this one into the valley and the one that came down the seaward ridge, where even now Zuñiga's men might be coming from the mesa.

Not that I stopped to argue with Ben Murchison. You can't go very fast with a rider like Doña Con-

stanza; they overhauled us before we reached the fork in the trail.

"Keep goin', Buck! Back by the hacienda, and down past the coffee *finca*, Fernando says. Hit for the beach!"

I knew the coffee *finca* on the seaward slope; but the beach? Three thousand feet down! Certainly the beach would lead straight to the river delta and Chunnango; but if it was possible to go that way, why did they use that roundabout trail into the valley and out through the cañon—almost twice as far?

"Is that one of Fernando's men with you? Tell him to gallop on ahead to the hacienda and load up with canteens and catch up with us. We're goin' to need water."

Up out of the valley rolled a new outbreak of stuttering echoes; but the moonlight showed the hillside empty behind us. I yelled back to Uncle Ben, "Who are they firing at now?"

"Johnny Hecht, I reckon."

"Johnny Hecht! Are they still chasing him?"

"No," said Uncle Ben, coming up, "they're chasin' us. Johnny's holdin' 'em back much as he can. . . . One thing to ease your mind, Buck. That skeleton Fernando buried wasn't Rufo's!"

"Huh?" I said. "How do you know?"

Don Fernando went by, spurring up beside his wife. I saw Ben Murchison's tired, mild old face—grinning!

"I told you I could get it out of Johnny now. Mad as a wet hen, Johnny is. He give that cavalry the slip all right, but he hid down there in the valley waitin' for me to come along; he knew I'd be hittin' back to Tolobaya sooner-later.

"He found that skeleton like he said, but not when he said. He run across it a month ago, hidin' by the trail to ambush some federal scouts. One sure thing, that ring wasn't on it!"

“Huh?” I said. “Then where did Johnny get it?”

“Brennan give it to him.”

“Huh?” I said. “Brennan?”

“Yeah. Brennan’s the one that sent him to La Caoba. Brennan’s the feller he’s been takin’ orders from all the time.”

“Brennan?” I said, unable to get hold of it all at once. “Then how come Johnny to be threatening to blow up Brennan’s oil wells?”

“The Consolidated Oil Company’s wells,” corrected Uncle Ben.

“Oh!” I said. “Brennan double-crossed his own company?”

“Yeah. He seems to be a double-crossin’ fool. He promised Johnny to give him plenty of time to get away before he slipped the word to Zuñiga that Johnny was hidin’ at La Caoba.”

“What—what for? Why did he send him to La Caoba?”

“So Zuñiga could have an excuse to confiscate it.”

“But didn’t you say Brennan was trying to buy it himself, before Zuñiga could get it confiscated?”

“He tried,” said Uncle Ben, “a good many things to get hold of that asphalt, the way I get it from Johnny and Fernando. First he tried to buy it, but Fernando wasn’t interested. Then he promoted a revolution to confiscate it himself, but Zuñiga—and Uncle Sam—had too much money for him. Then he tried to marry it—Fernando says. He come pretty near doin’ it, too. Fernando says he was willin’ for the girl to marry him—to—to make an honest woman out of her.

“If I was you,” he added, “I wouldn’t hold it against Fernando, Buck. He was pretty near crazy grievin’ about his boy. But the girl wouldn’t marry nobody; said he could starve her to death and she wouldn’t.”

“I know,” I said heavily.



“So then,” said Uncle Ben, “Brennan goes to Zuñiga and tells him what the asphalt’s worth, and makes him a proposition to give him half the profits for a concession if the gover’ment takes it over.”

“And Zuñiga threw in with him,” I said, “after he’d tried to upset the administration Zuñiga’s back-ing?”

“I reckon,” said Uncle Ben, “Zuñiga don’t know that yet. I reckon Zuñiga figured like we all did—that Brennan was the same as the company he works for. See?”

What I wanted to see, right then, was Peter Brennan. Even Doña Constanza, up ahead, was whacking her patient pony with her blunt lady’s spur. Hope is a mighty stimulant.

“Yeah,” said Ben Murchison; “slick feller, Brennan seems to be. Too slick. Blacked that ring up with sulphur himself, I reckon, to make it look like it had been layin’ out a long time. I reckon he forgot there wasn’t no sulphur out there where the skeleton was.”

“Maybe,” I said heavily, “there was sulphur—where Rufo’s body was.”

“Well,” said Uncle Ben, “if he knew where Rufo’s bones was, why did he tell Johnny to find him a skeleton?”

“Why did he need a skeleton at all?”

“He told Johnny it was to get Fernando to take him in, but maybe he hoped it would make Fernando sick enough to sell out and get away. Fernando says Brennan has been layin’ heavy on the sympathy gag all the time, sayin’ how sad the place must be to him now.

“Yeah,” said Uncle Ben, “I knew there was a she-nanigan about this thing. Not two-three of ’em; only one, all Brennan’s. But it’s Zuñiga we got to buck from here on out. See this?”

He patted something sticking out of his saddlebag.

“That’s the book our deed’s recorded in.”

“Huh?” I said, not getting it. “Where’d you get it?”

“Stole it,” said Uncle Ben. “We hadn’t no more than got through recordin’ it when Gachi—that’s Zuñiga’s storekeeper in Tolobaya—come gallopin’ up and says he wants to see it. I was a fool to brag to Zuñiga that I was goin’ to get that deed recorded before the sun went down. What I can’t figure is, how did the news get to Gachi?”

I told him, humbly; but he didn’t blame me.

“I ought to told you to look out for that,” he sighed. “I’m gettin’ old, that’s what. Can’t think of things like I used to.”

“What are you going to do with the book?”

“I’m goin’ to hang on to it till I find me some witnesses that can’t be scared. Wouldn’t take Gachi a minute to tear out the page, or spill ink on it, or change the date to day after to-morrow; and he could make that recorder swear his own name was Abraham Lincoln.”

Gabriel Zalas carried in his arms the child called Alice. I wondered why she didn’t ride behind one of the lighter men. I spoke to her humorously. She answered weakly, “Hello, old-timer.”

“Huh?” I said to Uncle Ben. “What’s the matter with her?”

“She’s half scalped,” he told me grimly, “that’s what.”

“Huh?” I said. “Why—how—who did it?”

“I did. . . . Buck, I’m so tired I don’t hardly trust my ears. Hear any more shootin’ now?”

“No.”

“I sure hope Johnny got away,” he sighed. “He’s a dirty little hound, but he come clean with me.”

Johnny Hecht, soldier of fortune! It would have been a fine romantic end for him—that queer, brave, cold-eyed little man who was a doctor once—if he had

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got his dozenth bullet hole that night, down there in the brooding jungle and the moonlit mist, fighting alone to hold the trail for us. But he didn't—I know now. The night I speak of was in late September, 1920; it was long afterward—in August, 1924, to be exact—that he was in New Orleans, framing a certain job for a too heavily taxed fruit company. And passing a peaceful crowd before a show window in Canal Street, Johnny stepped carelessly off the curb and let a flivver run him down.

## CHAPTER LI

SOLDIER of fortune! That's a funny phrase, anyway. Of course the palmy days were before my time, but I've met a few old-timers and I never saw one yet that cared a hang about a fortune.

Take old Ben Murchison. I remember the day we read of Johnny's death in the *Milo Morning Star*. *The Star* prints more Latin-American news than it used to; there are more people now in Milo who are interested; a good many of them are stockholders in Vizcayan Asphalt. Michael Nelson is—genial old Mike Nelson, Rotarian, millionaire boilermaker, leading citizen of Milo, Indiana, whose proudest memory is of the time he got drunk and wrecked a café in Mexico City with Billy Ames, a bonafide adventurer.

Mike had read of Johnny's unromantic finish, and that evening he strolled over from his own place in the Grove Hill addition to chew the rag with Uncle Ben.

"General," he said, "I see where one of your old-time buddies happened to hard luck in New Orleans."

"Johnny Hecht? Yeah," said Uncle Ben gloomily.

"Wasn't he the one that held the trail for you and Buck the night you made your get-away down in Vizcaya?"

"Yeah," said Ben Murchison, and let it go at that.

He didn't feel like talking, and that was a bad sign—for him. All that summer, I remember, he had been hinting that it wouldn't do any harm just to run down to the tropics—just for a month or two; just to look it over and see how it felt once more. Oh, I knew what ailed him, right enough! Milo had grown familiar to him; call it that. He knew every inch of Grove Hill

and the farms behind it. He knew what every man would answer when he said good morning. He had spun yarns for our romantic-minded neighbors until the colors of those pictures in his memory had dimmed—for him, if not for his listeners.

But the irony of Johnny's death had old Mike Nelson in a thoughtful mood. Soldiers of fortune, men who lived hard and took long chances when they could live better at a steady job. . . . What did they get out of it, anyway?

He asked Ben Murchison in so many words; not impertinently; they were good friends, those two. I know he asked him, because I've had occasion to remember—afterward. But at the moment Andy McAllister's balloon-tired roadster drove up in front of the house and Alice Dowling got out of it, laughing. Oddly I stared at her—this comely, modish child with her green eyes and her short ruddy hair, almost a woman grown.

Down on the boulevard the motor cars rolled by; on smooth green lawns whose every contour, every flower bed I knew, children were playing; across the river hung the familiar smoke of Milo's factories; at the curve of the tracks below the bridge, regularly every fifteen minutes, the peaceful wail of street-car wheels rose into the long Indiana twilight. It might have been any of a thousand summer days.

But the thought of Johnny Hecht had conjured up a place far off and different. . . . Blue moonlight in a lonely saddle of the hills, silence and distance that muffled a pursuing danger. The walls of La Caoba fading, beautiful, hiding their terrible prisoner and their human hate and pain. The deserted coffee *finca* on the seaward slope; southward the palisades, great organ shapes of stone, marking the place where treasure welled forever out of the depths of earth; the shimmering arch of the Pacific high under the setting moon; and far down, at the foot of a precipice too sheer for

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any horse, the dim white line you had to reach. Breakers, those were. The ocean sank as you toiled down to it—sank in its distances and pushed the horizon toward you, pushed in great ripples, towered and broke and thundered down into a sliding, reaching sheet of foam, blotting out a narrow strip of sand against the wall; sand that dragged cruelly at weary feet; black sand, volcanic sand, that never packs as our white northern beaches do.

Soldiers of fortune. . . .

“They get a lot of things to think about,” said Uncle Ben.

## CHAPTER LII

THINGS to remember. . . . Tired small creatures toiling between great precipice and greater sea, so small that even the shallow fringe of the returning tide could suck them down; clinging together, helping one another. In twenty years Doña Constanza had walked on nothing but level floors; her high-heeled shoes doubled the strain and her Latin pride doubled her shame when Gabriel had to carry her—pickaback, this stout elderly gentlewoman. Nothing funny about it; nothing romantic either; it's something else that makes it worth remembering. Her body was a heavy load, even for the mighty Gabriel, but not for one minute did she lean on her tired husband's courage. She walked till she dropped and then rode pickaback without heroics or excuse.

Sun blazing up behind the hills. The giant combers rolling closer, closer, bursting against the rocks and drenching you in the highest refuge you could reach. Sun beating down, caking the salt spray on your face, making the tall cliff shimmer like a furnace wall. Hanging on, dwarfed in the majesty and violence of earth.

Things to remember. . . . The frail skinny little body of Alice Dowling in my arms; the way her breath came in a ceaseless, shivering hiss of agony, salt burning in those raw red lacerations above her ears. The blessed baby look that teased her drawn face when she slept, exhausted.

This valiant woman-child doing the best she knew—this brave little Alice who had never heard of Wonderland. . . .

"I had a time persuadin' her to come," said Uncle

Ben. "I had to tell her it wasn't no use waitin' for her papa any longer. Dead, sure, or run off and left her. Shif'less runt! how he ever got a kid like her — Well, you can imagine. Made me feel so mean I pretty near bit Fernando's head off when I got down to the notary's house and found out he hadn't even got the deed sworn to. Just sittin' there tellin' the notary how maybe his boy was alive yet. . . .

"Oh, she never made no fuss about it. Just hangin' on to my hand and cryin' to herself. When we got down to the recorder's she just squatted down by the door with Gabriel, starin' across the plaza at the *meson* where she saw her papa drunk so many times, just whimperin' like a puppy that's been whipped and don't know why. I reckon I was pretty short with the recorder too. Course, he felt real important when he read about the five hundred thousand dollars. He kept congratulatin' Fernando and kowtowin' to me till I lost my temper and told him to shut up and get busy writin'.

"Took him half an hour, seem like, to get it in the book the way he wanted it. Then all of a sudden the kid runs in and says Gachi is comin'. She never had no use for Gachi, nor anybody that had anything to do with Zuñiga. So I stepped out to the door, and sure enough, there was Gachi and four-five other fellers makin' a bee line across the plaza. I told Gabriel and the kid to come inside and shut the door.

"Yeah," he said gloomily, "no two ways about it; I'm gettin' old and slow in the head. They come bang against the door and yells we better open it or they'll break it down.

"I says, 'We're busy. What do you want?'

"They says, 'We got business with Machain!'

"That's the recorder; he was scared half to death. Gachi was awful tame while the rebels was around, but he's on his high horse again now. He says he'll give us three seconds before he starts to shoot.



“Yeah, it sure looked like trouble; and there I had that kid. I asked Machain where his back door was, and he said there wasn’t any. You know how Tolobaya houses are, built up against the hill; the ground come right to the up-stairs windows behind. But the bars ain’t very close together; I thought maybe the kid could squeeze through.

“Machain, he wanted to open the door. But I knew what their business was; I put the key in my pocket and grabbed the book and run up-stairs and threw it out the window and told the kid, if she could get out, to hide it under her *rebozo* and sneak around to our horses.

“But she couldn’t. I called Gabriel and told him to spring those bars or bust a rib. He grabbed hold and heaved till he was black in the face, and they bent an inch or two. The kid could get through all but her head. I thought it was her hair that stuck. We could hear ’em bangin’ against the door, and Fernando yells up that the lock is comin’ off.

“So the kid says, ‘Push, old-timer! I’ll get it!’

“I pushed, Buck. I wanted her out of there. I never had no idea what I was doin’ to her. She never let out a cheep; just fell on all fours on top of the book and says, ‘I got it, General!’ and skedaddled around the corner. So I went down and unlocked the door and got ready to shoot my way out if I had to.

“And there wasn’t no trouble after all. Gachi just looks on the table where the book ought to be and sticks his gun in Machain’s ribs and says where is it, and Machain says I hid it up-stairs; and they went stormin’ up and I walked out.

“I reckon they didn’t hunt long. They had to take time to saddle their horses, but they was right behind us when we got down in the valley where Johnny was hidin’. I yelled to him to hold ’em back much as he could, and he said he would. I done it for him in Nicaragua once.”

In Nicaragua once. . . . I knew the yarn, one of the many that he told me first and last. Nothing especially funny about it while it was happening, I imagine; but it made quaint telling.

Eh, well! The tide went out, as all tides do if you can hang on long enough. I know how tired we were, sunburned and salt-burned and muscle-racked, forced still to toil through miles of sand that gave place to sucking marsh that fringed the river delta. The foul breath of the jungle, and mosquitos roaring; the heavy wash of water in the grass, like something alive and wicked, trying to drag us down. Rita del Valle needed both her hands to hold up her long riding habit; I helped her with an arm about her shoulders, lifting her almost bodily sometimes. Oh, yes, I know how miserable we were. Past a certain point you struggle just as dumb brutes do, dumbly, pitting your measured strength and courage against the vast immeasurable forces of eternity—the sun, the sea, the distances of earth and the unresting drag of its great mass on your own perishable bodies.

Yet those are not the things that I remember. Pictures remain, and they mean something to me. I see her white indomitable face against my shoulder, and I feel the toil of her soft slender body—this girl whom I could help because I was a stronger animal than she. I see us all, tired small creatures, struggling on. Like animals; different from animals only in one thing.

A man feels things, fears things, loves things not measured by his own short life. A man sees what he has not seen, remembering.

Lights! and the open beach about Chunango. The harsh ineffable music of a Yankee voice demanding, "Halt! Who goes?" Beautiful khaki-colored tents and lovely shapes in khaki uniforms, and the sweetest profanity I have ever heard—profanity in the language of the United States of North America. Their com-

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manding officer, a hard-faced, leather-necked young man who eyed us sternly until Ben Murchison introduced himself. Then he became suddenly a boy—this youngster in the fighting trade, greeting a man whose name had been a sort of legend to him.

McDonald, his name was, I remember; Captain McDonald, a witness who couldn't be scared. He said he'd get hunting leave any time we needed him. Officially, he frowned, listening and examining the stolen record of the Vizcayan Government; but personally he grinned and said he'd help convict us in any court.

And I remember Peter Brennan coming to his door, well groomed, immaculate, his blue eye smiling sympathetically at the three grim dragged figures who confronted him.

"Brennan," I said hoarsely, "where did you get that ring?"

"Where is my boy?" cried Don Fernando.

"I had a talk with Johnny Hecht," said old Ben Murchison.

## CHAPTER LIII

Not a muscle of Brennan's handsome face had changed. Only his eyes. You know? Nearly every man has one eye stronger than the other, but ordinarily you don't notice it. Ordinarily, when a man meets your eyes, his eyes don't really focus at all. It's when he's got to see into your mind that his weaker one shifts, converges sharply on the one of yours that corresponds to his strong one.

Brennan's brown eye stared, and absently he fumbled for cigarettes.

"Keep your hands still," said Uncle Ben. "I ain't goin' to hurt you, not if you come clean with me, and do it quick. I'm tired. I ain't got a word to say about you promotin' a revolution; that's up to the government of Vizcaya. I don't give a darn about you makin' your own company pay to keep your own rebels from burnin' your own wells; that's up to the Consolidated. But when you try to hang a murder on my partner, that's personal.

"Brennan, what do you know about Rufo del Valle?"

"Not a great deal," said Brennan. "He came here the night he fought with Pressley. A bit frantic, you know. He seemed to feel that Pressley's technique was unorthodox, not to say unethical. And the old gentleman had been harsh with him, I gathered. Altogether ——"

"Where did he go from here?"

"To New York, I believe. At least he begged a chance to work his passage on one of our tankers that happened to be sailing."

“What for?”

“To see the world, I gathered. Seemed rather fed up on parental discipline.”

“Turn around,” said Uncle Ben. “Keep your hands away from your pockets. Go inside. I got to sit down.”

I felt like sitting down myself, I won't deny. Quite a fellow, Brennan! He spoke so quietly, courteously, frankly, that it seemed almost reasonable—what he had done.

“How much did you give him for the ring?”

“Fifty dollars.”

“Too much,” said Uncle Ben. “What for?”

“Little enough, on which to see the world.”

“You made him promise not to write?”

“Naturally.”

“Yeah,” said Ben Murchison grimly. “Why did you want his papa to think he was dead?”

“I don't mind telling you,” said Brennan, “now. I hoped it might weaken his sentimental attachment for La Caoba. I did my best to get Pressley out of the way—you'll grant me that. It's not my fault he came back. I'm truly sorry for the old gentleman's mental suffering. But ——” He shrugged his shoulders.

“But,” said Uncle Ben, speaking softly, “you can bear up all right, long as you get the asphalt?”

“Put it that way,” admitted Brennan, smiling.

“How do you figure on squarin' yourself with Zuñiga when he finds out that it was you that promoted the revolution?”

“I fancy his profits from the asphalt may soothe his righteous wrath. Anything else you'd like to know?”

“One thing,” said Uncle Ben gently, “maybe you'd like to know. I done the trick you tried to do. I bought La Caoba yesterday, and I'm just as good an American citizen as you are British.”

"Eh?" said Brennan, still-faced.

"Yeah," said Ben Murchison. "And recorded the deed. And turned the record over to Captain McDonald so nothin' would happen to it. You and Mr. Zuñiga can go ahead and confiscate—and see what it gets you."

"Oh!" said Brennan, making two slow syllables of it.

I'd like to think my nerve would hold like that if I were on the losing end of such a gamble. He looked suddenly tired—terribly tired; that was all.

"Brennan," said Uncle Ben, "how ever come you to be fool enough to double-cross a man like Johnny Hecht?"

"Not guilty. That was Zuñiga. He was afraid of Hecht."

"You," said Ben Murchison, "better be—from now on."

"Thanks," sighed Brennan. "I fancy you're right."

"How come you ever to hook up with a feller like Zuñiga?"

"You'll admit I tried everything else."

"Except," said Uncle Ben mildly, "mindin' your own business and playin' square with the company that pays you wages."

Just for a minute, then, the shell of Brennan's iron composure cracked. Now, looking back, I partly understand. Chunango is not a port you touch on pleasure tours. It is for practical purposes only; maybe you'll think of it the next time you buy gasoline at some convenient filling station. A lonely place; jungle behind it, empty sea in front, these black mushrooms of oil tanks squatting over it like monsters of a mechanical age with men for slaves; a place of sun and sand, of year-long heat and monotony that can warp the inner fiber of a man.

Brennan's fine lips writhed and his voice began to shake.

“The Consolidated? Oh, yes. Wages I’ve had. For the millions I’ve earned them. For the best years of my life. Wages! And once a year some fat mikado comes—one of your Yankee captains of industry, if you like—and does me the honor to be amazed that I’ve not forgotten how to live like a white man—and takes the next boat out! Let them try it on! Let them ——”

Once on a time, no doubt, Brennan had felt the glamour of the tropics too.

Yet if you put Chunango on the stage it would do admirably for a comic-opera setting—all but the oil tanks, too dominant, too practical. The tents of the marines were there, and the feathered jungle fringe behind thatched huts and sun-dried wooden houses, and the flat black beach and the dreaming loveliness of the moon; yes, even the vibrant throb of a guitar somewhere, and native women singing. On the stage you wouldn’t feel the heavy, stifling heat, the slack-nerved weariness, the dull slow pounding of the surf that merges with the tomtom beat of pulses in your brain.

Nothing romantic about it, I assure you. Too tired to rest, too hot to sleep. A sergeant of marines, lounging out the door of the bar of the long wooden bunk house they call hotel, mopped his brow and asked me if it was hot enough for me. Gabriel, squatting placidly by the wall, waited for me to tell him what to do next. I envied him.

He rumbled tentatively, “Senor?”

“Speak,” I said listlessly.

“Do we return now to the United States?”

Dully I said we did. Dully I thought of Milo, Indiana—wondering if I was wanted for manslaughter there; wondering if that fellow with the fractured skull in Woodrow’s place had died.

“I am glad,” said Gabriel. This huge humble fellow—he liked the memory of Milo because it gave him food for wonder; already he forgot how lonely he had been there. Fool!

Rita came out into the moonlight. The sergeant said gallantly, "Ah, señorita!" She put her hand on my arm; he grinned, "Excuse me, buddy!" and philosophically lighted a cigarette.

"Don Howar', you—you will help us find my brother?"

Dully I said I would. I knew her thought; to her the northern world was vast, a trackless wilderness of strangers. But to me —

"To-night," she said, "my father is not sad; he can think only that my brother lives. But to-morrow —"

To-morrow the miracle of his son's life would be commonplace again; and Don Fernando was too old to be a wanderer. Eh, well! Maybe, at least, Milo would be kind to old Ben Murchison. It wasn't much he wanted. He didn't care a hang about a fortune; but he'd give four dollars if there was some place, anywhere on earth, that felt like home to him. Some place to rest.

Men toiling up and down the earth, their eyes on the horizon that recedes forever, on the to-morrow that lies always just inside the blank and soundless future. Chasing illusions; like squirrels in a cage, going nowhere. And all it came to in the end was—rest. Too tired to run, yet dreaming still of something that is not a cage. Too tired to reach, yet tortured still by nameless needs. Able to see the distance behind the stars. Able to hear the aching call of minor harmonies, unfinished and unsatisfied. Able to feel the need of slender vital hands, the hidden glory of a woman's eyes, the loved dependence of her body and the strength of her deep woman's soul. Shut in the prisons of separate selves, able to speak only with groping words.

"For him," said Rita—"for my father, for my mother, I am sorry. They will be lost, unhappy till we find a haven somewhere. But for me —"

Her face was lifted to the far horizon and the distant moon; I saw her eyes, dark, almost black—gray like the



storm clouds on Vizcayan hills, shadowed with weariness. I prompted her: "For thee?" Her soft lips parted and she drew a long slow breath before her eyes came to me, smiling; in their depths the fires of courage burned.

"Come what may," she said, "I shall be free a little from the walls I know! And afterward I shall have something to remember. . . . Howar' ——"

Her soft voice trailed into hesitancy and silence; but for me there was no sense of interruption. I knew what she was saying and could answer even as she spoke. A man does not live always shut within himself, need not depend on words alone. There was a thing that she had learned that day, a simple thing, yet hard to put a name to. Toiling shoulder to shoulder—her body had been precious to me and my bulk could help her when her own strength failed.

"I am glad, glad to be a woman!" said Rita del Valle.

Oh, not aloud. A guitar was throbbing somewhere in the shadows, metal strings vibrant on a wooden box, and untutored women singing—crooning, barbaric harmonies and a throbbing, aching rhythm; kin to the mighty tom-tom of the surf and to the stars. I knew her mouth was sweet, but I didn't know how I knew until a plaintive drawl recalled me to reality.

"Have a heart, buddy!" said the sergeant of marines.

## CHAPTER LIV

EH, WELL! What is reality? Take Rufo del Valle. It must have been a dull week when we landed in New York. The Sunday feature writers leaped on this latest resurrection of General Ben Murchison, the indestructible soldier of fortune. They enlarged on the superstition of his charmed life. They fished his forgotten career out of the newspaper morgue. They recorded his discovery of the biggest lake of asphalt in the world—it isn't—and his delivery of a Vizcayan princess; it made no difference to them that it was Rita's uncle, not her father, who had been king once for about a minute; they even credited her with descent from the Incas, lords of Peru. Not that she cared; those lurid yarns brought Rufo himself to our hotel—a timid, shabby, down-at-the-heel Rufo, a penitent and homesick Rufo, who had not found New York the gorgeous city of his dreams.

He had, in fact, nearly starved before he'd found an unskilled job, picking tobacco stems in a Cuban cigar factory on Second Avenue. New York had stunned him, crushed him. Even working his passage on the tanker had not proved a lark exactly.

And yet —

This was five years ago. You should hear Rufo talk about it now—this handsome young Vizcayan grandee, lording it over his young peers because he knows that roaring northern city, fabulous to them. A brave adventure! And he has built a picture in his mind—how his tall Yankee brother-in-law swept through Vizcaya like a scourge of God, freeing the land from the grip of the Galician. With appropriate gestures he will tell you

how marvelously I fenced with Ramon Zuñiga and ran him through and broke the heart of that terrible old paralytic, his father, so that he died.

It makes no difference to Rufo that he himself, fencing with me, can touch me almost as he pleases. It makes no difference that Teofilo Zuniga was long past the age when most men die anyway. That's Rufo's story and he sticks to it.

Take Milo, Indiana. I remember when I called up Harry Willis, county prosecutor, by long-distance from New York. I had to know. You can imagine it was an anxious moment for me; but Harry's voice broke into ribald laughter.

"Hello," it cried, "you ring-tailed fire eater! Is this straight goods about you in the paper? Are you — Huh? Oh, that fellow you cracked in Woodrow's place? No, come on home and try again; I've got him on my hands now for a hijacking job. Are you going to give us a look at your princess? Are you going to sell stock to —"

I had disgraced myself in Milo by getting mixed up in a fracas with gamblers and hijackers west of the railroad; yet now, because I'd been mixed up in greater violence, for a greater stake, farther from home, that minor scandal had become merely funny. The hair of the dog, they say —

Take old Ben Murchison. He liked Milo at once; you know, he liked to talk, and Milo liked to listen to those quaint romantic yarns of his adventurous career. Gus Hardy got him to address the Rotary Club on the—you know—romance of the tropics; but mostly he talked about Milo. Not the reality of it, the every-day business of making Milo a bigger and better city; they knew all that. No, he showed them the distant picture. How it looked to him, who had no roots fixed anywhere. What it had meant to me—a friendly town, a peaceful, homelike town—distant in time and space.

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The Rotary Club stood up and yelled, and told me fervently that he was a wonderful old man. Well, it was true. He was.

And what he said was true. A good town, Milo; it grows. For nearly four years he was content to potter around the Grove Hill addition, chewing the rag impartially with buyers and builders and workmen; he liked them all. It was not till 1924, the summer we read of Johnny Hecht's inglorious end, that he began to get tired of Milo; familiar with it, so that it offered no new pictures to his mind. He began to hint about going with me on my semiannual trip to Vizcaya—you know, just to see how the tropics felt once more.

But I discouraged that. For one thing, he was getting feeble, though he wouldn't admit it. His tough old body had traveled hard trails too long. And for another, I knew he'd be disappointed.

Vizcaya isn't the place it used to be. Oh, the hills are there; changeless, immense and calm and beautiful. But La Caoba is no longer distant from the world. There's quite a road to Tolobaya and Chunango now, and a sawmill working in the valley—not ours—and quite a village by the asphalt lake, and the steel towers of the tram down to the beach. The mail comes every other day. Peter Brennan is forgotten in Chunango and old Zuñiga is dead.

He made trouble, by the way, with practically his last breath. That was in 1921. He didn't try to break our purchase, but he got President Alba to issue the decree of confiscation with the idea of seizing the annual payments. He could have done it, too. But Zuñiga died, and Alba's a weak-kneed old scoundrel. I hope he lives a long time. The next man may not be so easy to get on with.

Eh, well! That's something to think about.

But there's nothing down there now but just a job. I knew how tame it would seem to Uncle Ben; so I

worked a shenanigan to dissuade him. I reminded him that Rita and the youngster were going with me, to visit the old folks, and asked him who was going to look after Alice Dowling while he was gone.

"Le's take her with us," said he.

"All right," I said, "if she wants to go."

So he called her and asked her. Unfairly, I caught her eye and shook my head—needlessly too. She didn't want him to go; and what she wanted of Ben Murchison, she got.

Solemnly, winking aside at me, she said she'd go.

"That is," she said, "if you want to. But I've got dates for the first three Town Club dances."

"All," I said with a dark glance at Uncle Ben, "with Andy?"

"No, only the first and third."

"Look here, young 'un," said the stern Murchison, "you ain't big enough to have a steady beau yet. You break one of them dates and go with some other feller. Hear me?"

"Yes, sir," said Alice meekly. "Then you'll stay home?"

"I dassent turn my back," grumbled the guardian of proprieties.

He never gave a hang about the money he got out of Vizcayan Asphalt, except that it could make a Wonderland for Alice Dowling.

It was the following spring—quite peacefully, so far as anybody knows—that General Ben Murchison, soldier of fortune, came to the last horizon men can know—alone, as he had traveled most of the way. He was sitting on the porch of our house in Grove Hill, and children were playing on the lawns below. I thought he was asleep until I touched him.

Ben Murchison wasn't there; only the worn-out body of him—this tired old warrior in his comfortably shabby black civilian clothes, his chair tipped placidly against

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the wall, his freckled hands placidly clasped across his middle. Just so he used to sit, remembering, conjuring up long trains of pictures for me. Where were those pictures now? What—what had become of all he did and was?

Well . . . Part of it I remember; it has become a part of me. No man can live one life alone. His life was woven into many lives—turned them a little in the pattern, or was turned. More than a little, mostly; there was a deep calm force in him you never realized—till afterward. You underestimated him because he seemed so mild, because he talked so easily. Why was he mild? Because he wanted nothing for himself. Why was he talkative? Because he wanted you to see the pictured trails he knew—deep colors and bold rugged lines, the record of a fearless seeking.

What vision did he follow? Who am I that I should even dare to guess? I, who was born practical; whose first instinctive thought is, "What am I going to get out of this?"

But I've learned a thing from him. I've learned to sit aside sometimes, as I do now, remembering. What is reality? Days and events go by in swift procession, like random beads along the string of time, not one of them ever to be seen before it comes; not one of them ever to be held as it goes by; but sometimes, looking back, a man can see a pattern spreading. The panorama widens, looking back. Maybe that's it; maybe it's life that moves, toiling, groping, questing into the hidden future—into reality that does not change. Travelers all, exploring, adventuring—into that timeless country where the old men live, whose name is memory.

THE END









