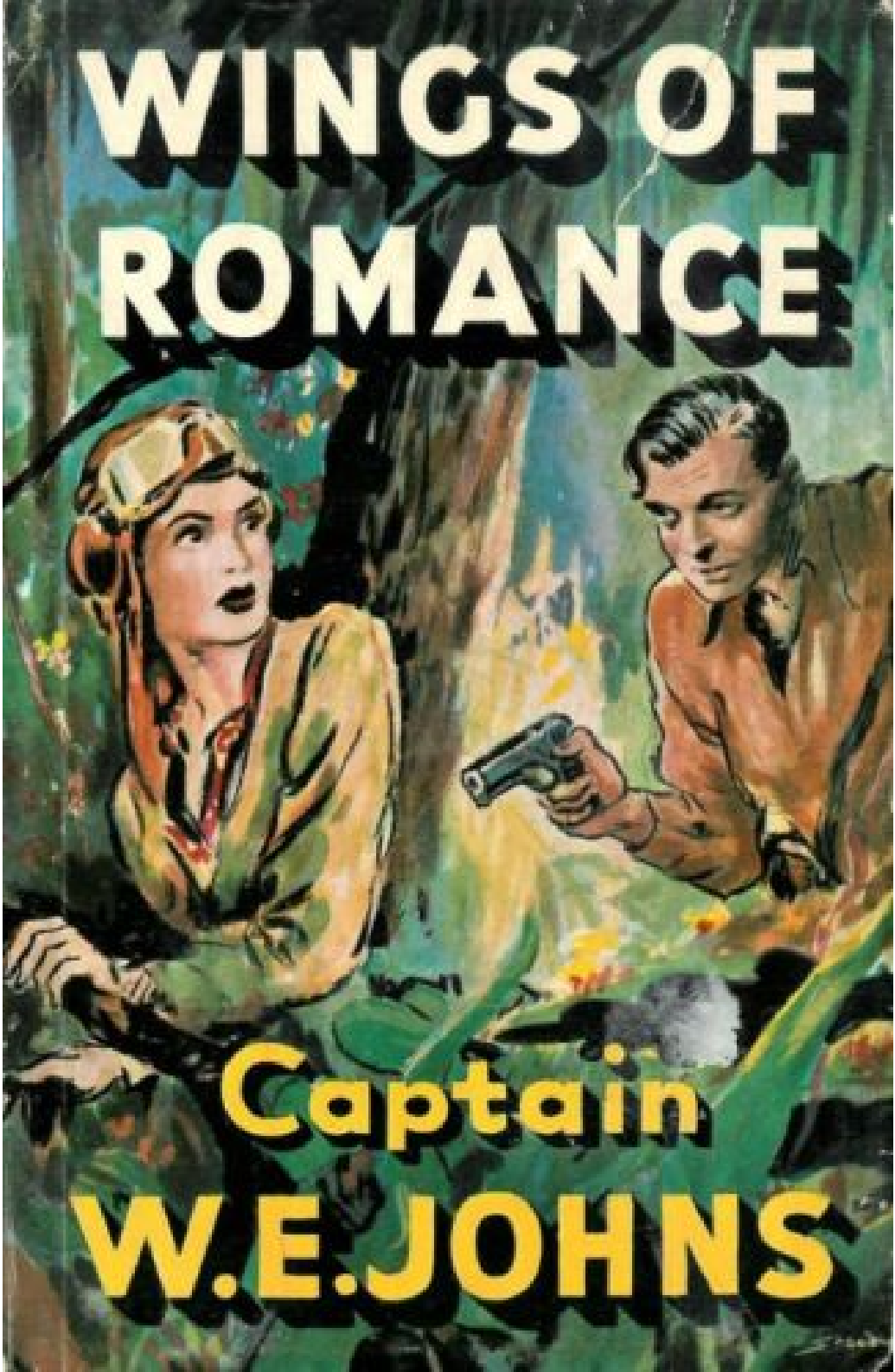
WINGS OF ROMANCE



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WINGS OF ROMANCE

A "Steeley Adventure"

BY

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CHAPTER I

"WELL, there it is."

The speaker was my old friend "Steeley" Delaroy. He was leaning over the rail of the dirtiest steamer on which it has ever been my misfortune to travel, gazing with speculative but slightly amused eyes at the remarkable collection of houses that lay beyond the squalid waterfront of the harbour we had just entered. But there was a peculiar inflection in his voice, a sort of fatalism in the way he said the words, that made me glance quickly at his face before resuming my inspection of our destination.

"Yes, here it is," I agreed, for want of something better to say. It seemed hardly worth mentioning that, I suspected strongly that his thoughts were running on the same lines as my own.

"You know. Tubby," went on Steeley reflectively, "life's a queer business. I mean, how things work out. Is it all a fluke, or are we all microscopic links in a chain the ends of which we cannot see? Look at us now, for example. Had a fortune-teller told me two months ago that before the year was out I should be sailing into a Central American port that I had never so much as heard of, I should have said 'Fiddlesticks!' Now check up on the sequence of events that brought it about. Has it occurred to you that your presence in Central America was brought about directly by an earthquake in New Zealand?"

For a moment I stared at him unbelievingly. I had not thought of it, but now he mentioned it, I was forced to admit that he was right.

Steeley nodded philosophically. "The whole business may be said to have begun when a woman whom I have never seen, but who happens to be my sister-in-law, was injured in the recent earthquake. My wife, her sister, rushes off to her, leaving me at a loose end in New York. Having nothing to do, it was not unnatural that I should slip across to London to see you and Brian, but it was odd, was it not, that I should arrive on what was probably the foulest day in a particularly foul winter? That is important, because the weather played a vital part in what was to follow.

"One direct result of it was that you were fed up to the teeth, and ready to jump at any excuse for getting out of it. I was in the same mood. That

inspired you to dig out a letter that had been lying under the papers on your desk for a fortnight. It was from a man neither of us knew, but he put up a proposition that offered an avenue of escape from the two most soul-destroying things on earth—boredom and beastly weather. We accepted, and here we are, diving figuratively into a bank of cloud without having the least idea of what awaits us on the other side, or, for that matter, what we are likely to run into before we get to the other side."

"Had we known that, what is now an adventure would have been a purely commercial enterprise, and as such it is unlikely that we would have undertaken it," interposed Brian, dryly and rather shrewdly, staring at the ramshackle quay to which we were evidently going to tie up.

Both Steeley and Brian were right. Two months ago I had never heard of the little Republic of Carabonia, much less its seaport capital of Prava. Steeley had turned up unexpectedly at my Jermyn Street flat on about as foul a day as it is possible to imagine. Had he not come, I think I should have gone to the Riviera. Certainly I should not have bothered to see Señor Marquez, Carabonian Ambassador in London, although he had written to me twice asking for an interview. But between them, Steeley and the weather had entirely altered the situation. At my invitation Señor Marquez called and explained his interest in me, although how he had got hold of my name is more than I can say. Possibly he had seen it in the newspapers in connection with one of Steeley's exploits. Be that as it may, the fact remained that Señor Marquez came, and this, briefly, was his proposition.

Carabonia, he explained, was in a bad way. The country was full of spies; the people were rebellious; the President was doing his best, but with big hungry neighbours waiting for an excuse to snap up his country in order to acquire its mineral wealth and its excellent harbour, he was having a difficult time. What he needed, he had decided, was what many other Central and South American states had acquired, a military force which could be relied upon to stand by the Government, a force composed of, or at least officered by, Europeans. Being practical in vision and modern in ideas, this force, owing to the deplorable condition of internal communications, should be an Air Force. There was already an Army (of sorts, as we were presently to discover) and a Navy. (The rusty hulk floating in the middle of the fairway down which we were by this time creeping was the Navy, but we did not suspect it at that moment.) There was also an Air Force, but it was not very good. It needed stiffening. (Had the Navy been pointed out to us in the harbour, we might have been prepared for the Air Force.) Would we undertake to "stiffen" the Carabonian Air Force? Would we reorganise on the latest European lines the Air Force of poor, suffering Carabonia?

Those were the questions Señor Marquez had asked with a sob in his voice and tears in his eyes. We could have any rank we cared to name or invent. As for pay, would a hundred pounds a month be enough?

I pointed out that not I, but my friend Steeley Delaroy, was the man for the job. But that was wonderful, declared Señor Marquez. Would we both go? I pointed out that we had a young, mutual friend, named Brian Ballantyne, who would doubtless enjoy the trip, besides being a credit to the brave Carabonian Air Force. That was simply marvellous; would we all go?

At the end we said yes.

Brian, now a regular Fleet Street sleuth, scenting an unusual story in the business, had no difficulty in persuading his Editor to let him go, on the understanding that he collected some inside facts about Carabonia, which nobody, not even in Fleet Street, seemed to know much about.

So that was that. And—well, here we were, steaming into Prava harbour in the rotten, unsavoury cattle-boat that had picked us up at Havana, where we had been set down by a Pan-American air liner, out from New York, whither we had travelled in the *Queen Mary*.

Señor Marquez had not come with us. He had presented us each with a hundred pounds in Carabonian currency (which we were soon to discover was no use outside Carabonia and very little use inside), three wonderful white-drill uniforms heavily loaded with gold braid, and letters of introduction. These, he had assured us, would not really be necessary, as Pedro the Lion, otherwise President Pedro Ramoza, would be advised of our coming. That was that. Señor Marquez had wished us God-speed with a warmth that at the time struck me as unnecessarily fervent, but which in the light of subsequent events was understandable. However, let us return to the harbour, through the oily waters of which we were just moving perceptibly towards the quay.

"What do you think of it?" asked Steeley, with a nonchalance that I suspected was not entirely sincere.

"I can't say I'm infatuated with it," I replied slowly, regarding the landscape without enthusiasm. "It doesn't look exactly bursting with either prosperity or high spirits."

Had I said that both those qualities were entirely absent, it would have been nearer the truth. In fact, in the whole of Prava—as far as one could make out from the waterfront, and as it sprawled across the face of the hill overlooking the harbour there was little of it that one could not see—there was only one building worthy of the name. This was a truly magnificent stone-built edifice, not unlike a medieval castle, which, rising from a sort of

plateau in the middle of the town, dominated everything. Clearly, it was the Presidential Residency.

As for the rest, in spite of the twenty thousand inhabitants of which Señor Marquez had boasted, it was simply a heterogeneous collection of wood and *adobe* buildings inserted at the most convenient angles in the face of the hill. The houses appeared to creep furtively out of the primeval forest that formed the background, and then, as if taking fright, stampede down to a single rotting wharf, where their headlong flight was arrested only by the black, oily mud of the harbour. Indeed, so thickly did they cluster at the water's edge that some were obviously in imminent danger of falling in.

Most of them were roofed with corrugated iron, the sheets being held in place by the simple expedient of logs or rocks being piled on top of them. The general effect was not pleasing, to say the least of it, in spite of the gaudily painted, although usually faded, French shutters which seemed to be a feature of the place: far from being picturesque, as they are in some places, they merely made the town look pathetically cheap and tawdry. Indeed, over the whole capital hung a brooding atmosphere of extreme poverty. It was something more than that. Decay. No, that isn't the word, although God knows that the place was in the last stages of dilapidation—it would be no exaggeration to say decomposition. Sickness, possibly, although that hardly describes it. Still, if it was possible for a town to look sick, Prava was certainly on its death-bed. It seemed to be a mixture of sinister melancholy and sullen neglect. Only the towering royal palms, which thrust their emerald crowns far up into the turquoise sky, and the gigantic growths of prickly-pear that sprawled like monstrous cuttle-fish among the houses, seemed happy.

The inhabitants, or what few we could see of them, now congregated on the quay to meet the boat, wore the same tired, morose expression as their houses. Of all colours, from black, through brown and tawny to dirty white, they looked dreary, despondent, and downtrodden. One alone was different. Well dressed in a white uniform with red facings and enormous gold epaulettes, he stood apart near a ragged, double line of men whose rifles proclaimed them to be police or soldiers.

"Plenty fever here," said a voice behind us, and turning, I saw the half-caste skipper of the cattle-boat regarding us with a queer expression.

"That's cheerful, but I'm not surprised," I muttered, as the boat touched the quay, crumbling great lumps of mildewed woodwork from the rotting timbers.

The unpleasant aroma of corruption reached my nostrils, but before I could remark on it our luggage was being stacked on deck and a dangerous-looking gangway lowered.

The man in white uniform had been watching us, and now he came aboard, followed by his motley escort, which, at close range, were even a worse-looking lot of scallywags than I had at first supposed. He came to where we were standing and bowed stiffly. "Señors Wilde, Delaroy, and Ballantyne?" he queried, with a strong foreign accent, reading from a piece of paper which he held in his hand. I didn't like his voice a bit. It had a soft, ingratiating timbre that was not genuine.

"That is correct," I answered.

"Good! Allow me to introduce myself." (I won't attempt to reproduce his accent.) "General Luis Vincenti." (Pronounced Vinthentee.) "Welcome to Carabonia."

I looked at General Vincenti, and what I saw did not attract me to him. He was tall, not less than six feet two or three, and cadaverous. Strictly speaking, one would call him white, but recurrent fever or jaundice had set its mark on his face, leaving it an unhealthy yellow. The same nasty tint was discernible in the whites of his eyes, which were pale grey and deeply set under shaggy brows. He wore gloves, so I could not see his finger-nails, but I suspected strongly that there was a dab of tarbrush in his make-up. His mouth was large, with thin lips that barely covered a double row of decayed teeth, and his appearance was not improved either by a blue shaving mark that eclipsed his powerful chin like a bruise, or his ears, which stuck out at a dangerous angle. (Never trust a man with sticking-out ears, was a lesson my father had taught me, and my experience had proved that he was seldom wrong.) Worst of all, his breath, which reached me in the stagnant air, stank like ten thousand devils.

Such was my first impression of General Vincenti, but one must not be misled by superficialities. There was a lot of character in his face, a promise of strength and determination which suggested that neither the sabre which he wore at his side, nor the revolver on his hip, was purely ornamental.

"Glad to meet you, sir," I replied, lying fluently.

"Then please to follow me. The President is waiting to speak to you," he informed us.

"I had intended having a word with the British Consul first," put in Steeley unexpectedly.

"Ah!" The General looked pained. "I fear you choose an unfortunate time for that," he said sadly. "Mr. Barnard, he has died only two days ago. It

was the dysentery."

I didn't like the sound of that. "But surely there is someone here to relieve him?" I suggested.

"No, the Consulate is closed," was the disconcerting answer.

Steeley shrugged his shoulders. "In that case we had better go and see the President," he observed dispassionately.

With our escort carrying or dragging our bags, we passed down the gangway and for the first time set foot in Prava, capital of Carabonia.

CHAPTER II

A DECREPIT motor-car of American make crept from a palm-covered shed like a nervous rabbit emerging from its hole as we crossed the quay and the General invited us to get in. I looked at the negro chauffeur and then at Steeley, wondering if I dare suggest walking. His eyes were on the windscreen, and following them with my own, I saw what had attracted his attention. In the centre of the glass was a neat round hole with little cracks radiating away from it like star rays. If it wasn't a bullet-hole, then I've never seen one, and the discovery did nothing to enhance my confidence either in Prava or the vehicle. However, there seemed to be no way of escape, so in we stepped and away we went. "Went" is the right word. Having once or twice driven behind coloured drivers I was prepared for something pretty drastic, but nothing so spectacular as we got on this occasion. The negro slammed everything on "Go", and we shot forward as though we were being launched by an aircraft catapult. Straight along the quay we rushed, and only when a flying leap into the harbour seemed inevitable did the driver decide that it was time to turn the wheel. Actually, he didn't turn it; he spun it. The car turned at right angles, and I nearly went over the side. How the whole thing did not go over I shall never understand, but it did not, and the next instant we had shot into an unsuspected turning and were bumping up a fairly steep gradient running parallel with our original course, with houses on one side and a sheer drop on the other. There was about six inches between our off wheels and the drop. I looked at the others. Steeley's face was set, his lips in a straight line. Brian was pale, but smiling wanly. Only the General didn't seem to mind. He was sitting up straight with his eyes on the windows of the houses just ahead of us. He seemed to be looking for something; expecting something. He was, but, of course, I had no inkling of what it was. I was not left long in ignorance.

Another of the hairpin bends by which I now observed the road wound its way up the face of the hill lay ahead of us, but just before we reached it there was a loud report. The General's hat flew forward over his eyes, while the bullet it had failed to stop bored a hole through the windscreen beside the other. I'll say this for Vincenti: he was the least upset of any of us. The

chauffeur's face when he looked round was a dirty cream, but at a snarl from the General he went on with his job.

It was no laughing matter, for the shot must have missed my head by less than six inches. Yet not a soul was in sight. Steeley caught my eye and made a grimace. "Not so good," he whispered.

The General either heard or guessed what he said. "A thousand apologies, gentlemen," he murmured. "These little things happen sometimes, although we do our best to prevent them."

Sometimes, I thought. Judging by the way he behaved, I suspected that they were an everyday affair. Something seemed to tell me that General Vincenti was not very popular.

However, the negro managed to keep the car the right way up, and as there was no more shooting we finally splashed through a pool of sewage, past a mob of sentries, into the palace courtyard, from where, after a short delay, we were ushered down a long stone corridor and up some stairs into the Presence.

I cannot remember disliking anyone at first sight as much as Pedro Ramoza, nicknamed The Lion, President of the Carabonian Republic, who, as we entered, was sitting behind a ponderous desk in the ornate reception room of his palace.

He was a half-caste, with the black predominating, about forty-five years of age, of medium height, but massive proportions. I never saw such shoulders in my life; they reminded me of a gorilla, although as an example of physique he was spoilt by a paunch of a stomach that was in accord with his face, which was flabby from over-eating or general self-indulgence. Or both. His cheeks were puffy, but his chin—which, I fancy, had taken him to the position he now held, was pugnacious, and in keeping with his little dark eyes, which were never still, but flashed suspiciously this way and that at every move. His lips were thick and sensual. There is only one word to describe his hair: it was luxuriant, with an unmistakable negro twist in it. An enormous black moustache completely concealed—I won't say adorned—his top lip, and made the sparse hair on his chin, which he was pleased to call a beard, incongruous. Briefly, I summed him up to be a man of considerable physical and mental strength, intolerant, crafty, vain, and unscrupulous; a man who would be brutal for the sheer pleasure of it, a bully who, at a pinch, would turn out to be a coward. Such was the unprepossessing gentleman who, clad in the most elaborate uniform I have ever seen in my life, greeted us with a condescending smile as we marched

into a room on the first floor of his palace. How far I was right or wrong in my judgment, the history of Carabonia will reveal.

Somewhat to my astonishment, Pedro addressed us in English. Not only in English, but in fluent English, although it had a pungent American accent. I learned later that he had been born in Washington and had spent some years of his life working on the Panama Canal, so it was really not as surprising as it might at first sight appear. I had been prepared for him to speak Spanish, of which I have a fair knowledge, and had, moreover, been to some trouble to polish it up during the journey across. However, we got along very well in English.

There is no need for me to repeat the entire conversation. In brief, he welcomed us to his country, hoped we would be happy, stay a long time, and derive some satisfaction from our task of putting Carabonia on the map. Steeley was to be the Air Admiral of the entire Carabonian Air Force, and Brian and I were to be his assistants, with the ranks of Deputy-Admirals. There was already an Air Admiral at Campanella Aerodrome, he informed us—the one and only official aerodrome in the country—but he was no use, so he could be dismissed forthwith—unless he cared to stay on as a mechanic. This drop from Admiral to second-class air mechanic, literally from the top of the tree to the bottom, struck me as being somewhat unusual, not to say drastic; but, as we were soon to learn, Carabonian standards should not be judged by British standards. Still, I suspected strongly that the late Air Admiral would not be too pleased about his swift slide down the ladder when he learned of it; nor was I mistaken. But let us deal with one thing at a time.

There were also (continued Pedro) some aeroplanes, some pilots, and some mechanics. He didn't know very much about any of them. Perhaps it would be a good thing if we looked them over and submitted a report. Then, if the personnel or equipment were not very good, he would see what could be done about it. Would we, therefore, go to Campanella, some ten miles from Prava, as quickly as possible, as there was a little trouble going on in the country?

"What sort of trouble?" Steeley had the temerity to ask.

"A minor revolution," explained Pedro airily. "Nothing serious."

That was a new one on me. Señor Marquez had said nothing about a revolution. The pot-shot that had knocked the General's hat off was now explained, but I derived little comfort from the explanation, for it seemed to me that if people were taking pot-shots at Generals, they were also likely to take pot-shots at Admirals, in which case my resignation from my exalted

rank would soon be on the table. I had not come to Prava to be shot at. At least, I didn't know I had.

At this juncture our interview was interrupted in no uncertain manner. In fact, with my mind running on pot-shots, I jumped violently when a volley crashed out in the courtyard immediately under our window.

Steeley was nearest to it. He swung round, and I saw his face turn as white as death.

President or no President, I had to look. The President was, in fact, looking himself, as I joined the others at the window, and at the sight that met my horrified eyes I felt something inside me go down like a lift.

Lying at the foot of the courtyard wall were half a dozen bodies. One was still twitching. A dozen yards away a score of soldiers were laughing as they reloaded their rifles, presumably in order to repeat the performance, for a chain of half a dozen more prisoners, roped together with their hands behind their backs, were being lined up behind their fallen comrades.

From that moment I knew we were in for trouble.

Steeley spoke, and his voice was as cold and hard as breaking ice. "What's going on here?" he asked tersely.

The President smiled. Clearly he was not in the least perturbed. "We are disposing of some rebels," he said softly. It sounded as if he was purring like a cat.

"But what have they done?" asked Steeley.

"Nothing yet," was the bland reply. "Our policy is to dispose of rebels before they can do anything."

"But if they have done nothing, how do you know they are rebels?"

"It was the misfortune of some to be suspected of sedition; others were unlucky enough to have relations with anti-Government sentiments," explained the President airily.

I turned away from the window feeling sick as the second volley rang out. That was quite enough for me. The President could keep his hundred a month and have his uniform back, and the words were on my lips to tell him so when Steeley's hand gripped my arm like a vice.

"Steady; don't lose your head," he breathed.

"Are you going to stand for this?" I demanded in a tense voice.

He half-dropped an eyelid. "Why not?" he said loudly. "There is only one motto in a place like this, and that is, never spare an enemy."

Pedro slapped him on the back. "Good boy," he said warmly. "That's my handwriting. We shall get on. Never spare an enemy." He rolled the words

round his tongue with obvious relish.

Steeley nodded. “We’d better get along to Campanella, sir, I think,” he suggested.

“Yes, the sooner the better.”

“How can we get there?”

“Take my car—the one you came up in. It isn’t so good as it might be, but it isn’t so bad; anyway, it is the only one in the country so it will just have to do.”

“Thanks! What about quarters?”

“You’ll find some at the aerodrome, but I’ll have some fixed up for you here in case of trouble.”

I noticed that he didn’t say *what* trouble he expected.

“By the way,” he called after us as we reached the door, “don’t stand for any nonsense from anyone.” He tapped the revolver that was strapped to his side significantly.

Steeley smiled knowingly. “Very good, sir,” he replied, saluting smartly as we withdrew.

Vincenti, who had said nothing during the interview, remained with the President.

Half-way along the corridor Steeley stopped and looked at me and Brian. The smile was no longer on his face. “My God! What an unutterable swine!” he breathed.

“He’s worse than that,” I opined bitterly. “It looks to me as if on this occasion we have bitten off a slightly larger mouthful than we shall be able to chew.”

Steeley nodded thoughtfully. “Tubby, old son, the piece we’ve bitten off is going to give us all severe indigestion, or else I don’t know a cold-blooded murderer when I see one; but for the moment we’ve got to do our best to swallow it, because if we start spitting it out we’re headed for trouble in a big way. We walked into the country easily enough, but we’ve got to find a way out before Pedro sees that we don’t like his methods, and that may not be so easy. For a start, you’d better learn to keep your temper. If you’d said in there what you were about to say when I stopped you, you’d either be in cells by now or down in the courtyard with those other poor devils. Meanwhile, let’s go and give this place Campanella the once over.”

CHAPTER III

THE distance to Campanella was, as I have said, about ten miles. It took us nearly an hour to get there. Never have I seen such a road. Really, it wasn't a road at all; I merely use the word in a broad sense. It was a lane, an evil track that wound a serpentine course through the dense, tropical jungle that looked as if it might harbour every horror in the Zoological catalogue. The heat outside was bad enough, but in the stagnant shade of the forest it was a Turkish bath; a steamy, suffocating heat that clung to one like a wet blanket and kept us in a perpetual state of perspiration. Even the trees seemed to sweat, for there was a steady drip, drip, drip from the vague green canopy overhead to the festering leaf-mould below. I began to understand why the Carabonians looked depressed. Here was one reason, anyway.

Steeley eyed the track with sombre eyes as we crept along, wallowing in mud-filled pot-holes, sliding over masses of rotting leaves, or crawling over crazy bridges that sagged in an alarming manner under our weight.

"I should be sorry to have to do a salvage job in that," he murmured at last, indicating the dismal hell on either side.

"And I should be sorry to be the pilot in the kite that came down in it," I told him morosely. "Look at that horror!" I pointed to a squat-headed snake, some five or six feet long, that slithered across our path.

"I shall be interested to see this aerodrome," was Steeley's only other comment.

We came to it at last, and looked at it silently, each busy with his own thoughts, working out the usual technical points of landing and taking off from it.

The aerodrome began where the forest ended. Why the forest ended is more than I can say, but it did, abruptly, giving way to a vast expanse of dreary, undulating plain. It was plenty large enough, there was no doubt about that, but it embodied certain features that appalled me. And I may as well say here that they were worse than they appeared to be from a distance. On one side, the side at which we had arrived, the forest rose up like a wall for a good two hundred feet, and anyone who flies will realise at once just what that meant. It meant that a pilot coming in from the direction of Prava

arrived at the edge of the aerodrome at a height of rather more than two hundred feet, so in order to get down he had to side-slip steeply. On the other hand, in order to take off it would be necessary to taxi out for the best part of a mile in order to get sufficient height to clear the trees.

Unfortunately, the trouble did not end there. Lying like vast ink-stains across the far side of the aerodrome were two sheets of stagnant water; lakes, I suppose one must call them. In landing or taking off it became necessary to run between the two. What happened if the pilot made a mistake was plain enough to see, for sticking out of the middle of the larger of the two lakes was the tail of an aeroplane painted in the red, black, and green colours of Carabonia.

We learned later on that these lakes were not lakes in the ordinary sense of the word. They were great pools of slime; shallow sheets of viscous fluid covering a bed of bottomless mud. Some ten to twenty yards of bog round the edges made them impossible to approach, consequently anything getting in could never get out. A pretty prospect indeed!

For the rest, the ground was fairly level, without any serious obstacles, although occasional growths of rushes marked soft patches which would probably capsize a machine running into them.

Some distance from the road on the eastern boundary—that is to say, on the forest side—was one enormous palm-thatched hangar built of rough-hewn timber, and four smaller buildings—save the word—of the same primitive construction. These were presumably the officers' mess, the men's quarters, and workshops. We advanced to inspect them.

"I am afraid we are going to be disappointed in the maintenance staff of this modern and certainly unique airport," murmured Steeley quietly as we got out of the car and started walking towards the sheds. I may mention here that the nearest point of the track was nearly a quarter of a mile from the buildings.

"Let's have a look in the hangar first," I suggested. "It will be interesting to see what sort of vehicles we are expected to fly."

Accordingly, we turned our steps towards it, and in doing so may have saved our lives at the outset; anyway, it was a stroke of luck, for reasons which will presently be understood, for, our feet making no noise on the soft turf, we reached the hangar unobserved, and thus came upon Luke Rogers in circumstances that could not have been more advantageous. In the first place, he was alone when we first saw him; and in the second, he was very busy. This was the way of it.

As we walked quietly along the near side of the hangar the familiar smell of dope and petrol reached our nostrils, so we knew that there was at least one aeroplane inside. But with the smell there was another, one that we were soon to know only too well. It was mildew; rot; the sickening smell of corruption. Our anxiety to see inside caused us to quicken our pace in the last few strides, but then, by a sort of tacit understanding, we pulled up dead, gazing at the remarkable scene before us.

The shed was littered with bits and pieces of aeroplanes—planes, fins, elevators, and the like. There were two or three machines more or less whole, and two without engines. But the one on which our eyes automatically came to rest stood in the foreground. It was an American Waco, upon the engine of which a single mechanic was working with feverish haste.

I don't know what made him look round. Possibly instinct. Anyway, he looked. For a moment he stared at us speechlessly, while we stared back at him. He was not a pretty sight. The overalls he wore might once have been white, but now they were mud-coloured, oil-stained, and torn in a hundred places. His boots were ribbons—yes, ribbons. From one, his toes were actually sticking out like a row of dirty sticks.

The owner of this unbecoming attire was a youth of about twenty years of age, unshaven, with a tangled mat of lank, straw-coloured hair, stuck low over his forehead with perspiration. He had bright blue eyes, the snub nose that promises impertinence, and the square jaw that goes with obstinacy, and these characteristics were at once apparent in the two first words he uttered.

"So what?" he drawled belligerently.

It was good to hear straightforward honest-to-God American spoken again.

Steeley frowned. "I am Air Admiral Delaroy," he said stiffly.

The other laughed outright. "What, again?" he grinned. "Well, it's O.K. by me, buddy. Choose yourself a crate, but don't stop me, I'm busy. By the way, the name's Rogers—Luke for short."

Steeley's frown grew deeper. "What do you mean—again?"

"Well, you're the seventh."

That made us all stare. "The seventh—in how long?" I asked.

"About six months."

I felt the lift go down inside me again. "Are you in the Carabonian Air Force?" I inquired.

"I was."

"What do you mean—you were?"

"I resigned."

"Resigned?"

"Sure."

"When?"

"The day after I got here. I haven't told anyone yet, though. No, *sir*. I'm still here, but it won't be for much longer. I've been working on this ship ever since I came; most of the time it dropped to pieces faster than I could put it together, but I've got it beat at last. If it will hold together for an hour, that's all I ask."

"Why, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going home—or as near as I can get."

"But that's desertion," declared Steeley. "If you talk like that I shall have to put you under arrest."

"Oh yeah?" Rogers dropped his tools and faced Steeley squarely. "Listen, big boy," he said crisply. "I forgive you because I guess you've got this outfit all wrong, but as you're white I'm going to put you wise. First of all, if you can dodge sniper's bullets for twenty-eight days, which I doubt, and outlive the fever for four weeks, which isn't likely, you'll still be alive in a month's time, but I'll lay you or either of your pals ten bucks American to a Carabonian dollar, which is the same as ten bucks to nothing, that you won't be. This place is bad medicine. The President's crook, the long streak of constipated rattlesnake named Vincenti who hangs round him is crook; the Army's crook; the Navy's crook; every son of a dago shooting crap in the end shed, by which I mean the Carabonian Air Force, is crook; and the country's crook. You may think a country can't be crook, but wait till you've seen Carabonia. I'm telling you. I've been inside it for six months. From the day I came I've been trying to get out, and at last I'm going. And I'm taking the only white man left in the country—except yourselves."

I could see that Steeley was impressed. "Who's the other man?" he asked quietly.

Rogers pointed to a pile of rotting tarpaulin in the corner of the hangar. "Hey, Alec, show yourself," he said.

The tarpaulin moved, and from it emerged one of the most extraordinary human beings I have ever seen in my life. He was an old man, as thin as a lath, with a face as yellow and wrinkled as perished washleather. His hands trembled as though with ague.

We all looked at him wonderingly. "Are you English?" asked Steeley.

"I'm Scotch," was the curt answer. "Alexander McNash, fra' Glascae. That's me. Now you listen to what I'm telling ye, because I've been in the country for twenty years."

"Good God!" I gasped. "What have you been doing all that time?"

"Drinking when I could get it and dying when I couldn't. Now you get out while you've got two legs to stand on. They've all gone. I'm the last. Barnard thought he was going to be, but he wasn't."

"Barnard—why, he was Consul, wasn't he? Died of dysentery."

"Aye, he was Consul, but he didna die o' no dysentery. He knew too much, so they poisoned him. Aye, mon, I know what I'm talkin' aboot."

I looked at Steeley, but he was staring at McNash.

"Tell me, Mac," he said curiously. "What's happened here? What's going on? We were offered jobs and we came; we've just arrived and we know nothing about it."

McNash nodded. "Havna' got a drop on ye——"

Steeley shook his head.

"Pity. A' weel. I'll tell ye. Everything was a'richt till five years ago, when this murderin' devil Ramoza got into power. I havna' time to tell ye all he's done, but he's got the country under his heel and he's squeezed every drop of blood out of it. Blood and money. Pay or die is his motto. He's got nine-tenths of all the money in the country in that castle of his, and he wants the other tenth. Then he'll go. Maybe he'll get it, but maybe he won't, for the caballero who's got it is the only man who's put up a fight. Antonio Gonzales, his name is. A Spaniard, it's true, but a white man and a gentleman. He was President before Ramoza. He owns all the grazing land on the far side of the forest. The people loved him; they wanted him back, but Ramoza twisted him out of power and has kept him out. There's no more elections, no nothing. A man who mentions Gonzales' name is dead within twelve hours. Ten thousand men and women has Ramoza killed, him and his imported cut-throats, and he's still killing them."

"Where is Gonzales now?" asked Steeley.

"In his *hacienda* away back of the forest, where Ramoza can't get at him. You can't take an army through the jungle. Ramoza has offered ten thousand dollars, Mexican, for his head, but Gonzales' people are loyal, and so far he's escaped. But they've got his son."

"Who has?" I asked quickly.

"Ramoza. He's in the castle at Prava. Fellow of twenty-one—a nice boy. Ramoza has sent a message to his father that he'll torture him to death

unless he gives himself up. Meanwhile, the old man, who lives with his daughter, has sent out and bought an aeroplane. He's got a good pilot, too—flown over here once or twice. He says that if Ramoza kills the boy, he'll bomb the palace, so it's a case of 'check'. That's how the position stands now. There's a rumour about that Ramoza has sent out for pilots to catch the other fellow when he comes over, and that, na doot, is why you're here."

As the old man finished speaking, Steeley looked at me with that queer, whimsical smile he adopts at such moments. "Pretty kettle of fish, isn't it?" he observed evenly.

"So pretty that I shall be glad to see the last of it," I told him bluntly. "We've slipped up, and the sooner we get out the better."

"Aye, but how are ye going to get oot?" asked McNash quickly. "Ye can't walk through the forest because it's full of leeches, and ye can't swim through the sea because it's full of sharks, and there ain't no boats, except the cattle-boat that comes in once a month—and they'll take care you don't get on that."

"What about these machines?" I asked, pointing to the collection inside the hangar.

Rogers shook his head. "You may be able to do something with one of them, but I doubt it. If I'd been able to get one of them into the air, I should have been gone long ago. It's taken me best part of six months to patch this one up."

"Patch up just about describes it," nodded Steeley, looking at the Waco, which was covered with patches of all shapes and sizes, and literally tied up with wire. "Are you going to fly that shocking mess?"

"I'm going to try, and I'm taking Alec with me in the back seat."

"Got a parachute? You'll need one."

Rogers threw us an amused smile. "Yeah," he said, "I've got a parachute. Take a look at it." He disappeared for a moment, and then returned, somewhat to my surprise, with what was undoubtedly a parachute. He ripped it open and pulled out the fabric. The silk came away in pieces, in handfuls, like wet tissue paper. I've never seen such a thing in my life. "How would you like to 'crack' that one?" he grinned.

"What caused it to go like that—the damp?"

"Rot! Just plain rot. It's rotten right through, like everything else in this Goddam country. Well, you boys had better make up your minds what you're going to do, because in five minutes I shall be on my way. Would you like me to take a message out for you?"

“By James! That’s an idea!” cried Steeley eagerly. “Here!” He delved in his pocket and pulled out a notebook. “Take the lot,” he said, putting it into Roger’s hands. “There’s five thousand dollars odd in there, with letters that will prove who I am. As soon as you get anywhere, try to make contact with my father-in-law, Silas P. Marven, the aeroplane manufacturer, and tell him the sort of jam we’re in. Ask him to send a machine down for us. It can land here. We’ll stick around.”

“O.K.” Rogers put the notecase in his pocket. “I’ll bring the machine down if you like,” he offered. “I know the layout of the place pretty well; a stranger, even if he found the place, would probably crack up when he tried to get down, or else stick himself in the middle of one of those puddles.” He pointed to the lakes.

“Have you got a map?” asked Steeley.

“Map—nix. There ain’t no such thing in Carabonia.”

I stared, aghast. “Do you mean to say that people are expected to fly over this sort of country without maps?”

“It ain’t a matter of what’s expected. There just ain’t no maps, and that’s all there is to it.”

“Hell’s bells!” I muttered.

“Well, that’s all, boys,” declared Rogers. “You might give me a hand to get her out.”

We helped him to drag the machine into the open. The whole thing was crazy, of course. The machine was crazy. The idea of an Air Admiral and two Vice-Admirals helping a mechanic to desert was crazy.

“How did they get you here?” I asked as Rogers climbed into the cockpit and McNash got in behind him.

“A guy named Marquez hooked me for a sucker. Promised me the rank of Admiral.”

“Did you get it?”

“Sure I did. I still am one as far as I know. There’s another one in the end shed. I guess he’s asleep, or drunk—maybe both.”

I remembered what Ramoza had said about someone being in charge. “What’s his name?” I asked.

“Krimm. Jacob Krimm—at least, that’s what he calls himself. But as his father was a rattlesnake and his mother a polecat, I guess there’s a mistake somewhere. He’s a great guy. Watch his hands—he’s dandy with a knife.”

I groaned inwardly. Worse and worse. “What about your hundred a month; have they paid you that?” I inquired.

“Listen, feller, there ain’t so much dough in Carabonia—leastways, not outside the castle,” Rogers assured me as I “sucked in” for him.

The engine started easily enough, and the airframe seemed to stand up to the strain fairly well.

With a parting wave, and “I’ll be right back”, the American taxied across the aerodrome into position to take off. Out of the corner of my eyes I saw several men run out of the end hut to watch him. There was some excitement, too, I noticed, when they saw us in our spotless uniforms.

Rogers made a good take-off, and it was a load off my mind to know that our people would soon be aware of our plight. He managed to clear the trees, and then began a wide turn to get on his course. As he did so I saw the machine sort of falter, and then go on again. I held my breath. Again it did it. Its nose tilted down and the note of the engine began to change. The nose of the machine dipped still more steeply, and it began to dive. The scream of the wind in the wires rose to a terrifying crescendo, ever increasing in volume. Pieces of fabric began to rip off and float away behind. Down—down—down plunged the machine. Louder became the scream.

Paralysed with horror and as cold as ice, I could only watch. I had seen a death-dive before, and I knew Rogers could never pull out.

There was a crash like the end of the world as the Waco struck close to the middle of the larger of the two lakes. A fountain of black mud spurted high into the air. Faintly to my ears came the soft splash of water as the lake settled down again. Long lines of ripples began to creep towards the muddy shore. The silence was even worse than the noise.

Steeley turned away. He was white to the lips. “Pity about that,” he said quietly. “I liked that boy.”

“That looks like our last link with home gone west,” I managed to get out through dry lips.

“ ’Fraid you’re right, Tubby,” he admitted sadly. “Let’s go and see what’s left in the shed.”

CHAPTER IV

WHEN we turned and faced the hangar the entire Carabonian Air Force was waiting for us, or so it appeared. It consisted of twenty-three men, six of whom were coal-black negroes. Some five or six were as near pure Indian as makes no difference; the rest were graded from coffee-colour to off-white. Only three of them might have passed at a distance for Europeans, and they stood together, slightly apart from the others, as though conscious of their superiority.

I will not attempt to describe their clothes. None wore anything approaching a uniform. Dirty dungaree trousers and rope sandals covered their lower parts, and in most cases that was all, but a few wore open-necked, short-sleeved vests or shirts in various stages of filth and disrepair. In short, they were as noisome a ladleful of scum as could be scooped in any Eastern port.

The whole thing was, of course, fantastic. Incredible. Had they been a little better they might have been a joke, but they were much too dreadful to be comic. And the matter was serious. Any one of them looked capable of anything.

One of the three white men, as nasty-looking a piece of work as ever I saw, left the others, and with his hands in his trousers pockets sauntered towards us. I suspected that it was Air Admiral Jacob Krimm, and I was right.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in a voice that left me in no doubt as to how he felt about us. His manner was the one of cocksure insolence so often adopted by an ignorant coloured man when he has an opportunity of asserting his superiority.

"We've come to take over the station," Steeley told him with better temper than I could have commanded.

"So!" The exclamation suggested that what European blood there was in Krimm was Teutonic. "You go," he warned us harshly. "I Boss here."

"Sorry, but the President has sent us along to do the job. If you don't believe it, or if you don't like it, you'd better go and tell him."

The other nodded slowly. For a moment or two he regarded us speculatively, as if trying to weigh up our fighting qualities; then he expectorated a stream of yellow tobacco juice at our feet, presumably to express his contempt, and walked slowly back to the others.

"Picture of an officer of the Carabonian Air Force relinquishing his command to a brother officer," murmured Steeley dryly. "Ah, well, we live and learn," he added tritely, running his eyes over the rest of his command. "Not a man amongst them," he said sadly. "It would be a waste of time even to speak to them. Let's go and have another look inside the shed."

We spent an hour looking over the junk in the hangar. At some time in the remote past, probably during Gonzales' period of office, an attempt had obviously been made to establish a real Air Force, for there were the remains of several types of aircraft and engines; but it was a long time since any of them had received attention, and with one possible exception they were beyond repair. The only one that offered the slightest promise of getting into the air again was an ancient, four-engined experimental type once used for troop-carrying in the Royal Air Force. Don't ask me how it had got there. Two of the engines had been taken down, but someone, probably poor Rogers, had spent a lot of time on the machine quite recently. It may have been that the American had thought of taking it, but then, for some reason or other, had switched over to the two-seater. Anyway, there it was.

There were several engines lying about, but without taking them down it would have been impossible for anyone to pass an opinion on their condition. Among others, I noticed an old Monosoupape rotary. God knows how it got there. The rest seemed to be mostly junk.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I could do with a bite of something to eat," I said at last. "We haven't had a meal since about six o'clock this morning, and it must be getting on for two."

Steeley looked at me thoughtfully. "I hadn't overlooked it," he said. "Not unnaturally, I fully expected that we should be able to get something here, but even if there is a dining-room, which I doubt, I should be very sorry indeed to eat in it; or, for that matter, eat anything prepared by those shocking thugs outside. I'm not particular, but there are limits."

"What are we going to do about it?"

"There's only one thing we can do as far as I can see, and that's go back to Prava. The car's waiting. In any case, we should have to go back to-night. I don't know what Ramoza meant about quarters here, but I'm not sleeping with those beauties for him or anyone else. I'm not looking forward to it, but

I'm afraid we shall have to have a heart-to-heart talk with our friend the President."

"What about?"

Steeley's manner became deadly serious. "We can't go on with this business, Tubby," he declared emphatically. "I mean—ask yourself. Even if things had been reasonable here, and God knows they're anything but that, after what Rogers and McNash have told us, it would be sheer hypocrisy."

"But can we back out now?"

"Not safely, I'll admit, but we've either got to go on or go back; there's no middle course. I, for one, can't go on. What would we do, anyway? No machines, no mechanics, no nothing. The thing is just a farce. Ramoza must have been crazy to bring us here. He probably won't believe it when I tell him that none of his machines are fit to fly."

"Are you going to tell him that?"

"What else can we tell him? It would only make things worse to lie about them. We shall just have to tell him as nicely as possible that we're very sorry, but there's nothing doing. We should be wasting our time and his by staying here. He can't take exception to that. There is no need for us to tell him that we know he's running a racket, or anything like that."

"All right," I agreed, without enthusiasm.

"Can you think of an alternative?"

"No, I can't," I confessed. "As you say, he's no cause for complaint, because when you get right down to brass tacks, there is no doubt that Marquez got us out here under false pretences. All the same, if what Rogers and McNash said was true, Pedro is not the sort of fellow to be decent, or even civil, about it."

"I don't think he'd dare to try any rough stuff," put in Brian comfortingly.

"You can never be sure what that sort of fellow will do," returned Steeley quietly. "Who's to know what happened to us if he decided to be awkward? He'd just say that we died of fever, or something of the sort, and who is there to deny it? Well, that's the position, and I can't see that beating about the bush is going to do us any good. It would only be postponing the evil day. Sooner or later he's bound to realise that we want to get away, whether we tell him or not, so it will come to the same thing in the end. If he's going to cut up rough, then he will, whatever we do or say. The chief thing is not to let him know that we are *au fait* with the real position, that we've spoken to Rogers and McNash."

It was at that moment I thought I saw the wall of the hangar bulge a little, and a nasty doubt shot into my mind. I nudged Steeley. “Come outside,” I whispered, and walking quickly to the door of the hangar looked along the side where the wall had bulged.

Krimm was leaning against it, smoking a black cigar.

I realised at once that he must have overheard every word we had said, and turned a bitter eye on Steeley. But he only shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say there was nothing we could do about it; and, barring shooting the fellow out of hand to keep his mouth shut, which was going rather far, I suppose he was right.

It was an uncomfortable moment, and I was still wondering what Steeley was going to say or do when the unmistakable drone of an aero engine reached my ears. The others heard it at the same moment, and we all ran into the open, staring up in the direction from which the sound was coming.

“Who the devil can it be?” I muttered in a surprised voice.

“We shall see in a minute,” returned Steeley with exasperating coolness.

“Well, there it is,” murmured Brian, a moment later. “A Gipsy Moth, and a brand-new one, by the look of it. Can you beat that, eh? I ask you. Of all the crazy countries——” He broke off helplessly.

It was quite true. A few hundred feet above the tops of the forest trees, heading in our direction, came what was unmistakably a Moth. It was fairly tootling along, too, with that nice air of confidence an aeroplane displays when it is in the hands of a capable pilot.

“Who is it, and where the devil does he think he’s going?” I asked.

“He must be one of these long-distance merchants, got off his course,” declared Brian.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” said Steeley in a funny sort of voice. With a little perplexed frown on his forehead he was watching the machine, which had now turned slightly and dipped its nose towards us, as if the pilot intended “zooming” the sheds.

I do not think I ever had a bigger shock in my life than when it opened a machine-gun on us. In fact, it was a miracle that I wasn’t killed. Actually, when the *taca-taca-taca-taca-taca* started, I didn’t realise that it was coming from the machine at all; I thought it was someone on the ground shooting at us; but when bits of mud and turf started ripping into the air about us, our dive for cover must have been funny to anyone watching. The entire Air Force, from Air Admiral to the lowest rank, either flung themselves flat or dived for anything that offered protection.

Three times the Moth "shot up" the sheds, coming down to within thirty feet of the ground, with long, raking bursts, fairly plastering us, before it zoomed high and turned away in the direction from which it had come.

"I think someone might at least have warned us that there was a war on," muttered Brian disgustedly, but the end of his observation was drowned in an excited clamour that arose from where the Air Force had taken cover.

"Sounds as if somebody's been hit," said Steeley, hurrying towards the hut from which members of the Carabonian Air Service were emerging, all talking and gesticulating excitedly.

Brian followed him. Frankly, I wouldn't have cared had they all been hit; it wouldn't have caused me the least concern if the whole mob had been wiped out. In fact, it would be in the nature of a blessing.

Watching Steeley advance towards our precious staff did not prevent me from hearing the note of the engine change, and my eyes switched back to the machine. By this time it was a mere speck in the sky, some three or four miles away, and pretty high up, although it was now losing height. I heard the engine *pop* again, and again, and even though the pilot was an enemy, I could find it in my heart to feel sorry for him. The idea of a forced landing in such country as that over which the wretched fellow in the Moth was now gliding, gave me the shivers. Presently it dropped below my field of vision, and I listened intently for the crash. I heard nothing, however, but put it down to the fact that the machine was so far away.

Curiously enough, the others were so taken up with what had happened on the *campo de aterrizaje*, as they called the aerodrome, that not one had noticed the Moth go down.

Steeley came hurrying back. "That was warm work," he said brightly. "Three killed outright and two wounded. They all huddled together, and the same burst got them."

"What are you going to do with the wounded?" I asked.

"God knows," was the disconcerting answer. "They'll both die, anyway. One's got it in the lungs, and the other through the stomach. I'm not a doctor, and apparently it wasn't considered worth while providing the Air Force with one. I doubt very much if there's one in Prava; he wouldn't be any good, anyway, if there was, or he wouldn't be in such a place. The miserable creatures will just have to die, and that's all there is to it. Their comrades are not in the least upset about it; on the contrary, I rather gather from remarks I overheard that the casualties are regarded with satisfaction, as certain card debts have now been washed out and there will be more food for the survivors."

"Pah! What a lot of swine they must be," grunted Brian, coming up. "Just think of it; they've nearly all got rifles or revolvers, and not one of them fired a shot at that machine."

"And now let me tell you something," I said crisply. "The machine's down."

"Down? How so?"

"The engine packed up. I heard it. The last I saw of the machine it was nearly on the tree-tops."

"Good God! Poor devil!"

Steeley's solicitude was shared by us. A pilot in evil case, no matter who he may be, is a pilot first and an enemy afterwards.

"Where the dickens did he come from, that's what I want to know?"

"He must be the fellow McNash told us about, the pilot who is flying for Gonzales' outfit," suggested Steeley.

"Whoever he is, I think we ought to do something about it," I put in. "He can't be far away. Look here, I tell you what," I continued, as an idea came into my head. "The road goes on in the direction which must take it somewhere near the crash. You two stay here for a bit and see what you can fix up in the way of an aircraft—that's the most urgent thing; I'll get Sambo to drive me on for a bit and see if I can locate the crash. I shouldn't sleep to-night for thinking that perhaps some poor devil is out there in the jungle with a broken leg, being eaten alive by leeches."

Brian shuddered.

"I think that's a good idea," agreed Steeley. "Don't be very long, though; we must try to get back to Prava before dark."

"Good enough," I declared as I started off. "I shan't be more than a couple of hours at the outside."

To my surprise and annoyance, Sambo, our black chauffeur, absolutely stuck his toes in and refused to go a yard farther up the road. From a rambling protest that poured from his ugly mouth I gathered that it was not safe, for more reasons than one, not the least being the risk of stray bullets from Gonzales' *peons*, who sometimes made sorties as far as the road, which led to Puebla, some sixty miles away, the only other town of any size in Carabonia.

I'm afraid my temper gave out at that. I kicked him out of the car and, getting in myself, started off on what was to be—although I did not suspect it—one of the most remarkable adventures of my life.

CHAPTER V

THE track, which in the early stages had been bad enough, grew steadily worse. I had heard a lot about tropical jungles, and I had seen one or two, but this was easily the worst. It was a place of death; a gloomy, dark-green world in which occasional rank growths of orchids, or petals that had fallen from blossoms high overhead, were the only spots of colour. The earth was soft; it steamed and it stank. Of the horrors that crawled beneath the mat of rotting vegetation I preferred not to think.

I had been going about three-quarters of an hour, and had covered perhaps four miles, when I came to a fork. The road split, one part going round to the right and the other bearing to the left. The right-hand one was definitely the better of the two, but the left-hand one seemed to lead more in the direction in which I wanted to go, so I took it. I managed to stick it for about a mile, but then it became so awful, and I made such slow progress, that I decided I should do better afoot. So out I got, and leaving the car where it was, set off at the best pace I could manage, with sweat fairly pouring off me.

Another mile or so and I saw to my surprise—not to say satisfaction—that a little way ahead of me the light grew much brighter, as if the forest was more open. I soon discovered that this was, in fact, the case, and I pushed on with renewed vigour, knowing that I could not now be far from the place where the Moth had come down. I watched the tree-tops as well as the ground, for it seemed quite likely that if the pilot had "pancaked," as seemed a natural thing to do, the machine might easily have got hung up in the branches.

Another quarter of a mile and the forest petered out altogether, being replaced by luxuriant *palmetto*, which in turn presently gave way to open, short-turfed *pampa*. And there, sure enough, not far from the edge of the bristling *palmetto*, with his back towards me, working under the open cowling of his engine, was the pilot. That he had managed to get down all right was evident, for the machine was on even keel, and not even the undercarriage appeared damaged.

This was something I certainly had not expected, a stroke of luck that might put a very different complexion on our position, and a delightful

picture floated before my eyes, in which I was landing triumphantly at Campanella, having saved the situation.

Automatic in hand, my feet making no noise on the soft turf, I advanced upon the unsuspecting pilot, who was clad in white overalls; but at a distance of about ten yards I trod on a twig, and at the sharp snap he twirled round as though he had been stung.

I say "he" deliberately because up to that moment it had not occurred to me that the pilot would be anybody but a man, but I now saw with no mild shock that I had been mistaken. The pilot was a girl. And what a girl! I am not much good at superlatives in connection with the female face and form, but I'll do my best. East and west, during a somewhat chequered career, I have seen many lovely women, but never before had I seen such a picture of perfect classical beauty as my prisoner made as she stood in front of me, her back against the nose of the machine, her dark eyes wide open and a little afraid, hands, with fingers outspread, held away from her lithe body, lips parted with anxiety, revealing teeth that were as white and evenly matched as pearls in a queen's necklace.

She was about twenty years of age, not more, with the perfect oval face that one often reads about but only finds in Central Spain. Her skin, now colourless, and without make-up of any sort, was the wonderful texture and colour of new ivory, and threw into vivid contrast her hair, brushed flat and parted Madonna-wise, and perfectly arched eyebrows, which were as black as polished ebony. Her eyes—but there, what is the use of going into extravagant clichés in order to try to describe something for which there is no real comparison?

Such was my first impression of Anita Gonzales. Believe it or not, I fell in love with her at that moment. I am in love with her now. I shall always be in love with her. From so prosaic a thing as the wheel of an aeroplane she crept into my heart and nestled there. Not that I realised it at the time. But as we stood there staring at each other—and God alone knows how long we did stand there—I knew that I could no more take her machine away from her than I could kill a child, not even if it meant walking all the way back to New York. But I did not tell her so.

She spoke first. "Who are you, señor?" she asked in liquid Castilian.

I told her that I was Deputy-Admiral Wilde, of the Carabonia Air Force, and that in view of her attack upon the aerodrome she must consider herself my prisoner. I also asked her for her name. It was then that she told me, proudly, that she was Señorita Anita Gonzales.

I put my automatic away. It seemed absurd and *infra dig*. to stand there holding the muzzle pointed at a girl.

"But you are not of Carabonia?" she said.

"No," I admitted, "I am English. I have just arrived. I was on the aerodrome when you attacked it, and I saw your machine go down."

"So you followed, in order to try to kill your enemy?"

"On the contrary, señorita, I came to save him, if that were possible," I protested truthfully. "I am a pilot, and the thought that another pilot might be lying injured in *that* disturbed my peace of mind." I pointed towards the forest. When I looked back at her she had moved slightly. I hadn't heard her, and she must have done it like lightning. There was a different expression on her face. She was smiling slightly, and soon I saw the reason. Pointing at me from her hip was a small but nasty-looking revolver.

I looked at her reproachfully while she regarded me thoughtfully, without malice.

"I am sorry, señor, but, the tables are now turned, and you are my prisoner," she said quietly. "Do not force me to shoot you. My gun is not a toy. In case you doubt it, observe that bush." She pointed to a stunted prickly-pear about twelve yards away. On the edge of one of the thick, fleshy leaves were three ripe fruits. Three times her revolver roared, the three shots coming so close together that they sounded like a short burst from a machine-gun, and the fruits were no longer there. A spray of red pulp spattered over the ground.

I blinked. "Yes, señorita," I said sadly, "I'll believe you."

She laughed musically, and walking over took my own weapon from my pocket, the muzzle of her gun pressing against the pit of my stomach as she did so.

She stopped, still standing very close, and turned her big dark eyes to mine. "And now, señor," she said softly, "you may go."

That was very nice of her, but I didn't want to go, and I told her so.

"Why not?" she asked in surprise.

I couldn't very well tell her the truth, but I did the next best thing. "Are there any vacancies in your Air Force?" I asked her seriously.

She stared. "But why?"

"Because I'd sooner fight for you than that murdering tyrant Ramoza," I told her frankly.

"So you have discovered that he is a tyrant?" she murmured gravely.

"I only landed in Carabonia this morning, señorita, but what little I have seen is more than enough to convince me that my friends and I have made a mistake."

"Your friends?"

I told her about Steeley and Brian. "Look, señorita," I said at the finish, "let us call a truce, at least for a little while. I will give you my parole for an hour; at the end of that time, without reopening hostilities, we will reconsider the position."

She put her revolver away at once, which flattered me not a little.

"First of all, what's the matter with your engine?" I asked.

"I don't know," she answered frankly. "I do not know so much about engines as I should," she admitted naïvely.

"Then we'd better try to put that right for a start, in case it becomes necessary for you to depart hurriedly," I declared. "How far are you from home?"

"Eighty miles. The *hacienda* is beyond those." She pointed to a range of hills that ran like a saw across the horizon. It had not been possible to see them before, on account of the forest.

"Do you carry any spare rations?" I asked her as I set about tackling the engine.

She produced a packet of biscuits, and we munched them between us as I worked. She also told me a lot about the country, and what her father hoped to do, which confirmed in detail what Rogers and McNash had told us. It all went to convince me that we were fighting on the wrong side.

I had a devil of a job with the engine. The trouble was caused by a piece of solder having got loose and jammed in what she called the *tubo de la gasolina*, which is a much prettier way of saying petrol pipe; I wasn't long locating it, but it was an awkward business getting it out. However, it was done at last, and with the engine giving its full revs., I stepped back, noting with some alarm that twilight was beginning to close in.

"My grateful thanks, señor," said my fair captor, earnestly. "Without your help I should have had a long walk home, and a dangerous one. Meanwhile," she continued, with a faint smile curving her lips, "your parole. The time has expired."

"As far as I am concerned, it still stands. I am your prisoner until you tell me to go," I answered meaningly. She understood, I think, for a faint flush showed for an instant on her cheeks. "You had better start for home," I went

on quickly, “for the light is failing, and if you do not hurry you will have to make a night landing.”

“And you?” she queried.

“What about me?”

“What are you going to do?”

“I suppose I shall have to walk back.”

“That would be bad. At night the forest is alive with leeches and other unpleasant things. Even if you did get back to Campanella, you would be in a sorry state.”

“Is there an alternative, señorita?” I asked, hoping fervently that there was.

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“Come back with me. Come and talk to my father. Then, even if you do not stay with us, you will not return to serve the villain Ramoza.”

I did some quick thinking. The President’s car had been abandoned in the jungle, but that did not worry me very much. I was more concerned about Steeley and Brian, who would already be getting worried. Still, the hazards of the forest journey by night were not to be lightly dismissed, and it did not take me long to make up my mind. A few words with Señor Gonzales might completely alter our precarious position. Sooner or later I should be able to find a way of getting in touch with Steeley again, when I could tell him what had transpired. Besides, I wanted to go with Anita, for already the thought of leaving her was distasteful to me.

I bowed. “Señorita,” I murmured, “I am at your service.”

In five minutes we were in the air, heading westward over the silent *pampa*. Anita had allowed me to assist her into her seat; for a moment our fingers had touched, and at the thrill of contact a new vista that had nothing to do with poor, suffering Carabonia, had unfolded before my eyes.

CHAPTER VI

DON ANTONIO GONZALES was an aristocrat from the toes of his elastic-sided riding-boots to the bald spot in the centre of his grey hair. He was a man of about fifty years of age, with a rather sad, ascetic face, fine dark eyes, and a poise that comes from generations of command. A pointed grey beard enhanced his knightly bearing; in armour he would have been one of the Conquistadores who came with Pizarro to conquer the New World.

He received me courteously, but not without a little suspicion, as his daughter presented me in the dining-room of their magnificent *hacienda*, after we had landed on the rolling plain that stretched for miles beyond the extensive paddocks of the estate. My position was, I felt, unique, and I asked permission to explain it. This being granted, we sat, the three of us (Anita's mother being dead) on the *patio*, with a bottle of rare sherry on the table between us. He heard me out in silence while I told him the full story of our ill-advised enlistment into the Carabonian Air Service, and our subsequent adventures.

"And what are your plans now?" he asked when I had finished.

"Until I met your daughter, I had only one, which was to get out of the country as quickly as possible," I told him frankly. "Even now I imagine my friends have no thought beyond that."

"Have you?"

I was rather taken aback at his abrupt question. "Clearly, there is only one thing I can do, that is to return to them in order that their anxiety on my behalf may be allayed," I told him. "Further, I am anxious to let them know that I have met you, which will confirm the rather improbable story told to us by the Scotchman, McNash."

"What he told you was no more than the truth."

"Having met you, sir, I no longer find any difficulty in believing it."

Don Antonio bowed gracefully at the implied compliment, and then, for the best part of an hour, entertained me with the full facts of the case, concluding with the amazing story of how Anita had gone to the United States, learned to fly, and then flown a machine home from the Pacific Coast in order that she might in some way help to depose the monster who was

slowly but surely bleeding the wretched country to death. There was no doubt that Don Antonio was the people's only hope of salvation.

"And your son, sir?" I asked. "Is it true that he is a prisoner?"

"My only son, Ramon, is a prisoner in the castle," was the quiet reply, but I could feel the pain and anxiety in the old man's voice.

"We must try to get him out," I said automatically, rather unthinkingly.

"That, I fear, is impossible," was the hopeless reply. "Ramoza goes in such fear of assassination that it is out of the question for anyone to pass the guards with which he has surrounded himself."

"We can but try," I persisted optimistically, and the glance that I got from Anita made the perhaps vainglorious statement pardonable. "The first difficulty seems to be the getting back to Campanella," I went on. "That is, assuming you are willing to let me go."

"You really wish to help us?" The old man regarded me with such pathos that a lump came into my throat.

"Sir," I said, "I owe no allegiance to the man who brought me here; if ever such allegiance were assumed, then it has been rendered null and void by his actions. I have only my word to offer, but you have it that while I am in Carabonia I shall be on your side. Moreover, should you think fit to accept what small assistance I can give you, then I am at your service until such time as you care to dispense with it." I held out my hand.

Don Antonio gripped it with an eagerness that astonished me. "Your words inspire me with new hope," he said with emotion. "You may think I have been easily downcast, but you can have no idea of what it has been like to wage a long, losing war alone. True, I have my *peons* here, and in spite of all that Ramoza has done to destroy them, I still have friends in Prava. They would give their lives for me and for my cause; many have already done so, and that is why I have been reduced to despair. But now something tells me that the tide has turned and our fortunes will flow the other way."

"That's fine," I said awkwardly, not knowing what else to say. In truth, the old man's sincerity rather overwhelmed me. "I had better get back to Campanella or Prava as soon as possible," I continued after a moment or two, "in order that I may enlist the help of my friends. Can you make any suggestions as to how I can get back?"

"We will arrange it, although it may take a few days," Gonzales shook me by saying.

"A few *days*!" I cried, aghast. "I was thinking of hours."

"What is the hurry?" asked the old man.

I realised that I was up against the inevitable Latin procrastination, *mañana*, the "never do to-day what can be done to-morrow" business that sends the average Saxon in Latin countries into hysterics until he learns to control himself.

I turned to Anita. "Do you ever fly by moonlight?" I asked.

"I have flown once or twice at night, but not from choice," she answered readily. "Why, what were you thinking of?"

"There is a moon to-night; I was thinking that you might fly me over to Campanella."

"Why not to-morrow, in daylight?"

"Because I should be seen landing, and it would be known that I had been here, which would make my task much harder."

"That is true," she agreed. "Very well, I will fly you by night. I will wear my parachute," she added quickly as her father looked at her askance.

A new idea flashed into my head. It had not occurred to me that she might possess a parachute. "Listen, señorita," I said quickly. "I have a better plan. Let me wear the parachute and then it will not be necessary for you to land at Campanella at all, and that is the most dangerous part of the whole undertaking. Flying very high towards the aerodrome, you can switch off your engine as we pass over it. Then you will be neither seen nor heard. No one will know how I got back. All you have to do then is come straight back here and land."

She looked dubious, and so did the old man. "Are you not afraid to take such a risk?" he asked curiously.

"My dear sir, I am far more frightened than you can possibly imagine, but I cannot allow that to stand in the way of my plans," I told him.

He nodded slowly. "I begin to understand how you British always succeed," he murmured.

"Provided the parachute opens, the only risk I run is of falling into one of those beastly lakes," I declared, with a good deal more confidence than I felt.

"I would take you far beyond them; it is all open country there," put in Anita quickly. "It will be a longer walk to the road, but that will be better than taking a chance of dropping into either the forest or the lakes."

I agreed, with an emphasis that made them both smile. "Then, happy as I am to be with you, señor, and señorita, I think it would be a good thing if I made an early start, for the moon has already risen." I turned to Don

Antonio. “Have you any idea of the position of the room in the castle in which your son is confined?”

“None, but I think he is most likely to be in one of the prisoner cells that are cut down in the rock on which the castle is built. There is a line of them, each with an unglazed, barred window overlooking the harbour.”

“If the windows are barred I had better take a file or a hacksaw,” I murmured.

“You can’t reach them from the ground. There is a sheer drop of about thirty feet to a ramp, a sort of wide ledge that runs all round the castle except for the area occupied by the courtyard.”

“In which case I shall need a rope,” I declared, feeling that I was being foolishly dramatic. “I will also take my pistol,” I added, “if the señorita will return it to me.”

Really, I was only talking for the sake of saying something. Having committed myself utterly, possibly under the influence of Anita’s lovely eyes, I was scared stiff of that jump in the dark. What with that, and talk of files and ropes. . . . However, I couldn’t back out now, so while dinner was being prepared I went with Anita to her small workshop to collect such things as I thought might be useful, without seriously supposing that I should have to use them. Apart from the jump, the whole project was medieval; there was no other word for it.

I selected a small, but useful-looking hacksaw, and a rope. The rope was clumsy, and I said so, whereupon Anita disappeared for a few minutes to return with a fine hide lariat, which, being thinner, yet even stronger than the rope, was likely to suit my purpose better. She also gave me my automatic, and with this in my pocket I declared that I was fully equipped for what, in my heart, I felt certain would be my last adventure.

For a minute or two we were alone in the workshop with only the light of the moon and a small oil lamp.

“It is wonderful to think you are really going to try to rescue Ramon,” said Anita quietly, looking up at me.

“I shall do my best, señorita,” I answered seriously.

Her eyes met mine. “It is noble of you,” she whispered. “Why should you risk your life for a stranger?”

“Since you ask me, because Ramon is your brother, Anita,” I replied quietly.

She dropped her eyes and I knew that she understood. She gave me her hand and I raised it to my lips. “That which sends me on this mission will

carry me to success and bring me back," I said softly.

"This night I shall pray that you may succeed," she whispered. "When you come back I shall be here, señor."

"The memory of your words will be the compass that will bring me back," I swore. "Come, we must go. I would not have your father think there is a motive in my new allegiance."

We returned to the dining-room, where a meal was waiting, and where—whatever Anita may have thought of it—I proceeded to prove that, although poets have often declared to the contrary, good honest affection does not interfere with the appetite.

"One other thing rather exercises my mind, señor," I said, between courses. "Assuming that I am fortunate enough to get Ramon outside the castle, how are we to get back here? Does he know the way, and even if he does, is it possible to walk?"

Don Antonio thought deeply for a moment or two. "This is a difficult place to reach," he said at last. "Which accounts for the fact that I have been allowed to remain here in comparative peace. It ought to be possible for you to get to the place where Anita tells me she landed in her aeroplane this afternoon, but it is a long way round, and even then many obstacles would still lie between you and this *hacienda*. There is a much nearer way through the forest, but you could not hope to find it alone. You would need a guide. I will, therefore, entrust you with a secret. If you succeed in getting Ramon out of the castle, or if, indeed, you are forced to return here without him, go to the Villa Valencia, in the Strada Reale, where lives an old friend of mine named Fernando Nuez, who has so far escaped the persecution. The street leads inland from the end of the wharf, so you will have no difficulty in finding it. The house cannot be mistaken, for there are five palm trees growing close together in the garden. Knock on the door twice quickly, and repeat it three times. Fernando will then admit you. Tell him that you have come from me and he will hide you until such time as he can procure Indian guides to bring you through the forest. It may be that he will be able to send me a runner who would reach here in two days, when I would send horses to meet you. That, I think, is the best plan."

I thanked him for his suggestion and for his confidence.

At the end of the meal I felt a good deal better, and anxious to get on with my task, so as soon as we had finished coffee I asked my host to permit me to depart.

Before we left the table we had one little ceremony. A soft-footed Indian servant charged our glasses with exquisite Amontillado, and Don Antonio

toasted Carabonia and success in my mission. I added a rider of my own, *sotto voce*, about confusion to Ramoza, and thereafter we adjourned to the corral where the Moth had been parked. Anita fetched the "brolly," but before putting it on I wound the lariat round and round my body, under my jacket, as the easiest place to carry it. I swung the prop; a last handshake with my new *padrone*, who kissed his daughter fondly, and we took our places, Anita in the rear cockpit, me in the front one. A wave, a roar, and we were off, climbing up over the moon-drenched *savannah*.

It was rather a wonderful flight, one that will live in my memory for ever. The night was still. The moon hung like a great white lamp in the star-spangled sky, making the distant rolling landscape a soft world of vague, mysterious shadows, while the nearness of Anita and the nature of my mission provided a background of romance for what was, in fact, an enterprise so desperate that in cold blood I should have shrunk from it in horror and alarm.

Anita climbed slowly for height all the way, and we must have been at eight or nine thousand feet when the break in the forest appeared, with the aerodrome beyond it. A spark of yellow light glowed from the window of the end shed.

The noise of the engine died away as Anita cut the throttle, and the roaring hum gave way to the soft whine of wind in the wires. A feeling of unreality began to steal over me, a sensation of fantasy, as one sometimes gets in a dream. Was I really flying over unknown country with a beautiful girl at the joystick? I pinched myself to make sure that I was awake.

Still gliding without power, we began to edge away from the aerodrome, and then made a detour which brought us to the far side of the two lakes that gleamed in the moonlight like pieces of broken looking-glass. The wings of the Moth rocked suddenly, and I knew the time had come.

Actually, I was not so afraid as I had expected to be. The knowledge that Anita was watching me, and that what I was doing I was really doing for her, may have had something to do with it. Gingerly I got out of my seat and stood near the trailing edge of the lower port plane, balancing myself by holding the fuselage with my left hand. I looked at Anita. She had pushed her goggles up and was watching. Her hand, ungloved, came out to me. For an instant I pressed it to my lips, before feeling for the release ring. I felt it was unlikely that I should see her again. "*Adios, carissima mia*," I cried, waving my hand to her. Then I dived into the void.

CHAPTER VII

FIVE seconds later I was swinging in a dark-blue vault between heaven and earth. "So far, so good," I thought. The parachute had functioned. It's funny how the mind works at such moments; if it hadn't opened I should have been dead by now and unable to worry about it, yet because it had worked, I was still able to think about it and contemplate the result if it hadn't. Quite absurd, of course. Where were those accursed devil's-washpans? I coined the name for the lakes on the spur of the moment, and it fitted them very well. There they were, well over to the left, between me and the hangar. I ought to miss them by a good margin. Good girl, Anita; she had judged her position well.

As usual, at the finish the ground seemed to rush up at me, and I struck it heavily, but it was soft, and although I fell, I arose unhurt. As the silk billowed down beside me there was a sudden squelching noise not far away, as if something heavy was walking through a mire, and with my heart going pit-a-pat I grabbed at my pistol. But in a few seconds the noise died away, and utter silence fell; so I rolled up the parachute and, making a bundle of it under my arm, set off towards the distant light, shaping my course as near as I could for the neck of land that divided the two lakes.

I had not taken more than a dozen paces when a long dark shadow started up in front of me and squirmed across my path; it gave me such a nasty turn that I broke out into a perspiration, but the beast—whatever it was—disappeared, so, feeling not in the least happy, I went on again, keeping an anxious watch in front of me. The sensation of expecting to tread on something alive at every step was disconcerting, to say the least of it.

The ground became softer as I neared the lakes; in fact, it quaked rather terrifyingly under my feet, as if I was walking on a thin crust that might break and let me through at any moment; but I could now see the water, and, determined to get the business over as quickly as possible, hurried towards the strip of land that lay like a narrow causeway between them.

It was the crocodile's eyes that I saw first. It lay like a great black log across my path, and but for the fact that it must have moved its head a trifle, so that its eyes caught the moonlight, I might have walked right into it. I didn't like the way it lay still, watching me; its indifference to my presence

suggested an absence of the fear that had been displayed by every other crocodile I had seen on dry land, and, reluctant to use my pistol, which could hardly fail to rouse the camp, I looked about me for a missile; a piece of wood, a stone or even a clod. Luckily, there was a piece of dead wood lying a little to my right—or what I thought was wood. God knows what it was; it must have been a thick, bloated snake, or an enormous centipede of some sort. Anyway, my hand was not a yard away from it when it suddenly jerked up with a vicious hiss. I bolted incontinently, nor did I stop until I was satisfied that the thing was not pursuing me.

It was while I was standing undecided, fighting to steady my nerves, that I felt something warm running down my leg. Choking back a cry, I pulled up the bottom half of my slacks to see what it was. My calf was black with leeches. Great black brutes like over-grown slugs. I nearly panicked. How I didn't, I don't know, but I had to fight myself to keep my head. I had enough sense to realise that to lose it would be fatal, not only to my enterprise but to myself. "God!" I muttered desperately. "I must get out of this or I shall be eaten alive."

The croc was still lying in the same place, and it was really in a fit of rage that I flung the rolled-up parachute at it. Evidently it didn't like that, for with a grunt it scuttled away. Not until then did I see its full size, and the sight left me aghast. However, I picked up the parachute and hurried on. But I didn't get far.

I can't recall the moment when I first realised that the path I had chosen, the isthmus as it were, was literally crawling-alive with crocodiles. The dreadful revelation came to me slowly. I saw one. Then another. Then others. There must have been hundreds of them. That finished me. I knew it was useless to try to work round either of the lakes, for they were much too large; in any case, there was no reason to suppose that I should not find the same conditions. Camp or no camp, Ramoza or no Ramoza, I knew I had got to get off that ghastly marsh or go mad. Whipping out my automatic, I took rough aim at the nearest monster and let drive.

The result of the shot baffles description. The marsh—or what I could see of it—came to life. Before the echoes of the explosion had died away the edge of the motionless water was churned into a seething maelstrom as every crocodile bolted into it. Elated by my success I dashed forward, firing another shot as I ran.

Once started, I ran amok. I couldn't stop. Sheer blind panic was at my heels, and I went across that neck of land as if a thousand devils were behind me. Nor did I stop when I got to the far side. The lamp in the hut beckoned me as a lighthouse calls a lost bird on a dark night, and I did not slow down

until I was within striking distance of it. Then common sense came to my rescue and bade me take heed. I stood still and listened. Silence. Whether the Air Force was so accustomed to stray shots that one or two more or less meant nothing, I do not know, but no one had troubled to come out to investigate.

The hangar was in darkness. Steeley and Brian were not there, evidently. However, I went along to make sure. "Steeley!" I said quietly, but there was no reply, so I crept back towards the lighted window.

On my way I passed near a heap of something that I could not remember having seen before, so I took a pace nearer to see what it was. My blood seemed to freeze as I found myself staring at a pile of corpses, six or seven of them. And they were not alone. The leeches had found them. With a shudder that made my teeth rattle, I went back to the hangar, and pulling a can of petrol from the pile I had marked down, poured the whole lot over my legs and feet, soaking my trousers. As I expected, the leeches didn't like that, and I was able to shake them off easily. With an idea that I might be able to return it to Anita sometime, I then hid the parachute I still carried under the pile of tarpaulins that had concealed McNash. What was going on in the hut? I decided that I had better look and see, so, taking my courage in both hands, I slunk past the ghastly pile of carrion and peered through the window.

The scene was pretty much as I expected it to be, except that I was surprised—why, I don't really know—to see Sambo, the black chauffeur, there. In the centre of the mud floor four men were playing cards on a crude table. Sambo was one, Krimm another. A bottle of what looked like rum stood beside an empty one in which a candle had been stuck. Scattered about the floor in various attitudes of ungraceful repose, without coverings of any sort, lay the surviving members of the Carabonian Air Force, asleep or drunk. I knew not which, nor did I care. It was like a scene in Grand Guignol.

I stepped back, wondering what to do for the best. Frankly, the idea of disturbing the hell-party inside made no appeal to me at all. Had I had someone with me, the moral courage that the presence of a comrade lends would have made it different; it is never quite the same when one is alone. Still, I reflected, they would probably be able to tell me something about Steeley and Brian, and where they had gone. Was it necessary to ask them? If they weren't here, there was only one place where they could be, and that was in Prava, probably in the palace. Perhaps it would be as well to make sure. Putting on a brave front, I went round to the door, pushed it open, and entered.

The heads of the four card players jerked round as one man. Krimm half-rose to his feet, hand flashing to his pocket. And thus, for two or three tense seconds, we stared at each other.

"Where are my friends?" I asked at last, addressing Krimm.

"Gone."

"Where?"

"Prava."

Sambo chipped in, with a smile that was no doubt intended to be disarming, but which did not deceive me for a moment. All the same, I was glad of the information he gave me; it sounded genuine. Apparently what had happened was this. When I did not come back Steeley and Brian had set out to look for me, as I fully expected they would. They had not found me, but they had found the car, and realising that I had abandoned it, they had brought it back to Campanella, whereupon Sambo had insisted upon taking it back to Prava in case the President needed it. Perceiving that the chauffeur would be likely to get into hot water if they withheld it, and, further, that with its departure would go their last chance of getting back to Prava that night, they had gone with him, their decision being influenced to some extent by the fact that they had had no food all day and could not go on with the search without some. The upshot of it was, therefore, that Steeley and Brian were in Prava, presumably at the palace.

Naturally, I asked Sambo why he had come back to Campanella, to which he offered the not unreasonable explanation that when the President learned of my disappearance he had sent him—that is, Sambo—back to the aerodrome in case I turned up and found myself stranded. He was playing cards to pass the time until I came. He was very glad that I had come, for now we could both return to Prava.

I was not exactly enamoured with the idea of a night drive through the forest with Sambo, nor did I like the look on Krimm's face as he listened intently to the conversation, but there was nothing else for it but to go. In any case, I was anxious to get to Prava myself, and there was no other way. Much as I disliked the idea of riding with Sambo, I disliked still more the idea of walking all that way by myself. So we went.

The drive through the jungle was no better and no worse than I expected it to be. The two oil lamps with which the car was fitted were, of course, hopelessly inadequate for such a journey and such a road, but by a little judgment and a devil of a lot of luck we managed to get there. My watch had stopped, but I figured that it was something after midnight by the time we creaked into the courtyard of the palace.

Now, during the entire trip my mind had been exercised as to the best procedure to adopt when I arrived. Naturally, I wanted to see Steeley and Brian first of all, but without knowing in the least how they were situated it was difficult to make any sort of plan. In view of what Ramoza had said about providing accommodation at the palace "in case of trouble", I imagined that they would be settled in some sort of quarters, in which case I did not expect any difficulty in finding them; nevertheless, I had developed an unexplainable feeling of uneasiness that made me loath to announce my arrival with any sort of ceremony.

It was this vague disquiet that made me avoid the front door, which was literally stiff with troops; instead, I walked across the courtyard to a narrow side door, adjacent to what appeared to be a guardroom, through the lighted window of which I could see five or six of Ramoza's hired cut-throats.

My uniform was, thanks to my berserk rush across the aerodrome, nearly as dirty as theirs were, so, attracting no particular attention, I came upon the sergeant of the guard (if there was such a thing as an N.C.O. in the Carabonian Army) in somewhat informal circumstances. He was sitting on a rough wooden seat built against the wall of the castle itself, making desperate love to a lady whose coal-black complexion suggested that she might be Sambo's sister; and, if appearances were anything to go by, his suit was progressing favourably. Very favourably.

He was not in the least embarrassed when I walked up and addressed him. Admittedly, he stood up with surprising alacrity, although such details of military regulations as saluting were not observed in Carabonia. He knew who I was, of course, and in answer to my question as to whether he knew where the Air Admiral was, he assured me that he did. The negress giggled, as if it were a great joke. Was he in the palace? I inquired, ignoring the woman. Yes, he was, and he—the sergeant—would be only too pleased to take me to him.

So far, so good. It began to look as though my fears were without foundation.

Ignoring his mistress, the sergeant fetched a lantern from the guardroom, showed me through the rather forbidding portal, and after leading the way through a maze of stone corridors, steadily descending, finally pulled up before one of a number of stoutly built wooden doors in a long, gloomy passage. He took a bunch of several large iron keys from his pocket, selected one, unlocked the door and invited me to enter.

For a moment I hung back, not liking the look of the place at all; the whole situation savoured too much of " 'won't you walk into my parlour,'

said the spider to the fly."

"Are you there, Steeley?" I called sharply.

To my intense relief his voice reached me. "Good God! It's Tubby," I heard him say, presumably to Brian.

I waited for no more, but took a quick pace forward. Instantly the door slammed behind me, and I heard the key grate in the lock.

"What the devil does that fellow think he's doing?" I asked angrily, not without alarm.

"Doing?" came Steeley's voice from the darkness. "Didn't you realise that we were prisoners?"

I could have kicked the door down in my rage at having been fooled so easily, but I mastered my temper. "No, I'm damned if I did," I answered shortly, and struck a match.

CHAPTER VIII

THE feeble yellow light did not last long, but it enabled me to form a good idea of the situation, both in respect of Steeley and Brian and the sort of place we were in. The room, or, to be more accurate, cell, was about ten yards long by half as many wide, with a semicircular roof that started from the floor on either side. In other words it was like a large culvert, or a tube cut in halves, and the roughly finished floor and walls told me that it had been cut out of the solid rock. Driven into the walls at intervals were huge iron staples, to which were attached lengths of chain, with gyves on the end, after the manner of medieval dungeons. The place was, in fact, a dungeon. What was even worse, Steeley and Brian were in chains.

"How the devil did this happen?" I asked, a trifle hoarsely.

"Krimm overheard what we said at Campanella, told Sambo to tell Vincenti, which he did," returned Steeley coolly. "That's all, except that we didn't know. We thought we were being shown to some proper quarters, instead of which we were just shoved in here."

"Have you seen Ramoza?"

"No; he's got a party of some sort on, but he knows all about it."

"Has Vincenti been to see you?"

"Yes, it was he who told us about Sambo spilling the beans."

"I'll shoot that treacherous, black-faced swine," I swore. "He brought me here. No wonder he was grinning like a Cheshire cat."

"What happened to you?" asked Steeley.

"It's a long story. I haven't time to tell you now. They may come back at any moment to search me. But I've seen Gonzales and joined his side. I came back with the bright idea of trying to rescue his son, Ramon, who is in here somewhere, but it seems to me that I shall have to rescue myself first—hark!"

Footsteps were coming down the passage.

"My God! Here they come," I muttered in a fever of anxiety. "Here, laddie, grab these things and sit on them." Brian being the nearer, I shoved matches, automatic, and hacksaw into his hands. The lariat was not so easy, for it was wound round my body. Throwing off my jacket, I gave the end of

the line to Brian and then unwound myself while he spun me like a top. It was a dizzy business, in every sense of the word, for a key was turning in the lock before I had finished. However, I got the lariat clear and just had time to slip on my jacket, without buttoning it, when the door was thrown open and Vincenti, with a squad of guards behind him, stood outlined in the yellow glow of the sergeant's lantern.

At a word from the General I was seized and thoroughly searched. Everything, including my money, was taken out of my pockets. When it was finished I was dragged roughly to the wall, where a gyve was locked on my right ankle. I did not protest. In the first place, it would have been no use, and secondly, I was anxious for them to go without disturbing Brian, and thus discovering our only hopes of escape.

"Gentlemen, it is my unpleasant duty to inform you that by the President's orders your commissions have been terminated," said the General suavely. "Further, as for reasons of State it is not thought advisable that you should leave the country, and there would be no purpose in keeping you here indefinitely, you will be shot as soon as it grows light."

Not one of us said a word. There was something so deadly definite in the General's manner. I think we all realised that it would have been a sheer waste of time to make any sort of protest.

Vincenti, rather unnecessarily, made a stiff little bow before he withdrew. The light disappeared. The door slammed. The lock turned. The tramp of footsteps in the corridor died away and silence fell.

A burning hatred such as I have never before experienced surged through me. "O.K., Mr. Vincenti," I snarled. "We'll see what can be done between now and daylight. If ever I get within striking distance of you, you won't forget it in a hurry. Get a light going, Brian, and pass me the hacksaw."

"Great Scott! Have you got a hacksaw?" burst out Steeley tensely, one of the few occasions on which I have seen him get worked up over anything.

"I have," I told him with considerable satisfaction.

"Since when have you started carrying a hacksaw about with you?"

"Since I met Anita Gonzales, and promised to get her brother out of this place."

"I see. So it's like that, eh?" observed Steeley slowly.

"It is," I said. "Any further comments, or shall we get busy?"

Steeley laughed his low, musical laugh. "Take it easy, old boy," he admonished me.

On the contrary, I let off steam on Brian's chain with such good effect that in ten minutes he was free, although the loose shackle was still around his ankle. Luckily, the chains were of soft iron, not steel, so the saw bit into the links like a bread-knife going through a stale loaf. Brian cut Steeley clear next, and then he freed me.

"Now, let's have a look at the window," I suggested, getting up.

There was only one, very much as I expected to find it after what Gonzales had told me, for I had no doubt but that we were in the cells he had mentioned. It was about four feet from the ground, roughly two by two and a half feet, oblong, with three iron bars upright in the middle, but, owing to the thickness of the rock, they were set well back and rather awkward to get at. However, by taking it in turns, we soon had two of them out, which made an opening large enough for us to look down and see what lay below.

I fancy we were a bit lucky, for as I stood staring down at a rather formidable drop which ended on a broad sort of ramp that ran the full length of the wall, a sentry came strolling round the corner. Strolling is the right word. Judging by his manner and the way he carried his rifle in a reversed position across the back of his neck, his job was merely a matter of form, but had he come along when we were sawing he could hardly have failed to have heard us. As it was, we suspended operations until he had passed out of sight round an angle of the wall.

Another five minutes and the last bar was out, and we were ready to depart.

"What exactly is underneath?" asked Brian.

I had another look. "There's a path about thirty feet immediately below us and then a steep bank of prickly-pear and stuff that seems to go down into some gardens at the back of a row of houses. It looks all plain sailing unless the sentry comes round the corner when we are half-way down the rope." The rope was, of course, the lariat, but it was easier to say rope.

We fixed it in position by the simple expedient of tying one end to one of the loose iron bars, and then wedging the bar crossways. We did not lower the rope, though, but held it ready to drop at a moment's notice.

I gave the automatic to Steeley. Brian picked up one of the other two bars while I stuck the last one through my belt with the hacksaw. "Now we're all set, but I think we'd better let the sentry go past again before we start to go down," I whispered. "He's about due."

"That would be a sensible precaution," agreed Steeley.

"There's only one other thing, and it's this," I went on while we were waiting. "When we get out of here, we shall have to lie up until we can get

guides to take us out of the town. That's all fixed. Gonzales gave me the name of a friend of his whom he can trust, and told me how to find the house. He will hide us and find us guides. There's one other thing. Ramon, old Gonzales' son; I can't go without him."

"You mean—Anita's brother?" murmured Steeley softly.

"Put it that way if you like," I answered curtly. One of the first signs of being in love is, I discovered, a violent dislike of having the matter alluded to, either directly or indirectly.

"Just how do you propose to get hold of Ramon?" inquired Steeley.

"I haven't had time to think about that yet," I admitted. "I thought we'd better try to get out of here first. But it seems pretty certain that he's in one of this row of cells. There are several of them, apparently. Anyway, I noticed several doors like ours as I came along the corridor."

"The question is, which one is he in?"

"Precisely. You've hit the nail right on the head."

Steeley bit his lips thoughtfully. "Bit difficult, isn't it? It's no use even thinking about trying to open the door in order to get out into the corridor, and we can't very well walk along the ramp shouting his name, yet as far as I can see it's got to be one or the other."

"Oh, hell," I muttered irritably, "there must be some way."

"There always is, if one can only think of it," observed Brian tritely.

"Well, there's no necessity for you fellows to stay, but I'm not going without him," I said tersely. "I shall never have a better chance than this of getting him."

Steeley looked at me reproachfully. "We've stuck together so far, and I don't propose to alter that arrangement."

"I don't see why. It seems unfair that I should jeopardise your safety for what is more or less a personal matter—but wait a minute, I believe I've got the solution. I wonder——"

"Ssh! Sentry coming," breathed Steeley, who was keeping watch.

We did not speak again until he had strolled out of sight around the next angle of his beat.

"How long is it since the last time that fellow went past?" I asked.

"About ten minutes—why?"

"Because he's going to help me to find Ramon," I declared.

"How so?"

“Listen! This is my idea,” I whispered. “We’ve got nearly four hours between now and daylight to get away, so there is no desperate urgency. I don’t think we shall be disturbed again until the firing party arrives for us. Give me a few minutes to see what I can do. Stay here while I go down the rope. The next time the sentry comes round the corner I shall sock him on the head with an iron bar, borrow his jacket, cap, and rifle, and go looking for that skunk of a sergeant who shoved me in here.”

“You’re crazy——”

“Maybe, but wait a minute; let me finish,” I went on swiftly. “The sergeant has got the keys of all these doors. The last time I saw him near the guardroom he was carrying on an affair with a coal-black mammy. He’ll still be there, if I know anything about it. Assuming that he is, I shall try to attract his attention. If I can manage to get him away from the wench, the keys that now repose in his pocket will soon be in mine. I shall come back here. You will haul me up, after which I’ll open every damn door in the corridor until I find the right one. If you hear shots, or a noise that sounds like trouble, you’ll know I’ve probably gone off at half-cock, in which case you’d both better shin down the rope and hop it. If that happens, make for a house named Villa Valencia in the Strada Reale. There’s a group of five palm trees in the garden. Three double knocks is the signal. The chap’s name is Fernando Nuez. That’s all. I’m going now. Give me the pistol, Steeley.”

“Go ahead,” he said quietly, handing me the automatic. “It sounds crazy to me, but crazy things sometimes come off. In any case, Ramon is your pigeon, and I can quite see that you can’t go without him. We’ll wait here.”

I dropped the line and crawled through the window. “See you presently, then,” I whispered, and began to let myself down.

There wasn’t much skin left on my knuckles by the time I got to the bottom, but I hardly felt anything at the time. I waited to see the line pulled up out of sight and then walked quickly but quietly to the angle round which the sentry had previously disappeared, and would, I hoped, do so again.

The waiting was the very dickens. It always is. It couldn’t have been more than five or six minutes, but it seemed like hours. At last I heard him coming, and with the bar grasped firmly in my hand I braced myself to deliver the blow. I had no more compunction about hitting the fellow than he had about shooting defenceless people in the courtyard; no doubt he had been a member of a firing party at some time or other.

It’s funny how things seldom work out the way we plan them. I might have stood crouched against that wall for hours, during which time the sentry would appear, as scheduled, a score of times. On this occasion, of

course, it was not him. It was Vincenti. I realised it at the moment I hit him. But his head was no harder than the sentry's and down he went with a grunt. Then, as I stood there staring down at his long lean face, wondering what on earth to do with him, the sentry came round the corner. It was a terrible moment.

But again things panned out in an extraordinary manner. Instead of coming at me, or letting out a shout, the sort of behaviour one might easily expect, the fool leaned his rifle against the wall and joined the party with every expression of goodwill.

"Sweet Mother of God!" he whispered delightedly in coarse Spanish. "Has someone killed the swine at last?"

Apparently General Vincenti was not loved by his men.

"Yes," I said, pointing downward. "Look at the wound."

The sentry, all agog for anything in the way of blood, leaned forward, placing his head in a far easier position to hit than it would have been in the ordinary way. Naturally, I did not allow such a unique opportunity to pass, and he pitched forward over the body of his commander. It seemed that with luck I might in time dispose of the entire Carabonian Army, but I did not try the experiment.

It was the work of a moment to acquire the sentry's cap and jacket, but I was rather worried to know what to do with the bodies. It would obviously be risky to leave them lying where they were, in case anyone came round the corner; moreover, I knew that I had not hit them hard enough to kill them—or thought not—so there was also a chance of one of them coming round and raising an alarm. At the finish I dragged them both to the edge of the ramp and allowed them to slide down into the prickly-pear. Then, with the sentry's cap at the orthodox jaunty angle, and the rifle sloped across the back of my neck, as it were, I moved off on the most difficult part of my undertaking.

I gave the signal "thumbs up" as I passed under Steeley and Brian, who I could see looking down at me, but I did not stop. Time was getting precious, and I was anxious to explore the ramp. I felt certain it followed the wall round to the courtyard, but I was eager to make sure. Another minute and I saw I was right. The ramp hugged the castle wall not a score of paces from the seat on which I had found the sergeant and his dusky maid. But they were no longer there.

That was a bitter disappointment, for it threw my whole plan out of gear. If he had returned to the guardroom, then that would be the end of it, for I

dare not show myself there; I might escape recognition in the dark, but not in the light.

It was while I stood there in an agony of indecision that I heard a sound that set my blood racing. It was the ridiculous, inane giggle of the sergeant's mistress. Where had the sound come from? It was not easy to determine. It had not come from the courtyard, for it was deserted. The likeliest place seemed to be a thick clump of oleander bushes which overhung the courtyard on my right. If she was there, it seemed to me that the light-hearted custodian of the keys might well be there, too.

I moved nearer, listening intently. The giggle came again, and I knew that my assumption had been correct. Apparently the gay sergeant was still making progress, and I almost regretted the necessity for disturbing him.

Going closer to the bushes, I uttered the peculiar hissing sound that is used as a call sign throughout Spain and Spanish America. "*Pssst!*"

The sergeant's head appeared with an alacrity that made me take a quick pace backward into the shadow. It seemed that either he was awake to his responsibilities, after all, or else he resented the interruption—probably the latter.

"What is it?" he asked gruffly.

"Come! *Venga aqui!*" I breathed in a hoarse whisper, and backed away along the wall, still keeping in shadow. I dare not risk saying more, in case he detected something strange in my voice.

To my relief, I saw him coming, although, judging by his muttering, he was not too pleased about being disturbed, so I continued to back slowly along the ramp in order to draw him as far away as possible from the guardroom.

He caught me up at last, and asked me in no uncertain terms what I thought I was playing at.

"This," I said crisply, and poked the muzzle of the automatic into his stomach. "One word, my friend, and I'll plaster your *intestinos* on the castle wall." As I spoke, I let him see my face.

As I hoped, and fully expected, the fellow was an arrant coward. Far from contemplating giving the alarm, he was concerned only with saving his skin, and he beseeched me to spare him. That is one advantage of dealing with people who cut each other's throats on the slightest provocation: they understand the methods they themselves employ, and expect no different treatment from other people. Had the present position been reversed, my prisoner would have stuck his knife into me with no more compunction than if I had been a chicken.

“I have killed the sentry, and I have killed General Vincenti,” I muttered darkly, “but I will spare you as long as you do exactly what I tell you.” The only weapon he carried was a knife, and I soon relieved him of it. “Give me the keys,” I demanded.

He handed them over without a word, the trembling of his hands causing them to jangle as he did so.

“Now march,” I said, “and do not stop until I tell you.”

We marched away smartly, I holding the muzzle of my gun in the small of his back. “Halt!” I said when we came immediately under the window through which I could see the silhouette of a head protruding.

“Steeley!” I called quietly.

“Yes!”

“Make a noose in the end of the line and let me have it; then stand by to receive a prisoner,” I called up.

A moment later the noose came down with a run. I looped it under the sergeant’s armpits. “Remain silent and you will be spared, but if you make one sound my friends up there will strangle you,” I whispered in his ear. Then, loudly, “Haul away!”

There was something comic about the manner in which the wretched fellow went up, swinging like a corpse.

Presently the line came down again, and in a couple of minutes I was back inside the cell.

“Good work. Tubby,” said Steeley, patting me on the back. “Neatest job I ever saw in my life. What are you going to do with the rabbit?”

“Put him in irons. Here are the keys.”

The sergeant made no demur as we locked a shackle round his ankle. I told him to sit down and sit still, and he obeyed like a child.

“And now what?” asked Steeley.

“I think you’d better both stay here and keep an eye on this chap while I go scouting for Ramon,” I replied. “I’ll leave you the rifle.” Then I got another inspiration. Turning to the sergeant, “Where is the Señor Ramon Gonzales?” I demanded.

“In number one, the end room,” he told me through chattering teeth.

“That’s better, we know where we are now,” I muttered with satisfaction. “How many matches are there left in the box, Steeley?” I asked that because it had been necessary to strike several during the progress of the affair.

“Five,” he answered.

"Let me have them; you won't need any more here."

"Go steady with them."

It took one to enable me to find the right key to open our own door, but at length it swung open and the corridor gaped like a black mouth of Hell in front of me.

"Be as quick as you can," said Steeley quietly, as I stepped into it.

It cost me another match to find the door of the end cell, for it was a long way down the passage, and yet another to open it, for in the pent-up excitement of the moment my hands were none too steady.

"Señor Gonzales," I whispered, as the door creaked open. I did not want to strike another match unnecessarily.

I heard someone start. "*Si!*" came a voice from the darkness.

"I am a friend come to rescue you," I went on swiftly. "Make no sound, but do as I tell you." With that I struck one of my last two matches, and before it burned out I had advanced well into the room. In the flickering orange light I saw Ramon. He had not even been given a bed, but was sitting on the hard stone floor with his back to the wall to which he had been chained. He was a handsome lad about eighteen or nineteen years of age, but with his face emaciated from hunger and drawn with suffering. His hair had grown long in captivity, and a short curly beard had sprouted on his chin. Poor lad, he must have been through a hell of a time. Even now his dark eyes were fixed on me as though he suspected a trick, so I took his thin hand in mine and squeezed it. "Cheer up," I said, "we'll soon have you out of this," and taking the hacksaw from my belt set about the chains, for there were two of them, one round an ankle and the other round his waist.

It took me a quarter of an hour to cut through them. "Who are you?" he asked me.

"A friend."

"Where have you come from?"

"From England," I told him.

"But why do you do this for me?"

"Because I hate Ramoza and believe in your father, with whom I spoke not many hours ago. Also, I hold your sister in deep regard," I added.

"A regard, I hope, she also feels for so brave a caballero," he returned with true Spanish gallantry.

I made no reply, but worked on the chains until the sweat poured off my face, for the heat was trying and the atmosphere of the cell none too pure.

But at last I was through, and helped him to his feet, for he was so weak that he nearly fell and I had to support him.

"Come," I said, "we have not far to go."

Holding him up with my left arm, we made our way down the passage. I had to use my last match to find the door, but I tore the box to pieces, and using it as a rather feeble torch, got back into our cell.

I wasted no time on introductions beyond saying, "These are my friends, and yours." Then we all went over to the window. "Are there any more prisoners?" I asked Ramon, as a thought occurred to me.

"Yes, there are prisoners in every room," he answered sadly.

"Look, Steeley," I said, "Brian had better go down first, taking the rifle; then let Ramon down; then go down yourself, leaving the line where it is."

"What are you going to do?" he asked in a surprised voice.

"Go ahead, I shan't be a minute," I told him.

Taking the keys, I groped my way back to the door, and then along the corridor to the next one. After a little fumbling, I managed to open it. "I speak for Don Antonio Gonzales, whose friend I am," I declared boldly. "Is there a man here among you?"

"*Si, Señor*," came a well-bred voice instantly.

I groped my way to the speaker. "I cannot stay because I am helping Ramon Gonzales, and he is not well," I said quickly. "Here is a saw, and the keys. The next door is open and the bars are cut out of the window. A line reaches to the ground. Let each help the other to escape, one by one, until all are freed. Are you chained?"

"Some are, some are not."

"Then let one go down the corridor opening all the doors. Those who are not chained may go at once; those who are will have to pass the saw from one to the other until all are free. Now I must go. *Adios.*"

There was a muffled chorus of fervent thanks and "*Adios!*"

Well satisfied, I returned to our cell. The others were waiting below, and I lost no time in joining them.

"What the devil have you been doing?" Steeley asked me impatiently.

"Giving the other prisoners a break," I answered shortly. "This place ought to look like the evacuation of Sodom and Gomorrah in a minute. How I should love to see Ramoza's face in the morning, when some poor devil has to go and report what has happened! Come on, let's go."

CHAPTER IX

"WHICH is the best way, I wonder?" murmured Steeley.

"This path leads to the courtyard, but there may be troops about, so I think we'd better try to get down through this cactus to the lower road. We shall be nearer to our objective, too," I replied.

"You're going to try to get to that house you told me about?"

"Yes. I don't think it's any good trying to do anything else. Gonzales warned me against trying to get through the forest without guides."

That settled it. We got over the low wall that kept the prickly-pears from encroaching on the footpath, and started to pick our way down through the bushes—*prick* our way would perhaps be nearer to the point, for the cactus was worse than barbed wire. I told Ramon of our intention, and he was in full agreement with it, saying that it would be quite hopeless for us to try to get through the forest alone, certainly at night. Moreover, he knew the house for which we were making, having been to it many times, and as soon as we got down to the road he could take us straight to it.

It was a nasty trip down the bank, and all of us got pretty badly torn about, but at last we reached the bottom and stood for a moment wondering which direction to take, for we seemed to have ended in a garden of sorts. We found a path, but it led us to a door, so we struck off through a wilderness of weeds that ended in a wall. Climbing it, we found ourselves on a broad track of loose pebbles, deeply rutted by storm water; it sloped steeply, so as our destination lay near the waterfront we chose the downhill route, and after a short walk emerged into a street which Ramon said he knew well. There was nobody about, so making no more noise that we could prevent we set off again, with Ramon, who already seemed to be in better trim, leading the way.

It was a weird business, creeping through the sleeping town, expecting something to happen at every turn. The dirty white walls with their tawdry shutters rose up on all sides, like cliffs, to the overhanging eaves; weeds and rank growths of fungus sprouted from our path, and even from the buildings themselves, while ever mingled with the strange foreign perfumes that hung in the still, oppressive air, was the sickening stench of sewage and decay.

Once we passed a dead dog, swollen and horrible, lying in the roadway, and a small creature that had evidently been feeding on it scuttled away as we approached.

At last we reached the waterfront, the wharf on which we had landed such a short while ago that seemed so long. It was silent and deserted. The only sound was the soft gurgling of the sullen water that embraced the crumbling supports. Not a ripple stirred the flat, oily surface of the sea; it was almost as if that, too, were dead.

Ramon now quickened his pace, and another five minutes' sharp walking brought us to a house which I knew, from the five tall palms that sprang skywards like a fountain from the back garden, was our destination. The front rose sheer from the street, which was the best thoroughfare I had seen in Prava, for the houses were several storeys high with iron balconies projecting in front of the shuttered windows in true Spanish style. From the carved stone windowsills and lintels I formed the opinion that the houses were old, probably dating back to the great days of Spanish colonisation.

On the opposite side of the street the houses stood farther back from the road, from which they were separated by over-grown shrubberies of oleander, hibiscus, and other dark-leaved bushes. The houses were, I noticed, detached, whereas those on our side were joined together in a long row that ran the full length of the street.

Ramon went to the door and tapped the signal.

There was a period of uncanny silence, but it was broken at last by a sound that suggested a small cupboard being opened. A voice spoke, softly, and looking closely at the door, I saw two eyes regarding us through a grille.

"Fernando! It is I, Ramon Gonzales," whispered Ramon. "These with me are my friends, who have helped me to escape from the castle."

Instantly the grille was closed. From within came the soft clink of a chain. Then the door opened, making no more noise than a shadow, and we crept inside. There was no light, so we could only shuffle along in the darkness, each holding the other to keep our direction. I heard the door closed and chained behind me. A match flared up.

"This way, señors," said Fernando, opening another door.

Reaching it, I saw that a flight of stairs led downwards. They did not look inviting, but Ramon went down without hesitation, so the rest of us followed, and presently found ourselves in a fairly roomy cellar. Nuez lighted an oil lamp that stood on a table in the centre of the room, and indicated a number of old trunks and wine-cases that were lying about. "Be seated," he said. "I am sorry to have to bring you here, but it would be

unwise to light a lamp upstairs, where the reflection might be seen from outside." He looked anxiously at Ramon. "You look ill, my poor boy," he said sympathetically. "Wait! I will fetch some cognac."

"You might bring him some food at the same time, if you have any in the house, señor," I suggested. "I think it is starvation that ails him."

"Yes, yes. I have some food; not very good, but I will bring what I have," said Nuez quickly, and went off up the stairs. He was a benevolent-looking old man, but painfully thin, and with a complexion that looked as if he had suffered much from fever.

He soon returned, bringing bread, brandy, some biscuits, a dish of *pescado a la marinera* (fish stewed with tomatoes), and some cold *tortillas*.

Ramon set about them ravenously. While he ate I told Nuez briefly what had happened, and that Don Antonio had told me to come to him for assistance. I concluded by asking if it was possible to get away before daylight, for it seemed to me that once the evacuation of the cells was discovered, it was going to be extremely difficult for anyone to get anywhere, day or night.

The old man shook his head. "There is no one in the house but me," he said. "True, I could find you a guide among the Indians who live together on the outskirts of the town, but I could not get there and back by daybreak. It will start to get light in less than an hour."

"Could we get horses anywhere?" I asked, with the idea of following the road that led to the aerodrome to the point where I had abandoned the car the previous day. If we could get to the *pampa*, I thought, we might in time get to the *hacienda*, even if we did not succeed in attracting the attention of Anita, who might possibly spot us from the air.

"No, there are no horses in Prava—not even donkeys," answered Nuez in a melancholy voice.

What the upshot of the debate would have been, I do not know, for at that moment came the beginning of the business that was to settle any question of choice in the method of our departure. It began with a soft creaking noise upstairs, followed by a metallic grinding sound, as if someone was trying to force the front door.

We all half-rose from our seats, silent, tense, eyes looking at each other questioningly. The old man was the first to move. "*Ssh!*" he breathed, and slipping off his shoes crept quietly but swiftly up the stairs.

We waited for him in breathless suspense.

He was soon back, as white as death, his face working convulsively. Perspiration glistened on his forehead. "There are soldiers at the front door,"

he gasped.

"How many?" I asked tersely.

"Twelve or thirteen. I suspected they were watching the house from the bushes opposite; now I know. They must have seen you enter. You must go, quickly. Come, this way. No noise."

In single file we followed him up the stairs to the back of the house. He darted to a window and peered out, only to recoil with his hands making gestures of hopelessness. "They are at the back, too," he almost sobbed.

"All right, don't lose your head," I said curtly as there came a sharp knock on the front door, for nothing is so infectious as panic, and the old man's agitation was already getting my nerves on the jump. "Is there no other way out of the house?" I asked.

"*Si, señor.* There is one, but I fear it is no use," he answered quickly.

"Where is it?"

"There is a way from this house to the next one, which is also mine, but the only door opens into the street and is not more than a dozen paces from the door of this house. If you try that way the soldiers are bound to see you the moment you open the door, and they will shoot."

The hammering at the front became insistent.

"They wouldn't see us if they were already in this house," I suggested.

"Do you mean I should let them in?" he gasped.

"No," I said. "I will. But first show us the way to the other door."

He did so. It was simply a long, straight passage leading from one house to the other, with two doors intervening.

I looked at Steeley. "I'm going to open the front door," I said. "You will hear them come in. As soon as they are inside, open this door and make a bolt for it. Try to get on the road that leads to the aerodrome; I think that's our only chance."

"But what about you?"

"Leave that to me," I declared, with an assurance that I was far from feeling, and in order to prevent any argument I ran back to the door through which we had entered. The soldiers were beating on it with the butts of their rifles by the time I got to it. I threw open the grille. "Wait! Wait! Señors, please," I pleaded. "Can't you give an old man time to get dressed?"

They stopped their hammering at once as I made a big business of undoing the chain, but I left the bolt until last. This I drew noiselessly and then darted back to the first of the two doors that occurred in the corridor which led to the other house. "All right! The door is open," I called loudly.

I heard the front door thrown open and the tramping of footsteps in the hall as they all poured in. There was no light there, of course, and presently I could hear them cursing as they groped their way about looking for me.

I waited for no more, but ran down the corridor into the next house. The others had gone, and the door stood wide open, so I lost no time in following them. They had not got far, however—about twenty or thirty yards—so after them I went as fast as I could go.

We were nearly at the end of the street, with me still bringing up the rear, when there came a shot behind us, followed a moment later by a volley that made the welkin ring. Bullets whistled up the street, some hitting the walls and some kicking up the pebbles that lay thickly on the ground. But they did not all miss. I saw poor old Nuez spin round and then crash forward on to his face. The others hesitated, not knowing whether to stop or not, but I yelled to them to go on. I was sorry for the old man, but it was out of the question for us to do anything for him, and there was no sense in us all losing our lives for no purpose. In any case, I think he was past earthly help, for he had been hit in the head; I saw the wound as I drew level with him.

It was a nasty moment, but as I say, it was the fortune of war, and we could do nothing about it except swear vengeance against the indiscriminate murderers. So we went on. Two or three shots whistled past us as we dashed round the corner, and then, for a moment or two, we were out of sight.

"This way," panted Ramon, darting into a side-turning that seemed to lead too close to the palace for my liking. However, we were in his hands, and followed blindly.

The shots had, of course, roused the town. Lights appeared at several windows, some of which were thrown open. There was a good deal of shouting near the palace, and I imagined that all available troops were being turned out. We had to pass near the courtyard in order to reach the road, but we got to it without being intercepted, and once in the shadow of the forest's edge Ramon slowed down.

"This is a dangerous path by night," he said.

"Less dangerous than some, I fancy," observed Steeley bluntly. "It sounds as if we've stirred up a hornets' nest."

We had, and that was putting it mildly, for Prava was fairly buzzing. A fresh outbreak of shouting came from the castle, and I rather suspected that the flight of the prisoners had been discovered.

"What about trying to get the car?" I suggested.

Steeley scouted the proposal, declaring that it was not worth the risk, and probably he was right. In any case, we could walk nearly as fast as the car

could travel on that road by night. It was thinking of Ramon that prompted my suggestion. The rest of us could walk ten miles, twenty if necessary, but could he? I doubted it. But there was no alternative. We were at least out of the castle, which was plenty to be thankful for. The way we were going was a good deal farther than the way a guide would have taken us, but it would have been folly to leave the only path we knew, the only real exit from the town, and I think we all realised it.

What a walk it was! To make matters worse, a tropical storm of unbelievable ferocity burst, and drenched us all to the skin. I had seen many storms in one part of the world or another, but never one like this. The water poured off the tree-tops in streams, and when the tempest was at its height we were compelled to stop and cover our mouths with our hands in order to breathe. The darkness between the flashes of vivid lightning was incredible. We hadn't a match between us—not that it would have been any use if we had, for anything would have been soaked through. A hurricane lantern would have been a blessing, but we did the best we could without one, feeling for the boggy path with our feet, hands outstretched in front of us to protect our faces.

Actually, the storm was a blessing in disguise although we did not know it at the time. It must have been nearly an hour later, when I heard the car making heavy weather behind us, that I realised that but for the soft going if would have overtaken us; as it was, it took it all its time to make any progress at all.

We had crossed several bridges, each one now spanning a roaring torrent, but at the next one Steeley stopped. The rain had ceased and the car was not very far behind. What was even more important, it was just beginning to get light, and a dim green radiance filtered down through the foliage.

"I think it should be possible for us to make things a bit awkward for the people in the car," murmured Steeley, looking at the bridge, a rough affair of small tree-trunks laid side by side and tied together with lianas. I knew what he meant, so with the sergeant's knife, which I had kept, I cut the lianas, while the others hurled the tree-trunks into the gulch it spanned.

"That should discourage them, anyway," observed Brian, when we had finished, and stood looking at our handiwork.

At the next bend in the road we stopped to watch what happened, and were amply repaid for our trouble. The car came into sight. It was full of troops. At least a dozen men had piled themselves into it, or were standing on the running-board. Two or three others were trotting along beside it.

Sambo was at the wheel. He could not have noticed that the bridge had gone —or not until it was too late. He stopped with his wheels about a foot away from the brink of the gulch, but the ground was saturated with water and at once began to break down. There were wild shouts of alarm as the wheels began to sink with the crumbling earth, and then, before the people in the car could get out, the whole thing slid forward and disappeared from sight. Only the fellows who had been on the running-board escaped. Approaching cautiously, with those who had been on foot, they knelt down near the edge of the gulch and peered into the cavity into which the car had fallen.

"I don't think they'll worry us for some time," observed Steeley casually. "Let's push on; we've got a long way to go."

We had. Never shall I forget that march. The sun came out, and although its direct rays did not reach us, the jungle steamed like a Turkish bath. I took off my jacket and threw it away. How Ramon lasted out in his weakened state I do not know, but he made no complaint, and plodded on steadily. We all had leeches on our legs, but there was nothing we could do about it; had we pulled them off, others would have taken their places in a few minutes, so in the end we gave them up as a bad job, regarding them as another trial that had to be endured.

It must have been nearly midday when we reached the aerodrome, and I could see that Ramon could not hold out much longer.

"Well, and what now?" asked Steeley, stopping in a place where we could not be seen by the aerodrome staff, some of whom were lounging outside the end hut, which they seemed to have made their home.

"Just look at those toughs," muttered Brian disgustedly. "I wonder they aren't afraid of Ramoza turning up one day and finding them doing nothing."

"That is not likely," returned Ramon wearily, speaking to me in Spanish. He knew a little English and must have caught the drift of our conversation. "Ramoza would not dare to come as far away from the castle as this, for fear of being shot. That is why he so seldom leaves it."

"Well, we shall soon have to decide on some plan or other," declared Steeley. "Ramoza isn't likely to let us go without making an effort to recapture us. There will be a bunch of his cut-throats along here presently, or I've mistaken my man."

"Just a minute, let me think," I protested. "Suppose we do manage to reach the open country where I first met Anita, which is doubtful, what are we going to do when we get there? We've no food—nothing. I'm beginning to doubt if we should ever get to the *hacienda*."

"I can't see that we've any alternative but to go on, however difficult it may seem," replied Steeley. "Is there any point in disturbing those gentlemen at their siesta?" He pointed to the "Air Force", now taking its ease in the shade of the hut.

"That's what I was wondering myself," I muttered anxiously. "One thing they have is petrol, which will at least discourage the leeches, and there must be some sort of food about, wholesome if not palatable, and we're in no state to be particular. It must be the best part of ninety miles from here to the *hacienda*, and if we're going to try to walk it, we shall be damned hungry by the time we get there."

"Is there any hope of getting that big machine going?" suggested Brian.

"I doubt it," I replied dubiously. "If we *can* get it into the air, even if it's only for half an hour, it would take us to within striking distance of the *hacienda*. On the other hand, if we're down there messing about in the hangar when Ramoza's men arrive, we're sunk. Even if they didn't storm the place, they could just sit quietly at a distance and pick us off when we tried to bolt, as, sooner or later we should have to, unless we sat still and starved to death. If you ask me, I think the whole thing revolves round Ramon. Were we by ourselves, I should vote for going on, because, bar fever knocking one of us over on the way, we've still got plenty of endurance left. But can he walk ninety miles over bad country? Look at him. Does he look as if he could walk nine, never mind ninety?"

Steeley shook his head. "No," he said. "Definitely no. And it's equally certain that we couldn't carry him."

"Well, we can't leave him here," I pointed out.

"So what?" queried Brian, lapsing into American.

"On the whole, I'm in favour of having a shot at getting the machine into the air," I decided. "That is, if you think there's the remotest chance of it. What's your opinion? You had a look at it while I was away, didn't you?"

"I'm dashed if I know what to think," muttered Steeley. "There are only two engines for a start, although the airframe seems fairly sound, apart from the fabric, which is pretty rotten. The instruments are no use, of course, and one of the tyres is flat. I've never tried to get a four-engined job into the air with two, but there is this about it: the Valid was designed to carry about twenty people, so with a light load, and providing the two engines give a fair number of revs., she might get off. We could jettison everything that was not absolutely necessary, to lighten her as far as possible."

"Well, I vote we have a go at it," I declared. "The idea of walking ninety miles in these circumstances gives me a pain."

“Sudden death to a lingering one for me, anyway,” acquiesced Steeley fatalistically.

“What about those skunks down there?” put in Brian. “Do you think they’ll just sit still and let us help ourselves to anything we want?”

“If they want trouble they can have it,” I growled, handling my automatic. “But if I know anything about human nature, they’ll be willing to call it a day when they see we mean business.”

Ramon looked at us questioningly when we started off towards the hangar, but he was too exhausted to protest, or even dispute our decision.

CHAPTER X

Air Admiral Krimm was apparently unaware that it is customary to post a guard round a military camp. Perhaps he thought it was unnecessary. And maybe he was right; in the ordinary way the last thing that would be likely to happen was an attack by a ground force on Campanella. Be that as it may, nobody thought of watching the road, and we were within a score of paces of the slumbering garrison, walking diagonally past them, when one, happening to sit up to roll a cigarette, saw us.

"All right, don't get alarmed," I called to Krimm, who sprang up in affright and reached for his rifle. "We haven't come back to worry you; we're only going to the hangar to get something."

One of them must have recognised Ramon, for I heard his name run from mouth to mouth, but, as I anticipated, our bold measures rather took the wind out of Krimm's sails, for he made no attempt to stop us, but merely stared in bemused astonishment. He may have thought that we should not be so foolish as to step into the lion's den unless we had a trump card handy, so he hesitated to take any action for fear of making a mistake. I saw his eyes sweep to the edge of the forest, as if he expected to discover a protecting force, but, finding nothing, they switched back to us and followed us until we disappeared inside the hangar.

Steeley spoke crisply to Brian, who was carrying the rifle that I had taken from the sentry. "Brian, watch those fellows, and report any move they make."

Brian took up his position while we started clearing a track for the Valid.

"There's a fellow—one of the Indians—running towards the road in the direction of Prava," came Brian's voice presently.

"Keep an eye on him," commanded Steeley.

Ramon couldn't help us—at least, for the present—so he squatted down on a pile of debris and watched us as we got busy on the machine. Our feverish activity seemed to fascinate him.

"That fellow has disappeared up the road in the direction of Prava; the others are standing in a bunch near the door of the hut, talking," came Brian's voice.

"Let me know if they look like trying any rough stuff," returned Steeley as we went on with our work.

It was, of course, quite impossible to strip the wings or fuselage to see what the woodwork underneath was like; we could only judge by external appearances. The two Napier "Lion" engines were firmly mounted, just as they had been put in at the Vickers works. The laminations had come unstuck at the end of one of the propellers, due to the moist heat, I suppose, so I got a piece of wire and bound it up while Steeley went on with the survey. The tanks, he told me, were bone dry, but that was only to be expected and did not matter very much, for there was a fair-sized pile of petrol cans at the back of the shed, also several drums of oil. All metal parts of the machine, including the bracing wires, were red with rust, and while corrosion may have weakened them, the trouble for the most part was only superficial. That was about all, except that the cabin was full of junk, and looked as if it had been used by somebody as a living-room—probably Rogers, the American. The whole thing depended, of course, on the engines. If they functioned, they would either get the machine into the air or tear it to pieces; if there was anything serious the matter with them, well, it would be a sheer waste of time to persist.

We half-filled the tanks, with Ramon, inspired by our example, lending a hand. Steeley attended to the oil, and we were still working for all we were worth when Brian gave us a nasty shock. "Look out! Here come the troops!" he called sharply.

"Damn it! I was hoping they wouldn't arrive just yet," muttered Steeley. "How many of them are there?" he went on, climbing into the cockpit and slamming the joystick about to loosen the controls, which evidently were very stiff.

"About a score; there are a few stragglers bringing up the rear. The Indian who went off towards Prava is with them. Krimm and the rest are running to join them. Now they are all coming this way at a trot." Brian's manner was that of a commentator broadcasting a football match.

"My God! We shall have to put a stop to that," muttered Steeley, leaping to the ground. He snatched the rifle from Brian's hands, took aim, and fired.

I ran out to see what was happening, and was in time to see the Carabonians drop flat at the sound of the shot. They opened fire, however, and while most of the bullets went wide, some of them smashed through the hangar.

"We shall have to get out of this," snapped Steeley, running back to the machine. "Keep them engaged, Brian, while you have any shots left. Let's

try to start up, Tubby. Give me a swing—port engine first."

I shall never forget the next five minutes as long as I live. The heat, the stink, bullets whizzing through the flimsy shed, while I hung on the heavy propeller to suck gas into the cylinders. The port engine started at the third attempt. Steeley had opened the throttle rather wide in his anxiety, and before he could close it the slipstream had blown the back clean out of the shed. Palm fronds, thatch, fabric, spare parts, and God knows what else went bowling across the open space between us and the forest.

The starboard engine was the devil. I thought it never would start. Half-blinded by perspiration, panting like a dog, I worked like a madman to Steeley's cool, methodical, "Contact"—"Switch off"—"Suck in"—"Contact." When it did start I nearly fell into it; the tips of the blades must have missed my head by inches as I pitched forward.

"They're coming!" shouted Brian.

"Get aboard, everybody," yelled Steeley, becoming infected with the general panic. I grabbed the parachute, thinking that it might save one of us, anyway, and flung it through the cabin door. A snake squirmed out of the loose folds as I jumped in, and I nearly landed on top of it. Recklessly I kicked it out, and it nearly hit Brian in the face as he ran forward to follow me in. Never shall I forget the extraordinary expression on his face. Ramon followed. Spasmodic shooting began again outside, and wild shouting. Bullets smashed through woodwork and *whanged* against metal. The engines roared, but the machine did not move, and I remembered suddenly, with a horrible sinking sensation, that the wheels of the undercarriage were well down in the mud.

Steeley must have remembered it, too, for in sheer desperation he shoved the throttle open. The rest was pandemonium. The sides of the hangar began to disappear in the howling blast. Machines and bits of machines went to pieces and swirled away aft. I remember thinking to myself that the whole thing was a crazy dream, and then the machine shot forward, throwing me into Ramon's arms. We both went down with a crash that must have severely strained the bottom of the fuselage. I crawled forward as we bumped over the ground, trying to remember which way the wind was blowing—or if there was any wind. The thing became a nightmare. Then, suddenly, the bumping ceased, and I knew that we were air-borne. Could it be true? I crawled into the second pilot's seat next to Steeley. Yes, it was true; we were a good fifty feet up.

Steeley's face was chalk white as he clung to the joystick. He seemed afraid to move it. He snatched a swift glance at me and then stared forward

again, shaking his head as if he was past words; which I expect he was. Very, very slowly, we began to turn back towards the trees. I held my breath. The sensation of flying in an aeroplane which might be expected to fall to pieces at any moment was new to me, and I hope I never have to repeat the experience. But he got it round. We were still very low; the trees were rushing towards us, and I was by no means sure that we should clear them. Looking down, I could see the mob underneath staring up at us. Some were pointing rifles, shooting, no doubt, but where the bullets went, I don't know; none hit the machine.

I crawled back into the cabin to see if the others were all right. The cabin door was still wide open; apparently nobody had thought to shut it, or else there had not been time, and I tried to get to it with the intention of doing something about it; but before I could reach it the slipstream had torn it clean off its hinges, and away it went into space. Several pieces of fabric were also floating about in the air, a very disconcerting spectacle.

Brian and Ramon were sitting on the floor. Brian's hands were over his face, and for one dreadful moment I thought he'd been hit, but presently he moved them and I saw that he was sobbing helplessly with laughter. It seemed an extraordinary thing to do, and I put it down to sheer nerves. The same thing often happened in France during the War.

For my part, I felt that the whole thing was too fantastic to be true. The wild rush of events, concluding with such a mad scramble that my brain was still whirling, could only occur in a nightmare. Yet the noise of the engines, and the bump that brought my heart into my mouth as we scraped over the edge of the forest, were real enough, and I started to crawl back to Steeley to show him the way. But before I could get to him the machine was vibrating horribly, and I knew that our minutes in the air were numbered.

"Port engine cracking up," he shouted as I sank limply into the seat next to him.

"Never mind, keep going as long as you can. Every mile makes a difference," I yelled back, with my eyes on the engine.

The cause of the trouble was apparent. Water was fairly dripping out of the radiator. No wonder the engine was getting hot. It could not be long before the whole thing either seized up or melted down.

I looked below, and saw with heartfelt thankfulness that we had nearly reached the edge of the jungle where the *palmetto* began; another five minutes and we should at least have fairly open country below us. That is, if the machine would hold together for so long. Quite apart from the engine, things were beginning to happen. A flying wire had torn out of its

turnbuckle, and was whipping about among the other wires and struts. What was worse, the whole of the lower port wing moved every time we struck a bump, as though it might tear itself off at the roots at any moment. Probably the longeron on that side was rotten at the junction.

Our height was less than a thousand feet, and it was manifestly impossible to get any higher; as it was, with throttles wide open, Steeley was having to coax the machine along to keep what height he had. In fact, I rather suspected that we were losing height, due to the failing engine, which was only to be expected. It necessitated rudder being held on that side to prevent us from being pulled round by the starboard engine. The vibration was getting worse all the time, too, and if there is anything more nerve-shattering than flying a vibrating aircraft, I have no desire to know what it is.

I eyed the range of hills ahead with suspicion and disfavour, knowing that even if we managed to reach them we should certainly not be able to clear them. I noticed, too, that there was some nasty-looking country between us and them, although fortunately it was broken up by wide stretches of open *pampa*.

It is remarkable how long a machine that is utterly unfit to fly can stay in the air. I have known one struggle on for hours, almost like a well-bred horse, as if aware of what depended on it. Often during the War I saw machines stagger home in the most shocking condition after being badly hit by flak, literally breaking up as they flew, cylinders dropping off, struts tearing loose, and the like; yet somehow the main members stuck together, although it was no uncommon thing for them to collapse as soon as the wheels touched the ground.

Every time Steeley caught my eye he shook his head sadly, as much as to say, “It isn’t true.” The expression on his face made me smile, and in the end that made him smile, too. There is no doubt that a sense of humour can be a very useful asset; it is certainly the finest antidote for overwrought nerves, and will carry the possessor of it through periods of strain that could not otherwise be borne.

I tried to estimate the distance we were covering as we roared over the ground. Our air speed must have been about sixty miles an hour, so each three minutes we survived cut at least an hour’s hard walking from our ground journey. But the knocking in the engine and the vibration had become positively terrifying, and knowing that we could not last much longer, I began to scan the ground ahead for possible landing-places.

Suddenly a tiny speck in the sky caught my eye, and I pointed to it jubilantly. “It must be Anita’s Moth,” I yelled.

Steeley merely nodded, as though he thought it was nothing to get excited about, but he continued to watch the speck.

I knew the moment she saw us, for the nose of the Moth came round with a jerk as it swung on a new course to meet us. At the same instant a violent explosion in the port engine made me catch my breath. A tongue of flame licked along the exhaust.

Steeley cut the switch. It was all he could do. The other engine continued to roar merrily, but it could not be expected to do the work of four, and our nose had to go down to keep flying speed. I leaned over one side of the cockpit and Steeley over the other, as, both realising that it would be an advantage to try to get down while we had a little power left, we looked anxiously for a landing-place. Fortunately, there were several open spaces, and towards one of them the Valid's nose turned.

I breathed a sigh of relief, for the strain of the last few minutes had been considerable, and looked back at Anita's Moth, which was now fairly close. It had, in fact, passed us, with plenty of height to spare, and it was now swinging round on our tail, the nose tilting down as it did so. The move was unpleasantly significant, and knowing that she carried a machine-gun, a nasty doubt flashed into my mind as I realised that the Valid was carrying the Carabonian colours, and Anita could not possibly know that we were in it.

"My God!" I yelled in Steeley's ear. "I believe she's going to shoot us up." As I finished speaking, surely enough a machine-gun started chattering.

This was a contingency on which I certainly had not reckoned, and I hastened to try to put things right. "For God's sake hold the machine steady," I yelled at Steeley, and then climbed up on the top of the fuselage just in front of the centre section, from which position I could see over the top plane. Hanging on like grim death with my left hand, I did the only thing I could think of. I waved like a madman, making all sorts of ridiculous signs that I hoped desperately would convey the information that we were friends.

My antics must have puzzled her, for she came roaring down in a perfect zoom that took her to within a span of us, and I could see her face as, with her goggles raised, she leaned out of the cockpit to see between her wings.

Whether she recognised us or not I do not know, but she must have realised that we were going down, for she did no more shooting, contenting herself with circling at a safe distance, presumably in order to watch us. I heard our other engine fade out, and knowing that Steeley was about to land flopped back into my seat in case he made a dud landing. And it was a good thing I did. Not that there was anything the matter with Steeley's technique.

The undercarriage must have been completely rotten, for no sooner did our wheels touch the ground than there was a frightful splintering crash that sounded like a steam-roller going over a pile of wooden boxes. The poor old Valid lurched sickeningly, but there was nothing she could do about it. For a moment we seemed to hesitate, and then she plunged forward. There was a ghastly grinding bump that ended in a long, slithering crash, and the machine just folded up about us. Something hit me a crack on the back of the head that made me see constellations of stars, and then I was rolling over and over, all arms and legs, as the saying goes, amid a tangle of wires, struts, and fabric.

In the usual sudden silence that followed, I staggered to my feet and, wiping away the blood that was running into my eyes, looked round for the others. Steeley was picking himself out of the debris, muttering; he got to his feet and came limping towards me, but altered his course as Brian started shouting from somewhere under the piled-up fuselage. Tearing the canvas off, we could see him raging like a caged tiger, obsessed with the usual terror of fire. Ramon was sitting on the floor of the ruin, looking somewhat dazed, and rubbing his jaw ruefully.

It did not take us long to get them out, and from a quick examination found that apart from minor cuts and bruises no one had been hurt.

The Moth came roaring past, low down, apparently for a close view of the crash, and it was clear in a few seconds that Anita had recognised us, for she turned neatly and then came gliding down, the machine coming to a stop about fifty yards away. She jumped out at once and came running towards us.

We turned away as she threw herself into Ramon's arms, but she did not stay there long, and presently I was introducing Steeley and Brian.

"I begin to understand your anxiety about Ramon," breathed Steeley in my ear while she was shaking hands with Brian.

"You remember that you're a married man," I told him shortly.

Anita came over to me, and the look she gave me was sufficient thanks for anything I had done for her brother. "Thank you, señor," she said simply. "You have done what we thought was impossible."

I squeezed her hand. "You were the inspiration that made it possible," I told her in a low voice. "But let us postpone congratulations until we get to the *hacienda*. It will only be possible for you to make the trip once before dark, so you had better take your brother home, returning for us in the morning."

"I don't like leaving you here," she remonstrated.

“There is no alternative,” I answered. “We shall be all right. Get Ramon home as soon as you can; he has had a bad time and is in need of both food and rest.”

“Very well; he will find both at the *hacienda*, you may be sure,” she told me earnestly.

Our conversation had been carried on in Spanish, so I gave Steeley and Brian the gist of it, and they were in full agreement. Ramon protested against leaving us, but in his weak state he was easily overruled, and in a few minutes we were waving to him as the Moth sped towards the setting sun.

“How far are we away from the *hacienda*?” asked Steeley, looking at the range of hills.

“About twenty-five to thirty miles, I should say,” I replied.

“Too far to walk,” he murmured, shaking his head. “Particularly if you don’t know the way. We had better see about making a shake-down for the night. I’m so tired that I could sleep anywhere.”

With which we both agreed.

CHAPTER XI

STILL, it was not so easy as all that. One can't just lie down in the middle of an open field and go to sleep—at least, not comfortably. About a quarter of a mile away a clump of thick *palmetto* burst out of the plain like a green explosion, and I pointed towards it.

"Let's go over there," I suggested.

"What's the matter with making some sort of shelter out of the bits and pieces of the machine?" offered Brian.

"That's a better idea," I declared enthusiastically. "Pity we can't make a fire; we aren't short of fuel."

Nobody had a match, but Brian's resourcefulness came to the rescue. Somehow or other he managed to get a spark out of one of the magnetos, and firing a plug beside a piece of petrol-soaked fabric produced a flame that was all we needed to start a camp-fire.

We set to work on the machine, and by the time the sun had sunk behind the hills we had made a fairly comfortable lean-to with the broken wings. It was rather shaky, but it was better than nothing, and we squatted fairly comfortably round the fire at the entrance on small piles of debris that each collected for himself, while I told the story of what had happened after I had left the others on the previous afternoon, to look for the Moth.

"Well, I must say that, as far as the love-making stakes are concerned, you've made a bright start," observed Steeley when I had finished. "Within a few hours you rescue the long-lost brother from the jaws of death and hand him over to the bosom of his family; if that doesn't put you on good terms with her father, it's hard to see what will. But how does the situation lie now? Something tells me that you are not so desperately anxious to get out of the country as you were, for which I don't blame you; but what about me and Brian?"

"Anita flew to the *hacienda* from the Pacific Coast, so it should be possible for her to fly back, in which case she would probably fly you there if you asked her. I don't know how far it is, or how she is fixed for petrol in a place like this, but if it is possible, I feel sure that she will use her machine to get you out as soon as you tell her that you want to go."

"What are you going to do?"

"I shall stay here and see the thing through," I answered. "For both personal and moral reasons I should like to see Ramoza kicked out, and if I can help Don Antonio to do it, I shall, regardless of the fact that there is now a possible way of escape from the country."

There was a short silence.

"I'm in no desperate hurry to get back," murmured Brian presently, "but I'm dashed if I can see how we're going to help Gonzales. You can't win a war with one light aeroplane any more than three people can fly it, and jungle warfare isn't in our line. One thing is certain—we can't afford to take risks. If we ever fall into Ramoza's hands again, he won't lose any time in bumping us off. I'll bet he's as sore as a scalded cat over last night's affair. From the purely personal aspect, I've got quite a good story for my paper, but it's only half a one, and rather than leave the reader in the air I'd like to get the rest; I've no means of getting in touch with my Editor, but I'm pretty certain that if he knew the circumstances he'd rather I stayed here than came home, especially as I'm in the thick of it. How do you feel about it, Steeley?"

Steeley had been staring into the fire for some time with a far-away look in his eyes, and I could tell from his manner that something was going on inside his nimble brain.

"You are definitely going to stay on, Tubby?" he said at last.

"Absolutely—that is, of course, assuming Gonzales wants me to."

"Well, to be quite frank, I'm inclined to agree with you that we owe it to Ramoza to kick him out if we can; but my common sense tells me that it can't be done with nothing. It would be absurd to expect that a few Indians could storm and take the castle that Ramoza has shut himself up in, however patriotic they may be. To run a full-sized revolution with any hope of success you need several things, money with which to buy arms and ammunition being the most important."

"Well?" I said, wondering what was coming.

"I'm just telling you this for your own good, in case you've got any funny ideas about launching an attack against Prava with a bunch of misguided *peons* armed with bows and arrows."

"No," I said quickly. "I wasn't thinking of anything quite so crazy as that, but since you raise the point, have you any better suggestion to make?"

"Yes, I've just had a brainwave that may or may not materialise, but before going into details I'd like to see old Gonzales and have a few words with him. My project is not a thing to be undertaken lightly, and, to be quite

honest, I wouldn't consider it but for the fact that you've obviously made up your mind to stay here, in which case it is my opinion that either Ramoza or the fever will get you in the end."

"What a nice cheerful companion you are," I muttered. "Do you think the fever is as bad as that?"

"The country is rotten with it. We've been asking for it ourselves, wandering about at night regardless of mosquitoes. Not that we've had any choice. With money to drain the swamps and generally clean up Prava, a lot could be done to improve matters, the same as has been done in West Africa; but a few pounds won't do it. Still, that may be getting away from the point."

"Well, come on," I said impatiently. "You've got an idea; you might as well tell us what it is."

Steeley stirred the fire thoughtfully with a piece of wing-rib. It caught fire, and for a moment his thin, æsthetic face was thrown into relief. "All right," he said. "I don't know how much Gonzales is worth or how much of his fortune he is prepared to spend on trying to establish order in Carabonia, but, however much it is, I shouldn't think it would be anything like enough. With plenty of cash it would be a different story, but you can't get cash for nothing, as I know only too well, and you probably do, too. Very well, where is the money coming from?"

"That's what I was hoping you were going to tell me," I answered a trifle sarcastically.

"If you will curb your impatience, I will endeavour to," went on Steeley smoothly. "But don't make any mistake. My scheme is, at the moment, in the nucleus stage, floating about without any tags to hang anything on, so to speak. This is it. Carabonia, speaking from the point of view of the population, is as poor as the proverbial church mouse, but as a country it is rich, rich in timber and minerals that have never been exploited because of that poverty. The forest is full of mahogany, rubber, camphor, cinchona, and other things which the outside world would like to have, but no one is coming here to get it while Ramoza sits in the big chair waiting to grab everything he can lay hands on. Again, in Prava you have one of the finest natural ports in the Caribbean, fairly shouting to be put into industrial activity. The commodities it has to offer would soon bring real money in. All the place needs is someone to finance it."

I laughed bitterly. "No syndicate or individual capitalist would look at the proposition while Ramoza holds the reins."

"I am well aware of it. They might, though, if he wasn't here."

"Unfortunately he is."

"But he's not immovable."

"You would have a job to make a financier believe it."

"In the ordinary way I should say you are absolutely right, but this is where my idea starts operating. My father-in-law, old Silas P. Marven, is, as you know, pretty well a millionaire. If he isn't literally a millionaire he has knocked up a tidy pile. He has a lot of interests, but his ewe lamb is aviation, because it tickles his vanity, not unnaturally, to think that he was one of the first men in America to see its possibilities. So far he has only achieved fame for his commercial machines, but I happen to know that for years his big ambition has been to prove to the United States Government that he can make military aeroplanes as well as anyone else. Having been in his works, as you know, I also happen to be aware that he has three or four very useful military prototypes eating their heads off in his sheds. As they stand, they are simply white elephants, rapidly becoming obsolete."

"And you were hoping that he might give them to us?" put in Brian brightly.

"No, I'm not such an optimist as that. Silas P. is, first of all, a business man. He hasn't made his money by giving things away, and he is not likely to start now. But if we had a proposition to put up to him, with me to back it, a proposition that might show a profit, I fancy he would look at it. He must have had some confidence in me or he wouldn't have allowed me to marry his daughter."

"But what can you offer him?" I asked, perhaps rather densely.

"A monopoly of all aviation in Carabonia. He could run the air lines which would be needed to open up the country, using his own machines. More important still, he could equip the Carabonian Air Force—a real Air Force—when it is formed, after Ramoza has been booted out and big business starts looking in this direction to foot the national bill. Furthermore, don't overlook the fact that according to McNash there is a fairly considerable sum of money in Carabonia belonging to the nation. Ramoza has got it tucked away in the castle. We might dig it out."

"What with?"

"The aeroplanes that Silas P. might lend us for the purpose."

"My God, Steeley, you've hit it," I cried enthusiastically. "You——"

"Not so fast, Tubby," he interrupted warningly. "Don't overlook the fact that I've got to get to Silas before I can speak to him."

"Borrow Anita's machine."

“Precisely; that is what I had in mind,” continued Steeley imperturbably. “Boiled down, it comes to this. We go to Gonzales and tell him what we have in mind. I don’t think there is any doubt whatever but that he would be President if Ramoza was cleared out. He would have to sign a document, as President-apparent, or whatever you like to call it, that in return for financial support from Silas P. he will give him all rights in aviation and so on and so forth. In Anita’s machine I should then go off to Silas P. with the draft of the agreement in my pocket. If he is interested, his lawyers will draw it up in proper legal form. I would get him to lend me pilots to bring the machines back, together with a transport plane to take them home again, which means that Gonzales would be able to see the planes and form an idea of what he’s getting for his promises before he signs the final contract. The borrowed pilots would then go home in the transport, taking the contract with them, but leaving the machines with us. That’s about all, except that if Silas is sufficiently interested to do that, he would make a proper job of the show and let us have such bombs and ammunition as we should require to kick Ramoza out of Carabonia. That, roughly, is how I see the thing if it worked out according to schedule.”

“Sounds good to me,” declared Brian.

“And me,” I agreed. As a matter of fact, it sounded more than that; it sounded too good to be true.

“Very well, we’ll put the thing up to Gonzales just as soon as we meet him,” concluded Steeley. “He will get the country, my father-in-law will get a useful contract, you, Tubby, will get a wife, and Brian will get a rip-snorting story for his paper. That ought to satisfy everybody.”

“And what do you get?” I couldn’t help asking.

“The satisfaction of seeing everybody else satisfied,” he answered simply.

“Suppose Gonzales does not agree?”

Steeley shrugged his shoulders. “In that case I shall have to ask Anita to give me a lift as far as the coast. I’ve got some business to attend to, to say nothing of a wife who might wonder what sort of a crazy husband she is married to. Frankly, Tubby, I would consider staying if I thought you had a chance, but as things are, the time you would require to shift Mr. Ramoza, even if you were successful, would be beyond what I could conveniently give. You can’t get away from the fact that the country is moribund, if, indeed, it is not already dead. I——” He did not finish, but sprang to his feet and began stamping out the fire. “What’s that!” he whispered tersely.

From a long way off came a regular drumming sound, like a distant tattoo.

"It's horsemen," muttered Brian, staring into the darkness. "They're coming this way at a gallop."

"All right; keep quiet, everybody," muttered Steeley, who, as usual, automatically assumed command in emergency. "It does not necessarily follow that they know we are here, and they won't see the wreck unless they pass very close to us—not until the moon comes up, anyway."

We all remained perfectly still, staring out into the gloom with what anxiety can be well imagined. It is curious how little things stick in the memory. I was close to the smouldering remains of our camp fire, and into my nostrils drifted the pungent reek of dope-covered fabric. It took me back across the years to France, when in the old days, I had stood near all-too-many burning crashes.

"There they are," breathed Brian suddenly. "I can just see their silhouettes. There's a whole bunch of them. My God! They're coming this way, too."

"Don't shoot unless it becomes absolutely necessary," whispered Steeley. "It's no use running away."

An instant later a hail floated to our ears, and so astonished was I that for a moment I could make no reply. "Señor Wilde!" it called.

"Someone's calling you, Tubby," said Steeley in a queer voice.

"It's Gonzales," I said with a deep sigh of thankfulness. It had not occurred to me that he might come, or even send a search-party to fetch us.

"Heigh-ho!" I called loudly. "Señor Gonzales!"

The horsemen galloped up, reining their horses to their haunches in true rough-rider style—Señor Gonzales, Anita, and a round score of *gauchos*, with sombreros and leather chaps. Three of them were leading spare horses.

Don Antonio dismounted with the agility of an Indian and, throwing his reins to the man next to him, hurried across and embraced me affectionately. "Señor, I owe you a debt that I can never repay," he said huskily.

I mumbled something appropriate, I forget what. Actually, I was *blasé* enough to wonder what he would say if and when I did ask him for something. Steeley and Brian having been introduced, I questioned his action in coming out to fetch us, whereupon he assured me in the most extravagant terms, yet with the utmost sincerity, that he could not have rested for a moment, even though Ramon was safe, knowing that we were out on the *pampa*.

I replied, speaking for all of us, that I was glad to see him. Which was true enough.

We mounted the spare horses which were led forward for us, and without further delay set out for the *hacienda*. For a little while we all rode together, Don Antonio, Anita, Steeley, Brian, and myself, but then the moon came up, and somehow or other Anita and I found ourselves a little behind the others.

We did not say very much, for the circumstances were far from ideal for romantic conversation. Besides, it is not always necessary to say aloud what one wishes to convey.

It was a long ride, and I am afraid that I for one was swaying in the saddle before it was over. I have a vague recollection of miles of open plain, outcrops of *palmetto*, the towering walls of a canyon, then lights—barking dogs—crowding figures. It seemed like a dream. Someone took me by the arm, led me indoors, and gave me a drink that made me gasp. But it pulled me together, and I saw that it was Anita, smiling up at me with a world of sympathy in her eyes.

"You are very tired, señor; I will show you to your room," she said.

I didn't wait for the others, but followed her along a panelled passage to where a door stood ajar. A small oil lamp inside cast a yellow bar of light aslant the passage.

"*Buenos noches, señor*," she said softly.

I kissed her very tenderly. "*Adios, cara mia*," I whispered.

I was too tired to undress. Kicking off my shoes, I flopped down on the bed and was asleep in an instant.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN I awoke I lay for some minutes in a semi-conscious state staring at an enormous antique Spanish dressing-table a few feet from my eyes. Gradually it dawned upon me that it was strange, and that I was in strange surroundings; then the weight of memory burst down the floodgates of sleep and I remembered everything.

With a start I sat upright in bed, gazing at a beautifully embroidered Indian blanket that I had no recollection of being put over me. A narrow strip of azure sky between two heavy curtains that hung over the window next caught my eye; it told me that the day had far advanced, so I got stiffly off the bed and drew one of the curtains aside. White daylight poured into the room, half-blinding me with its brilliancy. When I could see clearly I made out Ramon, fully dressed, talking with his father on a seat under a tree laden with ripe oranges, so, ashamed that I had overslept him, I turned to the mirror with which the top part of the dressing-table was fitted. I was quite unprepared for the shock that followed, and for a good half-minute I could only stare at the appalling apparition that glared at me from the glass.

At no time should I take a prize at a male beauty contest, but I had no idea that I could look so dreadful. It is amazing what a few hours can do to a normal human being debarred the ordinary creature comforts to which he has become accustomed. My hair was like nothing on earth, a mass of mud and filth, plastered down on my forehead, across which a jagged tear showed as an inflamed crimson line. My face was covered with blood and dirt, through which, on my chin, an untidy stubble had forced its way. The neck of my shirt had completely disappeared, as if ashamed of what it had once concealed, so, what with one thing and another, I was a child's worst dream of the bogy man come true.

I am not consciously vain, but there are limits, and a sudden fear came over me that if once Anita saw me in such a condition, all my good work of the previous night would be swept away in a wave of loathing and disgust. The window was open, so I crept to it and whistled softly. Ramon heard me and looked round. I beckoned frantically, and he came running.

"What is it?" he asked in genuine alarm, from outside the window.

"Bring me water, soap, a razor, and some towels," I muttered hoarsely.

He laughed as he understood, and told me to wait while he came round.

"You are on the *pampa*, señor, where a man is judged, not by what appears on the surface, but what lies underneath," he told me seriously as he came in.

"Thank God for that, anyway," I answered, "otherwise I should be shot at sight."

He attended to my needs like a valet, and a shave and a bath worked a miracle. My clothes were, of course, unwearable, but he supplied the deficiency, lending me a white silk shirt, an embroidered *bolero*, a pair of dark-blue, bell-bottomed *gaucho* trousers, a scarlet sash, and spurred, elastic-sided riding-boots. Then, feeling that I was on my way to a fancy-dress ball, I followed him out to the patio, presumably to breakfast.

Anita and Brian were already there, lounging in cane chairs, and I could have kicked Brian for the grin that spread slowly over his face as he looked me up and down. I bowed to Anita, rather stiffly, for I was feeling more than a little self-conscious: moreover, I had not forgotten my unpardonable lapse when I had said good night to her outside my room. I rather hoped she had.

"*Buenos diaz, señor*," she said—rather reproachfully, I thought—looking at me with her big dark eyes.

I returned the salutation and turned to Brian. "Where's Steeley?"

"He's gone," he astonished me by saying.

"Gone! Gone where?"

"To the U.S.A. Do you mean to say you didn't hear him take off?"

"I've heard nothing since I went to bed," I told him. "Why, what time is it?"

"Half-past three."

"*What!*" I fairly staggered at that, and was only brought up by Anita's musical laugh. "Good God!" I cried, aghast. "Why on earth did you let me sleep so long?"

"The señorita's orders," smiled Brian with his tongue in his cheek. "Steeley wanted to wake you, but she was on guard and wouldn't hear of it."

"But what about Steeley?" I asked uncomfortably.

"Oh, he doesn't need sleep; it's time you knew that. When I rolled out about eleven he had already been talking to Don Antonio for hours, settling the details of that idea of his he told us about last night."

"You mean—Don Antonio has agreed?"

"Agreed! He fairly jumped at it. Steeley went off about noon; he hopes to reach the coast before dark and, if all goes well, be back here with or

without the machines inside a week. While we are waiting, he says, you are to start organising the ground forces, drilling them, and all that sort of thing. It's all fixed up with Don Antonio."

"That sounds a pretty tall order," I muttered, turning the thing over in my mind.

Anita, who had not been able to follow the conversation very well, as she knew only a few words of English, took me by the arm and led me to a table on which an ample meal had been spread. "Eat your breakfast—or is it dinner?—señor," she smiled. "There will be plenty of time to talk afterwards."

It seemed a good idea, and she went off as I proceeded to follow her advice.

Brian pulled his chair nearer to the table. "I can understand your anxiety to remain in the country," he said meaningly.

"What are you suggesting?" I demanded indignantly.

"Anita certainly is something to get enthusiastic about," he replied with engaging frankness.

"If you are presuming——"

"Oh, come off it, Tubby," he jeered. "Ever since I've known you I've had an uneasy suspicion that one day you would fall for one of these city house-cats who would expect you to sit at home and hold the knitting. That would be the end of you, and our pleasant little expeditions. That's why I say three cheers for the Princess of the Pampa. Oh boy, oh boy——"

He ducked as I threw a hard piece of pineapple peel at him, just as Don Antonio, with Anita on his arm, came round the corner.

The old man looked at me and then at the pineapple peel, and I felt myself going red in the face; it looked so childish to be caught throwing pineapple peel about. I think Anita understood the situation, though; at least, I hoped she did.

"What ees it?" she asked Brian, in English, with a fascinating accent.

"He got peeved because I called you the Princess of the Pampa," declared the young ruffian brazenly.

That was too much for Anita. She shook her head. "*No comprendo*," she said sadly.

I changed the conversation as I rose to greet Don Antonio, only to be covered with confusion when he thanked me with touching sincerity for saving Ramon, who had apparently painted the story of his rescue in glowing colours.

Glad when it was over, I mumbled the usual rot about it being nothing, and all that sort of thing, and then sat down again while the old man joined me at coffee. Anita sat near us listening. He told me what he had arranged with Steeley, which was almost letter for letter what Steeley had himself told us round the camp-fire, and then passed on with less confidence to Steeley's suggestion as to how I should pass the time until he returned. He had plenty of men, he assured me, but he doubted very much if I should ever make soldiers of them according to our own standards.

I expressed my willingness to try, pointing out that three aeroplanes, even if we could get them, could not capture a town. They could, however, reduce it to such a state that its investiture by an armed ground force would be a comparatively simple matter. "I think the best thing would be for you to muster all your men who are willing to fight," I suggested. "Then I shall be able to form an idea as to what force we are likely to have at our disposal when we need it. One other important point is this. If I am to fly, I shall not be able to command a ground force as well, but the position of Commander-in-Chief will have to be taken by a man who is as reliable as he is brave. I put it to you that Ramon, if you are both willing, is the man for that job. I served in a British regiment of the line before I took up flying, so I could teach him something about the duties of a Commanding Officer, as well as recognised field tactics."

Don Antonio expressed his entire approval, and this was presently confirmed by Ramon himself when he joined us a few minutes later.

"I think it is rather late to start operations to-day," I continued. "And we shall probably all profit by a rest. So the best plan would be, if you are agreeable, for you to ask every man who is willing to fight for his country to be on parade to-morrow morning at, say, six-thirty."

This being agreed, Don Antonio departed to put his mobilisation plans into operation. Brian and Ramon strolled off together and I was left alone with Anita.

For a little while we both sat and regarded the *pampa*, and the mountains beyond, in silence.

"Well, señorita, I have come back," I said at last, quite unnecessarily, but the prolonged silence was becoming embarrassing, and I felt that I ought to say something.

"And, as I told you I would be, señor, I am here," she replied softly, still gazing at the blue mountains.

"Was that just a statement, or—a promise, Anita?" I asked pointedly.

"Whichever you would wish it to be, señor."

I picked up my chair and put it close to hers. “Let us call it a promise,” I suggested.

“Very well. I have kept my promise, have I not, since I am here?” she disconcerted me by saying, in a low voice.

“I was thinking of something more than that, Anita, as you know,” I told her quietly. “You know what it was that sent me to Prava; what it was that gave me strength to do what I did—for do not think that I was unafraid; what it was that brought me back; what it is that will keep me here until you tell me to go.”

She did not answer.

“Do you want me to tell you?”

“*Si, señor.*”

“Is it necessary for me to tell you?”

“*No, señor.*” She spoke so quietly that I could only just catch the words.

“But you still want me to tell you?”

“Of course, señor.”

I cursed under my breath as a *peon* arrived and began to clear the table. “Meet me to-night by the seat in the garden and I will tell you,” I whispered. “For the words that I have to say to you, Anita *mia*, would sound best by moonlight.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE next three days passed as quickly as time always does when one is fully occupied. And it was not without interest, for the novel experiment of trying to instil military discipline into Gonzales' *peons* was, I could see, likely to prove successful—at least, to some extent.

On the morning of the parade one hundred and twenty-nine men presented themselves on foot, and twenty-three on horseback. These were Gonzales' *gauchos*, each of whom was not only a past-master in the art of horsemanship, but knew the country like a book, a tremendous advantage for a troop of cavalry, for into such a unit I proposed to weld them. But this presented a certain difficulty that also occurred in the case of the infantry. Neither horse nor foot had the remotest idea of team work. Not one had ever either thought or fought as the member of a unit. Each man, following the custom of many generations, thought only for himself; his idea was to work out a plan, and then follow it up, regardless of what everyone else was doing.

In the class of fighting to which they were accustomed, which consisted either of guerrilla warfare against the Indian tribes that still ran wild in the heart of the country, or personal feuds, the method no doubt had its advantages. But for the class of work I had in mind it was hopeless. So the first thing I did was to give them all a lecture, in which I endeavoured to point out the strategical value of an army that could act as one man, and operate as a single striking force against the enemy's most vulnerable position. The idea struck them as novel; they liked it, but how far they would stick to it in practice remained to be seen, and I had my doubts.

As far as their quality as fighting-men was concerned, I felt that they did not lack courage while things were going well for them, but whether or not they would be able to stand up to punishment, which is a characteristic peculiar to the Anglo-Saxon, was open to question.

Their equipment was mixed, and, generally speaking, ridiculously inadequate. Each horseman carried a revolver, a considerable knife that was not unlike a small chopper, and a *bolas*. The *bolas* is a weight attached to the end of a long line, which they whirled round their heads, ultimately striking the target or causing the line to wind itself about it. Their skill with this

device was incredible. They all knew how to use a rifle, but only two or three possessed this weapon.

The infantry had about twenty rifles between them, most of them so old-fashioned that it would be more accurate to call them muskets. One or two had a revolver or a pistol. All had heavy knives, or *machetes*, while one or two Indians actually turned up carrying bows and arrows. There was this about it, however—whatever weapon each man possessed, he was an adept in the art of using it, for the same reason that a civilised man becomes proficient in the use of the razor or toothbrush. He uses them every day of his life.

Such was the force, then, which I was expected to lick into shape for an assault on Ramoza's redoubtable headquarters, and it did not take me long to discover that each man was prepared to do his best, the result, I suppose, of patriotic enthusiasm. From the point of view of morale, I did not doubt but that one of my volunteers would be as good as three of Ramoza's mercenaries.

They all thought drill was rather a joke. Even Ramon, who took his place as Commanding Officer, felt the same until I ticked him off for laughing on parade. It made him terribly angry at the time, but he nearly wept with remorse when I explained to him that what happened on the parade ground had nothing whatever to do with our relations when we were in the house, or off duty. Poor lad, I fear he found it difficult to understand at first, but when, on the third day, five minutes after I had told him off for lighting a cigarette on parade, I linked my arm through his and chatted as if nothing had happened, he suddenly grasped the principle and roared with laughter. I suppose the thing must seem a bit strange to those who have never come into contact with it. I had some trouble with the men in this direction, too, for one would think nothing of strolling off the paddock which I used as a parade ground; when I hauled him back and asked him where he was going, he would calmly reply that he was going to make some coffee, or speak to his wife, or something equally absurd.

The men had little leisure, for after parade was over I divided them into squads, with a rifle to each unit, and a man who understood it to give them aiming practice. It was all hard work and I got little thanks, for there was not one of them, even Gonzales himself, who did not think it was all rather unnecessary. The trouble was, never having seen disciplined troops either at home or in action, they could not really grasp the difference between mob warfare and controlled operations.

On the first day Brian sat on the *patio* with Anita, a slightly amused smile on his face as he watched me sweating in the sun, so I made him a sort

of equipment-cum-stores officer and saw that he had plenty to do, getting grain and ammunition together, with vehicles for transporting them. I could tell from his expression that even he thought I was rather overdoing the military stuff, but he was soon to change his mind. In fact, they all were.

The evenings I spent with Anita, either in the garden, or sitting on the *patio* with the others, trying to work out the minimum time in which Steeley could get back; so, what with one thing and another, the days passed quickly enough.

It was on the evening of the third day that our pleasant little party was shattered by a blow that threatened complete disorganisation. In fact, my own private opinion is that but for the modicum of discipline which I had managed to instil into my "army", it would have fled incontinently and I should never have seen it again. As I have said before, panic is an infectious thing. Even poor old Don Antonio's nerves were so shaken that had Brian and I not been there, God knows what he might, or might not, have done. As it was, I went on with my meal as if nothing untoward had happened, and, as I hoped and expected, this cold-blooded calm—as they regarded it—had the desired effect.

It all happened when we were at dinner, and started when a *peon* came panting into the room jabbering away in the Spanish-Indian patois which they used, much too fast for me to follow. Gonzales went as white as a sheet and uttered a loud groan. Ramon buried his face in his hands, and even Anita looked dismayed.

"What's the matter?" I asked the old man.

"Ramoza is on his way here with his soldiers."

"Well, what about it?" I inquired.

He stared at me as if I could not have understood. "I said, Ramoza and his army are on the way here," he cried again.

"Well, what about it?" I repeated, reaching for some more bread.

Gonzales, Ramon, and Anita all looked at me as though I were mad. "Did you ask what about it?" muttered the old man incredulously.

"I did," I asserted.

"He will massacre every one of us," was the Don's next anguished observation.

"You mean that's what he'd like to do," I suggested. "What do you suppose I'm going to do—just sit here and let him?"

"But already he is through the forest, a thing we did not think possible."

"Are you sure of that?" I asked, going on with my meal.

Seeing what I was doing, the old man picked up his knife and fork again; but his appetite had gone. It wasn't fear; I don't think that for a moment. His condition was due to shock caused by the mere mention of Ramoza's name.

"An Indian who was guiding some of those you helped to escape from the castle has just arrived with the terrible news," he said, through white lips.

"Send for him," I demanded. "I'd like to ask him a few questions."

Before he could comply, an uproar broke out from the direction of the log huts in which the men were housed, and I knew in an instant what it was. Throwing my knife and fork on to my plate, I made a dash for the door. "Come on, Brian," I flung over my shoulder.

One glance was enough. The *peons* were on the point of evacuating the station, carrying their portable belongings with them, and the sight made me grind my teeth. In a moment I was amongst them, blasting and cursing them with every coward's name I could think of. One fellow, a negro, who continued to shout, I laid out with a straight left. That made the others pause. I asked them what they thought they were, rabbits or men, and a good deal more in the same strain, and my vehemence brought them to their senses. One by one they dropped their loads and looked sheepish, whereupon I gave them a good lecture on the folly of panic, and concluded by announcing that, in my opinion, Ramoza was nothing but a blustering bully, and as such was certainly nothing to be afraid of.

His name was the whole trouble, I could see that. After five years of concentrated persecution the very word Ramoza had become something more terrifying than the devil himself, as Bonaparte's did in Europe at the time when mothers used to frighten their children by saying, "Boney is coming". This bogy of Ramoza would have to be squashed, and pretty soon, that was certain. If once I could make the poor wretches see that he was only a human being like the rest of us, things would be different. Having restored order, I ended up by declaring that the President, in venturing out of his citadel, had as good as delivered himself into our hands, and it was something more to be thankful for than deplored. Maybe it was a case of the wish being father to the thought, but most of the men seemed to believe it. Fortunately, they did not know what I was thinking myself.

I called two of the *gauchos* whom I knew by name, and, taking them aside, told them that this was where they could cover themselves with everlasting glory. It was, I declared, such an opportunity for which all good cavalrymen yearned. They were the eyes of the army, the intrepid scouts on whom the success of the campaign now depended, and so on and so forth.

Then I sent them off to scout, with orders to report back to me as soon as they had located the exact position of Ramoza's camp-fires. If they could find out exactly how many men and what transport he had with him, so much the better.

Off they went, fairly bursting with pride, while I returned to the dining-room, where I found the messenger who had brought the bad news awaiting me. He was a good-looking Indian, and using Gonzales as an interpreter, I was able to extract a certain amount of useful information.

Apparently Ramoza had flown into a frightful passion when the discovery of the general exodus of prisoners from the castle had been announced. That did not surprise me in the least. He had killed the man who told him, which was the sort of thing one might expect him to do, and then sworn a lurid oath that he would lead the army into the field and wipe out Gonzales, ourselves, and every other blank blank rebel in the country. He had been far too lenient, he opined. Thereafter the Army had been assembled and an Indian captured and tortured into leading it through the forest. Vincenti was with it. He was a very sick man, with his head in bandages, but Ramoza had insisted that he should lead the troops, of which there were, all told, nearly five hundred. The remainder, some fifty or sixty, had been left to guard the palace. The Army was now bivouacked on the *pampa* about half-way between the range of hills and the forest, which was a distance from us of about fifty miles.

That was as much as the Indian could tell me, but it was enough to give me food for thought, for it was obvious that unless Steeley arrived within the next two or three days, the *hacienda* would fall. The most grim factor of all lay in the fact that, not only was Ramoza's numerical strength more than double our own, but each soldier carried a rifle, whereas we had only about thirty between the lot of us, and a limited supply of ammunition. Naturally, I did not let the others see the pessimistic lines on which I was thinking; my outward casual indifference remained the same—or, at least, I hope it did.

I dismissed the Indian and called a council of war, although there was very little to discuss. Only one real natural obstacle lay between Ramoza and the *hacienda*, and that was the range of rocky hills. What I was anxious to learn, therefore, was how many passes there were through it. Gonzales told me there were two. One about eighteen miles to the north, and the other, which I remembered vaguely, in a direct line with the *hacienda*. The now over-grown and little-used track from the *hacienda* to Prava ran through it. Clearly, that would be the one Ramoza would make for, and that being so, the sooner I had a look at it the better, for if we intended making a stand—

for that was what I had in mind—the canyon was the obvious place. Which meant, of course, that we should have to get there first.

Neither Gonzales nor Ramon objected when I announced my plan, although neither looked very hopeful about it. Briefly, it was this. I proposed setting off at once, on horseback, taking the cavalry with me, to look at the pass. Ramon was to muster the infantry forthwith and follow me, each man carrying enough food to last for three days. Brian was to establish a line of communication between the *hacienda* and the pass, employing as many old men as he could find and any women who would volunteer. Along this line would pass food and ammunition. Anita was to stay at home and organise the main rooms of the house as a hospital; the women servants to help her. They were to start tearing up sheets into bandages and make any other provision which they thought might be beneficial for the treatment of sick and wounded. Don Antonio was to stay at home and look after things generally.

That was all, and I proceeded with the conclusion of my dinner in silence. I knew what the Gonzales', father and son, were thinking. They had pure Latin blood in their veins, so it would not be fair to blame them. They thought I was acting precipitately. They would have preferred to talk about it to-morrow, and the next day, and then done something desperate when it was too late.

The meal finished, I stood up and made arrangements for instant departure. They all followed me outside, where, after impressing upon them all the vital necessity for implicit obedience to orders, I gave the order "boot and saddle". Anita lent me her own horse, a small but wiry mare with a touch of Arab blood in her.

"Remember, we hold out until Steeley returns, when we will proceed to give President Ramoza a lesson that he will not forget in a hurry," I told them.

Somewhat to my own surprise, although there I may have done them an injustice, all my troopers turned up. I half expected to find that some of them had deserted. My only weapon was my automatic, but at the last minute Don Antonio ran indoors and came out carrying his own pet Express repeating rifle, and a bandolier of cartridges, which he insisted that I should have. I accepted it without hesitation, for it was likely to be of more use to me than him.

I should have liked to kiss Anita goodbye, but quite apart from her father being present—although he must have had a good idea of the way things were shaping—my men were waiting, and I knew it might have a bad effect

on them, many having wives and sweethearts. So I swung up into the saddle and took my place at their head. "*Adios, señor. Adios, señorita*," I cried. "We will show Pedro the Lion the way home."

Anita ran up and squeezed my hand. "*Adios, señor.* I shall be waiting," she whispered.

I gave them all a parting wave, and then turned to my troop. "*Marche!*" I ordered briefly.

CHAPTER XIV

For the most part the trail lay straight across the open *pampa*, studded here and there with clumps of cactus, but occasionally it wound a sinuous course through ground that was soft and boggy, where flourished riotous colonies of mipas palm and tree-fern. It was a strange country, and although my men may have been at home, to me it was essentially foreign and filled me with a sense of remoteness. We did not halt anywhere, but held on steadily towards the black *massif* that towered into the sky ahead of us.

We must have covered nearly twenty miles when I met my scouts coming back, but they could tell me little I did not already know. From the mountains it was possible to see Ramoza's camp-fires far away on the plain, they told me, after which they fell in with my troop and we pushed on towards our objective.

Occasionally I dropped back and spoke to one or another of the men in order to test their morale, and their answers to my questions confirmed the opinion I had already formed of them. For some reason not easy to understand, their idea of warfare was confined almost entirely to methods of defence. They lacked both the initiative and the aggressive spirit to go for the other man. Perhaps it had been crushed out of them, but the fact remained that, miserable though they were under Ramoza's regime, it had never occurred to them to try to overthrow it by direct frontal attack. Fortunately for them it had cut both ways, for not until this moment had Ramoza mustered sufficient courage or energy to set out on a punitive expedition against the *hacienda*. Even now my fellows would have preferred to wait there for him, hoping, no doubt, for a miracle to postpone the conflict or destroy the aggressor. To ride out to the mountains, thus expediting the issue, was, to their way of thinking, both foolish and unnecessarily risky.

Which was all rather disconcerting. However, it struck me that possibly this peculiar outlook was due to some extent to the fact that they had never had a real leader, and consequently knew nothing of the sensation of victory. They could not visualise an enemy on the run, but should that ever come to pass, they might show a different spirit, I thought. Anyway, I hoped so.

It must have been about three in the morning when we reached the mountains, and although it was dark, I could see enough to make me satisfied with my decision, for the pass consisted of a single canyon that ran like a cutting through the rocks. It was rather as if a colossal axe, with two blows, had cut out a giant wedge in the middle of the range, and its military possibilities were at once apparent. It was too dark for me to make any actual dispositions, so I halted my men just inside the far end of the canyon, posting sentries at the actual entrance. The horses I sent well back inside in charge of four men, in order that they might be under cover. As I fully expected, this order was received with something approaching consternation, for the *gauchos*, who made it a point of honour never to walk anywhere, did not think the eve of a battle an ideal time to start. However, I was standing for no nonsense, and the order was obeyed. Another spot of bother arose when I forbade camp-fires except at one spot, which was behind a great buttress of rock, for the last thing I wanted was Ramoza to know we were there. Of such importance did I consider this point that had I been leading disciplined troops I would have forbidden fires altogether, but such an order would, I knew, be asking for a mutiny, so I compromised.

There was nothing more we could do for the moment. Ramoza was encamped too far away for me to reach him and get back before daybreak, or I would have done a bit of personal scouting. As things were, the time seemed opportune for getting some rest, particularly as there was no knowing how long it would be before we got another chance. So we settled ourselves down for the night, which passed off without disturbance of any sort.

The following day dawned clear and bright, and we were soon astir. There was really very little the men could do, but knowing the inadvisability of leaving them to loaf about and talk, I kept them busy on all sorts of jobs, the chief one of which was the erection of a rock barricade across the mouth of the canyon. Loopholes were left for the riflemen. Other strong points on the face of the hill were also built up with rock to form shelters for other sharpshooters. I myself made a thorough survey of the place while it was possible to do so. I knew Ramoza must be on the move, but he still had some distance to cover, so I sent a messenger back to tell Ramon that he need not unduly tire his men by a forced march. Nevertheless, they arrived shortly after midday, simultaneously with several Indians who were fleeing before Ramoza. These, of course, came from the opposite direction, and although they had been close to the enemy, they could give us little information, and what they did give us was unreliable.

I had a few words with Ramon, after which we proceeded to post the troops in the most strategical positions. This released the *gauchos*, some of whom were detailed to act as dispatch riders along the line of communication with the *hacienda*. Nothing, of course, had been heard of Steeley; not that any news was expected; unaware of the swift march of events, he might take his time, and in any case he would have done a quick job if he managed to get back within the next two or three days.

Nightfall saw Ramoza's camp-fires blaze up on the *pampa* about ten miles away, from which it could be safely assumed that he would arrive at the pass early the next day, and I approached Ramon with a scheme that had been slowly formulating in my head for some hours. This, in short, was a sortie against the invaders. Having by now a fair idea of the Carabonian mind, it seemed to me that such an action would find the enemy unprepared, when it might be possible, not only to deliver a blow that would seriously damage their morale, but capture some rifles and ammunition, of which we were in such dire need.

He was not enthusiastic. I knew he would not be, simply because the move was entirely unorthodox and his mind did not run that way, which convinced me all the more that the effect of a successful raid would do my side as much good as it would do the others harm. Mobility and speed were the two most essential factors I required, so I called my *gauchos* together and asked for ten volunteers to help me smack Ramoza's face. That appealed to their sense of humour, and they all stepped forward, so I chose twelve whom I thought were the best men for my purpose, and armed each with a rifle and revolver.

The same trouble arose as on the previous night. The order "no fires" was received with dismay, but it was obeyed, which showed that my disciplinary training had not been wasted. All the same, it was nervous work, wondering how far one could go with them without causing an outbreak of insubordination.

It was midnight when I gave the order to mount, reckoning on arriving at Ramoza's camp about 2 a.m., by which time his men might be expected to be sound asleep. We travelled in military order and in silence, having no difficulty in keeping a straight course, for here and there a camp-fire still glowed, and in this way we approached to within half a mile without being challenged. At this point I halted for a few moments to repeat what I had already told my men about the manner in which I proposed to launch the attack, emphasising the vital necessity for keeping together and obeying orders. I was afraid they might lose their heads.

My plan was simple in the extreme. We were to approach as near as possible, and then, at a given signal, charge, shooting and shouting, as loudly as possible in order to create the impression that we were a much stronger force than we really were. If, as I hoped, the enemy camp broke up in disorder, everyone was to seize as many rifles and as much ammunition as he could carry, and then rally on the point from which the attack began. There was no question of taking prisoners.

The moon was low in the sky, but it still gave ample light for our purpose. Slowly, in dead silence, we worked our way forward until at last the enemy camp lay open to our gaze. It produced an eerie sensation. The glowing camp-fires, with their attendant circles and lines of recumbent figures, reminded me forcibly of a picture I had once seen depicting an incident in the Napoleonic Wars. The title was "The Eve of Battle", or something of the sort. But in that picture the foreground had been largely occupied by an alert-looking sentry. But here there was nothing like that. Incredible though it may appear, not a soul was on guard, and for a moment I wished that I had led out our entire army, for I honestly believed that I could have ended the campaign there and then. And the events of the next few minutes went far to confirm this belief.

"Ready!" I said in a low voice. "*Charge!*"

With a wild yell that even startled me, we thundered down on the camp, blazing away with our automatics as fast as we could pull trigger.

Never as long as I live shall I forget the scene that followed. It surpassed anything that could have been imagined, and no description that I could give would convey an adequate picture.

The entire camp awoke as one man. The recumbent figures came to life, and instantly all was confusion. Some of the men were only half-dressed; most of them had taken off their footgear; each man thought only of himself; no orders of any sort were given, so the result was a milling crowd in which no man could find his personal belongings or even see what was going on. With a single machine-gun I could have wiped out the lot. As it was, we continued to blaze away from the outskirts of the mob, shouting at the top of our voices, although I am afraid that any noise we made was drowned in the uproar that arose from the pandemonium. I had a wild hope of being able to pick out Ramoza in the scrum, but I soon saw that this was impossible.

At this juncture, as I had hoped, a few men abandoned everything and started to run; a stampede followed, hotly pursued by my *gauchos*, who, beside themselves with excitement, were having the time of their lives. It took me some minutes to round them up, and I was only just in time, for

those of the enemy who had managed to find their rifles, seeing that our numbers were few, were turning and firing at us. One or two groups were forming to make a definite stand.

We galloped back to the camp, where we dismounted and began picking up the best rifles we could find. The others we threw into such fires as were still alight. We did the same thing with the cartridge-belts and the bandoliers that we could not carry. Very soon, however, shots began to whistle about us, so after making sure that every man had as big a load as he could carry I gave the order to retire, a movement which I insisted on being carried out in good order, as opposed to a disorderly scramble, which would have broken up and perhaps scattered the unit.

The ride home was a cheerful affair, and my men, in their exuberance, would have fired off half the cartridges they had captured had I permitted it. I allowed them to talk and smoke, but nothing more, pointing out that indiscriminate shooting would arouse our own camp, and might even cause our own people to open fire on us.

We had only one casualty. A man had been wounded in the fleshy part of the arm, although I knew nothing of this until we had been on our way for some time. To tell the truth, I don't think he did, either, for he was nearly drunk with excitement. Poor devils, success was something new to them, so, far from blaming them, it cheered me to see their reaction to it.

The excitement was nearly as great in the camp when we reached it, and the story of our victory was heard. Ramon was astounded at our success, and it was clear that, in one step, I had become something between a god and a magician.

A quick tally revealed that our bag consisted of sixty-one rifles and five or six thousand rounds of ammunition, although, unfortunately, some of this was of no use, as we had not the right type of rifles to take it. This, considered with the fact that we had destroyed a lot of war material by throwing it into the fires, besides giving the enemy a severe jolt, made the show a real success, and I curled up in a corner to get some sleep with the satisfaction of a job well done.

CHAPTER XV

THE smack in the face that we had given Ramoza did not hold up his advance, but in view of the events which were soon to follow, it became increasingly clear to me that but for our sortie we could not have held the pass for twenty-four hours, although a platoon of regular soldiers could have held it against a force much stronger than Ramoza's. As it was, sundown the next day found us fighting with our backs to the wall.

This desperate state of affairs was due entirely to a circumstance that could not have been foreseen; nor did we learn the facts until later. Frankly, I thought by disarming many of his men we had pretty well spiked Ramoza's guns. Judge my astonishment and dismay, therefore, when, far from being crippled, the President attacked us with weapons that nearly broke down our defence at the first clash. I thought I was dreaming when, in reply to our fire, he opened up on us with artillery and machine-guns.

The mystery was explained later. What had happened was this. Unknown to anybody except Vincenti, Ramoza, determined to consolidate his position, had not only asked Marquez, in London, to find him some pilots, but he had also sent him some of his ill-gotten wealth in order to acquire some modern weapons. Thus it had come about that only two days previously a ship had arrived in Prava with many cases of brand-new rifles, machine-guns, and—more formidable still—a battery of four small field-guns with an ample supply of ammunition. Ramoza had already left Prava, but the new equipment was sent on after him, and actually arrived at his camp an hour or two after our sortie. In this way he was able to repair much of the material damage we had done, but his men had been shaken, and their attack lacked the vigour and determination that would have seen them through.

With Ramon beside me, I watched the advance of Ramoza's army from a point of vantage on the face of the hill, and in order to make the surprise as complete as possible I withheld our fire until he was well within range. The advance was held up immediately, and I thought, naturally—but, as it turned out, prematurely—that, holding the key position as we did, we had little or nothing to fear. I had noticed two parties of men break away from the main

body and disappear behind clumps of cactus, and although I wondered what they were going to do, not for one instant did I guess their purpose.

There is no doubt that one well-aimed salvo would have put my *peons* to flight right away, but, as one would imagine, the shelling began in a desultory fashion and the shooting was bad. At the first whistle of the shells, and the resultant din as they burst among the rocks, I just lay and stared in blank amazement. By the time I had recovered from the shock, my men—poor devils, they knew nothing of this sort of warfare—were on the move, and only by exposing myself with a nonchalance that I certainly did not feel did I restore anything like order. The shelling improved as the day wore on, but by that time they had become more or less accustomed to it and I had the situation fairly well in hand. Still, they did not like it, and things looked far from bright. It was not so much the damage caused by the guns; it was the hellish racket kicked up by the shrapnel and machine-gun bullets, which, ricocheting off the rocks, sounded a good deal more dangerous than they really were. To make matters worse, my men did not seem to realise that, by taking full advantage of the excellent cover their position provided, they were comparatively safe. Indeed, most of our casualties were incurred by fellows moving about and exposing themselves unnecessarily.

Brian arrived early in the afternoon, on his face the ridiculous smile that he so often adopts in moments of extreme emergency.

"This isn't so good, is it?" was his futile remark.

"It's damn bad," I told him shortly. "While we stand fast I don't think Ramoza can get through, but if he goes on pounding us with this heavy stuff, I shall have a job to keep our fellows together. What are you doing in the firing line, anyway?"

"The people back home were anxious to know what was going on, so I've come along to take a look."

"Well, you can't do much good here, so you'd better get back," I told him. "I shouldn't say anything about the guns, or the old man will throw a fit."

"There's no hurry. I'll stick around for a bit, if you don't mind," he replied quietly.

One of the most trying ordeals of modern warfare, as many people know, is to lie still under punishment without any means of retaliation. Only trained men can stand it for any length of time, and my *peons* were anything but that. For this reason I was really relieved when Ramoza launched his first attack against our position, for it did at least allow us to do something.

There must have been about five hundred men in the mob that charged. I say "mob," because there was no sort of order. They ran forward shouting and shooting as they came, and I would much rather have been where I was than in that crowd. I took the opportunity of picking off as many of the enemy as I could, and Brian, who had found himself a rifle, did the same, but I fear that most of our fellows paid more attention to the speed of their fire than the accuracy of their aim. It was quite impossible to make them behave differently. Still, they held their ground, and by the time the attack was checked, a good many of the enemy, who I could see had no great love for the task, were stretched out on the ground. The advance halted, Ramoza's troops took such cover as was available, while I detailed one or two of the steadiest men to keep up a brisk fire on the cactus bushes behind which many of the enemy had hidden themselves, apparently in the fond hope that we did not know they were there, or that the thick, fleshy leaves would stop high-velocity bullets.

I turned to Brian. "You'd better get back," I said. "We can hold out for the rest of the day and possibly to-morrow, but no longer. Another rush like this last one will bring the enemy very close, and if they haul their guns forward, as I expect they will during the night, our fellows won't face them. If Steeley arrives, tell him what is happening. Give him the facts; the others are likely to say anything."

"O.K.," he agreed, starting to crawl towards the canyon. "Be careful what you're doing."

Another attack was launched just before sundown, and although we checked it, a number of the enemy managed to get behind some outcrops of rock that lay at no great distance on the *pampa*, and from these positions sniped us steadily. I knew that as soon as it was dark Ramoza would bring his guns forward to these same rocks, in which case to-morrow would probably see the end of the affair, for the gunnery could hardly fail to improve at the shortened range. However, I had this consolation: the enemy were still on the wrong side of the hills, and but for our stand Ramoza would have slept that night in the *hacienda*—or what was left of it.

Ramon came and reported that we had lost thirteen men killed and twenty-seven wounded, chiefly by shell splinters. This was rather disturbing news, for it meant that about 25 per cent. of our force was already non-effective. Still, there was nothing more we could do. Wishing would not produce a howitzer, or even a Lewis gun, so I had a walk round to see that the men were still in their positions, and to try to restore their confidence, after which I went back into the canyon and ate some unappetising cold mutton, helping it down with half a bottle of Gonzales' sherry.

The night was a tedious business. I managed to snatch a few winks of sleep, but the men were on the jump, and I daren't leave them for long in case they got together and decided to evacuate. However, the morning came at last, and thereafter things happened pretty much on the lines I expected. The guns opened up a devastating fire from the shortened range, and it was clearly only a question of time before my men would break. Once that happened, panic would follow and nothing in the world would stop them. The war would be as good as over.

The shelling died away as Ramoza's storm troops broke cover, and from the way they behaved I suspected that they were as much afraid of their master as they were of us. I kept a watchful eye open, hoping to catch sight of Pedro or Vincenti, but they were either too cowardly or too careful to show themselves.

The attack broke down, and although we had inflicted severe punishment, it left a good many of the enemy much too close to be healthy. Some were within a hundred yards, lying behind their own dead or pieces of loose rock, and although we kept up a rapid fire on them, we could not drive them back.

It must have been nearly midday when Ramon, bleeding from a scratch across the face, came crawling up to me with the shattering information that our ammunition was nearly exhausted. The last reserve had been issued, and few of the men had more than a dozen rounds left. Also, our casualties had been heavy, nine more men being killed and a number wounded.

I lit a cigarette that I was quite convinced would be my last. The question now appeared to be, was it fair to ask the men to fight it out hand to hand, in which case they would all most certainly be wiped out, or should I give them a chance of saving their lives by giving the order to retire? Either way, nightfall would see Ramoza through the pass. Again, and this was rather a knotty point, the *gauchos* had most of Gonzales' horses, without which the people at the *hacienda* could not escape, yet if once it was known that the *gauchos* were returning, the infantry would certainly want to go, too.

In the end I decided to hold out, if possible, until the next attack. Then, the men's ammunition finished, they would go, anyway. But for the ammunition we had captured, it would have been all over before this.

I passed the word round that every man should conserve his ammunition and try to make every shot tell, and on no account to retire until I gave the signal. With a dozen stout men, if I could find them, I would then try to fight a rearguard action through the canyon, an ideal place for such tactics, but I

was afraid that if once my men started running, they would not stop until they reached the *hacienda*.

At about three o'clock there came another furious bombardment, which, from experience, I knew would be followed immediately by a general assault. Nor was I mistaken. While the air was still full of flying rocks and splinters the barrage died away and the enemy started to move forward, running from cover to cover, but drawing ever nearer, encouraged, no doubt, by the fact that our fire was weakening.

Ramon scrambled along to where I was firing as fast as I could load, using the ammunition of two fallen *gauchos*. "All is lost," he gasped.

"I am afraid you're right," I agreed. "Ride as fast as you can to the *hacienda*, taking as many horses as you can find."

"And you?"

Before I could answer, a sound reached my ears that nearly cost me my life, for instinctively I jerked up my head to see whence it came. I felt the wind of a bullet and bobbed down again quickly, but not before I had seen something that caused me to let out a ringing cheer. Roaring low over the hills from the direction of the *hacienda* were two racy-looking monoplanes. There was no mistaking their class. Steeley had come back!

For a few moments I think I went crazy. "Tell everybody to stand fast," I yelled to Ramon, and, jumping up, pointing at the machines, I let out another cheer, which was taken up by the men as Ramon told them what was happening.

Snatching up a fallen *peon's* rifle, I pumped out lead as fast as I could go until the magazine was empty. Some of the stoutest of my fellows followed suit, and whether it was this, or the sudden appearance of the aircraft that caused the enemy to falter, I do not know. Probably it was the latter, for the air was now filled with the vibrant roar of high-powered engines, and it was not in human nature to refrain from looking up at the machines.

They were flying close together, side by side, their metal props whirling arcs of white light as they cleared the hills and set their noses down at the enemy. I suspected that some of Ramoza's men knew what was coming to them, for they broke cover and ran for their lives. As they did so, a new sound became audible above the noise of the engines. It was the staccato rattle of speeded-up machine-guns. Turf, earth, and pieces of rock sprang unaccountably into the air amongst and around the running men. Lower and lower swept the machines, until it looked as if their wheels must hit the ground. But at the last moment they zoomed high, banked steeply, and swept down again. One of them turned and sprayed the outcrop of rock behind

which the guns were concealed. Their crews broke cover and joined the others, and soon the *pampa* was dotted with men running in all directions, anywhere to escape that deadly hail. Never have I seen the moral effect of "low strafing" more amply demonstrated. Not that it was by any means due to the number of men hit. As a matter of fact, it is doubtful if the machines caused more than thirty or forty casualties all told. It was just the devastating effect of withering fire coming from a source against which any man on the ground must feel impotent.

Here was an opportunity not to be lost, for it was one that might not appear again. Under cover of darkness Ramoza would rally his men and return. Indeed, as far as I could see, there was little else he could do if he wanted to carry on with the war. So I collected as many men as I could find and led them out on to the *pampa*, where we started collecting the rifles and ammunition that lay about. The machine-guns, four of them, had been left behind, as well as the field-guns. We took possession of all of them, dragging the artillery well back into the canyon until such time as we could decide what to do with it. Actually, there were very few shells left, although I suspected that there might be more where these had come from.

By the time we had finished, both machines had abandoned the pursuit, through lack of ammunition, I suppose, for at the rate they had used it neither could have much left. For a few minutes they continued to circle, and then, as there was no suitable landing-place, they made off in the direction from which they had come. Shortly afterwards I heard their engines cut out, and knew that they had landed on one of the open spaces near the *hacienda*. I felt like dashing through the canyon to find Steeley, but there was other work to be done and I could not leave my post. I could, of course, have left Ramon in charge, but I preferred to attend to things myself, because that is the only way one can be quite sure that a job is done.

First of all, I had a general muster and gave first aid to the wounded. There was no doctor, of course, so everyone helped. It was a sorry business, but we did the best we could in the circumstances. Those who were only slightly wounded and able to walk, we sent back to the *hacienda*. Others, more seriously hurt, were put on a primitive transport waggon that had arrived and sent back also. Of my original army, about ninety were still on their feet, fit to carry on. These I congratulated on their magnificent performance—they had really put up a very praiseworthy effort—and, after posting sentries, told them to eat and rest. With Ramon, and one or two of the more responsible *peons*, I set about the task of overhauling our equipment, with a view to making a new issue of the stuff we had captured

from Ramoza. The sun was low in the west by the time we had finished, and there seemed little chance of the attack being resumed again that day.

I was feeling pretty tired by the time things were in order, and accepted readily a cup of steaming black coffee that a peon brought me. Ramon came along with the flush of victory still on his grimy face.

"Good work, Ramon," I said. "You did well."

"You think so, señor?" he said eagerly. After all, he was only a boy.

"You behaved like a British soldier, and that is enough praise for any man," I declared.

"What will happen now, do you think?" he asked.

"I don't know, but I fancy we have given Ramoza something to think about," I answered. "It is no use trying to make any fresh plans until we have had a word with Steeley to find out what he has brought back with him. Here he comes now, with Brian."

CHAPTER XVI

STEELEY was walking quietly down the floor of the canyon towards us. His expression was grave. Brian was with him, his face wearing a contented smile. Both were bareheaded, carrying flying caps and goggles in their hands.

I strolled to meet them. "You arrived in what is known, I believe, as the nick of time," I said, addressing Steeley. "Another ten minutes and we were sunk."

"You seem to have had some excitement since I've been away," he replied.

"Too much for me," I declared. "Well, what is the position? What did you bring back with you?"

"Everything went like clockwork. I've got two fighters—those you saw just now. They are both fully equipped with guns and bomb-racks. Two of Silas's pilots brought them down. I had to fly Anita's Moth back. We landed about an hour ago at the *hacienda*, where Brian presented me with the shattering news that you were making a last stand at the canyon. In the circumstances I thought the best thing to do was to come right along to see if we could lend a hand."

"It was a thundering good thing you did," I assured him. "You've certainly caused a lull in the storm, if nothing more. What about the other pilots? How are they going to get back?"

"There is another machine, a big transport job, that I haven't told you about yet. It's brought a whole lot of stuff down—I loaded it pretty well to capacity with ammunition, bombs, oil, and petrol; actually, it is a twenty-four seater, but we pulled the seats out of it. It has got to go back right away. The pilot who brought it down will fly it home, taking the other two with him. The United States authorities were very definite about that. They say they don't want any diplomatic complications to arise through some nosey-parker suggesting that the U.S.A. is trying to grab Carabonia because it is close to the Panama Canal zone. The machine is being unloaded and I shall send it back to-morrow. That was the original proposition. We've got all the

stuff we expected, and it only remains for Gonzales to sign the contract for us to take it over and do the best we can with it."

"A sporting effort on your father-in-law's part," I said. "We've got to see him right over this, as well as Gonzales. We'd better have a quick pow-wow at the *hacienda*. Ramon is capable of taking charge here. There will be nothing doing until to-morrow, that's certain. Meanwhile, I wish you'd do a little job for me."

"What is it?"

"Make a short reconnaissance over the enemy lines and see what Ramoza's crowd is doing. We might as well know."

Steeley nodded. "All right. There is one thing you'd better understand, though: we've got to go steady with petrol. I reckon we've got about enough for twenty-four hours' flying, all told. There isn't much chance of getting any more."

I pursed my lips. "Yes, we shall certainly have to go steady," I agreed. "Right-ho. Go and see what the enemy is doing, and then take the machine to the *hacienda*. Don't land here again; I'll meet you there as soon as I can get back."

I sent for my horse, and with a *gaucho* to show me the way set off at a canter for the *hacienda*. As I rode, I tried to weigh up the situation as it now presented itself, for even though we were in a much stronger position, it was by no means easy to see just how we were going to capture Prava and depose the President. True, we had thoroughly shaken the enemy and reduced his numbers considerably, but it had not been without cost to ourselves. My effective force was only about two-thirds its original size, and numerical superiority still lay with Ramoza. With unlimited petrol we might have harassed him until his men were thoroughly demoralised and scattered all over the place, but we had not, and as things were, a march on the capital was likely to be a hazardous business. There was not much doubt about our now being able to hold the pass indefinitely, but that would not get us anywhere. Things would go on just the same as ever in Prava, and we should simply be isolated in the back of beyond, as it were. Somehow or other we had got to hold the pass to prevent the destruction of the *hacienda*, yet at the same time take Prava. It was not easy to see how this could be done. Admittedly, we now had two aeroplanes, but two aeroplanes, or twenty for that matter, could not capture a town, particularly when the nearest place where they could land was ten miles away. To start indiscriminate bombing would hardly make us popular with the inhabitants. What was needed was a

ground force to support the aeroplanes, yet here we were with a handful of men and a considerably larger force between them and the objective.

It was at that moment that a glimmering of an idea began to take shape in my head, and by the time I reached the *hacienda* at dusk the thing had crystallised into a definite plan.

The two fighters, the Moth, and the big transport plane were all standing together in the paddock—or corral as they call it—with Steeley, Brian, Gonzales, and the American pilots, in a group, talking.

I rode straight up to them and dismounted.

"Come and join the party," invited Steeley. "We're talking things over."

"And I've been doing a bit of thinking on the way here," I told him. "Have you got matters fixed up—I mean, the contract with Don Antonio, and the pilots?"

"Yes, it's all settled. These chaps"—he indicated the Americans—"are going back to-morrow in the big machine, taking the contract with them."

"I see," I said slowly. "Would the following day suit them as well?"

Steeley looked at me wonderingly. "Why?"

"Because I've got an idea which, if it were put into execution, might hold up the machine until it was too late for it to start back to-morrow."

"And what's the idea?"

"Briefly, this," I answered. "I've had the spotlight on the military situation as it now appears to me, and, to be quite frank, I can't see how the devil we are going to move a small body of men all the way across the open *pampa* from here to Prava, and then take an almost impregnable citadel at the other end. When we made our first plans there was nothing to prevent us marching to Prava. Now there is. Ramoza's march out, and our casualties, have produced a horse of a different colour, and I don't much like the look of it. It would be madness to take on Ramoza in the open, yet it doesn't seem much use just sitting here."

"I quite agree. I haven't had a great deal of time for thought since I came back, but I've had enough to turn the thing over in my mind. But what about this idea of yours? Let us hear it."

"As far as I can see, there is only one way we can get to Prava with our army intact," I told him. "Further, if we adopt it, we should stand a better chance of taking the castle now that Ramoza is out of it than we should if he and his cut-throats were inside."

"Well?"

"My idea is to detail a handful of men to hold the pass. As we now have four machine-guns, to say nothing of artillery, a dozen men might do it. The rest I propose to fly over to Campanella, using the big machine, and from there make a dash for the castle while it is practically empty, and while an assault is surely the last thing the garrison expects. We might never get such a chance again. With Prava in our hands, and the pass held, Ramoza would have no place to go, and shortage of provisions would soon reduce him to a pretty desperate state. How long do you suppose he would be able to hold his men together in such conditions?"

Steeley thought for some minutes before he replied. "Tubby, that's a brainwave," he declared. "If the boys will lend me the big machine, I can't see any reason why it should not come off. How many men could you spare from the pass for the show?"

"Between sixty and seventy."

"That would mean three journeys for the machine."

"That's what I calculated. We could get the lot over to-morrow morning inside four hours and strike at the castle the same day. I think the best way to go to work would be for you and Brian to fly the fighters over to the castle, aiming to arrive at a zero hour which we will fix. I would try to get there at the same time with the army. A few bombs on the castle would, I fancy, cause the garrison to evacuate, in which case we should merely have to walk in. We can settle the actual details presently. How does that sound to you?"

"I can't think of anything better."

"By the way," I asked, "what were Ramoza's crowd doing when last you saw them?"

"They were all together again about six or seven miles back from the hills. I imagine they are having to readjust their ideas."

Another thought struck me. "It wouldn't surprise me if, in view of the fact that he now knows we have got a couple of aeroplanes from somewhere, Ramoza abandons his idea of trying to capture the *hacienda*, and returns to Prava instead. It would certainly be the best thing he could do, and unless he's a fool he'll do it. We had better make an early start in the morning in case he does decide to go back. We shouldn't look very clever if we rushed the castle, only to find that he had got there first."

"By God, you're right," agreed Steeley. "Good enough; we'll have a word with the pilots about it, not that I think they will have any objection."

Nor did they. On the contrary, I rather gathered that they were only sorry that a promise to their employer prevented them from taking part in the operations. Fun, they called it.

The general plan being approved, it only remained for us to settle the details, which we did on the *patio* over a bottle of sherry. I pointed out that there was no need for the men to march all the way back to the *hacienda* in order to emplane; they could be picked up at the spot where Steeley and Brian had landed that afternoon, which had the advantage of being several miles nearer to the objective and would thus save a good deal of time and petrol. The details settled between us, I announced that I would go back to the pass, promising to have the men lined up ready for embarkation at the crack of dawn.

Before departing, however, I went in and had a few words with Anita. It was no time for tender speeches. She was up to her eyes in work attending to the wounded, who were being brought back in relays from the scene of action. However, she thanked me very nicely for all I was doing to help them, and reaffirmed that she would be waiting for me when the war was won.

That was all I needed to send me on my way in good spirits.

CHAPTER XVII

THE transportation of our little army from the landing-ground behind the mountains to Campanella was an extraordinary experience. Ramon, much against his will, for he would have preferred to come with us, was left with a dozen men strongly emplaced at the mouth of the canyon. With the field-guns for long-distance work, machine-guns, and plenty of small arms, there seemed to be no reason why he should not hold out for a week or more, should it be necessary, particularly as Steeley and Brian had promised to make a demonstration two or three times a day as they flew between the *hacienda* and Prava.

Every other available man we could raise was flown to Campanella. Not one had been in an aeroplane before, and it was rather curious to see how they reacted to the proposal. Not one demurred. And not one showed the slightest sign of fear or nervousness. In the confidence of ignorance, they regarded the aeroplane in precisely the same way as they did any other form of modern transport. As far as they were concerned, the vehicle had been designed to do a certain job, and the possibility that it might fail did not occur to them. Luckily, they had never heard of an aeroplane crashing in flames, so they were blissfully unaware of what *could* happen to them.

I went over with the first party of twenty. Wisps of early-morning mist were still filling the folds in the ground as, with Steeley at the joystick, we roared over *pampa* and jungle and landed at Campanella. Krimm and his party were too astonished to do anything. Whatever they might have thought, it was quite clear from their manner that the last thing they imagined was that we were an advance guard of Gonzales' army. In fact, they refused to believe it at first when we told them that such was the case, but having convinced them, a good idea of their characters and value may be gauged when I say that they at once offered to join us. They had only one policy in politics, and that was to be on the winning side, and I realised then that Ramoza must have with him many others of the same ilk, who would desert at the first opportunity. How correct I was in this assumption will presently be seen. The fact was, most of the decent men in Carabonia had either been murdered by the scoundrel Pedro, or were in hiding.

After disarming them, we locked Krimm and his craven companions in their hut and placed a guard over them. I had no intention of letting them get to Prava and give us away. Then we waited for the others to come.

By ten o'clock our entire force, better armed than it had been, was on parade near the edge of the forest, ready for the march on the capital. With the last load had arrived, much to my surprise, Don Antonio. I was not very pleased about this at first, but when he explained that he considered that his place was with his men, and that his personal appearance would probably help matters in Prava, I could do nothing else but agree.

I had a last word with Steeley before he flew the transport back to the *hacienda*. As a precautionary measure, we arranged that, should the scheme go wrong, he would fly over and fetch us. He also told me that the American pilots were standing by and would fly us out of the country if we wished.

The march to Prava was made without incident, and accomplished in four hours, a short delay being caused at the gully where we had overthrown the bridge. We did not see a soul on the way, which relieved me very much, as I still had a fear that our presence might be reported, in which case we might expect our task to be a lot more difficult.

I halted just inside the forest at a point where it overlooked the castle, and crept forward to scout out the land. All was as quiet as I hoped it would be. There were one or two soldiers lounging about outside the guardroom, but no sentries had been posted, and it was apparent that no thought of danger was in the heads of the garrison. The city itself was a place of the dead; indeed, so quiet was everything that I was greatly tempted to make a dash for the castle gates; but knowing the folly of departing from a prearranged plan, I thrust the temptation aside and went back to my men to await the arrival of the aircraft. Fortunately, the delay was of short duration.

With a roar that was terrifying in its volume, more particularly so on account of the silence, the two fighters suddenly dropped out of the blue, and it was only with difficulty that I restrained my men from rushing out to watch the performance. It was certainly a spectacular arrival. Skimming the roofs of the startled town, the two machines swept low over the castle, and the first two bombs exploded with a crash that rocked the hillside. One missed its mark, bursting in the courtyard, but the other exploded somewhere in the middle of the building, and a cloud of smoke and masonry shot high into the air. Both machines swung round at the top of their zoom, their white wings flashing in the sun, but before they could strike again the evacuation of the castle had begun. From the main entrance, and the small doorway through which I had gone with the sergeant in search of Ramon, poured troops and staff, like bees from a disturbed hive.

Observing the machines coming back, they ran for their lives, and it was only by beating down their rifles that I prevented my men from firing at them. The time was not yet ripe. I wanted them to get well clear of the place before they became aware of our presence, in case they should run back and lock themselves in, thus making our task more difficult. Quite a number of them ran in our direction, and seeing that we should presently be discovered, I gave the order to charge.

Their surprise when we burst from cover was utter and complete. Two more bombs burst on the castle, and they knew not where to run. Several threw down their rifles and held up their hands without further argument. One or two fired at us wildly, and then fled, throwing away their weapons. It was not really a fight; it was a rout from the very beginning. The poor wretches, having no leader—or none that I could see—were panic-stricken, and scattered in all directions, some making for the town and others for the forest. In fact, it was rather an anticlimax. Even taking the aircraft into account, I expected a more spirited resistance.

Both machines suspended operations when we broke cover, this being my arrangement with Steeley, and we reached the castle gate without hindrance of any sort. My men dashed in, and after that it was only a matter of time before the few survivors laid down their arms. The castle was ours, and running up to the parapet, we raised cheer after cheer, until it dawned upon the people in the town what had happened. At first they came out nervously, but once word of the fall of their "bastille" had flashed from mouth to mouth, they hurried to the courtyard in ever-increasing numbers and cheered Gonzales to the echo. There was no doubt whatever about public feeling, and inside twenty minutes our force was augmented by most of the male population of the town. It was a *coup d'état* with a vengeance.

But our work was by no means finished. There were still many things to be done, and we set about their execution without delay. Order was restored in the castle and guards posted. Two emergency regiments were formed, the men being sworn in after taking their oath of allegiance to the new republic, concerning which proclamations were read in the streets, which were now crowded with people of all ages. Gonzales, in a speech, promised a new regime of freedom, and in an unbelievably short time Prava was a normal town.

By evening everything was more or less settled, and it only remained for us to establish surface communication with the *hacienda* to consolidate our position. To this end a platoon of light infantry was sent off to strengthen Ramon's little force. Steeley and Brian, as soon as they saw that the battle

was won, knowing that they could serve no useful purpose by remaining, turned homeward, and the roar of their engines died away.

Ramoza was, of course, still at large with the remnants of his mercenary army, but I felt sure that it was now only a question of time before his followers began to desert him. With all supplies cut off, he could not hold out for more than a day or two. I had a vague hope that he would not learn that the castle had fallen, but would march back to occupy it, thus delivering himself into our hands; but things did not turn out that way.

What actually did happen was, for a time, something of a mystery. The solution was fairly easy to surmise, but difficult to prove. There seems little doubt that word of what had taken place in the capital was carried swiftly to Ramoza's camp, probably by refugees. Thereafter, the facts as we saw them were these.

The morning following the fall of the castle, as I was preparing to set out for the *hacienda* with one of the newly formed regiments, the first deserters from Ramoza's army began to straggle in. These were the fellows, mostly Indians and half-breeds, who had bolted when the last attack on the pass had been frustrated by the two aeroplanes. Naturally, they were not a little nervous about their possible fate, and were only too anxious to tell us all they knew. It was meagre, but interesting. Ramoza's army was breaking up. Most of the men were returning to Prava. The President and General Vincenti were already dead. How my informants were aware of this I could not ascertain, but they stated it simply, as a fact. At the time I refused to accept this story, but when more deserters began to trickle in with the same tale, it began to look as if there might be some truth in it.

These wretches, all of whom had thrown away their weapons, now begged for mercy, so I had them all put into a big compound until such time as they could be dealt with.

About the middle of the morning Steeley and Brian flew over, and a message streamer fluttered down. It was brought to me and turned out to be a note from Steeley. All was well at the *hacienda*, and at the pass, he said. Ramoza's army had dispersed, and it looked as if the war was over. Deserters were arriving at the pass, and were unanimous in reporting that Ramoza and Vincenti were dead, presumably having been murdered by their own men, although no one would name the actual culprits. Probably several people had taken a hand in it.

That this was, in fact, the case, we learned afterwards when the remains of the two wretched men were discovered.

There is little more to tell. From sheer lethargy the town awoke to real activity, and communication was quickly opened to all parts of the country, the aircraft acting as high-speed dispatch carriers.

Don Antonio had taken charge of the castle, so there was little more I could do. In any case, for reasons which need not be explained, I was anxious to return to the *hacienda*. So, on the third morning after the *coup*, I rode to Campanella, where Steeley, at my request, was waiting with the Moth to pick me up.

Within an hour I was at the *hacienda*. On the way he told me that he had decided to stay on for a time to look after the interests of his father-in-law, who had made everything possible; Brian was also going to stay for a short time, having sent the full and exclusive story of the revolution in Carabonia to his paper by means of the transport machine which had returned to the United States. In fact, as he remarked, everybody seemed happy.

"What are you going to do next?" he asked as the machine ran to a stop and I jumped out.

"I'll give you one guess," I replied, making for the door of the *hacienda*, where Anita was waiting for me.

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 *Wings of Romance* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]