

*The Valley of Bleached
Bones*

Madge Macbeth

Illustrated by

Ralph Pallen Coleman

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The Valley of Bleached Bones

By MADGE MACBETH

ILLUSTRATED BY RALPH PALLEN COLEMAN

David Anstruther had gone to South America in search of "atmosphere." He wanted to *feel* the effect of sunlight and shadow on *casas* whose exquisite symmetry of line was expressed in pink and blue plaster; he wanted to drink in the witchery of moonbeams flung across some palm-fringed *avenida*; he wanted to thrill under the gaze of languorous black eyes rimmed above that most dangerous of weapons a Spanish woman's fan. But he was quite unprepared for the prodigality of sensations with which Providence rewarded his quest.

Don Julio Gonzalez, his host, a wealthy young coffee planter, had introduced him to the life of the cities with its amazing extremes of magnificence and squalor, and to the rarer atmosphere of "*estancia* aristocracy"—as picturesque and colorfully romantic as that of feudal Europe. Moreover, he had taken Anstruther into the home of Dona Eloise Serrano, his betrothed, as beautiful an example of feminine loveliness as even Divinity could conceive. Yet toward her Don Julio entertained but a punctilious and lukewarm regard, his deeper emotions being centred upon one Maria Martinez, a flashing creature of the town, and he had listened with languid tolerance to the enthusiastic comment that accompanied his friend's congratulations.

"Yes, *amigo mio*," he had sighed, "she is not bad-looking. Even I who am no artist can see that. And doubtless she will make me an excellent wife. A capable girl, and virtuous. Why, she knows her father's business—rubber, you understand—and keeps his accounts as efficiently as any man." He rolled himself a cigarette with one hand, an affectation that never failed to entertain his friends—and went on. "The arrangement is quite satisfactory in a way, and yet—as you English say, 'There is a fly in the ointment.' The truth, my good David, is that I cannot support the thought of separation, even temporary, from my adored Maria, and Eloise will expect, naturally, a honeymoon in New York or in Europe!"

"Separation, even temporary." Anstruther flushed at the Spaniard's implication of unfaithfulness to the girl who was so soon to become his wife. He marvelled at the perversity of men in general and Don Julio in particular. Obviously, there was but one Dona Eloise, while the world was full of Marias. Yet, Gonzalez spurned the gold and craved the dross; and

there was a look in his fiancée's eyes at times, that made one suspect she was not ignorant of his preference.

When representing his host as a lover by proxy became a greater strain than Anstruther could endure, he announced his intention of penetrating into the untrodden forests.

"I'm bitten by a craving to feel Nature's animosity," he said, "to sense that mysterious allure one reads about when men brave all sorts of perils to get into the heart of things. I've a hunch that I can put something new on canvas . . . of course primitive nature stuff has been extensively done," he hastened to say, "but and not just as I should like to do it. I'd like to feel the atmosphere of the forest until it positively oozed from my pores, and then I might be able to do for Art what Joseph Conrad has done for Literature—I might be able to paint a HEART OF DARKNESS; to give to my pictures what he gives to his books—an atmosphere that is not a background but a living, breathing, menacing entity!"

Gonzalez bowed, politely.

"And why not?" he asked. "It is all there, my friend!" With a slender hand, he pointed southward where the forest rolled like a malachite sea against a barrier of sun-drenched cloud . . . "HEART OF DARKNESS," he repeated. "That is well said, for Mother Nature's heart is dark . . . and cruel, *amigo!* I have heard that none may look upon her secrets, yonder . . . and live! Men go into the forest and . . ." he shrugged, ". . . *quien sabe*, David? Why must you risk your life that way?"

Anstruther's eyes were gleaming. "Mystery," he replied, succinctly. "I want to feel it . . ."

"Are not women sufficiently mysterious? Think of the beautiful women in the town."

"And danger, perhaps . . ."

"Englishman!" cried Don Julio, half impatiently. "You shall have your mystery and danger; for, I think, where there is one, you'll find the other. Of a certainty there live Indians on those forest rivers, who have never seen a white man! I do not promise they will be friendly!"

"Shades of Gauguin," breathed the other, with suppressed excitement, "lead me to them! If I don't come back . . . at least, search for my pictures!"

Like a shadow moving across the floor of a green-roofed arcade, the canoe slipped between narrow walls of trees. Although it lacked an hour until sunset, the veil of darkness had already fallen heavily over the forest, and the river—a trail of polished ebony—seemed to reflect the very mystery of night.

The three men in the canoe strained forward not only on the alert for any obstacle that might lie in their course, but watching for a suitable *playa* upon which to spend the night.

“*Mayai!*” said Anstruther to the *popero*. The command to hurry, he had found, was a necessary part of equipment when travelling with the Colombian Indians.

“*Je, mon,*” (Yes, Chief) returned the pilot, plying his paddle more vigorously. “*Ite taife asicoma.*” (I feel the breath of the forest-devil) and he shivered.

“*Taife,*” echoed the *puntero* from the stern. “*Ve, Usinama . . . Ve Usinama. . .*” (God be with us).

Although Anstruther knew but half a dozen words in the Huitoto tongue, he had no doubt as to the Indians’ meaning. He, too, was conscious of a devil presence lurking on the edge of that density of trees; he, too, felt a strange, inexplicable chill of fear, the dread of unnamed terrors, the premonition of imminent danger. He was experiencing sensations more acute than ever before, sensations rich in artistic potentialities, but translating them with brush and pigment to canvas was vastly more difficult than he had anticipated.

It always eluded him . . . that curious antagonism of the forest. He could never lay his hand upon it, close with it, conquer it. Actually, there was nothing save a sly, dark river; solitude; and trees . . . trees . . . trees. Of all these, man had proven himself master. And yet, Anstruther knew a definite sense of impotence. Even in the day-time; he felt the changeless, cruel force that waited in the jungle . . . waited and watched his every movement. . . .

And as the dimness of day merged into the vaporous folds of night, it was as though unseen arms pinioned him against a formless barrier, while wisps of fog wound close about his body, and unintelligible whisperings of many voices urged him on . . . and on. . . .

“Nerves,” he muttered, thumping his chest in an effort to still the drumming of his heart. “*Mayai!*” he called again, impatiently.

A luminous mist appeared above the river. It parted before them and closed after them, threateningly. It was like a moving tunnel out of which they might never hope to emerge.

Now and then a whimper from the canopy overhead would set the Indians to praying. A sudden scream would call forth a hoarse echo from three dry throats. The plunging of some heavy body beyond the curtain of vapour would suspend the paddles in mid-air until the white man found his tongue, and cried:

“Imbeciles . . . are you afraid of a parrot? And does the prowling of a wild boar turn your blood to milk? Get on get on. . . . I’ve no intention of spending the night in this damned canoe!”

The mist thickened, warm and smothering. Anstruther could not see the shore. Something solid brushed across his neck and left a fiery trail where it had touched his flesh. He heard a confused fluttering of wings against the indefinite wall of tree-tops that would, he knew, soon support a diadem of stars.

“Some cursed thing has bitten me,” he said, trying to staunch the blood that gushed from his parched neck.

The *popero* leaned back on his haunches and peered through the mist.

“A vampire bat, *mon*,” he announced, fearfully. “We are lost . . . it is a sign of death!”

“*Ve. . . . Usinama. . . . Ve, Usinama!*” moaned the *puntero*, crouching on his face.



When representing his host as a lover by proxy became a greater strain than Anstruther could endure, he announced his intention of penetrating into the untrodden forests.

A form, white and tenuous, seemed to take shape beside the boat. The two Indians cried aloud in terror, and Anstruther lunged savagely at it with a paddle. He encountered no more resistance than that offered by a heavy fog, and the wraith floated airily away towards the bank where it extended long arms in mute and melancholy supplication.

“It’s nothing,” mumbled Anstruther. “Paddle, you fools. . . . Praying won’t find us a camp!”

The veil of vapour lifted. David Anstruther stared, rubbed his eyes and looked again. The figure on the shore was no wraith, no ghost, no vision born of nerves and mist. It was a living creature, an Indian, clad in the *cushma*—the long flowing garment of the country.

The man’s gaunt outline was quite distinguishable. Indeed, the white man could not only discern his evil, malevolent expression, but could see that his features were marked by the unsightly and prevalent eruption known as *carate*.

“*Ima!*” he cried, thinking to hearten his boatmen. “It’s a man!”

But even as he spoke, a shroud of mist blotted out the vision, and although they drove the canoe close along the shore, they could find no trace of man.

“*Taiife!*” they whimpered and grovelled at their master’s feet.

Ignoring their very evident reluctance to land, Anstruther commanded them to beach the boat on a patch of sand quite near the spot where the vision had disappeared, and make camp. He slept without waking but uneasily. Once, he cried out, and the stealthy movement of two blurred forms—shadows against shadows—was suddenly stilled, while the very forest seemed to hold its breath. Then, as he settled heavily under his mosquito bar again, the vague, faint rustling around him continued.

He awoke with a start, conscious that something was amiss. A sifting of sunlight lay across the amber sands. Overhead, a stretch of sapphire sky slipped between the foliage. But over all the district a strange and eerie silence lay.

There was no odour of tobacco, of cooking; no odour of the Indians, themselves.

“*Huitoto!*” he called.

“O . . . o . . . oo,” the forest flung back at him, mockingly.

Of course, he had known from the first what had happened. The Indians had deserted—they had left him. Why?

Anstruther was, at the moment, less angry than puzzled. What, he asked himself, could have influenced them to commit this act of disloyalty? They had proven themselves such sterling good fellows, of a type rather superior to the other guides he had employed. Robbery, he reasoned, was certainly not their motive, for they had taken but a little food, a few rounds of ammunition and scarcely enough “trade goods” to make the equivalent of their wages. If murder had been their object, they could have accomplished it a dozen times in as many different ways less inconvenient and dangerous to themselves than this. And yet, they had left him to end his days in a futile attempt to escape from the inevitable fate that awaited him!

The only explanation he could devise, viz., that they feared to go on, was unconvincing. For, ordinarily, an Indian would rather face probable danger in the company of a white man, than possible security alone. There must have been something more definite than an unnamed dread to account for their desertion.

At last he felt that he had found it. Burned into the trunk of a giant tree, which had been stripped of its bark, there was a sign—its message half printed, half drawn in symbol. The words were those of some unfamiliar Indian dialect, but one of the pictures was disturbingly obvious. It was a human skull.

For a long time, Anstruther puzz'ed over its meaning. That it was a warning of some sort, he felt reasonably certain. But what? If danger threatened, why had the Indians not told him? If he had been deliberately led into a trap. He set his teeth, and a flame of anger shot into his eyes.

There was no object to be gained in deceiving himself. The situation presented serious aspects. It was impossible to turn back. No man could paddle, single-handed, against the swift current of the river. To attempt the navigation of the unknown waters ahead, held all the elements of deliberate suicide. On the other hand, remaining where he was, even in the slender hope of being rescued, was an alternative that did not lack disquieting features.

That there was no other course open to him, however, Anstruther discovered at the end of twenty-four hours, for the river, subsiding with

incredible rapidity, left the heavy canoe imbedded beyond the possibility of moving in the mud and sand, and travelling along the shore alone was, of course, absolutely out of the question.

“If this isn’t the damnedest mess,” he thought, staring helplessly about. “Abundant opportunity for *feeling* the atmosphere of the forest . . . grand solitude . . . uninterrupted time for painting. . . . God, there must be *some* way out!”

He whistled a good deal while applying himself to the task of making his camp more comfortable. Occasionally he burst into song. But there was lacking the exuberance, the spontaneity that generally characterized his musical expression. Rather did it sound like the plodding notes of a child, set reluctantly to practise for a certain length of time. Anstruther was making a conscious effort to keep his spirits up, to discourage the visit not only of the forest *taife*, but his own personal Blue Devils. They were both insidious and persistent.

He had begun to lose track of the days, when, like a magic door in a fairy tale, the trail opened before him. He had penetrated some distance into the forest searching for eggs of the *charapilla*—a giant turtle happily plentiful in the district—when passing under a curtain of voluptuous orchids, he found himself in a definite though abandoned pathway that stretched seemingly right into the heart of the jungle.

Anstruther succumbed to a moment of weakness. He did not whistle; he did not sing. For the first time since the desertion of the Huitotos, he allowed the horror of his position to roll over him in a fierce, black flood—the awful solitude, the grim loneliness, the corrosive despair, the slow fading of hope, the hideous death by starvation! He reminded himself, also, of the one bullet he had set apart from the rest of his ammunition, and the moments when his soul was tortured by the fear that madness might overtake him before he had used it.

And then he looked down that suddenly-revealed trail, criss-crossed with *bejucsa* like giant cobwebs, but quite clear enough to follow. He imagined the settlement that must lay at the far end, the Indians more primitive than any he had yet encountered, the long sun-drenched days when he would record their quaint customs on canvas. And beyond that . . . civilization!

With a cry that sent the creatures of the forest scattering and scuttling in all directions, that stimulated parrots and monkeys to compete for supremacy in a wild cacophony of sound, David Anstruther raced back to the *playa* for provisions. He packed his knapsack in feverish haste but not without care, including, beside provisions for several days, a supply of “trade goods,” and a bottle of *aguardiente*, or native rum which forms the basis, frequently, of friendship with the Indians.

He plunged into the steamy shadows and stumbled hopefully along, obliged to stop every few yards and cut himself free of the clinging trailers that bound him like a struggling captive to the giant trees, or hew (with his machete) a passage through the barrier of flowering vines that prevented the progress of any body any more erect than that of a serpent. And once he floundered into a slim-covered pool, lying like treacherous, green quicksand in the forest floor. From it he emerged exhausted, not only by his struggles to reach solid ground but by the overpowering stench, bitter and pungent, that rose like a cloud of gnats and drugged his senses.

Hours passed. The trees lost their definite form as they retreated into the darkness. The trail was blotted out. Gloom, like a rampart, cut off his advance . . . his retreat. He stood bewildered and afraid of his bewilderment.

He began to shiver. A cold wind fanned the moisture that streamed from his body. A gray shape approached silently, and disintegrated as he moved to meet it. He sat down, closed his eyes and thrust his fingers in his ears. Night in the heart of the forest and alone! Alone . . . and at the mercy of a soundless throng of ghostly figures that hated him and hemmed him in from every side. Night in the heart of the forest . . . and alone! Alone . . . and powerless to escape beyond the hearing of half-articulated moans, thin sighing, smothered cries . . . alone, with an orchestra of desolation, a terrifying Nocturne of the Night!

A distant, wavering call penetrated Anstruther’s consciousness and brought him to his feet. *It was the voice of Eloise!*

“Madness,” he whispered, “and relief in sight. Perhaps if I walk—if I keep occupied do something—”

He pushed crazily forward with hands outstretched, to ward off the trees that struck him as he passed, and to guard against the lash of swinging creepers that bit into his flesh like the sting of venomous insects. He lost all sense of direction, but was obsessed with the conviction that he was guided by Eloise Serrano—guided to her! Her voice called him, distant yet

clear; now plaintive, now shrill with terror. Her eyes shone through the wilderness of night into which neither moon nor stars could penetrate. Her hands reached out to him and drew him irresistibly on . . . and on. . . .

In this way he moved through the dripping darkness, caromed heavily into tree after tree, dashed the blood from his lips and cried, “She needs me! She’s calling me! And I’m lost in this jungle hell Oh, God—I mustn’t fail her . . . not now . . . not now!”

He began to see as by some sense not physical. He closed his eyes and slipped into the spaces hewed long ago by a machete in some sternly vigorous hand. Utterly detached, practically sensationless, he gave himself up to the influence that, like a magnet, compelled him to press forward. And, as the heavens laid off their mournful livery of night and took on a mantle of slate gray, Anstruther burst from the smother of the forest into the open, into what seemed like a thick pale cloud.

He breathed in gulps like a diver coming up for air. He flung out his arms wildly with the gesture of one who has been hound for hours. He raised his face to the sky and felt an inrush of renewed vitality. Space . . . light . . . air!

He tried to pierce the heavy mist. A curious conviction of human nearness gripped him; a gust of fear. Wheeling sharply, he raised his arm as though to defend himself from an unseen attack. He beat the dense atmosphere on all sides—and encountered nothing.

“Who’s there?” he croaked, thickly.

Silence answered him.

He moved forward cautiously, as a man who suspects that a pit may yawn at his feet. He stepped on something hard and round and fell. Half stunned, he groped about for the thing that tripped him, and presently he held it in his hands, its outline vague and blurred in the gray shadows. It seemed to be a stone, oddly indented and polished very smooth—a large stone, about the size of a man’s head.

Anstruther dropped the object suddenly, as though it had become a living coal between his palms.



A great bird lighted with a raucous cry, upon the dome of a yellow skull. She screamed and clung to Anstruther.

“Great God,” he muttered, “that’s just what it is . . . a man’s head . . . a human skull! The sockets! The mouth! The rattling teeth! And here’s another . . . and another. Where in heaven’s name am I? What ghastly tomb have I found?”

The sight that met his gaze as the powerful sun sent the mist drifting like a veil of ragged chiffon over the tops of the trees, was horrible beyond the wildest conceits of his over-strained imagination. On looking round, he found himself in a valley, a shallow canon, that was lined, literally, with human bones. Dry and bleached they were, and glaring white. They clattered as he walked, like billiard balls on a tiled floor. Some crumbled under his weight, some snapped sharply. Skulls leered at him from the sides of the enclosure where they were banked row upon row. Here and there entire skeletons were mounted—men, women and children—their stark forms

draped with massive iron chains. No blade of grass, no fern, no tree relieved the hideous glare of the place, and as Anstruther gazed upon the mute testimony of Death's gargantuan greed, he fell into a paroxysm of uncontrolled shuddering.

For several minutes he shook as wave after wave of nauseous terror passed over him. The silence was suffocating, the solitude a grim menace. He stood in the midst of Death's unconquered Kingdom, himself touched by the first breath of decay.

What had happened here? What did it mean . . . this cemetery of unburied dead, this valley of bleached bones?

In a panic he moved about, unable to locate the entrance to the canon; nor could he find an outlet of any sort. The walls seemed to be an unbroken mound of sardonic, fleshless faces that taunted him with the effectiveness of his imprisonment.

Like a squirrel in a cage, David Anstruther ran about the enclosure. He tried to climb the sides only to find that the bones offered him no grip, no foothold. They loosened and shelved, and flung him back before he had mounted a third of the distance to their summit. There were literally thousands of them piled one upon the other.

He lost his head. He screamed. He became dangerously silent, with the fire of madness in his eyes. And then he saw it—more horrifying than all the evidence of lives long since extinct: a recently murdered white man, an aged patriarch, crucified head-downwards, upon a rusty iron cross.

Anstruther's veins froze. His flesh crawled, his brain reeled as he approached the figure. For the tortured, blue-blotched face of the martyred man was still recognizable as that of Don Vincente Serrano—the tyrannical old father of Eloise!

When his paralyzed brain began to function, it was not to wonder how Don Vincente, who had spoken of a projected inspection tour through his rubber concessions, had been done to death in this place, it was to feel the racking anguish of fear for Eloise.

What hideous fate had befallen her: where was she; how near? In a flash, David Anstruther knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that she was within reach of his hand . . . that it was her voice calling to him and leading him through the blackness of the night.

With the blood thundering in his ears, and knees scarcely able to support his weight; with eyeballs hot and dry and hands like ice, he commenced to search for her. Until that moment, he had not noticed that the floor of the valley lay in a series of gentle, yet definite undulations like mounds, under any one of which the form he longed yet dreaded to see, might be buried. He crouched over the nearest one and tore at it as a dog tears at the earth when uncovering a bone. The sound of those clattering skulls would haunt him until the hour when sound could no longer penetrate his consciousness.

A minute passed . . . another! A slender hand lay exposed to view. From its dead-white finger a flashing gem caught the first rays of the sun. Anstruther's heart seemed to swell until it closed his throat. He recognized that ring. He had seen it many times—on the hand of Don Julio Gonzalez' betrothed.

Like a maniac he scattered the entombing bones. Their sharp staccato rattle was as an accompaniment of hellish laughter to the gasping cries of a soul in torment. *Klat . . . klat-aklat-a-klat!*

A wisp of hair, black like the midnight sky, webbed his cold fingers, and a moment later the head of Eloise Serrano lay pillowed on his breast.

Incoherently he sobbed.

“My beloved . . . I have come! Open your eyes . . . speak to me! It's David! Oh, Eloise . . . Eloise . . .” he moaned, rocking her limp body as a mother cradles her child, “tell me I am not too late! Say that you hear me, my dear one! Eloise, you are not *dead!*”

He covered her pallid face with kisses. Upon her still, cold mouth he pressed his burning lips, murmuring brokenly the while.

And then—the miracle occurred. The faintest tremor stole through her body, the merest suggestion of movement, the vaguest promise of returning life.

“Oh, God,” cried Anstruther, “don't play with me. Don't give her back only to snatch her away again! Let her live . . . let her live!”

In an instant he had poured a sip of the fiery *aguardiente* between her lips and, breathless, waited for a definite sign of returning consciousness.

It came. A slow flush rose under her pale skin. Her lips parted and released a fluttering sigh. Her great black eyes opened and rested on the face of the man who bent above her, without surprise. In that long, steadfast glance, the very souls of these two seemed to meet.

“Are you hurt?” asked Anstruther, hoarsely. He moved so that his body might shield the awful spectacle of Don Vincente from her sight.

“I don’t know!” Her lips formed the words, but no sound came. “The weight was terrible . . . the slow crushing . . . But there was air!”

“Drink this!”

Once more the flask of rum was pressed to her mouth, and once more a wave of colour mounted to her cheeks.

“My father,” she whispered. “Did he—Ah, Dios—yes, I remember!”

Anstruther knew by the spasm that twisted her body in his arms, by the agony that glazed her eyes, she spoke the truth, and the comforting lie he had prepared died in his throat. He held her closer, drawing her slender form across his own, thereby protecting her from the pressure of the sharp uneven bones that bit cruelly into his flesh.

His thoughts turned to the problem of their escape, and his eyes travelled feverishly about that grim, bone-lined sepulchre. He must find a way out.

The girl’s voice broke in upon the silence. She spoke distinctly, but in a terrible, dead undertone.

“We had visited our last camp . . . a new concession, it was. The Indians were different—almost unfriendly. I felt something . . . a premonition. . . . For the first time, I was afraid. The guides deserted. We lost ourselves in the forest. Pedro, my father’s body servant, could not find the river. . . .”

A great bird lighted, with a raucous cry, upon the dome of a yellowing skull and sent it clattering to the girl’s feet. She screamed and clung to Anstruther, almost strangling him in the fierceness of her hold.

“I’m going mad” she cried. “Blindfold me, David. Put something over my ears, so that I may not see and hear them laugh!”

With infinite tenderness he soothed her. He even persuaded her to eat a little of the food he had brought, and presently, despite his entreaty to thrust the hideous memory from her, Eloise took up the story.

“At dusk one night, *he* came . . . that priest, that creature who is more a devil than a man. He appeared suddenly before us like a wraith, a ghost, without noise and without warning. He promised to lead us to a settlement and offered us his cabin for the night.”

A diadem of tiny glittering beads glistened on her brow, and gently Anstruther passed his handkerchief across her face.

“Never mind that now,” he said. “Let us think of our escape.”

“This was the settlement,” she continued, unheeding his words. “This is what we found . . . Can you picture it, under the light of the cold white moon?”

“Pedro turned on him. There was a flash of steel, and the brave lad fell, a death wound in his breast. My father, slow-witted in his horror, waited a second too long, and before he could draw his revolver, was struck senseless at my feet. In the same moment, the devil was upon me, binding my wrists and my ankles.

“Oh, dear God, that night!”

The tone set every nerve in Anstruther’s body a-quake. He saw the picture with harrowing vividness; the pitiless rain of moonlight intensifying the gruesomeness of this skull-filled tomb, the prone bodies of Don Vincente and the murdered Pedro, the dumb terror of Eloise and the demoniacal triumph of the man who had lured her to her death. He cursed aloud.

“My father,” the words were whispered and no more, “my father was crucified before my eyes, while I was buried—bone piled upon bone—from his dying gaze!”

The color drained from her face leaving it ashen. Her long eyelids fell, and for an instant, Anstruther thought she had fainted. But even as he reached for his flask, she raised herself in his arms and cried more vigorously than she had yet spoken.

“And why? What could he gain by the foul, cold-blooded murder of three innocent people?”

“*Vengeance!*”

A voice terrible in the intensity of its hatred whipped into the still air like the cut of a rapier; a shrill, thin voice such as one hears from the throat of the very deaf.



They turned to find a giant Indian behind them. How he had approached without sound, they never knew, but there he stood, towering above them, his lean, festering arm upraised as though to strike, his eyes burning with the madness of hate.

“Vengeance,” he repeated, speaking in Spanish. “It is for that I live; for that, you shall die . . . you and all the white-faced vermin I can trap into this ready tomb. Listen,” he cried and took a step nearer, “do you know why no settlement nestles in this jungle belt? Why desolation lies like a blight upon this land? Why spirits haunt the forest and fill the melody of night with their

piteous cries? Do you know where are the people—my people—who once lived in peace and happiness just here?”

He paused. His gleaming eyes played like a living flame over the man and woman at his feet.

“My people are dead,” he whispered, “driven, enslaved, ravaged, tortured, murdered, massacred—in hundreds, yes, in thousands, by such devil’s spawn as you—” he flung a long brown finger like a weapon in Anstruther’s face—“in order that hell’s favourites like *you*—” the finger flashed at Eloise—“might possess the treasures of the earth. An ear for a satin robe, an arm for a carriage, a soul for a jewel—Thus did you torture my people to force them to work for you. God oh, my merciless God!”

He bared his teeth, hideous, yellow fangs that rattled in his head like irregularly-spotted dice, and wailed upward at the sun.

“Rubber,” he went on, presently. “Black gold, it has been called! Do you know what it cost? Do you know at what price your pockets bulged with money? *For every pound of rubber, a human life was sacrificed!* It was not taken mercifully, by the hand of God who gave it. No! It was strangled, crushed, sapped by such murderous, torturing methods as only civilized Christians could devise!” He laughed shrilly and the evil sound set his victims shivering with horror.

“My people were relentlessly mutilated, some under the lash, some burned slowly with red-hot chains that bit and clawed and tore; some were strung upon trees and used as targets for those unskilled in the handling of a gun. The women . . . Oh, my God, what was left of the women . . .”

Eloise drew Anstruther’s head down to her lips and whispered.

“David, if you love me—shoot me!”

The Indian, scorched by the fire of his own passion, seemed to ignore them. Under his sallow, carate-spotted skin a dull flush glowed. His body trembled, his voice rose to a scream of fury as he cursed the despoilers of his country.

“They made this land a living hell,” he cried, “a place where unbridled cruelty and bestial lust ran riot. The reek of their abominations mounts to heaven in fumes of shame. On earth, through the length and breadth of the Putumayo, lay a field of blood, upon which mutilated bodies rotted beneath the forest trees. A carnival of crime! A fiesta of hell! No wonder the vegetation is luxuriant, for the soil has been moistened with the blood of

innocent human beings and fertilized with their flesh. The Putumayo," he shrieked, "the richest land on earth!"

Anstruther moved stealthily. He placed himself between Eloise and the gigantic brute whose frenzy bid fair to break any moment into a murderous assault. His hand stole down towards his pistol butt, not however before the movement was discovered by the Indian.

"Shoot," he taunted. "Shoot and write another crime upon the pages of your civilization's history. Think you that I fear Death—I, whose constant companionship I have known for eleven years?"

Again his voice rose in a series of penetrating cries that repeated themselves in fantastic echo. Again, he raised his arm as though to strike the crouching figures at his feet.

"We are one," he said. "I am Death—I am the avenger. Mine is the hand to slay. Listen; they never caught me—the monsters whose lust and greed lured them to this place. I never wore their chains," he pointed to the skeletons dotting the valley, "nor felt the sting of the lash upon my back. I had a hiding place . . . and as my people crawled away to die, I dragged their bodies here—hundreds of them—and fashioned this rare tomb with my own hands. Into it, I have trapped as many white men as God has sent my way. A life for a life—as you say. What care I for innocence? What cared *they*? I want vengeance, and it is Death, himself, who speaks!"

Then Anstruther saw something that caused him to doubt not only the accuracy of his vision, but his sanity. Behind the Indian, on the floor of the valley, there appeared between two grinning skulls, a human head. Just that—no more. It seemed to rise from the very ground, to lift itself out of a pit, as it were. The head was that of a man, beneath whose prodigious black moustache a knife blade glinted in the strengthening light.

As a bird is fascinated by a snake, so Anstruther sat immovable, his eyes riveted upon that human head, rising from a grave of dry, bleached bones, until the Indian, sensing an unseen danger, wheeled sharply to discover what lay behind him.

With a snarl like that of an infuriated animal, he sprang forward. Simultaneously, Anstruther's revolver barked, a skull in the far wall fell, and the native crashed heavily upon his face. In that same instant, too, the head became a man who cleared the space of ten feet with a leap and flung himself upon the Indian's body.

But in the act of striking, his hand was stayed, and a change spread over his face. Stooping, he peered at his foe. He rose and crossed himself.

“The beast is dead, my lady,” he announced.

“Madre de Dios,” Eloise breathed from behind her hands.

“I shot him,” said Anstruther.

“No—pardon, my lord,” contradicted Pedro. “Your bullet passed over him as he fell, and struck the skull, yonder. He struck his head, so— This pointed bone has killed him. His death was of his own making—may his soul burn forever in the hottest fires of hell!”

Once more, he made the sign of the Cross, perfunctorily.

With Anstruther’s assistance, Eloise rose to her feet. “I rejoice, Pedro,” said she, “to see you alive. I thought that the wound you suffered, had proven fatal. Don Vincente, my father—” Her voice trembled and she could not go on.

The Spaniard raised his hand. “I know,” he told her. “I heard. Powerless to move, to lift my knife in your defense, lady, yet I heard. Only God Himself knows the agony I suffered, lying just beyond this unholy spot and listening to your prayers for mercy—or at least, a less brutal death. But come,” he continued, in a different tone. “I have discovered the outlet from this valley; and also, I have found maps and charts that should lead us to a Huitoto settlement. Come, Dona Eloise! Rest you in the grove yonder, while the senor David and I do what is needful here.”

He led her through an aperture so cunningly devised as to be quite indiscernible to any save one who knew its secret, and later, when the body of Don Vincente had been laid to rest beneath a coverlet of forest flowers, the three set forth upon the trail that led to Anstruther’s camp.

A mood of black despair had settled on the man. His soul was swathed in darkness. Saved from an unthinkable cruel death at the hands of an Indian fanatic, yet he could find no joy in his deliverance. Nor, in a sense, in that of Eloise Serrano. She was spared, but for what? For the misery of a marriage with Julio Gonzalez—a state from which he, Anstruther, would be powerless to rescue her. Unless. . . .

Ugly temptations, ignoble thoughts like goblins crowded into his mind. Why take her back to Julio? Why not rid himself of Pedro, and keep Eloise a fellow prisoner in the dungeon of the forest? Half a dozen schemes, as

simple of execution as they were diabolical, presented themselves to him. And over all, hummed the voice of the tempter, saying,

“She will not resist you. You, alone, can make her happy!”

For an hour or more, David Anstruther fought with brute beasts, red-jawed and strong. Gradually, however, he bore them to the earth and emerged from the battle, spent but victorious. As he stumbled from sheer physical weakness, a groan passed his strained lips.

Eloise, who walked ahead of him and behind Pedro with his charts, came swiftly to his side.

“What troubles thee?” she asked gently.

The effect of her words was like the reflection of some unbearable pain. His conquering seemed less complete: he feared himself and dared not trust himself to speak. He clung to the tree that upheld his weight, as though to occupy hands that involuntarily moved out to her, and mutely shook his head.

But she persisted.

“Might it have anything to do with—Julio, for instance?”

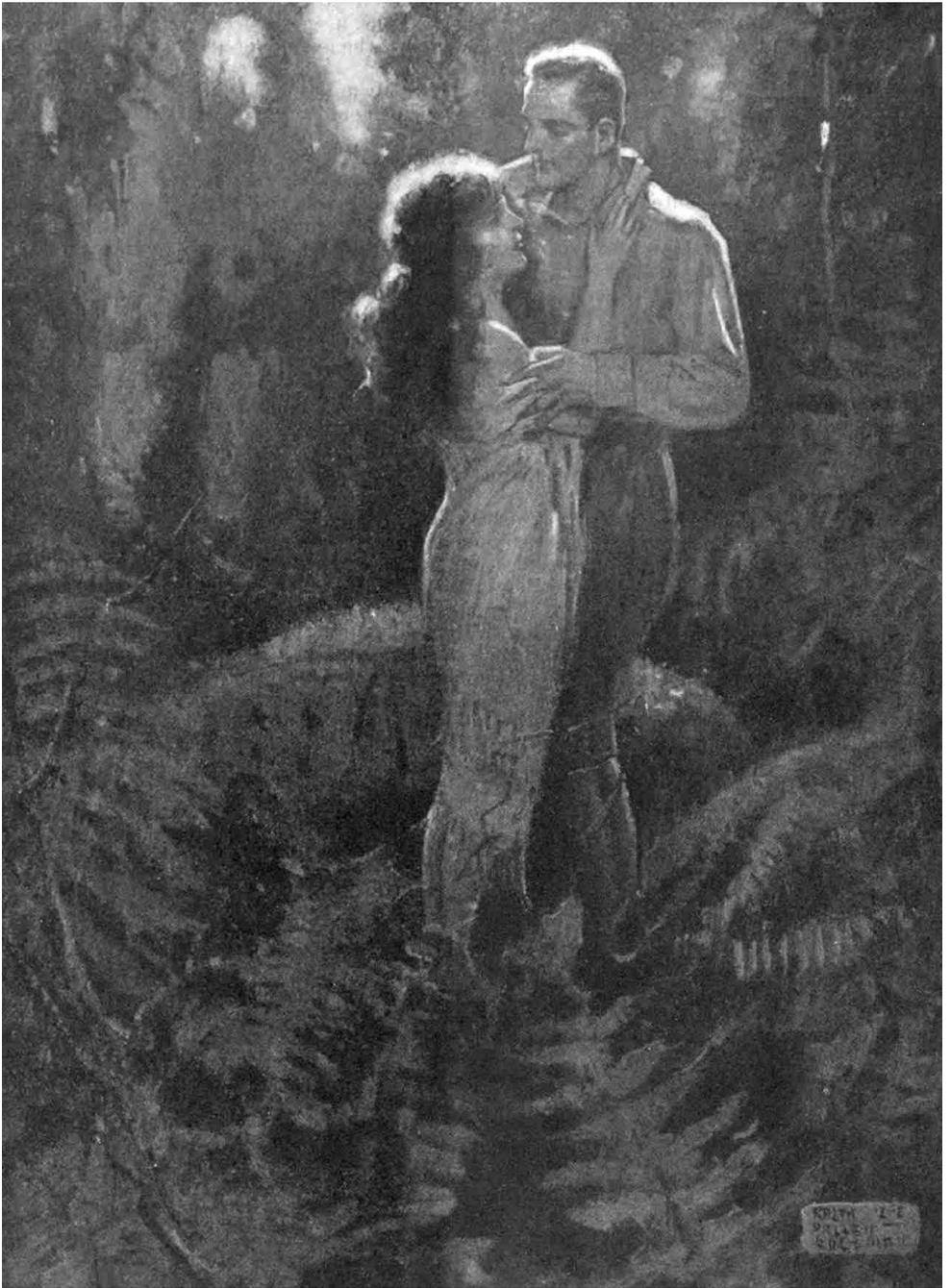
At that direct question, that accurate reading of his thoughts, his discretion flew to the winds.

“Everything,” he cried. “I love you—I love you, Eloise! There, I have said it, although, God knows, I had not intended to add the weight of my misery to your over-burdened heart. Can you forgive me? Can you understand a little of what it means to know that I take you back—to him?”

A wonderful light dispersed the sadness in her eyes. “Not unless this is your wish, David,” she whispered.

“Not unless—For God’s sake, Eloise, don’t play with me; tell me what you mean!”

“I mean that there is no love between Don Julio and me. The arrangement was of my father’s making, and one that pleased him.” A shadow of pain passed over her upturned face. “Now there is no longer any need for me to perform the distasteful act of obedience, so—if you want me, David—take me, please!”



Her small, patrician hands moved slowly up his arms until they met about his neck.

Her small, patrician hands moved slowly up his arms until they met about his neck. Her body relaxed against him, and her lips, parted in a smile of infinite tenderness, reached upward towards his own.

Fiercely, he crushed her in his arms.

A crashing through the brush, snatched from them their moment of ecstasy, and Pedro appeared on the trail.

“I hear the voice of the river, my lady,” he announced. “These maps are accurate and easy to follow. Have a little more patience, Dona Eloise, for we are saved!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

Some photographs have been enhanced to be more legible.

Because of copyright considerations, the illustrations by X (y-z) have been omitted from this text.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

Page numbers have been removed due to a non-page layout.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

Some pages of advertising from the publisher were excluded from the eBook edition.

Index page references refer to the book's original page order. Actual placement of the reference may be offset depending on the page and/or font size of your eBook reader.

[The end of *The Valley of Bleached Bones* by Madge Macbeth]