

IN DEFIANCE OF THE BAN



PERCY F.
WESTERMAN

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THE LOST STATUE

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Frontispiece

In Defiance of the Ban

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Author of "Unconquered Wings"

"Leslie Dexter, Cadet"

"Captain Starlight" &c.

Illustrated by E. S. Hodgson

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By Percy F.
Westerman

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The Riddle of the Air.	
Chums of the "Golden Vanity".	
Clipped Wings.	

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IN DEFIANCE OF THE BAN

CHAPTER I

Home Made

“I wonder if she will?” Alan Brampton voiced aloud his thoughts. “I wonder if she will?”

He stepped back a few paces and surveyed his recently completed handiwork as a whole for the first time, and what he saw was good.

For the last four months at every available opportunity he had been engaged upon his self-appointed task. Within the limits of a shed thirty feet in length and fifteen in breadth Alan had created a contraption which, he fondly hoped, would one day take wings and fly. And that day was at hand.

He was gazing with mingled feelings of pride, satisfaction, and doubt upon the assembled machine—a monoplane of unique feature and design.

Alan Brampton was a tall slender lad of sixteen, with deep blue eyes and fair complexion that were a heritage from Scandinavian or Saxon ancestors. The Bramptons had lived in the Cleveland Hills district for at least six centuries. Their records in the ancient church of Mexworth went back to the year 1641 (the previous registers having been lost to posterity), and showed that the Bramptons were of honest, law-abiding, yeoman stock.

But there was no record of Alan’s birth in the parish register, nor indeed in the archives of Somerset House. He had been born at Santa Barbara, the capital of the South American republic of Huavilia, where his father held a consular appointment.

Until two years ago Alan’s life had been spent in Santa Barbara and the surrounding district. He could speak the language—Spanish with a generous sprinkling of Indian—like a native. At five he could ride a horse barebacked; at ten he was a tolerably good shot with a miniature rifle. At

fourteen, just before his father's death, Alan could drive a car—Santa Barbara swarmed with American manufactured autos, and neither was a licence required nor a speed limit fixed in Huavilia—as well as anyone. Not that he was reckless like the native drivers, but he was fearless, possessing sound judgment and well-trained nerve, essentials in a country where bad roads with dangerous gradients were the rule rather than the exception.

Yet, during all those years, Alan Brampton was never allowed to forget that he was British by parentage. Although lacking the companionship of English-speaking boys, his education had not been neglected, in spite of obvious difficulties. So, when Mrs. Brampton returned to England with her fatherless son, Alan found himself “up against” conditions that were entirely new to him. For instance, although he had a theoretical knowledge of cricket and “footer”, he had never yet had an opportunity to take an active part in these pastimes. He was out of touch with the modern British schoolboy, and although he started to make up leeway rapidly he had still a long way to go. It did not take him long to discover that, without a chance to observe his skill with a rifle, his schoolfellows did not appreciate his strictly accurate stories of what he had done in that direction. Horsemanship, too, did not appeal to them in an age when mechanical locomotion is the only type of its kind that attracts British youth. Since he could not afford a car—and even if he could have done so he would not have been allowed on account of his youth to drive one—Alan had to try to be content with a motor-cycle.

But he was not content. Although he had never had a chance to “go up”, his mind was set upon aviation. By the aid of technical journals he had made himself well acquainted with the theory of flight, and had a fair knowledge of the principal types of heavier-than-air craft.

His chief ambition was to possess a plane, and now his hopes were nearing attainment. He had constructed a monoplane of his own design—but would she fly?

It—although he invariably referred to his production in the feminine gender—was a light aeroplane with a wing-span of thirty feet. The chassis was constructed chiefly of bamboo, the space between each pair of joints being carefully “whipped” with flax thread treated with bees-wax. The wings were of thin pressed aluminium and steel alloy, and had once formed part of an all-metal flying-boat that, after a crash, had been sold. Alan had bought the sheets of metal from a marine-store dealer, and with the aid of the local blacksmith had transformed them into a pair of well-cambered wings with safety-slots. The motive power was supplied by two air-cooled motor-cycle engines, each with opposed twin cylinders, which he had picked

up for a mere song at an auction at Darlington. One engine was at either side of the fuselage, being connected by a chain, so that to start both motors it was necessary only to swing one propeller.

It was the wing-controls upon which Alan relied for his chance of success. Curiously enough it was a dream that gave him the idea. He had not long started upon the construction of the monoplane when for three consecutive nights he had the same dream. To him it was not in the least fantastic even when he pondered over it during his waking hours. It seemed real.

Always it was in the same place—at night and in a crowded thoroughfare. The street had broad pavements on each side, with brightly lighted electric lamps or standards at least thirty feet in height. There were five-storeyed houses—private houses, not shops—with typically Georgian windows and with their roofs hidden by brick parapets with stone copings.

Alan was walking on the pavement when he was seized with an unaccountable desire to soar. With fingers closed like a swimmer's he beat the air, and lo! he found himself ascending. It was sheer hard muscular effort, but up and up he went until he was above the level of the dazzling arc-lamps. Looking down he could see the upturned faces of the people in the street.

He felt strangely elated, and, although he considered the possibility of crashing on his descent, that prospect did not fill him with alarm.

Slowly, though still fighting against gravity, he came down until his feet touched the hard pavement.

"It's quite easy!" he announced, to the gaping wondering crowd. "You try it. See, I'll do it again!"

And he did. This time he realized that his strength was failing slightly; yet by a determined effort his trudgeon-like strokes raised him until once more he soared high above the crowd. In his dream he had solved the problems of a vertical ascent, of soaring, and of a vertical descent, and it seemed so real, so simple!

"That's what I want," thought the lad, when day brought realization that the seemingly actual experience was but a phantasy. "A bird can soar and hover over a spot: why not a plane? Not a helicopter. At best that is a wasteful application of power. In any case, my low-powered pair of motors could not possibly overcome the force of gravity, but can they pull against an oblique plane and thus maintain a practically stationary position? Why

must an aeroplane maintain a speed of not less than forty miles an hour when it descends in order to land? A bird doesn't need to do that; it just alights with hardly an effort upon such an insecure object as the branch of a tree."

As the outcome of his deliberations, Alan decided to run the risk of mounting both wings of his monoplane on a horizontal axis, at the same time giving them play through an arc of about thirty degrees, the required "trim" being made by means of control wires.

"It's all right theoretically," he decided. "But how will it work in practice? I'll have to be jolly careful; if there's ever so little vertical angle more than there should be, the bus will drop like a stone."

At length, on a calm afternoon in August, Alan wheeled his creation out of the shed for the first time. It took the best part of two hours to assemble the wings, test the controls, fill the petrol tank, and lubricate the working parts both of the engine and the machine.

Then he stepped back.

"I wonder if she will?" he exclaimed.

Conscious of an indescribable thrill, the lad swung the monoplane round head to wind, for during the last half-hour a faint sou'westerly breeze had sprung up.

He was alone. The house, standing about fifty yards away, was deserted. Mrs. Brampton had gone into the village; the maid was having her "afternoon off"; while George, gardener and handyman, had been sent on an errand into Stockton. He had gone reluctantly at Mrs. Brampton's behest—reluctantly because he had an inkling that Master Alan would "get to wind'ard of him with that gadget of his". George had been in the navy until a piece of shrapnel at Zeebrugge had been the means of "putting him on the beach". He was really a handy man in more senses than one, and his skill at wire-splicing had been very useful during the construction of the monoplane. Quite reasonably he wanted "to enjoy the fruit of his labours" when the plane made her trial flight—if she ever did.

Alan, sanguine though recognizing the possibility of failure, was all in favour of a secret trial, and now the crucial time was at hand.

Grasping one of the twin blades of the port propeller the lad swung it vigorously. With a whirr and a roar both motors fired. A haze of bluish smoke issued from each exhaust. The monoplane rocked and vibrated as it strained to answer to the pull of the steadily revolving propellers.

Climbing into the cockpit Alan sat in the low bucket seat and throttled down both motors. By their purr he knew that they were firing properly, but, taking no unnecessary risk, he gave them time to warm up thoroughly.

Waiting, the thought flashed across his mind that he was about to undertake a tremendous adventure, one that might easily result in a swift death or, worse, being maimed for life. Without actual experience he was attempting flight, and for the first time he felt appalled at his own temerity.

Then the feeling passed. He had set his hand not to the plough but to the joy-stick. There could be no turning back.

Gently yet firmly he depressed the lever governing both throttles. The roar of the exhausts—for to develop maximum horse-power he had removed both silencers—became almost deafening as the sound was thrown back by the closed doors of the shed.

Wobbling like an ungainly bird, the monoplane gathered way. As it did so Alan tilted the plane almost to its maximum elevation.

The machine, almost air-borne, rose a foot or so from the ground, then bumped lightly with its landing-wheels. It was then travelling at not more than twenty miles an hour.

Taking his courage in his hands, Alan gave the motors more throttle. The ground beneath him seemed to drop.

“She’s done it!” he shouted in sheer excitement. “She’s done it! We’re up!”

CHAPTER II

A Splendid Failure

By the use of the plural pronoun Alan had paid a tribute to his aerial steed. It was a pretty compliment. While in perfect flight the two were one; the frail fabric the counterpart of a human body with its inventor as the brain that controlled its movements.

The monoplane climbed rapidly and steeply. In fact, against a ten miles an hour breeze, it was rising three feet to every one it progressed horizontally over the ground.

Alan let the plane just carry on. He was so surprised at its climbing power that he made no attempt to touch the controls until he was quite two hundred feet up. At that altitude what struck him most was the foreshortened appearance of the house and the tall poplars that bordered the narrow lane leading to the village. He could not help looking down; yet he experienced no sensation of giddiness. That discovery gave him intense satisfaction. He rather dreaded the prospect of being attacked by vertigo. He had experienced that once, when he leant over the parapet of Mexworth Church tower, and that was only eighty feet from the ground.

Now he was well over two hundred feet up and still climbing, but the thing that he had dreaded was not there—he was not air-sick.

As he glanced down he caught sight of what looked like a pigmy waving his arms frantically. It was George who, returning as hard as he could, was just in time to see Master Alan soaring skywards. In his enthusiasm the old pensioner had pushed his cycle into the hedge and was waving encouragement and good wishes to the monoplane and its occupant.

Now came another anxious moment. For the first time in actual flight George's splicing and his own workmanship would be put to the test, as the monoplane's direction was altered from a steep climb to a swift horizontal flight. Should one wire give, should the comparatively frail bamboo

structure buckle under the increased strain, Alan and his machine would dive earthwards in a most appalling crash.

Slowly and cautiously the lad thrust forward the lever controlling the two wings. He had to determine by experiment the correct angle of the plane for horizontal flight. A few degrees too much and the wind-pressure upon the upper surface of the wings would throw the machine into a dive followed by an uncontrollable spin.

A hurried glimpse of the spirit-level set in the coaming of the cockpit on his right side revealed the fact that the fuselage was almost horizontal. The lever was then ten degrees from the vertical. Alan locked it at that position.

Again he looked down. What he noticed most was the apparent flatness of the ground. Mexworth was in a hilly district, yet every contour appeared to have been wiped out. The terrain looked as flat as a pancake, buildings appearing no larger than knobs of sugar. In fact their shadows were far more conspicuous than the houses themselves.

He looked farther afield. He could discern the smoking factory chimneys of Darlington and Teesside on his right. On his left the Cleveland Hills, many miles away, still cut the clear skyline, while ahead the gaunt Pennines limited his range of vision in that direction.

Far beneath him a small dark shadow flitted over hill and dale and across wheat fields and green pastures. It was the shadow of his monoplane. Only that and the rush of air past the triplex glass wind-screen gave him any indication of speed, for at that altitude the panorama below seemed to move with exasperating slowness. But in five minutes Alan found himself over Toxley; he knew Toxley to be six miles from Mexworth.

“Not bad going,” he decided. “Now I suppose I’d better turn the little bus round.”

It was a combined test for ailerons and vertical rudder. Too much inclination of the former and the monoplane would roll over and over; too great an angle of helm and perhaps the tail would fly off under the terrific pressure.

Banking slightly, the “little bus” swung steadily to the right until the compass showed that it was heading nor’east. Ahead, beyond the expanse of land, he could discern the sea from Tynemouth to Flamborough Head.

In ten minutes, since the monoplane was “down wind”, going with it instead of against it as hitherto, Alan found himself high over Saltburn.

“May as well go over the coast for a bit,” he decided, confidence getting the better of discretion. “I know this district so there’s no chance of losing direction. Isn’t she a top-hole little bus?”

When passing over Runswick Bay the young pilot noticed that the machine was rolling more than before. It was the natural result of the hot air blowing over the whole breadth of England and Wales suddenly coming into contact with the relatively cooler waters of the North Sea. The atmosphere, too, was not so clear as it had been an hour ago. Patches of mist were covering the higher peaks of the gaunt Cleveland Hills and were slowly creeping down into the dales.

Presently Alan was over Whitby. He knew the place well. Even if he did not, there were the conspicuous ruins of St. Hilda’s Abbey to serve as an identification mark.

“Good enough, I think,” he soliloquized. “I’d better make tracks for home. All I have to do is to follow the course of this little river, and that will bring me within sight of Mexworth.”

The little river—the Esk—would have been a good guide but for the mist which was quickly developing into a dense fog. Even when the ground was hidden from Alan’s sight he did not fully realize the difficulty and danger. Overhead the sun was shining brightly, giving the billowing banks of vapour the appearance of a bank of clouds; but instead of the clouds being several hundred feet above the earth they were in direct contact with it. Flying, as he was, in sunshine, he did not take into consideration the fact that he would have either to penetrate this veil of fog or else carry on until the state of the atmosphere allowed him to discern a suitable landing-place.

Alan continued on his homeward way, steering a compass course now that the silvery Esk was invisible, and maintaining a height of about two thousand feet by the aid of a none too accurate altimeter. Both compass and altimeter he had picked up at a dealer’s, fully confident that they would answer his purpose.

Towards the end of an hour’s flight the young aviator began to entertain doubts concerning the petrol supply. The tank contained sufficient “juice” to propel a motor-cycle for eighty miles. It was now feeding two engines each running at a speed considerably greater than they would if they were on the road.

He stooped and consulted the petrol gauge. The information it gave was a bit of a shock to him. There was only about a quart left.

“I’d better get down quickly,” he decided. “There’s one blessing, I can always check the descent. If the ground’s not suitable I can go on a bit farther.”

With that he tilted the wings and half-closed the solo-controlled throttles. There were now three forces acting upon the machine—the resistance of the tilted plane, the pull of the motors, and the attraction of gravity. Pitting each against the others, Alan hoped to be able to make an almost vertical descent and to alight as gently as he had done in his dreams.

For the first five hundred feet the descent was decidedly rapid. Accordingly he increased the revolutions of the motors and decreased the angle of tilt of the wings.

The monoplane’s earthward progress was materially retarded. It was dropping at a rate of about five feet a second, quite enough to result in a bump detrimental both to the plane and the airman.

The bank of low-lying fog appeared to rise up to greet the descending machine. In a few seconds Alan was enveloped in a thick blinding mist that quickly dimmed the glass screen and obscured what little range of vision he might otherwise have had. More than that, he lost all sense of direction and stability.

A mild panic seized him. He opened out the throttles and groped for the lever actuating the wings.

Even as he did so there was a rift in the fog. Beneath him he could see the ground rushing up to meet him. In spite of the resistance of the thirty foot span of wings and the increased pull of the engine, gravity was winning the triangular tug-of-war.

Although the rate of descent was appreciably retarded the monoplane was beginning to tilt, the while falling—falling.

Then came the crash as the tail, striking the ground, collapsed like a concertina. The rest of the fuselage, describing a movement like that of a spoke of a revolving wheel, brought up against the earth to the accompaniment of the crackling of splintered bamboos, the bursting of both tyres of the landing-wheels, and the terrific roar of the exhausts. Both propellers, shattered to fragments, no longer afforded resistance to the motors, which were now racing at thrice their normal speed.

Flung from the cockpit, Alan Brampton saw all this as he lay sprawling upon the fog-moistened turf.

The fact that he had survived a crash did not impress itself upon him. His chief concern lay in the knowledge that the monoplane was a wreck and that the two motors were doing their level best to race themselves to a standstill. Visions of twisted crankshafts, “chawed-up” big-ends, and seized-up pistons goaded the lad to action.

Picking himself up, he staggered over the ten or twelve yards that separated him from the damaged monoplane.

He was just able to cut off the ignition when he realized that all was not well as far as he was concerned. The wreckage appeared to be turning white and endowed with a curious rotary movement. Purely imaginary lights danced before his eyes; there was a loud buzzing in his ears; he felt his knees sagging.

And then Alan Brampton lost all interest in things past, present, and future. He fell senseless across the crumpled metal of one of the wings of the monoplane that had failed on the threshold of success.

CHAPTER III

After the Crash

Alan Brampton's first impressions when he opened his eyes were that he was in a room of which the ceiling was decidedly unfamiliar. It was not a plain ceiling like those of the rooms at his home, but was covered with symmetrical designs in bas-relief. In the centre was an electric light in a half-round crystal bowl.

That was about as much as he could see, for on attempting to turn his head, he made the unpleasant discovery that the effort not only caused him acute pain, but was also futile. He tried to move his right hand, but found it so tightly bandaged that he was baulked there. Then with considerable effort he raised his left hand to his head, and by so doing made the discovery that with the exception of his face he was swathed in surgical dressings from crown to neck.

Still puzzling he lay quiet, trying to collect his thoughts. It was no light task, for his head was throbbing and his throat was hot and dry. The strong reek of iodoform and a lesser odour of chloroform were unpleasantly present. Yet, for the time being, he could form no idea of how he came to be in bed, bandaged and in a strange room that smelt like a hospital ward.

After a while he realized that he was not alone. Two people, if not more, were in the room. They were talking, but their voices only reached Alan's ears in a confused murmur.

Gradually the voices grew more distinct until the lad was able to catch scraps of conversation.

"No clue to his identity . . . not even a flying-certificate . . . there would be trouble if the authorities demanded that. . . . Spanish, I think, but I'm not sure. . . . Yes, slight concussion. . . . I'm not worrying about the *tibia*. . . . Perhaps, but I hope not. We'll have to wait a few days before any decision can be made. . . . Quite, I agree; one would have thought that the machine would have been smashed to bits. Yes, a pancake; no room to glide. Almost

a vertical descent. How he could have survived the impact is a mystery. . . . Oh, yes, I'll look in early to-morrow, but, of course, you'll send if I'm required."

The voices trailed away as the men in conversation went out and down a corridor. Then came the sound of a door closing, followed by the fainter noise of a motor starting on bottom gear. Then silence.

Alan continued to think. By degrees, aided by the scraps of conversation he had overheard, realization began to dawn. Curiously enough the chain of events started at the crash and ran backwards until he remembered almost every feature of the lone flight that had ended so unfortunately. Judging by the remarks he gathered that he was lucky to be alive, and that how he had survived the impact was a mystery.

With that Alan attempted a smile of satisfaction. The smile caused pain to shoot through the bandaged head, but for all that he had good reason for his satisfaction. The adjustable wings of the monoplane had proved their worth. They had retarded his descent sufficiently to enable him to survive the crash that with any other type of plane, other than a gyro-glider, would have ended fatally.

"She wants more wing surface and more powerful motors, and then she'll rise and fall as slowly as I wish," thought Alan.

Then he remembered that "she" was in a pretty rotten state. He knew for certain that both propellers had been smashed, one wing badly buckled, and the chassis damaged beyond repair. That much he had seen before insensibility had overtaken him.

The young airman was still pondering over his experiences when someone entered the room and came over to his bedside and bent over him.

His visitor was a man of middle age with bronzed features that looked darker than they actually were owing to the light being behind him. He had a typically military bearing, with square shoulders, closely cropped hair, and small "toothbrush" moustache.

"I see you are now awake," he began, speaking in Spanish. Although it differed from the dialect used in Huavilia, Alan understood.

"*Si, señor,*" he replied. "But I'm English."

"Are you, by Jove!" rejoined the other. "My error! But considering you were talking in your sleep in some sort of language that was very much like Spanish, perhaps you'll pardon my mistake, young man. Now I'm not going

to worry you. Doctor's orders are that you are to be kept perfectly quiet; but I'd like your name and address just in case your relatives want reassuring."

Alan gave the required information. Up to now he had not given a thought to his mother. She, of course, would be terribly anxious. She ought to be proud really; proud of her son who had actually flown in a machine of his own design. Mrs. Brampton was quite aware that Alan was experimenting on those lines, but not for a moment did she think that the mysterious contraption over which he had spent so many hours would ever take to the air.

"Where am I?" he added.

"At Bramerton Hall," was the reply. "I'll send a man over to Mexworth and let your people know. Now that's all for the present. No more talking. Get to sleep if you can."

"I'm fearfully thirsty, sir," declared Alan.

"All right," replied his host. "The nurse will see to that. Now, good night."

He disappeared from the lad's sight, his place being taken by a girl in a white uniform and with her head partly enveloped in a sort of hood. She was young and good looking, but with an air of placid authority, Alan decided.

She gave her patient something to drink out of a kind of miniature teapot. He tried first to raise his head and then to guide the cup to his lips with his unbandaged arm. Both attempts were failures; but although some of the liquid spilt he managed to swallow a small quantity of a cool draught and felt better for it.

"Where am I, please?" he asked.

"Didn't I hear Major Truscott tell you?" rejoined the nurse. "You're in his house, Bramerton Hall. No more questions, please."

Rather resentfully Alan lay perfectly quiet. He was not used to being "bossed" by a girl, even though she was a nurse. He wanted to ask a score of questions, chiefly because he had been told to be quiet.

In a few minutes he was asleep.

There was more humiliation in store for him when next morning he had to be washed like a helpless infant. He was not even allowed to raise a wet sponge to his face. Then the night-nurse was relieved by a day-nurse who brought his breakfast—very low diet—and fed her patient out of the

detestable cup with a spout. By way of compensation she let him talk and answered his questions, but she could throw no fresh light upon the subject of Alan's crash beyond telling him that he had received injuries to his head, right arm, and left leg.

"You'll be out and about in a month's time," she declared.

Shortly before nine the doctor arrived, stood by while the nurse deftly removed Alan's bandages and surgical dressings, and left his scalp wounds exposed to the *medico's* inspection. Then followed an examination of the "dorsal regions".

"Do you feel that, young man?" asked the doctor, as he gently prodded his patient's backbone.

"I should think I did, sir," replied Alan, who was hardly able to repress an exclamation of pain.

"Then be truly thankful that you can," rejoined the doctor oracularly.

For the next four or five days Alan had to be kept very quiet. The only visitors he was allowed to have were his mother and his host, Major Truscott, and they were only allowed in on the understanding that they were not to mention the accident and to limit their time to ten minutes.

At the end of a week, however, the doctor was so satisfied with his patient's progress that he was allowed ordinary diet and the ban upon visitors was lifted.

It was at Alan's request that Major Truscott gave details of his version of the crash.

"I had just put my car in the garage," he said, "when I heard a terrific row overhead. I took it to be at least a hundred horse-power motor——"

"I'd removed both silencers, sir."

"I should think you had," continued his host smilingly. "Then I caught sight of your bus coming down. I felt certain you'd be smashed to bits, because the only open ground was barely a hundred yards in length and twenty in width, and you were pointing across the latter distance. At one end of the rectangle were the garage and other outbuildings. The remaining sides were surrounded by trees except for the carriage-drive. I've seen dozens of crashes during the War, and goodness knows how many landings, good, bad, and indifferent, but I've never before known a plane to alight almost vertically in so small a space without fatal injuries to the crew. Mind you,

I'm not including machines of the helicopter type. These I regard as freaks. You descended almost vertically and yet at a marvellously low speed."

"If the wing span had been twenty per cent more I would have saved the bus and myself too," declared Alan. "You see——"

"Don't give away secrets, my lad."

"I haven't patented the device."

"Then I would if I were you," rejoined the Major. "And if you intend to continue flying when you're fit, I think it wouldn't be a bad idea to obtain a licence; that's the law, you know."

"I didn't know that," protested Alan. "And, of course, I want to fly again. A little mishap won't stop me."

He spoke in no boasting manner. His host nodded approvingly. He admired the lad's grit.

"I suppose you'll gain experience through this sort of thing," he remarked, "provided your nerve is good. I'm rather curious on another matter—you'll pardon my curiosity, won't you? but while you were semi-conscious you talked quite a lot in Spanish."

"I spent fourteen years of my life in Huavilia," explained Alan. "I was born there."

To the young airman's surprise Major Truscott bounded out of his chair and rubbed his hands together.

"How perfectly priceless!" he ejaculated. "You're just the very man I've been looking for! Huavilia, by Jove! What a rare slice of luck!"

CHAPTER IV

Major Truscott's Proposition

"How's that, sir?" asked Alan, somewhat astonished at his host's high pitch of enthusiasm.

"Because I'm thinking seriously of going there—to Santa Barbara," replied Major Truscott. "You can give me a lot of information about the place, I feel sure. No guide-book to the republic has been published as far as I am aware. I've applied to the Huavilian consulate in London, and I've looked up what information I could find at the British Museum Library. So far I haven't gathered much."

"I'll answer any questions I can, sir."

"Good fellow!" exclaimed the Major. "But first, let me tell you why I'm anxious for information. You know when Huavilia was liberated from the Spanish yoke?"

"In 1822," replied Alan, "by a fellow named Bolivar."

"Yes," agreed his host. "In the so-called War of Independence Bolivar was assisted by several British naval and military officers. They were on the retired list, but, between you and me, it seems hardly playing the game to butt in against a friendly state. One of the officers who took part in most of the fighting resulting in the liberation of Huavilia was my great-grandfather, Captain Brocas Truscott. I don't know what he did particularly."

"Perhaps that is how one of the towns, Brocasete, gets its name," interposed Alan. "It's about ten miles from Santa Barbara."

"Is that so? It's the first time I've heard that," continued the Major. "However, I suppose the Huavilians were grateful for what he'd done, for they presented him with a golden statue of Ixtlahuaca who, I believe, was one of the Inca deities. My error! It was a wooden statue plated with gold and a fairly bulky piece of work. At any rate, he had the statue for a time. Then in 1829—he was still living in Huavilia—a revolution broke out; one of many, perhaps, but that was the one that jolted my great-grandfather up

considerably. Probably he hadn't been able to keep his finger out of the Government pie; but, whether or no, he had to shift in a hurry. As he couldn't take the statue with him—as a matter of fact he got away with only his clothes and fifty dollars in hard cash—and as he was not at all inclined to let the rebels collar the thing, he pitched Ixtlahuaca's effigy into a lake. I hope to recover it."

"Do you know the name of the lake?" asked Alan.

"No, I don't," confessed Major Truscott. "You haven't heard any rumour out there, have you?"

The lad shook his head. He could do so now without inconvenience.

"There are half a dozen lakes in the neighbourhood of Santa Barbara," he declared. "Some of them are tremendously deep and the bottom covered with a thick bed of slime. There are electric eels to be found in the mud, and as for caimans—alligators—the water's stiff with them."

"Sounds cheerful," commented his host. "Any more attractions to offer while you are about it? A few anacondas, jaguars, and other side-shows thrown in as a make-weight? What about the lakes that aren't quite so deep?"

"They form part of the Rio Morte," replied Alan. "They are shallow, but there's a strong current. The river drops nearly a thousand feet in five miles just above Santa Barbara. Below that there are rapids, but it's possible to send a boat down to the sea, though not back."

"That seems a one-sided arrangement."

"Yes, sir. The Huavilians used to construct boats out of teak and mahogany, fill them with goods and take them down to Nueva Guacipiti, the capital of Diamala. There the boats were broken up and the timber exported. Before I left Santa Barbara an American tried to form a company to run motor-boats on the Rio Morte. They built two—one a stern-wheeler, and the other had its prop working in a tunnel. Neither was a success. The first was not powerful enough to stem the current; the second smashed three propellers in spite of the protection of the hull. The Yankee gave it up after that."

"And there's no railway, I believe."

"The terminus is at El Peso on the Diamala side of the frontier," said Alan. "From there you go up either by car or on horseback, and it's a pretty rotten road through the mountains. There's another way through the Sierras

into Nauta, but the only communication between Huavilia and Pondaguay on the south is by narrow tracks impassable even for horses. The Indians are employed as carriers. But there's not much trade done except with Diamala. Huavilia has no sea-coast. Every article imported—and what there is comes chiefly from the United States—has to pass through the ports of rival republics, and when they don't stop the goods they take jolly good care to whack on a pretty stiff tariff."

"It sounds a one-horse sort of a place," remarked Major Truscott.

"It's not so dusty when you get used to it, sir," rejoined Alan, thinking that perhaps it was about time he had a good word to say for the country in which he first drew breath. "There are cars—mostly Yankee—cinemas, a few theatres, and a bull-ring."

"I'm afraid the last doesn't appeal to me," said the Major. "Cruel sport bull-fighting. The animal doesn't stand an earthly."

"Neither does a stag here in England," countered Alan. "Chased for miles by dogs until the poor brute is exhausted——"

"Yes, but two wrongs don't make a right," broke in his host. Then, switching over to a different topic, he inquired: "What do you think of my Spanish? Self-taught by gramophone. Don't hesitate to express an opinion," and he rattled off a question in that language.

"It seems all right," replied Alan tactfully. "You would be able to make yourself understood by the higher class Huavilians. This is the same sentence as spoken by the natives."

"Is it, by Jove!" exclaimed the Major. "Your version doesn't tally with mine, not by long chalks."

"The words of Indian origin are your difficulty, sir," explained Alan. "I may have a Huavilian dictionary at home. We had one, I know; but I don't know what has become of it. I'll look when I get a chance."

"Thanks," replied the owner of Bramerton Hall. "But I tell you what: you can be jolly useful in another way. What do you say to coming out with me and acting as a sort of interpreter?"

"Would I not?" said the lad eagerly. "Of course it depends upon what the Mater says."

"Quite," agreed Major Truscott. "You have to consider her feelings upon the matter. However, there's plenty of time. You aren't fit yet, though with reasonable luck you should be by the time I'm ready. I've applied to the

Huavilian Consulate for a permit—a concession—to undertake a search for my great-grandfather's gold-plated statue. He—the Consul, I mean—will have to communicate with his government; probably the Santa Barbara *wallahs* will want *bakshish*. I suppose graft tells there. Then there'll be palm-oil this end before we're through with preliminaries. By the by, you're still at school—of course you're not; you're a semi-invalid in my place, but you know what I mean."

"I'm leaving next term, sir," replied Alan. "If not before."

"And then——"

"Reading up for the Consular Service," answered Alan. "I'd rather go in for flying though."

"All right while you're young," commented his host. "But after? Where do wasps go in winter? What becomes of airmen over forty? By the by, I've placed your bus, or what's left of it, in one of the sheds. Do you want it carted back to Mexworth or left here until you can recondition it?"

In the circumstances Alan thought it had better stop where it was.

"You've been awfully kind, sir," he said diffidently. "I've been a bit worried over my debt to you, and the doctor and all that——"

Major Truscott waved the suggestion aside.

"Don't let that worry you," he declared. "I couldn't let you and your machine block the entrance to my garage, could I? Joking aside, Brampton, the expense to which you refer can go hang as far as you are concerned. Don't mention the subject again. And if I can prevail upon your Mater to let you come with me to Huavilia, you'll repay the little I've done a thousandfold."

CHAPTER V

Strenuous Tests

Thanks to a healthy constitution, and buoyed up by the promise of a return visit to the land of his birth, Alan Brampton made rapid strides towards complete recovery. Already Mrs. Brampton had agreed to Major Truscott's proposal that her son should accompany him to Huavilia. The general outline of the suggested expedition began to assume a definite well-ordered plan, for the Major, with military preciseness, left nothing to chance that might be gained by care and forethought.

In view of Alan's description of the difficulties of transport Major Truscott decided to make use of an aeroplane, to which proposal Alan was entirely favourable.

Accordingly a biplane was ordered from a well-known firm of aeronautical engineers, the specification including a wing-tilting device similar to the one Alan had employed. Acting upon Major Truscott's advice Brampton had provisionally patented his invention; nevertheless the manufacturers looked askance at any attempt to deviate from their own well-tried types of heavier-than-air craft. In fact, their test pilots declined to take the machine up.

"We'll show them what we can do, Alan!" exclaimed the Major. "Before I was gazetted to the Tank Battalion I was in the old Royal Flying Corps. Flying in those days was a risk, especially with some of the buses we had to handle. Right-o! We're both in the same boat this trip."

The newly constructed biplane was wheeled from its hangar. Already the 250 horse-power Cyclops motor had been tested, and Alan was conversant with the controls. Nevertheless there was an appreciable difference between his own puny monoplane and the powerfully engined all-metal machine that was now ready either to fly or crash.

Greatly to the aeronautical firm's surprise and delight the biplane did not come to grief. Their workmanship was all right; Alan's airmanship was all

right; and the adjustable wing device “stood up” to the severe strain imposed upon it.

For an hour Alan, with Major Truscott as passenger, manœuvred over the aerodrome. Refraining from trick flying, the lad nevertheless demonstrated how it was possible almost to hover over a fixed object, and then alighted almost vertically yet without the slightest damage to those vulnerable parts, the landing-wheel and tail-skid.

Then Major Truscott took control and again the biplane soared skywards. He had lost little or none of his skill as a pilot as he put the new bus through its paces.

“That’s a topping device of yours, Alan,” he remarked, when the machine again made contact with solid ground. “Now, hop out. I want to see what I can do solo.”

Young Brampton had perforce to become a spectator, while Major Truscott went up alone. It was not mere desire for a solo flight that had prompted him. He meant to give the biplane a severe test, running risks that he would not have taken had Alan been a passenger.

He rolled, zoomed, threw the plane into a spin, flew upside down, and did half a dozen loops in quick succession, subjecting the machine to terrific strains and stresses that, had there been a fault in its construction, would have resulted in almost certain disaster.

“I’ve a jolly lot to learn yet,” thought Alan, filled with envious admiration of the Major’s dare-devil airmanship.

Then he held his breath as Major Truscott put the plane into a spinning nose-dive. The machine bore earthwards at a terrific pace until it was only about two hundred feet from the ground.

Gasps of horror arose from the onlookers, most of whom, experts in airmanship, were convinced that the biplane was out of control, and that a sickening crash was inevitable.

Alan could not help shutting his eyes. Involuntarily he placed his hand over his ears to try to avoid hearing the shattering noise of the impact.

Then expressions of relief came from the spectators. The lad opened his eyes to see the machine “sitting on its tail” and practically stationary, hovering over the crowd like a hawk waiting to pounce upon its prey. The daring pilot, determined to test Alan’s device to the uttermost, had tilted the

wings to their fullest extent. Virtually the biplane resembled a kite, the propeller being the counterpart of the string.

Five minutes later Major Truscott stepped out of the cockpit and rejoined the knot of aeronautical experts.

“She’ll do,” he remarked as coolly as if he were buying a horse at Mexworth market.

“I should think so,” agreed the manager of the works enthusiastically. “It’s the nearest approach to a bird that I’ve seen. Knocks the helicopter hollow! We’re open at once to negotiations for the sole manufacturing rights embodying your device.”

“Here’s your man,” replied Major Truscott, indicating the greatly elated Alan. “But perhaps it will be advisable for him to have time to consider any proposition you care to make. Meanwhile, Alan, your flying education is by no means complete. Are you game to test your parachute gear?”

“I suppose I’d better,” agreed the lad, but with marked reluctance. “It’s got to be done, I suppose?”

“No time like the present,” rejoined Major Truscott cheerfully. “Are you ready, sir?” he added, addressing the expert whose chief duty was to demonstrate the use of aeronautical life-saving devices.

The preliminary test consisted of leaping from a captive balloon moored at a height of a thousand feet. The demonstrator, a man of few words, signed to Alan to climb into the huge wicker basket. The Major went next, and then the expert.

Up shot the balloon as the groundmen released the brakes of the winding gear. Compared with flying, the motion was a disconcerting one. The basket began to revolve like a meat-jack, jerking and swaying in the breeze. The sense of freedom and security imparted by the swift motion of an aeroplane was lacking. Alan found himself wondering what would happen if the straining gasbag overhead burst through its nettings or the apparently frail wire rope should break and the balloon bound thousands of feet into the air; for it was not provided with sand ballast and relied solely upon the rope to keep in touch with the ground.

Leaning over the edge of the basket car Alan studied the scene below. Again he was conscious of a difference. Flying, he could obtain but momentary glances of the ground; from the balloon the sensation of altitude became unpleasantly evident, especially as he was expected to jump deliberately into the void. In a moment of peril he might have done so

unhesitatingly, carried away by the urgent necessity for the leap; but to think about it before trusting himself to a parachute that might not open—there was always the possibility—made him experience that sensation commonly alluded to as “having cold feet”.

“No worse than diving from a spring-board, Alan,” declared Major Truscott encouragingly. “I’ll go first.”

Balancing himself on the edge of the basket the Major waited until the slowly revolving car brought him to lee’ard. Then, hunched up with his head touching his knees, he toppled over into space.

Anxiously Alan watched the rapid descent of his companion until the parachutist looked no larger than a football. Already it seemed as if he had dropped two-thirds of the distance to earth and the umbrella-like device had not opened, although it was trailing upwards like the tail of a comet.

At length the body of the falling man was obscured by a steadily expanding circular disc. The parachute had done its duty. Slowly it drifted downwards and sideways in the breeze until it collapsed upon the ground and the Major could be seen backing in his harness to overcome the tendency of the apparatus to drag him across the field upon which he had successfully alighted.

“Easy as winking, Mr. Brampton,” declared his instructor. “Now you try. Don’t forget to let go the gadget when you’ve dropped clear.”

For quite ten seconds Alan hung on irresolutely to his precarious perch on the edge of the basket. He was about to release his hold when his arm was grasped by the instructor.

“You’ve lost your chance,” exclaimed the latter. “She’s swung round. Wait till you’re to lee’ard or you’ll foul the holding-down line.”

The wait until the basket had swung round into a favourable position was one of the worst intervals that the lad had ever experienced. He recalled his twice-repeated dream—how he had overcome the force of gravity by the downward beats of his arms. How futile the once-convincing effort of his brain seemed now! He felt much like a man under sentence of immediate execution.

“Now’s your chance!” exclaimed his companion, his voice sounding far away. “Off you go!”

Summoning his last reserve of will-power, Alan relaxed his grip and dropped. He was conscious of a terrific rush of wind as his hunched body

hurtled through the air. Long-drawn seconds passed. It seemed hours. Still the parachute did not open. He knew exactly what was happening—that he was falling earthwards with accelerated speed. He opened his eyes. In spite of the air pressure he could do so with comparative ease. He saw the ground apparently rushing up to meet him at express speed. Vaguely he realized that he would be alive and fully conscious until the actual moment of the terrible impact. The old theory that men falling from great heights were killed by the rush through the air before they crashed had been long exploded. It was the concussion, a quick death, but nevertheless there was complete knowledge of what was going to happen until the impact.

These thoughts were flashing across the lad's mind when he became aware of a steady and increasing strain of his harness. The rush of air past his ears ceased. His spread-eagled position gave place to an upright one.

Fear vanished. He was falling slowly earthwards, supported as if in a sort of swing by the fully extended envelope of the parachute.

Then his feet touched solid ground. Unluckily he was facing the direction of the wind as he did so. The parachute, partly collapsing, threw him backwards. He was being dragged willy-nilly over the grass, his legs beating a tattoo as he vainly endeavoured to regain his feet, when the Major and several of the groundmen ran to his aid.

The parachute was held and compressed into small compass while someone detached the straps that formed Alan's harness.

"How was that, Alan?" asked Major Truscott.

"Topping—after the first part of the drop," replied the lad. "I wouldn't mind doing it again."

"You shall," rejoined his companion. "From a plane flying all out. But perhaps you've had enough for to-day?"

Alan considered.

"Perhaps I have," he agreed.

CHAPTER VI

Preparations

The parachute descent from a swiftly moving biplane was actually quite an easy matter for Alan Brampton. The sensation of fear that he had previously experienced was missing, and when on the following day Major Truscott urged him to make the drop he did so without hesitation and with complete confidence in his equipment.

“Good enough!” declared the Major. “I’ll give instructions for the plane to be dismantled and crated, and then we’ll make tracks for Bramerton Hall. There’ll be a whale of work to be tackled before we embark.”

And up to the present, although he had purchased the biplane, he had not yet received the desired and necessary concession from the Huavilian Government!

By this time Alan had got to know something about the man who was virtually his employer. He was continually finding some new trait or an unsuspected qualification of the Major’s, and nothing to his discredit.

For instance, until Truscott had made arrangements to inspect the aeroplane Alan had not the slightest inkling that the Major had ever been “up”, still less that he had once held a commission as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps, before that branch of the service had been merged into the Royal Air Force.

Undoubtedly Major Truscott was well off financially. He had plenty of money and was unmarried and without near relations. He was generous to a fault, and although he had been victimized several times by impostors he never refused assistance to needy ex-servicemen, particularly to those who had served under him either in the R.F.C. or in the Tank Battalion. He was carefree; he was wont to declare that he knew he was alive and meant to enjoy himself while he had health and strength. The morrow might find him dead or perhaps a cripple for life, he was apt to assert, but he was content to take his chances; for happen what might, nothing could alter the fact that he

had had a thundering good time! Such was his philosophy. He enjoyed life—every minute of it—deriving much of the pleasure from the fact that he was keen on sharing his pleasure with others.

Alan had yet to see the Major in a temper. Nothing seemed to ruffle his serenity. Always cheerful and sublimely optimistic, Truscott had a well-balanced mind and the ability to form a quick decision that was rarely at fault.

“I’ve booked our passages by the Royal Mail for the second week in November, Alan,” he announced quite unexpectedly at breakfast. “The hurricane season in the Caribbean Sea is over by then. I’m a rotten sailor.”

“Have you heard from the Huavilian Consulate?” asked the lad.

Major Truscott shook his head.

“Not yet,” he replied. “But I shall before we sail.”

“I wonder,” thought Alan, knowing from what he remembered of his father’s words the dilatoriness of the Huavilian officials. Mr. Brampton was apt to remark that the only things which stirred them into activity were earthquakes and revolutions.

There were times when the lad wondered what had urged Major Truscott to go to all that trouble and expense to recover his great-grandfather’s lost statue of Ixtlahuaca. Already he must have expended, in preparations, more money than the thing was worth, and by the time it was found—if and when it were—the cost would be enormous.

Meanwhile, until the time fixed for their departure, Mr. Major kept his youthful assistant busy. There were trips to London to purchase stores, clothing, and equipment. Alan, already a good shot with a rifle, was put through an intensive course of pistol firing, until he could use a seven-shot .202 automatic with rapidity and accuracy. He had also to be “vetted”, an ordeal from which he emerged with flying colours, and had to submit to inoculation as a precaution against various tropical diseases prevalent in Huavilia and the adjacent republics.

The choice had to be made of the Major’s male employees, who almost without exception had volunteered to follow their master into the wilds of South America. They were all old soldiers who had served under him in France and Belgium. Although Major Truscott, when on active service, had been a strict disciplinarian and had never attempted to assume the character of a “Popularity Jack”, he had been devoted to the welfare and comfort of his men. Twenty old soldiers were now employed either on the indoor or

outdoor staffs of Bramerton Hall and twenty clamoured for the privilege of accompanying their employer to Huavilia.

Finally four were selected—Andrews, Bowden, and Campbell, who had formerly served in a Tank Battalion, and David Duncan.

The last had had a varied career. As a young man he had been a shipwright-diver in the Royal Navy, completing his term of “short service” just before the fateful fourth day of August, 1914. For some reason best known to himself Duncan did not re-engage afloat for the period of hostilities but “joined up” in the Royal Engineers. From that corps he transferred to the Flying branch. During the first Battle of the Somme Lieutenant Truscott (as he then was) and Sergeant David Duncan were on reconnaissance work when their plane was shot down over No Man’s Land. The officer was rendered unconscious, while David, though wounded by shrapnel in the left arm, remained with him in the precarious shelter of a shell hole until darkness fell. Then with great tenacity the Sergeant succeeded in dragging Truscott across the danger zone to the first line trenches.

Sergeant Duncan’s wound was a “blighty” one, and Truscott never saw him again until he met the discharged N.C.O. in low water in London about the year 1927. From that time David Duncan’s troubles were over.



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ALAN'S FIRST PARACHUTE DESCENT

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Andrews and Bowden were at present employed as estate carpenters at Bramerton Hall, while Campbell, a quiet well-spoken man who had been Major Truscott's batman, was now his master's valet.

There was an outstanding consideration that had influenced the inclusion of David Duncan as a member of the expedition. His experiences as a diver would make him almost indispensable when the actual search for the statue

of Ixtlahuaca had to be made. With this purpose in view the Major had ordered two self-contained diving-dresses. When these were delivered at Bramerton Hall, both Alan and the Major took turns under Duncan's supervision in making descents into the lake in the grounds in order to be able to take part in the search for the object of their quest.

At length, only forty-eight hours before the mail boat was due to leave Southampton, the long-expected permit arrived.

It was an imposing document written on parchment with the flamboyant arms of the republic at its head and with a huge red seal attached. It gave formal permission to "Señor Major Theophilus Truscott, a domiciled Englishman of Bramerton Hall in the County of York, England, to engage in a search for 'certain objects of art' bestowed upon Don Brocas Truscott". There was a provision which the Major, with his scanty knowledge of Spanish, had not fully grasped: that right of search was limited to the tenure of office of the President of the Huavilian Republic, Ramon y Miraflores de Souta.

There was also another clause which he *did* understand—that a tax of ten per cent of the assessed value of the "certain objects of art" would be levied before the articles in question were permitted to leave the country.

"There's a snag, Alan!" declared his employer. "There may be trouble with your Huavilian friends before we're clear of the place. However, there'll be time for that when we've found the idol! So yo-ho for the good old Spanish Main!"

CHAPTER VII

Checkmated

A grey, foggy, cheerless morning found the members of the expedition embarking at Southampton. It had been a case of touch-and-go, but with his customary energy Major Truscott had seen that his bulky equipment was alongside in record time. A large lorry had brought the crated and dismantled biplane from the works; the various railway companies concerned, their staffs and agents urged to unaccustomed haste by means of telegraph and telephone messages, had delivered the rest of the luggage, without allowing it to be temporarily lost for an indefinite period at some obscure railway-siding.

It was Alan's second voyage across the Atlantic, but in very different circumstances from the first. Taking his cue from his employer he was resolved to enjoy every moment of it, but——

The mail boat was hardly clear of the Wight when an incident occurred that was to have an effect upon the subsequent affairs of Major Truscott and his companions.

The Major had previously seen the passenger list, but none of the names was familiar to him.

"There's no reason why we shouldn't be sociable, Alan," he remarked. "Let's make for the smoking-room and see if I can recognize anyone. Last time I came back from Montreal I ran across three men I'd been billeted with in Albert. I'd forgotten their names but not their faces. Come along."

He led the way to the smoking-room. Already it was fairly crowded. Waiters were hurrying round to fulfil orders, while at a bar at one end of the saloon knots of men were either making or renewing friendships.

Suddenly a little meagre-framed fellow detached himself from one of the groups, took two quick steps in the Major's direction and extended his arm in an unspoken invitation to shake hands.

Without a moment's hesitation Truscott grasped the proffered hand. His big capable fingers enveloped the long, thin digits of the other man in a firm grip.

He made no attempt to shake hands; he merely grasped the other fellow's hand and continued to grasp, the while steadily and remorselessly increasing his grip.

"Hello!" exclaimed the Major in loud clear tones. "Never expected to find you here. Let me see, where did we meet last? Ah, I know: at the Old Bailey! I was lucky on that occasion; but I've forgotten what Darling gave you; pretty stiff, wasn't it?"

He continued to squeeze the long thin fingers of the over-demonstrative stranger until Alan imagined he saw blood oozing from under the man's nails. Meanwhile Truscott never shifted his gaze from the other's eyes.

"You've made a mistake!" protested the victim of the Major's vice-like grip.

"Have I? Sorry, my error!" rejoined Truscott, releasing the man's hand. "And I fancy you have too."

Amid the curious glances of the onlookers Major Truscott continued his interrupted way to an unoccupied table as coolly as if nothing had happened.

But Alan felt far from comfortable. Used as he was to fresh surprises being sprung upon him by his astonishing employer, he had not been prepared for the admission that the Major had figured in the dock at the Old Bailey.

Nor was any explanation forthcoming until Alan and the Major were about to turn in; their cabin, a four-berth one, being shared with two Civil Servants returning to Jamaica after the termination of their leave.

Truscott was about to close the sliding door of the cabin when the Ship's Purser came along the alleyway.

"Good evening, Major!" he exclaimed. "I'd like to have a word with you about that little incident in the smoking-room. I hadn't time to warn the passengers, but how did you know that Franker was a wrong 'un?"

"The fellow I shook hands with? I didn't know he was a bad hat. Is he?"

"Is he not?" rejoined the purser. "Do you mean to say you didn't know he was a confidence man and a card-sharper when you put the kybosh on those fingers of his?"

"I did not," was the reply. "But I've met fellows of that type before. It's curious how they all seem to employ the same means of forcing their unwanted acquaintance upon you: the proffered hand, apologies if you decline, and then an invitation to have a friendly drink. What do you do when you know there's a card-sharper on board?"

"Precious little except warn the other passengers," answered the purser. "If they allow themselves to be fleeced after being warned they can't blame the company. Franker booked his passage in the ordinary way, but he was shadowed by a Scotland Yard man until he was safe on board. When we've people of that sort we generally know their antecedents, but I didn't know you were in the dock at the Old Bailey, Major Truscott," he added smilingly.

"Be careful of my reputation," protested the Major jokingly. "I never said I was in the dock, but I have been in the Old Bailey as a witness on other occasions. Where's Franker bound for, by the by?"

"He's booked a passage to Barbadoes," said the purser. "It's my opinion that he's doubling on his tracks and trying to re-enter the United States. He'll probably feel sore because you've stopped him making his passage money and more out of his fellow voyagers. You'd better take care of your wallet."

But the purser's warning appeared to be exaggerated. During the rest of the run to the West Indies Alphonso Franker kept out of Major Truscott's way, and being shunned by the rest of the passengers he experienced a very lean time.

The voyage was otherwise uneventful. Greatly to the Major's satisfaction—for although a good airman he was rather a bad sailor—calm weather lasted throughout.

At Bridgetown, Barbadoes, the members of the Truscott expedition had to wait for nearly a week before the *San Thomé*, a vessel belonging to a Diamalan line, sailed for Nueva Guacipiti, the nearest port for Huavilia, whence a single line of rail ran as far as El Peso, the terminus, which was also on Diamalan territory.

Hitherto Major Truscott had had to deal with British organization. His baggage had been carried safely and promptly. Officials, although frequently brusque in manner, had carried out their part of the contract in a business-like manner. But at Nueva Guacipiti he had his first of many experiences of the lax way in which certain South American republics transact their affairs, especially with foreigners. In Diamala the principle of *Mañana*—which

broadly translated means “Never do to-day what you can do to-morrow”—is upheld more than anywhere else in the Spanish-speaking world; and quickly Truscott was “up against” the inherent laziness of all classes and the rotten system of “graft” that is an inseparable factor in dealings with the bureaucracy of the republic.

The *San Thomé* berthed alongside one of the wharves at Nueva Guacipiti at nine in the morning. Although the port was provided with electric cranes and other up-to-date appliances for working cargo, no move was made either to open hatches or to get the unloading machinery ready.

“What’s the delay, Alan?” asked his employer. “I’ve asked that gold-laced blighter over there, but I’m dashed if I can understand his lingo. You see what you can do.”

“He says that the customs people are still sitting in a café,” announced Alan. “If you’re in a hurry he suggests a present of about five dollars.”

“I’ll see them to blazes first,” declared the Major. “Tell Campbell to stand fast with our cabin trunks. Thank goodness we’re not out to break records, so we’ll take things easily until the customs people are ready.”

Drawing their deck-chairs close to the rail and under the double awnings—for already the morning sun was blazing fiercely—Alan and the Major could watch the scene as the rest of the passengers disembarked. For the most part they were half-caste citizens of Diamala and of the adjacent republics. There were a few Yankee “drummers”, otherwise commercial travellers, whose brisk exit formed a striking contrast to the languid attitude of the Spanish-speaking passengers.

“Look, sir!” exclaimed Alan, half rising out of his chair and pointing to one of the procession down the gang-plank. “There’s Franker.”

“So I see,” agreed the Major quietly.

“Did you know he was on board?” pursued the lad.

“No; the last I saw of him until this moment was when he left the mail boat at Bridgetown. I had no idea he was in the *San Thomé*. It’s his affair; but, at the same time, Alan, I’m a bit curious. Go and get hold of the steward, will you? Give him a couple of dollars, and ask him to let you see the passenger list.”

Alan was away for about a quarter of an hour before he returned looking rather excited.

“There was no Franker on the list,” he reported. “The steward became quite helpful after I’d given him a tip, and when I described Franker he declared that I had made a mistake in the name. The fellow calls himself Franco—Benito, not Alphonso—and he’s on his way to Santa Barbara.”

“He is, is he?” commented Major Truscott. “I wonder if that was his intention when he embarked at Southampton. I don’t suppose he’ll want to trouble us,” he added, with true British indifference. “Hello! Here are the Palm-oil Wallahs!”

CHAPTER VIII

Commandante Miguel Torello

He indicated half a dozen gorgeously uniformed men who were leisurely approaching the ship. They might easily have been mistaken for generals of the Diamalan army, since their uniforms included cocked-hats, epaulettes, and sashes, and each had a sword that rattled noisily as the scabbard trailed over the pavement.

Three of them were tackled by the Yankee drummers, who by word and gesture spared no pains to impress upon the officials that they were citizens of the Greatest Republic on Earth.

The remaining three boarded the *San Thomé*, where they started a leisurely conversation with the captain. This over, they went below with the chief steward. They were still drinking *maté* and *absinthe* when, twenty minutes later, Truscott routed them out.

By this time the crew had uncovered the cargo hatches, and a couple of shore engineers were taking preliminary steps to coax one of the electric cranes into a state of activity.

The import duties on the aeroplane, the diving-suits, and other gear were settled in about five minutes, thanks to a generous tip bestowed upon each of the three customs officials. Then, Duncan and his three co-workers bearing a hand, the crate containing the biplane was hoisted out and swung on to the wharf. Next the heavy baggage was taken ashore and carried by negro porters to the railway station, where Andrews and Bowden were left to guard the property until their employer, assisted by Alan, Campbell, and Duncan, were able to reassemble the wings of the aeroplane which had been removed to an open space on the outskirts of the town.

Toiling under a blazing sun the four Britons set to work, surrounded by a dense crowd of olive-skinned creoles, coffee-coloured half-castes, and a majority of negroes and Indians, all taking a delight in impeding the efforts of the airmen at every possible opportunity.

The task was nearing completion when an officer accompanied by an armed party appeared. At first Major Truscott was under the impression that the troops had been sent to preserve order and keep the crowd at a respectful distance, but he was quickly undeceived.

The officer announced that he was the Commandante of the Diamala Air Force, and that he proposed placing the foreign biplane under arrest.

“For what reason?” asked Alan, acting as his employer’s interpreter. “We have declared the machine at the customs. We have paid duty on it, and it has been passed by them.”

“The customs is no affair of mine,” declared the republican officer loftily. “It is strictly forbidden for any foreign aircraft to fly over Diamalan territory.”

“Then why wasn’t I told so before when my passport was visaed by your consul in London?” asked Truscott, without heat. “I told him I proposed going by air from here to Santa Barbara.”

The Diamalan officer shrugged his shoulders.

“It is the regulation,” he remarked. “In view of strained relations with Huavilia it is particularly of importance that no aircraft should enter that republic while I, Miguel Torello, Commandante of the Diamala Air Force, am here to prevent it.”

“Tell the Commandante that I admire his patriotic motives,” said the Major to Alan. “Ask him if we can have the honour of a few minutes’ private conversation.”

Truscott was not in the least surprised when Commandante Torello readily agreed to his suggestion. The soldiers cleared a way through the crowd, bringing down the butts of their rifles upon the bare toes of the onlookers who failed to respond smartly to the order to stand back.

Presently the Major and Alan were alone with the Commandante in a private room of the Hotel Comercio.

Unblushingly Truscott made his proposal that Torello should name the sum necessary to allow the biplane to proceed to Santa Barbara.

Without hesitation the Commandante named a price.

“But,” he added, “it is necessary in the interest of the State that the pilot of the machine should acquire republican status and that the biplane should become the property of the Diamala Air Force; temporarily, of course. Also

I myself must accompany you on your flight in order to satisfy my colleagues at the frontier station of El Peso.”

“I agree to that,” said Truscott. “When will you be ready to accompany us?”

“The morning after to-morrow at sunrise,” replied Torello. “I will myself telephone to El Peso and warn my brother commandante against our arrival. I would remind Your Honour that my personal expenses, including my railroad fare back to Nueva Guacipiti, are not inconsiderable.”

“They will be met,” rejoined the Major. “Then we can proceed with the reassembly of the machine, and we look forward to your presence on the morning of the day after to-morrow.”

On returning to the open space where the biplane was standing, Commandante Torello detailed an armed guard to remain and keep the crowd in order. Then smiling to himself, for he already had visions of placing obstacles in the Englishmen’s way at El Peso, he led the remainder of his men back to barracks.

“Greaser!” ejaculated the Major. “Every Diamalan has his price, I suppose. Look here, Alan, do you think you can pilot the machine? I’ll hurry up with the rest of the baggage and get to Santa Barbara as fast as I can.”

And he briefly outlined his plans, which included a nasty shock for Commandante Miguel Torello.

“My aunt, sir!” ejaculated Alan, his eyes sparkling. “It won’t be my fault if I don’t get to Santa Barbara before you.”

CHAPTER IX

Alan's Stratagem

By this time Alan had little doubts as to the Commandante's intentions. It seemed pretty certain that, in spite of his offer of assistance—he was quite ready to sacrifice his country's honour for a few dollars—Torello meant to put every obstacle in the way to prevent the biplane leaving Diamalan territory. That might or might not have been through patriotic motives, for relations between that republic and Huavilia were somewhat strained, and the possibility of Truscott's machine being commandeered by the authorities at Santa Barbara had to be considered. But what undoubtedly was in Torello's mind was to make the British airman descend at the frontier post of El Peso, extract more palm-oil, and then to invent some excuse to take possession of the biplane under the plea of national safety.

As soon as the machine was reassembled it was taken to one of the hangars belonging to the Diamala Air Force. Truscott was assured that it would be kept locked up and would be perfectly safe. Nevertheless he felt none too easy in his mind. Perhaps the machine would be tampered with. More than likely the republican airmen were already trying to probe the secrets of its construction.

But the Major had no option in the matter.

"Let's get back to the railway station, Alan," he suggested. "I'll catch the 2 p.m. train to El Peso and arrange for the rest of the baggage to be sent across the frontier and on to Santa Barbara by motor transport. I'll leave Duncan with you."

"That won't be necessary," replied Alan. "The Commandante is going to be a passenger, and he's a fairly hefty fellow. The lighter our load the better, as it means a 15,000-feet climb to clear the Sierras."

"Good, I understand," rejoined his employer. "I'll take Duncan with the others. If I've a chance I'll telegraph when I arrive at El Peso and again when I'm across the frontier."

Alan waited at the station assisting the Major in supervising the loading up of the heavy baggage by a mob of indolent *peons*. The gear was placed in a long open iron “bogie” truck, two of which were at the rear of the train. Since there was no platform, as is the case almost everywhere on the American continent, the labour entailed was hard and tedious.

When the luggage was on board the Major detailed Andrews and Bowden to travel on the truck as a necessary precaution against theft, while Campbell and Duncan armed, like the master, with automatics, were to travel with him in one of the corridor cars.

At the last moment—the train was already an hour late in starting—an additional locomotive was joined up to the rear of the train in order to overcome the stiff gradient between Nueva Guacipiti and El Peso, between which places the railroad attained an altitude of 7500 feet.

“Is Franker, or Franco as he calls himself, on board, sir?” asked Alan, when the train was about to make its belated start.

“I’ve been along the corridor and haven’t spotted him,” replied Major Truscott. “Probably he’s going up to Santa Barbara by a later train. Sure you don’t mind stopping here alone? Very well then; cheerio and good luck!”

The train moved slowly out of the station. Alan watched it until it disappeared round a curve, then he made his way back to the hotel where he had previously booked a room.

The next day passed uneventfully. On the morning of the day fixed for the flight Alan was up well before sunrise. He had breakfast and then went to his room to collect his scanty belongings.

A small suitcase in which he had placed his passport was no longer there. He had seen it just before going down for a meal half an hour ago, and he had locked the door before going down.

Ringling for one of the attendants Alan bade him bring the manager at once.

The *maître d’hôtel*, greasily polite, listened to his guest’s complaint.

“Has the señor lost his money?” he asked eagerly, as if, since that might affect the payment of his bill, such a catastrophe was of the first importance.

“I have not,” replied the lad. “But someone having a duplicate key has entered my room and removed my suitcase.”

The manager shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the open window leading on to a small balcony.

“If the señor is so forgetful as to leave open the window——” he remarked. “If the articles lost are of importance the señor should lodge a complaint with the Chief of Police.”

Alan had no time for the Diamalan police. His one object was to take the biplane from the undesired care of the republican airmen. Yet at the same time he realized the magnitude of his loss. The Diamalan authorities could and probably would arrest him and confiscate the aeroplane if it was found that he possessed no passport.

“I’ll have to risk that,” decided Alan. “They’ve already examined my passport, and if they don’t ask to see it again it won’t matter much. I can easily square matters when I’m back at Santa Barbara.”

When Alan arrived at the aerodrome he found that the biplane had been taken from its hangar and was standing with its nose pointing in the direction of a high stone wall fifty yards away. Close to it, but swung round in the opposite direction and against the wind, were two double-fuselaged triple-engined aeroplanes belonging to the National Air Force.

In spite of the early hour a considerable crowd had assembled, the throng being kept at a respectful distance by a number of armed troops and civil guards.

Standing by the British plane was Commandante Miguel Torello. He was conversing with a couple of his subordinates. Seeing Alan approach he returned the young airman’s salute in a casual manner and resumed his talk.

“I wonder why they’ve placed my bus there?” thought Alan. “Perhaps they’ve found out something about her climbing power and want me to give a demonstration. If they haven’t found out, then they’re trying to baulk me; but would they, since that boulder of a Commandante’s going to be my passenger?”

Presently Torello dismissed the two officers and beckoned to Alan.

“We have provided your master the Major with petrol,” he announced. “The tank is full, as you will be able to see.”

“Very good, Commandante,” rejoined Alan politely. “There’s no reason why we shouldn’t start at once if you are ready.”

He waved his hand in the direction of the seat behind that of the pilot’s.

The Commandante smiled and shook his head.

“You have mistaken me, *amigo*,” he said suavely. “It is true that I accompany you on your flight, but in another aeroplane; one of the two you see here. Capitano Juan Mercurio will go in your plane. Rest assured that with our escort you will come to no harm. But for that our anti-aircraft batteries along the frontier would certainly open fire on you.”

Alan took more than ordinary interest in the two Diamalan triple-engined craft. They were more powerful than the British biplane and probably possessed greater speed. Whether they could climb as swiftly was as yet an unsolved problem. They might not ascend so steeply—Alan was sure they could not—but the rate of ascent might be greater. Also judging by appearances Capitano Mercurio was a person of very different calibre to the spineless bombastic Torello.

“You have not left me much room to take off, Commandante,” observed Alan, pointing to the twenty feet high wall.

“Assuredly not,” agreed Torello. “No machine unless it were a helicopter could possibly take off in that short space. I am curious to see how you work your controls. When you have made a demonstration then you can turn and ascend.”

The young airman could hardly disguise his satisfaction at Torello’s words. The Commandante, then, had no suspicion of the extraordinary climbing powers of the biplane. He was anxious, too, to see how the machine was controlled. He was playing into Alan’s hands.

“I am only too willing to show you, Commandante,” he replied. “There are certain devices which are patented, and, of course, these rights can be acquired by anyone. I will show you.”

He climbed into the pilot’s seat and signed to one of the Diamalan mechanics to swing the propeller. Then he began to shout technicalities to Torello who, owing to the hum of the “prop”, could not hear a word.

Alan “switched off”.

“It would be better, Commandante, if you took this seat,” he said, indicating the bucket seat behind the pilot’s. “Then you can both hear and see.”

Unsuspectingly Torello unbuckled his sword-belt and handed the weapon to one of his staff. Then, puffing like a grampus, he allowed himself to be assisted into the after cockpit.

“Contact!” shouted Alan.

Again the propeller was swung into a state of activity. Alan commenced to move various controls and to explain their functions. Meanwhile he kept a wary eye upon the other Diamalan officers who were crowding on either side of the fuselage.

Slowly he drew back the lever actuating the tilting wings until the upper and lower planes were at an angle of thirty degrees.

Then, still talking to the Commandante, he gave the motor full throttle.

The roar of the exhaust, coming so unexpectedly, made the onlookers in the immediate vicinity step back.

At the same moment the biplane, shuddering violently, parted company with the ground.

For the next five seconds Alan had a very anxious time. With the wind behind the angle of ascent was considerably reduced. Could the machine clear the top of the wall? Would Torello attempt to interfere? If he were to grasp the pilot's arm in protest the chances were that the biplane would swerve and crash into the stone barrier.

It was touch and go. For a moment it seemed as if the propeller would shatter itself against the coping. A fraction of a second later and the starboard landing-wheel bumped against the edge of the wall.

Then, unscathed, the biplane roared skywards.

At a height of eight hundred feet, Alan reduced the angle of the planes. The comparatively slow and almost vertical ascent gave place to a rapid forward motion, but meanwhile the machine was climbing steadily. She had to if she were to clear the snow-clad peaks of the none too distant Sierras.

For the present Alan could devote a few moments' attention to his unwilling passenger. One glance sufficed to reassure the young pilot that he need not fear any interference from Torello. The Commandante, who had never flown except as a passenger, even though he was the head of the Diamala Air Force, was stark with fear. Perhaps he realized that if he put a bullet through the back of the Englishman he would be in a far worse plight. In the circumstances he sat still, his hands gripping the coamings of the cockpit. As a matter of fact, the sudden unexpected jerk when the plane took off had jolted him considerably.

“No need for me to threaten to loop and throw him out,” decided Alan. “Now if that blighter knew his job he'd turn off the petrol supply; and I

couldn't prevent him!"

Leaning over the cockpit the lad looked down. Already the biplane was over the town. Astern he could make out the aerodrome. One of the machines detailed as escort had just taken off; the other was taxi-ing.

"I've a good three minutes' start anyhow," thought Alan. "And by the time they're up and have swung round I'll be well ahead. I wonder where Truscott is? Held up somewhere, I expect. He didn't get a wire through to me, so evidently he's somewhere this side of El Peso."

A great factor in Alan's favour was that he could follow the railway line. Although it wound considerably as it climbed into the mountains its general direction could be discerned for fifteen or twenty miles ahead. Two hours, or say two and a half hours owing to the rarefied atmosphere and consequent loss of airscrew efficiency, and he would be over the frontier.

The two Diamalan aeroplanes were now in hot pursuit. Alan was not greatly concerned about them. Had he been flying solo it would have been a different proposition. They would not hesitate to overhaul and shoot down his bus; but with such an important personage as the Commandante on board they would refrain from such drastic measures. Nor could they head off the biplane and force it to descend. They were as incapable of doing him harm as a tiger behind stout iron bars. Nothing short of a forced descent would prevent Alan carrying the Diamalan Air Commandante across the frontier into the rival republic of Huavilia.

It was becoming decidedly colder. At first the cool air was a welcome change from the sweltering heat at Nueva Guacipiti, where even at night the temperature rarely falls below eighty degrees; but presently Alan became painfully aware of the drop in temperature. The altimeter recorded six thousand feet, but the ground was less than eighteen hundred feet beneath him. Although he was provided with a leather flying-coat he was not wearing it. He had thrown it into the cockpit before the start of the flight, and for all practical purposes it might not have been on board.

Nor was Commandante Torello any better equipped for the trip. His flying-kit had been handed to an orderly, who was probably still holding it and wondering what had befallen its rightful owner.

At the end of an hour the two Diamalan aeroplanes were almost abreast of the British machine. Alan had deliberately slowed his bus, bearing in mind that running all out for long placed too great a strain upon the motor. It

was as well to have some reserve of power when the crossing of the Sierras began.

Gradually the escort drew ahead. Alan had a clear view of the crews. The observers were gesticulating violently in a way which clearly indicated that the British biplane must descend forthwith.

Alan grinned in reply. He was revelling in being able to defy the republican airmen. But for feeling so horribly cold he would have been delightfully happy.

Then one of the aeroplanes swung across in front with the idea of compelling Alan to descend.

The biplane rocked in the other's wake, but the lad was unperturbed. Giving his bus full throttle he held on his course until the nose of his machine was within twenty yards of the Diamalan's tail. The manœuvre was too much for the republican pilot's nerve. He dived a good five hundred feet before attempting to flatten out, while the Commandante, realizing the danger to both planes, reviled his compatriot with curses which were, of course, quite inaudible to the individual to whom they were addressed.

At length Alan was over the frontier town of El Toro. He could see crowds in the plazas—a sea of brown faces gazing up at the three machines. From a fort on the outskirts a gun was fired. Alan caught sight of the flash and the haze of brown smoke and wondered whether he was under the fire of an anti-aircraft battery. But no burst of shrapnel followed, although the guns continued firing at regular intervals.

“Firing a salute to the Commandante, I expect,” he thought. “I don't think Torello will appreciate the honour.”

He held on. He no longer had the railway as a guide; but there was the Rio Morte which, he knew, flowed between the mountains in a deep canyon. The gorge was too narrow for the passage of an aeroplane. There was no alternative but to continue to climb and try to find a way between two of the saw-like peaks of the snow-clad Sierras.

The escort was no longer in futile attendance. Both machines had alighted to bear the tidings that the Commandante was being abducted. If Truscott was not across the frontier his position would not be an enviable one. He would be placed under arrest.

“I hope he's over,” thought Alan. “I've carried out his instructions, anyway.”

The temperature fell lower and lower as the young pilot headed for what looked like a probable airway between the peaks. He was still climbing, but the biplane was labouring.

Then, to increase the gravity of the situation, the engine began to misfire.

“Not out of petrol, surely?” thought Alan.

A glance at the gauge showed that there was sufficient for another five hours, but there was something wrong with the fuel supply.

“I don’t suppose Torello has been monkeying with the petrol tap,” soliloquized the pilot. “He wouldn’t risk a forced descent here. Seems like water in the petrol: it’s that muck he had put into the tank, I expect.”

As a test Alan diverted the supply to the duplicate carburetter. To his relief the engine picked up almost immediately, but there still remained the possibility that if there were foreign matter in the tank the jet of the second carburetter would presently become choked.

The prospect of a forced landing gave Alan a nasty turn. The biplane was now tearing through a gap in the mountains. On either side the snow-clad peaks towered a good two thousand feet above the machine. Beneath was a narrow valley also in a mantle of snow, although here and there ugly black rocks revealed themselves. Probably no human eye had ever before gazed down upon that scene of frozen desolation.

“I’ve taken the wrong route, by Jove!” exclaimed Alan, as the biplane, following the curve of the valley, was confronted with a towering mass that appeared to be an insurmountable barrier. “It’s a dead end; and if I can’t find a way out I’m properly in the cart!”

CHAPTER X

Across the Sierras

Again the engine showed signs of misfiring. In spite of Alan's efforts to increase altitude the biplane dropped a matter of two hundred feet. Loss of power combined with the rarefaction of the atmosphere made the young airman's task hazardous in the extreme.

It was impossible to turn and retrace his course. The sheer and often beetling cliffs on either side were within the aeroplane's minimum turning-circle. The only thing to be done was to hold on his course in the faint hope that the pilot had found a mountain-pass and not a *cul-de-sac*.

He was not long left in doubt. The biplane was moving at a rate of a hundred and twenty miles an hour—a mile every thirty seconds—and that speed was only just sufficient to enable it to maintain altitude. If it dropped into that valley of snow and ice its fate and that of its crew would be sealed, but no one would ever discover the wreckage.

Narrower grew the gorge. It seemed as if the wing-tips would touch. Masses of snow, set in motion by the air-wash of the swiftly moving plane, came crashing down into the depths, the noise of the succession of avalanches out-voicing the roar of the motor which was increased many fold by the echo and re-echo from the sides of the canyon.

Suddenly, as the biplane rounded yet another bend of the gorge, Alan sighted a white mass dead ahead. Not only did it completely fill the space between the walls of the canyon, but it towered high above the overhanging crags.

It was a veil of vapour. What was behind remained unseen. In a very few seconds the machine must dive blindly into the eddying bank of mist. Did it conceal the sheer face of a barrier of rock?

There was no help for it. Alan headed straight for the veil of mystery, perhaps death.

To the accompaniment of the thunderous roar of the motor and the crashing and rending of rocks swept by falling snow into the abyss, the biplane plunged into the mist.

In an instant it was pitch dark. Almost mechanically Alan stretched out a benumbed hand and switched on the searchlight and also the lamp on the instrument-board. Nothing but a blurred silhouette against the reflected glare of the headlight met his gaze. The vapour had frozen in his goggles. He pushed the fur-lined glasses up, rasping the bridge of his nose as he did so. The icy wind, sweeping over the top of the screen cut the exposed part of his face like a whiplash.

With an effort he half opened his eyes and peered at the instrument-board. The machine had lost nearly five hundred feet. Longitudinally she was almost on an even keel, but the clinometer recorded a list of twenty-five degrees. The compass showed that the plane was eight points off her course. Either by sheer good luck she had followed the bend of the canyon or else—it seemed too good to be true—the gorge had expanded, otherwise the machine must have crashed into the right-hand wall of rock.

Soon every exposed part of the blindly-driving biplane was covered with a coat of frost that sparkled like a galaxy of minute stars in the glare of the searchlight. The beam of light was almost valueless. It did not penetrate the cloud of freezing vapour for a distance of more than twenty or thirty feet.

By this time Alan had almost ceased to take any interest in life. Blinded by the glare, his face cut by the shower of hailstones, his fingers bereft of the sensation of feeling, his feet hardly conscious of the pressure they exerted on the rudder-bar, he was almost incapable of thought and action.

Then, like an express train dashing out of a black tunnel, the biplane emerged into dazzling sunshine. Astern was a mass of snow-white cloud that capped the southern side of the Sierras. Ahead, and six thousand feet below, lay the expanse of sun-scorched undulating land that composed two-thirds of the Republic of Huavilia.

But Alan was not in a condition to realize and appreciate his rare slice of luck. Only when the masterless biplane commenced a wide circling movement and headed back towards the precipitous mountain did he recover himself sufficiently to bring her round until her nose pointed for the dark smudge on the plains that marked the position of the still distant city of Santa Barbara.

Then, perhaps fortunately for him, the motor coughed and spluttered and finally “konked out”. The hitherto deafening roar gave place to almost total silence save for the thrumming of the wind past the struts between the planes.

The gravity of the situation roused the lethargic youth to immediate action. Provided he kept his presence of mind and retained control he could bring the machine to earth by means of a long gentle glide. On the other hand, should the biplane get out of control his little reserve of strength would be insufficient to prevent the bus getting into a terrific nose-dive to end in a fearful crash!

With a strong following wind the biplane glided many miles with a loss of only a couple of hundred feet. Although the air was still cold, some degree of warmth was returning to the lad’s hitherto frozen limbs. He began to take a renewed interest in things animate and inanimate.

A glance showed him that his passenger had slipped out of his bucket-seat and was lying inert with his head and shoulders under the after-deck of the fuselage. Whether the Commandante was still alive—men of his calibre had died from shock of a lesser degree than this—Alan could not determine.

“There’s one thing: I haven’t chucked him out of the bus,” he soliloquized grimly. “It looks as if I’m going to deliver the goods this time.”

Looking downwards the pilot made out the course of the Rio Morte on his left. Its nearest point was about seven miles away. Then the truth flashed across Alan’s mind. Instead of taking the Alborante Pass he had blundered into an almost blind alley a good three miles to the west of what should have been his correct course. In spite of stupendous difficulties he had won through.

Lower and lower sank the biplane. Again and again, taking advantage of an upward air current the young airman made good to the extent of a few hundred feet till the net result was that he was gradually approaching the earth.

He could now distinguish the main highway between Santa Barbara and the railhead at El Peso as it practically followed the course of the rapidly flowing Rio Morte. Villages could be discerned, while the glistening white marble façade of the Cathedral of Santa Barbara was now a distinctive feature in the wide landscape.

Body and mind attaining renewed activity, Alan set about to attempt to coax the motor from a state of potential into one of kinetic energy. He

“turned over” to the original carburettor in the hope that the jet had cleared itself. Then, “strangling” the air-intake, he risked a loss of precious altitude by diving steeply. The increased pressure made the propeller spin rapidly; then, following one terrific “bang” in the exhaust, the engine leapt into a state of activity.

Three minutes later Alan was over the city. Although seen for the first time from a totally different viewpoint, Santa Barbara was no stranger to him. He could even distinguish the patio-surrounded house in which he was born and had spent the first fourteen years of his life. Above the flat roof of the consulate the Union Jack streamed proudly in the strong wind. In the plaza in front of the cathedral crowds had gathered to watch the unusual sight of an aeroplane, and one that bore the distinctive markings of the neighbouring and much-hated rival Republic of Diamala.

Alan would not have been surprised if he had been greeted by shell-fire from the fort of San Domingo and San Thomé. Perhaps Major Truscott had already explained matters to the authorities; at all events no shattering burst of shrapnel formed a part of Huavilia’s welcome to the new arrival.

Already Alan had decided upon his landing-ground, a gently shelving expanse of sun-baked clay adjoining Lake Xaca on the south side of the city. Close to it was the race-course, together with the depot of the State Transport Company, where most of the goods for export and import were taken before distribution. It was the rendezvous that Alan had suggested to Major Truscott, since his baggage would have to be examined here by the city assessors of import duties.

Again there were evidences that the Major had reached Santa Barbara before him, for Alan could see that a large crowd had assembled, the throng being kept back by the military and civil police.

Turning head to wind, Alan put the biplane into a steep dive. Then, faultlessly timing his descent, he flattened out, bumped lightly at a speed of forty miles an hour, and covered a good two hundred yards before coming to a stop.

Instantly there was a rush on the part of the spectators. In spite of the troops and police the citizens of Santa Barbara broke through the cordon in their eagerness to inspect an aeroplane at close quarters.

Standing up in the cockpit, Alan scanned the crowd in the hope of seeing his employer. The young airman must have presented a weird spectacle, for his face resembled a piece of raw beef. Blood was flowing from the abrasion

on the bridge of his nose to which fur from his goggles was adhering. His saturated clothes, steaming in the hot sun, were splashed with black oil.

There was no sign of Truscott and his three men.

The crowd swarmed perilously close. One spat contemptuously at the identification mark of Diamala. That was a signal for another rush. The machine was tilted dangerously as the mob assailed it with sticks and with vicious kicks with their rope-soled boots.

“Down with Diamala!” they yelled.

Then the truth flashed across Alan’s mind. He had arrived before his employer, and in the absence of any previous explanation the Huavilians had taken the aeroplane for one of the air fleet of the rival republic.

Unless something were done promptly Truscott would find only a mass of twisted metal that was once the machine that had so nobly battled its way over the hitherto impassable Sierras.



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“ YOU ARE NOW IN SANTA BARBARA, COMMANDANTE ”

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CHAPTER XI

“What’s to be done?”

About twenty soldiers armed with rifles with fixed sword-bayonets forced their way through the crowd. The troops gave Alan the impression that they were carrying out an unpleasant duty and that had they followed their own inclinations they would have joined in the congenial task of badgering an airman who, they had reason to believe, was a Diamalan.

A ray of hope flashed across Alan’s mind as he recognized the officer in charge. Three years previously Juan Suarez had been a clerk in the consulate. Alan’s father had obtained him the post at the request of the President of the republic, and now Suarez was a full-fledged *tiente-capitano* of an infantry regiment.

“Oh, Juan!” exclaimed the lad. “Don’t you recognize me? I’m Alan Brampton.”

“*Dios!*” ejaculated the Huavilian officer. “It is indeed Alan. What are you doing here, and with an accursed Diamalan aeroplane?”

“It is not, Juan,” explained the lad. “The Diamalans at Nueva Guacipiti tried to take possession of it. They placed their distinguishing marks on it, but I tricked them and flew here. Is the British officer Major Truscott here? I say, can’t you make these fellows desist?”

The Huavilian officer gave an order. The soldiers levelled their bayonets; the crowd gave back; nevertheless the attitude towards the airman remained distinctly hostile until Juan, instead of arresting him as they quite expected, grasped Alan’s hand and shook it warmly.

“This is an English aeroplane!” shouted Capitan Suarez. “Señor Brampton I know: he was born at Santa Barbara. Many of you must remember his father, the English consul. These marks on the aeroplane were placed there to deceive those pigs of Diamalans!”

The Huavilian officer’s explanations had a favourable reception by the crowd. They even raised a sort of cheer for the English señor who had

braved a flight over the mountains.

“You must not remain here,” said Juan. “The horse-jumping contest is about to take place and your aeroplane obstructs the course. As a temporary measure you can place it in that store, that is, if the doors are of sufficient width.”

He pointed to a fairly large building forming part of the Transport Company’s premises.

“She won’t take it, I’m afraid,” replied Alan, mentally comparing the width of the doorway with that of the wing-span of the biplane. “If you don’t mind I’d like to run under the lee of the building until Major Truscott decides what is to be done.”

“*Bueno!*” agreed Juan. “My men will drag your machine there.”

“I won’t trouble them, thanks,” said Alan. “It’s no trouble to start up the engine.”

In declining the offer the young pilot had ulterior motives. Until his employer arrived upon the scene he was anxious to keep Commandante Miguel Torello hidden. Up to the present the Diamalan had made no sign or sound. Lying flat in the cockpit he was screened from outside observation by the raised coamings and the cambered deck.

Although the relations between Huavilia and Diamala were officially friendly, there was an intense and bitter rivalry between the two republics, especially as the latter, cutting off the former from the sea, was in a position to control and even to cut off all communication between the inland state and the rest of the world. The formation of the Diamalan Air Fleet, too, was considered to be directed against Huavilia; so that should Torello fall into the hands of the Santa Barbara mob he would run a great risk of being badly manhandled. Undoubtedly the Commandante was a rogue who had not hesitated to play a double game, but in Alan’s opinion he had already paid dearly for this duplicity.

To hand him over to mob rule, the lad decided, “wasn’t cricket”.

Restarting the engine, Alan clambered stiffly into the cockpit and taxied to the place he had selected. Fortunately the attention of the crowd was drawn to the greater attraction, the horse-jumping contest. Like most South and Central Americans the Huavilians were excellent horsemen and took the greatest interest in all equestrian meetings.

The walls of the building afforded complete shelter from the prevailing wind; also it had no windows overlooking the spot where the biplane was moored.

Before Captain Suarez had rejoined him, Alan whispered to Torello:

“You are now in Santa Barbara, Commandante. It is in your interest to remain quiet until I can find an opportunity to get you away.”

“I understand, señor,” replied Torello humbly.

Throwing a piece of canvas over the cockpit Alan alighted. He was puzzling his brain as to how he could get Torello to a place of comparative safety, especially if Major Truscott did not put in a speedy appearance.

“You can leave your aeroplane here in perfect safety, Señor Alan,” suggested Juan. “I will post two of my men to guard it. For the present, being on duty, I must remain on the race-course. Might I, without offence, suggest that you remove the traces of travel from your face.”

“I suppose I could do with a wash,” agreed Alan, who had no idea of the state of his face. “I suppose José Gomez still runs the Hotel Republico?”

At that moment a motor-car pulled up sharply within a few yards of the stationary aeroplane. As was the case with almost every car in the country, it had its hood up as a protection from the sun. A negro was in the driver’s seat, but the strong shadow cast by the hood prevented the passengers being recognized.

Recognition, however, came when Alan heard the Major’s voice shouting a greeting:

“Hello, Alan!” he exclaimed. “You’ve arrived before me, I see. Where’s the jolly old Commandante?”

“I’ve kept him out of the way,” he replied. Then turning to Juan he continued in Spanish: “Tiente-Capitano Suarez, permit me to introduce Major Truscott. He has promoted you already; he called you Commandante!”

Truscott “tumbled to it”. Quick to pick up his cue, he apologized to Suarez, and expressed the hope that ere long the Tiente-Capitano would attain the rank he had already bestowed.

Bidding the Englishmen “*Adios, señores!*” Juan left to continue his duty.

“You’ve delivered the goods then, Alan,” remarked the Major. “By Jove! We—or I suppose I must take responsibility—have made rather a mess of

things by bringing Torello here. The old rascal deserves all he's got; but that's not the point. We've run the risk of creating a 'diplomatic incident' between Huavilia and Diamala. The government of the latter will be demanding what has happened to its chief of the Air Force if we don't send him back on our own account. And if we do return the goods Torello will take jolly good care to prevent us embarking at Nueva Guacipiti, or indeed at any Diamalan port."

"I thought of that too," rejoined Alan. "We've rather mucked up our lines of communication. And we can't very well hand Torello over to the authorities at Santa Barbara. Popular feeling is so strong against him in Huavilia that his life would be in danger."

"Is that so?" said Truscott thoughtfully. "I've half a mind to fly across to El Peso and leave him there; but in our own interests we ought to keep him out of his own country until we've finished our search for Ixtlahuaca's statue. Our first job is to get him away from here. He can't exist indefinitely in the cockpit of an aeroplane. What's to be done?"

"Where are Duncan and the others, sir?"

"Left them ten miles away," replied the Major. "The transport broke down, so they're mounting guard over the baggage at an inn—a *fonda*, isn't it—at a village called Martinete. I hired this car and hurried into Santa Barbara to find you; I'd seen you pass overhead, you know."

"Then why not take the Commandante to Martinete until we can decide what's to be done with him?" suggested Alan. "I don't think he'll kick up a fuss and start bragging to people that he's a big boss in the Diamalan Air Force."

"All right; bring him along," agreed the Major. "Topping idea of yours, Alan! I don't suppose our coal-black chauffeur will discover the identity of the kidnapped commandante."

Alan went back to the aeroplane. His difficulty was not to induce Torello to emerge from his cramped quarters, but to divert the attention of the two soldiers whom Juan Suarez had left on guard.

The sentries were more interested in the horse trials than in the object they were ordered to guard. They had left their rifles against the wall and had climbed upon a derelict crate in order to obtain a better view. Seeing Alan approach they hurriedly jumped down, seized their rifles, and held them in the "port arms" position, the Huavilian form of military salute.

To Truscott's horror—for the action outraged his sense of military discipline—Alan handed each man a few coins.

“You won't be wanted here for the next half-hour,” he remarked. “Go and try your luck and put these *centavos* on the next race. I'll be responsible to your Tiente-Capitano if there's any difficulty.”

The sentries thanked Alan profusely. Then, resting their rifles against the wall, they made their way to the nearest *totalo* or box where bets were received.

“Be quick, Commandante!” said Alan earnestly. “We—Major Truscott and I—are taking you by car to Martinete. You will be quite safe if you follow our instructions. Throw this sheet of canvas over your shoulders like a poncho, and don't let your uniform be seen.”

Bareheaded, for he had the sense to remove his gold-laced cap and hide it under his improvised cloak, Torello alighted and followed his abductors to the waiting car. He was quaking violently but recovered somewhat when Truscott handed him a cigar.

“We remain here until the sentries return,” explained Alan. “They will not know who you are. Perhaps you'd better remove your tunic and sit on it.”

The Commandante did so. Fortunately the negro chauffeur was sitting with his back to Torello and was looking at the horses competing in the jumping events. Had he been curious he might have seen what was going on inside his car by the reflection on the wind-screen; but his whole attention was on the equestrian contest.

Five minutes after the time allowed the two sentries strolled leisurely to the posts. Apparently they had done well with their little gamble and were most effusive in their thanks to *los Inglees* for releasing them from duty. They glanced incuriously into the hooded car as they passed, but Torello, in a white shirt and with a red scarf round his waist, looked like one of the few thousand similarly garbed citizens of Santa Barbara.

“Back to the *fonda*, Zamba!” ordered the Major.

Reluctantly the negro “came back to earth”, for he had been following the jumping matches with intense attention. Kicking the self-starter and jamming in the clutch he set off at a furious pace.

Crossing the outskirts of the plain and narrowly avoiding collision with the narrow bridge across the river, the chauffeur drove through the broad

avenida leading to the plaza in the centre of the city. There did not appear to be either a speed limit or any rule of the road in Huavilia, and more than once Alan held his breath as the car appeared to dive under the nose of a prancing horse or swerved violently half across the road to avoid another *automobilio* tearing round a blind corner at a similar breakneck speed.

To the young airman it was a worse experience than piloting the biplane over the Sierras. There he had control more or less; here he was a mere passenger at the mercy of a dare-devil negro chauffeur who actually turned and grinned over his shoulder when the ramshackle car took a curve on two wheels!

At length the car drew up at the *patio* of the inn. Duncan and his fellow employees were there to greet Alan after his daring flight; but they hardly expected to find the obnoxious Commandante huddled in the corner and trembling like a jelly.

The innkeeper advanced, bowing and scraping.

“We are remaining here to-night,” announced Truscott, in his atrocious Spanish. “I require another bed for my new servant here.”

For a moment Commandante Miguel Torello bridled. He, a *hidalgo* and chief of the Diamala Air Force to be grossly insulted by being referred to as a mere *peon*!

But, luckily for him, the fit passed.

Outwardly humble, he followed the Major into the *fonda*, the designated servant of the Englishman whom, but that morning, he had hoped to humiliate and to plunder.

CHAPTER XII

A Warning

From a room in the *fonda* Alan gazed through the open window at the vast expanse. He had had a bath, changed into clean clothes, and had fed. In consequence he looked, and felt, a very different individual from the weather-beaten weary airman who had battled his way over the dangerously formidable Sierras.

Within fifty yards of the inn the Rio Morte flowed swiftly on its five hundred feet drop to the sea. A barge was being poled down by a crew of sombreroed natives whose task principally consisted in keeping the unwieldy craft clear of the rocks between which the river rushed in a series of cascades. The barge, Alan knew, was roughly built of squared mahogany and teak logs. Once across the frontier it would never return to Huavilian territory. At Nueva Guacipiti, its value having been fixed by the Diamalan customs and dues paid accordingly, it would be broken up and its valuable planks and timbers shipped for some European port.

The serenity of the aspect was disturbed by the clatter of metal as mechanics from Santa Barbara exerted unusual energy in repairing the heavy motor-lorry that Major Truscott had hired to transport his baggage from Nueva Guacipiti to Santa Barbara. In the circumstances the delay was advantageous. It enabled Truscott to make definite arrangements concerning the abducted Commandante.

“Are you ready, Alan?” inquired his employer through the open doorway. “I’ve given Torello a good square meal. Perhaps he’ll now be reasonable. You do the tongue-wagging; you know what to say.”

The abducted Commandante’s appearance had also undergone a change. He had taken off his gorgeous uniform and was wearing the dress of a *peon*. His usually carefully waxed moustache now resembled that of a walrus, while his sleek over-oiled ringlets were now trailing lankly over the nape of his neck.

“Commandante, we are sorry to have to curtail your liberty for the next month or six weeks,” explained Alan. “But, really, it was your fault. Not only did you demand an illegal payment from Major Truscott here, but you had intended to find a pretext for detaining and confiscating our aeroplane at El Peso.”

This was a pure guess on Alan’s part, but by the hang-dog expression on Torello’s face both Englishmen knew that the shaft had struck home.

“So I simply had to bring you here,” continued the young airman. “And you are not popular in Huavilia. Diamalans are not, I notice, and you are no exception: rather the reverse, in fact. We don’t wish you to come to any harm; so, in order to avoid an awkward situation, you will have to play the part of servant to Major Truscott until we can conveniently return you to your own country.

“And that raises a rather difficult problem. The knowledge that you were taken over the frontier by air must be common property in Diamala. We don’t want Huavilia to be dragged into a conflict on your account; so we want you to write a letter to your Presidente tendering your resignation and stating that you have been obliged to take a six weeks’ holiday, not in Huavilia, but in Pondaguay.”

“But, señor,” protested Torello, “it will ruin me. Never again can I hope to resume my important position as Commandante of the Air Force of Diamala.”

“‘Better a live dog than a dead lion’, Commandante,” quoted Alan. “In any case, it doesn’t say much for your cleverness; allowing yourself to be whisked off from your principal aerodrome. You know our terms. Do you agree?”

Miguel Torello thought the matter over for perhaps half a minute.

“Why will you not let me return now?” he asked. “I swear that I will not molest you in the future nor place any difficulties in the way of your way home through our republic.”

“My instructions are not to argue but to demand a reply, yes or no,” replied Alan, after conferring with his employer.

“Then I agree,” said Torello.

“Well, that’s that,” remarked Truscott, when Alan and he were again alone. “I think we’ve cut his claws. Now, concerning your passport; do you

think it was stolen as a passport or merely because it happened to be in your suitcase?"

"It was probably taken in order that my not being provided with one would serve as a pretext for my being arrested on the frontier," suggested Alan. "Of course it doesn't matter now. Technically, though I'm British, this is the country of my birth."

"I suppose so," agreed Truscott. "You've been a godsend to me in this business, Alan. All the same I'm wondering whether there'll be a dust up before we can send Torello's letter of resignation to his Presidente. I almost feel inclined to cut the telegraph line."

"That wouldn't be much good," Alan pointed out. "There's the wireless. Santa Barbara is quite up-to-date in that respect."

"Confound wireless," muttered Truscott. "It will take three days to send Torello's letter to Nueva Guacipiti via Pondaguay."

Early next morning, repairs to the lorry being completed, Truscott's baggage, guarded by his four trusty employees, was ready to resume its way. The Major and Alan had previously arranged to go on ahead by car, Torello accompanying them in his new rôle of servant.

Just as the negro chauffeur was about to start, a horseman came galloping furiously along the road. He pulled up at the *fonda* and demanded drink for himself and for his beast. The Major recognized him as one of the officers of the frontier post on the Huavilian side.

"Hola, Englishman!" exclaimed the horseman. "You've got through just in time. The frontier is closed."

Truscott did not immediately grasp the meaning of the announcement. Before he did so the innkeeper asked anxiously:

"Is it war, Señor Capitan?"

"Not war, but civil war," replied the officer. "An insurrection has broken out in Diamala. Whether the government or the rebels have the upper hand I don't know. No one does on this side of the frontier, and I doubt whether many know on the other side. Telegraphic communication is interrupted, and all persons wishing to enter Diamala are stopped at the barriers."

The innkeeper made a gesture that indicated both relief and annoyance—relief because the horrors of internecine strife were not present on the Huavilian side of the frontier, annoyance because the trouble in Diamala

affected his profits, since the closing of the frontier meant reduced traffic on the highway that passed his door.

“We’re in luck, Alan!” exclaimed his employer. “What’s one republic’s meat is another republic’s poison! The Presidente of Diamala will have too much to think about over the revolt to trouble about writing notes to Presidente Ramon y Miraflores de Souta. So I don’t think we need forward Commandante Miguel Torello’s letter to Nueva Guacipiti.”

“In any case the civil war will prevent us returning through Diamala,” remarked Alan.

“Pooh!” ejaculated the Major. “The affair will be settled one way or the other within a fortnight. Presto! Zambo, get a move on.”

For the rest of the day the Major and Alan were kept busy with what the former termed “spade work”. They called upon the British Consul, presented their credentials to Presidente Ramon y Miraflores de Souta, and made arrangements to hire a large house on the outskirts of Santa Barbara.

The house suited the requirements of the expedition admirably. It was furnished, but the rent asked was absurdly low judging by what was demanded at home for property. There were sixteen rooms, the building enclosing a quadrangle. Most of the windows opened upon the enclosed space, there being only a few on the outside wall. The roof was flat and protected by a waist-high parapet. There were also stables and outbuildings, one of the latter being spacious enough to house the biplane provided its wings were unshipped. There was about an acre of ground sloping down gradually to the Rio Morte, which at this point was nearly six hundred feet in width.

“Just room enough to swing a cat,” remarked Major Truscott facetiously, for the house was small in comparison with Bramerton Hall. “What’s the history of the place, do you know, Alan?”

“It used to belong to a General Montego,” replied the lad. “He was living there when I left Santa Barbara two years ago.”

But further inquiries elicited the information that the building was now the property of the State, General Montego having had a slight difference of opinion with Presidente de Souta that had resulted in the former having been placed against a wall and facing a firing-party.

“A foolish step for de Souta to take,” commented Truscott. “Montego, I suppose, has friends. Killing a political opponent, though it seems to be a common form of amusement in this part of the world, generally results in

the crime rebounding like a boomerang upon the instigator. Fortunately the Anglo-Saxon temperament does not lend itself to that sort of thing: in Great Britain politicians prefer to wipe out their opponents by ridicule. However, I don't suppose General Montego's premature demise will affect us"—a remark that subsequently failed to establish the Major's reputation as a prophet—"so let's get settled before we tackle the serious work. I've told Campbell to engage a staff and get the domestic organization going. He'll ask you for any information he requires. Hello, there's the telephone again! See what it is, Alan. I can only just understand a Huavilian when he's talking slowly, and I can watch the expression on his face; when it comes to one of them jabbering over a wire, I'm done."

Alan went to the instrument. Although it had been "connected up" only two hours previously calls from tradesmen had been almost continuously coming through, showing that, in spite of national apathy, they were energetically competing for the custom of the newly-arrived Englishmen at the "Casa Montego".

"Who is that speaking?" he asked.

"That is of no consequence," replied the unknown speaker. "But listen: we, the 'Cordon of the Lariat of Death' know the object of your presence in the Republic of Huavilia. Take warning: the statue of Ixtlahuaca is national property, having reverted to the Government when Brocas Truscott fled the country in 1837. Your search may be undertaken provided the statue, if found, is handed over to a representative of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death upon receipt of further instructions from us. You will then receive your reward, which will not be inconsiderable. Disregard at your peril."

CHAPTER XIII

The Cordon of the Lariat of Death

“Will you please hold the line and await my principal’s reply, Unknown Señor?” asked Alan politely.

The arrogant demand amused him. He would have liked to “tick off” the self-styled agent of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death. It might or might not be a genuine secret society, but the name failed to intimidate him. But resisting the temptation to “pull the fellow’s leg”, he thought it best to let Major Truscott know. He was curious to know how his employer would deal with the proposition.

As soon as Alan had briefly given the message Truscott strode to the telephone.

“What’s the lingo for ‘rats’, Alan?” he asked. “Something corresponding to the slangy meaning of the word. Good; that’ll do splendidly.”

Accordingly the Major gave a pithy reply to the ultimatum, rang off, and returned to his interrupted task.

“That’s settled that gentleman,” he declared. “Hello! There’s that confounded telephone again. This isn’t an exchange! I’ve a mind to tell the *Telegrafos y Postes* jossers to take the infernal machine away.”

Alan glanced at his employer. The almost invariably even-tempered Truscott was showing signs of irritation. Was it the effect of the climate?

While dinner was in progress the electric light failed. Duncan was sent to “sort” the mischief. He came back in about ten minutes with the information that a wire had “shorted” and had blown out a fuse.

“It would appear, sir,” he reported, as coolly as if he were announcing that the Major’s bath was ready, “that there is some promiscuous shooting affair taking place in the vicinity of the house. I found this, sir, embedded in the casing. It will account, sir, for the temporary failure of the electric current.”

In default of a salver he held out a plate on which, for his master's inspection, lay a bullet with its nose mushroomed.

"Three-nought-three automatic," pronounced Truscott. "We'll have to ask the Chief of Police to request people to take more care when they're practising. I think, Duncan, it would be well if you closed those shutters."

When coffee was about to be served Truscott sent for Miguel Torello.

"Will you join us at coffee, Commandante?" he asked. "You are probably feeling it rather dull sitting alone in your room. By the by, is there a tin-pot organization in Diamala known as the Cordon of the Lariat of Death?"

Torello's face turned a greyish hue.

"Señor Major!" he exclaimed. "Do not betray me! Does the Cordon know I am here—in Huavilia? In this house?"

"Not to my knowledge, Commandante," replied Truscott. "I gave you my word to do my utmost to conceal your identity. That should be sufficient guarantee. But you have not answered my question."

"Assuredly there is a secret society of that name, señor," declared Torello. "It exists in Diamala, in Nauta, in Pondaguay, and since the Republic of Huavilia lies between these three the Cordon of the Lariat of Death must have penetrated here."

"Judging by the fact that a bullet penetrated one of the electric-light wires this evening, I am inclined to agree with you on that point," remarked the Major drily.

"Was that the cause?" exclaimed the Commandante, in a fresh paroxysm of fear. "Then I am a doomed man."

"Not before your time," rejoined Truscott. "I fancy the Cordon of whatever it is is directing its misguided efforts against me. Quite possibly you would be included on their visiting list if they knew that the former Commandante of the Diamala Air Force were enjoying my hospitality at Casa Montego."

"The former Commandante? Allow me, señor, to remind you that I still hold that office."

"You wrote resigning your command," Truscott reminded him. "As a matter of fact I haven't dispatched that letter. There was no need. A revolution has broken out in Diamala, and according to the latest reports—

they are vague but probably have a sub-stratum of truth—the rebels are now the government, and what are left of the government are now the rebels.”

“Is Matoxa in power?” asked Torello.

“Not to my knowledge,” answered the Major. “I must admit that I’ve never heard of the gentleman; although that, of course, does not prevent him leaping into the limelight. Presumably he doesn’t see eye to eye with you; so I may reasonably conclude that since you would have prevented our exit through Nueva Guacipiti he may raise no objections. As for the jolly old Cordon of the Lariat of Death, that’s not going to deter me. Presidente de Souta has granted me a concession; that’s all I want to get on with my search. If and when I find the Ixtlahuaca statue it will take more than a gang of cowardly gunmen to stop me getting it out of Huavilia, or out of Diamala, if it comes to that.”

When, just before midnight, the inmates of Casa Montego were retiring to rest, Truscott, accompanied by Alan Brampton, “went the rounds”, making sure that the three doors were locked and bolted and that the windows on the outer wall, as well as those opening on to the quadrangle, were properly secured.

“That’s all ship-shape and Bristol fashion, Alan,” declared his employer. “I wish I had a good old English terrier here. Mind you, I’m not getting jumpy, but it’s better to be safe than sorry. So I’ll lock my bedroom door and take the precaution of putting my automatic under my pillow.”

“And I’ll do likewise,” said the lad.

“Please yourself,” rejoined Truscott. “I don’t suppose *you’ll* be disturbed; but don’t go dreaming and awaking suddenly and then start blazing away with a shooting-iron.”

A few minutes later Alan “turned in”. He was usually a sound healthy sleeper, but to-night sleep was denied him. After about an hour he switched on the light.

The room, like the rest of the building, was soundly constructed. The door was of oak and quite two inches in thickness. It was secured top and bottom by massive metal bolts. The window was shuttered with iron thick enough to stop a high-velocity bullet and was kept in position by two draw-bars. There was no fire-place, but ventilation was obtained by means of two rectangular openings each about ten inches by six and fitted with metal *grilles*. Nothing short of high explosive could force open either door or window. The original owner of Casa Montego had taken every possible

precaution against forcible entry; when the place was properly secured it was proof against a would-be assassin's bullet.

Even with this reassuring knowledge Alan felt far from easy in his mind, even though the Lariat of the secret society was not directed against him personally. During his previous years in Huavilia he had never heard of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death; although he had been told of many a political crime, he had yet to learn that they were the work of an organization. Public officials had been shot down by their rivals or had been assassinated by people who had a grudge against them. As often as not the criminal got off scot free, and was frequently honoured as a hero by certain sections of the populace.

Finding himself still unable to sleep, Alan got out of bed and went to a bookcase. The volumes in it were written in Spanish and were of a kind that did not appeal to him in the least. Most of them were more than a century old and were strongly bound in leather.

He was still dipping into them when, chancing to glance up, he noticed a small dark sinuous object wriggling through the bars of the lower of the two ventilators.

He recognized the thing as a "hamba", a particularly poisonous snake common to the northern part of South America. Although rarely exceeding eighteen inches in length it is of a decidedly aggressive nature, never hesitating to attack even though it is not molested. Its bite is almost invariably fatal, death often resulting within ten minutes. As a general rule the hamba keeps to swamps and avoids human habitations. It was all the more remarkable that the reptile had found its way up the outer wall and thence through the air shaft.

Alan did not hesitate. Closing the book he held in his hand and fastening the massive clasp, he hurled the volume with unerring accuracy at the deadly reptile.

The book clattered noisily to the floor while the snake, most of its vertebræ crushed almost to a pulp against the grille, floundered sluggishly for a few seconds before falling to the ground.

"What's to be done with the beastly thing?" thought Alan, who was decidedly loth to handle the lifeless reptile. Although without the means of removing it except by handling it, he realized that it might be a source of danger to the inexperienced Campbell, when that worthy arrived with the early morning cup of tea. The hamba might pardonably be mistaken for a

piece of twisted rope, and Campbell, with his almost righteous horror of anything not in its proper place, or of something that should not be there, would unhesitatingly remove it. And, like a wasp, a hamba retains its poisonous properties for a considerable time after death.

Then came a loud knocking on the door.

“What’s all this hullabaloo about, Alan?” inquired Truscott. “Are you awake? Open the door, lad.”

Drawing the bolts the lad opened the door and admitted his employer.

“Is that all?” asked the latter. “I thought you were smashing up the happy home. A smart rap with a cane just behind the snake’s neck would have done the trick without arousing everybody. I’ve killed dozens of them, when I was stationed in India.”

“But this is a hamba, something different from the snakes you find in India,” protested Alan. “You wouldn’t be safe within six feet of one.”

“Pooh!” exclaimed the Major contemptuously. “A snake can only strike at a distance equal to its own length.”

“A hamba can do more than that. It darts like a spring uncoiling, and throws itself clear of the ground,” explained the lad. “And it’s terribly poisonous.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know that,” said Truscott apologetically. “One has to get used to very different conditions in this country, I can see. How did the snake get into this room?”

“Through that ventilator, sir.”

“H’m. Lucky you spotted it. How was it you were awake? Did anything arouse you?”

“I hadn’t been to sleep,” admitted Alan. “Somehow I couldn’t.”

“Neither could I,” confessed the Major. “Perhaps it’s thundery weather. Yet I slept like a log at the *fonda*. Look here: we’d better stuff something between the bars of the ventilators in case there’s another reptile hanging around. Hard lines for a fresh-air devotee, I know; but better a bad headache in the morning than being bitten by a hamba. I’ll get Duncan to fix perforated zinc sheets over all the ventilators. That ought to do the trick. Well, good night once more.”

Alan heard the Major shut and bolt his bedroom door. Then he followed his employer’s example.

Still he could not get to sleep. Hour after hour passed until the noise of birds singing announced the dawn of another day.

Unbarring the shutters of the window, Alan let in the pure air of the early morn. He was feeling terribly tired yet glad that the sleepless night was past. He had a cold bath, dressed, and went out into the grounds.

At a quarter to seven Campbell, who had just awakened his master, came in search of the lad.

“Major Truscott, sir, wishes to see you at once,” he announced. “He is still in his room, sir.”

“Right-o, Campbell,” replied Alan.

Still wondering why his employer should want to see him before the former was up, Alan hurried to the Major’s bedroom.

As a matter of fact Truscott had nearly finished dressing.

“What do you make of that, Alan?” he asked, pointing to something hanging from one of the electric lamps. “And how did it get here? I’ll swear I didn’t get to sleep before three, and both the door and the window were securely fastened. And yet there’s that here.”

For, with its looped end engaged round the cord of a hanging lamp was a *lariat*.

“I’m sure I don’t know, sir,” replied Alan, at a loss to say anything more.

“I don’t suppose you do,” rejoined the Major. “But it would appear that our unknown friends have left a visiting-card of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death!”

CHAPTER XIV

The Symbol is Removed

“This shows that theirs was not an idle boast,” continued Truscott. “Our friends evidently mean business; but they can take it from me that I’m not going to be intimidated by a crowd of *jungle wallahs*. I’m curious to know how the thing got here. It would also be interesting to watch the expression on Torello’s face if I showed him the lariat. I won’t though; his nerves are shaken enough already. We’d better get the thing down. I’ll send Campbell to bring a step-ladder.”

Alan regarded the symbol of the secret society with feelings akin to admiration. He had often seen the cattlemen from the savannahs give a display with the lariat, but here was evidence of an uncanny skill. Someone had found a means of entering Truscott’s room, in spite of the shuttered window and bolted door, and had deftly thrown the loop up to the ceiling and around the flexible cord of the electric-light fitting. The expert had been in no hurry, for he had neatly coiled the other end of the rope on the floor by the side of the Major’s bed. He had vanished utterly without leaving a trace beyond the “trade mark” of his society. How he came in and how he made his exit were baffling problems.

“Do you think it was one of the servants?” hazarded the lad.

Truscott shrugged his shoulders.

“It might be,” he replied. “But that doesn’t solve the difficulty. Anyone in the place had still to get in here, and I must say it was a jolly smart piece of work. I’ve heard of men picking locks, but I’ve never heard of one going out of a door and double bolting it on the inside. And I’ve seen fellows do clever tricks with a lasso, but they never threw the noose from underneath and round a hanging object. That lamp’s twelve feet from the ground if it’s an inch.”

Just then the Major’s valet appeared with the steps. Stolidly he ascended and removed the running noose. Being an unimaginative man he expressed

no surprise at finding a rope dangling from one of the electric-light fittings. Probably he thought that his master had been practising with a rope. He never asked why the lariat was there, nor did Truscott enlighten him.

Alan and the Major had just finished breakfast when the telephone bell rang.

This time Truscott went to the instrument.

“What do you say?” he inquired, in his halting Spanish. “Please speak slowly. What? Oh, it’s you, is it? Yes, I could not help seeing it. Perhaps you’ll call and remove it. I’ve left it coiled round the bed-post. Thank you! Yes, if you care—hello, I’m cut off! Here, Alan, sharp! Ring up the exchange and ask them where that last call came from.”

Alan did so. The result was what the Major had expected. The mouthpiece of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death had made use of one of the public kiosks in the Grand Plaza.

“I’ve invited the blighter to call and remove his property,” remarked the Major. “If he tries to do so I’ll be ready for him. But,” he continued cheerfully, “we’re not here to solve the identity of an anonymous sender of alarmist telephone messages. I want you to come with me to the Santa Barbara equivalent to the City Surveyor. I want to see if he knows this house in which my great-grandfather lived. That might give us a clue to the lake into which he pitched the statue. But before we do that we’ll go the rounds and set the men to work.”

Leaving Campbell in charge of the house, the Major told Andrews and Bowden to go down to one of the outbuildings on the bank of the river and get the place ready as a workshop. Duncan was dispatched with about a dozen *peons* to supervise the removal of a quantity of teak logs from the Rio Morte, where they had been floated down from a sawing-mill. These logs, which ranged from forty feet in length and fifteen inches square down to three-inch planks, had been ordered by telephone on the previous day.

When, a quarter of an hour later, Alan and the Major arrived at the river bank, they found that the logs had already been delivered, somewhat to the latter’s astonishment.

“I didn’t think they’d be so smart,” remarked Truscott. “Judging by the lackadaisical way the Huavilians go about things, I thought I’d be lucky if the timber were here within a fortnight.”

“What is the timber for?” asked Alan.

"I'm merely securing my lines of communication as it were," explained the Major. "If you like you can consider it as a speculation. I'm building a lighter which will be most useful when Duncan explores the bed of the lake. Then, when we pack up, I'll send all our heavy gear down to Nueva Guacipiti by water, since I expect that the revolution in Diamala will be settled by that time. The lighter will then be broken up and the timber shipped home. I've a scheme to restore part of the roof of Bramerton Hall with teak as a substitute for the existing oak beams. Teak, unlike oak, is practically immune from dry rot, and I reckon that I'll save considerably on the estimate."

Andrews and Bowden were examining the plan of the proposed lighter when the Major arrived at the river-bank.

"How long will it take you?" he asked.

"It depends on how these greasers work, sir," replied Andrews, referring to the *peons*, who, urged by the forcible language and gestures of the energetic David Duncan, were dragging the heavy baulks by means of rollers and tackle to the improvised boatshed. "It's not knowing their lingo that's the bother. With luck we'll have the lighter ready by this day week. There's no fancy work required."

"No; but it must be strongly put together and yet capable of being broken up without unduly injuring the timber," said Truscott.

"Copper fastenings, sir?" asked Bowden.

"Gracious, no! You aren't building a yacht! Iron will be sufficient. It isn't as if we're using the lighter in salt water, and it will last longer than we want. All right; get on with it. If the natives give trouble send for Mr. Brampton."

In Santa Barbara Truscott was directed to a large stone building adjoining the Presidente's residence. From a courteous official the Major learnt that the house in which his ancestor lived had been demolished after being damaged by an earthquake in 1880. It stood about a quarter of a mile from Casa Montego and was within a hundred yards of Lake Ximenes, one of the smaller of the chain of lakes fed and drained by the Rio Morte.

On their way back Truscott called at a shop and purchased an electric bell and a couple of dry cells.

"Just in case our unknown visitor returns for his lariat," explained the Major. "We'll fix it up before dinner."

Accordingly the bell was placed at the head of the Major's bed and was connected by means of insulated wires to a metal plate concealed beneath the thick carpet. The plate was so arranged that under a pressure of anything more than thirty pounds, contact would be made and the alarm set ringing. Several tests proved that no one could stand within reach of the coiled lariat without causing the bell to give a loud warning.

After dinner Truscott unfolded a large-scale map of the district.

"Here's Lake Ximenes, Alan," he said, pointing to its position on the map. "And here is the site of Brocas Truscott's house. Now, as he had to clear out in a hurry, he hadn't much choice of a safe hiding-place; so it's reasonable to assume that he lugged the jolly old statue down to the nearest lake—Ximenes—and slung it in. Now, how did he do it? In his account my great-grandfather simply says that he hurled it into the water. Did he do that from the bank or from a boat? Did anyone see him do it and did anyone beside himself know? If so there may have been attempts made to recover the statue. This map, although it gives contours and heights, does not indicate the depth of the lake, so we'll have to take soundings. If the bottom is fairly hard Duncan ought to explore the whole bed of the lake in, say, three periods of two hours' diving. If it's soft mud we've a pretty stiff job in front of us. To-morrow we'll have a look at the lake and see what it's like."

They talked until nearly ten o'clock and then, to Alan's satisfaction, Truscott suggested that it was time to go to bed.

"We ought to sleep soundly to-night after keeping awake nearly all last night," remarked the Major, as they went round the building to make sure that all doors and windows were secured. "It looks like a thunderstorm."

"It will take more than that to keep me awake," declared the lad, as he vainly attempted to stifle a yawn.

On going to his own room Alan switched on the light and had a look round. Everything was in order. Duncan had found time to fix sheets of perforated zinc over the ventilators so that there was no likelihood of another snake making its way in. Then he undressed, folded his clothes, and placed them in an insect-proof metal trunk, turned in, and switched off the light.

In a few minutes he was sound asleep. Outside the lightning flashed incessantly yet no glare penetrated into the darkened room. The thunder crashed and rolled, but Alan slumbered through it all. Nor did he awake until a quarter to seven, to find Campbell banging on the locked door.

“Sir, I have knocked three times on Major Truscott’s door and have failed to get a reply,” announced the valet, when Alan admitted him.

“Then knock louder,” suggested Alan, still heavy with sleep.

“I have, sir, with this,” rejoined Campbell, holding up for Alan’s inspection the head of a broom. “And I fancy, sir, there is a strange odour in Major Truscott’s room. Perhaps, sir, you will come and investigate.”

Alan crossed the corridor to the locked door of the Major’s room. The key was still in the lock, but, being turned, it left a small gap in the lower part of the keyhole.

The lad bent and peered through the hole. The electric light was still on, but owing to the narrow slit of the keyhole, the limit of observation was but small. But there was a peculiarly pungent smell. It reminded Alan of a hospital.

“He’s been chloroformed!” he declared. “We’ll have to force the door. Try shoving: now—together.”

Their combined force as they put their shoulders to the door was unavailing. The massive oak was proof against their efforts.

“We’ll want a crowbar or dynamite,” said Alan. “Go and find Duncan and Andrews. Tell them to bring a brace and bits. Look alive!”

The latter remark was hardly necessary, for Campbell, devoted to his master, did not need to be told to hurry.

In a few minutes he returned with Duncan, Andrews, and Bowden.

Working desperately, they drilled several holes through the door until there was room to work a thin-bladed saw. The oak was tremendously tough and required twenty minutes’ hard work before it was cut through close to the lock. Then a similar operation had to be performed because the Major had also shot the lower bolt.

At length the door swung open and the five men entered the room.

Truscott was lying on his back in bed. His eyes were closed, but his mouth was wide open. He was breathing stertorously and showing symptoms of recovering from the effects of some gas allied to chloroform.

“Open the shutter!” exclaimed Alan. “It’s fresh air he wants.”

While Andrews was doing so Alan suddenly remembered the alarm device. Duncan and Bowden were at that moment standing on the carpet

over the concealed metal plate and the electric bell was mute.

A hasty examination revealed the fact that both wires had been severed. Not only that, but the coiled-up lariat had disappeared from the bed-post.

The unknown member of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death had not hesitated to accept Major Truscott's invitation to come and remove the symbol of his order.

CHAPTER XV

The Electric Eels

“What’s the idea, sir?” whispered Duncan. “Is it an accident or has the Boss taken something—attempted suicide like?”

Alan shook his head. He did not want to tell the men anything about the Cordon of the Lariat of Death, since Major Truscott had expressed his intention of keeping the incident dark.

“You can take it from me that Major Truscott wouldn’t do a thing like that,” he replied. “It’s evident that he’s suffering from the effects of some noxious gas. How it got into the room is a mystery. We’d better carry him out into the open air.”

“Shall I send for a doctor, sir?” asked Campbell.

“Perhaps you’d better,” agreed Alan. “It may not be necessary, but it’s well to be on the safe side.”

“Where can I find one, sir?” continued the valet. “You see, sir, I can’t express myself in the lingo.”

“Don’t trouble,” rejoined the lad. “I’ll telephone for one.”

While the four men were carrying their master out of the house Alan went to the telephone. Before he could lift the earpieces the bell rang.

“Who speaks?” demanded the lad in Spanish.

“A friend,” was the reply. “A friend who, in answer to the Señor Major’s invitation, called and took away a certain article. In my own interests I had reluctantly to give the señor a whiff of chloroform. There is no danger. Perhaps the señor has by this time recovered. Now listen attentively: the Cordon of the Lariat of Death offers no opposition to you Englishmen in your search for the statue of Ixtlahuaca. On the contrary, our members will readily assist you in every possible way without revealing our identity. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” replied Alan. “It’s awfully kind of you, I’m sure. Major Truscott will be much obliged. But the other night a bullet was fired into one of our windows. Fortunately it was open and no glass was broken, although the bullet put the electric light temporarily out of action. Now is that an act of a secret society whose members are ready to assist us in every possible way?”

“Señor Brampton, I swear by the Virgin that the Cordon of the Lariat of Death was in no way responsible for that. We warn first and then take drastic action if the person warned fails to take heed. Now attention! If Señor Major Truscott finds the statue of Ixtlahuaca, he has our blessing; but on no account must that statue leave Huavilia. Any attempt on his part or on that of any of his party will result in sure death to the offender. *Adios*, Señor Brampton, until our next friendly conversation by telephone.”

The call terminated abruptly.

“Dash it all!” ejaculated Alan. “The blighter knows my name right enough. Hanged if I can recognize his voice though. Since he says that Truscott is in no danger from the whiff of chloroform I don’t think I’ll phone for a doctor. So we’re all threatened with death if we attempt to remove the statue; we’ll see. All the same we’re up against something big. How that fellow managed to enter the Major’s bedroom on two separate occasions beats me. Cutting those wires too! How did he know they were there? They weren’t conspicuous; rather the other way.”

It was nearly ten o’clock in the morning before Major Truscott fully regained possession of his senses. While he was “coming to” he had talked incoherently, but had not mentioned the Cordon of the Lariat of Death. Conscious, he refrained from so doing until the anxious and devoted Campbell had been dismissed and he was left alone with Alan.

“I know I’ve been gassed,” he declared. “What else happened, do you know?”

The lad related what had taken place, including an account of his telephonic conversation.

“So the fellow took me at my word and collected his lariat,” commented the Major. “He had pluck, considering he knew there was an electric bell, and he probably guessed I’d a loaded automatic under my pillow. I wonder if he’s helped himself to any of my gear. Give me a hand, Alan; I feel a bit shaky on my pins even now. I want to see if anything is missing besides the lariat.”

An examination of the room showed that with the exception of the wires of the electric bell nothing had been disturbed. Truscott had left his watch on the dressing-table, and a considerable amount of money in an unlocked drawer; so the intruder was evidently a man with honest motives.

“He’s not going to spoil my plans for to-day,” asserted the Major. “We’re behind time, but we’ll have to make that up. No; no breakfast for me, thanks. Had yours? Good; I’ll be ready in a quarter of an hour.”

Presently, mounted on small but wiry horses, Truscott and Alan set off to the shores of Lake Ximenes. David Duncan, who declined to risk his neck in the saddle, followed in a Ford tender that had been hired for the duration of the operations. Campbell was left to take charge of Casa Montego; while Andrews and Bowden had gone to their work of building the lighter.

As the Major and his assistant passed out of the gateway of the grounds of Casa Montego they were greeted by Tiente-Capitano Juan Suarez, who was rigged out in the gorgeous uniform of the Huavilian Republican Infantry. He was mounted on a superb Andalusian charger, the sight of which aroused the English officer’s professional envy.

“And how does Casa Montego suit you, Major?” asked Suarez during the course of conversation.

“I am not likely to suffer from *ennui* while I’m there,” replied Truscott.

“So?” The Tiente-Capitano raised his eyebrows.

“Have you any knowledge of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death?” inquired the Major.

Suarez smiled and shrugged his shoulder.

“I have heard of such,” he replied. “It is a secret society like the Americanos’ Ku Klux Klan. There are associated members also in Diamala, in Nauta, and in Pondaguay. They are a thorn in the flesh of our excellent Presidente, Ramon y Miraflorea de Souta. He decreed the dissolution of the Cordon; but if one does not know the names of the members or their places of meeting how can the Presidente’s ordinance be enforced? But in what way have you heard of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death, señor?”

At the Major’s request Alan briefly related what had taken place at Casa Montego, since the lad’s command of the language enabled him to do so rapidly and almost flawlessly.

“And what would you do in my case?” asked Truscott.

Suarez again shrugged his shoulders.

“Since you have Presidente de Souta’s concession to search for the statue of Ixtlahuaca, you should continue to prosecute your search,” he advised.

“I mean to do that,” rejoined Truscott.

“And you should apply to the Presidente for an armed guard,” advised Juan. “At a word from you perhaps he will appoint me as chief of your bodyguard, Major. There are worse duties than being quartered in the house of a wealthy English *hidalgo* such as yourself.”

“Many thanks, Tiente-Capitano; I will consider your thoughtful suggestion,” replied Truscott, although he had not the faintest intention of making the request.

“*Adios, señores!*” exclaimed Suarez. “I must be away. This afternoon Santa Barbara holds a fiesta in honour of our Presidente’s name-day and the officers of the garrison have to attend a reception at the palace.”

“I suppose we are expected to attend that function, Alan,” remarked Truscott, as they resumed their way. “But we must give it a miss. Courteous fellow, Suarez. You knew him when you were living here before?”

“My father gave him a leg up,” replied Alan.

“I’m not going to apply for military protection all the same,” continued Truscott. “If we can’t score off our own bat we’ll miss most of the fun. Hello, what’s all this?”

They had arrived at the banks of the Rio Morte, which at this point was divided into two unequal parts by a small island, which was also midway between the grounds of Casa Montego and the outlet from Lake Ximenes.

Across the narrower part of the river a line of nets had been stretched between the island and the right bank, the water here being no more than four feet in depth. Congregated on the slope down to the river were about forty or fifty Indians, all of them mounted, bareheaded, on horses. There were also about a dozen riderless animals, sorry-looking creatures, which were being driven, much against their inclinations, into the water. It was noticeable that none of the Indians attempted to follow; they remained on dry land, yelling and waving their ragged blankets in order to force the terrified hacks into the stream.

Suddenly one of the wretched animals gave a fearful yell of agony. It sounded more like the cry of a human being in mortal terror than that of a

four-footed animal.

The horse disappeared. Then, amidst a smother of foam, its hoofs appeared as the submerged animal lashed upwards with its feet. Another and yet another shared the same fate, to be finally hauled ashore by means of lariats.

“Stop that, you brutes!” shouted Truscott, urging his horse between the gesticulating Indians. “Here, Alan! Tell them to knock off or, by Jove, I’ll give some of them a taste of this riding-crop!”

Alan interpreted. The Indians, much to his surprise and relief, evinced no hostility.

“Tell the señor we have finished,” replied one of the natives mildly. “He will now see the result.”

With that about half a dozen Indians armed with double-pronged barbed spears urged their steeds into the water. Probing and thrusting they eventually secured and brought to land nearly a dozen huge loathsome-looking eels.

Then the Major “tumbled to it”. The eels, allied to the gymnotus tribe, were normally capable of discharging a powerful electric shock. To render them relatively harmless the wretched horses, useless for almost any other purpose, were sent into the water to receive the paralysing discharge. The eels were then like accumulators “run down”. Long before nature could recharge the exhausted cells the now harmless water-snakes were at the mercy of their human hunters.

“Those Indians must have food,” remarked Truscott, “but it’s a brutal way of getting it. By Jove! I don’t hanker after exploring the lake in a diving-dress if there are any of those eels about. The rubber suit is all right; it’s the copper helmet and the diver’s bare hands that are the vulnerable parts. I can quite understand now why the Huavilians haven’t tried to recover the statue themselves, even though a certain section of them are so frightfully keen to regain possession of it.”

“And I think I know why your great-grandfather didn’t pitch it into the river,” added Alan. “It’s too shallow and the bottom’s quite hard. It would have been easily recovered by a grapnel or some such device.”

Breasting a slight rise the two horsemen came in sight of the lake. The first impression was not a favourable one. The shores were low and marshy except at one place where the high ground terminated abruptly in a sheer

cliff about a hundred feet above the surface of the lake. On the nearest side of the bluff was a mean village inhabited chiefly by Indians.

Duncan, who had driven by a circuitous route over a vile stretch of road, was already awaiting his master and was the centre of interest of a crowd of ragged *peons*. Fortunately their pointed remarks were unintelligible to the stolid “Americano”—all English-speaking people being thus styled by the half-castes and Indians of South America—who nevertheless kept a sharp look-out against the thieving proclivities of the spectators.

“You’re here before us, I see,” remarked the Major. “You have all the gear, I hope?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Duncan. “Two lead-lines, a compass, field-glasses, box-sextant, and the map in the tin case.”

“Good; now I want you to stand by the car while Mr. Brampton and I take soundings. Come along, Alan! We’ve got to hire some sort of craft. You do the bartering; you know how to tackle these fellows.”

After a considerable amount of bargaining with a wizened *cacique*, or headman, who had brazenly demanded at least five times as much as he expected to receive—actually he got double—Alan secured the temporary use of a decidedly crank-looking dug-out. According to the headman’s statement it would carry twenty people.

Two Indians were engaged to paddle the craft, into which about two hundredweight of stones as ballast were placed. It took Truscott a considerable time to have this done, the Indians protesting that it was useless to carry “dead” cargo that could be sold neither for food nor for clothing. They could not grasp the reason why stones should be placed in the dug-out, taken for a trip on the lake, and then removed.

“You see what I’m after,” explained the Major to his assistant. “We start here, from this point shown on the map. We keep as straight a course as possible from the outlet from the lake—nor’-nor’-east. I want you to steer a compass course; I’ll check distances by the box-sextant and every twenty yards or so I’ll take soundings. These I’ll ‘plot’ on the map as we go along. Then we’ll make for the inlet where the Rio Morte flows into the lake, on a course west-by-south, still taking soundings. From that point a course south-east will bring us back to our starting-place. That will be enough for one day’s work.”

At first progress was slow. The natives could not be made to understand that they were to paddle for only a short distance and then to stop while the

“Americano” fished with a weighted line that had no hooks and no bait. They were still more puzzled to see the Major examine the “arming” of the lead-line in order to discover the nature of the bottom of the lake by means of mud or sand adhering to the tallow. To them it was a sheer waste of good mutton fat to plaster the bottom of a piece of lead with it, and then throw the weight into the water and let the tallow become spoilt by getting it mixed with dirt!

“Fifty-seven feet here, Alan,” announced the Major. “As I expected it’s quite deep close to the cliff. And a muddy bottom too. I hope to goodness my great-grandfather didn’t heave the statue in here or we’ll have our work cut out to find it after the lapse of a century. There must be several feet of silt here. Ah, well! fifty-seven feet over mud. That goes down on the map. Right-o, Alan; let the galley proceed!”

Three more soundings gave depths of forty-five, thirty-eight, and twenty-nine feet respectively. Apparently the Major’s surmise was being confirmed, the deepest water of the lake being close under the bluff. The bottom, too, continued to be firm without any appreciable stratum of mud.

“That’s strange,” commented Truscott. “Considering there’s very little current setting across the lake one would expect plenty of silt. Apparently it is to be found only close inshore. Now for another cast: tell the nigger to stop paddling, Alan.”

The lead disappeared over the side with a splash. Truscott was still paying out the line when suddenly he gave a loud yell, leapt a good two feet into the air, and sat down on the layer of stones at the bottom of the dug-out. Had it not been for the ballast the crazy craft would have capsized.

“Keep back!” spluttered the Major, as Alan went to his assistance. “Mind that line; don’t touch it! One of those electric eels has given me a brute of a shock.”

CHAPTER XVI

The Thunderstorm Test

“We’ll have to chuck it for the time being,” declared Truscott, after he had recovered from the numbing electrical discharge, although the shock had, to use his own words, “knocked the stuffing out of him”. “Until we provide ourselves with rubber gloves the game isn’t worth the candle.”

Alan ordered the Indians to make for the shore. The lead-line trailed astern. The Major fought shy of touching it, but when the canoe grounded Alan took hold of the wet line and proceeded to haul it ashore without feeling the slightest trace of an electrical current.

The two Indians who had watched the “Americano’s” antics impassively, were dismissed and told that they would be wanted on the following day. Quite probably they spent the rest of the day in relating to their fellow-villagers the story of the ignorant fisherman who went fishing with a line without hooks, and instead of catching any fish was caught by a shock from one of the electric eels that abound in these waters.

“I can’t make out how you received a charge, sir,” remarked Alan, as they regained the car. “Water is a good conductor of electricity.”

“It may be,” agreed Truscott grimly as he massaged his elbow. “I don’t care what scientists say, but I do know that that line was a better conductor than water. The lead fell foul of one of the beastly eels, and I got the shock right enough. You’ll think twice before you go diving here, Duncan,” he added.

“It would take more than an electric eel to scare me stiff, sir,” replied the ex-naval man stoutly. “It’s my experience that congers and such like fight shy of a man in diving-dress; although I admit I’ve not been shipmates with one of those sort of creatures, sir. ‘Sides, the rubber suit is a protection.”

“But your headdress and bare hands aren’t,” rejoined the Major. “Mr. Brampton and I were discussing that on our way down. You could wear rubber gloves, but you can’t insulate your headdress.”

"I'd fix it up somehow," persisted Duncan stubbornly. "I've not been engaged by you to come all this way and then to be choked off by an eel, sir."

"No wonder the Huavilians were afraid to drag for the statue," said Alan.

"They didn't know that the thing was pitched into this lake," remarked the Major. "All they knew was that it was thrown into a lake, one of half a dozen. We may be on the wrong tack, but we're only using our common sense in reconstructing the scene. In my great-grandfather's manuscript he mentions that there is a clue in the last half-dozen pages, but I'm dashed if I've come across it. Hello! What does this chap want?"

The headman of the village was standing a few paces off, having approached unobserved.

Alan asked the *cacique* whether he had a request to make.

The Indian shook his head.

"If the Americanos wish to fish for the eels without harm to themselves," he announced, "let them try while there is a thunderstorm overhead. Then the eels cannot 'burn' with their tails."

"I wonder," remarked Truscott incredulously. "Ask him to prove it, Alan. Unless I'm much mistaken there's a thunderstorm brewing. We've had one almost every day since we've been here. Tell him I'll make him a present of half a dozen red blankets if he can give a practical demonstration."

The headman expressed his willingness to put his statement to a practical test, and invited them to go with him to the village where, he declared, he kept one of these eels in captivity.

"What's his idea?" asked the Major dubiously. "Why should he want to make a pet of a dangerous reptile?"

"Quite possibly it's an object of veneration amongst the Indians," suggested Alan. "Many of the natives of Indian descent are heathens; and others, although they profess to be Christians, are so steeped in superstition that in secret they believe in witchcraft and even offer sacrifices to heathen deities."

"Well, let's go and see the jolly old eel," agreed Truscott reluctantly. "I suppose we can find shelter when the rain starts."

The *cacique* led the way to a piece of ground behind his hut. Here an artificial pond had been formed with sides about three feet above the surface. The depth of water was not more than eighteen inches. There was no sign of the eel.

Shouting to one of his men the *cacique* sent him on an errand. Presently the Indian returned with a young pig under one arm and holding a small bell with his right hand.

He had not rung the bell more than ten seconds when an enormous gymnotus emerged from a hole in the bank. Alan estimated its length at between six and seven feet, its circumference being not less than that of a man's leg above the knee.

"He's not going to throw that pig to the brute, is he?" protested the Major. "Tell him not to do anything of the sort. Apart from rank cruelty the eel will discharge its reserve of electricity, so how can we tell that it is temporarily out of action owing to the thunderstorm?"

Alan translated.

The *cacique* listened gravely and patiently.

"Tell the señor it was not my intention to harm the pig," he replied. "During the storm the pig will be placed in the pond and he will see that the water-snake cannot harm it."

"That may be so," observed Truscott. "But what's to prevent the eel biting a chunk out of the animal? And what if the eel has already been deprived of its electrical power?"

"I have no object in deceiving the señor," declared the headman with quiet dignity. "My word is true, as my people will declare; but if the Americano still doubts here is an iron rod. Let him touch the water-snake and prove my word for himself. As for the pig, the eel, being in my captivity, must be fed. To that end the pig must be killed and its carcass thrown into the pond."

"Dashed if I'm going to accept the old boy's invitation," remarked the Major. "One shock of that kind is quite enough. You don't hanker after one, I suppose, Duncan?"

The man shook his head.

"Maybe I'd best be going back to the car, sir," he said. "Although I'd like fine to see the experiment, I doubt but what the niggers will be helping themselves to what's in the car."

“They won’t,” declared Alan. “They know we are here as sort of guests of the *cacique*. They wouldn’t dare to steal anything.”

“Sort of *tabu*, eh?” remarked his employer.

“Hardly, sir; it’s a sense of hospitality. If we had left the car and strolled into the village uninvited the car would have been stripped of everything before we returned.”

A blinding flash, followed almost immediately by a deafening crash of thunder, warned the experimenters that the threatened storm was now overhead. There was not a breath of wind; so far no rain had fallen. An oppressive silence brooded over everything.

The gymnotus which had hitherto been lazily swimming round the pond was now lying almost motionless in the slime that covered the bottom. Its small wicked-looking eyes were almost closed.



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The headman leaning over the bank touched the brute's neck with the iron rod. The eel gave a slight spasmodic movement and then resumed its lethargic state.

Then Truscott took the rod and repeated the test.

“Dud, absolutely!” he announced. “By Jove! I’d like to thrust this iron bar through its neck!”

“It would probably cause a riot,” rejoined Alan. “The brute seems to be held in veneration by the Indians.”

“I’m satisfied, sir,” declared Duncan. “I’ll go down into the lake whenever there’s a thunderstorm on after this.”

“We’d better be making for shelter,” said the Major, as a vivid flash seemed to play across the surface of the pond. “It’ll be raining like blazes in half a minute.”

The *cacique* conducted them to his hut, a mean though spacious place built of *adobe*, or sun-dried mud, and thatched with palm leaves. The floor was littered with garbage in which pigs wallowed, while in the rafters fowls occupied every available space.

“Any port in a storm, eh, what?” remarked the Major. “By Jove! That was a flash!”

With the booming of the thunder down came the rain, not in drops but in solid sheets. In a few minutes the well-trodden path outside the hut was a torrent. For twenty minutes it rained incessantly, accompanied by blinding flashes and deafening peels of thunder that shook the hut to its foundations. Then followed a marked drop in temperature, the herald of a terrific wind that bent the palm trees almost to the ground.

“The car, sir!” exclaimed Duncan, shouting to make himself heard above the noise of the storm.

“Will have to take its chance, David!” replied his master. “Thank your lucky stars you aren’t out in it.”

The storm ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Promising to send the red blankets on the morrow, Truscott thanked the *cacique* for his hospitality and the party returned to the car.

It had not been capsized by the wind, but the hood was ripped to shreds, while the wheels had sunk almost to the axles in the quagmire created by the rain. Not until the ground had dried, which it did quickly in the rays of the sun, could the car be jacked up and the wheels freed from the deep ruts.

“We’ll resume sounding operations to-morrow,” announced the Major, when Alan and he were having their usual conversation after dinner. “By the time we’ve completed that job the lighter should be ready.”

“And you’ll chance another electric shock, sir?”

“No fear, I won’t; I’ll trust to rubber gloves,” said Truscott. “By the by, have another look at my great-grandfather’s MS. and see if you can spot the clue to which he refers. I know my Governor had a shot at it, and so did my elder brother, before I came into the estate, but they made nothing of it. Probably I shan’t; but there’s no harm done. I haven’t invited subscriptions from deluded individuals who think they are going to get rich quickly. The bulk of the expedition money I’ve spent—after all, it’s my own—has gone to British manufacturers and what I’m expending here is about the same as I would have spent on a holiday abroad. If we find the statue, well and good. If not, we’ve had adventure and perhaps more to follow. Well, here you are; see if you can find anything.”

He handed Alan the travel-stained manuscript. The lad had read it before. Now his attention was limited to the last chapter dealing with Brocas Truscott’s somewhat hasty departure from the republic that had so basely treated one of her chiefest benefactors. The narrator had set forth at length a list of gifts to various Huavilian friends and members of his household. Quite probably this information had not interested any of Brocas Truscott’s descendants who had access to the MS., and more than likely they had “skipped” the list entirely.

“What’s this, sir?” asked Alan. “‘To Tomé Guizot my double-barrelled fowling-piece: to Mendoza my silver-mounted hunting-knife (being likely to be of no further use to me in England); to Ximenes gold.’ Now is Ximenes a man or does it mean the lake?”

“Good shot, Alan!” exclaimed the Major. “Excellent! You’ve tumbled to it right away. That must be the clue. We’re perfectly right to devote our efforts to explore Lake Ximenes. I thought so directly I studied the map. I can almost imagine old Brocas chuckling to himself as he wrote those words! Another fortnight and Ixtlahuaca’s statue will be in our possession, I feel sure of it.”

CHAPTER XVII

Catching a Tartar

Soon after breakfast Truscott took the car and went into Santa Barbara on a shopping expedition with the primary intention of buying blankets for the *cacique*. Alan went with him to drive the car, Duncan having gone down to the boatshed to put in a morning's work with Andrews and Bowden.

"Many a time have I metaphorically consigned our police at home to perdition," observed the Major, as the car bumped and swayed over the uneven road. "By Jove! I take back all I said. A speed limit may be a debatable point in the British Isles, but one misses the restrictions we have at home. No speed limit; no proper side of the road; no caution signs; driving's a perfect nightmare here. Look at that fool!"

A half-caste driving a Ford with a recklessness that would have deprived the original Jehu of his time-honoured laurels, had "cut in" in front of the Major's car, missing the offside front wheel by inches. He was hardly in time to avoid another furiously-driven car approaching in the opposite direction. But he scraped through! Mounting the side-walk, the overtaking car collided with a fruit-stall, sending the wares in all directions. The negro owner saved himself by vaulting backwards through the open window of a drug-store, landing on his back upon tiers of bottles.

Before the outraged store-keeper could realize what had happened the offending car had turned into the nearest side street, slithering half-way across the road as it did so, and was out of sight, leaving a cloud of smoke and dust in its wake.

"That's where a number plate would have been an advantage," commented Truscott. "That is, if it could be read through that cloud of dust. I couldn't swear to that car, nor could anyone. Consequently the fellow can do as much damage as he jolly well cares to and gets away with it."

Alan nodded agreement. His whole attention was devoted to the task of driving the car. It meant constant vigilance and the ability either to

accelerate swiftly or to pull up almost dead. The Huavilian method of driving consisted of going all out and sounding the horn vigorously when on the straight. When cornering the Santa Barbara *automobilistas* never by any chance gave warning, either by hand signals or by use of the horn. All their work was cut out to shave round corners with the near side wheels of the car clear of the ground. Fortunately pedestrians were few, and the horsemen, who were many, had such perfect control over their steeds that they generally managed to avoid the oncoming car. Occasionally an irate *caballero* would whip out a revolver and fire half a dozen rounds at the rapidly receding vehicle, and any Civil Guards who happened to be near would discreetly look the other way.

At length, after several hair-raising escapes, Alan brought the car to a standstill as near as he could to a large general store. Other cars drawn up outside the place prevented him stopping opposite the imposing entrance. He was about twenty yards off and just outside the Café Republico, one of the most popular places of entertainment in the city.

“I won’t be more than ten minutes,” said Truscott, as he alighted.

Alan smiled to himself. Unless Huavilian store-keepers’ system had undergone a drastic change during the past two years, Truscott would not be able to make his purchases—in less than twice the time he had given himself.

And so the Major discovered when he tried to make his first purchase—the present for the *cacique*. Before long he wished he had brought Alan along; for in spite of his belief that he was making rapid strides in the language he found that he had great difficulty in making the assistant store-keeper understand. He “got tied up in knots” over the change, and was still more disconcerted when he discovered that the store did not employ porters to carry the purchases to the car. Too late did he discover the custom that customers either brought their servants with them or else were expected to carry their purchases away with them, and half a dozen blankets alone needed some carrying!

“If the señor would care to hire a porter there are many to be found in the Café Republico,” suggested the assistant, with the ulterior motive of obtaining a drink at the expense of the erratic Americano. “I myself will be happy to conduct the señor through our private door to the café.”

The Major eagerly accepted the offer. It would save him from presenting the ludicrous spectacle of staggering across the public footwalk under the burden of half a dozen gaudy red blankets in addition to his other purchases.

In one corner of the open-air café was a place set apart for the lower-class citizens, *peons* and the like, who were ready for a consideration to undertake any task, lawful or otherwise.

To get to this part of the café Truscott had to make his way between rows of round marble-topped tables at which the patrons of the place were eating, drinking, gaming, and frequently quarrelling.

Seated with three companions at one of the tables was a big fleshy-faced man known as El Lopez, or “The Wolf”. His cheeks were flabby and of a bluish hue. His nose was hooked, his lips over-full, while his chin was small and receding. His hair was long and straight and raven-coloured, and was plastered down by a liberal application of greasy oil. He was wearing a pleated shirt, black coat cut like a Zouave’s, tight-fitting trousers, and a crimson scarf.

Truscott was still some distance off when El Lopez, happening to look round, caught sight of him. Whispering to his companions, the Huavilian laid his cards face downwards on the table. The other three followed his example.

As the Major, following his guide, passed by, El Lopez stretched out his foot, slowly and deliberately. Truscott stumbled but recovered himself.

“A thousand pardons, señor,” he said in Spanish, thinking that it had been his fault.

El Lopez was on his feet in an instant.

“Señor, it was deliberate!” he declared. “You owe me satisfaction.”

“I’ve apologized, what more can I do?” rejoined the Major.

“You owe me satisfaction for the insult,” reiterated the Huavilian. “Behold my second, Don Felipe Chagris.”

By this time quite a number of people had risen from their tables and were crowding round. The assistant from the store had discreetly made himself scarce.

“Rot!” ejaculated Truscott, in English. “We British do not fight duels,” he continued. “In our country it is illegal.”

“But not in Huavilia, señor,” sneered El Lopez. “If you are an honourable gentleman you will find a second, and we will see this business through.”

“Permit me to act as your second, señor,” interposed a bystander, probably one of El Lopez’s partisans.

Truscott, generally so easy going and even tempered, began to feel annoyed. He realized that for some reason unknown to himself the Huavilian had deliberately provoked a row. He was not satisfied with an apology; perhaps he wanted solace in the form of money.

“Suppose we fight with fists,” suggested the Major. “Then you can have all the satisfaction you can get.”

Both El Lopez and his second shook their heads.

“It is impossible,” declared Don Felipe. “Quite impossible. The pistol is the weapon of gentlemen. Behind the café there is plenty of room for an exchange of shots and ample opportunity for the patrons of La Republica to witness the duel.”

“You cannot honourably withdraw, señor,” whispered Truscott’s self-constituted second, loud enough for those standing round to overhear.

“I suppose not, señor,” replied Truscott coolly. “At the same time I don’t want to take an unfair advantage of a man who knows nothing of my skill with a pistol. Allow me to give a demonstration.”

He stepped up to the table on which the four hands of cards lay face downwards.

“Stop!” hissed El Lopez. “That is my hand. How can I finish my game?”

“I was unaware that a dead man could finish a game,” rejoined the Major, as he turned over one card. It was the five of diamonds. “This one will do.”

He walked to the nearest wall and pinned the card to it. Then, turning, he took ten good paces, the crowd giving way with considerable celerity as he waved them aside.

He drew his automatic and released the safety catch. Then, with apparent carelessness, he raised the weapon.

Five shots rang out in rapid succession.

Gasps of astonishment and admiration burst from the majority of the onlookers, for where the red “pips” had been there were five jagged holes.

El Lopez also gasped, but not with admiration. His bluish features went a shade bluer. He had the reputation of being a dead shot, but never had he

been able to make a display such as this. He had been told that the Americano was no hand with a pistol, and behold! the man he had insulted was a past master in the art of pistol-firing!

Truscott, outwardly calm, was boiling inwardly with fury. He meant to give the bully another lesson.

“I suppose the duel with pistols is off?” he asked.

“*Si, señor.*”

“Good; I thought so,” continued the Major. “But it seems a pity to do your friends out of a treat. We will adjourn to the ground you mentioned and we’ll give the onlookers a display in the noble art of self-defence, just a boxing match.”

The bully—he was two inches taller than Truscott and perhaps a couple of stone heavier—did not at all relish the proposal. The idea of feeling those capable-looking fists pounding his flabby carcass filled him with dismay. He could not be humiliated before his compatriots; anything but that.

With a snarl of rage El Lopez whipped out his dagger-like knife.

He was a second too late. Even as the steel flashed in the sunlight Truscott let drive with a powerful right. The blow, beautifully timed, caught the Huavilian fairly on the apology for the point of his jaw. It lifted El Lopez completely off his feet. He fell with a terrific crash across one of the tables, scattering glasses and cards in all directions.

When the noise had subsided an almost uncanny silence filled the crowded café. Everyone, astounded at the prowess of the Americano in felling the notorious El Lopez, was on tenterhooks, wondering what would happen next.

The proprietor came bustling through the crowd. Anxiety as to what might happen to his premises, for with the bully’s defeat the Englishman had gained a number of sympathizers, and more than likely a most unholy row between the rival partisans might result, rather than solicitude towards the victor urged him to offer advice.

“Señor, it would be well if you took your departure at once. El Lopez is a dangerous man. When he recovers—— Surely you are satisfied?”

But Truscott was not satisfied. His blood was up. He felt very much as he did when, hardly knowing what he was doing, he performed the deed that had won him his D.S.O. It was only on very rare occasions that he could be prevailed to talk about it; when he did he invariably declared that had he

thought even once he would have thought not twice but many times before rushing a German machine-gun single-handed.

“I’ve not finished with him yet,” he almost shouted at the proprietor, who shrank back in affright. “He’s got to have his medicine,” he continued in English, “and I’m going to see he takes it.”

The bystanders, hearing the word “medicine”, thought that the *Americano* meant “doctor”. Two *Huavilians* who were members of the medical profession elbowed their way towards the still prostrate El Lopez.

Truscott, mistaking their intention, waved them aside; then grasping the unconscious bully by his ankles, he unceremoniously dragged him across the floor, down the steps to the gorgeous portico, and across the footwalk to the waiting car.

Alan looked at his employer in amazement. It was not exactly the fact that Truscott was dragging a *Huavilian* feet foremost that astonished the lad, but it was the sight of the Major’s face. He had never before seen the easy-going Truscott in a rage, not even in his encounter with the card-sharper, Alfonso Franker. The Major looked positively demoniacal.

Opening the rear door with one hand, Truscott stooped, hiked El Lopez into an upright position, and literally threw him into the car. Then, slamming the door he took his seat beside his youthful driver.

“Get her going, Alan,” he ordered. “Drive to the Prefecture of Police.”

The car gathered way. By this time the entire *clientèle* of the *Café Republico* had rushed out into the street, their numbers augmented by passers-by. Crowds, having no time to find their horses or cars—for a pedestrian is a rare bird in Santa Barbara—attempted to run after the car. Horsemen in increasing numbers formed a cavalcade, while motorists, into whose cars uninvited passengers scrambled, joined in the pursuit. Like lightning the rumour had spread that the *Americano* had defeated the notorious El Lopez in single combat and was now carrying him off to hold him to ransom.

Suddenly Truscott had an inspiration. He knew no one at the Prefecture. Quite possibly El Lopez might have friends there, for in Santa Barbara “graft” was as prominent as in any other city in North and South America.

“Make for the Infantry Barracks in the Avenida Balmacida,” he directed. “Juan Suarez promised to help us in every possible way. I’ll put his promise to the test.”

“What happened, sir?” asked Alan.

“No time now,” replied the Major, breathing heavily. “Tell you later.”

The car swung round and through the barrack gates. The sentry, more alert than is usual with Huavilian troops, came to attention. Then, catching sight of the mob of pursuing vehicles and horsemen, he shouted for the guard to turn out, thinking that nothing less than a revolution had broken out.

The shout sobered the crowd, whose motive was mostly curiosity. Half a dozen of the guard under the direction of a sergeant closed and barred the gate.

Meanwhile Alan had brought the car to a standstill outside a building which he rightly guessed to be the officers’ quarters. More troops were hastily pouring out of their barracks into the square, while several officers, including the Commandante, came hurrying down the steps from the balcony of the mess.

“By Jove! We’ve stirred up a hornet’s nest this time!” exclaimed Truscott. “Hello! What luck! There’s Suarez.”

He got out of the car and went to meet the Tiente-Capitano.

“Good morning!” he exclaimed. “We have called to see you, Tiente-Capitano Suarez. But as our arrival is, perhaps, slightly irregular, will you do us the honour of introducing us to your Commandante?”

“Truscott’s getting quite a polite linguist,” thought Alan. “I wonder what all the rumpus is about?”

Without delay Suarez obtained permission from his commanding officer, and Truscott and Alan were formally introduced to Commandante Manuel Castanos.

When Truscott announced that he had brought the unconscious El Lopez in his car—reviewing the incident in cooler blood it seemed rather a rash thing to do—the Commandante’s eyes gleamed. He embraced the embarrassed Englishman and kissed him on both cheeks!

Then explanations followed. On the Huavilian colonel’s part he mentioned that it was an act of Providence. Only a fortnight ago El Lopez had “called out” a popular young officer and had shot him dead in a duel. Duelling being countenanced in Huavilia, the only steps that could be taken were for another officer to challenge the surviving principal; but El Lopez’s reputation as a crack shot made would-be avengers hesitate. El Lopez, with

many “legalized” murders to his credit, had hitherto taken particular pains to keep within the law. Now, by drawing a knife on Truscott, he had overstepped the bounds of discretion. By the Huavilian Code of Laws a culprit in the case of attempted murder could be summarily dealt with either by the military or the civil courts according to the status of the prosecutor. Although Truscott was an Englishman, the fact that he was a retired military officer was sufficient to bring El Lopez into the clutches of Commandante Manuel Castanos.

“I don’t wish to be vindictive, Commandante,” said Truscott. “I think I’ve taught him a lesson, but I don’t want a repetition of this sort of thing. Nor do I want a bullet in my back. But I should like to know what prompted him to go out of his way to insult me.”

At the Commandante’s command two soldiers lifted the senseless bully from the car, laid him on the ground, and thoroughly soused him with buckets of water.

In a few minutes El Lopez opened his eyes. He sat up, gazed with terror at the array of military, and began to howl dolorously. He cut a very abject figure in his saturated and bedraggled peacock’s feathers.

“Why did you attempt to provoke the Major Truscott?” demanded Castanos, in the course of a strict cross-examination.

“I was paid to do so, señor,” whimpered the bully.

“By whom?”

“By Benito Franco, Excellency.”

Truscott gave Alan an astonished look. He understood it all now. Benito Franco was the name taken by the card-sharper Alfonso Franker. Wanting revenge, yet afraid to tackle Truscott himself, the despicable wretch had hired El Lopez to do his dirty work for him.

“Deal with him lightly, Commandante,” said Truscott. “He’s bitten off more than he could chew. He’s only the mean tool of a bigger rascal than himself.”

“Very well, El Lopez,” pronounced Commandante Castanos. “The English señor has pleaded on your behalf. In future let Major Truscott severely alone. He is the friend and honoured guest of His Excellency Presidente Ramon y Miraflores de Souta (“By Jove! I wasn’t aware of it,” soliloquized the amused Truscott), and rest assured that any insult offered to Señor Truscott will be suitably dealt with by His Excellency. If you want

revenge take it out of the person who hired you. Now for your punishment: you will receive twenty lashes! Señores,” he continued, addressing Truscott and Alan, “permit me to offer you hospitality as guests of the officers of the regiment.”

CHAPTER XVIII

Truscott's Indiscretion

A sense of gratitude compelled Truscott to accept the invitation against his inclinations. Already he had wasted the best part of the morning. His shopping expedition was not yet accomplished, and he had promised the *cacique* that the gift of blankets would be handed to him that day.

The Major took a glass of wine. It was very good wine. His hosts, noticing his appreciation, insisted that he should have another.

"Why did you plead for El Lopez, señor?" asked the Commandante, as the screams of the wretched man undergoing his punishment came faintly through the open windows of the mess.

"I'd beaten him hollow," explained Truscott, still conscious of the satisfaction of having got the upper hand of a swaggering bully, but also having the typical Briton's magnanimity in refraining from hitting a man when he's down. He hadn't El Lopez's record and knew nothing about the young officer whom the bully had killed in a deliberately provoked duel.

"Had I been in your place I would have refrained from giving a display of marksmanship until I had him as a target," commented the Colonel. "I hear from Suarez that some person broke into Casa Montego; might it have been the man Benito Franco?"

"Does he belong to the Cordon of the Lariat of Death, Commandante?" asked Truscott.

Castanos raised his eyebrows.

"So? I was not aware that you came under their displeasure. How did the intruder make an entrance?"

"I'd like to know that myself," replied his guest, and proceeded to give an account of what had taken place.

"By a trap-hatch in the floor or ceiling, perhaps," suggested the Commandante.

"I've examined ceiling, walls, and floor," declared Truscott. "The ceiling is plastered, the walls and the floor are of stone fixed in cement. Apparently the Cordon objects to my removing Ixtlahuaca's statue from this country, and I haven't found it yet."

Just then a bugle sounded for the regiment to fall in. Most of the officers rose to leave, but the Commandante remained seated.

"You will take the parade for me, Truxillo," he ordered, addressing the second-in-command. "Tiente-Capitano Suarez, since the señores are friends of yours, you will be excused duty. Now, Señor Major, pray proceed with your interesting story."

Truscott described progress to date. The Commandante listened intently until the conclusion of the narrative.

"It almost reminds me of a poem I once heard," remarked Castanos reflectively. "It was translated from the English and concerned an English officer who at the behest of his sweetheart stole the eye from an idol in an Indian temple. The devotees tracked him and stabbed him to the heart as he lay asleep in his quarters."

"Oh, yes!" rejoined Truscott. "The piece is called 'The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God'. I've heard it rather too often. Personally I don't think much of it. The young fool was asking for trouble in wounding the religious susceptibilities of the natives, even though they were heathens. But I don't quite see your point, Commandante."

"You are doing practically the same thing," interposed Juan Suarez.

"How?" asked Truscott.

"The statue is that of one of the old Inca deities," replied the Tiente-Capitano.

"Quite so," agreed Truscott. "A deity of an extinct religion. It was presented to my great-grandfather. Your Presidente de Souta has admitted the validity of the gift by granting me a concession to recover it if I can."

"Reverting to that poem: do you consider that the penalty was excessive?" asked the Commandante. "Supposing someone in England stole something, a relic for example, from one of your cathedrals, what punishment would he receive?"

"Probably two months' imprisonment," replied Truscott. "He might even be let off under the First Offenders' Act, if he hadn't been previously convicted of another crime."

“Is that all? What, then, would happen to a thief who stole your king’s jewels? Would he be executed?”

“As a matter of fact,” said Truscott, smiling, “a desperado did steal the crown from the Tower of London, one of the strongest fortresses in the kingdom. He almost got away with it, but was captured at the outer gate.”

“And what was his punishment?” asked the Commandante.

“The king not only pardoned him, but gave him a pension for life,” replied the Major.

“How absurd!” exclaimed Castanos. “You English must be a nation of fools.”

“Perhaps we are,” admitted Truscott cheerfully. “But we do manage somehow to muddle through.”

“I wonder if you’ll ‘muddle through’ with your present project, señor,” remarked the Commandante. “I’ll be greatly interested to hear of your achievement. In view of the opposition of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death—mind you, it is a menace not lightly to be regarded—how do you propose to remove the statue if you have the fortune to discover it?”

Truscott finished his fourth glass of wine.

“I make no secret of it, Commandante,” he replied. “As Tiente-Capitano Suarez here knows, we have an aeroplane.”

Alan had all his work cut out to conceal his astonishment at the undoubted indiscretion of his companion. It was no news to Suarez that the Major possessed an aeroplane; in fact the Huavilian officer had seen Alan alight. The lad, however, had purposely landed after a long glide in order to keep secret the remarkable powers of the machine in landing and taking-off almost vertically.

The lad was on tenterhooks lest Truscott should dwell upon these properties. He was also surprised that, after being warned by the Cordon of the Lariat of Death, Truscott should so brazenly imply his intention of removing the Ixtlahuaca statue by air transport.

But Castanos made no rejoinder. He directed the conversation into other channels, particularly in relation to the recent revolution in Diamala.

“That is their affair,” he remarked. “We hope that it will be to our benefit. The former government was always inclined to be aggressive towards Huavilia, as witness the exacting restrictions it placed upon our

export and import trade. The Sierras, of course, form a natural frontier where my regiment alone could hold the entire Diamalan army; but our chief anxiety is, or was, the Diamalan Air Force. What will happen to it now I know not, nor do I know what has befallen Commandante Miguel Torello. He is our national enemy, a man more to be mistrusted than any other member of the Diamalan Government. With aeroplanes, which we do not possess, Diamala could do us incalculable harm. *Sapristi!* If Torello ever fell into my hands I'd know what to do with him, war or no war. I would quickly put him up in front of a firing-party."

"For personal reasons, Commandante?" asked Truscott.

"No, for purely patriotic reasons, señor," replied the Huavilian. "This country will not enjoy peace with freedom from anxiety while Torello can prevent it. Would I knew where he is now."

At length Truscott judged that he could, without offending the courteous Commandante's susceptibilities, take his leave.

Both Castanos and Suarez shook hands with Truscott and Alan, the Commandante warmly expressing a hope that they would pay him another visit at an early date.

"I am more than idly curious to know how your enterprise progresses," he added.

Truscott drove the car back to Casa Montego, and the way in which he skilfully steered through a maze of unorganized traffic reassured Alan that his companion had not taken too much wine. Nevertheless he wondered why the Major had let his tongue have full play on a topic that certainly required discretion.

"I'll go and see how the lighter is progressing, Alan," he observed. "Get hold of a couple of *peons* and see that they wash down and thoroughly disinfect those cushions. They simply reek of the cheap scent that El Lopez is partial to. After that, take a man with you and drive to the stores and fetch those blankets and other stuff I bought. I've learnt something to-day, anyway; to maintain one's prestige in Santa Barbara one mustn't even carry the smallest parcel."

An hour later Alan, accompanied by a mestezo man-servant, drove to the store and collected the purchases Truscott had temporarily abandoned, owing to his little difference with El Lopez. He had to relate to a number of the staff the story of what had happened to *el Americano's* aggressor.

“Assuredly, señor,” declared the proprietor, “El Lopez will not dare to remain in Santa Barbara after his discomfiture. For very shame he will go away and hide. And we will not lament his departure.”

On the way home Alan had to pull up owing to a dense crowd in the Avenida Independencia. Men and women were standing on the seats of their cars, horsemen on the outskirts were maintaining a precarious perch by balancing themselves on their horses’ backs in order to obtain a better view. Solitary pistol shots were ringing out at regular five-second intervals.

In the centre of the crowd an ornamental steel electric-light standard towered to a height of about forty feet. Within six feet of the top a man was frantically hugging the post. He probably wanted to climb higher, but he could neither ascend nor descend owing to the fact that his red-and-yellow scarf had become entangled in one of the projections of the scroll-work.

Someone in the crowd was slowly and deliberately emptying a revolver in the direction of the panic-stricken man. Evidently the marksman knew what he was doing. There was no law in Huavilia forbidding the discharge of firearms in the public streets; but if anyone were killed or wounded the person who had fired would be liable to be arrested either for murder or attempted murder, as the case might be. In this instance the individual with the revolver was taking extreme care not to hit the object of his attentions; yet by the way the luckless man winced it was obvious that the bullets were whizzing unpleasantly close to his head.

Presently the marksman, doubtless thinking that he had wasted enough ammunition, turned and began to force his horse through the press. As he did so his unhappy victim looked at his retreating figure.

Then Alan recognized both the principals in the comedy. The man hitched to the lamp standard like a modern St. Sebastian was the card-sharper Alfonso Franker, otherwise Benito Franco; the marksman was Truscott’s worsted adversary El Lopez.

El Lopez had lost little time in acting upon Commandante Manuel Castanos’s advice; he had revenged himself upon the despicable rascal who had, with such unfortunate results, hired the professional bully to attempt to do his dirty work.

“I almost feel inclined to give El Lopez a pat on the back,” remarked Truscott, when Alan related the incident. “Well, we haven’t exactly had a wasted day. We’ve made a useful acquaintance in the person of

Commandante Castanos. By the by, Alan, I suppose you thought I was talking through my hat over the Ixtlahuaca business?"

"I really did, sir," admitted the lad frankly.

"I thought so," continued the Major cheerfully. "I wasn't as a matter of fact. I do look ahead occasionally, you know. It won't be my fault if, before the year is out, the statue of Ixtlahuaca does not occupy a niche in Bramerton Hall in spite of the ban of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death."

CHAPTER XIX

The Diver's Find

During the next fortnight Truscott and his staff put in some solid useful work. Lake Ximenes was effectively surveyed and charted, soundings having been obtained in spite of interruptions by thunderstorms, electric eels, and on two occasions by slight earthquake shocks.

The lighter was now completed. Even Alan, who knew little about ships and boats, expressed surprise at her massive construction. She was flat-bottomed, with heavy ribs spaced two feet apart, and was decked fore and aft, giving ample space for the impending diving operations. Her hold was spacious, the coamings being separated from the low bulwarks by relatively wide waterways.

But the astonishing feature was her keels on a piece of teak extending almost the extreme length of the lighter and having a girth of nearly nine feet, its breadth being three feet, its depth fifteen or sixteen inches.

"We are not taking unnecessary risks, Alan," remarked his employer, noticing the lad's interest. "The lighter must be strong enough to withstand the shallows and rapids. She certainly won't be overloaded, but that timber's worth a small fortune. You've done remarkably well, Andrews. It's a good thing I'm not a thirsty individual, and better still that you haven't to pay for the beer."

Andrews, a Suffolk man, grinned delightedly. He knew what Major Truscott meant; for, according to a long-standing custom on the East Coast of England a boatbuilder is supposed to stand his customer as much beer as the newly-launched craft takes in water when committed to her natural element.

The lighter was thoroughly water-tight, and Andrews was justified in taking the Major's remarks as a compliment to himself.

"Let's hope, sir, she'll be as dry when we get her down to Nueva Guacipiti," he replied.

“Much water will flow down the Rio Morte before then, Andrews,” rejoined his employer. “Well, are we ready?”

“Ay, ay, sir!”

At a signal from Andrews thirty bare-chested *peons* tailed on to two stout hawsers, one leading from a point six feet from the bows, the other from aft. Bowden, at the helm, swung the long tiller over to starboard. Slowly against a two-knot current the lighter started on her maiden voyage from the little wharf at Casa Montego to Lake Ximenes.

Alan and the Major were standing aft, for the present idle; Duncan was down in the hold busy preparing the diving-gear, in which task he was assisted by Miguel Torello. The ex-commandante was taking quite a lively interest in the operations, but whether it was with the idea of currying favour with Truscott the latter was unable to say. At any rate Torello had abandoned all idea of returning to take an active part in Diamalan affairs now that the revolution had placed his rival in power. Also he knew the risk he was running by remaining in Huavilia, and possibly he possessed a sufficient sense of gratitude to the Englishman who, in giving him shelter, was incurring the danger of being arrested by the authorities.

It was hard work stemming the current. Normally, water-borne traffic in Huavilia rarely did so except in the case of small craft equipped with Yankee outboard engines, and these were confined to the chain of lakes above the city of Santa Barbara. Heavy goods were almost invariably rafted downstream or conveyed in roughly-constructed barges that could be poled along with very little effort.

The trip to Lake Ximenes attracted an enormous amount of attention on the part of the inhabitants. In spite of no announcement having been made, the news that the Americanos' lighter was on its way to take part in the operations for the search for the Ixtlahuaca statue had got abroad, and hundreds of people lined both banks of the wide Rio Morte to watch progress. At one point, where the national race-course abutted on the river-bank, a brass band was in full blast, the instrumentalists playing the Huavilian National Anthem and a hardly recognizable rendering of “God Save the King!”

“Was ever a treasure-hunting expedition conducted with such publicity before?” questioned Truscott. “Well, they can't say we've been working behind their backs. I wonder how many members of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death are amongst that mob?”

At length the lighter was moored to the bank of Lake Ximenes at a spot a little to the east of the bluff. It was arranged that Andrews and Bowden should take up their quarters on board while the rest of the party continued to live at Casa Montego. Whenever a thunderstorm was imminent, and they were of almost daily occurrence, Truscott and the Casa Montego contingent were to motor over to the lake and diving operations would then proceed during the storm. It was under these conditions, provided the *cacique's* statement held good, that the formidable electric eels were relatively harmless.

All preparations were now complete for the first descent. The lighter was moored by means of insulated cables at a distance of fifty yards from shore. David Duncan donned his diving-dress with the exception of the helmet, to the delight of nearly two thousand spectators. Armed troops and Civil Guards had arrived in order to keep the forefront of the throng from being pushed into Lake Ximenes by the press behind. The excitement redoubled when, to the strains of two brass bands playing in different keys, Presidente Ramon y Miraflores de Souta arrived, accompanied by most of his ministers and a number of military officers.

Booths sprang up as if by magic on the outskirts of the crowd. Hucksters started their noisy business while, knowing the keenness of the Huavilian to bet upon almost every form of amusement, a number of bookmakers were offering odds on *los Americanos* recovering the statue of Ixtlahuaca at the first attempt.

Everything was in readiness for Duncan to descend beneath the surface of Lake Ximenes, but there was at least one fly in the ointment.

The expected thunderstorm did not arrive!

Over the distant Sierras masses of black and copper-coloured clouds rolled menacingly. A light breeze blew in the direction of the mountains. According to the general conditions the storm should be rapidly approaching against the wind. It did not. The nimbus stuck tenaciously to the snow-capped peaks, and although the air reverberated to the rumble of distant thunder the greatly desired electrical conditions were decidedly absent from the scene of the operations.

"I'll go down, sir," declared Duncan. "The mob'll think I'm funking it if I don't."

"Let them think then," rejoined Truscott. "I'm not going to allow you to risk your life for the sake of amusing a crowd of dagos."

“Is that an order, sir?” inquired the diver.

“M’yes. Look here, Duncan, what’s the idea?”

“I hate having to hang on to the slack, sir. I’ve an idea that the dress will give protection from any electric eel in the lake. It’s a pity to disappoint the crowd.”

“If anything happens we can’t haul you up, you know,” objected the Major.

“I know that, sir.”

“And if I want to put forward a personal selfish motive: I’ve gone to the trouble and expense of bringing you out here especially for skilled diving work. If you deliberately allow yourself to be put out of action what’s going to happen to the operations?”

“Well, sir, it’s like this,” persisted the diver doggedly. “I’ve been thinking things over. I remember a mate of mine during the war had to sort a power cable in connexion with some position-mines. There was a high voltage leaking somewhere. At any rate, before he knew it the cable had surged and the bare wire came hard up against his dress. Unthinking-like he pushed the wire away with his bare hands. According to people in the know he ought to have been laid out there and then. The current must have passed up one arm, through his body, and to ‘earth’ through his other hand. All he felt was a faint prickling sensation. Now, I don’t propose to go gripping electric eels with my bare hands, sir; but I reckon that with rubber gloves I’m all O.K.”

“Sometimes it’s necessary to give a dog treatment by means of an electric battery,” remarked Truscott. “For instance, it’s very beneficial when the animal has St. Virus’ Dance following distemper. Now, it’s useless applying the handle to the dog’s fur; the current would merely flow unheeded over the surface of its body. So two earthenware bowls of water are necessary. You place one terminal handle and one paw in each bowl and the animal receives the current right enough. I mention this because it tends to support your story of the diver. On the other hand, how do you account for the fact that those poor brutes of horses were bowled over by the electric eels? Their coats are as insulated as the fur of a dog, or your diving-dress.”

“Well, sir, I’ll risk it,” decided Duncan. “I’m not keen on getting a shock, I’ll admit, but I’d rather risk that than be jeered at by that crowd. They’re getting a bit impatient already.”

“If you insist, then jolly good luck!” rejoined his employer.

Duncan sat down on a wooden chest on the after-deck while Andrews and Bowden placed the heavy copper helmet over his head and screwed it down to the corselet of the dress. The self-contained suit had neither life-line nor air-tube, air being supplied chemically from a double reservoir strapped to the diver's back.

Drawing on a pair of rubber gloves, Duncan told his assistant to close and secure the front of his helmet. Then he tested the air-supply and found it working satisfactorily, announcing the fact by an affirmative gesture with his hand.

Over the stern a wooden ladder thirty-five feet in length, its lowermost end weighted with lead, was already in position. Close to it was a three-inch "shot-rope" with an insulated swivel just above water-level. Having had one shock Truscott was not going to allow any of his crew to risk a similar experience.

It did not take Duncan long to reach the bottom. The floor of the lake at this point was fairly hard, consisting of gravel with a layer of about six inches of silt. At that depth the water was sufficiently clear to allow the sunlight to penetrate, but every movement of the diver's lead-shod feet disturbed the mud to such an extent as to hide the floor of the lake and to prevent objects being seen much beyond arm's length.

Slowly the man set out, paying out his distance-line as he went and prodding the mud with a metal-shod pole. Shoals of small fish darted away at his approach, but so far no gymnotus appeared to dispute his presence.

"Like looking for a needle in a bottle of hay, this job," he muttered. "I didn't bargain for a little jaunt in a big bowl of pea-soup. Give me salt water and sand any old time."

At the twenty-first pace—it was his means of measuring his distance—Duncan felt his metal-shod stick rasp against a solid object. It might be a stone: certainly it was too hard to be a water-logged tree trunk.

He prodded again and again. The object, whatever it was, was of oblong shape.

"Don't say I've hit upon the governor's fakealorum straight away!" he exclaimed. "Here goes!"

Stooping he thrust his gloved hand into the slime and groped for the object. It was about five feet in length and about fifteen inches in width. It might be metal, but its surface was slippery.

“I’ll up-end it and see what it’s like when the mud settles,” he decided. “If this isn’t the shape of a man’s head I’m a Dutchman!”

With difficulty obtaining a grip, Duncan sought to lift his find. For a while it resisted his efforts. It was not its weight, which under water was not more than half a hundredweight, but the suction of the mud that defied his strength.

As he tugged and heaved he could hear the gurgling sound of the thing partly parting company with the tenacious slime. The water was thick with sediment. Only by sense of touch could he gauge his progress, and it seemed tediously slow.

At length Duncan desisted. He stood erect to ease the strain of his back. Sweat, in spite of his red woollen cap, poured from him, running down his face and partly obscuring the front and side glasses of his helmet.

Gradually the mud settled. The diver, his limited outlook restored, was about to resume his task when a huge sinuous object, horribly distorted by the water, glided into his field of vision. It was one of the dreaded electric eels, a gymnotus of quite six feet in length.

To strike at the brute was futile. The resistance of the water would render a swinging blow harmless. Duncan did the best thing he could: he brought his metal-pointed pole into the position corresponding to a bayonet-fighter’s “on guard”.

The gymnotus hesitated, or appeared to do so. Then, with a sudden movement of its tail, it hurled itself at the diver.

Duncan felt the point of his pole rasp over the brute’s head. Obviously the metal tip had failed to penetrate the eel’s skin or even to encounter resistance.

The next instant Duncan was hurled sideways. Of what happened during the ensuing minutes or so he had but a hazy recollection. He remembered finding himself in total darkness and feeling panic-stricken because he erroneously imagined that in his fall he had smashed the container of his air-supply.

Then it dawned upon him that the darkness was caused by the quantity of mud stirred up by the scuffle. The eel had attacked him, that was certain, but with this knowledge came the reassuring fact that the brute’s electrical means of offence had been totally ineffectual; it had failed to penetrate the insulated diving-dress.

With considerable difficulty Duncan regained his feet. His steel-tipped stick was standing upright almost within arm's length. Luckily the gymnopus during its attack had not fouled his distance-line.

Recovering his normal spirits the man set to work to complete his interrupted task. He found that by using his pole as a lever—the hard ground underlying the mud formed an efficient fulcrum—he could prise the object until the suction of the slime was overcome.

The rest was easy. Quickly he had the object in an upright position. Then, as the sediment began to settle, the thing assumed form and definition.

It was a rough representation of the human form, its face square-jawed, its eyes long and narrow, the head sitting upon the shoulders without much suggestion of a neck. Undoubtedly it was a statue of an Inca deity and of considerable antiquity.

“By smoke! It's it!” declared the delighted diver. “Now stop there, my beauty, until I fetch a rope.”

The mud was sufficiently adhesive to allow the statue to remain upright. Bending one end of his distance-line to it, Duncan followed the rest of the rope until he regained the foot of the ladder.

Then up he went until his helmet appeared above the surface. His assistants made to help him over the side, but he made signs to them to desist and that he wanted his helmet opened.

“I've had a go with an electric eel, sir,” he declared triumphantly. “The brute can't give a diver a shock, but it can capsize him. But that's not what I've come up to tell you, sir; what I want to report, sir, is that I've found the old idol you're after!”

CHAPTER XX

Brought to the Surface

“What, already?” exclaimed the Major.

“Sure thing, sir,” replied Duncan. “I’ve up-ended the old jossier. He’s nearly as tall as myself and wasn’t he firmly in the mud! All we’ve got to do is to send a rope down, bend it round him, and haul him aboard. It seems _____”

His words were interrupted by the sharp crack of a rifle. A bullet sang overhead, so close it seemed that Alan involuntarily ducked his head, although by then the missile had sped on its way.

It struck an object a hundred yards off with a resounding smack, then ricochetting, hit the surface of the lake twice before disappearing.

But no one on the lighter was interested in the ricochet. All eyes, with the exception of the diver’s, who could not turn his head, were directed towards a furious smother of foam coming from the spot where the bullet had first glided from its objective.

It was a caiman, one of the most ferocious of the alligator tribe. Floating just awash it looked exactly like a drifting log. Truscott had noticed it, but had paid no attention to it.

Luckily one of the soldiers on the bluff had spotted the saurian, and although his bullet had failed to penetrate the armour-like hide of the caiman it had scared the brute sufficiently to make it dive for safety. Still more lucky was the fact that the unexpected report had not made Duncan relax his grasp upon the ladder; otherwise with his helmet open he would have sunk like a stone.

“Strikes me a few depth charges would come in handy here, sir,” remarked the diver, when the Major had explained the reason for the rifle-shot. “Howsomever, I don’t expect that brute’ll worry me. I’ll go down, sir, and fix that rope.”

In ten minutes this task was completed.

Duncan returned and was assisted on to the lighter's after-deck.

"All's needed is to tail on to that rope and up comes your precious idol, sir," he reported.

"Ca' canny, man," replied Truscott. "We'll let the thing stop where it is for a while."

There were blank looks upon the faces of the rest of the party. The Major's decision held them dumbfounded. They could not understand why, on the threshold of success, he should have stayed his hand.

For his part Alan, although he was glad that the search had proved successful, could not help feeling disappointed. After all these preparations the actual finding of the statue was relatively such a simple matter that it destroyed the glamour of his idea of a treasure-hunt. In addition he realized that his term of employment was nearing its end. Truscott would return home and the whole business would have taken only a matter of six weeks. If only Brocas Truscott had hurled the statue into an almost inaccessible place!

"We've given the stalls and the gallery something for their money," continued Truscott. "In fact, Duncan has executed a rather smart turn. So we'll let the crowd disperse. We'll go back to Casa Montego. Then to-night we'll return, haul up our find, and take it to the house. Before we arrange to send it out of the country I suppose we must place it on exhibition, if only to interest our friends, the Cordon of the Lariat of Death."

Accordingly the rope attached to the statue was buoyed and the mark-buoy thrown overboard. While Duncan, with the aid of Bowden, was divesting himself of his diving-dress the lighter was warped to the bank.

With the exception of Andrews and Bowden the party went ashore. The *peons* in attendance knew nothing of what had transpired under water, so they could tell nothing, while the British members of the party kept silent.

The diver was given a tremendous reception as he made his way through the crowd. He, at all events, had not deprived them of their amusement. Never before had the crowd had an opportunity of seeing a man go down under water in a lake infested with electric eels and return alive. And he had done this not once, but twice.

Right to the gates of Casa Montego the car was escorted by a crowd of horsemen who cheered and fired revolver shots into the air. It was

impossible to increase speed and shake them off. The pace of the car was limited to that of the cavalcade. Other cars followed, taking up the entire width of the road, while in the rear toiled a few hundred of the poorest inhabitants of Santa Barbara who did not possess the extremely low price of a mount.

“We’re very popular all at once,” remarked the Major.

“Yes,” agreed Alan. “It doesn’t take much to be popular in Huavilia. I remember seeing a tight-rope walker give a show on the plaza. The crowd pelted him with flowers and serenaded him until long after midnight. When he declined an encore they threw rotten eggs at him.”

“I see; it’s the novelty and not the individual that appeals to them,” rejoined Truscott. “Apparently all we need do when the time comes to transport the statue by air is to get Duncan to amuse the crowd by giving a diving display in the lake. Then we can return and fetch him in due course. So much for our friends of the Cordon.”

Alan made no reply, but thought the more. Although Truscott treated the existence of what was undoubtedly a powerful secret society as a sort of joke the lad realized that there was a serious menace. It was pretty certain that the Cordon of the Lariat of Death, keen as it was upon the retention of Ixtlahuaca’s statue in Huavilia, was not to be deceived by such a futile artifice.

Soon after midnight Truscott, Alan, and Duncan set out for Lake Ximenes. They did so in the car with headlights ablaze, but they made a circuitous detour in the course of which they drove through the still thronged streets of Santa Barbara.

Two miles out on the far side of the city the lamps were extinguished. For the rest of the way they drove in the darkness and at their own risk, since lights on cars were the exception rather than the rule in the outlying districts of the republic. The white dusty road, so reminiscent of the highways of Britain before tar-spraying came as a mixed blessing, was easy to follow in the starlight. Nevertheless at a modest twenty miles an hour it took Alan fifty minutes before he pulled up within ten yards of the spot where the lighter was moored.

“Ahoy, there!” hailed the Major.

“Aye, aye, sir!” replied Andrews.

“All correct?”

“Only a dug-out hanging around the buoy, sir, about an hour ago. I gave ’em a hail and they shoved off pretty quick.”

“The buoy hasn’t been removed?”

“No, sir; you can see it. A little to the left of our stemhead, sir.”

“Right, I spot it,” declared Truscott.

It was a warm windless night. The dark surface of the lake was splashed with streaks of pale, phosphorescent light as the denizens of the water darted in search of prey. On the edge of the lake mosquitoes *pinged* incessantly, while fire-flies flew in the shadows under the fringe of the tropical forest.

The lighter was slowly poled to within boathook’s length of the buoy. Carefully and with rubber-gloved hands the buoy-rope was brought inboard and three men slowly hauled in the slack.

“Up an’ down, sir!” reported Andrews.

“Gently with her, then,” cautioned Truscott.

Evidently the statue had again fallen into a recumbent position in the mud, for the suction was enormous. It was not until Truscott and Alan added their not inconsiderable strength that the strain was sufficient to break out the object of their efforts.

It did, so suddenly that the five sat down in a confused heap on deck.

After that the statue offered but slight resistance.

“At that!” ordered the Major. “Ease it over the gunwale. Mind you don’t damage it. Here it is!”

With a dull thud the statue landed on the thick deck-planking. Resisting the temptation there and then to examine his find by the light of an electric torch, the Major had the image covered with canvas and lowered into the hold.

Then did Truscott switch on his torch. For about half a minute he gently scraped the grotesquely carved features with a knife. Then:

“We’ve found a pearl of great price, lads!” he announced calmly, “but not the one we’re after! This is a stone statue of undoubted antiquarian value—something that would gladden the eyes of the British Museum authorities. As far as we are concerned we must look upon it as a milestone on the road to success.”

The others gazed at the cruel-looking features of the Inca idol. To Andrews and his mates it was a piece of graven stone, nothing more. Alan found himself trying to picture the statue during those dark days when cruelty formed one of the chief ceremonials of the once powerful South American race, and human victims were sacrificed in thousands to propitiate a deity represented by a block of carved stone.

“What’s to be done with it, sir?” asked Duncan, who, now the truth was out, hankered for his interrupted night’s rest.

“Let it remain here,” decided his employer. “To-morrow, business as usual. In other words, we resume diving operations.”

CHAPTER XXI

Alan makes a Descent

Throughout the rest of the week Duncan made twice daily descents. Apparently the menace of the gymnotus tribe was a futile one as far as the diver was concerned, and in a very brief space of time he regarded the electric eels with almost contemptuous indifference.

Although the task of exploring the bed of Lake Ximenes progressed steadily nothing more of importance was discovered. Day after day Truscott and his assistants grilled in the hot sun as they kept watch on the deck of the lighter while Duncan pursued his under-water investigations.

“Can’t I have a shot at it, too?” asked Alan, only too glad to have something to do to vary the monotonous vigil. “It seems a pity to have another diving-dress and not to be able to use it.”

“I see no reason why you should not,” agreed the Major. “As a matter of fact, I propose going down to-morrow. See what David has to say when he comes up.”

Duncan, when the subject was broached to him, shook his head dubiously.

“I’ll not say there’s danger,” he remarked. “You’ve shown yourself capable of using the diving-dress, Mr. Brampton. In a way you’ll hinder me, because I’ll have to keep an eye on you. I reckon I’d cover more ground in less time when I’m alone. But,” he added, “suppose you put in half an hour down there.”

When, after his usual “breathing spell” Duncan prepared to descend, Alan was ready in his self-contained diving-dress. As a matter of precaution Duncan suggested that his companion should be equipped with a life-line. In addition to the usual outfit both men wore thick indiarubber gloves.

When Alan’s turn came to descend the insulated ladder he began to feel a little “jumpy”. It was one thing to go down into the placid, clear water of

the lake at Bramerton Hall; another to venture into the muddy, reptile-infested Lake Ximenes.

The front of his helmet was closed and locked. Andrews gave the metal dome two sharp taps, the signal that the diver was cut off from the outside air.

For some seconds Alan held on to the rungs of the insulated ladder irresolutely. The hiss of the self-contained air sounded like the roar of a high-pressure safety-valve. His temples throbbed; the abnormal air-pressure sent stabbing pains against his ear-drums. At the slightest invitation from Truscott he would have willingly abandoned the attempt; but through the plate glass of his helmet Alan detected no sign on the Major's set features. Whatever Truscott thought of his assistant's inclinations, he kept to himself; he meant to let Alan abide by his own decision.

Slowly the lad descended three rungs of the ladder. The water closed over his helmet. It seemed so turbid that he could with difficulty just make out the bilge strake of the lighter.

Again he paused in order to adjust the valve of the air-supply. The hissing almost ceased, the throbbing on his ear-drums was no longer painful, nor did his lungs feel oppressed under the abnormal pressure.

Gaining confidence, Alan continued his descent until his lead-soled boots touched the deposit of mud overlying the hard bottom of the lake. Then, in accordance with a pre-arranged signal, he tugged thrice at the tautened life-line. The tension on the rope was relaxed; he was free to make his way more or less blindly in the wake of his companion.

By degrees Alan grew accustomed to the unusual conditions. There appeared to be more light at the bottom of the lake than there had been just below the surface. It might have been due to the partial condensation on the glass front of the helmet having disappeared or to the fact that his eyes were becoming used to the subdued light. In any case, he found he could discern Duncan's distorted figure as the professional diver shuffled awkwardly over the ground, taking his direction by means of short, white-painted stakes planted in the mud.

These stakes, which Duncan had set during his previous descent, formed a basis for his present field of operations, by which means the whole bed of the lake would be systematically explored. By a pre-arranged plan Alan was to keep two yards to the right of his companion until the extreme limit was

reached. Then both were to return at similar intervals, Duncan fixing fresh pickets as he did so.

A huge gymnotus, hideously distorted by the water, glided in front of the two divers. For a moment it paused as if meditating an attack upon the disturbers of its domain; but directly Duncan released a small amount of air from his helmet the reptile vanished.

Once more Alan had a nasty shock when his weighted boot trod upon a freshwater crab, the shell of which was about six inches in diameter.

Normally he would have expected to find the crab crushed under the weight of the boot; but instead the crustacean almost jerked Alan off his balance as it squirmed, freed itself, and scuttled out of his way.

On and on the lad plodded, keeping his eyes fixed upon the muddy ground and sounding with his metal-pointed stick as he went.

Always there was the same result. The stick encountered nothing but hard ground beneath the stratum of ooze.

At length his life-line tautened. He had reached the extreme limit of the rope. Almost at the same time, Duncan picked up the last of his painted mark-posts, shuffled past the now stationary lad and took up his position two yards on his right. Then he signed to Alan to move to *his* right and commence the return journey.

“A needle in a bottle of hay isn’t in it,” thought the lad. “What we want is a sort of submarine harrow towed behind a powerful motor-boat. If a magnet could be invented that would attract gold—but, no! In that case there’d be enough gold recovered from under the sea to make it as common as iron.”

Facing about, the lad shuffled forward. As he did so his life-line slackened and began to form a loop behind him, since the men on the lighter had not begun to heave in the slack.

Suddenly there was a terrific jerk on the rope. Swept completely off his feet, Alan sprawled in the mud, his frantic struggles to recover his balance creating an artificial fog of disturbed water. To his horror he felt himself being dragged along the bed of the lake at a pace that could not be accounted for by the efforts of the people on the raft.

Then, as quickly as it had begun, the tension slackened. A moment later a gigantic form literally rasped over the diving-dress of the recumbent and helpless youth. A heavy clawed foot rested for a moment on the glass front

of his helmet. Then a long, scaly tail whisked round and hurled Duncan headlong across his fellow diver's body.

Their attacker was an enormous caiman—the dreaded South American alligator and first-cousin to the as formidable crocodile of the Old World.

Still floundering on his back, Duncan drew his knife. Blindly he struck at the greenish-yellow stomach of the saurian.

It was not a hard blow: the resistance of the water impeded the free movement of the diver's arm. The caiman's skin, one of the vulnerable parts of the otherwise armour-clad body was relatively tough. The point of the knife inflicted only a slight wound.

It had the desired result. The alligator, finding that its intended victim could and did hit back, abandoned its attack and made off. As it did so it again fouled Alan's life-line, and once more the lad was dragged, as helpless as a hooked fish, over the muddy bed of the lake.

Grasping the situation, Duncan went to his companion's aid. Still unable to recover his balance, the diver contrived to obtain a grip on Alan's ankle. Both men were carried about twenty yards before Duncan found an opportunity to slash at the tautened rope.

Both ends vanished, leaving the two divers prostrate in the mud.

Duncan was the first to regain his feet. Still grasping his keen blade in anticipation of a renewed attack, he helped Alan to an upright position and pointed significantly to the hilt of his companion's knife.

The lad understood. He drew his knife and remained on the defensive although he realized that both weapons were useless against the scaly hide of the saurian.

Moments passed, but the caiman did not appear again. Gradually the sediment in suspension began to settle until Alan had a fairly clear view covering a radius of about ten feet. He was glad to rest his gloved hand upon the metal corselet of his companion.

On his part Duncan made no immediate effort to move. Like Alan, he had lost his metal-tipped staff. What was worse, he was out of touch with his shot-rope, nor were any of his white-painted pickets within sight.

At first Alan wondered at his companion's inaction. Then the truth of the situation dawned upon him. Had they moved they might wander round and round the floor of Lake Ximenes until exhaustion and the failure of their air-supply overcame them. It was too hopeless a business to attempt to make

their way back to the ladder hung from the lighter. Their comrades would see the air-bubble rising, but would not guess that anything was wrong beyond the fact that Alan's life-line had been cut—a thing that would be accounted for by the suggestion that it had fouled some obstruction.

Again Alan “had the wind up”. He felt himself possessed by the mad desire to cast off the weighted metal on his back and chest, to cut the laces that held his leaden soles, and thus lightened, to float head-downwards to the surface.

Duncan pressed his copper helmet against that of his companion. In this position they were able to converse, since the metal conducted the sound of their voices.

“We’ve lost touch!” he exclaimed. “Keep your end up, Mr. Brampton!”

“What end?” was Alan’s unspoken question, still visualizing himself rising feet-foremost to the surface. “What’s to be done?” he asked aloud.

“Wait and see, sir,” was the response. “They’ll see by the air-bubbles that we aren’t on the move and they’ve hauled in your life-line by now, I reckon.”

“And what then?”

“Just you wait,” replied Duncan confidently, although in his mind he realized that their position would be hopeless should the caiman return to the attack. The brute was quite capable of seizing either of them in his enormous jaws and biting him in half.



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The wait seemed interminable. In fact, Alan began to entertain fears that his air-supply was giving out, when suddenly a huge grey object swooped down within his range of vision.

Self-preservation prompted him to strike with his knife. Then he dropped his arm to his side.

In spite of the magnifying properties of the water he recognized the figure of a human being swimming downwards with slow, powerful strokes and trailing a line behind him.

It was Truscott, clad only in a pair of shorts, his brick-red face and arms contrasting vividly with the apparently greenish white of his bare body from the waist upwards.

For a moment Truscott paused in his descent to reassure himself that the two divers were capable of action. Then, thrusting the end of the rope into Duncan's hands, he turned and with one kick on the muddy bottom shot rapidly to the surface.

A few minutes later Alan and his companion, guided by the line, found themselves at the foot of the ladder.

Almost frantically Alan ascended. Willing hands assisted him on to the deck of the lighter and opened the front of his helmet.

For a while he could do nothing but gasp. He was speechless and almost unconscious of the fact that Andrews and Bowden were stripping him of his diving-dress.

Then he became aware of Truscott, towel girded, wringing the water from his saturated shorts.

"Jolly plucky of you, sir!" he heard Duncan remark.

"Plucky be hanged!" retorted the Major. "If ever I felt the breeze it was then!"

"But the caiman might have got you, sir!"

"Caiman! It was the electric eels that scared me stiff! Look, there's your jolly old caiman!"

He pointed to the shore where already a dozen natives had just hauled ashore the dead body of the alligator.

"That can't be the one," protested Duncan. "I only just tickled its hide."

"That was enough," explained Truscott. "The blood attracted some of our friends, the electric eels. One of them must have released a charge into the wound—no other place would have been vulnerable—and the alligator just kicked for ten seconds and then *finée*. Well, Alan, how goes it?"

"I've had enough for to-day, sir," admitted the lad, though loth to acknowledge defeat.

"So say I for us all," rejoined the Major.

"There's time for another descent, sir!" protested Duncan. "I'll go down. There's one alligator the less to worry about."

"No," decided Truscott. "We'll pack up until to-morrow. Up with the mooring tackle, Andrews!"

On landing, Truscott was met by the chief of the village, accompanied by fifty or more wildly excited Indians.

Their jubilation was explained when the *cacique* declared that the dead caiman had been the scourge of the village for several years. Apparently it was a notorious character. Not only had it devoured several natives who had rashly ventured into the lake, but it had upset canoes and seized their occupants. On more than one occasion it had even entered some of the huts during the night and had made off with several women and children.

"But there are other alligators," remarked the Major.

The Indian shook his head.

"This is the only one that matters, señor," he replied. "See, here is proof."

He led the way to where the disembowelled body of the saurian lay. From its stomach the Indians had taken two gold bangles, a small copper lamp, and the heads of several fish-spears. Just behind the brute's snout was a recently made furrow undoubtedly caused by the bullet of the Huavilian rifleman a few days previously.

It was not until that evening that Alan learnt from Campbell the actual facts of Major Truscott's heroism. Directly the severed portion of Alan's life-line had been hauled in, Truscott, realizing that something was amiss, plunged overboard and swam a distance of about sixty yards to the spot where the air-bubbles were breaking surface. Then, deliberately running the risk of being stunned and perhaps killed by a gymnotus, he dived to a depth of between twenty and thirty feet, taking a rope with him.

"You're lucky to be here, Mr. Brampton," concluded Campbell. "I reckon you'll not be going down again."

"I'm not at all keen about it," confessed Alan. "But if I have to that's all there is to say about it."

CHAPTER XXII

A Pledge to the Presidente

It was one thing for Major Truscott to plan a resumption of diving operations on the following day, and another when Fate in the guise of the Presidente of the Huavilian Republic intervened.

Alan and the Major had barely finished breakfast when an officer of the presidential bodyguard, escorted by half a dozen troopers, rode up to the steps of the patio of Casa Montego.

"I have a communication from His Excellency Ramon y Miraflores de Souta, Presidente of the Republic, Señor Truscott," announced the officer producing a large envelope stamped with the Huavilian Arms. "Will the señor condescend to read it and favour me with a written reply?"

"Is this the Huavilian way of delivering Income Tax demands, Alan?" remarked Truscott, as he broke the seals. "Stand by, old son, and bear me a hand; or ten-to-one I'll make a hash of the lingo and that might be decidedly awkward."

The letter was a politely-worded request that Señor Major Truscott should present himself at a private audience with Presidente de Souta at the Government House at eleven o'clock that morning.

"What's the idea, I wonder?" observed Truscott, as he sat down to write the only possible reply. Since he was virtually allowed in Huavilia by licence he realized that he was at the beck and call of the supreme rule of the State. "Private audience, too! All the same, my lad, you'll come along to give me a leg-up as it were. Now, how will this do? Why, what's wrong?" he added, noticing a broad smile on Alan's face.

"Only that you've written to say that you hope to have the pleasure of *washing* His Excellency," the lad pointed out. "You mean 'calling upon'."

"Course," agreed the Major. "But p'raps when I do see him I'll feel inclined to scrub him down. But never meet trouble half-way; we'll see what the morning brings forth."

The Huavilian officer took the reply, saluted, and rode off, leaving Truscott to bolt to his bedroom and don a rig-out suitable for the occasion.

Precisely at five minutes to eleven Truscott and Alan alighted from their car at the Government House, where they were received with military honours by a guard under a lieutenant. Although the men belonged to the regiment commanded by Manuel Castanos, the *tiente-capitano* was not Juan Suarez.

In the ante-room a magnificently attired Major-domo called Truscott's attention to the fact that His Excellency Presidente Ramon y Miraflores de Souta desired to give a private audience, and on that account his companion must remain without until the interview was ended.

Haltingly the Major protested that his lack of complete command of the language rendered Alan's presence necessary, adding that his companion's mouth was dry!

"In that case, señor, it will be a pleasure and honour to provide wine for your friend," rejoined the official.

Not the faintest suspicion of a smile flitted across the Major-domo's face when Alan explained that his mouth was not really dry, but that Señor Truscott had meant to convey the information that his, Alan's lips, were sealed: in other words Presidente de Souta could rely upon his reticence upon whatever subject was discussed at the forthcoming interview.

Accordingly Truscott and Alan were admitted to the Presidente's private room. The Major-domo explained the lad's presence and awaited instructions.

For some moments de Souta appeared to be irresolute. Obviously he was ill at ease over some matter.

"Señor Alan Brampton, you can remain," he said at length. "Knowing the responsible position held by your late father during his tenure of office at Santa Barbara, I feel I can rely upon the absolute discretion of his son. Don Gonzales, you have my permission to retire."

The Major-domo bowed thrice and backed to the door.

As soon as the official had gone de Souta locked the door and drew a heavy *portière*. Then he went to a chair at a massive table and signed to his visitors to be seated.

Another wave of indecision appeared to sweep over the Presidente. For quite a minute he remained motionless, his chin resting on the palm of his

right hand, while his eyes were fixed vacantly upon a spot well above Truscott's head.

"For what reason did you bring Commandante Miguel Torello of the Diamala Air Force into Huavilia, Señor Truscott?" he asked abruptly.

"To save myself immediate inconvenience, Your Excellency," replied the Major.

"What inconvenience?"

"He would have taken steps to confiscate my aeroplane, Your Excellency," explained Truscott. "As it happened, Mr. Brampton found a pretext to lure him into the cockpit and then flew off with him."

"So? Then you were not in league with him? You were not engaged in espionage?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then why did you not hand him over to the Huavilian Government?"

"Was there need?" countered Truscott. "Is a state of hostilities existing between Diamala and Huavilia?"

"There is not," replied de Souta, "but relations are always strained. The presence of Torello on this side of the frontier is a menace to the security of the Republic."

"In view of the state of affairs brought about by the revolution in Diamala, I think not, Your Excellency," replied the Major quietly. "As it happens, Torello is in fear of his life both here and in Diamala. I am merely giving shelter to the under-dog, as it were, until such time as I can get him out of the country."

"You swear you have no other motive?"

"I've given you my word, Your Excellency."

Again de Souta fell into a brown study. Then, opening a drawer in one of the pedestals of the table, he produced a folded paper.

"Read this, Señor Major," he said.

Truscott did so. As he read the letter his brow grew dark with anger. And no wonder, for the letter was of the nature of a complaint to Presidente de Souta, informing him that Truscott was harbouring the Diamalan Commandante Torello. The writer requested that he should be rewarded for giving the information, and had signed the letter, "Benito Franco".

"If you can question a man known as El Lopez, he will give you the reason for Benito Franco's interest in my affairs, Your Excellency," remarked Truscott through the medium of his interpreter. "Tell the Presidente, Alan, what happened to Franco the last time you saw him."

"I'll give orders for Benito Franco to be arrested as an undesirable alien," declared de Souta when Alan had related the incident in question. "No doubt he will claim that he is a citizen of the United States, but I will not let that fact interfere with Huavilian justice. During the remainder of your stay in Santa Barbara, Señor Major, you will not be subjected to further annoyance from this rascal."

"Thank you, Your Excellency."

"But tell me," continued de Souta almost in a whisper, "why did you—do you always help what you call 'the under-dog'?"

"My countrymen have a failing for that sort of thing," was the reply.

"And would you assist me if perchance I were in need of aid?" asked the Presidente in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes, of course!" declared Truscott impulsively. "Why, what is your trouble?"

Frankly de Souta explained the situation. Although outwardly all was quiet in Huavilia, internal disorders were fermenting. The undercurrent of popular opinion was running against the present head of the Republic. He could not rely upon the loyalty of the army. Fearing the fate that had overtaken most of his predecessors and knowing that if he abdicated his life would be forfeit, he was in a very hazardous position. He knew perfectly well that it was impossible for him to cross the frontier into any one of the three adjacent states. If he attempted to do so he would not get more than a few miles away from Santa Barbara. The knowledge that Truscott possessed an aeroplane had prompted him, finding Benito Franco's letter as a pretext for a private audience, to crave the British Major's aid.

"Would not our consulate be a better refuge, Your Excellency?" suggested the latter.

Ramon y Miraflores de Souta shrugged his shoulders.

"I think not, Señor Major," he replied. "The insurgents would not hesitate to enter the consulate and remove me forcibly. They know that it would be an insult to your country which your country could not avenge. For one reason, there is the Monroe doctrine which gives to Americanos

right to interfere with our affairs, but denies us the chance to appeal for aid to any European state. For another, Huavilia would not suffer loss if Great Britain broke off diplomatic relations with the Republic. She would be powerless to obtain compensation for the affront offered to her representative in Santa Barbara.”

“I see,” assented Truscott. “But if the rebels can rush the consulate they will not hesitate to take possession of Casa Montego: that’s a dead cert.”

“If the revolution does break out,” rejoined de Souta, “I shall receive sufficient warning to enable me to reach your house although I cannot flee from the capital. There, at Casa Montego, you have your aeroplane.”

“Exactly,” agreed the Major. “But I don’t quite see how I can fly away with you and leave my comrades in the lurch, as it were. There’s Commandante Miguel Torello to be taken into account too. And, of course, there is our search for the Ixtlahuaca statue. It seems that if we are successful in that direction we’ll be up against a jolly old gang calling themselves the Cordon of the Lariat of Death. So altogether, Your Excellency, it looks as if I’m in for a very hectic time.”

“*Caramba!*” ejaculated the Presidents. “Have they threatened you?”

“I suppose so,” replied Truscott coolly. “At any rate, one of the crush left a visiting-card in the form of a lariat. He took it away the next night, but how he got in and out of my room is a mystery that I’d very much like to solve.”

“One of the Cordon entered your room? Then I am indeed a dead man! I thought at least that I should find sanctuary within the walls of Casa Montego until you were able to get me out of Huavilia by air.”

“Cheer up, Your Excellency,” exclaimed Truscott brightly. “We’ll do our best to see you through, although it’s against my principles to interfere in the internal affairs of any country except my own. We’ll stand by with the plane. If necessary I’ll pack up and send my men down to Nueva Guacipiti by river; but I’m hanged if I like throwing in my hand over the Ixtlahuaca business. I was rather keen on outwitting the Cordon of the Lariat of Death! When do you expect the revolution to break out?”

“Not before the harvest is in,” replied de Souta. “The revolutionaries know that if they start too soon the peasants will be too excited to work in the fields. If the harvest fails then Huavilia will be on the verge of starvation, since she can import nothing from either Nauta or Diamala. So we have yet another month or five weeks.”

“In that case I’ll carry on with my search,” decided Truscott. “At any rate until the end of this month; but I’ll be ready to give you a hand directly you’re in need of it.”

“You are indeed my benefactor, señor,” declared the harassed Presidente. “Meanwhile, while I am still in power, I will see to it that Benito Franco will not be in a position to trouble you again. *Adios, señores!*”

“I wonder,” thought Alan, as he passed in front of the saluting guard on his way to the waiting car, “I wonder whether those fellows are revolutionaries or members of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death. My word! As Truscott remarked, we’re in for a very hectic time.”

CHAPTER XXIII

Truscott's Guests

"It's hardly worth while resuming operations to-day, Alan," remarked Truscott, as they drove across the Plaza Nacional. "I'll look in at the barracks and invite Commandante Castanos to dinner. It's short notice, I admit. If, without offending the old chap's dignity, we can include your friend Suarez, so much the better."

"Very good, sir," replied Alan, who, though curious to know his employer's object in asking the Commandante to dinner, knew better than to ask the reason.

Apparently Castanos was not offended, for he promised to be at Casa Montego at seven that evening, and also accepted the invitation on behalf of his subordinate.

Although work at Lake Ximenes was stopped for the day Truscott was far from remaining inactive. He realized the complex problem to which he had committed himself. He was pledged to do his utmost to aid Presidente de Souta; he had held himself responsible for Commandante Miguel Torello's flight from South America; he was about to be involved in a conflict of wits, and perhaps force, with the Cordon of the Lariat of Death; and he had yet his main object, the discovery of the Ixtlahuaca statue, to achieve.

Regarding the last objective he knew that time was now limited. Whether he succeeded in saving de Souta from the revolutionaries or not it was certain that the new Presidente would not renew the concession his deposed rival had granted.

Accordingly, directly after lunch, the usual *siesta* was dispensed with. The Major and Alan, assisted by Campbell and Duncan, set to work to remove the biplane from its temporary shed, dismantle the wings, and wheel the machine into the quadrangle. Here the wings were reassembled and the engine refuelled, oiled, and given a trial run.

No one unacquainted with the marvellous climbing powers of the machine—and Alan on his arrival at Santa Barbara had taken great pains to conceal its unique properties—would imagine for one moment that it could ascend from its limited taking-off ground. The quadrangle was roughly eighty feet in length and sixty in breadth, so that there was very little clearance between the wing-tips and the sides of the building. Even the Major expressed his doubts as to whether the machine, on rising, would clear the parapet.

“She’ll do it,” declared Alan confidently. “I had less space to play with when I took off at Nueva Guacipiti with Torello on board.”

“I hope you’re right,” rejoined Truscott. “The proof will rest with me. Listen, Alan; if we have to clear off in a hurry, I’ll want you to take the lighter down the Rio Morte. Andrews and the others will go with you, and I’ll arrange for half a dozen *peons* who are acquainted with the rapids to complete the crew. At Nueva Guacipiti, unless you have other instructions, you’ll wait with the lighter until I return, and then we’ll ship the thing as it stands—without breaking it up, that is—on a vessel bound either for Jamaica or Barbadoes. I’ll take de Souta and Torello with me—I don’t suppose they’ll start quarrelling en route—and make a dash in the biplane for the nearest of the Leeward Islands. It will be a good load, especially if we have the luck to find Old Ixtlahuaca. I should put his dead weight at at least two hundredweights. Then, having deposited de Souta and Torello on neutral ground, I hope to fly to Barbadoes and await your arrival by steamer. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly, sir.”

“Good. Then, subject to circumstances, these orders stand unless countermanded by me.”

“Would it not be better, sir,” suggested Alan, “that in the event of it being discovered we should take it in the lighter?”

Truscott smiled.

“Can’t you see, Alan,” he replied, “that if you have the image with you there’ll be trouble with the Diamalan authorities? and in addition there’s a particularly strong branch of the Cordon of the Lariat johnnies there, I understand. I’ve learnt things since I’ve been here; amongst them that it’s almost hopeless to get an antique, especially one of precious metal, through Diamala. Consequently Ixtlahuaca will have to make an aerial voyage if he condescends to be resurrected from the mud of Lake Ximenes.”

“What do you say to a trial flight, sir; and load the plane with weights equal to those of your passengers? Then we could see whether there’s sufficient taking-off space in the quadrangle.”

“No,” decided the Major firmly. “Even though this is *siesta* we can’t guarantee that there’ll be no inquisitive Huavilians in the neighbourhood. The machine would be shouting for attention the moment it rose above the parapet. At any rate, we’ve cleared decks for action.”

At a few minutes before seven, Commandante Manuel Castanos and Tiente-Capitano Juan Suarez, arrived in an open, horse-drawn carriage, escorted by mounted troops.

It was now dark except for the arc-lamps at the entrance-gates and over the patio. The moon was not due to rise until just before eight.

According to the custom of the country, Truscott was awaiting his guests at the foot of the stone steps in front of the portico.

“By Jove, Alan!” he remarked. “I didn’t bargain for that crush. What happens to the escort? Am I supposed to provide food and drink for them?”

“I thought you knew, sir,” replied his assistant. “In Huavilia military and civil officers never pay visits after sunset except with an armed escort, and their host is expected to make arrangements for his staff to entertain his guests. Our trouble is to stable the horses.”

“Bother them!” exclaimed the Major. “Why can’t they picket the animals and leave a guard?”

“It’s not done here,” rejoined Alan, rather amused at the result of his employer’s impulsive invitation.

“They’d better stable some of the horses in the building where we kept the plane,” suggested Truscott. “Dash it all! Duncan can’t speak a word of the lingo and Campbell isn’t much of a hand at that business. How they are going to entertain half a dozen Dago horse-marines is beyond my comprehension. Hello! Here’s the Commandante.”

“I’ll get Suarez to come with me and arrange about the men and the horses,” volunteered Alan. “He’s a good sort. I don’t think he’ll object.”

Accordingly Truscott welcomed Commandante Castanos to Casa Montego, while Alan, having explained his employer’s dilemma to the Tiente-Capitano, accompanied the latter to the temporary stables.

“This is the place where your aeroplane was housed, Señor Alan,” remarked Suarez. “What has happened to it? Have you made another flight?”

“Oh, no,” replied the lad, realizing that Truscott had committed an error of judgment. “We had to shift it; that’s all.”

Suarez made no further comment.

The horses having been stabled, the troopers were shown into one of the rooms the windows of which overlooked the quadrangle. At Juan’s suggestion Alan told Campbell to provide wine and flat, unsweetened cakes, similar to the standard food given to the native workmen in Truscott’s employ.

“They’ll be all right now,” declared Alan. “Let us rejoin the others.”

Instead of immediately falling in with the suggestion, Suarez pointed through one of the open windows. The glare of the lighted room shone directly upon the aeroplane in the quadrangle.

“You have chosen a strange hangar, Señor Alan,” he remarked.

“That’s merely a temporary place for the plane,” rejoined the lad. “It has been undergoing engine tests. You don’t suppose it could take-off from that narrow space?”

“I should certainly not think so,” replied the Tiente-Capitano. “A thousand pardons for my curiosity, señor!”

But as Alan took his guests to the dining-room, he wondered why Juan should have shown such an interest—not in the machine but in its position. Obviously Truscott and he had committed another indiscretion in reassembling the wings. Juan was no fool; doubtless he was wondering what was the object in removing the wings—a necessity in order to get the machine through the doors—and then to replace them when it meant doing the work all over again before the biplane could be taken to a normally practicable flying-ground.

The dinner went well. Commandante Manuel Castanos was most affable and kept his host entertained by humorous anecdotes of life in the Huavilian army.

“By the way,” he remarked, “you remember the man El Lopez accused of employing him to insult you? We had orders to arrest him this afternoon.”

“Indeed!” was Truscott’s non-committal rejoinder.

“Yes, by His Excellency the Presidente’s orders,” continued Castanos. “Unfortunately for him, Benito Franco offered resistance. In the *mêlée* shots were fired, and he had his lower jaw shattered by a bullet. At any rate he won’t be able to talk for a very long time. Did His Excellency mention his intention to you this morning?”

It was a pointed question though made in a casual manner. Truscott had very little time to consider what form his reply should take. Obviously, being bound to secrecy he could not mention his compact with de Souta, which had a direct bearing upon Benito Franco’s arrest. He wondered whether the miserable informer had given any information about Miguel Torello to anyone in addition to the Presidente. If so, did Commandante Castanos know anything of the matter?

“He did,” replied the Major. “It was in connexion with the affair of El Lopez.”

“Indeed,” rejoined the Commandante. “It would seem as if His Excellency is in no hurry. I myself reported the incident to him on the day on which you kidnapped the famous El Lopez. Concerning El Lopez, have you heard this little incident?”

To Truscott’s relief Castanos related a story concerning the notorious bully that had no bearing upon the case under discussion. His three listeners roared with laughter. The tension was relaxed.

A little later, however, Juan Suarez made a remark about Truscott’s biplane.

“I would like to make a flight if, without inconvenience to you, señores, it could be arranged,” he continued. “It would be exciting and entertaining to have a bird’s-eye view of Santa Barbara.”

“Quite possibly we can arrange a trip,” replied Truscott. “At present we are keeping the machine in the quadrangle.”

“Obviously you cannot make it ascend from that limited space,” remarked Castanos.

“Exactly,” rejoined the Major. “Only we are keeping it there in preference to its former hangar so that it will be safe from any unwanted attention on the part of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death.”

Alan felt decidedly uncomfortable. There might be truth in the statement, but it did not coincide with the explanation he had given to Suarez earlier in the evening.

“Has the Cordon given you trouble apart from the incident of the lariat left in your rooms, señor?” asked the Commandante.

“No, not at all,” replied Truscott readily. “At the same time, one has to exercise caution.”

“Precisely,” continued Castanos. “Before I go I should like to see the room in which the Cordon’s unconventional visiting-card was left. Mere curiosity on my part, I know. By the by, how progresses your search? I hear that your men have explored the greater part of Lake Ximenes.”

From that moment conversation took an easier path until it was almost time for Truscott’s visitors to depart. Then, only too mindful of the Commandante’s request, Truscott showed his guests the room in which he was sleeping when the envoy of the Cordon paid his two mysterious calls.

“Remarkable!” ejaculated Castanos, when the Major had explained the precautions he had taken. “Door locked and bolted, windows iron-shuttered and yet the rascal comes and goes undetected!”

“You have tested walls, ceiling, and floor for a concealed passage, señor?” inquired the Tiente-Capitano.

“Yes,” replied Truscott emphatically. “I should be indebted to you if you could discover the secret.”

“With your permission I will try,” rejoined Suarez. “Have you a stick or preferably a mallet?”

Armed with an ebonite ruler Juan Suarez tapped walls and floor and even the two central pillars supporting the ceiling.

“Solid as one could desire,” he declared. “As for the ceiling, it does not appear to have more than a few cracks in it. That can be attributed to slight earthquake shocks. No doubt, Señor Alan, you can remember the great earthquake that overthrew part of the façade of the cathedral? The whole of the roof of this building had to be renewed. That was when General Montego lived here.”

“I don’t remember it,” replied Alan, “although my father often spoke of it.”

“I do not wish to experience another such earthquake,” said Suarez.

A few minutes later the escort was summoned and the Commandante courteously bade his host farewell.

“By Jove, Alan!” exclaimed Truscott, when they were alone. “I made a blunder in inviting those fellows! Genial and well-meaning and all that, but somehow Castanos has a knack of asking awkward questions.”

“Yes, and unfortunately Suarez made inquiries about our plane and my explanation differed from yours,” said Alan.

“That is a pity. However, we mustn’t meet trouble half-way. ‘Never say die till you’re dead’, you know. There’s one thing; Castanos and Suarez seem agreed that the plane is incapable of taking off from the quadrangle. Mind you, I don’t entertain any suspicions that the Commandante is disloyal to de Souta. At the same time we can’t be too careful, although I’ve been a bit careless to-night.”

CHAPTER XXIV

Alan's Discovery and Campbell's Blunder

Early on the following morning diving operations were resumed.

"Do you wish me to make another descent, sir?" asked Alan, whose fear of being thought a coward outweighed his reluctance to renew his acquaintance with the under-water denizens of Lake Ximenes.

Before Truscott could reply, Duncan interposed.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Brampton, you'd better bide where you are. Last time was trouble enough and you were more of a hindrance than——"

"Duncan!" exclaimed his employer sternly.

"Sorry if you've misunderstood me, sir," rejoined the diver. "Maybe I've got an awk'ard way of expressing myself. All the same, sir, what I say I mean!"

It was the first jarring note between members of the expedition since its commencement. Yet Alan was prompt to recognize the blunt truth. He *had* been a hindrance. Duncan had had to neglect his work to keep an eye on him. Yet, on the other hand, the caiman might have directed its attack upon Duncan—probably it would have done so—in which case the diver would have had a single-handed fight against fearful odds in the semi-opaque waters of the lake.

"Duncan is right, sir!" he declared frankly. "I'm not much use at the game."

"You would be, in clear water and without 'gators and eels scuffling round, sir," said the man in a conciliatory tone. "I'm right glad you understand. You've pluck, Mr. Brampton, but you haven't the experience."

As a matter of fact Alan admitted to himself that, as far as diving in Lake Ximenes was concerned, he had neither. But, in diplomatic language, the incident could be considered closed.

Duncan proceeded to don his diving-dress.

For another ten days operations continued with unbroken regularity. At the end of that period the bed of the lake was all but thoroughly explored. Roughly nine-tenths of the area had been systematically searched, and as yet no trace of the statue of Ixtlahuaca had been discovered.

If Truscott felt any sense of disappointment he kept his emotions well under control. Alan was decidedly out of sorts. Possibly the thought of failure affected him; probably working day after day on the exposed deck of the lighter, and under a cloudless sun, had been responsible for his ill-concealed lassitude.

“Looks to me as if you have a touch of malaria, my lad,” observed his employer. “You’d better stay behind to-day. I’ll phone for a doctor.”

“I don’t mind resting to-day,” admitted Alan. “But I don’t want a *medico*. The local brand hasn’t much to recommend it. A few grains of quinine will set me right.”

“Very well, then,” agreed the Major. “Take things easily. I’ll tell Campbell to remain in the house just in case you should feel worse—matter for precaution, you know. He’ll have plenty to keep himself busy.”

Accordingly Alan prepared to have a restful day—not that he wanted to remain inactive, but because he felt that he must.

Lying on a wicker couch in the coolest room where jalousied shutters admitted air but shut out the blinding sunshine, the lad tried to let brain and body remain at rest.

It was one thing to keep bodily quiet; another to allow his mind to remain inactive. He had not slept well during the night; during the day he tried in vain to slumber.

At last he sat up and looked around for something to read, if only to kill time. With the exception of Truscott’s English-Spanish dictionary, there was not a book in the room, and he felt too fatigued to go to his own quarters where there were a number of ancient tomes once belonging to the defunct General Montego. A month-old copy of a London weekly newspaper Alan had read from beginning to end.

Then he remembered the manuscript journal of the Major’s ancestor, Brocas Truscott. He had read it before and more than once; but somehow the inclination to renew its acquaintance urged Alan to fetch the bulky volume from the safe where it usually reposed.

Alan read three sections that dealt mainly with Brocas Truscott's adventures during the War of Independence. Tiring, for a faint buzzing in his head warned him that the quinine was having its effect, the lad placed the journal on a chair beside his couch and again tried to fall asleep.

This time he fell into a fitful dose that altogether lasted about twenty minutes. Rousing, he raised himself on one elbow, drank some lime-juice and soda-water and then lay back on the couch with the right side of his head resting on the pillow.

In that position he found himself looking at the journal. He had left it propped up against the back of the chair and open at the page he had finished reading.

Now, possibly owing to a draught—unless Campbell had entered the room while Alan was asleep—a number of the pages had been turned. Guessing the cause, the sleepy youth did not worry himself over his discovery. He remained looking at the crabbed handwriting without making any attempt to read it.

Gradually, by some inexplicable freak of mind, Alan found himself paying attention to the sequence of certain capital letters. Then he sat up, drew the journal closer and made his momentous discovery.

“So the day for my departure arrived (began the page). Took wine with the governor. Afterwards to the custom-house. Then to see my baggage to the boat. Unless the wind veers it would seem that the ship cannot set sail, blowing as it does straight into the harbour. Eventide perhaps, the breeze will fall and the ship can be warped out.”

There was nothing particularly exciting about this portion of the diary. It seemed to be merely a meagre account of the voyage homeward. Yet Brocas Truscott had hinted that the clue to the hiding-place of the Ixtlahuaca statue was to be found in this section of his journal. The word *Ximenes*, without any connexion with the lake of that name, had previously attracted Alan's notice and he had called his employer's attention to it.

But, quite unexpectedly, the secret was revealed. *The capital letters of each paragraph, when taken in sequence, spelt the word "Statue".*

Alan was now wide awake. Eagerly he continued on similar lines, reading the initial letter of each paragraph.

“—into Lake Boca from eastern shore. Pinnacle cap of Liberty in line with north tower cathedral. Close in; about seven. To him that discovers this clew—I trust a son of my house—good fortune. B. T.”

Headache and lassitude completely gone, the lad turned to the first page of the same chapter. There, again, the sequence of capitals formed words: “Having been basely repaid by Delgado and the new government I have by stealth thrown the golden statue of Ixtlahuaca into Lake Boca.”

Crossing the room Alan rang the electric bell—rang it loudly and continuously.

Campbell, breathless, hurried in.

“Anything wrong, sir?” he asked, when he had partly recovered his voice. “Are you worse, sir?”

“Never better in my life, Campbell,” was the reply. “Look here; I want you to ride over at once and ask Major Truscott to return as quickly as possible.”

The valet hesitated.

“But, sir, I must give him a reason. Are you worse, sir?”

“Give him any reason you can invent. Tell him I’ve got malaria, diphtheria, anthrax, hydrophobia, or elephantiasis—the whole boiling of ’em, if you like. Get him to drop everything and come back here as fast as he jolly well can. Hop it, Campbell. Don’t break blood-vessels, but do break records!”

Too mystified to offer further protests, Campbell went out and softly closed the door. Then he took to his heels and ran down the corridor to the telephone.

The valet had made considerable effort to learn the language of Huavilia. Already he could ask simple questions and generally make himself understood. Consulting the directory he gave a number and asked the subscriber to come to Casa Montego at once.

Then, getting one of the native servants to saddle a horse, the valet rode at considerable risk to his neck to the shore of Lake Ximenes.

“What’s wrong, Campbell?” shouted the Major, when the excited man had hailed the lighter from the shore.

“It’s Mr. Brampton, sir!” was the reply. “He seems to have taken a very remarkable bad turn, sir. So much so, sir, that he gave me hurried and almost incoherent instructions to summon you without delay, sir. Before so doing, sir, I took the liberty of ringing up Doctor Fuego, and asking him to come to Casa Montego as soon as possible, sir.”

“All right, Campbell. Get that horse of yours tethered—it’s in a frightful lather—and ride back in the car with me. Avast diving, lads! Warp the lighter alongside, Andrews.”

Without waiting for the unwieldy craft to be brought to the bank, Truscott took a flying leap, missed a ducking by inches, and raced up the sloping ground to where the car stood under the shade of a clump of palm trees.

Bumping his head against the frame of the hood, the Major flopped into the driver’s seat, released the side brake, and gave the self-starter a vicious punch. Unfortunately he had left the gear in reverse. Before he realized it, the car was backing down the slope at the rate of knots, Campbell’s forehead and nose making painful contact with the wind-screen during the process.

In the nick of time, for the car was almost on the point of toppling backwards into the lake, Truscott changed into first. With another bone-jarring jerk the car leapt forward and was soon doing a good forty miles an hour over the vile-surfaced track.

When the car swung round into the broad, well-kept, tree-lined Avenida, Truscott “let her rip”. The needle of the speed-gauge hovered on the sixty mark. Reckless though the motorists of Santa Barbara were, the Major certainly gave them points and left them standing! As for the relatively few pedestrians, he left several of them sitting or lying, as in their haste to get out of the way they tripped and fell. Horses plunged, very nearly unseating their experienced riders. A gorgeously-uniformed member of the Civil Guard raised his hand warningly. Truscott took not the slightest notice. His attention was centred on the road ahead and not on a mounted policeman by the side-walk. The man drew his revolver and emptied it in the direction of the rapidly receding car; but, the reports drowned by the roar of the engine, Truscott was unaware of his narrow escape until some hours later when he discovered two bullet holes through the back of the hood.

Quick though he had been, the Major had been forestalled. Through the open gates of Casa Montego the Santa Barbara fire brigade were pouring in in full force! A fire-engine, that in its prime and before the introduction of motor-driven fire-fighting equipment had seen years of strenuous service in New York City, was being drawn along by eight splendid horses. Half a dozen men in silver-laced uniform and looking more like cinema commissionaires than firemen clung precariously to a double, back-to-back seat. Others followed on horseback. In one case, two of the fire-fighters were astride one obviously exhausted animal.

Close on the heels of the engine came a fire-escape, the telescoped ladder swaying dangerously to the rhythm of the galloping animals. With it were two mules, each carrying two reels of hoses, pannier-fashion.

On either flank of the procession—although bunched up as they came to the entrance gate—were mounted sightseers. Motor-cars and the inevitable tail of half-castes and Indians completed the cortege. Although conflagrations in Santa Barbara were of common occurrence, the prospect of witnessing a fire at the house hired by the wealthy Americanos was sufficient to attract a fair percentage of the population of Huavilia's capital.

"What's up now?" exclaimed Truscott, jamming on his brakes and pulling up the car with its radiator only a few inches from the temporary stationary fire-escape.

"I am unable to say, sir," replied the well-trained valet, whose relief that the perilous ride was accomplished made him almost indifferent to the activities of Santa Barbara's fire brigade.

More by good luck than good management the Major contrived to swing the car round into a gap between the hose-carrying mules and another car, the owner of which had at an opportune moment inadvertently stopped his engine.

Then through the wide-open gates and up the broad drive Truscott drove, trying in vain to head off the uninvited spectators.

The fire-engine stopped outside the porticoed steps. The men looked in vain for wisps of smoke; then proceeded to unroll the hoses, blissfully ignorant of the fact that the nearest water, apart from the limited supply for drinking and domestic purposes, was the Rio Morte, and roughly two hundred feet beyond the extreme length of the coupled hoses.

Standing at the open door was Alan Brampton, seemingly in perfect health, yet displaying astonishment at the mysterious arrival of the fire brigade.

"What's wrong, old son?" asked Truscott, after he had edged his way through the press.

"Nothing, sir, as far as I know!"

"But you sent for me."

"Oh, yes, rather! It's jolly important, too!"

“Well, that can wait! The first thing is to get rid of this mob. Where’s the captain of the brigade? Come along, Alan, and do the chin-wagging for me.”

It took the lad some time to inform the head of the fire-fighters that there was not a fire; still longer to convince the justifiably excited men that they had not been deliberately hoaxed.

Then the reason came out: Campbell in his flurry had called the wrong number on the telephone. Instead of summoning Dr. Fuego to Casa Montego, he had rung up the Santa Barbara fire brigade! His halting, excitably-spoken Spanish, coupled with the fact that “Fuego” means “fire” had brought the brigade hot-foot to the house, only to find that their services were not required and that their presence was undesirable.

A liberal disbursement of “palm-oil” and a promise to write a letter of apology to the chief of the brigade had the effect of conciliating the firemen. It took more than that to induce the spectators to disperse. In their opinion they had a grievance, because there was not a fire and they had been deprived of an opportunity for looting. They began to taunt the firemen. The latter retaliated until the battle of words looked like developing into a free fight.

At length the captain of the brigade resorted to a stratagem. Sending one of his men to the outskirts of the crowd he caused him to shout at the top of his voice that a serious fire had broken out in the Calle Vittoria. Since some of the wealthier of Santa Barbara’s inhabitants lived in that district, the prospects both of a spectacular display and of a chance of loot acted like magic. The mob hurried away towards the city even before the brigade could “pack up” and rush back to their quarters. There, at any rate, the proximity of the military barracks would afford them protection from the doubly-hoaxed mob.

“Now, what’s your little trouble, my lad?” inquired Truscott.

“No trouble at all, sir,” replied Alan. “It’s you that have had all that for nothing! We’ve been on the wrong tack. Ixtlahuaca’s statue isn’t in Lake Ximenes. It never was! It’s in Lake Boca!”

CHAPTER XXV

The Rapids of Rio Boca

“Indeed! By what precise manner of divination or deduction did you arrive at that remarkable conclusion?” asked Truscott without enthusiasm. In his mind he felt sure that Alan was harbouring delusions as one effect of his indisposition. The proper course to pursue, then, was to keep calm and so prevent the lad becoming still more excited. Undoubtedly Campbell had not exaggerated when he reported to his master on the lad’s condition.

Alan was quick to detect the attitude of his employer’s mind. At first he resented it; then his shrewd common sense prevailed. In view of the fact that when Truscott left him he had a splitting headache it was perhaps reasonable that the Major should think that he was under the effect of too much quinine.

“It’s a fact, sir,” he replied quietly. “I was reading the last chapter of your great-grandfather’s journal—the clue is contained there, as you know, only we were led astray by the word ‘Ximenes’. That has nothing to do with it; except, perhaps, as a blind. If you will examine this page and take the initial letter of each sentence——”

“By Jupiter, Alan!” ejaculated Truscott. “You’ve hit it! If I were a Spaniard I’d say ‘A thousand pardons’. Since I’m not, I’ll merely say I’m sorry for having misunderstood you.”

“That’s all right, sir,” protested Alan hurriedly. “It was a bit of luck, really.”

“Well, there it is in black and white,” continued the Major. “Where is Lake Boca?”

He reached for the large scale map of the district. The lake was not shown. Consulting another map he made the discovery that Boca was fifteen miles away. The lake was not a widening of the Rio Morte, as in the case of Lake Ximenes, but was drained by one of the tributaries of that river.

“It would be interesting to find out how old Brocas lugged the jolly old statue all the way from Casa Montego,” continued Truscott. “I thought he

had to clear out in a tearing hurry. Ah, well! it means starting all over again, and the worst of the business is that if this fool revolution does break out we'll be some distance away if we are wanted in a hurry. I wonder what the current's like in the Rio Boca?"

Early on the following morning Truscott hired a small boat fitted with an outboard motor. The owner of the craft, learning that Lake Boca was Truscott's objective, insisted on going with him.

"As your pilot, señor; also because I fear damage might otherwise be done to my boat. The river is swift and the rocks many."

The little craft, capable of doing seven miles per hour through the water, got under way. The Major, armed with camera and binoculars, was in the bows; Alan, with note-book and a ten-foot rod marked with a painted band at every twelve inches, was amidships.

Without difficulty the boat ascended the Rio Morte from the Grand Bridge of Santa Barbara, made her way across Lake Ximenes—the scene of so much labour in vain—and resumed her course up the main river. So far, navigation presented little difficulty, for although the current ran swiftly in places, the rapids were free of slightly submerged rocks.

But when, at four miles above Lake Ximenes, the Rio Boca joined the Rio Morte, both Truscott and his assistant realized that the motor-boat's owner's objections were well founded. The tributary was on an average only about twenty yards in breadth and followed a tortuous course between tall bluffs that in several places overhung the swift-flowing stream. Nevertheless the water was fairly deep and free from fixed obstructions. Tree-trunks and other debris coming down with the current entailed considerable skill on the part of the helmsman to prevent the exposed propeller blades being damaged.

It took two hours to cover a distance of three miles. Then the river widened to three or four times its previous breadth, but the swirling eddies betokened hidden dangers in the shape of rocks that in many places were but a few inches beneath the surface.

Truscott was now busy with his camera, taking snapshots of the view ahead whenever there was a very drastic alteration of helm. By this means he could form a permanent record of the course for future reference. Meanwhile Alan kept taking soundings and entering them upon a skeleton chart previously prepared from the map.

At one place the boat was almost stationary, although going at full speed against the swirling current.

The Huavilian helmsman shook his head.

“Much water is coming down, señores,” he declared. “The snow on the Sierras is melting earlier than one might expect. It would seem that the current is too strong for my little boat. Since the señores possess a flying machine may they forgive me if I humbly suggest that it would be far easier to fly to Lake Boca than to waste precious petrol in pounding against the stream?”

“You do not realize,” replied Alan, “that for a flight to Lake Boca and back at least ten times as much petrol will be required than would keep your engine running all day. Besides, the señor has particular reasons for making the trip by boat. He has paid you to do that; so let that suffice.”

“It will take days at this rate,” protested the man.

“Then let it!” rejoined Alan. “Your contract is to take us to Lake Boca and back to Santa Barbara!”

The Huavilian, realizing that he was “up against it” as far as his dealings with the Englishman were concerned, and that it was a case of no pay until he had carried out his contract, promptly slowed down his engine.

At first Truscott was under the impression that the man was refusing to carry on. There could be no doubt that the fellow had never intended to take the boat as far as the lake. He had hoped that the Major, tired of the apparently futile struggle against the current, would order him to turn and make for Santa Barbara.

Directly the speed of the engine was reduced, the boat, although forging through the water, was being rapidly swept backwards. This continued for nearly two hundred yards. Then the owner ported his helm, gave the outboard motor full throttle, and edged to the left bank of the river until Alan could have touched the rocky wall on his right with his sounding-pole.

Meanwhile the boat continued to gain over the strength of the current, making headway faster than before. Obviously the force of the stream in the centre of the Rio Boca was at least double that of the stream in the subsidiary channel close to the bank.

“We’ll do it, sir!” exclaimed Alan.

“Yes,” agreed Truscott. “But we’ll never be able to tow or warp the lighter against this. I wonder how the statue was brought upstream—if it

was at all!”

Presently a weird-looking craft came scurrying downstream, keeping to that part of the river that had proved such a formidable obstacle to the outboard motor-boat.

It consisted merely of six inflated goats' skins on which was a rough platform of bamboos. Kneeling upon the after end of this frail craft was an Indian who, with leisurely movement of a steering paddle, kept the raft clear of the jagged rocks on either side of the main channel.

With hardly a glance at the motor-driven craft the Indian held on his way until the rapidly swirling current carried him past an intervening bluff and hid him from sight.

“How will that black return?” inquired Truscott of the Huavilian. “He can't paddle that contraption against the stream.”

“No, señor, he cannot,” agreed the man. “He is taking produce either to Santa Barbara or to Brocasete. Then he will let the air out of his goatskins and tramp back to his village with them over his shoulder.”

“Then, by Jove!” thought the Major. “If we do have the luck to find the statue I'll get the Indians to rig up a goatskin raft and float the thing down on that. The business isn't going to be the picnic I imagined it would be.”

After that Truscott paid scant attention to the intricate course. He no longer made use of his camera, but bade Alan put down the sounding-pole. Since it was out of the question to bring the lighter up to Lake Boca, any attempt to commit the course of the river to memory was a mere waste of time.

At length the boat, deftly manœuvred between a number of boulders that obstructed almost the entire width of the river, emerged into the lake—the scene of Truscott's future endeavours.

Here the current was hardly perceptible. The water, unlike that of Lake Ximenes, was remarkably clear. It was possible in many places to see the bottom of the lake which was composed mainly of white sand with considerable out-cropping of brownish rocks. The shores were flat with the exception of a short line of low cliffs culminating in twin bluffs barely eighty feet in height.

“Can we land there?” inquired the Major, pointing to a beach of gravel on which were gathered about eighty or a hundred Indians.

“*Si, señor,*” replied the helmsman. “They will do us no harm.”

"I did not mean that," protested the Major. "Is it a good landing?"

Giving an affirmative reply, the Huavilian stopped and unshipped the motor, and, grasping a single paddle, urged the boat until her forefoot grounded on the shore.

Landing and ignoring the importunate natives, the Major and Alan made their way up the rising ground in the direction of the bluffs. Before they had gone a little more than a hundred yards Alan caught his companion's arm and pointed across the lake.

On the opposite shore, and just clear of a clump of trees that had hitherto masked it from the lad's gaze, was an isolated rock that bore a striking resemblance to a "Cap of Liberty". Beyond—a good ten miles off—could be discerned the city of Santa Barbara with the twin towers of the cathedral standing out conspicuously in the sunlight.

"Well, that's the bearing my great-grandfather gave, anyway," commented Truscott. "It shows that he must have stood on this spot, for a few yards either way, and the rock is shut in by the trees. Now, go slow, Alan; the edge of the cliff may be treacherous."

To the obvious perplexity of the inquiring natives whose curiosity had prompted them to follow *los Americanos*, the Major and Alan stood cautiously upon the edge of the low cliff and peered into the limpid water, the surface of which was about thirty feet below them. Allowing for refraction, the depth of the lake was here not more than seven fathoms, with a very rocky bottom. It looked as if the formation was due to violent volcanic action, as probably it was, since in addition to the disrupted mass of subaqueous rocks the cliff face presented a remarkable number of violent "faults". Obviously this had taken place several thousands of years ago, a fact that gave the Major no slight consolation. If a violent earthquake had occurred since the statue of Ixtlahuaca had been hurled into the depths of the lake, the probability was that it would be irrevocably buried beneath the displaced boulders.

Stepping back a few paces, Truscott beckoned to the Indians to approach, at the same time holding up a few sticks of tobacco—an irresistible bait as far as these wretched, poverty-stricken natives were concerned.

"Ask them if there are electric eels or caimans in the lake, Alan," he said.

The headman replied that there were not. By his tone he implied that he wished there were, since trapping these aquatic monsters would provide the villagers with food. The lake, fed by the icy waters from the snow-clad Sierras, was too cold for either alligator or gymnotus. There were, however, several large fish of the salmon variety which were esteemed a delicacy in Santa Barbara. The principal industry of the lakeside Indians was spearing the fish and sending them down on goatskin rafts to the city markets.

“Tell them,” continued Truscott, “that I want twenty Indians to work for us. I’ll give them enough tobacco to last them for a twelvemonth in return for ten days’ services.”

The offer was hailed with delight until the natives discovered that *los Americanos* had not the tobacco with them. Too often had the Indians been deluded and duped by false promises of traders from Santa Barbara. Alan’s and Truscott’s return to the waiting boat was to the accompaniment of a storm of angry shouts and a few stones.

It was an exciting trip down the Rio Boca. The motor-boat travelled at terrific speed, shooting rapids and avoiding submerged rocks in a hair-raising manner. One false move on the part of the helmsman and disaster would have been inevitable.

Just before sunset the explorers stepped ashore at the public landing-place hard by the Grand Bridge at Santa Barbara. Here the Major paid the agreed sum to the owner of the boat, adding a generous “tip” that caused the swarthy face of the Huavilian to be wreathed in smiles.

“Now to buy a mule-load of tobacco,” announced Truscott briskly. “Thank goodness that commodity is cheap in Huavilia. To-morrow, Alan, we shift the scene of our activities; but hanged if I can understand why old Brocas went to the extreme trouble of lugging Ixtlahuaca all the way to Lake Boca when the statue would have found a more secure hiding-place in the mud of Lake Ximenes.”

CHAPTER XXVI

“Great Snakes!”

After consulting the map and making inquiries in the city, Truscott found that there was a road—a mere mule-track—from Santa Barbara that skirted the shores of Lake Boca. Until fifty years before it had been one of the principal means of communication with the coast, diving through a deep and narrow gorge in the Sierras at about twenty miles to the west of the canyon through which the Rio Morte carves its way to the Caribbean. A landslide had blocked the gorge and the road fell into disuse, only the Huavilian portion being occasionally used for mule traffic.

“Perhaps your ancestor was making for the coast by that road, and, finding he couldn’t get the statue away, threw Ixtlahuaca into Lake Boca,” suggested Alan.

“He didn’t say so in his journal,” demurred the Major. “Of course, he may have taken that route. At any rate, Alan, you’ve advanced a rational theory for the apparently objectless act on my great-grandfather’s part. We Truscotts are apt to be erratic at times, I admit; but hanged if I can picture one of us lugging a two-hundredweight statue over ten miles of uphill road just for the satisfaction of pitching it into Lake Boca.”

Leaving Andrews in charge of the lighter, which, until further orders was to remain on Lake Ximenes, Truscott marshalled the remainder of his forces. A team of mules was hired; the diving-dresses and other apparatus necessary for the impending task were loaded up, while to render the expedition independent of civilization, provisions for three weeks were taken.

Mindful of his promise to the Presidente, the Major had sent de Souta a formal note announcing his departure and immediate destination. On the face of it it was merely an act of courtesy; reading between the lines it enabled the threatened ruler of Huavilia to get into touch with his pledged benefactor within a few hours.

“If we could have made use of the plane,” thought Alan, as he rode at the rear of the column along the narrow, rough mule track. “There isn’t a landing ground anywhere on the shores of the lake—not even for a machine like ours, but if she had been fitted with floats! But she isn’t, so that’s that!”

It took the best part of a day to reach the desired site. Here tents were erected, stores unpacked, mules picketed and temporary shelters built for the *peons*, who on no account could be induced to live under canvas. Then, without loss of time, the gift of tobacco was made to the Indians, whose attitude, now that *los Americanos* had fulfilled their promise, changed to one of almost overpowering cordiality.

“We’ll lay a rope on the ground round each tent, Alan,” announced his employer.

“What for, sir?”

“To keep snakes away,” explained Truscott. “It’s an old wheeze. The reptiles don’t like being tickled by the rough fibre, so they won’t crawl over the rope. There’s one blessing: we aren’t troubled by mosquitoes, but there may be centipedes about, so don’t forget to hold your boots upside down, and tap them when you get up.”

Alan and Truscott were sharing a green, rot-proof “engineer’s tent” set up by two poles with a ridge-pole in place of a ridge-rope. The floor space was about eight feet by seven, affording room for two collapsible camp-beds. The walls of the tent were securely pegged down and the flaps at each end fastened by ropes passing through eyelets, a supply of fresh air being obtained by means of ventilators close to the ridge.

At a safe distance from the tents a large fire had been lighted, the *peons* having been detailed in pairs to tend the blaze. Bowden and Campbell had volunteered to keep watch, relieving each other at four-hour intervals; the former being on duty from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., while the valet carried on from 2 a.m. to sunrise. This arrangement was necessary since the *peons* could not be relied upon. Left to themselves, they would not only allow the fire to die out, but would fall asleep and thus give the Indians an opportunity to steal some of the stores.

Notwithstanding the novelty of a tent as sleeping place, Alan was quickly asleep. Although the air was much cooler than in the lower lying valley of the Rio Morte the lad’s sole bed covering consisted of a thin blanket.

When he awoke it was daylight, but the slanting rays of the sun were dimmed by the green canvas of the tent. On one of his feet there seemed to be a weight which puzzled him. He raised his head and discovered for one thing that the blanket had slipped off both feet, but that while one foot was exposed to the chilly air, upon the other was the coiled-up form of a particularly venomous-looking snake.

Then Alan felt cold all over. His heart seemed to miss a beat or two; an icy sweat oozed from his forehead.

Fortunately he kept his presence of mind sufficiently to remain perfectly still. One movement and the reptile would certainly strike. That meant death within a couple of minutes.

Very slowly Alan turned his head. It required a determined effort of will-power to look away from the basilisk-like eyes of the snake.

He looked at his companion. Truscott was still sleeping with his blanket pulled well up over his head.

Alan wondered what was the best thing to be done. If he called to Truscott the Major would probably jump out of bed at once, and in that case might be greeted by a vicious dart of the reptile. Nor could the lad reasonably hope to summon assistance from without. Before the tent flap could be opened—it was lashed on the inside—the noise of the canvas would rouse the snake to anger and action. Rope or no rope, the reptile had crawled over the supposed inviolable barrier and had found an entrance under the pegged-down walls of the tent. Alan guessed that it was about seven feet in length. In that case, provided the theory held good that a snake's effective striking range is equal to its own length, even the still-sleeping Major was within reach of the reptile's poison fangs.

The lad's loaded automatic lay upon the lid of a leather suitcase that had been placed under his camp-bed. He could not reach the weapon without contorting his body. The risk was too great. The movement would result in the snake making an attack.

Then an idea flashed across the lad's mind. He remembered having heard that reptiles could be tamed or at least lulled into inaction by soft music. If he whistled would that effort come under the category of music?

Alan commenced his solo. His best friends would not have complimented him upon his effort even though they would not have hesitated to do so on his pluck. It sounded to him "like nothing on earth".

Under the most favourable conditions his whistling was atrocious; now it was simply appalling—a monotonous string of feeble notes.

What effect it had upon the snake he knew not. Once he had contrived to avoid staring at the reptile's hypnotic eyes he feared to repeat the experience. He kept looking at the still-sleeping Truscott, the while dreading direct action on the part of the slimy creature coiled on his bare foot.

At length—probably because the whistler was gaining confidence and putting more lung power into his efforts—Truscott opened his eyes.

“Shut that beastly noise, Alan!” he exclaimed drowsily. “What on earth!”

The newly-awakened sleeper caught sight of the snake which had raised its mottled head and was listening to the intended-to-be-soothing notes. Quite possibly it was curiosity bordering upon resentment and anger that was affecting the reptile.

Fortunately the Major kept his head. Cautiously his right hand stole under his pillow where his ready-loaded automatic invariably shared its owner's hours of slumber. Softly the safety-catch was released and the muzzle of the weapon turned in the direction of the foot of Alan's camp-bed.

A slight click, as Truscott cocked the pistol, attracted the snake's attention. It turned its head suspiciously and gave vent to a warning hiss.

And, since the Major kept his head, the reptile lost its!

The confined space within the tent reverberated to the loud bark of the automatic. A tang of acrid-smelling cordite filled the air. Something writhed on Alan's feet.

Almost at the same time came a piercing yell of agony from outside.

Alan, not conscious of what he was doing, continued his doleful whistling.

“For goodness sake stop that infernal row, Alan!” reiterated his companion, as he ejected a still-smoking cartridge-case from the breech of the automatic. “The brute's done in! And someone else is, I should imagine!”

Both occupants of the tent rolled out of their beds. As Alan did so the beheaded reptile slid to the ground. It had been a fine shot on Truscott's part, since an inch lower down and the bullet would have ploughed through the lad's foot. As it was, the snake's head had been shattered to bits. In the

canvas was a small round hole; around it a nimbus of gore, brains, and poison juice.

“It hasn’t improved the tent,” continued the Major, as he deliberately up-ended his boots before putting them on. “Now, let’s see what’s the matter outside.”

The whole camp was in an uproar, the *peons* shouting and dancing round a pile of small cases. At some distance away, Campbell, breathless and with streaks of blood on his face, was returning from a fruitless pursuit.

“What’s the matter, Campbell?” inquired his master.

“Nothing much, sir; unfortunately my face came in contact with a bramble.”

“Yes, yes; but anyone hurt? I didn’t wing you, by any chance?”

“Oh no, sir!” replied the valet. “It was one of those Indians from the adjoining village—if village I can term it, sir. I was on watch until daybreak and I can assure you, sir, that I took the greatest possible care to see that the two *peons* were wakeful and alert. I had just finished shaving, sir; in another minute or so I could have roused you with your early morning cup of tea, sir _____”

“Jolly good thing you didn’t,” interrupted Truscott. “Well; carry on.”

“With your early morning cup of tea, sir, when you fired. It was a magnificent shot, sir, if you will allow me to say it, although how you saw that there was a black thief lying between the cases beats me, sir. Still more of a mystery, sir, is how he came to get there in view of my vigilance. You winged him aft, sir; but not enough to stop him. He was up and off like greased lightning, and although I went in pursuit, sir, he had the heels of me. I would respectfully suggest, sir, that if an identification parade could be made, the culprit will be found.”

Truscott and Alan examined the spot where the would-be thief had been hit. Owing to the limited amount of open ground the stores, packed in about a dozen zinc-lined chests, had been placed close to a thicket of cacti. There were two rows each of five chests, with the remaining two on top, the whole being covered by a tarpaulin the ends of which had been securely pegged down.

Although the camp-fire was only twenty feet away and throughout the night either Bowden or Campbell with two *peons* had been on watch, the thief had crept noiselessly and unobserved through the thicket and under the

awning. Then, forcing two pairs of boxes sufficiently apart to enable him to squeeze in between, he had set to work to cut through the side of one of the zinc-lined cases—probably his keen sense of smell told him that it contained bully-beef—and had almost attained his object when Truscott's bullet struck him. Another extraordinary fact was that the bullet had passed between two of the outside cases without injuring either, before it found its human billet.

"If there were poison carried with the bullet, it will be all up with that Indian," observed Alan, who, now the tension was over, was feeling decidedly sorry for himself and feeling sympathetic towards the thwarted thief.

"Yes, by Jove!" agreed the Major. "Come along and get your things on. Then we'll see the headman and make him muster his men. Campbell! See to my medicine chest, please!"

While he was dressing, Truscott, pausing in the act of shaving, remarked:

"Dash it all! Human life may be cheap in Huavilia, but I'm hanged if I want even a black thief's death on my conscience. I'll get one of the *peons* to bring the snake along. That will convince the headman that the shooting was accidental."

Without loss of time, Truscott, accompanied by his white assistant, and two of the *peons*, went to the Indian village.

The chief came out to greet them and, Alan acting as interpreter, made no secret of the fact that one of the men had been shot. He was, in fact, lying down in his hut.

Alan explained the circumstances, adding that as the wounded man was on a thieving expedition he had only himself to blame for what had occurred.

The headman listened gravely and then held up his hands in protest.

"It was a challenge, señores," he declared. "Had you not set men to watch, your goods would not have been touched. It was a contest of wits between them and the most skilful hunter and tracker of the village. If you did not wish him to display his prowess, señores, why did you provoke him by guarding your belongings?"

In the face of this simple logic what could Truscott do but say how sorry he was that the man had been accidentally hit, and that he hoped to doctor his wound.

“Surely the señor should make amends for his mistake,” suggested the chief.

“That’s what I propose doing,” replied the Major through his interpreter. “By saving the man from death. The bullet is infected with snake-poison. See, here is the dead reptile.”

The chief merely glanced at the reptile.

“It will serve as food,” he remarked.

Just then the wounded man appeared from his hut. Although he limped, his face was wreathed in smiles. Evidently he bore no animosity even though, in his opinion, his rivals had taken a mean advantage.

“Tell him I’ll give him two tins of bully when I’ve finished with him,” said the Major, as he rolled up his sleeves and opened the medicine chest.

Quite calmly the wounded thief, at Alan’s direction, placed himself on his stomach on the ground. The amateur doctor, after cleaning the injury with iodine, probed for the bullet and without much difficulty extracted it. Throughout the whole operation the native had neither writhed nor uttered a sound.

“It’s the risk of poison that worried me, Alan,” remarked his employer. “I know of no antidote. Perhaps the jolly old chief knows of one. You’ve told him that we suspect the bullet to be infected with snake-poison?”

The headman, who had been gravely watching Truscott’s surgical efforts, now smiled broadly.

Without replying directly to Alan he gave an order to one of his men. The fellow darted off, returning in less than five minutes with a live snake similar to but larger than the one that had given Alan the fright of his life.

Holding the reptile just below the neck with his left hand, the Indian deliberately provoked it until the snake struck viciously at his right arm.

Thrice the reptile bit. The Englishmen quite expected the native to fall down dead; but the latter only grinned delightedly.

“Your boss, will he give me a tin of meat for showing you this?” he asked, as he tossed the snake upon the thatch of a nearby hut.

“Then it isn’t poisonous?” inquired Alan.

“No, señor; there are no poisonous snakes between the Rio Boca and the Sierras—only anacondas. Them you must heed. This snake I keep in my hut

to eat centipedes that would disturb my sleep. Ah! ah! ah! And the señores did not know! Will it be all right about that tin of meat?"

CHAPTER XXVII

Trapped

It was close upon high noon when David Duncan was ready to make his first descent into the waters of Lake Boca. Although the day was warm the sun lacked its usual strength, owing to the difference in altitude between Lake Ximenes and the high ground that was virtually on the lower slopes of the Sierras. In consequence the workers could dispense with the customary *siesta* and thus have the advantage of two extra hours of daylight.

"I don't like the idea of your going down without a life-line, Duncan," said his employer. "Although we have been told that there are neither caimans nor electric eels here, it's the bottom of the lake that's the trouble. What would happen if you fell into one of those fissures?"

The diver smiled confidently.

"I'll try not to, sir," he replied. "Even if so, I'd fall light. As for jumping a matter of ten feet or so under water in this dress, why, it's as easy as winking. No, sir, I'd rather be shot of a life-line; but I tell you what, I'll take a few slabs of wood with me, and if I'm in a bit of a fix—or if I've any information to give, if it comes to that—I'll write a message and send it up."

"That seems hardly good enough," objected Truscott, leaning over and peering into the depths. "The whole show's like a labyrinth. You'll never be able to work systematically without a life-line in addition to a shot-rope."

"All the more reason I should not have one, sir," insisted Duncan. "The life-line fouls under one of those arches and where am I? It's no use dragging twenty fathoms of three-inch stuff after you when it comes to crawling through tunnels, as it were. No, sir; I'll be all right, never fear. If I'm not, I'll let you know soon enough."

He signed to Bowden to close the glass front of his helmet, tested the self-contained air-supply and then shuffled awkwardly to the top of the ladder.

Owing to transport difficulties the iron ladder had to be left on board the lighter. In its place was one of the rope variety, but in place of wooden rungs, metal had been substituted. The upper end of the ladder was secured to pickets driven firmly into the ground, but the bottom end trailed free, since there was no way of anchoring it firmly to the bed of the lake.

Duncan could have walked into the water from the shelving bank a hundred yards or more away; but that would entail climbing over four or five steep ledges of rock before reaching the area he was to explore. Consequently he chose the direct though more complicated path of descent—the flexible rope-ladder.

He went down half a dozen rungs without difficulty. Then, unexpectedly, he discovered that the cliff face under the water caved in considerably. Instead of the ladder pressing against an almost vertical wall of rock, it was bulging inwards into liquid space.

Every step he took increased his difficulties. Part of the way his feet were almost level with his shoulders, to the detriment of a normal air-supply. He had to grope with one foot before he found the next rung. A “free” flexible ladder hanging in air is a difficult proposition; in water it becomes an almost impossible one.

At length, perspiring freely and feeling slightly fatigued, Duncan arrived at the end of the lake, here forty feet beneath the surface, and twice that distance from the brink of the cliff. A diffused light made it possible to see objects for a distance of about ten yards—a great advantage over the semi-opaque waters of Lake Ximenes.

Obviously, since Brocas Truscott had stated that he had hurled the statue into the lake from the point approximately overhead, the object of Duncan’s search should be close to the base of the cliff. Possibly “hurled” was a mere figure of speech on the part of the diarist, since it would require tremendous human strength to treat such a weighty thing in that manner. More than likely Truscott’s great-grandfather had rolled the statue over the edge. In that case it might strike the sharp ridge of one of the rocks and slip either farther from the cliff or else nearer to it.

Such were Duncan’s deductions as he stood on the bed of the lake. Then action succeeded thought. His first work was to secure the foot of the ladder firmly—he did not want to make another descent like the one he had just accomplished.

Then, without depending upon his distance-line—since the base of the cliff formed a guide—he set out, with the idea of keeping in a direction parallel with the shore.

He progressed slowly. The ground was uneven, a mass of pitfalls. Some of the cavities were so deep that their floors were shrouded in darkness. Others, of lesser depth, ended in irregularly shaped patches of white sand.

The white sand set the diver thinking once more. One does not expect to find silver sand in still water. It requires a steady current to keep the granules clean and free from sedimentary deposit. The chances were, then, that these pits, or most of them, were connected, and that an undercurrent flowed through these subaqueous channels.

“It’s not such a soft job as the Boss imagines,” thought Duncan, as his lead-soled boot slithered over a sloping rock. “I suppose I’d better attend to the ground floor first and then see to the coal cellars,” he added facetiously.

Avoiding the deep cavities the diver went to work slowly, examining each recess in the actual face of the cliff—and these were many—as he progressed. By the bearings of the “Cap of Liberty Rock” and the towers of Santa Barbara Cathedral, he had already determined the width of his “beat”. Allowing generously for errors on Brocas Truscott’s bearings, a base line of forty yards should be ample—or twenty yards on each direction from the foot of the ladder.

At every step Duncan sounded with his steel-tipped staff in order to make sure of his ground.

It was, therefore, no fault of his when, treading upon what had appeared to be a solid slab of rock, the diver felt his feet slipping from under him.

He fell slowly. It was a very different sensation from that of hurtling through space; yet there was no opportunity for him to recover his balance.

The rock, poised on a natural pivot, had acted like a trap-door but with this difference: it checked its downward movement and then began to resume its horizontal position.

But not quite.

David Duncan’s thighs served as human wedges. The diver was firmly trapped between the movable slab and the adjoining mass of fixed rock.

The pressure was inconsiderable. Duncan felt no pain; only a sense of annoyance that he should have found himself in such an ignominious

position. He could wriggle and writhe, but the rocks held him as firmly as if he had been chained to them.

In his present predicament he compared himself with a gigantic Teuton who had been captured during the Great War by a party of whom David Duncan had been an insignificant unit. The fellow had resisted gallantly; he did not want to surrender, but to fight on till the end. His captors, recognizing his bravery, attempted to persuade him to give up an unequal fight. Failing in that, they had to “rush” the German and render him helpless, until, the heat of conflict having been given time to cool down, the prisoner would see the good sense of bowing to the inevitable. His captors did not want to hurt the man, nor could they detail a strong guard. Accordingly they tied the prisoner’s wrists behind his back and then thrust a mop-handle up each of his trousers’ legs, securing the sticks by lashing them to his ankles. By this simple expedient the powerfully-built, hot-headed Teuton was rendered as helpless as a babe. He could writhe, but do all he could he found it impossible to rise to his feet.

And Duncan felt in much the same condition. His arms were free; he still retained possession of his pointed stick. Yet, do all he could, he was utterly unable, using the stick as a lever, to prise up the slab of rock that was pinning him down.

He felt humiliated. It seemed such a confession of failure to have to send a message for assistance. He, who but a few days previously, had objected to young Brampton making a descent with him, must needs now ask for the youth to be sent down to extricate him from his ignominious position, unless Major Truscott decided to go to the diver’s assistance—and Duncan was not at all pleased at this possibility.

Before he made use of the wooden tablets he would make another effort—a more deliberate and carefully thought out one this time—to free himself.

To this end he carefully inserted the metal-shod stick between the fixed and the movable rocks, using the rod as a lever of the first order. But though the power he applied was far more than had previously been required—when the slab gave and partly shot him into the crevice—the hitherto pivoted rock refused to budge. To make matters worse, either the pressure on his hips had increased or else his legs were becoming numbed by inaction and lack of circulation.

“I’ll have to send for help,” decided Duncan.

Then, for the first time since his descent, he looked upward. Somewhat to his surprise, he found that in falling he had rolled inward towards a sort of shallow cave at the base of the cliff. Even if, through the clear water, his companions had followed his under-water track, they would now be unable to see him, owing to the intervening projection of the cliff. And there was no way of warning anyone coming to his assistance of the pitfalls that would beset him—unless Duncan could write a message and let it float to the surface.

It was a simple matter to detach one of the pieces of wood stuck in his belt. Holding the buoyant material down with his left hand, Duncan began to write.

“Stuck. Send someone with crowbars and life-line. Mind footsteps, ground dangers. Unhurt.”

He released his hold of the tablet. The wood shot upwards in erratic spirals. Half-way to the surface it glided against the under side of a projecting ledge of rock and remained there.

“No go, No. 1,” thought Duncan, seeing that his first *ballon d’essai* had failed. “Better luck next time.”

The second wooden messenger fared no better, although Duncan did his best to propel it away from the cliff face. Zigzagging, it, too, lodged in a crevice and appeared to be fixed there.

Laboriously the diver used his third and last tablet. He was far from feeling sanguine when he released it too. To his disgust the slab made a direct upward dive towards the cliff. It seemed as if that mass of rock possessed some force of attraction similar to that of a magnet for steel and iron. At any rate David Duncan’s three appeals had gone astray and he was no longer in a position to communicate with his friends on the top of the cliff.

“It’s merely a case of waiting, I suppose,” he soliloquized. “Air-supply good for another three hours—so no fear on that score. If young Brampton does come a cropper and get wedged in, too, then it’s all up with the pair of us!”

Meanwhile things were moving on the top of the cliff, so much so that Truscott was beginning to think that this was one of his unlucky days. In addition to spoiling the beauty of an almost brand-new tent by putting a bullet through it and otherwise disfiguring it, he discovered that the first-aid chest was missing. Campbell, when questioned, declared that he had last

seen it when the Major was doctoring the wounded thief. At any rate the chest was nowhere to be found.

Next in order was a remark made by Alan.

“I wonder if the statue, being made of wood and only gold plated, is lighter than the weight of water it displaces?”

“Meaning that when thrown in it would float?”

“Exactly, sir.”

“Confound you and your theories, Alan!” exclaimed Truscott, although quite good-humouredly. “I’ve been confronted by that problem too. Supposing the thing wasn’t weighted sufficiently to make it sink and, when it was thrown into the water, Brocas couldn’t see what had happened to it. We’ll presume he hurled Ixtlahuaca into Lake Boca in the dark. What would happen? Either the statue would drift ashore here or else be carried down the Rio Boca into the Rio Morte and thence through Santa Barbara. No; I don’t think so. I believe and hope that the gold plating is of sufficient thickness to make old Ixtlahuaca sink like a stone. Also, I hope that Duncan’s hot on the trail. How are the air-bubbles, Bowden?”

“Haven’t seen them for the last couple of minutes, sir,” replied the man. “It’s my belief Duncan’s working close to the cliff and the overhang stops us from seeing how he progresses.”

“Not for two minutes?” questioned the Major sharply. “Why didn’t you report to me before this?”

Without waiting for the man’s reply Truscott sprang to his feet with the intention of making his way to the edge of the cliff.

One of the *peons* had just opened the top of a packing-case. The lid lay upside down upon the short turf. There were several two-inch French nails sticking point-uppermost in the lid. On one of these aggressive spikes Truscott trod. He was wearing light canvas shoes with rubber soles. The nail pierced the rubber and penetrated deeply into the Major’s foot before he realized his mishap. When he did he leapt in the air with one board of the packing-case lid fixed to his foot by means of the French nail. Then the pain of the wound became forcibly acute. The Major sat down and managed to free his foot before Alan could come to his assistance.

“Sorry, sir!” exclaimed the lad.

Even though Truscott was feeling pretty bad he could not help smiling.

“Sorry, what for?” he asked. “You didn’t leave that nail sticking up, I take it?”

“I’m sorry you hurt yourself, I mean.”

“That’s better. It was my own confounded carelessness. Ought to have looked where I was planting my pedal extremities. Course this would happen when the medicine chest has gone adrift!”

Although only a small, round, punctured wound was visible in the sole of Truscott’s left foot it was bleeding fairly freely. To make matters worse, when Alan examined the nail that had caused the injury he found that it was in a rusty state.

“I’ve iodine in my kit,” declared Alan.

“Good!” rejoined his employer. “You seem to have a happy knack of being in the right spot at the right time, old son! If you’ll get the stuff. Then I’ll get into the second diving-dress and see what Duncan’s doing.”

It was one thing to suggest a descent; another for Truscott to carry out his intention. In spite of the application of iodine his foot was so painful when put to the ground that Alan realized the futility of his employer’s determination.

“You simply can’t do it,” he declared. “I’ll go down. It’s different from Lake Ximenes.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Truscott. “All the same I’ll have a cut at it.”

“No you won’t, sir,” exclaimed Alan firmly. “You jolly well stop where you are and keep that foot up! If you don’t you’ll be no good in the aeroplane.”

So saying, Alan began, with Campbell’s aid, to get into the stiff, rubber-lined diving-dress. The Major made one attempt to stop him, but without avail. The slightest pressure of his foot upon the ground sent shooting pains up his leg. Alan’s mention of the aeroplane put a finish to his resistance. Obviously the sooner the Major’s injury was healed the better, especially in the event of Presidente Ramon y Miraflores de Souta putting in an express call for an air-trip.

“All right, then!” he agreed. “Only, for goodness’ sake be careful! Don’t go down without a life-line.”

“Very good, sir,” replied Alan.

Having gained his point on the main issue he could afford to fall in with his employer's suggestion concerning the life-line.

"And close your helmet before you go over the top," added the Major.

This was a necessary precaution, as the lad discovered, when, a few minutes later, Bowden and Campbell assisted him to the brink of the cliff whence the ladder trailed into the depths beneath.

Thanks to Duncan's action in "anchoring" the bottom of the rope-ladder, Alan's task was easier than that of his predecessor. Nevertheless he felt glad when his feet touched the sandy bed of the lake.

Duncan had left no tracks. All Alan knew was that the diver had gone in a certain direction close to the base of the cliff.

Soon the lad found that his supposed easy task was the reverse. The labyrinth of irregular fissures, invisible from the top of the cliff, was now revealed in the semi-gloom. He would have to tread warily, avoiding the pitfalls yet at the same time examining them to see if Duncan had accidentally fallen into one of these uninviting cavities.

Presently something moving at about ten yards' distance attracted his attention. At first sight the object, magnified under water, resembled a floundering hippopotamus; but since these animals are strangers to South American waters, Alan knew that, whatever it was, it was not a hippo. Also he was well acquainted with the distorting properties of water. It might be an up-ended turtle—it might not.

Gripping his metal-pointed stick with both hands, Alan drew nearer the floundering object. As he approached, dim, ill-defined mystery developed into something of a recognizable nature—it was Duncan, legs pinned beneath some large object, his arms waving as he strove to extricate himself.

Throwing caution to the winds—or, rather to the water of Lake Boca, Alan shuffled forward to the professional diver's aid.

He grasped Duncan's hand.

Even as he did so the rock which hitherto had appeared to Alan to be immovable, suddenly tilted. Before either man could do anything to prevent it, both slid, struggling unavailingly, into a hitherto hidden cavity. Directly their combined weight was clear of the slab, the rock rose into its former position, cutting off Alan and Duncan from the outside world.

They were trapped, beyond all human aid, since no other diving-dress was available. Nor was it long before both realized the fact.

Deprived of light, imprisoned in a cavity of unknown dimensions, it seemed only a question of how long their separate self-contained supplies of air lasted before death overtook them.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Ixtlahuaca is Discovered

Somehow Alan contrived to regain his feet. It seemed almost a miracle that, during their involuntary descent the divers had not damaged each other's glass-fronted helmets. Yet the gear had survived the fall.

Duncan too was on his feet. He was holding Alan by his wrists, and trying to convey some message. Then Duncan gave a sharp tug at his companion's life-line.

Alan only partly understood. Under the impression that Duncan wanted him to ascend, he commenced to do so. It was a fairly rough matter climbing hand-over-hand notwithstanding the weight of his leaden accoutrements.

Actually Duncan was testing the life-line to see if it were firmly fixed between the mobile and the immobile rocks that held them prisoner.

The lad guessed that he had climbed a matter of eighteen or twenty feet before the domed top of his helmet came in contact with the under side of the rock that had turned on its own axis and had deposited the two men into the gulf beneath.

Holding on to the life-line by one hand and the grip of his feet, Alan felt for the tautened part of his life-line. It was fixed as firmly as if gripped by a giant "clam"—the oyster of the New World—so much so that the stout manila rope was "nipped" almost flat. He could feel the "heart" of the rope. There wasn't the slightest hope of the people on the cliff being able to heave up the door of his prison. It would not take much tension to sever the rope; in which case the one clue to the tomb of the two divers would be destroyed.

Alan allowed himself to descend to the floor of the cavity. That, too, was an easy task. Checking his downward way by the friction on the rope, he alighted close to where Duncan was still standing.

Both men literally put their heads together—the one way of vocal communication possible.

“Jammed hard,” reported Alan.

“Then cut it,” rejoined Duncan. “No use; only a drag. We’ll try crawling round. There may be a way out. Keep in touch with me.”

Acting upon the more experienced diver’s advice, Alan drew his knife and severed his life-line, so that a length of about six feet still remained attached to his body. At all events the rope served as a means of communication between the two men.

A few steps brought them up against one wall of their prison—an almost vertical piece of smooth rock absolutely devoid of weed or other subaqueous growth. Its bareness caused Alan to wonder whether the cave was of very recent origin. Even in his state of suspense this fact struck him; but had he been able to use his sense of smell he would have understood—there was a sulphur spring not so far away, the water of which had the properties of a weed-destroyer.

Keeping close to the wall, though without any sense of direction, Duncan continued his exploration with Alan keeping close behind him.

For all they knew they might be going round and round, or they might be proceeding along some darkened tunnel. There was nothing in that apparently uniformly smooth wall of rock to indicate either distance or direction—until Duncan stopped and again placed his helmet in contact with that of his companion in misfortune.

“Looks like lights on our left,” he announced. “Follow me. We’ll make for them if we don’t stick!”

It meant dropping on hands and knees; crawling blindly through a dark tunnel with the risk of damaging their copper head-dresses against the rocky roof or of throwing out of action the somewhat delicate mechanism that controlled their self-contained air-supply.

Duncan made his way slowly, Alan following at the extreme length of the severed portion of his life-line, the end of which his companion had hitched to his belt. The faint blur of light that had attracted Duncan’s notice was now obscured, as far as Alan was concerned. All the latter could do was to follow blindly, like a blind man led by means of a string.

It was a nerve-racking experience. The lad’s air-supply was beginning to give trouble, probably owing to the fact that the apparatus was not designed to work normally when strapped to the back of a crawling person. The tunnel, too, was contracting. It was likely that before Duncan had gone very much farther, his progress would be stopped owing to the diminished size of

the more or less horizontal funnel. In that case could either or both men back out of the trap; if so, would there be another way which would not prove to be a blind alley?

Neither of the divers had an electric lamp. Although this was part of the standard equipment they had not reckoned upon finding themselves in the dark and consequently had discarded their lamps as needless encumbrances.

Presently, and almost before he was aware of it, Duncan discovered that the blur of light towards which he was making came not from right ahead but from a supplementary tunnel on his right. In fact, he had overrun the side-shaft and would have gone blindly on if Alan had not called his attention to it by giving a sharp tug on their connecting rope.

Both men came to a standstill. The auxiliary shaft was barely five yards in length until it opened into a larger sort of cavity that was feebly lighted by the sun's rays filtering through sixty or seventy feet of fairly clear water.

It did not take Alan long to make for this place of comparative safety. He led the way, since Duncan had to wait until his companion was out of the original tunnel before he could back and then turn.

At length the two divers stood erect upon a floor of clear white sand. They found themselves in a sort of pit enclosed by walls of rock rising to a height of about twenty feet to the ordinary level of the floor of the lake. Out of the pit were two horizontal shafts which formed part of the ramification of the tunnels through which flowed a warm current from the subaqueous sulphur springs. If evidence of the presence of sulphur were necessary the condition of the divers' helmets was sufficient. The hitherto greenish copper had been cleaned until it glowed like a dull red fire in the translucent light.

But neither Alan nor Duncan paid much attention to that fact. What did rivet their gaze was a human-shaped object lying in a semi-recumbent posture against the wall of the pit. Its feet were buried in sand; the back of its head rested against the rocks. It appeared to be swaying slightly, although this might be an optical delusion caused by the flow of the water.

By its colour, by the grotesquely carved features, Alan recognized the graven image as the object of Truscott's search—the statue of Ixtlahuaca.

A hundred years submergence in the sulphurous waters at the bottom of Lake Boca had failed to harm the image. Its precious metal sheathing looked as fresh as on the day when Brocas Truscott, in his hurried flight from Santa Barbara, had hurled the statue into the depths. By sheer chance it had fallen, not upon the normal bed of the lake, but into one of the almost vertical

shafts with which the ground was pitted. Here, sheltered from observation by the overhanging face of the cliff, it had remained until a fortunate accident had once more enabled human eye to gaze upon the coldly-hideous features of one of the Inca's deities.

Their present predicament forgotten, both Alan and Duncan made a staggering rush to lay hands upon their find.

As they did so, Ixtlahuaca swayed. They heaved him from the sand that covered his legs nearly knee-deep. In spite of its long submergence the statue weighed less than thirty pounds in water. When first hurled into the lake its negative buoyancy must have been only a pound or so—a mere matter of ounces had prevented Ixtlahuaca floating gaily down the Rio Boca into the Rio Morte.

Again Duncan brought his helmet into contact with his companion's.

“Jump!” he said, pointing upwards to the submerged brink of the pit. “Jump! I'll send the thing up to you! Jump! You can do it!”

The idea of leaping twenty or thirty feet vertically when clad in a weighted diving-dress had never occurred to the lad. Nevertheless he bent his knees, gave a vigorous kick off and, aided by an equally powerful shove from his companion, found himself shooting upwards.

It was almost like that oft-recurring dream of his in pre-flying days. The sensation was akin to that he had so vividly experienced when realistically he had leapt thirty feet or so up from the pavement of a crowded street.

He even found himself striking out with his arms as, still rising, though at a reduced speed, he could see the wall of rock glide past the window of his helmet.

Gradually his upward movement grew less and less until for a brief moment he was poised with his head a little above the ledge of rock encircling the pit. With an effort resembling a swimmer's breast-stroke Alan succeeded in getting within reach of the edge before the retrograde movement set in. Then, with very little exertion he dragged himself upon the relatively smooth ground surrounding the cavity from which he had just emerged.

Somewhat to his surprise he could discern the rope-ladder only a few yards off. Descending almost vertically from the edge of the cliff, it touched the main bed of the lake at a spot quite ten yards from the actual base-line, owing to the bold recession of the rocky wall at this point. Yet, although refracted sunlight found its way into the nethermost depths of the cavity into

which the statue had fallen, the pit was invisible to anyone descending the ladder.

But Alan had little time to devote to these details. His immediate attention had to be centred upon the recovery of the statue.

Leaning over the edge, he slowly waved one arm as a signal to his fellow diver. Duncan then held up the gold-plated image, and with one determined effort sent it upwards through the water.

It rose above the level at which the lad stood, but too far off for him to secure it. Slowly the grotesque statue stopped and, gradually gaining momentum, sank once more into the cavity.

Again, but without success, Duncan essayed the task; but at the third attempt Alan, at the risk of overbalancing, contrived to grasp one of Ixtlahuaca's prominent and pendent ears. In this humiliating manner the one-time Inca deity was literally lugged from obscurity.

Alan had barely placed the statue upon the floor of the lake when Duncan, by means of a stupendous leap, emerged from the pit.

Together they dragged the statue round the semi-circular edge of the cavity until they gained the rope ladder. Then Duncan signed to his companion to ascend and then to send a rope down.

Strangely enough, Alan found that the ascent of the ladder was a far easier task than the descent. Yet with feelings of thankfulness he emerged from the water and was assisted by Bowden to dry ground.

His companions, white, half-caste, and black, crowded round. Truscott, supported by Campbell and with his injured foot in a sling, hopped to greet him.

"Where's David?" was the Major's first and anxious inquiry. "Seen any sign of him?"

"He's all right," panted the lad.

"That's jolly good!" ejaculated Truscott. "But what happened? We knew that your life-line had jammed. We thought——"

His sentence remained unfinished. A characteristic gesture with his hands expressed what his fears had been.

"We want a rope lowered," announced Alan.

“All right; but what for?” asked the Major. “Can’t Duncan climb the ladder?”

“He can, I think,” replied Alan cheerfully. “It’s the third party for whom a rope is required—for we’ve found Ixtlahuaca!”

CHAPTER XXIX

The Return

“No joking, Alan?”

“Honest, sir!”

“Good!”

After long days of hard work and disappointment, the news of the finding of the statue provoked nothing more from the director of operations than just “Good!” At least there might be cheers from the members of the expedition and a sort of informal dance on the part of the Indians. But no. The news was received with no more demonstration than if word had arrived of the result of an international chess match between Li Wung of China, and Señor Tomé of Peru!

Truscott’s chief thought was for Duncan. In spite of Alan’s assurance the Major would not feel satisfied until the diver was up.

“Lower a rope, Bowden,” he ordered, after Campbell had assisted his master to a seat on an upturned box. “Weight the end. One moment: write a chit to Duncan. Tell him to take a turn with the rope round the statue and then to come up immediately.”

“Very good, sir!” replied Bowden, who proceeded to write the Major’s instructions upon a piece of flat wood which was attached to the weighted end of the rope.

The rope was lowered. It was not long before Bowden reported that Duncan was ascending.

But the diver was not so doing—not yet. A strip of wood floated to the surface. It was secured by means of a boathook. On it was written: “All fast. When statue is safe up, I come. D. D.”

“Rank insubordination,” commented Truscott, when Duncan’s message was shown him. “The old rascal knows we can’t get at him now the rope’s

made fast. Unless you make another descent, Alan? That would only complicate matters. All ready there? Heave in!”

“Avast there! Belay!” shouted Bowden.

The crowd of *peons*, understanding Bowden’s gesture, ceased hauling.

“Won’t do, sir,” explained the man. “Rope’s cutting into the edge of the cliff. We’ll smash the thing if we go on hauling like this. What we want is a pair of sheer-legs and a single block.”

“Very good,” agreed Truscott. “Only get a move on. Remember that Duncan’s still down there.”

In remarkably quick time the necessary gear was in position, the hauling-in rope being led through a snatch-block at the head of the sheer-legs. In this way the rope ran up and down and well away from the rugged face of the cliff.

Once more the crowd tailed on to the rope—twenty men hauling at an object that in water weighed about forty pounds! By this time enthusiasm had risen from blood-heat to boiling-point. Everyone wanted to have a hand at bringing Ixtlahuaca to the surface.

Slowly—for Bowden in charge of operations kept his helpers well in hand—the image came into view. Then as it drew clear of the water the increased weight became apparent. The sheer-legs groaned under the stress and strain.

At length the gold-cased image was almost chock-a-block. In this position Truscott gazed upon it for the first time.

“He’s no beauty, Alan,” he remarked to his assistant. “Well, we’ve got the blighter safe at last. Now comes the task of getting him out of the country in spite of our friends of the Cordon! However, we’ve got the blighter at last!” he reiterated.

Even as he spoke the taut rope suddenly parted. With a terrific splash the statue of Ixtlahuaca returned to the element that had given it shelter for so long.

“Hard lines, sir!” exclaimed Bowden. “I could have sworn that rope was a good ‘un!”

“Never mind about that,” declared Truscott. “The point is: has the thing missed Duncan? Can you see below there?”

“Yes, sir,” reported Bowden, after a pause. “He’s on his way up this time right enough. Here he is, sir.”

“Thank heaven!” ejaculated the Major.

Presently the diver was assisted to dry ground. The front of his helmet was opened. He drank in the fresh air gratefully. It was some moments before he could find words.

“Managed a save in goal, sir,” he reported. “The thing looked like tumbling back into one of those pits——”

“What pits?” asked the Major.

“Sorry, sir; I thought Mr. Brampton would have explained,” replied Duncan. “Tany rate, the statue nearly dropped into a particularly nasty looking hole when, with luck, I managed to fish it out, as it were.”

“It nearly fell on you, then.”

The diver smiled.

“If nothing heavier than that falls on me, I won’t grumble, sir,” he rejoined. “However, there it is. No rope—couldn’t do anything. I’ll go down and have another shot at it when there’s another rope ready.”

“You jolly well stop where you are, you mutineering rogue!” exclaimed Truscott cheerfully, being only too pleased that the man had escaped from the perils that had beset him. “Get your gear off: you’ve finished for to-day.”

“But the thing’s there waiting to be hoisted up, sir,” protested Duncan.

“I don’t care; you are not going down again to-day,” decided the Major firmly.

Duncan gave in. He knew how far to go and when to stop. There was a certain tone in Major Truscott’s words that his men knew only too well. It demanded and obtained obedience.

“I’ll go down again, sir,” volunteered Alan, who was still in his diving-dress but without his helmet. “I’ll see the rope is lashed securely. Now we’ve nearly had the statue up we may as well make a job of it.”

“All right, then,” agreed Truscott. “Only, mind you, see that you have a life-line and that you don’t get it foul of anything this time.”

Bowden and Campbell assisted Alan to resume his helmet. A fresh chemical charge was introduced into his self-contained air-supply reservoir.

A rope was made fast round his waist and another and slightly smaller one was handed to him to take down.

This time, knowing more of the nature of the ground and of what to expect on the floor of the lake, Alan made the descent without hesitation. He found the image of Ixtlahuaca prone on the sand within six feet of the bottom of the ladder and even nearer one of those sinister looking cavities that had all but cost the two divers their lives. In fact, the margin of safety was so slight that Alan was immensely glad when he succeeded in passing the rope round the statue without toppling the latter into the chasm during the process.

Then he gave three tugs at the hauling rope—the signal for the men to heave away.

For the second time that day Ixtlahuaca was about to expose his hideous features to the light and air of day.

Standing aside, Alan watched, as far as his rigid helmet permitted, the ascent of the golden statue as it spun slowly at the end of the rope, until it passed out of his range of vision.

Then he waited until a succession of jerks on his life-line told him that the way was clear for his ascent. Deliberately casting loose the bottom of the ladder, Alan swung himself rung by rung until his helmet emerged above the surface. Assisted by willing helpers he was then divested of his diving-dress.

“Finished with for all time, I hope,” was Alan’s unspoken comment as the discarded suit was hung up to dry. “I’ve had quite enough of that sort of amusement to last my lifetime; give me flying any old day of the jolly old week, month or year.”

Truscott, his foot swathed in bandages that could not be described as surgical ones, hailed him cheerfully:

“There’s no mistake this time, Alan! We’ve got the statue, lock, stock, and barrel as it were. As soon as you have a chance, you might photograph old Ixtlahuaca, just in case we do happen to lose touch with him again. And you might see the headman for me and arrange for the Indians to knock up a goatskin raft large enough to transport the statue down to the lighter. ‘Fraid I can’t see the chief myself unless he comes to see me.”

“When do you think you’ll be able to put foot to ground?” asked Alan.

“Give me three clear days and it will be all right,” declared the Major confidently. “I’m not going to run unnecessary risks with it, I give you my

word!”

After a belated meal—for, with the exception of the *peons*, who were ready to eat anything of an edible nature at any time of the day or night, no one had bothered to think of food during the diving operations—Alan went over to the village to confer with the headman.

Thanks to his previous experience of life in Huavilia, the lad knew how to go about the business in question. A “raw hand” might spend hours in bartering with the Indians who, though generally giving way in the end, enjoy haggling solely as a form of amusement.

In less than a quarter of an hour he had arranged for the raft to be ready early next morning and in charge of two experienced Indians. The headman was to receive fifty dollars—half to be paid when the “cargo” was placed on the raft, the remainder when the statue was safely on board the lighter on Lake Ximenes. In addition the boatmen were to receive ten dollars apiece when the contract was successfully completed.

That night the camp was again guarded, not necessarily against thieving natives but against a greater menace. Undoubtedly the news of the finding of Ixtlahuaca’s statue was by this time known in Santa Barbara. In all probability the Cordon of the Lariat of Death had spies amongst the men Truscott had engaged, and they had kept the heads of their secret society well posted concerning the work of the British expedition. Consequently, in order to leave nothing to chance, armed guards were posted.

However, the night passed uneventfully, except that Alan, mindful of his unwelcome bedfellow of the previous night, slept but little. Even the creaking of the tent poles as the heavy dew contracted the guy-ropes, caused him to sit up, wondering whether another snake, even though a harmless one, had crawled under the canvas.

Soon after dawn, the camp was astir. Tents were struck, all heavy gear packed ready to be taken down by mules. After breakfast the statue, wrapped in canvas, was taken down to the flat shore of the lake where the Indian boatmen were ready with their inflated goatskin raft. This, consisting of eight skins in two parallel rows with a strong platform of bamboo, was a larger contrivance than was usually made.

In the centre of the platform was placed the statue, securely lashed to the raft. In addition, one end of a length of strong line was fixed to the shrouded image. To the other end was made fast an inflated bladder so that, in the unhappy event of the raft either capsizing or sinking, the makeshift buoy

would indicate the position of the sunken statue and thus facilitate salvage operations.

Truscott and his valet Campbell were to travel downstream on the raft—a means of conveyance less likely to hurt the Major's injured foot than if he had ridden to Santa Barbara on horseback.

The rest of the party, under Alan's orders, were to form an escort to the mule transport.

"We've three mules unladen," reported Alan to his employer. "They brought provisions up and now the stuff is eaten."

"Exactly," agreed Truscott. "But what is the idea?"

"If we could rig up a sort of dummy statue, sir, and let one of the animals carry it——"

"Go on," said the Major encouragingly.

"Then if any of the Cordon people are on the look out, they might seize the counterpart Ixtlahuaca."

"It would make them wild when they found it out," remarked Truscott. "Otherwise I don't see the object. Unless, of course, you can rig up your dummy without letting the *peons* know. Then if the unlucky mule disappears, or its burden is carried off, we can reasonably suppose that our Lariat friends are sitting up and taking notice. All right; get on with it."

An hour later the inflation raft, with the statue hidden from sight between the goatskin floats and with Truscott reclining on a camp-bed amidships, pushed off on its somewhat hazardous descent of the Rio Boca. Almost at the same time, Alan's mule train, well-armed guards in front and rear, set off along the narrow winding track that eventually merges into one of the trunk roads into Santa Barbara.

Carried down by the strong current, Truscott and his party arrived alongside the lighter moored in Lake Ximenes several hours before Alan's section. While waiting for the latter, the Major, transhipped to the lighter, directed operations, while Andrews and Campbell removed the shrouded statue from the raft to the hold of the larger craft.

The Indians were then paid off. They immediately paddled ashore, dismantled the raft, and deflated the goatskins as a preliminary to returning by mule-track to their village on the shore of Lake Boca.

"Sorry you've hurt your foot, sir," remarked Andrews.

“It’s nothing much,” rejoined his employer. “I could use my leg if necessary; but another day or so’s rest will do it a lot of good. Anything startling to report, while we’ve been away?”

“No, sir.”

“Good; then, when the others rejoin us we’ll unmoor and drop downstream to the anchorage off Casa Montego. You must make Ixtlahuaca’s acquaintance, Andrews. If our friends of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death have their way, you may not have another chance. Bear a hand, Campbell! I’ll risk going down the ladder.”

The Major and his two men were in the hold for nearly three-quarters of an hour.

“Yes,” observed Truscott, as he carefully hoisted himself up the ladder. “A packing-case would certainly do better for Ixtlahuaca to travel in. You might see about knocking up one.”

CHAPTER XXX

The Revolution

It was nearly sunset before Alan and his party arrived at Casa Montego. Here the mules were unloaded and stabled, until the owner could come and remove them. Somewhat to Alan's chagrin no attempt had been made to seize the dummy counterfeit of Ixtlahuaca, although on the way down, especially where the track passed through dense woods, every opportunity had been offered for the Cordon to swallow the bait.

"Anything to report?" he inquired of ex-Commandante Miguel Torello, who, during the Englishmen's absence, had been left in charge of the domestic staff of Casa Montego.

Torello shook his head cheerfully.

"No, señor. All has been quiet."

"That's good," rejoined Alan. "We've found the statue, Torello; so with luck, in a few days, you'll be on your way to New York or wherever you think of making your abode. Any telephone calls?"

Again the ex-Commandante shook his head. He was still shaking it when the telephone bell rang.

"For the first time, señor, since you left," he declared.

Alan picked up the receiver.

"Who speaks?" he inquired in Spanish.

"Is that the voice of the estimable Señor Alan Brampton?" inquired the speaker. "*Dios!* I thought so. Listen, señor; the Cordon of the Lariat of Death offers its sincere congratulations to Señor Major Truscott on the successful result of his visit to Lake Boca. But it cannot offer you similar wishes, Señor Brampton, on your feeble effort to deceive us with a spurious image of Ixtlahuaca. That is all; good night, señor."

“That’s another one up for the Cordon,” thought Alan, as he replaced the instrument. “The blighter evidently knows all about us and our movements. Yet I cannot recognize his voice. I wonder what Truscott will say to the latest communication?”

It was night by the time Alan, accompanied by Bowden and Duncan, went by car to the shores of Lake Ximenes.

“That you, Alan?” hailed the Major through the darkness. “Good! Thought you’d come a cropper on your way down. Right; Andrews will bring you off. Who’s with you? Yes, let Duncan take the car back and bring Bowden on board with you.”

It did not take Alan long to get on board the lighter. By this time all preparations had been made for the short journey downstream to the berth off Casa Montego. Truscott was lying down under an awning spread to keep off the heavy night dews. In answer to Alan’s inquiry he replied that regarding his injured foot, “there was nothing to write home about”.

“And how did you get on?” he asked.

“Quite an uneventful trek down,” replied Alan. “But when I arrived at Casa Montego I was called up on the phone. Torello was just saying that there hadn’t been a single call, when the bell rang.”

“And then?”

Alan related the substance of the Cordon agent’s message.

“Evidently the final round isn’t yet,” commented Truscott. “We’re up against something big. I’m more intrigued with the Lariat crush than I am over the statue itself. No news of Presidente de Souta? No communication from him, by any chance?”

Alan replied in the negative.

“Well, that’s good in a way,” continued the Major. “But if the jolly old revolution is coming off, the sooner after to-morrow the better, as far as we are situated. All ready, Andrews?”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“Then get her going!”

Already the moorings had been raised, leaving the lighter riding to a single anchor. This was soon weighed, and by means of sweeps and poles the unwieldy craft was urged towards the outlet from the lake whence the Rio Morte flows rather sluggishly through the city of Santa Barbara.

It was a weird passage. The river, gurgling on its way, was a contrast of vividly reflected lights from the city, with deep shadows cast by the high banks with their fringe of gently swaying palms.

The crew, silhouetted against the distant glare, walked slowly up and down the waterways, alternately pushing and then brandishing their insulated poles as they urged the lighter downstream. Right aft stood Andrews, for the most part motionless at the tiller, save when a change of course became necessary, when he thrust at the heavy baulk of timber with his broad shoulders.

"There's one good thing," remarked the helmsman to Alan. "We're not likely to fall foul of any traffic to-night. What beats me is why these Dagoes seem funky to trust themselves afloat after dark."

"I'm not complaining of that," rejoined Alan cheerfully. "We—all of us except Major Truscott—are booked for a voyage downstream to Nueva Guacipiti."

"So I believe," rejoined Andrews, "but when, sir?"

"Ask me another," said Alan.

"And even I couldn't enlighten you, Andrews," interposed Truscott who had overheard the conversation. "But what you have to bear in mind is that you must be prepared to start at any moment of the day or night. So remember, Andrews, the lighter must be kept fully provisioned and, from tomorrow, four experienced native boatmen must be on duty in watches throughout the twenty-four hours. I'm glad of this opportunity to discuss matters with you both. If——"

"One minute, sir!" interrupted Andrews, putting his whole strength into a pull on the tiller.

"Ah, I forgot, 'do not speak to the man at the wheel', eh, Andrews?" remarked his employer.

"That doesn't hold good in this hooker, sir," said Andrews apologetically. "You can carry on, sir, and I'll be all attention; though I may have to knock off listening, off and on, just to tend the hellum."

"It's like this," continued the Major. "I want the lighter to be kept figuratively with steam raised ready to make a dash down the Rio Morte at a moment's notice. Mr. Brampton will be in charge, with you, Andrews, as second in command. I want you to get the lighter down to Nueva Guacipiti at all costs. There you will arrange with the Diamalan Customs to pass the

craft through as timber for export and will pay all dues; but the lighter is to be shipped on board the first available cargo vessel bound for a British port whether at home or in the West Indies.

“By that time I shall be able to get into touch with you by wireless. You will then let me know either the probable date of departure or arrival, and I’ll arrange in consequence where to rejoin you. I’m not running the risk of taking the statue down by river, but will run the lesser risk of getting it out of Huavilia by air. But the thing I want to impress upon you both is the importance of having the lighter swung as she is on the deck of the cargo boat you decide upon.”

“But you can’t fly that machine with that leg of yours, sir,” remarked Andrews.

“I don’t intend to try,” replied the Major humorously. “I’ll pin my faith on petrol. But, joking apart, if I’m not able to pilot that machine, I’ll jolly well eat my hat.”

Soon after midnight the lighter berthed alongside the rough jetty at the bottom of the grounds of Casa Montego, where Duncan had mustered a party of native employees for the purpose.

“All secure, sir!” reported Andrews.

“Good; then you’ll carry on here,” rejoined the Major. “Now, Duncan, get your party to work. We’ll have old Ixtlahuaca taken to dry quarters—in other words, up to the house.”

Evidently Truscott did not want any concealment over the business. He gave his orders loudly. Electric lamps illumined the lighter’s deck and hold. Considering that one of the city bridges was only a hundred yards away and in spite of the lateness of the hour was crowded with traffic, and that by this time news of the discovery of the statue by *los Americanos* was common property, the Major’s action struck Alan as being decidedly risky.

Half a dozen *peons* under Bowden’s orders went down into the hold. Others stood on the waterways ready to receive the now crated image. Then, under circumstances resembling a funeral procession by night, and with pomp and ceremonial, Ixtlahuaca’s statue was borne on the shoulders of the native bearers and taken up to the house. Behind the “bier” came Truscott, carried in a litter by two stalwart Indian servants.

“Where do you want the thing stowed, sir?” asked Campbell, who was now in charge of the statue.

“In my bedroom,” replied Truscott.

“Very good, sir,” rejoined his valet imperturbably, as if dumping a grotesque image, even though it lay concealed in a crate, upon the floor of his master’s sleeping quarters was in the natural order of things.

“It’s a direct challenge to the Cordon,” declared Alan, as the *peons* manhandled their heavy burden into the bedroom.

“That’s what I want it to be,” agreed Truscott cheerfully. “They won’t dope me this time, I give you my word! I’m a bit curious to meet our friends of the telephonic messages face to face.”

“Do you want me to sit up?” asked Alan.

“Sit up? What on earth for?” ejaculated the Major. “No; you turn in and make up for your two disturbed nights. If I want you, I’ll let you know soon enough. Don’t lock your bedroom door unless you feel jumpy. I’ll keep mine ajar and also the window wide open just to allow of the fresh air circulating. Of course, I mean to keep the jalousied iron shutters closed.”

“Will you shoot at sight?” asked the youth, noticing that the Major’s automatic was lying by the side of his camp-bed.

“I might,” replied Truscott grimly. “It depends. Well, you’d better turn in, Alan. I’m going to rest here, just as I am. I expect that this foot of mine will serve a useful purpose by keeping me awake. Throb? No; only the irritating but reassuring tingle of a wound healing well.”

Bidding his employer “Good night” Alan went to his room. He was desperately tired—almost too tired to throw off his clothes. Almost he wished that he had an excuse like Truscott to “turn in all standing”, even at the expense of an injured foot.

It was one of those close, oppressive nights so usual in Santa Barbara. In all probability a thunderstorm would break before daylight and then the temperature of the air would experience a sharp drop. Following a thunderstorm at night one could generally reckon upon twelve hours’ rain.

Alan was not long in falling asleep. Then he awoke with a start and with a feeling of resentment at being disturbed just as he was enjoying a much needed slumber. From no great distance came a peculiar rattle and rumble that was not thunder.

“Rifle and machine-gun fire, by Jove!” exclaimed the lad, as he leapt out of bed and commenced to dress. Throwing on his clothes to the ominous rattle of musketry, Alan began to realize that the expected revolution had

broken out prematurely. It was not due until the harvest was in; yet a full ten days before that event Santa Barbara was in the throes.

Alan glanced at the clock. It was now a quarter to five. He had turned in at 2.30 a.m. so that, after all, he had had more than two hours' sleep. Under changed conditions he might not have another chance to slumber for perhaps at least twenty-four hours.

He crossed the corridor to Truscott's room. The latter's door was wide open. So were the windows and the jalousied shutters as well. Without, it was dark—that remarkable period of intense darkness preceding the dawn.

The only light in Truscott's room was a small electric table lamp which the Major had placed upon the coffin-like box containing the recovered statue.

Truscott was sitting bolt upright on his camp-bed. His face was silhouetted against the light except when he puffed slowly at a large cigar.

"It's started, sir," remarked Alan.

"So it seems," agreed Truscott. "They might have had the decency to wait until my foot was better," he added with mild sarcasm. "Judging by the infernal din it would seem that de Souta is putting up a bigger fight than his attitude led me to expect."

"Perhaps it's his party who are offering resistance," suggested Alan. "I wouldn't be surprised to find him banging on our door."

"It's the first show of this kind I've been in," continued Truscott, as he hurled the still-glowing butt of his cigar through the open window. "They can be pretty ghastly affairs, I believe; sort of *væ victis*! put-all-prisoners-up-against-the-wall touch, eh?"

"Hardly as bad as that in Huavilia, or, in fact, in any South American Republic nowadays," said Alan. "If there's street fighting there are bound to be casualties; the victorious side might even execute the leaders of the opposing faction, but indiscriminate slaughter has gone out of fashion. Uncle Sam disapproves of that sort of thing, and as the Yankee is a 'big noise' all over the American continent, these small states have to go slow, as it were."

"H'm, they haven't wasted much time over this set-to," commented the Major. "There's volley-firing of sorts—at any rate controlled rifle fire. That means that there are fairly disciplined troops opposing each other. Evidently the whole of the army hasn't gone over to the insurgents. If de Souta does

show more spirit than I gave him credit for, and if he regains the mastery, it will be a good thing for us. Personally I don't want to have to carry him off by plane; although I'll have to if he claims my protection. Listen!"

Dawn was now breaking with the rapidity usual in that part of the world. In a few minutes it would be broad daylight.

Over Santa Barbara the sky was no longer illuminated by the flashes of musketry, but clouds of smoke rising sullenly in the still air indicated that fires had broken out in various parts of the capital. The riff-raff of the city, indifferent as to which faction gained the day, but keen to seize upon the opportunity to loot, were burning and plundering the houses of the wealthier inhabitants.

Alan listened. Above the rattle of machine-gun fire and the now intermittent bursts of rifle fire could be heard the clatter of hoofs along the high-road that skirted the grounds of Casa Montego.

Then, sweeping into view in the now light of day came the Presidente's motor-car. There were men leaning out of the windows and firing with rifles and revolvers at their pursuers—a medley of cars and horsemen.

Owing to the avenue bounding the road, the view of the highway from Casa Montego was limited. In a few seconds pursuers and pursued were out of sight, although the exchange of shots could still be heard.

"That looks as if I can't be wanted to give de Souta a friendly lift," observed Truscott. "It would seem as if the Presidente thought it was about time he legged it, and made for this place as arranged. Instead of slipping quietly away he must needs take the family coach—the Presidential motor; so that, attracting attention, he is being pursued. The old boy was decent enough not to come blundering in and putting me in a difficult situation, so he's off as hard as his car will take him."

"I hope they won't overtake him," said Alan. "In a way, it's fortunate for us. I was wondering whether the plane would take off with de Souta, Torello, and the statue on board. It was rather a heavy load."

"She would have done it hands down," declared the Major confidently. "Well, the show's practically over! Tell Campbell to get breakfast, please. While he's about it you might try to get on to the consulate. They might be able to tell us who the new Presidente is."

Going to the telephone, Alan found himself unable to get a call. Either the line was out of order or else the staff at the exchange had found the revolution too much for their nerves.

Curiosity prompted Alan to leave the house and go down to the front entrance to the grounds. By this time the flood of traffic had changed in direction. Judging by remarks he overheard, Alan guessed that the pursuit of the deposed Presidente Ramon y Miraflores de Souta had failed to achieve its object. The car had outstripped its pursuers, but the latter had continued their chase, knowing that the fairly good high-road deteriorated into a mere track beyond the town of El Mendez. Actually de Souta's car was found abandoned two miles short of El Mendez, but of its former occupants not a trace had been found. Troops were, however, patrolling the neighbourhood and news of de Souta's capture was expected within the next few hours.

Another even more astonishing piece of information Alan gleaned was that the new presidente would undoubtedly be Commandante Manuel Castanos.

"That's a surprise for me, by Jove!" exclaimed Truscott when the lad told him. "Old Castanos seemed too decent a fellow to plot against de Souta. At least that was my opinion. Well, if he's what he professed to be, he won't cancel our concession, so we're all right when it comes to getting Ixtlahuaca's statue out of the country."

By nine o'clock the revolution was *un fait accompli*. It was remarkable how quickly conditions in Santa Barbara became practically normal. Troops were assisting the City Fire Brigade to put out the various conflagrations. Stores and cafés were reopening. Crowds, mostly of mounted men, thronged the streets. There was hardly more excitement than if it were one of Santa Barbara's numerous feast days.

As evidence of the state of tranquillity now prevailing, a motor van delivered two crates of washing at Casa Montego!

The van had gone but a few minutes before Campbell knocked at the breakfast-room door.

"Excuse me, sir!" he began, "but it is about the washing which has just arrived. I was not aware, sir, that such a considerable quantity had been sent out. Both crates are addressed here, sir."

"I don't want to be bothered about such matters, Campbell," protested his master.

"That I can quite understand, sir," continued the valet. "But, sir, I wish to report that in one of the baskets I discovered a man. I gathered that he is anxious to let you know that he's here. His name, sir, is 'In-the-Soup' or words to that effect."

“Surely not de Souta,” exclaimed the Major. “Here, Alan, go and see if it is. If so, bring de Souta here. Not a word to anyone concerning the man, Campbell!”

CHAPTER XXXI

Refugees

Major Truscott's suspicion was justified. Alan, hurrying to the room in which the baskets had been left, was not greatly surprised to find the ex-Presidente.

Ramon y Miraflores de Souta looked a physical wreck. He was trembling violently. His bloodshot eyes and twitching lips betokened mental strain. Considering the fact that de Souta had been anticipating the revolution for some time, Alan was not prepared for such a change in the deposed Presidente's appearance and demeanour.

"Where is the Señor Major?" asked de Souta in a quavering voice. "Is he in the place?"

"In the house," Alan reassured him. "He told me to bring you to him."

"Is he alone?"

"Yes."

"And not likely to be disturbed?"

"Except by Your Excellency," observed the lad drily. "You'll irritate him if you act in that way. Pull yourself together; you are safe here. Who brought you here?"

"Two trusted friends," replied de Souta. "They thought out the whole business. Others took my car and led some of my enemies on a false trail. While they were pursuing Ramon y Miraflores de Souta, as they thought, Ramon y Miraflores de Souta was being conveyed here in a basket, hidden amongst a lot of washing. Although the baskets bear Señor Truscott's name their contents are mine. Likewise the contents of the second crate."

"I don't suppose Major Truscott will question your statement," rejoined Alan. "However, had you not better come along? He wishes to see you."

“But these,” persisted the ex-Presidente, indicating the two wicker baskets. “Will they be safe where they are?”

“Campbell!”

“Sir?”

“Get hold of a couple of hands and have this gear taken to the room next to mine,” said Alan.

“Very good, sir,” replied the valet.

Accordingly he shouted to two of the native indoor staff, who were at the other end of the corridor. By this time Campbell was steadily acquiring a working knowledge of the language and his way of giving orders, even though it amused the under-servants by its crudeness, never failed to command instant obedience.

Two men hurried into the room. One was a native of Santa Barbara, the other the ex-Commandante Miguel Torello of Diamala.

It was more or less a coincidence that the one-time antagonists should meet on common ground and in such circumstances. While Torello was head of the Diamala Air Force he was always regarded as a menace to Huavilia. On the other hand, de Souta was looked upon as a potent danger to Diamala. Even though Huavilia was the weaker state it had been generally recognized that her then Presidente was a personality who might form an offensive and defensive alliance with the neighbouring republics of Nauta and Pondaguay, to the peril of Diamala.

And now the mighty had fallen! The rivals, now supplanted, were brothers in adversity—fugitives, relying upon the magnanimity and determination of an Englishman to ensure their safety.

Alan, watching the expression on each of the ex-officials’ faces, began to wonder what would happen if either denounced the other.

It was certain that the servant who had answered Campbell’s summons was unaware of the identity of Torello. Apparently he had not the slightest inkling as to who the wretched-looking de Souta was. Certain it was that he did not recognize him as the recently deposed Presidente of Huavilia.

“Get two more men to handle this gear, Campbell,” said Alan. “You’ll want three. I’ll tell Miguel (Miguel was Torello’s only name during his detention at Casa Montego) to accompany this gentleman to Major Truscott’s room. It’s quite all right, Campbell; it’s part of the scheme. Your master knows of it.”

“Very good, sir,” replied the valet, tumbling to young Brampton’s strategy.

Accordingly the two former rivals and now companions in misfortune were taken to Truscott’s room.

“You two will have to make the best of things and of one another,” declared the Major bluntly. “All being well, I hope to give you a passage in the plane, starting to-morrow morning. Circumstances prevent me making an earlier flight. So, meanwhile, Señor de Souta, you must possess your soul in patience. Provided no one betrays you, you have a sanctuary here, even as Torello has had. If, on the other hand, you start quarrelling, there’s trouble in store for both of you.”

“But my luggage, Señor Major,” almost whispered de Souta. “I have managed to bring away ten thousand dollars in gold. I have to pay you for the journey and——”

“Did I bargain?” interrupted Truscott.

“Assuredly,” replied the ex-Presidente. “Because I ignored Benito Franco’s report that you were sheltering the Diamalan Commandante Torello here, you guaranteed a flight in your biplane should—as has happened—my enemies overthrow me. Is not that so?”

“Did I agree to accept money from you?” countered the Englishman swiftly. “No, of course I did not. As for your ten thousand dollars in gold, it’s quite out of the question to take that weight by air, especially as Ixtlahuaca’s statue is going with us. I might let you place the gold on board the lighter we are about to send down to Nueva Guacipiti, but the chances of your getting it past the frontier posts are very remote. If the Huavilian guards at El Toro don’t relieve you of your hard cash it’s a dead certainty that the Diamalan authorities at El Peso will. What say you, Torello?”

Miguel Torello shrugged his shoulders. After all, it did not concern him if de Souta’s gold were confiscated. In fact he would be glad if it were; for, he argued, why should the ex-Presidente of Huavilia “get away with” thousands of dollars, while he, ex-Commandante of the Diamala Air Service, possessed nothing except the mean clothes he wore?

“It would seem hopeless, Señor Major,” he replied.

“In that case, Señor de Souta,” continued Truscott. “If I were in your place I’d borrow a spade and bury your hoard. The chances are that some day you can return and recover your money. Perhaps Señor Torello will assist you to dig?” he added mischievously.

Just then the telephone bell rang, and Campbell came hurrying to inform his master that Presidente Manuel Castanos desired to speak with him at once.

Alan looked inquiringly at his employer.

"I'll go," decided Truscott, as he limped across the room. "You stop here, Alan," he added.

Assisted by his valet the Major went to the telephone. Here he dismissed Campbell and proceeded to offer formal congratulations to the new Presidente.

In five minutes Truscott returned to his room where Torello and de Souta were still present.

"Someone has let you down, de Souta," he announced. "And you, too, Torello. Quite possibly Benito Franco has been busy again. Although his jaw may be shattered, he can still use a pen."

"*Dios!*" ejaculated the ex-Presidente. "What is to be done? I am a dead man!"

"Not yet," rejoined Truscott coolly. "I've given you my promise to see you through, and, Castanos or no Castanos, I'm keeping my word!"

CHAPTER XXXII

The Earthquake

“Look here, Alan,” began his employer when Torello and de Souta were dismissed, “we’ve got to hurry things up a bit. I declared that Presidente de Souta wasn’t within the walls of Casa Montego. Nor is he: the ex-Presidente is! The trouble will be if Castanos is still suspicious and sends an armed party to search the place. If so, I’ll take the plane up at once and risk being potted at by rifle fire when she’s clear of the ground. In that case you’ll get away as best you can and get the lighter down the Rio Morte. You’ll probably be arrested, but they can’t detain you because they can prove nothing against you. On the same grounds they cannot seize the lighter.”

“Shall I see that the statue is placed in the cockpit?” asked Alan.

Truscott shook his head.

“I’ll have to sacrifice the statue if it means a night-flight,” he decided. “After all, we’ve had the fun of the jolly old thing, and since our friends of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death seem to have taken a violent fancy to Ixtlahuaca’s statue, I wonder how the new Presidente will hit it off with the Cordon?”

Alan felt rather surprised at his employer’s change of decision. Hitherto Truscott had vowed to do his best to outwit the secret society; now he proposed to surrender his find to the Cordon of the Lariat.

“To-morrow my foot will be fit to use,” continued Truscott. “So at nine o’clock, unless anything unforeseen occurs, I’ll take off with my two protégés *and* the statue. You might have a look at the old bus and see that the petrol tanks are full. And tell de Souta from me to take a hundred dollars and no more. The rest he’d better bury.”

The Major rested and slept the greater part of the remainder of the day. At sunset, nothing of a disquieting character having occurred, he had dinner and then prepared to turn in early.

As before, he turned in on the camp-bed and not in the four-poster affair in which he had been sleeping when the agent of the Cordon succeeded in chloroforming him. He had left his door unlocked. A small electric lamp gleamed over the coffin-like crate containing the statue. Under Truscott's pillow was his automatic, fully loaded and ready for instant action.

In contrast with the previous night, however, he had the iron shutters of every outside window closed and barred. The door, too, was bolted. It was proof against rifle fire; nothing short of a field-piece or a charge of explosive could remove that from its hinges.

A little before midnight Alan "went the rounds". As far as he could judge, all was quiet. Unwilling to disturb Truscott, he did not make his usual report of "all correct" but went to his own room.

Suddenly the lad was aroused from a deep sleep to find the bed rocking violently. Things in the room were falling—particularly the old bookcase.

"By Jove! that's a fairly heavy shock!" thought Alan, to whom earth tremors were no strangers.

He made no attempt to get out of bed, since it seemed that that was a fairly safe place, and generally the shocks were over in about ten or fifteen seconds.

But this was no mere tremor. It was a violent earthquake of which the first shock was but a mild preliminary.

There was a terrific crash of falling masonry. Judging by the noise, it seemed as if the greater part of Casa Montego had fallen to the ground.

Hurled completely out of bed, Alan contrived to regain his feet although the floor was still oscillating. Then he groped for the electric-light switch. It clicked, but no dazzling light flooded the disordered room. The earthquake had, amongst other things, caused a breakdown of the city's electricity supply.

Then Alan remembered that he had an electric torch in a drawer of a bureau. Stumbling over an upturned chair, barking his shins against the side of the capsized bookcase, he finally found the bureau lying on its face in front of the open door of the bedroom. It had been flung a distance of nearly ten feet.

Still groping, Alan managed to raise the bureau sufficiently to enable him to get to the drawer. Within was the looked-for torch. After the terrific shaking the furniture had received, Alan quite expected to find that the

delicate filament of the bulb was shattered. Yet, in spite of the succession of concussions, the torch was intact. He pressed the switch and a bright, narrow beam of light was flung across the devastated room.

By this time the shock of the earthquake had passed. The loud roar of falling masonry had ceased, although stonework was still dropping from the tottering walls.

In the distance could be heard the screams of terrified women and the yells and shouts of equally scared men, as the inhabitants of Santa Barbara poured from their houses to find comparative safety in the open plazas. Fires, too, exceeding in brilliancy those that had occurred during the revolution, were now blazing furiously in several quarters of the city.

But of all this Alan knew little except what his sense of hearing had taught him. His immediate attention was attracted to the place where Truscott's bedroom had been. Judging by the groans, the lad guessed that the Major had fallen a victim to the catastrophe. Torello and de Souta were yelling in stark terror; obviously they were unhurt or nearly so, since they were able to use their voices unrestrainedly.

Stopping only to put on a pair of rubber boots—relics of the now over-and-done-with salvage operations in Lake Ximenes—Alan crossed the corridor and tried the handle of Truscott's door. The door opened quite easily.

It was an astonishing sight that met Alan's gaze. The angle formed by two adjoining outside walls of the house was now open to the brilliant moonlight. Above, the ends of gaunt beams were sharply silhouetted against the night sky.

Where the crate containing the statue had stood was a high mound of rubble. The woodwork must have been crushed by the weight of tons of stone and brickwork. What had happened to the much-adventured statue Alan could but surmise; but it seemed certain that it had met its end beneath the avalanche of masonry.

The Major's four-poster had also disappeared beneath the debris, but his camp-bed had escaped destruction.

At first there was no sign of Truscott, although the groans came with horrible insistence.

"Where are you?" inquired Alan loudly, as he swung the beam of his torch in order to let the light pierce the dark shadows.

“Hello! That you, Alan?” asked the Major. “Here I am. Bear a hand, will you? Steady, though. Better get Campbell to come along with a light. And the two Dagoes, too, if you can induce them to stop that horrible clatter. Look alive! Yes, I’m quite all right!”

Reassured, the lad hurried to find the valet. Campbell, who had been temporarily knocked out of action by a piece of falling timber, was in the act of lighting an oil lamp.

“We have apparently been involved in the bombardment, sir!” he observed.

“Bombardment! What do you mean?” rejoined Alan. “It’s an earthquake.”

“Is that so, sir?” asked Campbell. “I was quite under the impression that the house had been subjected to shell fire, sir.”

“Well, it hasn’t so far,” said the lad. “Still, you never know. But bring that light along as fast as you can. Major Truscott’s been inquiring for you.”

“Indeed, sir, I was about to go to him,” declared the valet. “As soon as I came to myself, sir, I set to work to light the lamp——”

“Yes, then get a move on,” interrupted Alan. “We’ll have to rope in de Souta and Miguel, though for what reason I don’t know.”

To Alan’s satisfaction the ex-officials gave no trouble. Assured that they were in no immediate danger, they ceased yelling and followed Alan and Campbell to Truscott’s room.

The all-round light from the oil lamp gave a fairly clear picture of the state of affairs.

Truscott, wearing only a pair of pyjama trousers, was bending over a massive beam that had fallen from overhead. His bare back was black with dust and dirt and furrowed with rivulets of sweat.

At one end of the beam was a slab of stone. Under the stone, looking like the head of a tortoise projecting from its shell, was the upper part of a human being. The man was no longer groaning loudly, but uttering low moans.

“Glad you’re here, Campbell,” exclaimed his master breathlessly. “Now we can see what we are doing! Bear a hand and try and prise up the beam while Alan and the others pull the fellow out. There are others under that

rumble who aren't quite so lucky—or perhaps, after all, they are the lucky ones!”

The first united effort proved unsuccessful. It was not until another beam had been brought into action as a lever that the slab of stone was raised sufficiently to enable Alan and Torello to drag the maimed body clear of what had been a fearful man-trap.

Then,

“*Dios!*” ejaculated de Souta. “One of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death!”

“Great heavens!” exclaimed Truscott. “It’s your friend Tiente-Capitano Suarez!”

“So it is,” agreed Alan, as with a wet towel he gently wiped the blood and sweat from the face of the terribly injured Juan Suarez.

Very carefully the five men between them lifted the victim of the earthquake and placed him upon the camp-bed. To Alan it seemed as if every bone in the unfortunate man’s body was broken.

“Water!” gasped Juan faintly.

A glass of water was placed to his lips. He sipped eagerly then turned his head away.

To the helpless watchers it seemed as if the Tiente-Capitano was now beyond speech. The end was very near.

“He’s finished, poor blighter!” whispered Truscott.

Even as the Major spoke, Suarez opened his eyes and smiled recognition.

“It would appear, Señor Truscott, that neither of us has gained the statue of Ixtlahuaca,” he said slowly and distinctly. “Yet the Cordon of the Lariat of Death has won, since the statue of the great Ixtlahuaca will not leave his native land.”

“Then honour is satisfied on both sides, Señor Tiente-Capitano,” rejoined Truscott.

Suarez nodded feebly, then his eyes turned upon the face of the ex-Presidente.

“Your Excellency!” he said, with the same clearness of speech. “Remember I, Juan Suarez, officer of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death, am still loyal to the Presidente Ramon y Miraflores de Souta. Castanos (may

vultures pick his bones!) will be sending here to arrest you, Your Excellency. He knows that you are here and he ordered your arrest by noon to-day. Your Excellency! Dying, I salute you.”

Five minutes later and Juan Suarez, tiente-capitano in the Huavilian army and also a high official in the secret society known as the Cordon of the Lariat of Death, was no more.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Flight

“A decent Dago, if ever there was one,” commented Truscott as, his injured foot apparently forgotten, he led the way from the devastated room. “Yes, he was bringing half a dozen of his fellow *Cordoniers* through a secret passage in order to remove the image, when the earthquake occurred. I was expecting it—the visit, not the earthquake. But that’s that, and Suarez’s pals are, I’m afraid, squashed under a few tons of masonry. Suarez warned us of Presidente Manuel Castanos’ amiable intentions towards his uprooted predecessor; so we’d better be getting a move on. I hope to goodness that the plane isn’t damaged.”

“I’ll soon find out,” said Alan. “It will be dawn in a few minutes. There’s one thing, sir; you won’t be burdened with the dead weight of the statue.”

“No, indeed,” agreed Truscott, as he performed very necessary ablutions. “Tell Campbell to bring my things along before you go. Right-o; we’ll have breakfast and then be off. Warn Torello and de Souta.”

It was daylight when Alan tried to let himself out of the building by one of the doors opening into the quadrangle. The arched masonry had collapsed, completely jamming the door. It was now impossible to remove the aeroplane even in a dismantled state through that opening. Unless the machine could take off and clear the enclosing buildings, escape, as far as de Souta and Torello were concerned, was almost impossible.

Finding the door immovable Alan tried one of the windows. Here his luck was in. Without difficulty he gained the rectangular patch of grass on which the biplane rested.

To Alan’s delight, the machine appeared to be undamaged, although stones from the surrounding parapet had been dislodged in several places and had fallen close to the relatively frail fabric of the aeroplane.

Anxiously the lad climbed into the cockpit and tested the controls. Apparently everything was in order. Thanks to its lightness the machine had not suffered damage during the horizontal earth tremor that had proved so destructive to solidly constructed buildings.

In ten minutes he returned to report that the biplane was in flying order.

“Good,” rejoined Truscott. “Now get your breakfast. I’ve almost finished mine. Then it will be a case of ‘Say au revoir but not good-bye’—or, at least, I hope so. Directly I take off—I’d let you do the aviation part of the business if it weren’t for unpleasant complications that would be bound to arise if you did have the ill-luck to descend either in Huavilia or Diamala—you’d better get your crew on board and proceed down the Rio Morte. Let’s hope that the earthquake hasn’t dammed the river or made some such obstruction. With ordinary luck you should be well the other side of Santa Barbara by noon and nearing the frontier by nightfall.”

“I expect the telephone and telegraph wires will be down,” observed Alan. “That will be in our favour.”

“Yes,” agreed the Major. “And no doubt the new Presidente will be too busy with the results of the earthquake to carry out his original intention of arresting de Souta here. However, we daren’t bank on that, so the sooner we evacuate the position the better.”

Just after eight o’clock Truscott’s party, consisting of the Major, Alan, Campbell, de Souta, and Torello clambered through the open window to the enclosed courtyard.

Torello expressed no surprise at the apparently impossible flying off position of the aeroplane. After his previous experience at Nueva Guacipiti, when Alan had flown off with him, the climbing powers of the biplane no longer astonished him. De Souta, however, hesitated.

“On board!” ordered the Major.

“But surely you cannot fly from this place?” protested the ex-Presidente.

“But surely I can,” declared Truscott grimly. “And unless you wish to be left behind you’d better look lively!”

With that the Huavilian followed the other South American into the after seats of the cockpit. Truscott took his place at the controls and signed to Alan to come nearer.

“Directly we’re off,” he said, “don’t waste time, but get away with the lighter. And don’t forget to cover our tracks; you know what I mean.”

“Very good, sir; and good luck!”

“The same to you, Alan,” rejoined Truscott. “Right-o: contact!”

The propeller blades droned as they spun through the air. The draught they set up whirled round and round the quadrangle, stirring up clouds of dust from the debris that had fallen during the earthquake. More masonry, left in a tottering position, came crashing earthwards with the vibration of the powerful motor.

Alan and Campbell sprang aside. There was no need to remove the chocks in front of the landing wheels; in fact it was better not to do so.

Under increased throttle the machine quivered and rolled. Giving the planes maximum elevation, Truscott opened out the motor.

The next instant the machine fairly leapt from the ground in a cloud of dust and a haze of smoke from the exhausts. Neither Alan nor the valet saw the aeroplane’s actual departure, for by the time the smoke screen had subsided not only had the machine safely cleared the parapet of the building, but was out of sight and almost of sound.

“They’re well away, sir,” remarked Campbell.

“Yes; and now it’s our turn,” added Alan. “Have you collected all our traps?”

“Yes, sir; the niggers are on their way to the wharf with them.”

“Good. I’ll just have a look round and see that I’ve left nothing of consequence.”

Alan went to his room. It still remained in a state of confusion, although Campbell had restored the bureau to an upright position. Everything in the nature of the lad’s personal belongings had been packed up and removed.

Then, going into the corridor, Alan struck a match and lighted the end of a fuse. He was completing his employer’s instructions concerning the evacuation of Casa Montego.

“It’s fired, Campbell!” he announced. “Hop it as fast as you can!”

The last two living occupants of Casa Montego hurried out of the building and made their way through the ground towards the river. They were about half-way to the place where the lighter was moored when quite a faint report, followed by the rumble of falling masonry, announced that the charge of dynamite had done its work.

The partly-wrecked room in which lay the bodies of Juan Suarez and four of his fellow members of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death, was now completely buried under a vast mound of rubble and stonework. It was a distasteful yet necessary piece of work; for, had Presidente Castanos' troops discovered the bodies of Suarez and his companions, Truscott's party would be almost certainly placed under arrest on a charge of murder. Especially so, if Castanos knew, as he probably did, that the Tiente-Capitano was attempting to gain possession of the statue of Ixtlahuaca.

"And the jolly old statue is doubly buried now," thought Alan as he glanced back at the slowly subsiding cloud of smoke and dust. "That earthquake was a lucky one for us!"

"All ready to cast off, Andrews?" inquired Alan as he stepped on board the lighter.

"Ay, ay, sir," was the reply. "And the boss is well away, too! He flew overhead at quite two thousand feet."

"No damage here, I hope?" continued Truscott's second in command.

"No, sir," replied Andrews. "Truth to tell, I was asleep in my hammock and never heard or felt anything of the shock. David told me afterwards that the old hooker surged and carried away her after-spring."

"You must have slept soundly," commented Alan. "Let's hope that the river hasn't altered its course."

"We'd drift down the new channel in any case," declared Andrews. "'Tain't as if we'd been left high and dry like I was once on the West Coast of Africa. Let go for'ard, David! Let go, aft, Bowden!"

The warps were shaken from the bollards on the wharf. The *peons*, retained for the task of poling or sweeping the lighter down to the seaport of Nueva Guacipiti, pushed the heavy, unwieldy craft towards midstream.

The first of the city bridges was shot without difficulty. Fortunately the main structure had withstood the earthquake shock although several yards of the stone balustrade were missing. There seemed very few people about. Those who were visible from the deck of the lighter were sitting upon bundles and boxes, which in some cases represented their sole worldly goods that had survived the shock. The wretched inhabitants seemed too apathetic even to raise their eyes and look at the passing craft.

One of the *peons*, who had been poling along the starboard waterway, laid down his pole and came up to Andrews at the helm.

“What does he say, sir?” inquired the steersman. “I can’t understand the lingo.”

To Alan the native expressed his fears. Pointing to the central pier of the bridge astern, he called the lad’s attention to the fact that the water level was at least a man’s height above normal.

“What of it?” rejoined Alan. “There is more than enough headroom.”

“But, señor,” protested the *peon*, “each bridge we come to is lower than the one before. Of a certainty we shall not be able to pass under the bridge of San Felipe until the level of the Rio Morte falls a lot.”

Andrews, when the native’s words were translated for his benefit, shrugged his shoulders incredulously.

“Those niggers always pile it on, sir,” he declared. “I wouldn’t mind betting that this one’s caboose is somewhere handy and he wants us to tie up and give him a chance to nip ashore.”

Nevertheless Andrews took the precaution of coiling down two stout hawsers provided with bowlines, so as to be ready in case of emergency.

“If it is what he says it is,” he remarked, “we can easily send a hand ashore and take a turn round something; but I doubt if it’s necessary.”

A bend of the river brought the principal plaza in sight. Here the damage done by the earthquake was only too apparent. One of the twin west towers of the cathedral had crashed to the ground, bringing the greater part of the façade with it. Other buildings had also suffered severely, not only through collapse but through the after effects of the shock—fire. Clouds of smoke were still blowing across the crowded square and eddying over the surface of the swollen river.

“They’ve had it worse than we did, sir,” remarked Campbell. “After this, give me home any old time. We don’t get earthquakes there, thank goodness.”

“I’ve seen worse in an air raid,” declared Andrews.

“Maybe you have,” agreed the valet. “And so’ve I; but what I say is this: people have only themselves to blame in a manner of speaking, for playing hanky-panky tricks such as air raids. Earthquakes are things they can’t prevent.”

Andrews made no reply but pointed to the next bridge, that was now looming through the drifting smoke. Two of the arches were down. The

yellow waters of the Rio Morte were foaming over the submerged wreckage. There still remained intact three arches, two adjoining the right bank, the third springing from the opposite shore.

“No wonder the level’s risen some,” exclaimed Andrews. “It ain’t half rushing under those arches. Tell the niggers to keep the old hooker going hard, sir, or we’ll lose steerage way.”

The *peons* required little urging. The prospect of being flung broadside on to one of those buttresses was sufficient incentive to strenuous action.

The lighter passed fairly underneath one of the undamaged arches but with only three or four feet clearance. The men on the fore and aft decks had to stoop or in some cases to throw themselves flat as the dark archway, looking lower than it actually was, threatened to sweep them overboard.

Then, almost before the lighter was her own length clear of the damaged bridge, the arch through which she had just passed collapsed with a terrific rumble.

“Near shave that,” remarked Alan to the helmsman.

“Ay, ay, sir,” agreed Andrews. “Maybe it was another shock that settled the arch. This trip isn’t to be a picnic, I can see. Strikes me the Governor has the better time in the airplane, though I didn’t think so a while ago. How many more bridges, sir?”

“Two,” replied Alan. “Think we’ll have enough clearance?”

“I can tell when I get there,” said Andrews. “All the same we’ll let her drag while we’ve the chance. Stand by to let go, Davy!” shouted he to Duncan on the fore deck. “Right-o; let go!”

By means of a handspike Duncan heaved the lighter’s anchor overboard. The anchor was merely a large stone with an iron ring dowelled into it. To the ring was bent a four-inch grass warp that possessed not only lightness, but strength and springiness.

Out ran nearly fifteen fathoms of warp. Then the lighter snubbed and swung round with her bows upstream, the while drifting down with the current.

The drag of the stone on the river bed was sufficient to retard the barge’s drift, so that by giving her a sheer with the helm, it was possible to steer the lighter with a fair degree of precision.

Meanwhile the *peons* had laid sweeps and poles on the waterways and were rather apprehensively regarding the next bridge, which apparently had withstood the shock.

“She’ll do it!” declared Andrews confidently. “I can see the under side of the arch; but it’ll be a close shave.”

It was a weird sensation approaching the bridge stern foremost. Alan and Campbell flung themselves flat, while Andrews, kneeling on the deck, bent his head as he grasped the tiller. There was so little headroom that the head of the tiller actually rasped against the keystone of the arch.

“And there’s less headroom at San Felipe, señor,” exclaimed the *peon* who had previously uttered a warning.

“Is there?” asked Andrews caustically when Alan had translated the native’s remark. “Look at it, sir; it’s carried away!”

Such indeed was the case. Every one of the five arches had collapsed, the rubble forming a sort of weir right across the river. The water thus dammed by the now submerged wall accounted for the abnormal height of the stream.

“Stand by to get a line ashore!” shouted Andrews, as he thrust the helm hard over in order to sheer the lighter alongside the embankment.

He realized that the Rio Morte had beaten him: at least for the present. It seemed hopeless to attempt to shoot the formidable rapid set up by the submerged ruins of the Bridge of San Felipe.

“Pay out more hawser, Dave!” ordered the helmsman. “Give her plenty.”

At last the lighter’s bows swung almost in contact with the wall on the right-hand bank. Bowden and two of the *peons* leapt ashore, the former taking with him a light line, one end of which was bent to the bowlined hawser.

But before Bowden could drop the looped end of the hawser over the nearest of a row of wooden mooring-posts, the unexpected happened.

Without warning the strain on the anchor-cable ceased. No doubt the grass rope had chafed through at the ring as it dragged over the bed of the river.

In vain Bowden and the two *peons* made a gallant attempt to hold on to the rope. Not until they were in imminent danger of being dragged into the foaming current did they let go.

The lighter, free from any restraining influence, swung broadside on to the stream and in that position was being rapidly swept to destruction upon the ruins of the bridge.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Aground

The natives on board were panic-stricken. Had they been able to swim they would have jumped overboard and struck out for the nearer bank; since they could not, they cowered, waiting for the inevitable impact.

Nor could the British members of the crew do anything to prevent disaster. There was not another anchor on board; even if there had been, no cable available would have withstood the momentum of the heavily-built lighter in the grip of the swift-flowing current.

“Hang on, lads!” shouted Andrews.

Curiously enough Alan awaited the impending impact with far more trepidation than he had felt when his home-made monoplane crashed in the grounds of Bramerton Hall. Possibly the expected catastrophe with the lighter was a fairly prolonged affair and gave him time to realize the situation; in the air crash events took place so rapidly that he really hadn’t a chance to anticipate the result.

At Andrew’s warning, Alan commenced to tie a rope round his waist. Then, contemplating the spectacle of the lighter turning completely over, he thought better of lashing himself to the deck.

Obtaining a firm grip with both hands round one of the after samson-posts, he waited and, waiting, wondered what might happen. Would he be flung by the impact into the surging torrent or be crushed between the listing deck and the jagged stonework that was momentarily drawing nearer and nearer?

Then, under the influence of some freakish eddy, the lighter swung until her bows pointed nearly downstream. As she did so, Alan, glancing shorewards, had a fleeting view of Bowden and the two marooned *peons* running along the bank as hard as they could. Even then they failed to keep pace with the rapidly drifting craft.

The next instant Alan saw the bows of the lighter rise clear of the water as it charged the weir formed by the collapsed arches.

Then came a sickening trembling motion as the vessel, like a balanced see-saw, poised irresolutely. A moment later the bows dipped and the stern rose quite ten feet above the foaming water pouring over the submerged wall of rubble.

The heavy teak planks and timbers creaked and groaned, but no frightful crash of shattered woodwork followed.

Providentially the lighter had been swept through the only gap in the jagged barrier. With less than three inches of water under her keel and grazing the stones on either side by a handsbreadth, she had won through.

“Jehosephat! We’ve done it!” yelled Duncan from for’ard.

“Better’n being done in, Dave!” shouted Andrews to his mate as he threw his weight against the tiller in an attempt to check the pronounced rotary motion. “Nip below and see if you can find anything that’ll do as a drag-weight. We’ve got to get alongside the bank and pick up Bowden and the niggers. Strikes me they’re a bit blown!”

Glancing astern Alan could discern the Englishman and the two *peons* “faint yet pursuing”. Although outdistanced by the lighter, they were keeping up a steady jog-trot despite the heat, smoke, and the rough state of the bank following the earthquake.

While Duncan was rummaging in the hold, Alan by dint of threats compelled the still dazed natives to use the sweeps. The massive oars enabled them to keep the unwieldy craft clear of the banks when, drifting at her present rate, she might easily crush in her sides against the stonework.

By this time the force of the current had slackened considerably, a great volume of the water pouring over the demolished San Felipe bridge having found its way through a gap on the left bank.

“Can’t find a blessed thing that’ll do,” reported Duncan.

He glanced shorewards.

“Stream’s slackening,” he continued. “We’re nearly clear of the city. Push her snout into the mud below where the wall ends.”

“That’s a sound scheme,” said Alan to the helmsman. “The bank is so soft that it will do the lighter no harm.”

“Very good, sir,” agreed Andrews. “Get those dagoes to put more beef into it.”

Slowly the lighter was swept crab-wise diagonally across the stream until with a slight shock her shovel-nosed bows struck the earthen bank of the river. Then her stern swung round until at last the craft brought up parallel with the shore.

This time Duncan and one of the *peons* jumped ashore and took a couple of turns with the hawser round the trunk of a large palm tree.

“Good-bye to Santa Barbara, thank goodness,” remarked Andrews as he rammed tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. “I don’t want to see the place again in my lifetime. When is Bowden going to show up?”

It was nearly an hour before the missing members of the crew rejoined their craft. Bowden was hot, tired, and decidedly cross as the result of a seven miles’ jog-trot along the bank in pursuit of the drifting lighter.

“Get out of the sun and have some grub, chum,” suggested Andrews. “Could do with a meal myself.”

Alan, too, fell in with the suggestion. Although he was not hungry the anxiety of the shooting of the weir had left him with a burning throat. He drank three glasses of lime-juice straight off before satisfying his thirst, although he knew perfectly well that one glassful sipped slowly would have had far better effect.

“Ready for another start?” inquired Andrews, as he knocked the dottle from his pipe. “Nip ashore again, Dave, an’ cast off. Mind *you* aren’t left, ‘cause stream’s still running mighty strong.”

“I’m not keen on cross-country marathons, like Bowden,” rejoined Duncan, “so I’ll take jolly good care not to be left ashore.”

He vaulted to the bank, ran to the palm tree and deftly cast off the rope. Then he doubled back and with a clean jump regained the lighter.

“Why, she’s not moving!” he declared.

“She isn’t, by smoke!” ejaculated Andrews. “Here, you. Out with those poles and push for all you’re worth.”

Everyone on board contributed to the task of attempting to push the lighter into deep water; but, although the current swirled fiercely between the craft and the bank, their efforts to pole her into enough water to float her were unavailing.

“She’s hard on it, sir,” declared Andrews.

“Possibly,” agreed Alan tentatively. “But the main point is that she’s got to come off. Who’ll go overboard with me and try to lever her off?”

Bowden, Duncan, and several of the Huavilians volunteered. It was not likely to be a dangerous task, since the depth was only a matter of eighteen inches. Armed with handspikes and similar implements, eight of the crew lowered themselves over the side.

“Our weight’s nearly done it already!” announced Alan. “Steady there! We’d better run a hawser ashore again, or if she floats off we’ll be stranded.”

“Just what I was thinking, sir,” added Andrews, who was in the after deck and within easy reach of the now useless tiller.

The rope was accordingly made fast to the same palm tree as before. Then the working party began levering against the sharp chine of the stranded lighter.

They heaved, levered, and did everything they could think of in an endeavour to get the massive craft to budge. She was now immovable. Already the level of the water had dropped six inches, giving the lighter a slight list to port.

An hour’s tedious work convinced Alan that for the present he was beaten. Reluctantly he ordered all hands aboard.

One of the *peons*, questioned upon the matter, replied that even at its present level the river was well above normal. The unusual rise could only be attributed to seismic action. It was doubtful whether, unless under similar circumstances, the Rio Morte would again attain such a height.

“We’d better pay off the dagoes, sir,” suggested Andrews. “Then we ourselves can pack up and make tracks for the nearest railway station.”

“And the lighter?”

“It’s not much use to anybody, sir,” replied the man. “Teak’s cheap in these parts. As for the gear, perhaps Major Truscott could sell it for a trifle. It seems to me as if he wouldn’t mind losing that, coming on top of what he’s lost already.”

“You really think that, Andrews?” asked Alan.

“Sure thing, sir.”

"I'm sorry to hear you say it," continued the lad. "My instructions were to get the lighter down to Nueva Guacipiti at all costs—and *I'm going to do it!* If she won't do the trip as she is she'll do it piecemeal. In other words, we'll have two more attempts to re-float her. If they fail, then we'll break up the lighter and make a raft of her timbers and planks. Then we'll float that down to the sea."

Andrews hesitated and glanced at his companion before replying.

"It'll mean a lot of hard graft for nothing to speak of, sir," he protested. "I'm sure the boss wouldn't want us to go to all that trouble."

Then, quite unexpectedly, Bowden interposed.

"I'm with Mr. Brampton on this lay," he declared, in spite of the fact that he and Andrews were pals.

"Same here," added Duncan.

"And of course those are my sentiments, sir," said Campbell.

"In that case there's nothing more to be said, sir," conceded Andrews. "When do you propose to start knocking her up?"

"We'll wait until to-morrow," decided Alan. "But we'll have two more shots at getting her afloat to-day, first."

They waited until all hands had had a rest after their arduous labours. By this time the level had risen two inches. Alan's hopes also rose.

"She'll float herself off in an hour, at this rate," he declared. "But we won't wait for that. The sooner we're afloat the better."

More elaborate steps were taken for the operation. The *peons* were set to work to dig trenches round the lighter so that the rush of the current would tend to undermine and loosen the ground on which the craft rested. Wedges were used to assist in levering operations; all hands, with the exception of Andrews, went overboard, both to help lighten the craft and to apply more power to the task of shifting her into deep water.

At the end of two hours' strenuous labour the lighter still remained hard and fast aground, while the gain in depth of two inches had been turned into a fall of nearly a foot. It required but a further drop of nine inches to leave the craft high and dry.

"It's a case of ebb and flow," declared Alan. "We'll have to watch our chance."

But he felt none too sure on that point. In fact, the fall in the level of the river seemed too pronounced to give any hope of a recovery. The prospect of having to knock the lighter to bits loomed large on Alan's mental horizon.

Just before four in the afternoon a dug-out canoe manned by half a dozen Indians passed the stranded lighter. In answer to a hail the Indians replied that they could give no assistance, not even to the extent of taking a rope across to the opposite bank.

A little later on, a raft came downstream. It consisted of a number of large logs with a platform at one end on which was a small hut. Since the roof was higher than the highest part of the lighter it was evident that the level of the water above the demolished bridge of San Felipe had fallen considerably, otherwise the raft would not have passed underneath the arches of the bridges without having part of its structure demolished.

"What is the latest news from Santa Barbara?" asked Alan.

One of the two Huavilian men shrugged his shoulders indifferently. The other, without ceasing in his task of keeping the raft in midstream, replied:

"It is said, señor, that the Presidente Manuel Castanos was assassinated early this morning."

"Probably de Souta, when he hears the news, won't be sorry he left so quickly, sir," remarked Campbell.

"I don't know so much about that," rejoined Alan. "It's more than likely that Castanos was held to be responsible for the earthquake by some of the more ignorant inhabitants, and was shot on that account. Probably de Souta would have been assassinated had he been in power. As it is, I think he's well out of it."

Just before sunset another examination of the lighter's position was made. The water was only ankle-deep—less than it had previously been since the stranding—and obviously it would be impossible under these conditions to float her off.

"We'll start demolition work to-morrow morning," decided Alan.

Soon after sunset all hands turned in. The *peons* were accommodated in the forepart of the hold; the Englishmen had hammocks slung under the after-deck beams. There was no need of a lamp. The open hold was lighted up by the red glare in the sky in the direction of Santa Barbara. The fires started by the earthquake were still burning fiercely, unless other

conflagrations had been started during the state of chaos following the death of Presidente Castanos.

Dog-tired, for none of the crew had had much sleep during the last thirty-six hours, the wearied men were soon fast asleep. Nothing disturbed their slumbers, not even the occasional bumping of various bits of wreckage that, brought down by the current, rasped noisily along the side of the lighter, until—

Crash!

The noise, magnified in the confined space, was followed by a terrific lurch that sent the line of hammocks rolling and bumping against each other.

Not knowing what had occurred, the crew turned out hurriedly. The *peons*, filled with terror, were yelling dolorously. On deck men were shouting in Spanish and giving encouragement to others who apparently were not in such a secure position as themselves.

Then came another heavy lurch, followed by the crash of woodwork.

Groping and finding his electric torch, Alan flashed the light across the hold. The rays shone upon the still blinking eyes of Andrews.

“We’re afloat, Andrews!” exclaimed Alan. “We won’t have to break up the lighter after all!”

“That’s a fact, sir,” rejoined the man calmly. “It seems to me as if we’re having that job done for us now!”



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CHAPTER XXXV

Running the Gauntlet

At the foot of the ladder leading to the aft deck, Alan directed the beam of his torch upwards. The rays impinged upon the gaudy-laced uniform of a staff officer of the Huavilian army.

The man, holding his hand to his eyes to shield them from the glare, began to protest violently in Spanish.

Obligingly Alan shifted the beam. It lighted up the fat, oily features of Presidente Manuel Castanos! Only a few hours previously Castanos had been reported as having been murdered in a counter revolution.

All sorts of thoughts flashed across Alan's mind. What was Castanos doing on the lighter? Had he discovered that Truscott had assisted his rival to escape and had arrived in person to arrest the remaining members of the expedition? Hardly—the group of Huavilian officers on deck looked distinctly scared, as if they had just passed through a particularly “sticky” time, and even now were not at all certain of their position.

Nevertheless Alan deemed it advisable to proceed cautiously.

“Good evening, Your Excellency!” he exclaimed politely.

“*Dios!* Who speaks?” demanded Castanos.

“Only Alan Brampton, formerly of Santa Barbara.”

“The saints be thanked!” rejoined the Huavilian fervently. “This is indeed——”

Another violent lurch interrupted Castanos' words. The lighter had bumped against some obstruction and the impact, although slight, was sufficient to seriously threaten the equilibrium of the group of Huavilians.

“Best see what's wrong up topsides, sir!” suggested Andrews whose scanty knowledge of Spanish was enough to enable him to follow the gist of the conversation. “While the old hooker's afloat, 'tis well to keep her so.”

“Quite,” agreed Alan. “The question is: where are we?”

“Don’t know,” replied the man imperturbably. “An’ don’t care overmuch, seein’ we’re on our way down the *Row-Morty*.”

The British members of the crew made their way out of the hold. Nothing short of violence would have induced the *peons* to turn out at that hour and in the darkness.

The lighter was afloat right enough. A sudden rise in the level of the river—caused by a terrific thunderstorm on the slopes of the Sierras—had swept her from her ignominious position. The lighter’s strain on the hawser had uprooted the palm tree to which it has been made fast. The trunk floated, still connected to the drifting craft by the stout rope. In this way the lighter dropped downstream for several miles, while her crew slumbered in blissful ignorance of the trick that Fate had played them.

At four o’clock in the morning, Manuel Castanos, after a brief term of office as Presidente of Huavilia, found himself a fugitive in a light river boat. Accompanied by four officers of his former regiment, he was endeavouring to effect his escape from the republic, choosing to throw himself upon the mercy of Diamala, rather than risk attempting to hold his precarious position against the latest aspirant to presidential honour.

At one minute past four Castanos and his companions were frantically clambering over the unguarded side of the drifting lighter, their own craft having crushed her comparatively frail bows against the other’s massive timbers and planking.

There they found themselves in relative safety on some unknown craft. It was only when Alan had declared his identity that the Huavilian officers regained some slight measure of confidence.

“Better get ’em below, sir,” suggested Bowden. “They’re only in our way here; and if the old hooker bumps against anything big, over go the whole boilin’ of ’em into the perishin’ ditch.”

It required little persuasion to get the refugees to leave the exposed deck.

Then Andrews took the tiller while Bowden and Duncan went for’ard to investigate.

They found the cable taut but showing unmistakable signs that it was towing some heavy object over the bed of the river. Actually, although they did not know it at the time, the tree trunk at the end of the hawser had fouled the sunken boat from which Castanos and his companions had made their

escape. The Huavilian officers had attempted to remove some of their belongings and the weighty objects had caused the light craft to sink. It was now acting as a sort of drag to the lighter.

“We’re driving all right,” declared Duncan. “Stern foremost like a Trent keel.”

“Ay, ay,” agreed Bowden. “Best let her carry on until daylight. What say you, sir?”

Alan agreed; not that he knew much about the tactics now being employed, but because his more experienced companion had suggested that course.

“No need for you to stop here, sir,” suggested Andrews. “We’ll keep her in midstream until it’s light enough to get the sweeps to work.”

“Thanks, I’ll go below and try to sound Castanos,” rejoined Alan. “We don’t want complications when we arrive at El Toro.”

“Where is Señor Major Truscott, Señor Alan?” asked the deposed Presidente.

“Goodness knows, Your Excellency,” replied the Major’s deputy. “He may be in Jamaica by this time. He went away by plane.”

“Did he fly with the Ixtlahuaca image?” inquired Castanos.

“He did not,” declared Alan. “We found it, as you probably know. Then your Tiente-Capitano, Suarez and some of his friends tried to—to—shall we say steal it?”

“Suarez—why should he?”

“I fancy Suarez was unfortunately mixed up with the Cordon of the Lariat of Death.”

“Yes, but why was he?”

“Because,” explained Alan rather grimly, “he’s now mixed up with the ruins of a part of Casa Montego. The earthquake occurred at rather an unfortunate moment for Juan Suarez. At any rate, the image is buried with him.”

“I always suspected that young man,” said Castanos reflectively. “And now it seems my suspicions are justified. Yet the Cordon——”

“What of it?” inquired Alan, who could not help noticing the ex-Presidente’s hesitancy.

“It was the Cordon who drove me from Santa Barbara,” he replied. “In Huavilia, if not in the other republics, the Cordon will no longer be a secret society. They regarded Ixtlahuaca’s statue as a sort of mascot. The Indian section of the Cordon are ready to worship it, I think. Ah! They can dig up the remains. Meanwhile it is expedient for me to get beyond the frontier with the utmost celerity. Fortunately for me, telegraphic and telephonic communication between the capital and the frontier port of El Toro is interrupted, and there are deep chasms in the road, rendering motor and horse traffic impossible.”

“That’s all very well for you, Commandante,” observed Alan, giving Manuel Castanos his military title. “We had to give you shelter on board here when your boat sank. We would have done so for anyone—even if he were a member of the Cordon. But, if we attempt to smuggle you past the frontier, what happens to us if you’re collared?”

“Your employer, Señor Major Truscott, did not count the cost when he helped de Souta to escape,” remarked Castanos with the suspicion of a sneer.

“I wonder how you knew that?” thought the lad; then, aloud: “I wasn’t thinking of myself. The main point is that I’m responsible to Major Truscott for the safety of this craft and certain stores in her. I would suggest setting you ashore, say about two miles this side of the frontier, and letting you find your way across. You say the news of the latest revolution—I wonder whether there has been yet another since you left Santa Barbara?—has not reached the frontier. I wouldn’t put too much faith in that, if I were you.”

“The English señor is right,” said one of the ex-Presidente’s companions. “We must not risk being seen at El Toro.”

Just then Bowden hailed:

“Daybreak, sir; it looks as if we’re coming to a town of sorts.”

At this announcement Alan hastened on deck. It was grey dawn; even the snow-capped peaks of the Sierras, now but a few miles distant, did not display their usual rosy tints. Right astern the sky was black with smoke that rose sullenly from the devastated city of Santa Barbara.

But it was neither the Sierras nor the pall of smoke that attracted Alan’s attention.

Less than half a mile ahead was a collection of houses dominated by an eighteenth-century fort and fronted by a wharf. Across the river was stretched a chain supported at intervals on rafts of spiked timber. At either

end a sentry was posted, while on the wharf on the right-hand bank were about a dozen artillerymen standing around a twelve-pounder quick-firer.

Underrating the strength of the current, the crew of the lighter were within easy distance of El Toro long before they had expected to make that frontier post. Nor had they any previous knowledge of the fact that their progress would be barred by a massive chain.

“It strikes me, sir,” remarked Bowden, “that our dago popinjays are in the jolly old soup this time.”

“And I should not be surprised,” added Alan, “if we found ourselves sharing the same bowl! We’ll have to stop, I suppose.”

“Stop!” repeated Bowden. “I’d like to know how we can jolly well stop, short of running ashore. No, sir, we’ve just got to carry on and give those chaps a chance to show what bad shots they are with a field-gun. Ahoy there, Andrews!”

“What d’you want?” inquired the man who had stationed himself on the fore deck.

“Slip that cable,” continued Bowden. “We’re going to do a bit o’ steeplechasing that’ll make the Grand National take a back seat!”

Fortunately Andrews, although nominally senior to Bowden, and inclined to quibble over matters relating to precedence, raised no objection to the suggestion that the hawser should be slipped. As a matter of fact, it was jammed so tightly round the bitts that Andrews had to sever it with an axe.

Directly the strain on the hawser was taken off, the lighter swung round broadside on to the stream. Feverishly Andrews and Duncan, each manning a sweep, contrived to slew her until her bluff bows pointed down the river.

By this time the chain across the river was a bare fifty yards off. The rush of water had set up such a strain that, although the chain dipped between the supporting rafts, it was stretched to its utmost capacity.

“Better tell those dagoes below to keep there, sir,” suggested Bowden, as he placed his weight against the now far from idle tiller.

Alan did so—by hailing down into the hold. Nothing would induce him to leave the exposed deck, even at the risk of being blown to smithereens by a well-directed shell from the field-piece.

The artillerymen, however, were inclined to be irresolute. Puzzled by the tactics of the drifting lighter, and possibly regarding the chain as a sufficient barrier, they stood watching the approaching craft. One of the sentries, however, fired his rifle in the air and shouted and gesticulated to imply to the rash navigators that they were to bring up alongside the wharf and not to attempt to charge the chain.

Anticipating a tremendous impact, Alan followed the men's example and obtained a firm grip. As he waited, a rifle bullet sung past his head. Involuntarily he ducked, remembering too late that the missile was already a couple of hundred yards away.

Then came the impact. It was hardly noticeable. The already tautened chain, pinned down under the shovel nose of the lighter, snapped like a dry twig. Immediately the two separated sections and the rafts by which they were supported swung downstream and brought up alongside either bank of the river.

Through the ever-widening gap formed by the receding rafts the lighter was borne by the swirling torrent. Neither sentry could now discharge his musket at the transgressors of the regulations since each was in the other's line of fire. The gunners, however, roused to activity, sprang to their piece. The primeval instinct to let fly with the first missile that came to hand at any object that was attempting to escape was too strong.

Alan distinctly heard the clang of the breech-block as the metal cylinder was thrust home and secured. He could not help raising his head and looking at the group of artillerymen. They had swung the quick-firer round until its sinister muzzle appeared to be pointing straight at the lad's head!

Fascinated, Alan watched one of the men press the trigger of the firing-pistol. By rights a vivid flash of flame, a deafening report and then—as far as the crew of the lighter were concerned—annihilation should have followed.

"Misfire!" yelled Andrews, partly with feelings of relief and partly of the nature of a gibe. "Time they're ready for another round we're past the bend, lads!"

Unfortunately for the Huavilian artillerymen, their impetuosity and excitement proved their undoing. One of their number swung open the breech-block. The defective cartridge immediately exploded, bursting the chase of the weapon and hurling the gun's crew in all directions. The shell,

with very slight initial velocity, dropped harmlessly into the river at about twenty yards from the lighter's port quarter.

Hearing the report of the explosion, Manuel Castanos hurried up three or four steps of the ladder until his eyes were just above the deck level.

"Tell him it's all right, sir," exclaimed Bowden. "He can thank his lucky stars that there's some dud ammunition in this one-horse-show place!"

"Where are we, señor?" inquired the recently-deposed Presidente.

"On the right side of El Toro, thank goodness," replied Alan. "Another mile and we'll be beyond the frontier."

CHAPTER XXXVI

The Last Lap

The lighter was now well beyond range of rifle fire from the Huavilian frontier post. Owing to an acute bend of the Rio Morte and to the fact that the river was plunging into the deep and narrow canyon through the heart of the Sierras, pursuit was also out of the question.

What dangers there were between the fugitives and the Diamalan frontier town of El Peso, were confined to the swift, penned-in waters of the Rio Morte.

By this time the *peons* who had been engaged to work the lighter downstream had recovered from their fright. They realized that their own safety lay in the skilful handling of the heavy craft. Massive though she was, of timbers and planking, the lighter would be crushed like an eggshell should faulty work on the part of the *peons* drive her against the jagged walls of the canyon.

It was one of the most thrilling experiences that Alan had known since he left England. During his hazardous flight across the Sierras his time was fully occupied in keeping the plane under control. Here, on his return journey between, if not across, the Sierras, he was a mere passenger with nothing to occupy his attention except the stupendous, awe-inspiring scenery.

Great walls of bluish, greenish, brownish, and greyish rock reared themselves nearly half a mile above the rushing waters. At most, the Rio Morte at this point was barely eighty yards in width, its foaming waters looking even more formidable than they actually were for the reason that they were for the most part in deep shadow. Only here and there did the curve of the canyon permit the oblique rays of the morning sun to penetrate into the deep chasm. Occasionally, masses of snow dislodged from the higher peaks would glissade over the edge of the precipices and fall with a roar like thunder into the canyon. Not only snow, but enormous boulders

would fall crashing into the water, some of Nature's missiles dropping uncomfortably close to the lighter.

Suddenly, with an abrupt bend of the river, the canyon ended. Ahead could be seen the fertile plains of Diamala and in the near distance the town of El Peso.

Then followed the rapid descent to the plains. It was here that the natives excelled in their handling of the unwieldy lighter. They knew the deepest places where rapid after rapid had to be shot to gain the lower levels.

Andrews at the now useless tiller watched the *peons* with unbounded admiration.

"Those dagoes have earned their Christmas box, sir!" he remarked. "What are we going to do with the other little lot?"

"Castanos and company?"

The man nodded.

"Hanged if I know," continued Alan. "We don't want to stand the racket with the authorities. I'll ask Castanos."

The ex-Presidente made no secret of his intention.

"The new ruler of Diamala is a friend of mine," he declared. "It will not require much effort on my part to get him to declare war upon Huavilia and then I can obtain my revenge."

"In that case," remarked Alan disdainfully, "you'd better go ashore at El Peso and carry on down by railway. I'm certain that Major Truscott would not have raised any objection to giving you a chance to escape—even as he did for de Souta and Torello—but it's equally certain he won't allow his employees to get mixed up in a scrap between the two republics. And another thing—the Diamala branch of the Cordon of the Lariat of Death are pretty sure to want to examine the lighter just in case we've the statue of Ixtlahuaca on board. Of course we haven't, but there you are. They might like to have a word with you, knowing that the Huavilian section of the Cordon have just given you your marching orders."

"I think we'll leave you at El Peso, señor," decided Castanos.

At El Peso the lighter was subjected to a rigid search by the frontier customs officers. When, sixty hours later, Alan's party arrived at the port of Nueva Guacipiti, similar formalities were gone through. Then quite a considerable sum was demanded as an export duty on the hardwoods

comprising the lighter. This Alan paid and was given the usual clearance. He was now free to make arrangements for the shipment of his unique cargo.

By a rare slice of luck a British tramp was taking in a cargo of cotton at Nueva Guacipiti. Alan went on board and interviewed the master. She was bound for Liverpool and Manchester.

“Want me to ship a lighter? What’s her tonnage?”

Alan gave the dimensions.

“Queer cargo?” queried the skipper. “What’s the idea? Why not wait till a proper timber-carrying craft comes along? There’ll be the *Dinotus* in ten days’ time. That’ll give you a chance to dismantle the lighter and get the timber ready.”

“But my instructions are to get the lighter home as she is,” declared the lad. “If you can’t manage it then there’s an end to the business. I’ll try another ship.”

“Sure there’s nothing fishy about the lighter?” persisted the Old Man. “I don’t want to fall foul of the port authorities in this dead-and-alive hole. The local prison is, according to reports, a particularly dismal sort of lodging.”

“I can give you my word it’s all above board,” said Alan. “The customs people have been on board twice and I’ve a clearance.”

The skipper of the *Nysotis*, who was also a part owner, pondered awhile. He never neglected the chance of additional cargo if he could help it.

“You say your governor wants the lighter shipped as she is: would he mind if we slung her into No. 2 hold and packed her inside and out with cotton?”

“Would you be using hydraulic jacks or anything of that sort to stow the bales?”

The Old Man shook his head.

“No, loose stowage,” he replied. “Less risk of fire—spontaneous combustion.”

“Right-o,” agreed Alan.



Three weeks later the *Nysotis* arrived in the Mersey. Here Major Truscott, who had arrived from Kingston, Jamaica, by mail boat, was

awaiting his assistant and the rest of the expedition.

“So you managed to bring the lighter as she is?” remarked Truscott.

“Yes, but nearly buried in cotton,” observed Alan. “We’ll have to go on to Manchester to unload.”

During the run up the Manchester Ship Canal, Alan learned of the Major’s adventures. Both de Souta and Torello had been landed at Jamaica, whence they had shipped for New York.

“They are probably still trying to convince Uncle Sam’s immigration authorities that they are desirable dagoes, I expect,” concluded Truscott. “And now: how did you get on after I left in a hurry?”

In due course the *Nysotis* berthed at Manchester, and as soon as possible the lighter was slung out of her hold and deposited on one of the wharves.

“Now I think we can find a contractor who will break her up and forward the timber by rail to Bramerton Hall,” said Truscott. “But before doing that, come on board. Bring your tools along, Bowden,” he added.

The three men went down into the lighter’s hold.

“Get busy and remove this part of the keelson, Bowden,” ordered his employer, indicating apparently an intact length of massive teak.

Ten minutes’ work resulted in a close-fitting panel being removed. In the cavity thus exposed to view was the statue of Ixtlahuaca!

“I cheated you; I cheated everybody, Alan!” declared Truscott. “The Cordon of the Lariat of Death challenged me to get the thing out of the country, and I took up the challenge. But you might rightly ask why I deceived you. That was to enable you to carry out your work with a clear conscience. Had you known that the statue was hidden there—I substituted it for the leaden one we fished out of Lake Ximenes—you would have been on tenterhooks the whole time. As it was, knowing nothing, you could reveal nothing. And when we’ve carted the genuine Ixtlahuaca to Bramerton Hall, I feel inclined to have a photograph of it taken to send to the Cordon johnnies at Santa Barbara.”

“I don’t think I would, sir,” remarked Alan.

“Why not?”

“Let sleeping dogs lie,” quoted the lad.

And Truscott, mindful of a grim warning he had received at Casa Montego, nodded his head slowly.

“Perhaps you’re right, Alan,” he replied. “Dash it all, you generally are! I don’t mind bona-fide visitors calling at Bramerton Hall to see my latest find, but I do draw the line at the Cordon of the Lariat of Death!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *In Defiance of the Ban* by Percy F. Westerman]