



# BLUE BOOK



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# Blood Brothers

A COMPLETE NOVEL



Decorations by E. H. Kuhlhoff

THE road along Alacrán Island reeked abominably of swamps and mud and mangroves, of fish-gurry and old turtleshell. A marvelous place for *tómagofs* and other utterly deadly snakes, too, among all those coconut-groves. Pete Sturgis, A.B., wished himself safe aboard the *Dos Equis*, that red-rusted little Mexican tramp at Puerto Hondo; especially now when night was closing in, and the sun plunging down into clouds that certainly menaced storm.

Pete Sturgis, A.B.! Pause to regard him. The A.B. is not a university degree. No, it signifies *Able Bodied Seaman*. Just at present, very much out of a job; but also, very able-bodied. If you guess his age at twenty-four, you won't be far wrong. Fighting-weight, some hundred and seventy pounds. A red-haired young man, and handy with his fists. Too handy, perhaps. If he hadn't been quite so handy, he might have possibly avoided that scrap aboard the banana-steamer *Almendares*, when mutiny had threatened; the scrap off the coast of this God-forsaken island, which scrap had ended by his being clouted over the head with a club and dumped into the Gulf.

That would have finished most third mates—such being the position he had occupied when the misunderstanding had taken place. But God loves the Irish; and somehow or other Pete, for all his being dazed, had swum ashore, and missed the sharks, and found his way to Puerto Hondo. And after that he had met and chummed up with good old fat Captain Gonzales, of the *Dos Equis*.

The Captain had offered to take him along to Vera Cruz, when and if the *Dos Equis* ever got there. She might start *mañana*—perhaps. Charming uncertainty, so characteristic of the Land of the Aztec.

Now Pete Sturgis, after having killed a few hours perambulating round this most obnoxious island, started back to town—the town he was destined never to reach. He whistled as he walked, even though he hadn't much to whistle about. For Pete simply *had* to have two thousand dollars, P.D.Q., to hold on to that Madre del Oro gold-mine option, which was ninety-nine per cent sure to make him some real money *if* he could hold it. And Pete needed that real money. Two years ago he had quit college and gone to sea because his father

*An American's tremendous adventure in search of Maya gold in Yucatan.*



By **GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND**

*A writing man who has given us many good stories, and an adventurer who has himself sought buried treasure in the jungles of Yucatan, like the hero of this fine novel.*

could no longer afford the college, and jobs ashore were mighty scarce. But lately he had received letters from home that weren't so good—and Pete thought a lot of his folks. Through business treachery on the part of an associate, the old man was going to be on the spot in a month or two unless twenty thousand dollars turned up from somewhere to save him.

Pete's total capital was now just \$28.45, Mex. And the option would be out, in only a little over a month; and with it, all his savings, and his chance to rescue the old man. Not so hot. Nevertheless, Pete whistled as he struck toward Puerto Hondo with that said capital in his pocket, where it jostled the snake-antidote kit that old Captain Gonzales had insisted on his carrying if he went walking on Alacrán.

But the whistle died on Sturgis' lips as—coming along the rocky road that dimmed to a vague ribbon of white among dense-arching groves—he saw a Mexican. Here in such desolation, even a poverty-bitten, limping fellow like this looked good to him. The Mexican could tell him the best road back to Puerto Hondo. Out in these damned coconut-groves, with all these confounded paths, it was pretty hard not to get lost. So Pete Sturgis stood there and waited for the Mexican to come along.

"*Buenas!*" he greeted the Mexican, now close at hand. "Which is the best way back to town, señor?"

The other said nothing, but came close; and if a man ever had a gallows-

face on him, this was certainly the one. A lantern-jawed, saffron-tinted fellow, dressed in fine clothing which had, however, apparently suffered misadventures.

"*Americano, eh?*" snarled this *hombre*.

"Sure! What about it?"

Then the bad *hombre's* very dirty left hand snapped back to the bad *hombre's* hip, and Pete Sturgis felt a gun poking him moderately hard in the short ribs.

"*Arriba las manos!*"

Sturgis obeyed by reaching for a cluster of coconuts about sixteen feet overhead.

The stick-up man laughed without merriment.

"It grieves me, señor," he mocked. "But I am a child of misfortune, and must needs recoup my fortunes. Only yesterday I was wealthy, for I had sold my—a ranch, for one hundred and twenty-five thousand pesos. Last night I was set upon by robbers who stole every penny and left me—as you see. It grieves me indeed, señor, but I am desperate. So—your pocketbook, money and watch—throw them down in the road. And then, *Americano*, be quickly on your way!"

Pete hit him—hard.

AS for science, pooh! Very little science. But it was a good wallop just the same. It landed on the bad *hombre's* mouth, and did the job. The Mexican crashed. His gun skidded away.

Pete Sturgis, with knuckles bleeding where the Mex's teeth had gashed them, stood over him, cursing heartily.

Only a groan replied. There the bandit sprawled limply.

Sturgis wanted that gun. He peered about, in the dimming light. Stooping, he groped around for it. Where the devil? Ah! There it lay!

Just as he almost had it, the Mex was on him. Pete felt a rush, a fling. So then, that sprawl had been only a 'possum ruse? Sturgis ducked. Pain slashed his right forearm.

He struck at random, hard. It landed. He felt the jar of it, right back to his spine. Something crunched.

The bad *hombre* dropped again. Pete heard a sort of choking grunt.

What was all this warm trickle down Sturgis' fingers? He half-sensed it now, as he stood there in the darkening road and peered down at something motionless, white, vague.

The fellow had knifed him!

Sturgis felt a cold wrath, and longed for a chance to hit him again. He prodded the inert figure with his foot; the Mexican yielded to it with utter relaxation.

"Knocked him for a row of goals, this time," judged the American. He knelt, touched the highly unsuccessful bandit, shook him. "Hand over that knife!"

More silence.

The man was out, right enough. Sturgis, bleeding a bit freely, felt about and located the knife. He rammed it into his pocket. Then he scabbled around in the blood-spotted road, came across the gun, held it ready lest this collapse also be a stratagem.

"Get up, you!"

No groan answered, nor any breath.

"Whew! What the hell?"

Suspicion whispered alarmingly at the back of Pete's mind. He knelt again and listened closely. The fellow wasn't even breathing!

**S**TURGIS found one of his wrists and located the place where a pulse ought to be, but where now most certainly one was *not*.

Bending, he applied his ear to the wastrel's chest. Heart-beats? Nothing doing.

Pete Sturgis crouched staring, realizing that he had just killed a Mexican, and that it was one devil of a long, hard trek from there back to the U. S. A.

If he were caught now, with a Mexican's blood on his hands—

Blood still dribbled down his arm from the gash made by the bandit's

knife; it dripped to the roadway, but he gave it no heed. If pain lay in his wounded flesh, he felt none. Nothing. What did that matter? What did anything matter, except just the one supreme effort to save his life?

**F**OR perfectly well he understood it meant death now, if he was caught. He knew all about the deep, underlying hate and resentment against Americans in Mexico; down here, especially, in this remote corner of the country. Mexico City might have been different. He'd have had a chance, there. But in this far island at the Back of Beyond—

"Not a chance! Once they get me, I'm done!"

No matter what his story or his plea—self-defense, justifiable homicide—the local court in Puerto Hondo would speedily convict him of murder.

Then the firing-squad awaited him; or if not that, interminable years of torture in some filthy jail. And he had others besides himself to think of too—the folks in trouble back home.

"No *carcel* for mine!" determined Sturgis, shoving the gun into his pocket, along with the dirk. "No firing-squad, either. Not while there's all outdoors to get away in!"

Instant flight—here lay his only hope.

First, though, he must check his bleeding. Did he leave a crimson trail, peril would track him. And much further loss of blood might bring collapse.

One of his shirt-sleeves, ripped off and tightly bound, gave him rough first-aid.

He dragged the body off the road, into some bushes, and for a moment more stood peering, listening. What was that sound? Voices of some one plodding along the road? Pete's heart thumped painfully. But no—only a far-off cur was yapping. Save for this, and a mournful susurration of surf on beaches, the world lay quiet under a purple velvet sky now pricked with faintest stars. Along the west, those stars were blacking out, behind a sullen-drifting band of cloud. Time to be on the move!

Sturgis realized numberless cohorts of mosquitoes were swarming to torment him, but what odds? Nothing mattered now, but just the get-away. But how about all that blood on the path? That certainly would never do. In the morning it would surely raise a hue-and-cry. It must be obliterated.

The American stood a moment, to think. Then he knelt, risked lighting a

match—one of those exasperating, weak little wax affairs used by all Mexico. Dimly he saw dark spots. The match died. In that gloom, sultry and oppressive, he scooped dust, scattered it. Another match; more dust; and so on till no visible sign of blood remained.

Then he took off his shoes and socks. Holding them in hand, he walked barefoot many times up and down the road, covering all that place with naked footprints. Splendid alibi, this! What Mexican would ever connect a shoe-wearing gringo with bare footprints?

Now all traces were obliterated as best they might be, and Sturgis once more turned his thoughts actively toward a get-away. A peculiar stinging sensation on his left wrist brought his right hand to it. He shuddered at feeling some soft, pulpy thing that clung there. Another match showed him a gorged tick. He pulled it off with a cry of disgust, and flung it far.

Some country! Which way out?

Only one solution seemed obvious to this problem, and that was none too promising. It hung on the possibility of stealing a *cayuco*—a dugout—at a fishing-village, and striking across the lagoon to the mainland, to the Usamainta River country.

What Sturgis might find over on that coast, he could hardly guess. More swamps, probably; mangroves, venomous reptiles, insects, fever, starvation, probably death. But at all hazards, the chance of life existed, and of freedom.

"Must be some kind of settlements over on the mainland," he judged. And those settlements, if any, wouldn't be likely to hear of anything that had happened on the island. "If I can get ashore and hide the boat, or sink it, I can maybe strike a trail that'll lead me to some village or other. Let's go."

He stuffed his socks into a pocket of his not over-clean white drill jacket, and hung his shoes by their lacings round his neck. Barefoot and watchful, he plodded back along the road toward a cluster of fishing-huts he remembered having seen about half a mile to eastward. Mosquito-swarms tormented him. He felt a bit light-headed from loss of blood, but plenty of strength still remained in him. And never had his mind been keener.

Cautiously scouting along, he presently sighted the vague glow of a few lights. Somebody was still awake in the village—worse luck!



"No closer, now," he judged; and waited, crouching and listening in a bamboo-thicket. Some of the fisherfolk were still out and about. Cooking-fires glowed under open sheds. Sturgis could see dim, barefoot figures—men in flapping loose clothes, women in head-shawls and dresses, like long Mother-Hubbards. Tick and flea-infested bags of bones in canine form wandered and scratched around the huts.

ONE by one the lights in the village winked out. The tiny settlement of thatched huts grew quiet as the inside of a church on Monday morning.

At last, after three-quarters of eternity, Sturgis decided it was safe to make the try. Cramped, stiff, swollen with insect-bites, he made way down through soft white sand to the beach. He scouted along it, toward the village. Shells bruised and cut his bare feet.

Now he waited awhile, near the surf, to make sure everybody in the village was asleep. A glory of stars loomed overhead; and far beyond the lagoon, the Southern Cross hung tip-tilted against the sky.

Then presently a vast black drive of cloud smeared out all constellations, like a giant hand wiping a slate clean. The breeze flawed, freshened to a wind. The lagoon, all of thirty miles wide, seemed darkly ominous. In those shoal waters, no great gale was needed to kick up hell's own tumult of sea. A spit of rain pattered. What utter obscurity!

At thought of venturing out into that unknown and perilous dark, the most foolhardy man in the world might have paused for a brace of thoughts. Pete Sturgis gave it three. After all, mightn't it be better to turn back to Puerto Hondo, slip aboard the *Dos Equis* and stow away there? She might be out of port and gone, in the morning. Pete could square things with the captain—if indeed any suspicion fell on him, at all.

For a few breaths, he was almost persuaded. But no, no—

"Fat chance a gringo'd have, a wounded gringo on a steamer, with a Mexican killed! Me for the mainland!"

He pushed on along the beach, and all at once stumbled across a boat drawn up safely above high tide. Coconut-palm leaves covered it, as commonly in the tropics, to keep the wood from cracking. Sturgis felt underneath these leaves, grunted with relief and satisfaction as he found a paddle.

Then a sudden, throaty growl swung him round. Something dim, hostile in the black night, confronted him—a dog.

This brute's intentions were only too clearly homicidal. Sturgis unwisely attempted diplomacy.

"*Ven acá, chico!*" he tried to cozen it. But the dog, well enough sensing a stranger, burst into savage tumult; surged in at him with bared fangs.

Sturgis reeled back as the animal leaped against his right thigh. He felt flesh tear. Snatching out the dead man's knife, he drove to the hilt between ribs. A shrill yelp—and the dog lay thrashing there on the sand at his feet, convulsed with agonies of death.

Wiping the blade, Sturgis once more pocketed the knife, and bent to his task of hauling the *cayuco* down into the surf.

Gleams wavered in a hut. Then a door, opening, cut a vague oblong of illumination in the black. Dim-seen, a man was standing in that doorway.

"*Ea, Carlos!*" called a voice.

Another voice began mumbling. The man in the doorway vanished. Sturgis sensed that this man was now outside, was coming to investigate.

**W**ITH a surge of effort he dragged the *cayuco* down. It grated loudly on loose corals and broken shells. How damnably clumsy and heavy! A second, it stuck. Sturgis tugged till the veins swelled in his neck. Again the dugout started. Already some of the higher surfs were lightening one end. Now, into the tumbling breakers it slid.

"*Quién va?*" the voice shouted.

Straight out into the surf, Sturgis hauled the boat. Knee-deep in warm rollers that hissed and crumbled, he waded; waist-deep, then almost to his breast.

Shipping much water, he scrambled aboard. The long, narrow but wonderfully seaworthy craft yawed. It rolled heavily, scooping another load of brine.

Sturgis groped for the paddle, found it. Now up on his toes with keen exertion, if ever in his life, he flung all his muscle into a long, hard stroke.

Logy, but none the less bucking like a terrified bronco, the dugout swerved and reared. Halfway round it slewed. Another wave would have swamped it, rolled it ashore—and with it Sturgis, to his very certain finish.

But before that other wave could batter, he had swung the slim canoe straight out to sea, driven it on, on. Spray-flung, in a succession of fantastic and violent leaps, the *cayuco* forged ahead.

Now surf diminished. Shouts from the beach impotently faded through that impenetrable dark, black as a stack of the world's blackest cats. Silently, sweating with blind effort, wounded and dizzy, Peter Sturgis thrust the heavy dugout south, out into the ebon mystery and silence of that lost lagoon.

## CHAPTER II

### THE GUEST FROM GOD

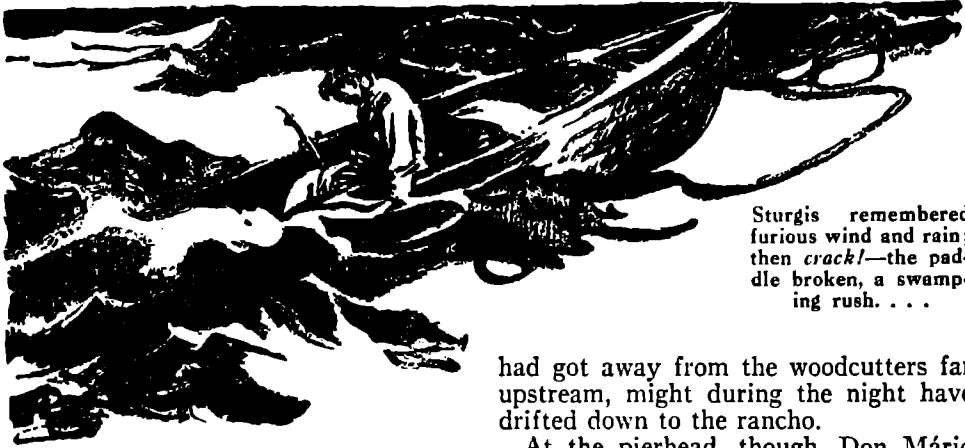
**T**HE Señor Mário Martínez, at gray dawn of a sullen and windy day, came out on the red-tiled porch in front of his ranch-house at the mouth of the Río Fangoso. He yawned, stretched, and cast a weather-wise eye at the milky shoals beyond the river-mouth, the sullen heavens and low-scudding clouds.

"A bad morning," he judged, "and today we need a good one. Ill-luck seldom comes alone. It will be hard, a day like this, for my *vaqueros* to round up those cattle, but it must be done."

Two hours before, the great ranch horn had blared to rouse the *vaqueros* out of their hammocks, in their earth-floored, thatched huts; for, "God helps the early riser," was Don Mário's favorite proverb. An hour past, after their *tortillas*, bread and coffee had been gulped, the *vaqueros* had saddled their broncos and hauled on their huge leather "chaps" that all night long had been soaking in the water-trough.

Then with leather *reatas*, grub-bags, water-bottles, machetes and rifles—in case of meeting peccaries or jaguars—they had departed in fading darkness for wild regions far up-country.

At the Rancho de San Agustín now only the womenfolk and children remained, with old Tío Pablo, the storekeeper. Don Mário was counting on a quiet day with his wife, Doña Perfecta,



Sturgis remembered furious wind and rain; then *crack!*—the paddle broken, a swamping rush. . . .

and with Lolita their nine-year-old daughter, light of their eyes.

"Ho-hum!" yawned Don Mário. He stretched again, rolled and lighted a cigarette. Erect and wiry, with only a slight grizzle in beard and mustache to show his more than forty years, he looked rather an aristocrat. His white linen shirt, well-scrubbed blue trousers and rawhide sandals, into which bare feet were thrust, made him a figure worth looking at twice; these, and his deep-set black eyes, hawk-nose and firm-set jaw. The slightest coppery tinge imaginable, on high cheek-bones, told that his Spanish blood had somewhere in the past been mingled with a drop of Indian.

As was his custom, now he strolled a bit before his coffee, for a general inspection of his little kingdom. "The eye of the master fattens the cow," was a firm article of his faith. He cast searching glances into the calf-pens, into the corrals, then through his coconut-grove. All seemed in order.

"It is well," judged Don Mário, and lighted another cigarette.

In front of his ranch silently flowed the turgid, paint-green current of the Río Fangoso, out toward the oyster-shell bar that all but closed the river's mouth. On mud-flats beyond the bar, Don Mário could glimpse rose-pink flamingos, cormorants, snow-white cranes. Still farther he could see the olive lagoon, with here or there the vague dot of a fishing-boat. Nothing unusual.

"Let us see if the river has brought us, perhaps, a few *pesos*," thought the Don. He walked leisurely, blowing smoke, down the long pier built of palm-logs and earth, the pier that extended far out into the river. Perhaps some worthwhile mahogany or logwood stick, that

had got away from the woodcutters far upstream, might during the night have drifted down to the rancho.

At the pierhead, though, Don Mário saw, across a yellow and muddy shoal, something that made him look with close attention.

"*Dios mío!* What is *that*?"

A man, motionless, silent, was lying half in the water on a mucky flat composed of mud and oyster-shells.

Don Mário paused for no speculation, but turned and strode up the pier. As he went, he violently clapped his hands together, in Spanish style, summoning old Tío Pablo.

Tío, a privileged character, was just out of his hammock in his yellow-plastered hut with the palm-thatch roof. Out through this thatch, smoke was now drifting as the old man brewed coffee over a tiny fire of driftwood in a sand-filled firebox. Now hearing the master's summons, he appeared in his doorway, blinking his one good eye. The other was covered with a horn-like cataract, which gave him the nickname of El Tuerto—"The One-eyed."

"What is it, señor?"

"A man ashore here, Pablo! Drowned, perhaps. Come, launch a boat swiftly!"

"A man, señor? What kind of a man?"

"Thousand devils! No questions, now, but come!"

**B**ACK to the river they hurried, launched a dugout, plied round-bladed paddles swiftly. In five minutes they had reached the mucky flat. Barefoot and with trousers rolled high, Tío Pablo leaped into the mud.

"An *Americano*, señor! He must be from far up-river, from the San Rosario chicle-camp!"

"Never mind! Aboard with him!"

Pablo lifting, Don Mário hauling, they boggled the stranger over the tilting gunwale and into the bottom of the dugout.



"Dead, señor?" asked Tío Pablo.

"Not yet!"

"Praise to all saints! There is a remedy for all things but death. With a mouthful of tequila we shall bring him back to his senses. But how came he here? We have seen no boat arrive. And surely, he could not have swum down-river or across the *laguna*, with sharks and barracudas and—"

"Silence, Tuerto! *Vamos!*"

Back at the long pier, they took the human derelict head-and-heels, carried him sagging and dripping to the guest-room of the ranch-house, laid him in a sisal hammock stretched between white-washed walls.

Tío Pablo hastily brought tequila from the little ranch store, spilled a stiff shot of the fiery white fluid into the stranger's mouth, then exclaimed:

"*Ay, mi madre!* Look, señor, he is wounded!"

"Yes, on the arm. Bandaged with a piece of shirt, eh? And his leg, too, it has been bitten. This man has suffered many things. He may yet die."

"All saints forbid!" piously ejaculated the old servitor, crossing himself. "Shall we undress him, care for his wounds, and wrap him in warm ponchos?"

"At once, Tío! And here—open his jaws again. Another swallow of tequila may save him. Ah, so!"

GRAY glimmerings of consciousness won back to Peter Sturgis. He got vague impressions of white walls with rows of iron rings in them, a window with iron bars,—could it be a prison?—ropes and rough beams, a massive wooden door. Just a glimpse came to him of a tiled floor. He could see row after row of palm-leaf fans overhead, beyond all calculation.

Two, four, eight, sixteen rows—were those pulsations of pain he was counting? Something burned inside him. But an arm ached, too; and somewhere down in regions that might have been a thigh, more pain tried to register.

At some indefinite time, long after, he found himself looking at a strip of sunlight now slanting through the barred window. A cock shrilly crowed, outside; and somewhere cattle were bellowing. A fly settled on his forehead. He raised an arm to brush it away, and saw the arm was neatly bandaged. What the devil?

Last thing he could remember was a madness of furious warm whitecaps washing over him, surging, thrusting, battering him down. Before that, what? Oh, yes—some frantic nightmare—a boat—furious wind, driving rain—luminous combers breaking in pitch-darkness. A roaring, frothing confusion. Frantic efforts to bail, with cupped hands. Muscles that ached, panting breath, the agony of a supreme and hopeless struggle once more with the paddle.

Then, *crack!*—only a useless pole in hand. Paddle broken. After that, stark confusion—a swamping rush, a short, mad battle with whelming waters that choked and strangled him in inky dark—and then, *this!*

"WHERE the hell's bells am I at, anyhow?" he gulped thickly through swollen lips. "And what's it all about? Where's the dugout, and how did I get here, and what the devil—"

In the long sweep of the hammock stretched between those walls of plastered whiteness, once more he lapsed, lay senseless and inert.

"Drink this, señor!"

A voice, speaking in Spanish—a vibrant, grave and soothing voice—penetrated fogs of lassitude and confusion. Sturgis felt something hot and spicy, something savory, tempting, at his battered lips. He swallowed, with painful effort. Ah, good!

"A little more... And now, rest."

"No, no! I've rested enough. How did I get here? What place is this?"

"It is your house, señor, as long as you will honor us. We call it El Rancho de San Agustín. You have met with great mischances. But fortune always leaves some open door."

Sturgis saw a grave and quiet face, with lean cheeks, grizzled mustache and beard; hair black and stiff almost as an Indian's, and somewhat streaked with gray; eyes deep-set, black but kindly. The voice went on:

"You came ashore here in some manner that I do not know. You are an *Americano*, señor?"



"Yes, that's right," gulped Sturgis. Then giddiness once more took him. He let his eyes droop shut, lay very still, conscious of pain but also of a vast relief. He thought:

"So then, I'm alive, anyhow. This is no pipe-dream. I got across the lagoon, after all."

For the moment, this seemed quite enough. But presently he was thinking again:

"And I'm spotted as an American, of course. And the way they've overhauled me, they've never missed my tattooings. They've got me as a sailor, okay. What yarn shall I spin 'em? Well, the nearest possible to the truth, the better—so long as that dead bandit doesn't figure in it, that's all!"

By noon, everybody at the ranch knew that a Meester Esmith, mate of an American freighter, had been in a fight with some members of a mutinous crew, just outside the lagoon; that one of the mutineers had set a savage dog on him, while another had knifed his right arm; that he had beaten them off, and bandaged his wounded arm, only to have them attack him again and fling him overboard in the dark.

A thrilling story! It gave the ranch more to talk about than anything that had happened in a month of saints' days.

"And to think," exclaimed the plump and comely Doña Perfecta, mistress of the ranch, while the family sat at dinner, "to think he clung to a floating beam and was drifted ashore here! Surely, a miracle!"

"Yes, certainly the hand of the good God was in it," assented Don Mário, while Lolita listened wide-eyed, and the Maya serving-maid almost forgot to pass the black beans, chicken, tortillas and stuffed cheese-cake. "Poor Señor Esmith! He has suffered greatly. But he will take no great harm. No bones are broken, and his wounds are not deep. His clothes are already dry. In a few days he will be well again—*si Dios quiere*."

"Surely God will wish it," the rancher's wife assented. "But would it not be well to take from his pockets whatever he has in them, and dry those things separately?"

Don Mário shook a negating head.

"No, my dear one. A man's house and his pockets are never to be invaded."

"You are right. But now, I will send him some more broth, also a bit of chicken. These, with some good coffee, will bring back his strength."



"Send nothing, my wife. I myself will carry him food and drink. No guest, under our roof, can have too much honor shown him. For such a one is sent to us by God."

### CHAPTER III

#### THE NAUYACA

**B**EFORE a week was out, Peter Sturgis had begun to feel somewhat like himself again. Rest and care, with plenty of good ranch provender—beef and *plátanos*, oysters from long reefs in the lagoon, eggs, pork, chocolate whipped to froth in a wooden jug; and beside all these, odd, high-seasoned things that piqued the appetite—were rapidly putting him back on his feet, once more.

The dog-bite on his thigh amounted to little. As for the knife-slash, that was healing with no complications. If only no news from the island happened to reach San Agustín—

"I'll be sitting pretty!" judged Peter Sturgis, A.B.

He inventoried his personal effects; found his watch done for; totaled his cash at—as aforesaid—a little over twenty-eight pesos; overhauled the knife and gun. These he cleaned and oiled, laying them away—together with the uninjured snake-bite kit that Captain Gonzales had given him—in an ancient Spanish mahogany chest of drawers in his guest-quarters.

"Some souvenirs, when I get back to the States!"

The knife, eight inches long and razor-keen, had an ebony handle, a blade beautifully inlaid with silver. The gun was a .38, and a good one. Sturgis showed them not even to Don Mário. Just as well, down there in Mexico, to make no display of weapons.

Life became singularly restful, brimmed with a peace such as he had seldom known. Luck, so far, companioned him. Danger stood afar, and all seemed peace.

Sturgis enjoyed the hens and turkeys that roamed about the ranch-house, and the tame peccary that rooted in the strip of land along the river. At times that peccary and those fowls would invade the porch or even the house, all in a most democratic spirit. Doña Perfecta would shoo them out, and laugh; or she would bring her embroidery to the bench near Sturgis' hammock, and talk with him of the incredible things in *Nueva-Yor'*.

STURGIS presently began to wonder just how long he'd have to stay within those gates. A bit of questioning brought out the information that—unless he wanted to go back to Puerto Hondo in a dugout, which most emphatically he did not—he might be in for a protracted stay.

"You see, señor," Don Mário told him, "we have no regular communication with the outside world. That is, except once in three months, when a *goleta* from San Ignacio anchors off the river-mouth, and we swim cattle out to it."

"When will the next *goleta* be here?" Sturgis asked anxiously.

"One left, only a fortnight ago. The next will come in two months and a half."

"About the last of March, then?"

"Yes, *amigo*."

"Good night!" thought Peter. "It's all off with that option."

"What is it, my friend?" asked the rancher. "You look disturbed. Is it that you have urgent business, so that you want to hurry away from us?"

"Oh, no, no—it's nothing."

"If you must go, of course it might be arranged. I might send one of my men to borrow some kind of boat at the village of San Ignacio, a few kilometers up the coast, and thus get you over to Puerto Hondo."

Sturgis shook his head, in negation. The mining-option, he saw, was up the flue. Better let it go, cold, than risk returning to Puerto Hondo. And evidently no other town existed, for a long way up and down the coast, that he could use as an exit back into the world again.

"As I say," the Don continued, "we are here very much cut off from everything. Except for the *goleta* every three months, only a chance fishing-boat now or then puts in here, for a bit of fresh meat. I advise against your trying to leave here, otherwise than on the *goleta*."

"Yes, yes, you're right."

"At this season of the year, a *norte* is always liable to swoop over the Gulf and the lagoon. Treacherous gales, that strike swiftly as a clenched fist. So, señor, you had best be patient and stay with us a while. We will do our best to make you happy. And here you are in your own house, Señor Esmith."

And as day drifted into lazy day, the exotic ranch-routine grew familiar. Sturgis liked the Indian women carrying water-jars balanced on their heads, striding along with barefoot ease, and smoking cigarettes. He enjoyed the lowing of cattle, the fat herds grazing on broad vegas amid tall grass; the whish and crack of quirts, pulling up of cinches; the roping and breaking of wild horses in dusty corrals, by yelling and excited *vaqueros*; the black buzzards perched on tall gates of the enclosures built of vertical palm logs laced together by lianas.

He watched the throwing and branding of cattle, the training of steers. These the *vaqueros* flung to earth and tied. Then through the long horns they bored holes, to receive iron pegs. Horn to horn they lashed pairs of animals—now called *mancornados* so that for many months, the pair lived as one, night and day, lying down together, getting up, eating, sleeping together. And all their lives thereafter, those two creatures would obey as one, till death.

The making of high-horned, wooden saddles interested him; the cutting and finishing of *reatas*, deftly spiraled out of a single rawhide. The *vaqueros* would tie one end of such a *reata* to a horse's tail, take a turn round a post of granadilla-wood, then—keeping the leather well greased with tallow—make the horse pull it smartly away. A few such pulls, and the *reata* was smooth, tight-twisted, pliant, a marvel of efficiency.

HE wondered why some of the men had their faces smeared with blue pigments.

"Ah, this is the carnival season, señor," Tío Pablo explained, smoking with him in the primitive little store. Tío fixed on him his single eye, that blinked from a parchment face. "And then too, it is the fiesta of the very ancient god, Kukulkan."

Greatly Sturgis puzzled over that. Did the ancient Maya faith still hold sway? What were these people, anyhow—Christians? Pagans?

TOWARD mid-afternoon of the ninth day since the American's coming; there shrilled from the patio a sudden, terrified wailing. A shriek in a child's voice—the voice of Lolita, the rancho's little girl. And the child cried out:

"Ay, mamá, mamá! Ven, ven acá!"

Then, in a moment, a scream from the mother:

"Jesús-María! Mário, Mário, come quick! A *nauyaca*—and it has bitten our Lolita—God have mercy!"

Other voices mingled. Oaths, shouts sounded, in terrified confusion, Don Mário's voice among them.

Running to the patio, Sturgis saw the rancher—pale to the lips—furiously thrashing with a quirt at something sinuous and black and brown, something deadly, something that from a venomous serpent was now being swiftly reduced to a bleeding, twitching pulp.

Caught up in the mother's arms, Lolita was moaning, while servants and *vaqueros*, crowding into the patio, uttered confused cries and prayers. Some were crossing themselves. Old Tío Pablo shook a furious fist, trampled with blasphemies on the mangled rag of flesh that had been a deadly snake.

On the child's thin brown ankle, two small but terrible punctures had already grown livid, swollen. The hand of death was swiftly closing on Lolita.

"Into the house with her!" commanded Don Mário, foam on his lips. "You, Tío, get my razor—*quick!*"

Sturgis turned, ran for his quarters, flung open the old chest of drawers, snatched his snake-bite kit. When he got back to the bedroom of the rancho-house, though hardly three minutes had passed, Lolita was barely moaning. Tremors ran through her slim little body, as she lay in a hammock beside which her father knelt. Don Mário looked up, haggard-eyed.

"Clear this crowd out of here!" he commanded Tío Pablo. "All out, but the mother and a couple of *criadas!*"

His hand shook, but his waxen face was stolid as an Indian's, as he tightened a rawhide ligature about the child's leg, twisted it up with a bit of stick.

"The razor!"

He cut deftly, sucked and spat blood.

"Permanganate!" he ordered. "Tío Pablo, bring it from the store-room! *Pronto!*"

"Hold on!" cried Sturgis. He had assembled the nickel-plated syringe. Now he held it out. "Permanganate



PETER  
STURGIS

won't suffice, Don Mário. Here—let me try this!"

"Eh, what?" The father squinted, as with eyes that could not see. Doña Perfecta had slumped into a chair, was praying with white lips, while a couple of maids called on all the saints they knew. "What is that?"

"It is an American medicine. It is very powerful! May I use it?"

"Yes—and God give it strength!"

Sturgis shot the antivenin home, under the skin just above the child's knee.

"If it's only in time!" he exclaimed.

"Is it not, oh, my friend?"

"Ought to be. Isn't five minutes since she was bitten!"

Don Mário said nothing. Now his face was gray. In those few moments a mask as of old age—sunken, deep-lined—seemed to have drawn itself across his features. His lips trembled soundlessly in prayer. Quivering fingers made the sign of the cross.

"Not too tight with that bandage, Don Mário," warned the American. "And loosen it a bit, now and then."

The ranchoer nodded.

"Yes, I know."

**F**AINTING, Doña Perfecta collapsed. The servants carried her to her own hammock. At the door, ranch-folk crowded, murmuring prayers.

"Ay, madre santísima! . . . Ay, Jesús! . . . Misericordia!"

One of the serving-women lighted a candle.

"Blow out that damned thing!" commanded Don Mário. "That shall be only for a funeral—and by God's grace there shall be no funeral here!"

Agonized, he hung over his dear treasure; light of his eyes. Lolita now hard-

ly moaned at all. Her pulse was swift and thready, her breathing shallow.

Wrenched with grief and sympathy, the American stood by. In Lolita's blood, white magic of the American antivenin battled with black magic of that deadly venom—venom of the terrible *nauyaca*, the yellow-jawed *tómagof*, scourge of southern Mexico.

## CHAPTER IV

### OATH AND BETRAYAL

LATE that night, with everybody else asleep, Don Mário sat alone with Sturgis in the living-room of the ranch, sat smoking in a silence that had lasted now some minutes.

An old hand-wrought Spanish lamp burning on the table of broad and rough mahogany planks threw vague light over a wine-jug and glasses; on tiles and whitewashed walls with huge hand-hewn beams, on holy pictures, on ponchos and sombreros that hung against the door leading into the store-room. Through the iron window-bars sounded a whispering rustle of palm-fronds, the sleepy mooring of cattle, a vague murmur of dark-sliding waters, as the Río Fangoso slipped onward to the wide lagoon.

Don Mário's aquiline nose looked more stern than ever, his beard and mustache more severe, by that dim light. Deeper shadows cut across his hollowed cheeks and touched the salient bones above them. Half-lying in his huge chair covered with the skin of a jaguar,—*tigre*, they call it in Mexico,—he at last made speech:

"*Amigo*, my heart is very full. Too full, for me to tell it. What, after all, are words in any tongue, when one man has done for another man what you have done for me? Our old proverb says you must eat a peck of salt with a friend before you really know him, but is it true? Not always. I have eaten not yet half a cupful of salt with you, Señor Esmith, but already I know you as a brother. What you have done—"

"You needn't say anything, Don Mário," cut in Sturgis, from his chair beside the table. He took another drink of wine. The *ranchero* did the same. "What less would any man have done? A friend is a friend; and if he's really such, he'll go against hell with one bucket of water, for the other fellow. But what I did was little. Mostly luck, that I happened to have the stuff with me."

"Luck? No. The hand of God! And you, *amigo*, were the instrument through which that divine hand worked."

To this, Sturgis made no answer. He was rather hard-boiled about matters theological, but why argue?

"Perhaps I should have said 'the gods,' Don Martínez added, after a long and smoky pause punctuated by two more drinks. "When life and death hang in the balance, and life wins,—as now,—something stirs in my blood, not wholly Christian. Something of the old days, something from beyond the white man's world. Reversion, atavism—*qué sé yo?* My great-grandfather was a Chimalapa Indian. In my veins still run a few drops of that primitive blood. You may as well look for five feet on a cat, as hope to kill that kind of blood completely. One little drop is enough to give a man thoughts that are—different."

"Yes, I suppose so. But why speak of this? Lolita will get well. In a few days she will quite recover. Nothing else really matters."

"Señor, something else does matter!"

"And what?"

Light glinted in the ranchman's dark eyes. He tugged at his mustache.

"And what?—the relationship between you, señor, and me! You, an American; and me, a Mexican. Since you have done this thing for me, given me more than life, are we not brothers now?"

"All men are brothers, Don Mário, when it comes to that."

"Yes, but not in this special sense. Would you accept blood-brotherhood with me?"

NOT understanding, a bit surprised, Sturgis knit his brows and looked at the *ranchero*.

"Eh? How do you mean?" he asked.

"*Oiga, amigo!*" And Don Mário leaned forward, his deep-set eyes steady on the American's face. "The bond between us, for good or evil, should be stronger than mere words can make it. My life is yours now, to dispose of as you will, should need arise. I pledge it! And that pledge—will you not seal it with the ancient Chimalapa Indian ceremony—a ceremony so very simple, yet more binding than the gates of hell?"

"What—what ceremony do you mean, señor?" Sturgis stammered, astonished.

"The blood-exchange. A drop of your blood for a drop of mine. Then we are brothers, truly, till eternity—and beyond!"



A moment Sturgis pondered this arresting proposal. In his rather ticklish circumstances, what could fall more welcome than some such protection as this? He nodded:

"*Muy bien*, Don Mário."

"Ah! And when?"

"Any time that suits you. Right now, if you like."

Don Mário got up, strode across the tiled floor, opened the drawer of an old hand-made cabinet. When he turned back, a slim blade gleamed in his hand.

"Give me your left hand, *hermano mío!*"

Sturgis arose, advanced to him, extended his hand. The ranchman bared his own left arm, brown, sinewy. Sturgis imitated him.

"Think well, now," warned Don Mário. "This alliance is defensive and offensive. Once this oath is taken, your friends are mine, my friends are yours. Our enemies, the same. Life or death, we must share as one. Are you duly and truly prepared to swear this oath, for life and all its perils?"

"Yes, Don Mário," the American made answer, strangely moved. "I pledge my word to it, for life and all its perils."

"To heaven or hell?"

"Yes! To heaven or hell!"

"To all eternity?"

"And beyond!"

Don Mário's steel drew a drop of blood from the American's naked arm, one from his own. The arms, close-pressed, mingled those drops.

"Now are we brothers indeed," he said. "*Está acabado!* It is finished!"

IT was on the third night after Lolita's narrow escape—again in the lamp-lit living-room of the hacienda—that Sturgis had proof of how deep, how all-comprehensive this new bond really was.

"Listen, my brother," said the Don. "Words without deeds are poor indeed.

A close mouth is good, at times, for no flies enter there. But again, speech is necessary, even to the telling of a great secret."

"A secret, brother?"

"Yes, and a mighty one. You are a mariner?" The American nodded. "And not rich, I take it?"

Sturgis laughed, but his heart-strings tightened with portents of expectancy.

"Rich, Don Mário? When were sailors ever rich?"

"Never, since my ancestors, the Spanish *conquistadores*, overran this country." The ranchero eyed his coiling smoke. "Tell me, brother, what is your dearest wish?"

Peter Sturgis, A.B., felt his heart give a bump or two.

"Just now," he made answer, "it would be to hold on to a valuable mining-option I've got, in Sonora. It's called the Madre del Oro, and how I happened to get hold of it would take too long to tell. But anyhow, I'm liable to lose it, if I don't pay something on the option."

"How much?"

"Well—two thousand, American."

"Pooh! A mere trifle!" Don Mário dismissed it. "If *this* is all that worries you, dismiss it. It is paid. No matter what happen, the option remains in your hands. But,"—and he leaned forward, looked earnestly at Peter,—"but I am speaking of larger things. Of real wealth. Have you never thought of wanting it?"

"Why, of course! Who hasn't? But what chance has a sailor, at best a mate on a freighter, to—"

"The chance is yours, now, my brother! For I will give it you!"

"You mean—" Peter began.

"Understand me well, brother. It is not that I am paying you, for anything you have done. Never that! It is rather that one brother, who needs nothing but who knows of much, offers

the other one that which will help him. Do you comprehend?"

"I do. And then?"

"As for me," continued Don Mário, drawing at his cigar, "money means little. True, we say that for money the dog dances, but who needs dancing in this wilderness? I have had much money, lost it, forgotten it."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. Before I came to this lost lagoon, I lived on a vast estate in Tabasco. My father had more than eight million pesos, in lands and cattle. A revolution finished him. All the cattle were driven off, and killed. The buildings went up in smoke. Many of our people were shot, others drafted into the army of—well, never mind. Those were black days, my brother. We learned the meaning of the old proverb: 'Trust no one, and you'll never be deceived!'"

"Lots of truth in that, Don Mário."

"Not between you and me, though. But as I was telling you, we were ruined. My father—God rest him in peace!—escaped with his life, and little more. But he soon died. The soul was dried, in him. As for me, I was arrested as a rich man's son. I was condemned to the firing-squad. Two Americans interceded for me. My life was spared. For that, I owe all Americans a debt of gratitude, that sometime I swore to pay."

"And then?"

"I came here. How I married, built up this rancho and all, matters nothing. But here I am, content. The happy heart makes the unending feast, eh? Money means little, so long as I have health, food and shelter, wife, child. To you, though, money could mean much. And to you I shall give it, as much as you can carry hence!"

HE paused, keen eyes on Sturgis. The American felt his head swim.

"Lord!" he thought, leaning forward in the lamp-shine, elbow on knee. "Now we *are* getting down to tacks! Is this a hop-dream, or—"

"Listen, my brother. Far up-country in the swamps and jungles of Chiapas, far to the southwest of here, lies the ruined Maya city of Yaloxcaan."

"Yes?"

"In that city is a subterranean hiding-place, where the last of the sacred Maya books—histories, works on astronomy and mathematics—lie hidden. The Spaniards swept through this country like wolves. I, of their race, admit it. They

burned, tortured, slaughtered. They hanged women, with children hanging from those women's feet. One of the old Maya histories records:

"Then began the construction of the church, and great labor was ours. Then began the execution by hanging, and the fire at the ends of our hands. Then also came ropes and cords. Then we passed under the hardship of legal summons, tribute and Christianity."

"Why didn't the Mayas fight?"

"They fought well; but armor and gunpowder were too much for them. Two hundred Spaniards defeated seventy thousand Mayas at Ti'hu, which is now Mérida. So the Mayas were enslaved; and even now there is hatred for the name of Spain. Most of the Maya books were destroyed, but the remnant were carried far inland, were hidden at Yaloxcaan. It is the gold for the making of these books that I can give you."

STURGIS made a gesture of disappointment.

"Books, Don Mário? But ancient Maya books are of no value to me!"

"Ah, but these books are different. Books so important that a black curse lies on any Maya who dares touch them. The curse of Kukulkaan!"

"Kukulkaan? And who is he?"

"A great god of the Mayas. The Feathered Serpent. Also, the curse of Ah Puch, God of Death, rests on any Maya who takes away those books. Myself, I have no Maya blood, or—even though you are my brother—I would not tell you this. But all the Indian blood I have is Chimalapa. My ancestors were enemies of the Mayas, and had other gods. Despite all that, however, I myself would never touch those books. But I can go with you and show you where they lie—the books, and the blank gold sheets to complete them. None of my men would go, for they all have Maya blood. But with my help, you can find them."

"And what then, Don Mário? What should I do with Maya books?"

"We shall have to penetrate a formidable wilderness, risk perils from blood-lusting *tigres* and more blood-lusting wild jungle Mayas with curaré-poisoned arrows. Some few Spaniards have tried it, and failed. In our old saying, where they expected to find bacon, they found broken bones. Then too, you will have to face the curses of Ah Puch and of Kukulkaan—"

"Oh, those!" Sturgis shrugged his shoulders. "But suppose I find those books? What good are they to me?"

Don Mário stroked his beard, and his voice lowered: "They are not books such as you know. They are made of solid gold. Each—so I know from Mayas who have seen them—is perhaps an inch thick, two feet long, a foot and a half wide. They are all engraved with ancient hieroglyphs, that no living man these days can read. Each represents a fortune for the gold alone, but of course as records they are priceless. And there are known to be over a hundred blank gold sheets besides—wealth almost beyond calculation. And these blank sheets are of value for their precious metal alone. Now are you interested?"

"Interested? Holy heaven!"

"Ah, I thought you would be," smiled the rancho.

"*Vamos!* How soon can we start?"

"Softly! First you must understand how far it is, and how perilous."

"Oh, the devil take that!" Sturgis got up, and began pacing the tiled floor. "Only show me the way!"

"That is the voice of youth," said the elder man. "Perhaps of true wisdom. Good wits jump swiftly, and Fortune gives her hand to the daring. But first, you must know the great distance. I have a map that shows the location of Yaloxcaan."

"A map?"

"Yes. It has come down to me from my grandfather, and beyond. It is very ancient."

"And where is it?"

Don Mário gestured toward the door on which hung the ponchos and sombreros.

"In a chest in my store-room. Bring the lamp, and you shall see."

Sturgis' hand shook with something like "buck fever" as he took the old Spanish lamp and followed the rancho. Don Mário drew a ring with clumsy iron keys from his pocket, turned the squeaking lock, threw the door wide.

Boxes, sacks and bales, old saddles, bridles, a general confusion cluttered the windowless and dark place. The lamp carved out only a small sphere of light from this dense gloom. Don Mário pointed at a leather-covered chest in the farthest corner; a chest with rusted lock and bands of iron.

"Here is where I keep it, my brother, together with all my valuable documents, the title-deeds to this ranch, everything



DON  
MÁRIO

of that sort. Nobody knows about it. Nobody has ever seen it, these many years. But now you, my blood-brother, nearer than any kin of mine, you shall see it. For its secret is yours, so that you may bring away from Yaloxcaan all the gold that you can carry. It shall be all yours, and yours alone!"

Don Mário knelt beside the chest, and by the dim light coaxed the lock open. He threw up the lid. Dust floated on that close, dead air. It hung dimly golden in the lamplight.

For a moment Don Mário fumbled in the chest. He peered more closely, uttered a startled word.

"What's the matter now, Don Mário?"

"Closer with that lamp!"

Sturgis held it at the very edge of the open chest. Its rays flooded the interior, revealed packets, books, documents sealed and taped.

Don Mário stared with blank dismay.

"But, but," he stammered, "the big envelope—the big blue envelope—"

"What, in the devil's name?"

"The map—the title-deeds— *Madre de Dios!* Gone—all, all gone!"

## CHAPTER V

### INTO THE JUNGLE

FOR a moment Don Mário remained kneeling there, speechless, staring into the chest. Then, with hands that shook, he fell to scrabbling through the contents.

"The map—deeds—*mil diablos!*"

"Sure you had them here?"

"Sure? Am I sure of my own name?"

"How long since you saw them last?"

"A year, maybe. They have always been fast locked, here. Who, in God's name, could have robbed me? When?"

"Some enemy, I take it," suggested the American.

"But I have none, that I know of!" Don Mário exclaimed. "Here in this lonely corner of nowhere, what enemies should I have? And so—the deepest wound comes from the hidden hand!"

"You've probably put your papers somewhere else," suggested Sturgis, "and forgotten about it."

"No!" Don Mário shook a decisive head. "I have been robbed! God knows what the outcome may be."

"You'll find them all right, Don Mário! And even supposing you don't, could anybody else do anything with that map?"

"The map! It is not the map I am thinking of now!" cried the ranchero, still kneeling. "In my mind I have an outline of the way to Yaloxcaan, clear enough to find the gold. But my title-deeds!"

"You can get a copy made. Surely your deeds are recorded in Puerto Hon-do. The law—"

Bitterly Don Mário laughed.

"The law! You know only the law as it is in the United States! Here"—his laugh flickered out like a blown candle-flame—"the law is one thing, and what happens is another. Here, when we go to law, we may leap out of the flames and fall into the glowing coals. This is the bitterest blow that could have come upon me, save only the death of my señora or the little one!"

"Cheer up, Don Mário. It can't be as bad as all that."

"It can be very bad, my brother." The ranchero got up, looked Sturgis in the face. "With these deeds missing, what day am I not afraid some *bandido*, with forged signatures, may come, may claim this ranch as his own? May throw me out, in spite of all I can do? May ruin me, annihilate me—"

STURGIS laid a hand on the ranchero's shoulder.

"Patience, and shuffle the cards!" he smiled. "I wager you'll find your deeds somewhere round the house. And even if you don't, you have forty or fifty *vaqueros*, with plenty of guns. I've got a gun myself, and—"

"And then?"

"Am I not with you—through all?"

Don Mário extended a hand that trembled. Sturgis took it. Under the lamplight, each man looked silently into the other's eyes. Their clasp tightened. Then Don Mário said:

"An untried friend is like an un-cracked nut. But a blood-brother—"

THOUGH no searching, that night and next day, revealed the slightest trace of map and deeds, and though for a while Don Mário was beaten down to blackest depths of dismay and ugly foreboding, his purpose in regard to the gold plates was by no means destroyed or even weakened. His word once given, he would carry out his promise.

"Despite all, my brother, we will go. And soon! Delay breeds danger. As quickly as we can prepare, we will be on our road. Now that some one else has the map—"

"Yes, Don Mário, the sooner now, the better. How about entering the ruins with me? Changed your mind about that?"

"No. That part of it must be for you alone. A brave man carves out his own fortune. Call it superstition, if you will. Call it the last few drops of Indian blood in my veins, or anything you please. But something tells me not to invade the final stronghold of the priests of Kukulkaan. As for you, though—"

"I'll take a chance. Gods or men, ghosts or devils, they all look alike to me, provided there's gold enough at the end of the trail!" And he thought again of his father, who was going to be in deep trouble, unless real money came to his rescue. . . .

Dawn of that tomorrow had hardly begun to gray over the Río Fangoso and the vast lagoon, when the little cavalcade trekked out of the rancho and set a course southwest, toward the formidable jungles, swamps and forests of the interior.

Not even Doña Perfecta knew the truth. For "in this affair the hidden cat must not be seen," Don Mário had quoted the old proverb. So his señora, like all hands at the ranch, had accepted his word that this was nothing but a hunting-expedition for wild game.

"And may all the saints go with thee, *querido mio*," the señora had prayed, hanging a scapulary round her husband's neck. "I shall say many Paternosters, many Ave Marias for thee, till thy return—and some, too, for the *Americano*. And come back soon to me, soul of my



eyes, for till I see thee again, my heart will be as dust and ashes."

"It shall be soon, my heart," Don Mário had promised, kissing her and Lolita. "Soon and sure. Only the mountains never meet again. Remain thou with God!"

The two best horses at the rancho—Mariposa and Bravo—with tails carefully braided, carried the adventurers. A pair of stout burros completed the remuda. Two more animals sufficed to transport their freight, into which Don Mário had managed to smuggle a small pickaxe and handle, also a short-handled spade.

The equipment was complete as any foresight and reckoning could make it. Grub-bags contained corn, rice, *frijoles negros* and coffee, tortillas, bacon and jerked beef. These, with perhaps a little game they might pick up—if they dared risk the noise of firearms—would suffice. The señora had also slipped in various packets containing *arroz con pollo*, cheese-fritters and cakes. Two bottles of tequila also went along.

The medical kit included permanganate, iodine, quinine and the antivenin syringe with the second—and last—vial of serum. "God grant you need not use it!" prayed Doña Perfecta.

Ponchos, hammocks, candles, supplemented the layout. Sturgis wore the usual huge chaps, but for work at the ruins had a pair of stout leather leggings. Don Mário took a small pocket-compass.

Armament consisted of two rifles, two shotguns and a pair of revolvers—one of these, the gun that Sturgis had taken from the bandit. Sturgis also had the bandit's knife; Don Mário carried a hunting-blade of his own. And there was ammunition aplenty. In case of meeting jungle Mayas, it might be sorely needed. Machetes were not forgotten.

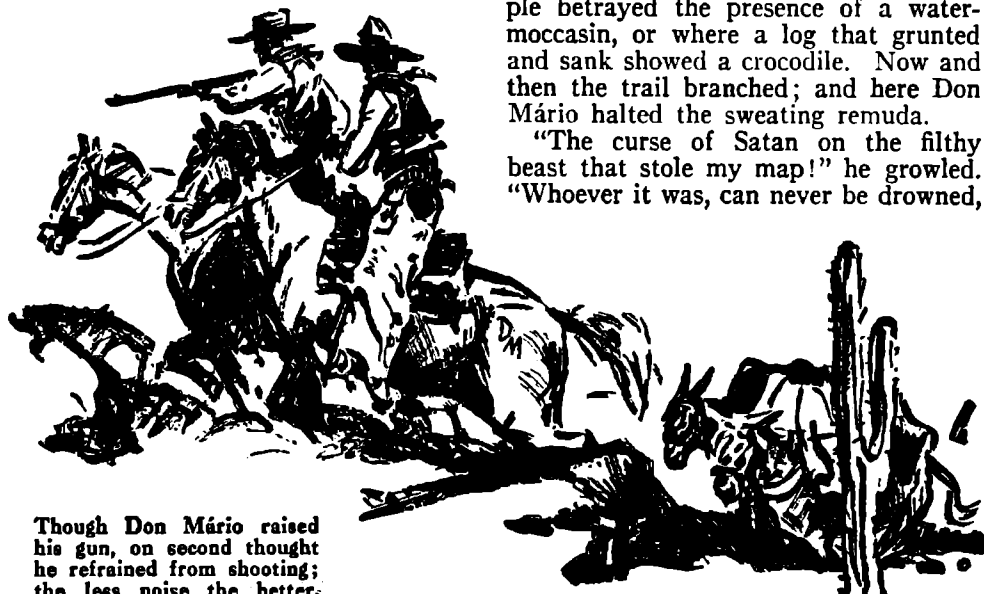
More than three hours they followed a fairly well-beaten trail through immense vegas of sour savanna-grass, saw-grass and *yerba guinea*, now and then plowing through swampy stretches of lush reeds, or winding among patches of thorny cactus.

At Las Pocilgas the party halted to feed and water the animals, as well as to rest the men. Three grass huts with a handful of *vaqueros* made up this outpost of the rancho, beyond which lay almost unbroken jungle. Coffee, tobacco and a few tortillas—rolled out on broad leaves and baked on an iron plate over three stones—refreshed them.

Well before noon they were once more on their way. Now insects began to grow more pestiferous, as the trail narrowed into forest paths. Sunlight faded, blotted out by a dense and leafy roof where gorgeous macaws screamed. They sighted a few grotesque iguanas, but though Don Mário raised his gun once to shoot, on second thought he refrained; the less noise, the better.

Swamps began to impede them, dismal and tortuous morasses that confused the trail among miasmatic pools which stank abominably, pools where a V-shaped ripple betrayed the presence of a water-moccasin, or where a log that grunted and sank showed a crocodile. Now and then the trail branched; and here Don Mário halted the sweating remuda.

"The curse of Satan on the filthy beast that stole my map!" he growled. "Whoever it was, can never be drowned,



Though Don Mário raised his gun, on second thought he refrained from shooting; the less noise the better.



for he is destined to be hangman's meat. With the map, all would have been simple. But now—"

"You can't find Yaloxcaan?"

"Have I said so, my brother? Ah, no. Even though it is well not to count on the bearskin before having killed the bear, we shall find the ruins. But the way must be much more difficult. To lose one's path, to retrace it, to seek—it wastes time. And time is precious. For, once any of the jungle Mayas suspect we are bound for Yaloxcaan—"

"It may mean fighting?"

"Yes. And we should try to avoid all hostilities. Even though no curaré-poisoned arrows wound us, and we gain the victory, war is not what we seek. And if we kill or even injure a forest Maya, that will be bad business. It might mean fire thrown into the thatch of a rancho building, some dark night—and *vaya!*"

"I see. Well—"

"But there will be no fighting, if God wills. So, forward!"

About two o'clock they halted in a green-gloomy clearing where mahogany-cutters had felled giant boles beside a sluggish scum-covered stream. The Río Pardo, Don Mário named it. Reeking with sweat, swollen with insect-bites and with stings of the *xbubul*, a poisonous beetle, muddy and splashed, both men had already begun to show the effects of even less than one day in the bush.

Coffee, grub and a brief lie-down on their ponchos somewhat refreshed them. By half-past three they were under way again, through ever more difficult entanglements. Now an almost intolerable stench of stagnant waters assailed them. The heat blurred those jungle depths with steamy haze.

Lianas, dangling from orchid-grown trunks and limbs obstructed the path—if now indeed a path it could be called. Here machetes came into play.

"Nobody has passed through here for some weeks," judged Don Mário. "And

this is good. For if the road to the ruined city is really abandoned, so much the better. The last animal I want to see now is the human animal."

Slowly, floundering and with heart-breaking exertions, the caravan forged ever into the southwest. Toward evening Sturgis began to notice that his eyes were smarting, face and hands growing crimson and swollen.

"What kind of damned bug, now?" he wondered. And when the symptoms kept increasing, and he reported them to Don Mário, the Don looked grave.

"Ay, this is far from good! It is *guao* poisoning."

"What's that?"

"When God had made all the good plants and trees, Satan created *guao*, to balance them. It is the devil's own work. To touch it, even to pass near it—and behold what happens!"

"Doesn't last long, though, does it?" asked the American.

"It may last days and days, my brother. It may grow much worse than this, even to the blinding of a man."

"How about medicine? Anything in our kit?"

Don Mário shook his head.

"No. Only the juice from leaves of the *guásima*—which God bless!—will cure it. I will watch keenly for a *guásima*-tree. There is nothing more I can do. Forward!"

Already suffering intensely, but more grim-jawed and determined than ever, Sturgis rode along. Ticks had also begun to torment him—and liquid fire has no advantage by way of torture, over Mexican *garrapata* ticks.

Toward night, with men and animals now tormented almost beyond endurance—many a fat black leech clinging to the animals' legs—they reached and forded a slimy bayou.

"Not much farther now, to rest," said Don Mário. "I recognize this place."

"The ruins are near?"

"Not quite yet. But we shall presently reach Pozo Negro, a chicle-camp, where we can pass the night."

Just beyond the ford, Don Mário hauled to a stop, and pointed.

"*Gudsima!*" cried he.

A FEW machete-slashes, and leafy branches lay across his saddle.

"Here, brother! Rub the juice well on hands and face. It will cure you. And an hour from now we should be at Pozo Negro."

The spent and sweating cavalcade slogged onward through thorny thickets, among swamps, past giant termite-nests. Dusk was beginning to threaten, the early-falling gloom of tropical jungles. Two burros now were limping; round the shoulder of one which had been gashed by a thorn, carrion-flies were clustered.

Then, quite at once, at another fork in the elusive trail where again they paused to reconnoiter, Sturgis beheld a moving creature that crouched, that peered.

He had but an instant's glimpse at this; but in that instant he had seen—or thought to see—a vague white shirt, blue apron, long thin reed. A blow-gun, maybe?

"Don Mário!" called the American.

"Eh, what?"

"A man! There, see?"

At Sturgis' pointing, the *ranchero* knit his brows, peered keenly. The figure seemed to melt, to fade and vanish, silent as a wraith.

Don Mário's mouth grew hard as he exclaimed: "A *bravo!* I would have given much had he not seen us!"

DUSK had fallen like a thin gray curtain as the spent and weary cavalcade limped into Pozo Negro, where a chicle storehouse was surrounded by half a dozen huts, all grouped beside a dark-flowing stream, the Río Sucio.

The old Gallegan foreman, Hernández Bermejo, welcomed them; gave them hot soup and venison. The chicle-gatherers fed and tended the horses and burros, showed themselves friendly; for Don Mário's fame ran even to these remote regions.

As the Don and Sturgis squatted at supper on the dirt floor, protected from at least part of the mosquitoes and gnats by an eye-stinging smudge, a few dim canoes came poling in over dark waters where stars lay mirrored. In those canoes were *chicleros* and spearers of fish, eager to hear news of the outside world, to gossip with the guests.

"Hunting, eh?" queried the old Gallego. "Well, take a fool's advice, señores, and go no further to the southward. For one thing, rains have made the swamps beyond here almost impassible. Even our best men are not slashing the zapote-trees, down yonder. Then too, the ruins of Yaloxcaan lie in that direction, and you know as well as I, it is not safe to approach them too closely."

Don Mário shrugged indifferently.

"What have we to do with ruins? We, who seek the wondrous rare plumes of the white egret, the feathers of the *quetzal*, the skins of jaguars?"

"Nothing, of course. But go not near that place, señor. I have been told that on moonlight nights ghost-music is still heard there, and that Ah Puch, the ancient God of Death, has been seen walking there—he, the terrible one, with full-fleshed arms and legs, but with skeleton ribs gleaming in the moon. With strings of skulls rattling on his wrists and ankles!"

"Is that old nonsense still believed?" laughed the Don, though some of the silent listeners cringed and shuddered. "If so, after all that the *padres* have tried to teach in this country, I can only say that he who washes a donkey's head, loses both his labor and his soap."

"Ah, señor! You may laugh, here in a dwelling with living men. Here, with fire, and *tigre*-skins to sit on. But in Yaloxcaan it is different. Ghosts still walk there, seeking to touch men who still live. And whatsoever man they touch, that miserable one must die."

"Thank you, my friend. We shall take care not to go near the ruins. It is not ghosts and death and hell we seek, but rare plumage and pelts for the museums of the *Americanos*, so have no fear!"

A night under cover greatly restored the two. The *guásima*-juice worked miracles with Sturgis' poisoning. Dawn had hardly begun to glimmer in pale gold through the forest, very loud with bird-song and the harsh cries of whooper-cranes, when the little party was ready, to set out again.

The cavalcade had now been reduced by one burro. One limped so badly that Don Mário saw it could not possibly go on. This meant increasing the loads of the other animals, but—

"There is no help for it," said Don Mário. "Onward!"

THAT day, guided by the compass, tried their mettle sorely. Sometimes on trails, again floundering through swamps where crabs scuttled in the mud, and swarms of torturing insects droned about them, they pushed forward. Added to these, and clutching, ripping thorns that with diabolical persistence impeded them, was now the peril of *charcán* snakes—tree-serpents that made the life of the chicle-gatherers a nightmare.

By noon, rain had begun to fall, increasing the muck and stifle. About

three o'clock, spent and exhausted but still fighting southeast, they suddenly picked up a trail. Faint though it was, it vastly enheartened Don Mário.

"Now then, the city is near," he judged. "There are jungle-Maya villages scattered about Yaloxcaan. This trail must lead toward it. We are surely on the way to the ruins. God grant we encounter no settlement. *Vámonos!*"

**I**N a thicket of thorn-trees something like a wet firecracker squibbed—a foolish little *pop!* that seemed no more than the noise of a child's cap-pistol. Don Mário's horse reared and floundered. The Don cursed, clutched at his left leg.

"Some son of hell has shot me!" he cried.

"Where?"

"In the leg. It is nothing—if the bullet be not poisoned!"

Already Sturgis was out of his saddle.

"Get those chaps off, quick!"

The rancho swung himself to mucky earth, but his leg crumpled, and he fell.

Sturgis pulled his gun and loosed a volley at the spot whence the attack had come. The jungle grew loud with raucous screams of parrots, beating of wings.

"Hope I hit something! Maybe it'll scare the devils off for a while, anyhow." He turned to Don Mário, hauled down his chaps, then with a knife ripped up the wounded man's trousers. "Now then—"

The wound was only superficial, a little above the knee. Its jagged look, though, told of some rough and primitively cast slug; no regular bullet could have made such a tear.

"Poison, you think?"

"*Quién sabe?*"

Without hesitation, Sturgis sucked the wound. He spat crimson, repeated the process.

"Pooh! A mere scratch," said Don Mário, but the eyes in his deep-lined face showed anxiety.

"I'll have you good as new, in no time," the American cheered him. He dipped water from a scummy pool, added plenty of permanganate crystals, and dressed the wound. When it was tightly bandaged, Don Mário smoked a cigarette and said he felt much better. But something of the greenish light of that foul, sodden and miasmatic jungle seemed to have spread over his features.

"No fortune without pain," he tried to smile, as Sturgis reloaded his gun.

"Spice is good, with meat—and the spice of danger, too, is good with life. This is nothing, my brother, less than nothing. Provided always that there be no poison on the bullet."

"Where did that bullet go? It's not in the wound."

"*Quién sabe?* Never mind it. Give me a hand, now, up into the saddle, and away once more!"

The bullet could hardly have been poisoned, for no symptoms developed. As they rode on, Don Mário declared himself all right, save for some pain and a bit of fever.

Floundering with spent animals and sore-tried courage, dusk found them deep in a black cedar and mahogany swamp, apparently as much lost—under a deluge of devastating rain—as though on some strange planet long-abandoned to its own horror. But with almost the last dim fading of light through the forest roof, Don Mário turned lamely in his saddle, drew rein with a joyful cry:

"*Gracias a Dios!*"

"Eh, what?" demanded Sturgis, his nerves chafed raw. "Looks more like something to thank the devil for!"

"Ah, no—these cedars! And beyond, I know the land will rise. Soon we shall be on the higher ground where lies Yaloxcaan! Only one more camp, my brother. Then, tomorrow, the City of the Golden Books!"

## CHAPTER VI

### CITY OF DEATH

**M**ORNING, after a fevered, hammock-spent night of insect-torments, of disordered dreams, found Sturgis crouching with Don Mário at a sullenly smoldering fire. That night had been stark hell, with the tree-frogs' maddening chorus a-throb like pulses of madness; with now or then the scream of the jaguar echoing like the shriek of a damned soul through the jungle; with rain doggedly beating down. A colony of fire-ants had capped the peak of misery by attacking men and animals alike, and that had meant moving camp in the pitch-darkness. All about the invaders, hostile and deadly forces—whether of man or nature—seemed closing inexorably as the hand of Ah Puch, himself, the Maya god of Death.

But strong coffee, chile-con-carne and a couple of tortillas somewhat dispelled these mental fogs. What, after all, was



to be feared by modern men, from gods of the long ago? If only the jungle-Mayas did not attack, and if the jungle spared them, what could happen?

"How about going up to the ruins with me, Don Mário?" asked Sturgis, blowing smoke and scratching some of his flaming tick-bites, there in that mysterious, vague jungle gloom.

The rancho shook a negative head.

"But it would help a lot, if you only would!"

"No, my brother. Only in the last extremity of peril to you, can I go. If death menaces, fire three revolver-shots, close together, and I will come. Or if you hear me fire thus, come swiftly to me. But otherwise, now we must separate. You alone must take the final steps. There is no bad bread to a good appetite; nor are there any too-great hardships where gold waits. I will trace you a map of the place, as I remember it from the paper that some son of hell stole from me. You can take a burro, more sure-footed than any horse, and bring back what you can. I will await you here."

"How long ought it to take me to reach the ruins, now?"

"An hour, if God wills."

"In that case, I may be able to make two or three trips up and back, before night."

Don Mário shrugged.

"Do not seek too much, and perhaps lose all," he advised. But see—I will draw you the map I spoke of."

He scraped leaf-mold, detritus, ants and litter from the sodden black earth, which sent up a smell as of ten thousand generations of things that had lived and died there. With his knife-blade he traced outlines.

"Straight ahead now, up this rising ground to the south, you take your way. You cannot miss it, for the land slopes up in all directions, toward the ruins. At the top, maybe three or four kilo-

meters from here, you will come upon something like a large clearing."

"Ah?" queried Sturgis, crouching beside him. "The trees have been cut there?"

"No, it is not that. In centuries, no woodcutter has ventured there. They have been fools, perhaps; but who is not? If every foolish man had to wear a white cap, this world would look like a flock of sheep. So, as I say, Yaloxcaan has never been deforested. The forest has never grown there, at all. For the center of the city was once paved with great limestone slabs. It was a place, long ago, of more than a million people. The jungle has not yet been able to conquer it. Though small bush has sprung up between the paving-stones, no heavy growth has ever rooted there. So you will find only low scrub. You understand?"

"Yes, my brother. Go on!"

**E**AGERLY the American watched, listened as Don Mário sketched more outlines.

"Now then, suppose this to be the great central plaza. It lies at the highest portion of the ruins."

"And about how big is it?"

"Some thousand meters long, I have been told, by perhaps half as wide. At the eastern end of it you will come upon a mound of masonry and earth, something like the top of your sombrero, though not quite so pointed."

"And then?"

"Patience, my brother, till I tell you! You must circle about that mound. On its eastern side—I hear—stone steps descend into its interior. Those steps are probably choked with earth and bushes, but you can clear the way."

"I go down the steps?"

"Yes. And then—what you find is yours. If you can make it so!"

"Leave that part to me!" Sturgis exclaimed, with dry lips that trembled a



little, spite of all that he could do to hold his nerves in leash. His insides felt as if some giant hand were winding them up tight, like the spring of a mechanism. Three kilometers, four perhaps, and then—

"*Muy bien!*" he exclaimed. "I understand it all, Don Mário. And the sooner I get started, now—"

"True, my brother. And may you go with God!"

**H**OW many decades, centuries perhaps, had dissolved into eternity since the dead plaza of that thrice-dead but ever sacred city of Yaloxcaan had seen a sight like this?

No telling! For now the vanished gods, wherever they still dwelt, were beholding invasion by an outlander of alien race, color, speech. Kukulkaan, the Feathered Serpent; Balam, God of the Black Jaguar; Itzimna, the Supreme; Ah Puch, Lord of Death; and all the others—now they were watching a thing strange to them, and very terrible.

Under a cooking, brain-addling sun this invader forced his way, machete swinging to lop down thickets of thorn bushes, spiky cacti with hooked barbs, wild-grape and palmetto tangles. He looked no very heroic figure; hardly a type or symbol of those Conquistadores who centuries ago ravaged most of this land. Instead of armor, he wore a torn sombrero; ragged shirt; foul and muddy drill trousers; scratched leather leggings. He bestrode no prancing barb, gayly caparisoned; but led a lowly and patient Mexican burro, long-eared, gaunt and plastered with ticks.

Sweat, mud, insect-bites and vegetable poisons made him an object grotesquely repellent. But for all that, under his skin he was of the same breed as Cortez, Pizarro or any of that plundering crew.

A hundred yards or so out into the plaza, Sturgis paused to reconnoiter. Behind him now lay the primitive jungle that ages ago had buried all the unpaved

portions of this city. Carefully blazing a path along which to return, he had forced his road among ruined temples, palaces, observatories, glyphs, pyramids of ancient Yaloxcaan.

There, once upon a time, magnificent processions had streamed onward; princes and kings been carried—decked with gold and gems and quetzal plumes—in brightly painted litters. There drums and trumpets had once stirringly sounded, where now only the crested cat-owl mournfully hooted, or vagrant butterflies wafted like bits of living flame.

There smooth-polished roads and streets had once gleamed white in the suns of ages past and gone; there magnificent and tremendous structures of splendid masonry had towered toward the blue. There soft-eyed and graceful women had laughed and jested, bearing their water-jars homeward; slaves had sweat and sunk under grievous burdens; merchants had chattered for gold and turquoise, copper and pottery, fine fabrics, little bells. The busy din of market places had sounded there; myriads of soft-sandaled feet had trodden the inevitable ways of life, to death; games had been hotly contested and applauded; human sacrifices been bloodily offered for the appeasement of gods never yet insulted and outraged as now, by this intruder.

Life in its fullest measure of numbers, toil, joy, hope, faith, achievement, grief, pride and splendor had been lived here, in long-forgotten times; and now? Save for the dart of that green jewel-eyed lizard up that serpent-like and twisted vine, the web-spinning of a crablike spider on the plinth of a dead king's palace, the slow and high drift of those watching buzzards, all had vanished.

**O**PPRESSION weighed on Sturgis. Not even the golden dream of his errand could dispel an ominous dread. A thing scuttered near his feet—a large red scorpion. He stamped it to creamy pulp, and felt a bit giddy. That sun! What, he vaguely wondered, was sun-stroke like? To get a touch of that, all alone here—not so good. Better be on his way. But where?

A glance at his shadow, then at the compass, gave him his direction plainly enough. "East end of the clearing," Don Mário had said. *That way!*

Turning east, dragging the exhausted burro after him, he slashed his path along. A lovely long-feathered blue-

green bird winged away—a sacred quetzal, though Sturgis knew it not. Through thick scrub, over heaved-up slabs of limestone and crusty brown ant-hills, among thorny vines he shoved ahead.

Thirst assailed him, and ever more feverishly a giddy oppression swirled and bubbled in his brain. Most terrible of all was the dead silence, which the swish and whack of his machete, the cracking of branches, and the plodding tread of the burro threw into more ominous relief. Then—he saw it—the conical, bush-grown mound!

A wave of surging exultation swept out every cobweb from his brain, left him once more taut, keen, eager.

"There she is!"

**B**UT when, with pounding heart and dry mouth he reached its brush-tangled base, it looked hopeless. In that confused and desolate ruin, could there indeed be any entrance?

"Pipe-dream!" mused Sturgis, as with shaking hands he lighted a cigarette, then stood surveying the tumulus, hoary with age. There could be nothing to the story. And yet—had not Don Mário himself risked everything, even his own life, to guide his blood-brother here?

"Don Mário said the door was on the east side of it," he recalled. So, round the tumulus to its other side he forced his path. Grass, bushes, lianas yielded to his blade, as—half-drowned in sweat, panting like a blown dog—he cleared the way. Limestone blocks, some showing odd and complex hieroglyphs, lay overgrown with flowering vines. Sickly palms shoved up between them, with three or four clumps of wild pepper and a couple of half-dead breadnut-trees. On the summit, perhaps twenty feet above the plaza level, a nest of black wasps hung to the limb of a half-grown tree. The hum of their busy swarming reached Sturgis' ears. Where the devil could the entrance be?

He stood at gaze, now with fair coolness and more steady nerves surveying the mound. Earth, he saw, for the most part covered it; but here and there gaunt juts or thrusts of masonry peeped through. All seemed solid, impassable.

"How the blazes, now, am I going to get into *that*?"

Then all at once Sturgis saw the entrance. Square on the eastern side, blocked by earth and tangled vines, yet clearly visible, he perceived drunkenly leaning uprights of stone, a cracked

and sagging lintel made of an immense monolith.

Again his heart tightened. He shivered, as with an ague. Then his machete cleared the thickets right up to the very threshold of this House of Mystery.

"Pick and shovel, now!" he decided. Jamming his machete point-down in the earth, he shoved back to the patient and suffering burro. "Stick with me, old kid, and you'll soon be on Oat Street, for life!"

Once more at the blocked doorway he fell to work.

*Plog!* Deep into the mold of centuries he drove the pick. Again he struck, again. Presently his spade came into play. Sweat burst from every pore. Within his skull, pulses like trip-hammers fell a-pounding. Still he struck and dug, delved, flung the earth spinning away.

Panting and spent, he had to stop for wind. From a block of carven masonry a tiny chameleon unwinkingly stared at him, then vanished. Once more Sturgis threw himself into that inferno of toil; and—

Something slid, caved in, gave way. Amid blinding dust-clouds, an opening yawned, down-sloping. Sturgis felt a waft of dead, sepulchral air, so choking and so foul that he recoiled, a-gasp.

"Got to wait for *that* to clear out!" he gulped, in a mental blur that dimly grasped at thoughts of poison-gas. "But in a few minutes, now—"

He gave ground, stumbled back to where his machete stuck, jerked it from the earth. The tail of his eye had almost subconsciously caught a glimpse of something sinuous, deadly, repulsive—something gray and fatal.

He swung round, leaped back with a choking cry as an undulating streak of horror launched itself.

*Thud!*

On his left leg he felt the grisly impact of the serpent. He saw it fall and writhe.

His machete flailed. There at his feet, thrashing halves of the *uol-potch* flung themselves about, whipping the earth in their death-struggle.

**S**ICK at heart and yellow-faced, Sturgis stared down at his leg. Bitten? Could this be death?

On his legging he perceived two tiny scratches, down from which in the sunlight oozed trickles of a pale, clear, yellow liquid.

Sudden nausea gripped him. Clearing, sky and mound and everything swam into one whirling, darkening blur.

Slumping, he folded together grotesquely as a broken marionette; and—close beside the still-twitching halves of the severed *wol-potch*—plunged into a swooning blackness of unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER VII

### GOLD

**F**LIES and ants crawling over his face, an intolerable glare of sun on his bare head, heat and oppression—these were Sturgis' first perceptions as he came back to gray-glimmering consciousness. With racking efforts he heaved himself up to a sitting posture.

There still loomed the treasure-mound. There, almost at his feet, lay the severed snake, about which already a host of carrion-flies had begun to swarm. Sturgis shuddered and turned away.

A shadow skimmed the earth. The American saw a swoop and fold of broad wings. Then, a-top the mound, on a branch of the stunted zapote-tree, he perceived a foul and hunchbacked bird with wattled bill, hooked like a scimitar. The vulture fixed on him a calculating eye. Sturgis quivered.

"God!" he gulped. "I better get out of here."

Then his thoughts surged to the bitten legging. Had those deadly fangs pierced the leather? Gingerly, with shrinking horror, Sturgis focused his vision on the legging. No, the leather was only scratched.

Faint and giddy, he drew his knife. With infinite care he shaved off poison and leather. Then, plunging the blade time and again in black earth, he made sure no taint remained upon it.

"Whew!"

His nerves were steadying. He picked up his sombrero and jammed it once more on his head, which dully ached. Only an idiot would come so far, go through so much hell, to stop now!

In five minutes more, after a welcome cigarette, Sturgis was back again at the entrance. Cautiously he scouted step by step down the declivity. On he pushed, into the cavernous burial-place of the dead gods' golden books.

A fetid waft of air still rose from below, an odor of decay and death. But Sturgis judged the air was breathable. Foot by foot, machete ready in right

hand, he slid and stumbled down. Nothing now seemed to menace. For the moment, silence held. No creature stirred. But suddenly, from depths unknown, a faint chipping noise grew audible.

"More snakes?"

He paused, staring, listening. Then he recognized the sound, and laughed hoarsely.

"Only bats. I must be going cuckoo, to let bats worry me!"

With strengthening nerves he advanced. Underfoot, the detritus of centuries crumbled, filled the air with choking dust. Sliding, now on his feet, now half-sitting, he descended. Overhead, he saw stone slabs that sagged, that might at any shock break loose, bringing down tons of débris. Never mind—

"They've lasted God knows how many hundred years. Thousands, maybe. Reckon they'll hold up, an hour more!"

A sudden slide, a plunge through reeking dust—and down Sturgis catapulted neck-and-crop into a murky gloom. Unhurt, he struggled up and waded out of a muck of loose, granular stuff—bat-guano. Narrowly he squinted round.

"Bottom of this dump, anyhow—that's something!"

True enough; he had at last come to the floor of this ancient temple, vault, storehouse, tomb or whatsoever it might be. Now, with dilating pupils, he began to gather certain vague impressions of a chamber perhaps thirty feet wide and stretching away into shadows impenetrable; time-blackened walls most curiously carved, with here or there a red hand painted on them; a roof nearly lost in dim obscurity.

From that roof sounded the faint, querulous chipping that told of clustered bats. He felt an odd relief at their presence. Even that queer form of life seemed to companion him.

Lighting one of his candles, he shuffled forward through the accumulated guano of centuries untold. The candle-flame, as he held it aloft, grew spangled with tiny dust-motes. Dim though it was, it half-revealed something that halted him, staring—a thing vague and immense, a thing grotesque and frowning, that seemed to curse and to repel.

**A**N archæologist would have known it, at a glance; would have called it a "stela." But Sturgis knew no more of archæology than a mouse knows of mathematics. So this fifteen-foot stela of Ah'Puch was just, to him, "an' idbl."



For a moment the Lord of Death and the invading pillager, of alien race and color, looked each upon the other. Ah Puch beheld a ragged man, grimy and hollow-cheeked. The invader dimly saw a skull of carven stone, skeleton ribs, grotesque arms and legs, with bracelets and anklets of death's-heads; and at the sides of this ominous figure, plumed serpents, with rows of intricate carvings.

**N**OW Sturgis' eyes had fallen to something that lay stretched before this mighty god of stone; something that riveted his attention, there under the feeble yellow candle-gleam. This thing was an object that might be called a table, a stone table, standing about three feet in front of Ah Puch.

A table, indeed, but of such strange form, of workmanship so massive, as to suggest the labor of Titans rather than of human hands. Six rough-chiseled legs supported its ponderous length. And as Sturgis lowered the candle toward it, straining his bloodshot eyes, he saw it was covered with something confused yet regular—something that suggested a series of objects laid in slanting rows.

"The books, by God! The books!" he gasped.

Yes, there they lay, the golden archives of Maya. Now more plainly Sturgis saw them, as with pounding heart he came closer. He perceived plates of some kind; plates arranged in ranks, each rank overlapping the next and resting on it.

Brown, massive, covered with batguano, now for the first time in all this world those sacred books were being seen by any white man's eye.

For a moment complete realization could not win through to Sturgis' consciousness. His mind seemed split, divided between the commonplace and the fantastic, the real and the incredible.

One part of his brain appeared to say: "Here are scores of gold plates. Here are more than five million dollars! And a priceless record of a great civilization."

The other part seemed to assert:

"This is just a bunch of junk, lying on an old stone bench. There's nothing to this. There can't be anything!"

Hot candle-grease dropping on his hand roused him to something like coherence. Holding the candle down close to some of the objects, he stared open-jawed, motionless and dumb.

Plates, plates, plates—what an incredible number of plates, all square-cor-

nered and oblong! Each plate, he now saw, was pierced at one end by a round hole; and every row was held together by a curved metal bar with a knob at both ends.

The rows all sagged down in a curve, into the concave table-top. Yes, with utmost care and order, all those plates had been laid there—when? By what hands, now dust these centuries gone?

Sturgis held the guttering candle nearer still.

Now he could see the plates were about two feet long, perhaps a foot and a half wide, a half-inch thick. He pried the end one loose and held the candle so that the flame shone along its surface—a surface that gleamed yellow through the dust of ages; a surface covered with strange symbols and hieroglyphics carved into its flat-beaten surface.

"Yeah, those are the books, all right. But—gold?"

## CHAPTER VIII

### TERROR

**B**EHIND him, it seemed as if the faint light grew for a second even more tenebrous and dim. Sturgis thought he heard a slight thudding sound. Was it a stone that fell, jarred loose by the echo of his cry?

He shifted his machete to the left hand, drew his gun and swung round. Every nerve taut, he struggled up the crumbling slope.

"*Quién va?*" he demanded, as once more he reached the sunlit glare. No answer. No sound or sight of anyone. Scrub jungle and ruined plaza stretched away deserted, silent.

His mind inflamed with a suffocating excitement, Sturgis circled the mound. Heavily upon him lay the feeling that somebody hostile and deadly, had now entered this loneliness. Again he challenged:

"Who the hell's here, now?"

Then he stopped short, gaping. In the saw-grass beside the stunted coco-palm, a dark object was lying. An animal—the burro!

Sturgis crashed through the bush to it, stood for a moment staring. And very well he might; for from the creature's throat a tiny trickle of blood had clotted down. Unseeingly the burro's filmed eyes looked up at him with cynical indifference, as if to say—

"I'm out of hell, anyhow; and you're just beginning it!"

"God's sake!" choked Sturgis. "What the hell did that—or who?"

No answer. Only the deadly silence of the plaza, ringed by watching jungle, offered its blank and terrible hostility.

Pondering a moment and with crisped nerves, Sturgis remained there on the watch. Presently he began to understand that death might have come to the burro through other means than human. In this land of poisonous creatures, something unknown to him might have bitten the animal, reached a vein, and swiftly killed it. Maybe a snake— He examined the slight wound. Was it double? If so, surely it was a snake-bite. But no—only one tiny puncture showed.

Panic struggled for mastery, a second. Sturgis felt an almost uncontrollable urge to abandon everything, to run.

But this was only a swift-passing quiver of nerves long overwrought. Almost at once, he steadied again.

"Damned if I'll quit!" he swore.

Nerved afresh by this decision, he took his *reata* from the dead burro and went back to the mound. Unmolested, he slid down once more into the dark chamber, relighted his candle that he had dropped near the bottom of the slope, and again approached the table of the books.

With a little hot wax he fastened his candle to the edge of the stone table. And now he saw, piled flat under the table, a dozen or so plates similar in size and shape to those resting in ranks above. He tugged off the top one, stood it on edge. Its surface was flat and plain and dingy yellow. Gold? With his machete he shaved at one edge, and a bright golden sliver curled off.

Gold! Gold indeed! And in ecstasy Sturgis burst forth in a ringing shout: "Gold! Gold!"

Disjointed plans flitted through his brain, plans about sometime coming back, getting up an expedition to clean out the whole temple, rose to mind. He shut them out. Never mind that, now!

WITH a strong effort Sturgis slid the plate off the severed bar toward the entrance.

"Weighs all of a hundred avoirdupois," he judged. "But I'll drag a couple of 'em out of this joss-house, or bust my b'ilers!"

Sweating like rain, in that close stifle, he scraped the bat-guano from the plate. He knotted his rope fast to it, dragged

it to the entrance. Grudgingly it slid along, as if held back by ghostly hands.

At the base of the exit slope, he paused to rest and breathe. Then up, and out!

"That's one of 'em!"

Sturgis smoked a cigarette in the shade of the temple doorway, then untied his rope and went down for another plate. After that, he'd cut poles, rig a travois and be on his back-tracks.

"Couple of hours, at the outside," he judged, "and I ought to be at camp, with Don Mário." And then—the rancho! All these fool notions about hostile forces in the jungle, and ghosts among the ruins—

"Just a bunch o' bull, that's all. Nothing to 'em—not a thing in the world!"

When he got back to the plaza, though, with the second plate—

"Where the devil's the first one?" he gasped.

His scalp crawled with a nameless terror. Skin quivered, tightened, with panic. No sign, no trace remained of the first golden plate hauled from the crypt of Ah Puch, God of Death.

THEN Peter Sturgis knew fear. To have met and done battle with any visible enemy, to have killed or been killed—that would have been all in the game. But this silent, hostile mystery now closing in on him, clutched his soul with a horror very close to superstition.

Panting heavily, he peered about with smarting and inflamed eyes. Dust was in them, in hair and nose and throat, a dust that stung, that strangled. He spat, hauled up his belt, and cursed again.

It got him nowhere. Insulting the vacancy of a Maya ruin was fruitless as Xerxes' flogging of the Hellespont with chains. A wonder came upon him—was this all some wild, fantastic dream? How else could a gold plate weighing a hundred pounds or so completely disappear, with no visible, no audible agency?

"Holy Lord, I'm getting out o' here!"

One gold plate would have to do, now—if indeed this plate were real. To look for the first one, or to go down into that crypt for another—never! Perfectly well he knew that, did he leave this plate which he now had, it too would vanish. His only hope now was to hang fast to it and try to make his escape with it.

Whether even that was possible seemed more than doubtful. But still, the bulldog in him would not quit, beaten. When he went, this plate was going too!

Stopping not to cut poles and rig an Indian sledge as planned, he cast the



rope over his shoulder, and leaning far forward, dragged the plate away from the mound. It slithered through grass and bush, smeared out the remnants of the dead *uol-potch*, streaked a long furrow past the carcass of the burro.

Machete penduluming against his leg, gun in hand, he toiled like any beast of burden back along the slashed-out path that he had come. Flies, cruelly biting, tortured him. Sweat stung his eyes. Into his shoulder the leather rope gouged deep. Now and again the gold plate wedged and stuck. Bitterly cursing, he had to stop and free it. Still he slogged onward.

Unmolested, he reached the edge of the ancient plaza. He shoved into the forest, ever following the blaze-marks made on his way up. But very soon exhaustion forced a halt. Wheezing, he stopped. He cast off the rope and slumped on a fallen cannonball-tree to have a smoke, to pull himself together for the trek of agony that still remained.

Suddenly he stiffened with dismay.

Very far off there to northward in the jungle, he had heard—faint but incisive—three tiny detonations. Don Mário's signal-shots, for help!

## CHAPTER IX

### THUNDERBOLT

**S**TURGIS' hesitation lasted but a moment, while from the web of immense tree-tops more than a hundred feet in air burst forth the deep and wailing roar of a band of howler-monkeys, startled by the shots.

Then, as those black devils of the jungle started to leap away through clustered vines and creepers of the forest roof, and a chacalaca-bird added its maniacal laughter, Sturgis dragged the golden plate off to one side of the trail under a gigantic ceiba-tree, flung the rope down upon it, and heaped over them an

armful of dead leaves and rotten detritus.

Three answering shots from his gun, straight up into the green jungle gloom—then a couple of machete-cuts on the ceiba, to mark it as the hiding-place of the gold, and he ran down the trail.

Freed now from the burden he had been sweating along, he forged onward at his best pace. None too good, at that! Slithering in slimy and leech-infested waters of swamp-holes as he reached the lower ground, then clambering over roots and windfalls, often he was checked; but still he struggled on.

Nearly spent, he paused a moment to breathe and to reload his gun. Eagerly he listened. What tragedy might not already have culminated? And then, with relief, he heard louder firing.

"That's the shotgun!" Its heavy boom distinguished it from rifle or pistol-fire. "Close work now, I reckon. Don Mário must be flat up against the wall."

Sweating, panting, bleeding from thorn-slashes, he fought his way. Now and again, loud detonations echoed.

He stopped again, to breathe and reconnoiter.

"*Ea!*" he shouted. "*Hermano mio!*"

An answering hail, through far, dim aisles of the dark forest! Once more Sturgis drove ahead.

Then he saw the tzubin-tree where he had left Don Mário. Under it he saw a horse and a burro, prostrate. Over the horse's belly a man's head peeped out—Don Mário's.

"What's happened?" called Sturgis.

The Don reared up, shotgun in hand. He shook an infuriated fist.

"They have killed him!" he roared.

"Mariposa, my best horse!"

Panting, Sturgis came running up.

"Where are they?" he demanded.

"The devils—the forest-Mayas! Cowards, sons of bats! Now that you come, they melt away. They will not stand and fight!"



"All right, let 'em go. Farther they go, the better! Where's the other burro, and Bravo?"

"Back there!" Don Mário jerked a thumb toward a dense thicket of button-trees. "I hid them there. These devils—they have no guns, like the one that shot me. But they have poisoned arrows and blowguns. They shot Mariposa, and—"

"And you?"

"Untouched. Even in death, Mariposa served me. He made a breastwork for me. I sprayed the jungle with buck-shot. May the saints grant that I have killed a few! And you—are you safe?"

"Yes. But they killed my burro."

"Bad business. These forest demons are not only showing their teeth; they are biting, also. And the gold? You found the gold?"

"Yes. Much happened, that I cannot tell you now. I started with one gold plate, dragging it by the *reata*. When I heard your three signal-shots, I buried it, and ran. I can find that plate again. I will go for it—"

"No! To other dogs, such bones. Now you and I are like those who went for wool and came back shorn—if indeed we can get back, at all. Luck has turned. The candle now is worth more than the game."

"You mean, we're quitting cold?"

"I mean, my brother, that the alarm has been given. By tomorrow the whole jungle may be swarming against us, if we try again. But if we depart in peace, perhaps we shall be allowed to go. Not lightly do these devils kill white men. The fear of the Spaniard still lurks in their hearts. We had best go, at once!"

"Go back with empty hands?"

Don Mário nodded.

"What is gold worth, to dead men? Many a mouth that has watered for gold has been filled with earth."

"Might as well be dead, anyhow, as be a quitter! Whatever you do, Don

Mário, I'm going back for that plate. Holy saints, man! More than a hundred pounds of gold—fifty thousand dollars, American!"

"It is much, much. Where did you hide that plate? In the ruins?"

"No. Outside, under a big ceiba in the forest. And worth a hundred thousand, Mex. Are we going to let *that* lie around loose in the jungle?"

"It would seem a pity, no? Perhaps, after all—"

"You'll go back there with me, and help me get it?"

"Yes! For my brother I will risk even life. We will take the two remaining animals, and go. Then, swiftly to the rancho!"

Whether Don Mário's vigorous gun-play and Sturgis' arrival had frightened off the forest Mayas, or whether they had only retired for reinforcements and to perfect an annihilating attack, who could tell? At any rate, no further hostilities now for the moment declared themselves. And early afternoon found the blood-brothers back at the tzubintree camp, with the gold plate lashed on top of their surviving burro's *basto*.

Both men were pretty well at the end of their strength, but fires of spirit sustained the flesh.

"And now indeed we must be gone at once!" warned the ranchero, as they wolfed down such grub as came handiest. "What you have told me of the happenings there among the ruins—well, it shows me these devils will surely kill us now, if they but dare. All that can save us—if anything—is their fear of our weapons. Now—the words are ours, the acts are God's. Every hour counts. Every minute. Away!"

**D**ELAYING not a moment, they girt themselves for the northward trek through jungles and morasses, back toward Pozo Negro, Las Pociigas and the ranch. By half-past two the now sadly diminished cavalcade was floundering in retreat through that somber and menacing wilderness, with such food as still remained and with the hundredweight of gold. The one horse, Bravo, carried Don Mário and Sturgis, turn and turn about.

Night, dropping a sudden wall of almost solid darkness, found them utterly spent beside a fever-scummed lagoon. They had barely strength to unload the animals and sling the hammocks. Food and tobacco somewhat revived them; these, and a swallow of tequila, urgent-

ly they needed a fire to dry their sodden clothes, boil coffee, and with its smudge abate the intolerable insect-torment; but fire they dared not light, with the possibility of forest-Mayas lurking near by.

"We must stand watches tonight, brother," said Don Mário. "While one sleeps, the other wakes—remembering always that if he so much as closes an eye, neither of us may ever see God's daylight again. I will keep guard till midnight, and after that, you."

"Let's make it three-hour watches," Sturgis amended. "That will be easier. You take the first trick of sleep."

"No, we will spin a coin for it!"

Don Mário lost. Sturgis thrust his aching and feverish head through the hole of his poncho, fell into his hammock and slept almost before he had found time to draw three breaths. Beside him and the exhausted, sprawled-out animals, Don Mário—also wrapped in his poncho—brooded with the shotgun under his arm.

NEAR and far, sounds of the jungle drifted; strange inexplicable noises, furtive, shrill, whispering—the antiphony of life and death ever busily at work. And myriads of tiny lights—fireflies, or perhaps the eyes of little, unknown creatures—glimmered in a dark that seemed to quiver.

Then a vague shimmer of moonlight trickled through the jungle roof of giant treetops penetrating the distorted vines and creepers. It etched the shadows with silver filigree. Sounds died away to timorous murmurs, fading to silence. Miasmas and pale, poisonous vapors wreathed themselves above the swamp. Don Mário wrapped his poncho closer.

The three hours he should have kept watch extended to six, but still he kept his vigil.

"He needs sleep more than I," thought the Don. "How can I have the heart to waken him?"

And it was well past midnight when at last he shook the American's arm, roused him from deep pits of unconsciousness.

But this he did not tell.

"Your turn, now," he lied. "Three hours are past. Now three for you, and then I watch again!"

Waking, sleeping, suffering, they passed the hours. An endless night thinned away. Far above the stupendous tufted curtain of jungle, the broad purple floor of star-dusted tropic beauty paled to dawn. Then up again the blood-brothers

aroused themselves, to a clammy mockery of breakfast—jerked beef, dry *galletas* and a mouthful of tequila. A whiff of sodden tobacco; and so, pack for another day of hell.

PACKING the burro's *basto* with the heavy slab of gold, Sturgis drew his knife to cut a loose end of cord. And having need of both hands to haul a loop tight, he disposed of that knife a moment by stabbing its point into a twisted rubber-tree.

Don Mário's eye fell on the knife. Its curious, silver-inlaid steel woke in him a gathering wonder. He leaned closer, narrowly studied it under that mysterious and dim jungle-light. Then he plucked it from the tree.

"This knife!"

"Eh, my brother?"

"Where did you get this knife?"

"Oh, from a Mexican at Puerto Hondo," Sturgis carelessly made answer.

"You bought it?"

"In a way. Paid for it with quite a lot of blood."

"Mira! I must understand! What is your meaning?"

Sturgis paused in his work at the knot, faced Don Mário.

"What's the idea?" he asked. "What's this all about, anyhow?"

"I demand that you tell me how you got this knife—and do not lie!"

The American flushed.

"If you weren't my blood-brother, Don Mário— Well, I got that knife where I got my gun. From a *bandido* who tried to stick me up and rob me, one dark night!"

"And did he rob you?"

"Not perceptibly. I was just a shade too quick for him. He ended up in a clump of bushes."

"Bushes? The police got him?"

"No, the buzzards."

"*Madre de Dios!* Let me see your gun!"

"My gun?"

"Yes! Give it me!"

Wondering greatly, Sturgis drew his gun, held it out.

Don Mário took the weapon in a hand that trembled. With tightening jaw, eyes that darkened to black slashes, he examined it. An odd, yellowish tinge overspread his face.

"You mean," he asked in a wire-taut voice, "this gun, this knife—you took them from the body of a man you—killed?"

"Well, putting it in plain Castilian, that's about the size of it." Amazed, the American stared. "He was going to kill *me*. He'd have had that knife into my heart, if I hadn't been a breath too quick for him. As it was, he ripped my arm, and—"

"So that was a lie, that story you told about having been knifed in a mutiny?"

"Only children and fools always speak the truth, Don Mário," shrugged the American.

"But you will speak it now!" the rancho flung at him. "What kind of man was it, you killed?"

"Dressed in fine clothes, but torn and muddy. He said he had been robbed himself, of a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars that he had been paid for his ranch. So he tried to take it out on me."

"Never mind that! I mean—did you notice anything about him, not like all other men? Answer me!"

"Well, since you insist, the *bandido* limped. He was lame."

"*Ay, Dios!* And did he hold the knife in his right hand?"

"No! In his left. Why?"

**W**ITH a furious oath, Don Mário flung the knife down. Eyes blood-shot, teeth like a wolf's through retracted lips, he leveled the gun.

"These weapons belonged to Eduardo, my own brother!" he snarled. "That lame, left-handed man was the son of my own father and mother. It was my brother Eduardo you murdered! Now I repay!"

As Sturgis swung a fist that caught Don Mário's bearded jaw, the gun crashed so close to his ear that it deafened him. Powder-grains scorched his flesh. But the bullet struck only swamp-water, jetting up slime and mud.

Another blow dropped the Don. Sturgis leaped on him like a tiger. The jungle echoed to confused cries and curses. Black-sodden muck smeared both men as they rolled, twisted, wrenched in a rage that kills.

Flaring like a fire of dry straw, the combat died as swiftly. For a spraining twist numbed the Don's gun-hand. The weapon dropped, was smeared into the mud. Sturgis landed a smash back of the rancho's ear. Don Mário grunted, kicked a couple of times, lay still.

Sturgis staggered to his feet.

"That'll be—about all for you!" he panted, standing over the unconscious

Mexican, with bruised knuckles. He peered down with bitter blue eyes. "Try to shoot me up, eh, because I killed a thug? Get up—get out o' here!"

The American picked up knife and gun. The knife he thrust into his belt, but he held the gun ready.

"*Arriba!*"

No answer. The rancho, knocked stiff, lay in a huddled heap. For a moment Sturgis stared down at him. But swiftly a tinge of anxiety shadowed his eyes. He stooped, shook the Mexican.

"Jumping Jupiter—I hope I haven't killed him too!"

Half a sombrero of water sluiced over his face brought back a tiny glimmer of consciousness. That glimmer brightened to a waxing flame of hate. He choked and spat, and struggled to sit up.

"Murderer! The blood of my own brother," gulped the Don, "is on your hands. You must pay! If not now—"

"Look here! I'm not going to argue this thing. You wouldn't understand." Judicially he weighed his gun. "Self-defense probably means nothing to you, a case like this. And you don't believe me now, anyhow. So let it pass. The only question is—what are we going to do about it?"

"Do? *Madre de Dios!* I shall kill you—or you, me!"

"That killing stuff is out. I've had enough of it. And as for you, you're under oath to stand by me!"

"I repudiate that oath! It does not hold, with a murderer."

"Oh, that's how you work it, eh? See here, Don Mário, I demand that you go back to the rancho with me, and arrange some way for me to clear out of this country with my gold! Or else you've perjured yourself."

**D**ON MÁRIO, rubbing his ear, looked blacker than sin. Doggedly he shook his head.

"The oath does not cover a man who has murdered my own brother. To the rancho, no. If you try to reach it—if you get there, my *vaqueros*—"

"Oh, so they'll finish me? That's it, eh?"

"No, I shall not let them touch you, otherwise than to deliver you as a prisoner to the soldiers at Puerto Hondo. And then—"

"Then, the presidio or the firing-squad? Fine! You're what we Americans call an Indian giver. You give—but you take back again. So a life-sentence or a firing-

squad—that's the best you offer the blood-brother that saved Lolita's life?"

Don Mário winced, painfully dragged himself to his knees, got up, stood bracing himself against the rubber-tree. A moment he pondered. Then—

"Listen, *Americano*," he retorted, scowling from under eyebrows heavy with wrath. "Listen. My oath shall at least give you a chance for life and wealth. It was the word of an *hidalgo*, and cannot be wholly broken. You still have one chance."

"I do, eh? What's that? You're generous, in the real old Spanish style! What's the chance, Don Mário?"

The *ranchero* gestured toward the east.

"Almost due into the sunrise, from here, is British Honduras. There is Belize. The distance is perhaps four hundred and fifty kilometers—jungles, swamps, Maya ruins, forest Indians, snakes—but the journey has been made. It can be made again."

"You mean?"

"The gold is yours. I will give you the one remaining horse, the compass, most of the food. Myself, I will keep only a very little of that, with the burro. You may find trails of *chicleros*. Villages, perhaps. You can perhaps fight your way through to the Gulf of Honduras. If you live, you live. If you die, well—death makes all men the same size."

"So that's your program for me, eh?"

"It is my program. It must be yours. Whatever happens, it will sometime end. Every day has its evening. You had best accept, for in a tempest every port is good. What I offer you is at least a fighting chance for life and riches. The road north from here leads you only to prison or the firing-squad. So, choose well, and maybe you will reach safety at Belize—if God wills. This now is my final word, forever. I have finished!"

Silently the American looked at this man, bruised and disheveled, but still with some inherent dignity that nothing could obliterate. That this word was final indeed, Sturgis well understood. The Indian strain in Don Mário had met the European and had conquered it. As well now argue with a Maya pyramid as with this man.

Sturgis nodded.

"*Está bien!*" he agreed. "Let us make the division swiftly, for I must be on my way—back to white men once more!"

Don Mário quivered, but said only:

"It shall all be as God wills. Let God, no other, be the judge!"

TÍO  
PABLO



## CHAPTER X

### DON MÁRIO UNDERSTANDS

TOWARD night of the next day Don Mário rode—on a horse from Las Pocilgas—through the broad vegas to the Rancho de San Agustín.

Torn, lacerated, swollen with insect-bites, gaunt and weary and grim, he reined up at the outer corral gates and stiffly dismounted. He leaned a moment against the gates, hardly able to stand, as welcoming shouts rose from old Tío Pablo.

"The master! The master, home again! Praise all the saints—our master, home!"

The rancho woke to sudden life. Vaqueros set up a joyous tumult. Doña Perfecta and Lolita came running.

"Eyes of my soul!" the Doña cried, in the shelter of Don Mário's arms. "Again I see thee, thanks to God! And, *ay!*—how weary and how spent! But—the *Americano?*"

"Bitten by a *charcón*. Nothing could be done, to save him. It was God's will. I buried him as best I could, and set up a little wooden cross."

"*Pobrecito!*" The señora crossed herself. "May his soul, even though outside the faith, find rest! But thou, my treasure?"

"I am well. We had many hardships. All the animals were lost but one of the burros, that I left at Las Pocilgas. It matters nothing about them. What God has given, God can take. I rejoice only that I am well, and see thee again, *querida mía*. In a day or two, I shall be as always. And what has happened in my absence?"

He released her from his arms. Together they walked toward the ranch-house, while some of his people followed at a respectful distance, others led the horse away.

"Happened? Nothing much. Only, yesterday came two men from Puerto

Hondo, in a little ketch. There, you can see the vessel, just outside the bar." She pointed toward the lagoon, all a wimple of dying pastel shades. "They came ashore in a *cayuco*. They are here now."

"Here? And what seek they?"

The wife shrugged, as they climbed the few brick steps up into the *zaguán*.

"How should I know, my husband? It is not for women to put their noses into men's porridge. They told me nothing, except that they wanted speech with thee."

"Hmmm! And what names did they give?"

"One is a Señor Tácito Montante. The other, thou knowest. Chato Piedra."

"What—Chato Piedra? The notary, that human buzzard?"

"Hush, *mi alma!* Remember, they are the guests beneath our roof. And Chato Piedra is a good lawyer."

"Good lawyer, bad neighbor!" Don Mário growled out the ancient proverb. "A curse on all notaries and men of the law! Where are these men, now?"

"There, down past the calf-pens." She pointed in the fading light. "Dost thou not see them? They have spent much time looking at our cattle, talking with the *vaqueros*, asking Tío Pablo about the number bred and branded and sold."

"So?" And Don Mário frowned. "Now they are coming toward the house."

"It is maybe that they want to buy the rancho?"

"This rancho is not for sale. I will speak with them, immediately."

"Wait, my soul, till thou hast rested and eaten."

"No, it shall be at once. Go in, Perfecta. It may be that what we have to say will not be suitable for thy ears." He thrust her toward the entrance of the ranch-house. "Now, then," he muttered, "here is an egg that certainly needs salt. And I will salt it properly, if God wills!"

WITH a bow of frigid courtesy Don Mário greeted Chato Piedra's over-effusive, greeting, and acknowledged the introduction of the other man, Señor Tácito Montante.

"And to what," he asked, "do I owe the very great honor of this visit?"

"Let us not speak of that, this extremely beautiful evening," smiled the lawyer. "You have been away, traveling far. You are weary. Is not tomorrow another day?"

By the fading light over the sullen-flowing Río Fangoso and the vast, dim lagoon where rode the ketch from Puerto Hondo, Don Mário fixed bloodshot severe eyes on the lawyer. A little, fat, greasy fellow was this man of the law, with curled-up mustachios and a very much too heavy gold watch-chain.

Covertly smiling, Montante cast an oblique glance at the lawyer, as who should say: "Here now is a man who can catch even old birds with chaff!" Don Mário did not miss that glance. He bent his gaze on Montante—a gaunt bag of bones, swarthy and pockmarked.

"A Turco," thought the rancher. "Wolves of the same litter hunt together. There is evil, blowing in this wind!"

MONTANTE indeed bore all earmarks of being what the Mexicans call a "Turk," which is to say an Armenian. Now Montante spoke up:

"No business tonight, señor. My friend the lawyer well says that tomorrow is always another day."

"Tomorrow we may all be dead. Pardon me, but I must know the reason for your honoring me with this visit, no later than tonight!" returned Don Mário. He felt a nameless dread constricting his tired heart.

"If you insist," smiled the lawyer, lighting a cigarette, "I must inform you this gentleman has come to the Rancho San Agustín for the purpose of inspecting and appraising his new property."

"Ah, so?" the rancher queried, sensing relief. "And where may that property lie? Some mahogany forest or some chicle concession, up the river? Or it may be—"

"No, Don Mário. Let us whip no dogs about the bushes. The property he—my client—has acquired is this same Rancho San Agustín, where we now have the honor of finding ourselves. This very rancho, here, señor!"

For a moment Don Mário remained staring at him, seeming not to have heard.

"Eh? You say—"

"He has bought this rancho, Don Mário."

"No more riddles, please! To drink soup and to whistle at the same time is impossible. You, as a lawyer, are fond of spinning words and embroidering phrases. Now I ask you to speak plainly, Señor Piedra! What is the meaning of all this?"

"But I have already told you!" the lawyer affirmed. "This señor, now with



me, has bought your rancho. Bought and paid for it, and it is his!"

"Bought it?"

"*Si señor!*"

"But I have never sold it! I do not understand. My rancho, my property—how can he have bought it, when I have not sold?"

"It is useless to deny, señor," replied the lawyer. "The papers are in order."

"Thousand devils! What papers?"

"What should they be, but the deeds?"

"Deeds? But—"

"Everything is properly recorded, Don Mário. First, the sale by you to your brother, Don Eduardo—lands, buildings, cattle, everything. Then, his transfer to my client, here, of all the above. It is all entirely legal, señor. The money has been paid to your brother, and there remains nothing for your family and for you to do but—"

"But what?"

"Need I tell you? To vacate the rancho. My client, the new owner, is taking possession immediately."

"God above!" choked Don Mário, and burst into a raw gust of execration. A flash of lightninglike comprehension blazed through his mind—understanding of the theft of his title-deeds by his brother Eduardo, forgery, villainy past all belief. "*Ladrones!* Thieves, sons of swine—"

A cry from the patio interrupted him; a shout in Tío Pablo's cracked voice:

"Bravo is here! The *Americano's* horse is here! Come quickly, Don Mário—for behold, Bravo has come!"

CONFUSION overwhelmed Don Mário. Then his brain cleared. Was he not after all a *caballero*, and of Spanish blood? Epithets, brawlings—these were for the vulgar. His voice steadied.

"A thousand pardons, señores! You are my guests, under my roof. Forgive what I have just said."

"There is no need to forgive, Don Mário," the lawyer answered. "We heard nothing."

"It is well. Let us proceed in order, and regularly. You say my brother Eduardo sold you this rancho?"

"*Sí, señor.*"

"And on what date?"

"The eighteenth of December, last."

"I see. Five weeks ago. What price did your client pay him?"

"One hundred and twenty-five thousand pesos."

"Hmmm! A bargain. It is worth easily twice that sum. But never mind. And my brother is now where?"

The lawyer gestured vaguely.

"*Quién sabe?* It is believed he took boat for Vera Cruz, a fortnight past."

"It is believed? It is not known?"

"No, señor. Your brother's whereabouts—who can tell? Nothing is known of him, save that he is no longer seen at Puerto Hondo. But the papers, they are regular."

A MOMENT, Don Mário steadied himself, to think. So his brother's death was not yet known! This could mean only that the body had not been discovered. But the American must have lied. For why should even the rascally Eduardo have attempted a hold-up when he had just completed this much more lucrative villainy? . . . Unless, of course, this rascally lawyer and his confederate had stolen again the money they had paid Eduardo. . . . But wait! One hundred and twenty-five thousand pesos! Was that not indeed the precise sum which the American had quoted the hold-up man as having been robbed of himself? Now at last the pieces of this puzzle fitted together. . . . At all events, one chapter of family anguish—that of scandal and publicity—would be spared them.

The Don glanced up.

"I see," he nodded. "So then, my brother has just disappeared. Probably to Vera Cruz, eh?"

"*Sí, señor,*" the lawyer agreed.

"And in that case—"

"Master, master!" interrupted Tío Pablo, arriving with sombrero in hand. "Forgive me, if I break in upon your talking, but Bravo is here!"

"*Está bien,* Tío. I will go, in a minute." Then to the lawyer and the Turco: "Now, señores, I have to tell you very plainly that if you are laughing over your bargain, I shall change that laughter to the merriment of a nut between two stones. I never sold this property to my brother, or to any man. There has been forgery at work, and—"

"Careful, Don Mário! The law is on our side."

"That is a game two can play at. Even though employing a lawyer to fight another lawyer is like calling a tiger to chase away a dog, it can be done. I shall do it. And I shall get at the bottom of this well, where truth lies." He turned to Tío Pablo. "Tell me, Pablo, how

many *vaqueros* are now on the pay-list of this rancho?"

"Forty-seven."

"How many of them would die, defending this home of theirs?"

"Forty-seven, señor. And I make forty-eight!"

"What?" exclaimed the lawyer. "You threaten us?"

"By no means. You are my guests. Here you are in your own house—till tomorrow noon. After that—"

"After that, we are also in our own house! This property is ours."

"As you will," smiled the Don. "I am merely telling you that you are safe here—till tomorrow at midday. After that, I shall answer for nothing. I shall not be here. I have a long journey to make. When I return, let me not find you at the Rancho San Agustín. And should you seek to press this matter in a court of law, I have private knowledge and information which would give you a jail for a dwelling instead of this house. . . . And now, you will excuse me? *Señores, adiós!*"

He turned to Tío Pablo, whose one good eye blinked nervously.

"You say Bravo has come back?"

"*Sí, señor.* He is now in the farther corral. And so torn and wounded! Come, señor; come and see!"

"I go with you, Tío Pablo!"

Together they strode along the tiles, and away through the dusk to the corral where torch-flares were smokily gleaming.

"But, señor," ventured Pablo, "I thought you told us both horses were dead?"

"The word I used, Tío, was *lost*. So then—"

An excitedly arguing group of *vaqueros* were gathered round the exhausted animal. Don Mário thrust half a dozen men aside.

"Here—a torch!"

**B**Y the guttering light he made swift examination. The horse, spent and with drooping head, could barely stand. Mired, covered with ticks, with wounds from leeches, with long and bleeding thorn-gashes, it made a sorry spectacle.

"This is bad, bad," Don Mário judged. "But Bravo will recover. Nothing fatal here."

"*Ay, pobrecito!*"

"Off with saddle and bridle!"

He himself removed the wreckage of the saddle-bag; the holsters that still

contained rifle and shotgun, the machete hanging in its sheath at the saddle-bow.

What had happened, he could mentally sketch with only too terrible clarity. The torn, ripped saddle-bag gave him evidence. On the side where he had helped Sturgis stow the gold slab, the stitching had ripped. All that side was hanging down loose, eloquently proclaiming what had taken place.

The horse had escaped, either from Sturgis, living; or had trekked home from Sturgis, dead. Somewhere a branch had caught and torn the leather. The weight of the gold had finished that work. Now, God knows where—in some morass, some slimy pool—the golden slab was lying. Even to dream of ever finding it again was madness.

The other side of the saddle-bag, though, gave an even more fatal message. For still untouched in that pocket lay all the weight of food and supplies that Don Mário had left with Sturgis. There too was all the ammunition, everything the American had depended on for salvation, for life itself.

**S**WIFT determination gripped Don Mário. His nerves tautened; strength flowed back through vein and muscle.

"Saddle Pepita!" he ordered. "And saddle Chiquita, too. Load them with food, *aguardiente*, guns and ammunition, with hammocks, machetes. Tío Pablo!"

"Señor?"

"You are old, but wiry as a *tigre*. Make ready at once to travel! Your one eye sees more than other men's two!"

"Your word, señor, is my law."

"Hasten, then. You and I ride south again, this night. At once—within the hour!"

"*Mi alma, no!*"

Doña Perfecta's voice broke in on the confused tumult of this astonishing announcement. There she stood now in the dust of the corral. Pale, with clasped hands, she fixed dark eyes on Don Mário.

"Thou canst not go away, again!" she exclaimed. "To what end, since the *Americano* is dead and buried? This is madness!"

"Silence!" he commanded. "Come with me!"

He led her to the ranch-house, into their bedroom; lighted a candle—for now dark had come—then closed the shutters. By the wavering light, a crucifix looked down on the ranchero and his wife, from white-plastered walls.

"What is this mystery, Mário?"

"My heart, come here!" He took her by the hand, led her to the crucifix. "There are certain things thou must know. Secret things, never to be told, till eternity is over—and not even then. If I tell thee, dost thou swear silence?"

"I swear!" She crossed herself.

"It is well. Now, listen to me!" His eyes burned redly. Mud still smeared his face, but it was the face once more of a *caballero*. "Time is short. Every moment is golden. So my words shall be few. Thou dost remember that my brother Eduardo was here, seven months ago?"

"Yes. And then—"

"He robbed me. How he got my keys, I do not know. But he took them, opened the leather-covered chest, stole my title-deeds. The deeds to this, our home, all our property, everything."

"Impossible!"

"No, true. And after all I had done for him!" And Don Mário went on to confide in her the whole story of Eduardo's treachery—and of his death at the hands of the American he had attempted to rob.

"Mother of God!" exclaimed the señora. "And now the American also is dead? Dead from the bite of a *chacón*? Ay, what fatality!"

"That was a lie," Don Mário replied thickly, with dry lips. "If he be dead or not, I do not know. Heaven send him its protection till I find him! We were far in the jungle. I discovered it was he who, defending his own life, worked justice on Eduardo. Madness came upon me. I would have killed him, but he was stronger than I. The oath of brotherhood between us, I renounced. I sent him eastward, to Belize—if by any miracle he could reach it. And now—"

"Now, *álmita mía*?"

"Now comes his horse with his food, weapons, ammunition, all that could have saved him. Now my blood-brother is either dead there in the swamps, or he is wandering, a madman without hope. And I must—"

"But how wilt thou find him?"

"By returning to the spot where we parted, and then following the track he has made. Tío Pablo can follow it. He is a famous tracker. With only one eye, he could trace the footsteps of an ant, across a desert of brass."

"Go then, Mário. Go with God!"

"And thou, Perfecta, with God remain! Have no fear. This matter of the forger, of the Turco who is a gambler and

a thief, shall all be made right. Our home shall not be taken from us. Remember only, silence!"

"I will remember."

## CHAPTER XI

### THE GREATER BOND

TWO frightful-looking scarecrows, bloated, reeking with mud and slime, stumbled up a little knoll under the stewing overheated stifle of a poisonous wilderness. Up through a tangle of *chayas*—forest-nettles that burn like living flame—they dragged themselves, and with hoarse cries laid hands upon a third and even more ghastly scarecrow that crouched half-blind and gibbering, that laughed with blood-stopping merriment.

Then this merriment suddenly faded out into a desperate and insane terror. Uttering a throaty howl, the third scarecrow writhed out of the others' clutch, then fought his staggering path into a thorny jungle, fell prone.

"Catch him!" croaked Don Mário—he could not shout—between parched, blackened lips. "*Por Dios*, quick, before he gets into that swamp!"

OLD Tío Pablo, tough as leather and with strength still left in his stringy muscles, crashed after the fugitive. Don Mário's inflamed and squinting eyes dimly perceived a vague, struggling confusion. It ceased. He heard the old man gasping.

"I have him, señor! Can you—help me?"

Together, their joined forces hardly equal to the task, they dragged Sturgis up the knoll again, and laid him down. Inert, unconscious, he remained there, covered with ticks and red-bugs, bitten by leeches and mosquitoes, plastered with mud. Scratches, cuts and bruises, swellings from poisonous plants, made him hardly recognizable as human.

"*Tequila!*" gasped Don Mário. "Quick, Tío—my right-hand saddle-bag. *Tequila*, here!"

Later, Sturgis lay on a poncho under a royal-palm that crowned the knoll. Several slugs of fiery white liquor had been poured into him, some of the filth smeared from his exterior. He had begun to look again something like a man.

Tied to a tree, the horses uneasily nickered, stung by merciless insects. They too showed signs of fearful going. A gorgeous butterfly lighted on a blade

of savanna-grass. Near it a *chintún*-spider lay in wait—a flat, crablike spider, swift and stealthy, horny-plated with wicked, caliper-like jaws. Its bite meant fever to man, death to any small creature. It crouched to attack the butterfly; but this, indifferent to near fate, wavered off through the deep green aisles and vanished.

"Ah, with wings like that, we should soon be home again," murmured Tío Pablo, crouching by the little fire they had dared risk. Aromas of coffee and bacon idled up through the tropic heat. "Many a weary league, though—" One-eyed, he blinked.

"Speak not of that, Tío," the rancher hoarsely reproved him. "These ants travel more slowly, but they at least know where they are going!" He blew cigarette-smoke, and pointed at what seemed a tiny, moving line of green umbrellas. Each umbrella was a neatly cut-out piece of leaf, carried over the head of a marching *vivijagua*-ant.

**S**ILENCE a moment, broken only by the strident cry of a blackbird, the hum of a gold and crimson humming-bird as with blurred wings and long-curved needle bill it quested sugary sap.

"Ay, what a life!" at last the old man muttered. "We weep the day we are born, and every day we live explains why. And the *Americano*—he will live to weep again?"

"If God wills. But rather, I hope, to smile."

"Of course!" And Tío Pablo's parchment face wrinkled into something like a grin. He stroked his horsehair-like Indian mustache, chief object of his pride. "But from what you judge, señor, does God will it now?"

"Yes," Don Mário nodded. "He sleeps. He is young yet, and stronger than a wild boar. These gringos—it is very hard to kill them. What powerful devils of men they be! We have food and drink in plenty. They are good medicine; never forgetting the tequila."

"Which is the best of all. Then too, the saints will help. I have my scapulary. They *must* help!"

"It may be."

Silence again. A black scorpion crept from beneath rotting leaves, approached the sleeper. Don Mário's boot turned it to custardy pulp, that quivered.

"Lawyer!" he growled. "*Turco!*" His heel ground the pulp into dank earth.

Suddenly a third voice sounded, weak but perfectly rational:

"Give me a cigarette, eh?"

"Here!"

Don Mário lighted one, passed it to Peter Sturgis, A.B. For a moment the American lay there, smoking. Vapor drifted on the dusky jungle air, that seemed to quiver with green fires.

"Boy!" murmured Sturgis, in English. "Last thing I remember, I thought I was selling ice-water in hell!"

Don Mário knelt beside him.

"You know me, brother?"

"Of course. What's all the trouble been about? Where have you been?"

"I have been away—learning wisdom. Only three days have passed, in time, but more than a thousand years in understanding. Great has been our gain."

"But the gold?"

"Ah, never mind the gold. Dreams come; dreams go. And life remains. Never forgetting, *hermano mío*, that your mining-option will be all taken care of by funds which I have safely set aside—and may fortune smile on it! And now, will you forgive?"

"Forgive what?"

"The wrong I have done you."

"What wrong? Brother of mine, what are you talking about?"

Don Mário's hand, gashed and swollen, sought the American's. For a moment the two hands of the blood-brothers tightened on each other. Then, with a queer little catch in his throat—

"*Oye, chico!*" the rancher hailed Tío Pablo.

"Señor?"

"Coffee, here! Bacon—a tortilla!" The words trembled. "Son of a lazy father, make haste!"

"*Sí, señor!* Coffee and all, they shall be ready in one small minute!"

A little pause. Then—

"Brother," smiled Don Mário, "what after all is gold, weighed against wisdom of the heart?"

**T**HEY shook hands again. And Peter Sturgis knew that Don Mário would keep his word about funds for that option. He knew, too, that with the rising price of gold and silver he should have no trouble in selling it, and repaying Don Mário. Better still, he would soon be going home now; and in his pocket would be the money to rescue his dad. Peter Sturgis, A.B., was getting a break at last.

THE END