

SOLDIERS OF CHANCE*

A SERIAL IN IV PARTS—PART II

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

BILLY MOUNTAIN, a soldier of fortune, returns to New York from Honduras in his own ship, after an eight-year exile. Lawler, a promoter of questionable enterprises, with a dark past, and now a millionaire, expects that Mountain, who comes under the name of Captain Josslyn, will take a million dollars' worth of stocks off his hands. But Billy has come to New York for revenge, not stocks. Years before, the vicious Lawler robbed Billy—first of his fortune of twenty thousand dollars, and then of his beautiful young wife, whom the plunderer soon cast adrift. Now he is about to make restitution, though he suspects nothing. Billy entraps the millionaire on board his ship. They sail for Key West to load with rifles and ammunition for the revolutionists, and are picked up by a strange white yacht flying the Spanish flag. In New York, Billy has had a brief and startling encounter with a beautiful girl, whom he discovers with a lighted match before the door of a safe in Lawler's offices. She is named Josephine. Through his glasses, Billy sees her on board the pursuing yacht. Lawler is a prisoner on board the Mountain privateer, and is forced to work in the hell of the stoke-hold.

CHAPTER VII.

Loring Plans a Coup.

DO you know them?" Billy demanded.

"I thought I did," Lawler replied. "But I was mistaken."

Billy looked at him and knew that he was lying. As soon as possible he went to his cabin. He felt the necessity of being alone, of recovering his mental equilibrium before facing either Thorpe or Lawler. Never in his life had he experienced such a surprise as that which had just fallen upon him. If an air-ship had descended suddenly upon The Prune's deck, bearing with it the beautiful girl who was playing such a part in his thoughts, he could not have been more amazed than by the fact that she was aboard the mysterious yacht.

Like powder touched by a spark his

mind flashed to sudden conclusions. The man whom he had seen with her in New York was Juan Costillo, and the Sans Souci was Costillo's yacht. She was following Lawler! That was the first thought that had leaped into his head. In some way she had learned that Lawler's papers had been forwarded to him at Key West, and she and Costillo had lost no time in reaching that point ahead of The Prune.

Billy was perplexed, if not dazed, by the mysterious developments that had followed swiftly, one after the other, since he had first met Lawler. He fell into his old habit of pacing back and forth while he tried to reason out the chaotic tangle. What could that motive be? Why had she and her companion hurried after the papers to Key West? Why were they following Lawler now?

That they knew he was on board

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The Prune he had no doubt. He was equally certain that they were aware of The Prune's destination, or they would not have overtaken the filibusterer, and gone in advance of her. He would have wagered his last dollar that the Sans Souci would be waiting for them in Truxillo harbor a few hours later.

Lawler himself had now become a vital factor in the puzzling situation. It was he who had first recognized the yacht, and after that, through Billy's glass, had seen and recognized Josephine. Billy recalled Lawler's excited exclamation as the yacht had swept alongside, and his strange excitement a few moments later, when he returned the glass to him.

Why had Lawler lied, he wondered. And why had Josephine and her companion so openly exposed themselves to the view of all aboard The Prune? Was it possible that for some reason the girl wished Lawler to know that she had followed him and would be at Truxillo?

Billy gripped his head in both hands and called himself a fool for asking this last question. The girl was afraid of Lawler. He pictured again her terror on that night when they had heard his footsteps in the corridor, and the fear that had set her trembling and her breath sobbing when Lawler had fumbled at the outer door, and he had held her close to him for a moment in the darkness of the alcove.

Lawler could explain. Half determined to have him brought to his cabin, and to force that explanation from him, Billy went to the door to call Thorpe. In another moment he realized the absurdity of this move. Lawler would be in a position to lie to him, even to laugh at him.

And if he revealed to the millionaire what had happened in his office, he might be weakening his chances of getting to the bottom of an affair whose solution was only subordinate now to the success of the revolutionary movement which he had schemed so

long to bring about. With Lawler in his power he possessed the key to the mystery. He would wait. A few days more and, he assured himself, Lawler would be willing to tell what he wished to know.

He did not see Lawler again, except once or twice when he was enjoying his period of prostration on the deck, until the night The Prune ran into the little bay of Truxillo.

It was a black and stormy night, filled with a rising wind and low thunder—the sort of night that Billy and Thorpe had prayed for. For half an hour after The Prune had anchored close in to the densely wooded shore the two men sat in earnest conversation, while three bright lights burned low over the ship's bow. Then Thorpe left the cabin. Ten minutes later Billy advanced to meet Lawler in the doorway. The millionaire wore only the grimy overalls, cut off at the knees. His fat hands were bound securely behind him, and the half-bloods had gagged him with waste and tarpaulin. His eyes were almost green. His flesh quivered as though stricken with the ague. Behind him stood Miguel and Pedro, knives and revolvers in their belts, and carbines in their hands. Billy motioned them to lead Lawler back on deck and followed.

He saw now that there were no lights at The Prune's bow. Up out of the night came the dip of muffled oars. A low voice called cautiously in Spanish and was responded to by Thorpe. Boats grated alongside. Shadowy forms climbed over the rail, and at a word from Thorpe and another from Billy, the half-bloods gripped Lawler by his fat arms and pulled him to the ship's side.

For an instant a flash of lightning lit up the scene under his eyes. With a rope under his arms, he was lowered into one of the boats, and a few moments later, half a cable's length from The Prune, a second flash of lightning showed him that Pedro and Miguel and Billy were still with him. He saw

the gleam of Billy's teeth and the pitiless menace of the eyes that pierced him even in the darkness. His last hope died out. A crash of thunder drowned the groan on his lips.

The boat touched shore and in the blackness he was dragged forth. He knew that they were soon in a jungle-trail, and only the gag about his throat and lips muffled his cries, as his naked feet felt the sting and laceration of the things he trod upon. All at once, as suddenly as a clap of thunder, there fell a deluge of rain.

In his misery and hopelessness, Lawler could not tell how long he traveled. But at last he sank almost to his knees in mire, and then he was guided into a second boat. Occasional lightning flashes illuminated a still more terrifying scene. Over his head and on both sides of him was a tropical jungle. Snakelike tangles of vines swept him in the face. His last thread of nerve was shattered by a strange, screeching sound scarcely a dozen feet away; he saw nothing but blackness, even in the lightning-glare; the black trees, the black caverns of the jungle, the water, black as oil, ahead of him.

The deluge of rain ceased, followed by a wailing wind. Then the rain fell again. In the crash of the storm, Billy leaned forward so that his mouth was close to the other's face.

"Lawler!" he shouted. "Lawler! No one will ever know where you died!"

The night, the jungle, the deluge itself, seemed to have no end. But at last the boat stopped again, and Lawler felt firm earth under his feet. A glow of lightning revealed a different scene to him now. He saw a dozen rough shacks of logs. A few moments later a key grated in the lock of one of these. He was thrust inside, his hands were freed, and he was left in blackness.

Outside the door Billy stopped long enough to give instructions to Pedro and Miguel, and then made his way to another and larger cabin. His arrival

in camp had not aroused Loring, and he knocked loudly for admittance. A light appeared a moment later. The bolt to the door shot back and Loring appeared in his striped pajamas. When he saw Billy in the lamp-glow, soaked to the skin, and with little rivulets of water running over his face, he gave a low whoop of joy and dragged him in with both hands.

"I'm devilish glad to see you, Billy!" he greeted him. "You're forty-eight hours ahead of my schedule or I would have met you at Truxillo. Are you wet?"

"Wet?" gasped Billy. "I'm nearly drowned, Lorry! I had to take the medicine myself in order to give Lawler a good dose. Otherwise I would have hung to The Prune until morning. Dig out something dry, will you? And then if you'll mix me a little Scotch while I'm—"

Billy's voice was lost in the smother of the shirt which he was already pulling over his head. Loring dug out a pile of dry clothes from behind a cheese-cloth curtain that draped one side of the wall, lighted an alcohol-stove, and produced a bottle and glasses. For an hour after that he smoked cigarettes and listened to Billy's account of the adventures that had begun in New York. Billy held nothing back.

For nearly eight years these two had been the partners of each other's secrets, and when he had finished Loring knew that something had come into Billy's life that had not been there before.

He understood what it was. It had come into his own a year before, while he and Billy were in Tegucigalpa. At frequent intervals during the months since then he had received letters from the capital, and most of them he had read to Billy. One he had received while his friend was away, and he gave it to him now to read.

What it contained was not quite unexpected, and yet Billy felt a lump rise in his throat when he came to the

small feminine signature at the end, and knew that very soon Loring would be breaking away from him. He looked up, and his voice trembled a little.

"Congratulations, old man," he said, holding out his hand. "If there's one girl on earth for you, Lorry, it's Dolores. I knew it that first moment your eyes fell on her, in the palm-plaza at the capital, when she came in on her father's arm. Remember? Until then I'd never seen that look in your eyes—and I knew!"

"You said you'd never, never marry a Spanish girl, but when you found that her mother was an American, and had died in the United States, where Dolores had gone to school—Lord! what a time I had to hold you back. If it hadn't been you—"

"I wasn't going to show you that letter, Billy—not until we'd turned up trumps in this game with Barilla," interrupted Loring. "But now that we're both in the same boat, y'know—" He leaned over and brought his hand down with a thump on Billy's knee. "Look here, old chap," he exclaimed suddenly. "What you going to do about that girl?"

Billy looked at him blankly for a moment.

"What the dickens can I do?" he asked then. "I'm up in the air, Lorry, bag and baggage! It's all up to Lawler—and chance!"

Loring settled back comfortably and blew out a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"I've a mind to tell you what I'm going to do," he drawled. "Don Alcasia may object to his daughter marrying a block like me. He's a blooded chap, y'know, with the Castilian running in him straight down from the year one, and I foresee trouble. If it comes, I'm going to carry Dolores off like a brigand. See the point, Billy? A dozen good men—a dark night—and you could cut this dágo yacht out of Truxillo harbor without any trouble. We've got Lawler. We can

shoot the old chap, or drown 'im, or string 'im up to a tree, any time we see fit. You know there's something up between Lawler and the girl. Bring them together. Face them right in this room. The cat will bob out or I'm a dot, 'pon my soul, I am!"

Billy sat up straight. "Great Caesar!" he gasped. "If we did that we'd have a United States gunboat or a Venezuelan fleet at Truxillo before you could wipe the mud off your feet! I'm going to watch my chance, Lorry. And, meanwhile, we'll put Lawler to the rope. He's bluffing it out on his last legs. A day or two more and he'll be on his knees to us. Our end of the game is running fine. But how about the others? Have you heard from Alvarado?"

"He's got a thousand men in the Department of Cortez ready to fall in at the word," said Loring. "He says he can take San Pedro and Puerto Cortez within twenty-four hours after he gets word that we're moving on the capital."

"Hurrah for Alvarado!" cried Billy. He jumped to his feet and dug out his war-map from the chest which Miguel had brought into the cabin. "With the Pimienta Railroad, Puerto Cortez and San Pedro in Alvarado's hands, we've got as good as the whole coast nailed down. The men of Omoa, Ceiba, Truxillo, and the others will fall in line like Alvarado's own patriots, and if there's any of 'em that hang out, Thorpe and The Prune will blow 'em up from the sea. Lorry, we'll be in possession of the whole Caribbean Coast before word gets to Barilla that he's got a war on his hands. And by that time, we'll be so close to the gates of Tegucigalpa that Barilla will smell our cigarettes."

Billy ran his forefinger slowly over the map.

"They'll all have word to strike on the 1st of October," he added. "And every man's a winner. We haven't a piker in the bunch, Lorry. There's young Cristobal de Olid, over on the

south coast, ready to fall upon Amapala, and General Gracia is in the mountains between Comayagua and La Paz, with eight hundred men who know how to fight. Don Nueva is as sure of the whole department of Mosquita as he is of his dinner. Looks to me as though this outfit of ours back in the swamp is going to have the biggest job of all. Barilla has two thousand Federals in his capital, and there'll be half the officers of the whole Honduran army there during the fête weeks. What's our limit, Lorry? We could count on nine hundred men when I left."

"One of Salvador's lieutenants has sent in word from the mountains that he can muster another thousand," said Loring.

"Good! That makes a thousand." Billy turned to the table and picked up one of the freshly filled glasses. "Lorry, here's to the whitest man in Honduras—Señor Diaz—the next President of the Republic!"

A knock came at the door as they were drinking. Billy opened it and Pedro entered ahead of the dripping figure of a man whom he recognized as a member of Captain Thorpe's crew. He had instructed Thorpe to lose no time in getting word to him of the presence of the yacht, if it was in Truxillo harbor, but he had not expected to hear from him until morning at least, as Truxillo was seven or eight miles from The Prune. He opened the note Thorpe had sent to him, and read it to Loring:

DEAR BILLY: The blasted dago ran in within a quarter of a mile of us after you left. Turned a search-light on us and was scooting away before I had a chance to turn my quid. Now what do you think of that?
THORPE.

"What do you think of it?" asked Billy, staring in his amazement at Loring. "Lorry, that little girl is a brick! For some reason, she isn't going to lose sight of Lawler for a minute. By Jove! old man, if she discovers we've brought him to this camp, it's a ten-to-

one shot that she's going to follow him up!"

He asked the messenger a few questions and found that the small boats had nearly emptied The Prune of her cargo before the yacht had made her appearance. Thorpe's plan for the next few days was to hover close to the shore fifteen or twenty miles above Truxillo, within call of a signal rocket, or the explosion of a dynamite cartridge. Either would bring him to the mouth of the river within an hour or two.

During the remainder of the night Billy and Loring did not think of sleep. They had too much to talk about and too many plans to make, and with dawn both were dressed and ready for breakfast. Pedro and Miguel appeared with Lawler soon after they had finished the meal.

As Lawler entered the cabin, Loring fixed his eye-glass on him in a cold stare.

The millionaire was a ghastly spectacle. His one garment was torn and shrunken until he seemed about to pop out of it. His naked feet were caked with black mud, and his legs were scratched and bruised. Of his features, only his eyes seemed alive.

Mouth, nose, and chin were fused in a single and unflinching expression that was scarcely definable. Hopelessness and misery were there, but only Billy saw something more. He knew that in Lawler's heart there was now not only cowardice, but the desire and the will to kill. Had Lawler possessed a weapon then, Billy knew that he would have used it.

"So this is the chap, eh?" said Loring, inspecting Lawler through his monocle. "He looks like a bloody pig to me, 'pon my soul, he does! Take him away! He is unpleasant to look upon! Miguel! Pedro! Take him to the swamp. Don't let a poisonous snake strike him. It's going to be good sport, you know, and we don't want it spoiled!"

Through the clammy heat that was

already beginning to ooze up out of the lower jungles and swamps, Lawler was taken to a flat-bottomed boat. Half a mile deeper in the swamp they came upon six or seven men working to their waists in the black and slimy water. They were building a raft of light wood under a mahogany log. There was not a white man among them, and the eyes in their black and insect-toughened faces were fixed at Lawler as the boat stopped.

For a few moments Pedro spoke rapidly in Spanish and Indian. Work ceased. White teeth gleamed understandingly. The men gathered about Lawler, and half a dozen hands pulled him from the boat. Head and shoulders he disappeared under the surface of the liquid mud. When he came up he was as black as a tar baby, and choking.

"Make him work—you!" commanded Pedro, rolling a cigarette. "Whip the pig to it!"

Half blinded, choked with mud, the clammy stickiness of the thick water chilling him to the marrow, Peter Lawler foundered to his armpits, while Pedro and Miguel smoked and looked on. Not until late in the afternoon did they return with him to the camp.

Lawler could no longer walk without their support. Swamp-gnats had feasted upon his flat flesh until his arms and shoulders were raw, and his eyes were swollen nearly shut. He was brought before Billy and dropped into a chair. He could still see the merciless gleam in Billy's eyes.

"It is almost over, Lawler," he heard the young man say. "Tomorrow you will sink down under the mud like a toad, and no one will pull you up. This is the last time that I shall see you. Have you any word to leave? The papers will say that you died of a sudden fever, while looking over our concession."

Once more the words came to Lawler's lips:

"I will pay—"

"Take him away!" ordered Billy.

Ten minutes later Loring came in, accompanied by Miguel and Pedro, and a captain from the insurrecto camp. For once Loring had forgotten his monocle. His face glowed with an excitement that was unusual in the cool-blooded Englishman.

"Everything is ready for ten o'clock," he said. "Captain Salvador will be waiting with his men. I have loaned him one of our interpreters."

"Good!" exclaimed Billy. "Captain Salvador—Pedro—it's up to you. Gentlemen, have a cigar!"

CHAPTER VIII.

The Escape.

THAT night the door to Lawler's prison was opened cautiously, and he heard a low voice calling to him. He recognized it as Pedro's.

"Señor—are you awake?"

Lawler moved, but did not speak.

"Be quiet," warned the voice in a whisper. "It is I, Pedro Velasquez, señor! I heard you say—that you would pay—pay much—to get away—"

Pedro spoke good English. His low words came distinctly to Lawler's ears, and a thrill shot through the prisoner.

"Yes, yes, I will pay," he wheezed out of the darkness. "I will pay big, Pedro. I will make you rich."

"Then—come!"

Trembling with excitement, Lawler crept out into the night. There were no lights in the camp. Pedro stood at his side.

"I have brought your clothes," he whispered. "But you will pay? You swear that? You will send the money to me—to Pedro Velasquez—at Truxillo?"

"I'll send you enough to make you rich for life!" promised Lawler.

Pedro led him quickly to a well-worn road back of the camp, and assisted him to put on the clothes. Then he pointed down the gloomy tunnel through the walls of vegetation.

"The mahogany logs are carried over that road, and it takes you to Truxillo," he said. "You cannot lose yourself. You are sure—you will not forget?"

"No, I shall not forget," replied Lawler.

Pedro drew something from under his coat. It glittered in his hand.

"They would kill me if they knew, *señor*," he whispered. "See! I have brought a revolver. You will need it. Can you shoot, *señor*?"

He thrust it into Lawler's hand, and the chill of it made the millionaire start.

"Can you shoot, *señor*?" insisted Pedro. "If you cannot, you will never reach Truxillo, for there is a scout—one man—patrolling this road to-night, and you must kill him."

Lawler's fingers gripped the butt of the revolver.

"Only one?" he asked.

"That is all, *señor*. It may be that you will pass him unobserved. But if not—if he should challenge you—you must shoot. After that your road will be clear. You understand, *señor*?"

"Yes," breathed Lawler heavily, "I understand."

"And you will not forget the money—Pedro Velasquez—at Truxillo?"

"I will not forget!" repeated Lawler again.

He started down the road. A few steps and he began to run, and continued, until his breath choked him and he was compelled to stop. In his right hand he gripped the revolver, and suddenly his left touched something dangling from his waistcoat. It was his watch-chain. He was surprised to find that his captors—and Pedro—had left him his watch. He began to investigate his pockets. Nothing had been touched. There were the loose coins, a few bills, a key-ring and a knife in his trouser-pockets.

His wallet was still in his waistcoat, and he opened it in astonishment and looked at the big denomination bills in the starlight. There was over a thou-

sand dollars in that wallet! What fools they were back there in the camp! What a blockhead Pedro had been for not having looked through his clothing! In spite of the uncomfortable chills that were creeping up and down his back, Peter Lawler chuckled aloud. In his coat pocket were the papers Billy had allowed him to take, and which he had placed there when Pedro gave him the garment, and he chuckled still louder as his fingers came in contact with them.

He went on, stopping to listen now and then. After a little he told himself that he was wasting time in these intervals. No one would follow him. No one but Pedro knew that he was free, and Pedro was a fool. He had the whole night ahead of him. He hurried on—recalling Pedro's words at every step.

Would he forget? Would he pay? Yes, he would pay. He would pay as he had never paid a debt in all his life. He had ruined Billy Mountain once—this time he would destroy him utterly. If money counted, if there was law, if there were authorities, if there was a United States of America, he would pay! He repeated that over and over again. He would pay—pay—pay.

He believed in the truthfulness of Pedro's instructions, and he made up his mind to use the revolver if it was necessary to his escape. He even planned how he would use it. He had not fired a weapon a dozen times in his life, but he would make sure of his man at the first shot. He would not fire when he was challenged.

He would keep his revolver behind him, and would shoot when the sentry was very near, and was not expecting it. He recalled a newspaper account of how a man had once shot a burglar, and he was sure that he could play the same trick to-night.

The sentry would be questioning him. He would suddenly point down the trail, and cry, "What's that?" The sentry would turn for a moment—and he would shoot him in the back.

That would be the surest way, for he could place the muzzle of the revolver directly against him, and there would be no chance of a miss. After that he would hurry on to Truxillo. He could surely reach the town by morning, and then—

He had traveled for an hour, when suddenly the figure of a man rose up a dozen feet ahead of him. He heard a single sharp command in Spanish, and caught the gleam of the starlight on a rifle barrel. He stopped, his pistol hand held behind him. The man had leveled his rifle, but now he lowered it, and came nearer. Lawler forgot his scheme. He raised his weapon and fired—once, twice, three times, as fast as he could pull the trigger.

With a low cry the man fell upon his face. Lawler ran past him—ran until he almost dropped in his tracks. And then, so suddenly that he had no time to cry out or to voice a single word of his terror, he found himself in a little opening surrounded by a score of shadowy forms. In the dull glow of the night he saw that they were armed men. A saber clanked. A voice rang out in Spanish. Rough hands were laid upon him from all sides.

In the shadows behind him the man who had fallen rose to his feet and picked up his rifle. Another figure joined him out of the gloom. It was Pedro. They spoke a few words, and then Pedro turned and ran back swiftly over the trail. The camp was no longer dark when he reached it. One of the cabins was lighted, and Pedro rushed in. Billy and Loring were waiting for him, smoking cigars.

"He is taken, *señors*!" he cried. "Francisco rose in the trail. He fired twice at him with the blank cartridges, and Francisco fell as if dead. He ran then into the arms of the men. It remains now only for Captain Salvador to do his work."

Loring no longer wore his expressionless mask of coolness. He sat nervously twisting his blond mustache until Pedro retired.

"I almost hoped the scoundrel would escape," he said, as the door closed behind the half-blood. "I—I really did, Billy. I've been thinking it over, and I believe you're playing a deuce of a high hand."

A cold glint came into Billy's eyes.

"Perhaps—it may seem so, to you, Lorry, he replied quietly. "But to me it doesn't. It's justice. It's justice that would never be achieved in any other way. Men have killed themselves because of Lawler. He drove them to ruin. He has driven women to shame. Not a dollar that he has made is an honest dollar. They are like those he took from me—stolen. He started as a blackmailer, ruining homes and reputations. He has been a curse to humanity, and he will remain a curse if I let him go. He is too clever to be caught, and yet if all things were known he could be sent to prison for a hundred years. If I let him go now my conscience would never rest. There are more years of destruction ahead of him, and I can see the ruin of a thousand other unfortunates if I allow him to live to go on. I've got him now, Lorry. And what is the punishment I inflict on him compared to the torture he has inflicted upon others? I made him work for a few hours in a stoke-hole—the first honest work he ever did. I put him for a single day in the swamp, shoulder to shoulder with *honest men*. You told me once that it was 'torture.' A pretty torture, indeed, that a criminal, a thief, a debaucher of life and honor, should be put in the company of men who have hearts and souls! And now—"

Billy straightened himself, the lines of his mouth tense and determined.

"And now—I'm going to finish the job," he added.

He went to the door. Loring followed him.

"If Captain Salvador should fail us—" he began.

"He won't," interrupted Billy.

His confidence was verified an hour later, when Pedro ushered in a mes-

senger from the insurrecto chief. The man gave Billy two letters. One was written in Spanish, the other in English. Billy passed Salvador's letter on to Loring.

"I know what's in that," he said. "This is from Lawler."

In a big, unsteady hand Lawler had written:

If you have a spark of mercy in your heart, return with the messenger who brings you this. I have fallen into the hands of a mob of cutthroats who are going to shoot me at sunrise. For God's sake, come! Even though you kill me afterward, rescue me from the hands of these murderers, and I will pay—pay anything I have on earth. PETER LAWLER.

Billy exchanged letters with Loring. After he had read Captain Salvador's message he turned to Pedro and the messenger.

"Come back in an hour," he said. "We'll start then for Captain Salvador's camp. I want to reach it a few minutes before sunrise."

CHAPTER IX.

An Interruption.

IN Captain Salvador's camp, with his back to a tree, sat Peter Lawler. He had killed a man. He had been told that by the interpreter. He—a non-combatant—had deliberately and without cause shot down a soldier in cold blood. According to the precedents of war there was but one punishment for him—and that was death. He was to pay the penalty at sunrise.

He sat in a cold sweat, scarcely feeling the warmth of life in his veins. A sentinel paced slowly back and forth in front of him, but in spite of this precaution against his escape he was tied hand and foot. He figured that the messenger Salvador had allowed him to send to Billy had been gone for at least two hours. It was two o'clock then. In another hour it would be dawn. And then—*surprise!*

In his weakness and fear a moan broke from his lips. The sentinel

stopped for a moment at the sound, then resumed his pace.

Would Billy Mountain come to him? he asked himself. Would he listen to that prayer for mercy? Lawler tried to tell himself that he would. He muttered the words aloud, while his heart shook with fear. For to his questions—something within him whispered *no*. It was the voice of a dead conscience stirred to a flutter of life.

Why should Billy Mountain come to him? asked. Why should he come to save the man who had robbed him, who had destroyed his home, who had sent him out into the world a penniless outcast—and who had laughed—yes, *laughed*—at the destruction he had brought upon him?

For the first time in his life there rose up before Lawler those pictures of ruin that had been painted out of the pigment-pot of his own sins and passions, and the voice whispered more terribly than ever, *he will not come!*

He counted the minutes, almost the seconds. Colder grew the chill at his heart, as the dark night drifted back before the oncoming dawn. The camp fires were stirred. The men rose from their sleeping places on the earth, and at last he knew that it was only a matter of minutes before the day would break.

For an instant hope revived within him as two figures approached. They were Captain Salvador and the interpreter. Speechless and only half hearing the words of the interpreter, Peter Lawler listened to his fate.

"The messenger has returned," said the interpreter. "The Señor Mountain repudiates your claim to his protection, and you will be shot."

Billy had repudiated him! He was to be shot! He wanted to cry out, but a thickness rose in his throat, and what came was only a groan. Shot! Shot at sunrise! And—"My God—oh, my God!" he moaned, for over the jungle he saw the first glow of day.

Men were approaching him. They gathered round him quietly in that

terrible silence that precedes the horror of execution. They lifted him to his feet, so that he stood with his back to the tree, and a rope was passed under his arms to hold his almost lifeless body erect.

He had no voice, no strength, not even the prayers of the coward who faces death. And then in a flash of red splendor the sun rose. Lawler scarcely realized that he was living and breathing. A bandage was drawn over his eyes. A voice roused him from his stupor. It spoke sharply a command in Spanish. He heard the tramp of feet, and the sounds ceased a few paces away. Another command! They were aiming, they were about to fire—

A cry burst from his lips, and at that same instant there came a shout, and then another, followed by a familiar voice speaking in Spanish. A moment later the bandage was raised from his eyes, and Billy Mountain stood before him.

"Just in time—eh, Lawler?" he smiled. "They had their fingers on the triggers, so I guess you were about as near to death as you ever were in your life. I was sorry for you at the last minute, and I've come to see what I can do."

Salvador was drawing back his men, and without waiting for an answer from Lawler's palsied lips, Billy returned to him. For a quarter of an hour he conversed earnestly with the insurrecto captain. Again he approached Lawler. His step was slow this time and there was hopelessness in his face.

"It's bad, Lawler—very bad," he said. "You are a noncombatant, and you killed a soldier without cause while trying to pass through the lines. According to all the rules of war you are condemned to pay the penalty. I cannot convince them otherwise. I'm sorry, Lawler. All along I was only working to punish you through fear. I did not intend to kill you. One more day in the swamp and I would have given you your freedom. But you escaped, and—"

"Billy—Billy—won't they sell me my freedom?"

"No. You are a murderer. There is only one punishment for you—from their point of view. I tried—tried hard to save you. I told them that you had come down to buy our concession, and Captain Salvador asked me if you had made the purchase. When I told him that you had not, he said you had come as a prospective purchaser merely to conceal your identity as a spy for the Federals. There is no hope—absolutely none. They have postponed your execution for half an hour."

"And you—you—see no way—"

Lawler's voice choked him.

For a moment Billy was silent. Then he said:

"Lawler, you know what you have done to me, and you know what you have done to hundreds of others like me. There is no need of going over the old story. But I am sorry for you. There is one way, and only one, of saving your life. A short time ago I gave you the opportunity to contribute to the glorious cause of making a real nation of Honduras and her people. You refused—and so insistently that I know that only the fear of death would make you become a partner in our cause now. I have told you that I do not want to coerce you—that whatever you do must be done voluntarily.

"Therefore I will not again ask you to join us, even though by doing so you might save your life. I should consider such a proposition on my part now as equivalent to using force. But there is one other way—a possible way. It would mean a big sacrifice for me. I could sell you our concession, and you would then practically become a supporter of the revolution through an investment—which in the end would probably pay you back all you put into it. But I can't see my way clear to take the money. It is blood money. Every dollar of it that I touched, save my own twenty thousand and what it has earned, would make me shudder."

Lawler writhed in his bonds.

"I will give you your price," he urged. "Good God, Billy, you won't let them murder me!"

"It is blood money," said Billy softly, as if to himself. "It's blood money, Lawler. But—wait. I will think—"

He went back to where Loring was standing, and for a time the two men talked alone. Lawler's little eyes lighted up when he saw the change that was in Billy's face when he returned.

"In a way I hold myself accountable for your present situation," he began, "and am willing to sacrifice to a certain extent to make amends. We will sell you the concession, Lawler, but the price is big. You said that it was cheap at two million—"

I meant that it could be floated for that," interrupted Lawler. "In cash it isn't worth fifty thousand—"

"We won't argue," said Billy. "I'm sorry for you, Lawler. Our time is up. I see that Salvador is lining up his men. Good-by—"

Lawler's voice was almost fierce in its entreaty.

"I'll buy, Bill—I'll buy!"

"The price is a million," said Billy as quietly as before. "Perhaps I should say that is the cash price. There is another price which you must pay. I can't accept that money as my own. There's probably fifty thousand of it rightfully mine. The rest I shall devote to our cause. The second price is this, Lawler. In your own writing and above your own signature you must give to me such confessions as will make you from this time forth an outlaw in your own country. I know enough of certain deals to tell you what I want. The evidence which I shall demand will send you to the penitentiary a dozen times over if you ever set foot in the United States again. That is the price, Lawler. Our time is about up!"

The Spanish captain had spoken in a low voice to Billy.

"Quick! Which shall it be?"

"Another minute, just another minute!" breathed Lawler huskily.

Captain Salvador had drawn his saber. Six men advanced slowly to the firing-line.

"There is no time to waste!" insisted Billy. "It's cheap, Lawler—your life, a whole world to roam in, the concession! You will be a man without a country, an outlaw, an outcast; your power broken, your ambitions crushed. But what are all of those compared with life?"

"And even though you are down and out, Lawler, even though the penitentiary doors of at least one country will be gaping hungrily for you, you will not be poor. You will still have a million left; and I might demand that other million on the strength of your own valuation of the concession. You said it was worth two million. It is costing you one. You will still be a rich man, even if the revolution should fail and the concession be worthless. But I do not begrudge you the wealth I am leaving to you. Your punishment will be sufficient to me in this—that I shall possess the evidence which will make you an outlaw forever in your own country—the country that you sent me from eight years ago. Your answer. Which shall it be?"

Slowly Lawler dropped his head. He no longer saw the line of waiting men. Only the men who stood close at his side heard the broken words he uttered.

"I agree—I'll pay it," he said.

"And there is one other thing—just one," said Billy quietly. "You must answer me this, Lawler, before I speak the final word that will save you. Who was the girl that passed us on the yacht San Souci? And why has she followed you to Truxillo?"

Lawler looked up, and his eyes met Billy's.

"I don't know why she has followed me to Truxillo," he said, and there was something in his voice which convinced Billy that he was speaking the truth. "But I can tell you who she is, if that will interest you. She is my affianced wife."

Billy fell back from Lawler as though he had seen the plague in his face. He forced himself to speak calmly when he faced Loring and Salvador.

"Take your prisoner back to the camp, captain," he said. "Señor Lawler is going to buy the concession."

CHAPTER X.

Declaration of War.

AT first Lawler's words had filled Billy with a sort of horror. His affianced wife! Josephine the affianced wife of this scoundrel, Peter Lawler!

A vision of her rose up before him, her face filled with its sweetness and purity, the soft, dark hair drawn smoothly back, making her look to him in its rich and simple beauty like a rare painting he had once seen of the Madonna.

Lawler's affianced wife! He looked at the man as Salvador's soldiers led him past, and a disgust rose in his breast and sickened him. He clenched his hands until his nails left blood-marks on his palms. Was it possible that she was marrying him to become a partner in the millions he had stolen?

The blood swept back into his face at the thought, and his hands unclenched. She was not *that*. If she was Lawler's promised wife, it was not from choice. There was something back of it all, something hidden and terrible, and in a flash he thought again of the scene in Lawler's office, of the girl's terror, and her plea for him to let her break into the safe. Did Lawler hold some power over her, the mystery of which the safe contained? If that were so, why had she followed him to Truxillo? If the safe contained—

A sudden thrill tingled to his fingertips.

The safe had contained something, but it did not now! That *something* had disappeared with Lawler's private

papers, and those papers were now in his possession!

The solution to the mystery of the girl's actions came upon him with such force that for a few moments he was oblivious to what was passing about him, and he did not hear Loring's voice calling to him. Josephine had pursued the papers to Key West. She had followed them to Truxillo. And those papers were in his cabin at the camp!

Loring's hand fell upon his shoulder.

"I say, Billy—"

Billy turned and interrupted him.

"Lorry," he said quickly, "I'm going to ask you to go with Captain Salvador in my place. There is something that I must do before Lawler arrives at the camp, and I will hurry on ahead. Lawler is bushed, and you will travel slow."

He gave the Englishman no time to question him, but hurried past Salvador's men, who were preparing breakfast, and disappeared down the trail. The dismay he had felt at first was gone. In place of it a sort of jubilation possessed him. If Lawler had told him that the girl he loved was the affianced wife of Costillo he would have been hopeless. But it was not Costillo. It was not even a man. It was Lawler—a beast.

He formed his plans as he walked swiftly toward the camp. He had determined at the last moment, while Lawler was still in fear of death, to tell him of what had happened that night in his office and force an explanation from him.

Lawler's startling revelation had altered this determination. To betray that night's event now would be to betray the girl, and would perhaps warn Lawler of her mission to Truxillo. If the papers in the cabin revealed to him what he wanted to know, he could confront Lawler with everything. If they did not, he would be compelled to achieve his end by means of Lawler's own weapon—cunning—even though the other was a prisoner and in his

power. But he was sure that the papers held the key to the mystery. Josephine had followed the papers—not the man whom she was to marry.

Billy was perspiring when he reached the camp. He had made the trip in record time. He entered the cabin, bolted the door behind him, and got Lawler's papers from the cedar chest. For half an hour he went over them, one by one. Each paper—even the stock certificates—he examined back and front. Not until he was through did he take time to light a cigar.

Nothing was there to give him a clue. In spite of this, he was not greatly disappointed. The fact that he had found nothing only added to the conviction that for some time had been forming in his head. Lawler had taken three or four sealed envelopes from among the papers. They were now in his possession. In one of these envelopes, he believed, he would find that which he was seeking.

When Lawler was brought into camp should he demand those papers of him? His first impulse was to do this, but a moment later he realized that such haste might react upon other plans which were not entirely his own.

He made up his mind to wait until Lawler was completely and irrevocably in his power—until he had written down those confessions of certain criminal transactions which would open the penitentiary doors for him, if Billy saw fit to pursue his advantage. He still feared that in some way Lawler might guess all that he had passed through since his escape had been purposely staged for him, and that at no time had he been in peril of the death he had so greatly feared.

It was not likely that he would have a suspicion of this truth, but the possibility was worth considering, especially as it would delay his investigation of the mysterious papers in Lawler's possession for only a few hours.

It was noon before Loring and Captain Salvador brought Lawler in. By

that time Billy had everything in readiness. He had moved a table and writing materials to Lawler's cabin, but his first look at the exhausted millionaire assured him that he was not in a condition to use them at once.

Lawler was ready to drop when two of Captain Salvador's men let go of his arms. Billy escorted him into the cabin.

"Here are pen, ink, and paper, Lawler," he said. "But we'll wait until after dinner before we get down to business. You need rest. Your hand must be steady. Captain Salvador has given us until nine o'clock to-night. If all is not finished then, if our work is not done, he says that your reprieve will end. Between you and me, Lawler, I wouldn't waste any time in getting into shape for business. Salvador isn't quite convinced that he is doing the correct thing. In fact, he is sure that he is not. His commanding officer, who has placed him in charge of this district, would have you shot without hesitation. I advise you to lose no time. I will return at two o'clock, and, meanwhile, will fix up the papers, transferring the concession to you."

After dinner, Billy went over carefully the data he had gathered regarding certain criminal operations which Lawler had put through. He was confident that he had sufficient information to work his purpose. Promptly, at two o'clock, he joined Lawler again, taking with him the stock certificates and other papers.

Loring waited outside, smoking and chatting with Captain Salvador. An hour passed. Four o'clock came, and Billy had not reappeared. Loring knocked at the door, and when Billy answered him he rejoined Salvador. It was five o'clock when Billy came out. His hair and face were wet. He had rolled up his shirt-sleeves. In his eyes there shone triumph.

"It was the hardest fight I ever had in my life, Lorry," he breathed deeply.

He gave into Loring's hands fifteen or twenty sheets of paper on which the ink was scarcely dry.

"It's there!" he repeated. "If I wanted to break my word now, I could take Lawler back to the United States and send him to prison for the rest of his life. He has implicated a dozen men known in New York. I've got the names of real people there—scores of them—some of whom I know. I had him where he couldn't lie. I knew enough of his old history, when blackmail was his business, to make him tell me a great deal more. That evidence is going to take from us at least a quarter of the million he is paying us for the concession. We's going to pay it back, Lorry—back to some of the people he robbed. I may sound like Don Quixote talking to a windmill, but you'll understand when you read that stuff: Look it over while I smoke. I haven't had a smoke since I went in."

He walked up and down the clearing, drawing in deep breaths of air, while Loring read. Fifteen minutes later the Englishman interrupted him.

"Billy—you know this is true?"

"As true as the fact that you're living!" replied Billy. "Lawler wrote it. It's over his signature. Lawler has a signature and a scrawl that a thousand people can swear to, and it's down in a hundred official records."

"Then—if it's true—" said Loring slowly, "there's just one thing for you to do, Billy. Take this scoundrel home and hand him over!"

"I can't do that. I have given him my word that this confession and the purchase of the concession mean his freedom. His wings are clipped. He can never show up in his own country again. And we can do the next best thing—return a quarter of a million of what he has stolen. He is too exhausted to use a pen any more just now, so I left the negotiable papers with him. He understands that they must be signed before nine o'clock to-night."

A sudden commotion at the edge of the river drew their attention. Two or three boats were putting in to shore. Others were following, and the two men hurried down to meet them.

Thorpe himself jumped ashore from the first boat.

"Changed my mind after I sent you word last night," he greeted. "Blakeslee has gone up the coast with The Pruine and is going to call in for me tomorrow. I wanted to bring this stuff up myself. Brought everything but the cannon and the machine-gun, and they're hidden in the edge of the swamp. I've got half a dozen men building rafts."

Thorpe and his men were nearly famished, and the camp was soon busy with preparations for supper. It was dark when the three sat down at the table in the cabin. Billy filled a big tin cup with strong coffee, heaped a plate with frijoles, tortillas, cheese, and bread, and called Miguel.

"Take this in to Señor Lawler," he said. "Tell him that Captain Salvador's men have caught Pedro, and that he can bless his lucky stars that he is not in Pedro's shoes. Tell him also that the captain is gnashing his teeth—which in truth he is doing, for I saw him digging into the shell of a roasted armadillo as I came in. I will join him in half an hour."

The half hour was up, and the men were lighting black cigars, when Miguel reappeared in the open door. His face was covered with blood. He staggered as he came in, and Thorpe, who was nearest, sprang to his feet and saved him from falling.

"Dios—he is gone!" groaned the half-blood, clutching his head. "Señors, I put the frijoles on the table—he strike me when I am not looking. *Estoy cansado*—all of a sudden—I know nothing—and when I crawl up—*Hombre!* he is not there!"

Without a word Billy ran past him. The door to Lawler's prison was open and he dashed in. The room was empty. On the table was a lighted lamp, and close to the lamp lay the broken leg of a chair. With this weapon Lawler had struck down Miguel. The food he had carried was scattered about the floor. At a glance

Billy saw that Lawler had taken the papers with him. He met Thorpe and Loring at the door.

"He has at least twenty minutes the start of us," he said. "Set every man in camp on the hunt. If he has taken the Truxillo road I'll catch him. Send a couple of Salvador's men after me."

He threw off his light coat and ran swiftly to the road. He believed that Lawler would follow this one trail out of the jungle and swamp in spite of his unpleasant experience of a few hours before. But this time he would be on his guard, and Billy pursued with his eyes fixed steadily on the road ahead of him.

He was amazed at Lawler's attempt to escape. With the confessions of crime in his hands, he had thought that the man had surrendered himself completely. How badly he had measured the fighting qualities of his old enemy he only now began to realize. No longer could he think of Lawler as a coward. He had accepted a desperate chance, had struck down Miguel, and was risking his life in an almost hopeless effort to save the papers in his possession.

Recapture meant death. Lawler must have argued that, if he had stopped to consider the consequences at all. He must have reasoned with himself that if he turned traitor to his agreement he could no longer expect clemency of any kind from Captain Salvador, who had, to all appearances, regretted the forbearance he had shown. Lawler had staked his all on the one chance of reaching Truxillo, and the thought added speed to Billy's feet.

Not until he had covered at least four miles did he stop. In that distance he would have overtaken Lawler, if the latter had followed the road. He turned back slowly. Ten minutes later he met Pedro, and one of Salvador's men. Instructing them to guard the road until further word from him, he returned to camp. There was no word of Lawler. Loring had counted the

boats, and found none missing. He had sent half a hundred men to the roads and trails to the south. If Lawler had plunged boldly into the jungle he must come out in that direction, if he found his way out at all, and Loring had lost no time in getting his forces into action. Half a dozen of Captain Salvador's best men, dressed as buscadores from the swamps, were about to leave for the one big road of the open country, a dozen miles coastward, when Billy arrived.

"He has taken to the thickets, and if he finds his way out he's bound to hit that road," said Loring. "He can't help it. It's almost a half circle from Truxillo to Iyca. We'll catch him, if he hides for a week."

"If you think there's a chance of him reaching Truxillo just give me the word and I'll be down there to welcome him by the scruff of the neck," said Thorpe. "There's always a chance of missing fire—"

"There is a chance," interrupted Billy. "And if he *does* reach Truxillo—"

They had entered the cabin and he smiled a little grimly at the other two.

"If he does reach Truxillo," he repeated, "it means—fight!"

Loring was twisting his mustache.

"You mean—he will go to the Federals?"

"Immediately. He won't lose an hour. It's his only salvation. He knows that so long as his signed confessions are in our hands he is no better than an outlaw, and he will fight to his last dollar and the last drop of blood in him to regain possession of them. I didn't believe he was that sort a few hours ago. But I do now. If we allow him to reach Truxillo there will be no alternative left us. It means war—without waiting for further preparations."

"Thank God!" rumbled Captain Thorpe devoutly. "I hope he gets there!"

"If he does, you may find a government gun-boat waiting for you instead

of Blakeslee and The Prune," said Billy. "Lieutenant Ricardo, of whom the Federal commandant at Truxillo hasn't the faintest suspicion, will keep us posted. We'll send him word to-night. Miguel is the best man to carry our message, if he's in condition to travel."

Loring went out to find Miguel, while Billy wrote to the Federal lieutenant, Ricardo, who was slated for a colonelcy under the new government. Miguel came in with his head bandaged, but quite recovered from the stunning blow Lawler had dealt him. Billy accompanied him half a mile down the road, impressing upon him certain information for Ricardo, which he had not written in the letter.

He returned to camp with the conviction that a net had been spread for Lawler through which he could not escape. He believed that the millionaire, after burying himself in the jungle, would not attempt to continue his flight through the almost impenetrable undergrowth until it became light enough for him to see, and he was not alarmed as the hours of the night passed without news from the searchers.

Toward morning both he and Loring turned in for a few hours' rest, leaving Captain Thorpe and Salvador awake outside. It was six o'clock when Thorpe awakened them. Billy jumped from his bunk and went to the door. One of Salvador's men had come in from the main road and stood behind the two captains. There was the look in Thorpe's face which Billy had seen there on the morning that had promised a fight with the Spanish yacht.

"A detachment of Federals passed over the main road toward Truxillo at four o'clock this morning," he announced. "They had a covered cart, and this man, who's just come in, swears there was some one in that cart. He found the Federal camp a mile up the road, and the fires were still burning. Never before in my life heard of a bunch of Honduras 'eroes getting up to breakfast in the middle of the night,

or hustling for home at four o'clock in the morning. If it ain't suspicious you can blow me for a fool! Lawler was in that wagon, an' if you'll give me ten men, or half a dozen—"

"How many were there in the detachment?" demanded Billy of the insurrecto scout.

"Eight men, a lieutenant, and two mozas, *señor*."

"Salvador," cried Billy, "you've enough men here to capture that outfit. Overtake it if you can, and don't use your guns unless you have to. Give the impression you're a party of robbers, and steal a mule or two, and what grub they've got. If you can't overtake them within two hours they'll be at Truxillo."

"*Si, señor!*" replied Salvador, turning quickly in the direction of his men.

"God save us, Billy," gasped the amazed Thorpe, "ain't you going to let me go?"

"If I did," said Billy, "you'd follow that outfit right into Truxillo if you didn't come up with it before. You wouldn't stop this side of the fort, and I'd be pretty sure to lose the best man I've got. When you get a little older, Thorpe, and use better judgment—"

"Murder!" growled Thorpe, turning away.

Five minutes later Captain Salvador and his men left the camp on a trot. Billy no longer attempted to conceal his anxiety from Loring.

"It's possible that blind luck carried Lawler through the bush to the road," he said to him. "If he is with the Federal detachment, and Ricardo fails to bag him in some way at Truxillo, the war is on. It's a ten-to-one shot that Salvador can't overtake the cart and its convoy."

The wait became more tense as the morning lengthened, and no word was brought of Lawler. Captain Thorpe left early for the point where his men were building the rafts, and Billy advised him to put himself in command of The Prune as soon as possible after he had started the guns up the river.

Early in the afternoon members of the searching parties began to come in, and at last Loring suggested that couriers be sent to the chiefs waiting in the hills, and in the jungle country, ordering them to be prepared for sudden operations.

In their cabin Billy and Loring figured that within forty-eight hours they could turn eight hundred men against Truxillo, and that Thorpe alone could take Irióna from the sea. With the fall of Truxillo, a thousand armed men would begin their long-planned march on Tegucigalpa, while swift couriers would be carrying the news of war to the insurrecto chiefs waiting in other parts of Honduras.

Loring was eager, and even half hopeful, that the hour for action was at hand. Billy still hoped that Lawler had not found his way out of the jungle, and that he would be brought in a prisoner before night.

He reproached himself for having shown mercy to Lawler. If he had taken advantage of his one opportunity to force from him the papers which he believed to be so vitally associated with Josephine, he would not altogether have regretted the incident that was bringing their plans to this premature climax.

Even as it was, he felt the thrill of a subdued excitement in his veins. It increased as the day grew older, and the searchers brought in no word. In their cabin the two men hung over maps and papers, and when Captain Salvador returned with word that the Federal detachment had reached Truxillo before he had arrived at the point where he had hoped to intercept it, Billy requested him to send out immediately for the couriers who were to carry the final word of war to Alvarado, Cristóbal de Olid, General Garcías, Don Nueva, and half a dozen other insurrecto leaders. Toward evening a messenger brought word that Thorpe had started the heavy guns up-stream, and that he would be aboard The Prune by morning.

That night neither Billy nor Loring went to bed. In ones and twos the

men who had gone out to search for Lawler returned to camp. By midnight all had come in except those who were guarding the main road from Ilyea to Truxillo. No word had come from Ricardo, who by this time should have sent them information from the Federal town, if some accident had not befallen Miguel.

It was dawn when a lone figure came running out from the thin edge of the jungle. It was Miguel. He was so nearly exhausted that he staggered as he came across the open. Billy and Loring were in their cabin, but Captain Salvador saw him, and the two came in through the door together.

"I start this morning—early señors," said Miguel. "I have lose no time. *Tengo sed—un vaso de agua—*" He put his hands to his head, and Billy saw that his dark face was flushed with fever. Loring and Salvador helped him into a chair, while Billy brought a glass of water.

Miguel gulped down the water, and then from the crown of his straw hat produced a letter. Billy's fingers trembled as he opened it. Loring stood straight and stiff, staring at him through his monocle. Captain Salvador's face was filled with expectancy, and his dark eyes glowed with a slumbering fire.

With a thrill which he could not keep out of his voice Billy read aloud:

Señor Lawler entered Truxillo early yesterday morning, accompanied by a detachment of General LaBrea's soldiers, and was taken immediately to the general's headquarters at the fort. I waited all day and part of the present night in hope of getting information. Yesterday, at noon the gunboat *Kia* left Truxillo harbor. Only an hour ago did I learn that Señor Lawler was aboard, and that the gunboat is taking him to Puerto Cortez. Thence, I have learned, he goes by rail to San Pedro, and is to continue over the old highway to the capital. The yacht *Sans Souci* lifted her anchor early this evening and followed the *Kia*.

There was no signature at the bottom of the letter, but a half-cross and a dash told the identity of the writer.

In silence Billy filled four glasses with wine, and gave three of them to the men about him. The fourth he raised above his head.

"Gentlemen," he cried, "Fate has struck for us! Drink, and let this be our declaration of war! To-night we move on Truxillo. To-morrow the world will learn that another Morazan has risen in Honduras!"

CHAPTER XI.

On the Old Highway.

AN hour later Billy and Loring were alone in the cabin. Couriers were already on their way to the insurrecto forces that for a fortnight had been hiding in small detachments of from thirty to fifty men back in the hills and swamps.

Within a few hours they would be on the move. At the head of fifty men Captain Salvador was on his way to the Ilyea road to hold back all traffic bound for Truxillo. By night-fall eight hundred men and five guns would be on the march to give battle to General LaBrea.

In this first battle of the revolution Billy would not take part, and in spite of the importance of the other task that had confronted him, he felt a keen sense of disappointment. Lawler had been gone from Truxillo for twenty hours. He had reached Puerto Cortez and was probably on his way to San Pedro, if he had not already arrived at that town. From San Pedro it was a hundred and fifty miles over the old Spanish highway to the capital.

By striking southwest through the rough-trail country, Billy planned to reach the road fifty miles from Tegucigalpa, covering about the same distance that Lawler would be compelled to travel. If he could reach that point ahead of Lawler, he was confident that with a few picked men he could rout Lawler's escort and recapture his man.

It was a desperate chance, but he had decided to take it. Lawler would have the advantage of a splendid road and mules, while he would have to overcome the obstacles of a rough and largely uninhabited country of forests and mountains. Everything was in Lawler's favor. If he was too late to intercept him, Billy planned to join General Garcías near Comayagua, and wait for Loring, who would begin the march on the capital as soon as he had taken Truxillo.

"The fight at Truxillo won't last half an hour after you get the machine-guns in action," Billy was saying. "While LaBrea has concentrated there practically the whole Federal strength of the department of Colon, his forces don't number more than five hundred men, and they've got nothing between them and your lead but corrugated iron. The fort is a joke, and if you'll give the citizens half an hour's warning they'll get out and you can make a sieve of every tin house in the place." Ricardo tells us that half of the soldiers are growling because they haven't had any pay for six months and are on dog-rations. When they learn we've got a thousand bushels of black beans and real coffee for a year, they'll make you think you're the President of the United States at a Fourth-of-July celebration. Thorpe is going to have more real fun blowing up Irióna, for they've got two or three guns there, with a German sergeant in command with the rank of colonel."

"Confound the Germans!" exploded Loring.

"Ditto, and multiply the sentiment as many times as you please," agreed Billy. "Barilla has imported half a dozen German officers into the capital, and they've made real soldiers out of the barefooted mob they found there. They'll know just what to do if Lawler gets through with his information. It would take Barilla a week to move, but it won't take those Germans fifteen minutes. They'll be dig-

ging pits for us before Lawler wakes from his first nap in the capital."

Pedro presented himself at the door.

"The men are ready, *señor*," he announced.

Billy buckled on his revolver, filled one of his pockets with a pipe and tobacco, took down his rifle from the wall, and held out a hand to Loring.

Loring's white teeth gleamed beneath his mustache.

"If I don't find you with Garcias, and you don't meet me on the road, I'll know where you are, Billy," he laughed. "I'll expect to meet you under Morazan's statue in Tegucigalpa. If it happens, I won't blame you. If I were in your shoes, and it was Dolores Alcasia instead of Miss Josephine—"

He laughed, and then suddenly his face grew serious. "If it should happen that you get into trouble, Billy, and you find yourself in the capital, get word to Dolores. Don Alcasia is a power with the opposition party, and Dolores can find friends for you."

He winced at the grip of Billy's hand.

Pedro and eight men, armed with carbines and machetes, were waiting outside the cabin, and after a final hand-shake with his friend, Billy gave the word of command, and the little troop struck into one of the narrow mule-trails leading south.

The smallness of the force with which he was setting out on his hazardous enterprise did not trouble Billy. Lawler would undoubtedly be under an escort of government soldiers, but that escort would probably number no more than a dozen men. Even if it was twice or three times that number, Billy was confident that his picked men could put the Federals to rout. His chief apprehension was that he would not be able to reach the national highway in time to intercept Lawler and his guard.

He did not believe that they would arrive at the point where he had determined to hit the road in less than three days, and to reach that place

ahead of them meant that he and his men would have to travel forty miles a day through a part of the roughest country in Honduras. His chief hope was that something would delay Lawler.

A dozen things could arise to make him lose time. At Puerto Cortez he might miss a quick connection with the San Pedro train, and at San Pedro it was possible that a day would be lost, or even more before the journey to the capital was begun. He trusted to the natural laziness of both officers and soldiers to help overcome his handicap. LaBrea had acted quickly at Truxillo, but LaBrea was an exception to the rule.

By the end of the first day he knew that unless his hopes of delay were realized, Lawler would escape him. The detachment had traveled a little more than forty miles by nightfall, striking camp on the San Carlos at dusk, but most of the distance had been over mule-paths and a comparatively level country.

His men were exhausted and footsore, and the following morning one of them was so lame that Billy was compelled to leave him behind. The second day was intensely hot. Until noon they made their way through a low, jungle country, and about three o'clock came upon the old and abandoned mule-trail leading from Zucualpa to the ancient silver mines in the mountains. At the end of the third day they were still thirty miles from the highway.

It was early evening of the fourth day when they struck the white, pavementlike road of century-worn stone leading to the capital. Billy sent a man in both directions. Half an hour later one of them returned with the information that he had come upon a small bodega, or native public house, a quarter of a mile down the road. Billy advanced with his men until they were within a hundred yards of the place, and then went on alone. An old man met him at the door of the adobe

hut. Billy heard the clatter of earthen dishes.

"*Tengo hambre*," he greeted, and before the old man could answer he thrust an American dollar into his hand. "I am hungry. Give me something to eat. You may keep the change."

With a gurgle of delight at this sudden fortune the aged *mozo* invited Billy in. There was but one room, and in the center of this was a long table covered with the remnants of a recent meal, about which a bent and wrinkled old woman was fluttering in evident excitement.

"*Dinero! Dinero! Dinero!*" cackled the old man, showing the silver dollar to his wife. "The saints have blessed us to-night, *señor!* We have had great fortune. If there were only more foreigners we would be rich!"

"You have had company," said Billy, pointing to the table.

"*Como mo*. But what company! If you had arrived only an hour ago you would have seen them, *señor*. There were five, including the lady. *Dios*, but I would say that she must have been the President's daughter, if she had not been an American!"

"An American!" almost shouted Billy. He tossed another dollar on the table, and the old woman pounced upon it like a hawk. "Tell me what they were like," he demanded. "I have been trying to overtake some friends of mine. It cannot be that they are so near. Were they from San Pedro Sula?"

"They were from San Pedro, *señor*, and there were three *mozas* and six mules!"

The old woman was fumbling in her ragged dress.

"I picked this up after they had gone, *señor*," she said, in a high, cracked voice. "There is writing on it, and it may tell you if they were your friends."

Billy took the crumpled envelope she held out to him. It was empty,

but his heart leaped as he read the address on the face of it:

MISS JOSEPHINE WINTON

Riverside Drive

New York City

For a few moments he stood speechless. Fatigue and hunger left him in the excitement that swept over him. Josephine had been in this room only an hour before. At this moment she could not be more than three or four miles away.

"I hope they are the *señor's* friends," he heard the old man saying, but he scarcely sensed the words.

He was staring at the address. Josephine—*Winton! Winton!*—He could not repress the low cry that came to his lips. It was this name that Lawler had shown him on one of the thick envelopes he had taken from among the papers—Paul Winton!

"If they are your friends you can overtake them to-night," the bodega keeper was saying. "They will travel all night, because it is cool. They cannot have gone far."

"Was the—the lady's father with them?" questioned Billy.

"No, *señor*. There were only the *señorita*, a Spanish gentleman, and the three *mozas*."

"Did others go on ahead of them—yesterday—the day before, with soldiers, perhaps?"

"A fat *Americano*, *señor*, with a red face, and on a mule?"

"Yes."

"They were here yesterday afternoon, *señor*, and the *bestias*—those dirty pigs of soldiers—robbed us of a dozen fowls and a pig."

"Give me something to eat—what is left there on the table," said Billy. "Put it in a cloth or a paper and I will come for it in a few minutes."

He was out of the hut almost before he had spoken the last words. Pedro saw him running, and came to meet him. In his excitement Billy caught him by the arm.

"Listen, Pedro," he said. "I am

going to send you back to Señor Loring. You will have charge of the men, and you will lose no time in doing what I tell you. To-night you must travel as far back over this road as you can, and destroy the telegraph-wires as you go. Cut down some of the poles and destroy the wires so they cannot be repaired.

"Then hurry to Señor Loring. Tell him that Lawler passed eighteen hours ahead of us, and that we are only an hour behind—the—Costillo—and the girl. He will understand. Say to him that I will overtake her before morning, and that I will join him on the road to the capital. I believe we are in time to keep the president from warning Comayagua and the ports. Quick, climb up that pole and use your machete on the wires!"

Pedro sprang to the telegraph-pole near which they were standing, and Billy hurried on to the men. In a few words he told them that the wires must be destroyed for a distance of six or eight miles that night, and that Pedro would command them until they rejoined Loring.

Ten minutes after he had rushed out of the bodega he was back again. The old man was awaiting him, with part of a fowl, bread, and native cheese wrapped in plantain-leaves.

"I have a mule, *señor*," he said. "He is a little lame, but—"

"I can make better time on foot," replied Billy, taking the parcel.

He started at a fast walk down the road, eating chicken and bread as he went. A foot he could make five miles an hour. The slow-footed mules ahead traveled no more than three or four.

At that rate he would overtake Josephine an hour or two before midnight. He was no longer conscious of the fatigue of the day.

Every nerve in his body was alive with anticipation and an excitement which he found it impossible to subdue. To-night he would again stand face to face with Josephine, and this time it would not be as a stranger. It seemed to him now as though she had

been a part of his life for a long time, and he knew that it would not be hard for him to tell her why he had followed her. And he believed that she would understand. Not for an instant did he hesitate in what he had made up his mind to do.

He would tell her all that he knew about herself and Lawler, and of his relations with the man who he was sure held some strange power over her. They would be partners. He would fight for her. If she was after the package on which he had seen the name Paul Winton, he would get it for her.

Just how he could secure possession of it he did not reason out. But he would get it—if he could follow Lawler to the president's palace. If he failed before Loring arrived at the head of the army—

He laughed aloud, and for a few minutes quickened his pace to a half run. With the army before Tegucigalpa; Lawler would have no chance to escape. Nothing could save him then. The tables would be turned, and it would be for Josephine to command his fate.

Life ran joyously through him. He stopped for a moment to light his pipe, and he observed for the first time the wildness of the country through which the narrow white highway was taking him. It was a splendid night, with a cloudless-sky and a full moon.

On one side of him rose the foothills of the Misoco Mountains, from which the Spaniards of two centuries before had brought down the white limestone with which they had paved the road. Below him, on the other side, swept a great valley where there had been people and villages in the old days of the first captains-general, but which were silent and lifeless now.

He breathed deeply of the clear air of the highlands, sweet with the odor of the tall pitch-pines and electric with ozone. In places the mountain-wall hung close to the trail, and the pines swept over and hid him in a darkness

faintly scented with the aroma of the orchids that grew upon them.

An hour after he had left the bodega he came to a grass-thatched hut of adobe almost hidden in a clump of orange-trees; but as the house was dark and the door closed, he passed on without wasting time to make inquiries. For another hour he followed the road in a gradual descent, and then the trail grew wider, and ahead of him he could see it winding down into the valley of Tamara.

He had descended not more than a quarter of a mile when he saw several figures moving in the road ahead of him. On approaching nearer, he made them out to be three men and a mule. He was surprised at the haste in which they were traveling, and it was some time before he came up with them.

He found then that there were four men, three on foot and one astride the mule. The latter had his arm in a sling, and a bloody cloth was bound about his head. The three men who were walking carried short, thick sticks. At Billy's greeting and words of inquiry regarding their injured companion, one of them replied that they were *mozos* belonging to a hacienda in the valley, and that the wounded man had fallen and broken his arm.

Hardly had the spokesman uttered

this when one of the men struck fiercely at Billy's head with his club. With a quick movement Billy evaded the full force of the murderous blow, and the club fell upon his shoulder. Before he could recover sufficiently to put himself in a position of defense, a second blow sent him reeling to the edge of the road, and as he crashed back through a mass of sumac the three men rushed upon him. He made an effort to reach his revolver, but his arm seemed powerless. His head swam and the brilliant night grew black. He heard an excited chatter of voices; but there was no meaning in the sounds that came to him. And then, suddenly, as his consciousness wavered, he heard a shot. It was followed by a second and a third. A shrill cry came from the edge of the road, and he heard the distant clatter of hoofs.

It seemed an interminable time before he was conscious of anything after that. Then he knew that some one was lifting him. He tried to speak, but his effort was only a groan.

"*Dios!* but it was lucky I happened to be out gazing at the moon," he heard a voice say. "The saints confound me if you are not a heavy load for an old man who has gone through nine revolutions and a war, *señor!*" Total darkness enveloped him then.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.

FOR YOUR THREE BEST FRIENDS HERE IS AN IDEA

Send me the names and addresses of three of your friends who you think will be interested in the stories in THE CAVALIER, and I will send them sample copies direct from this office. You might, if you wish, to prepare them for the coming of the magazine, write to them as well, and say that sample copies of THE CAVALIER are being sent them at your request.

This is just a suggestion. If it is too much trouble, don't do it, but I will appreciate it if you do, and you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you have let your friends in on a good thing.

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