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JANUARY 30th 1922
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The WEB OF THE SUN* A COMPLETE NOVEL

Being an Account Given by Charles Lassiter of
Some Explorations on the Nanay, a Tributary
of the Upper Amazon, and Transcribed

By *T. S. Stribling*
Author of "The Green Splotches"

EDITOR'S NOTE — During the eleven years of this magazine's life I think we have not once prefaced a story with any statement to the effect that "this is the most remarkable story of the, etc." We do not so announce "The Web of the Sun." Its place in the literature of the day must be determined by the general judgment. To those who wish only a good story of action it will, I think, be fully satisfying. But you will find it much more than that. One critic, whose judgment seems to me personally of first-rank value on such a point, gave as his opinion — with an almost fierce enthusiasm unusual to him — that this story ranks Mr. Stribling with Voltaire and the greatest satirists of all time. I do not feel myself competent to draw such a comparison, but I believe that no thinking man can read this story without finding Mr. Stribling's rapier very deeply inserted in his notions of things in general.

To any who may be distracted from the main point of the story by one phase of one of its factors, finding what seems disparagement of any man's religious belief, let it be pointed out that *Birdsong* emerges with at least as much credit as do the characters who disparage it and him, that the fictitious narrator can not be taken as expressing the author's own opinions, and

*"The Web of the Sun," copyright 1921, by T. S. Stribling.

that said narrator in the end confesses his own failure to assess correctly the values of men and philosophies. In other words, the story must be judged as a whole, not by any detached part of itself. In the broad sense, the same words the *Century* uses to characterize Mr. Stribling's "Birthright," the negro-problem serial now being featured in that magazine, may be applied also to this other story of his—"without a line of preachment or prejudice."—A. S. H.

Foreword by the Transcriber

I CULTIVATE strangers because it is a tenet of mine that no human being is worth talking to for more than sixty minutes. I go further and hold that it is indiscreet, not to say immoral, to indulge in repeated conversations with any man.

My reasoning on this point is as follows:

Every normal human being desires in his conversation to entertain. When the interesting facts of his life are exhausted (which usually occurs well within the sixty-minute limit) the talker is apt to resort to non-factual material.

However, when two strangers meet, their pasts are to each other virgin fields. It is unnecessary for them to lie. When one does, it is usually because his listener has exhibited listlessness or restlessness and he attempts to supply interest in his narrative by art.

A good listener almost always hears a truthful tale; a bad listener demoralizes the most sincere man. I should say, if there be an after life in which the good and evil of our earthly existences are punished and rewarded, I should say that — is paved with bad listeners.

I, myself, am, by profession, a skilful listener. When I heard this story in a little Rio Janeiro wine-shop, Charles Lassiter, who told it, was a complete stranger to me. Therefore it had the psychological setting of truth. Likewise, it possessed every internal evidence of verity. Nevertheless, I have always hesitated to publish the account Lassiter gave me of his sojourn in Motobat in the

year 1917, and of his, shall I say, explosion out of that sinister land.

Personally I have never doubted the genuineness of his narrative. His manner, voice, gesture, his changing color and once, his tears, bore the imprint of sincerity. But heretofore, I did not care to hazard my professional standing as a representative of the Associated Press by publishing so strange a relation upon the uncorroborated word of one man.

Fortunately, the appearance of Sir Cecil Hindshaw's new volume, "A Naturalist on the Upper Amazon,"* has furnished exactly the corroboration required.

I say, "fortunately," but really the shoe now pinches the other foot. Sir Cecil's elaborate work not only has allayed all doubt, it has killed all the novelty and all the timeliness of Charles Lassiter's unscientific account. However, the latter is presented herewith, not for its details, which have become trite, but for the human interest it contains, and for a certain dramatic element, which naturally Sir Cecil carefully avoided.

Indeed the dénouement resolves itself so nearly into the form of the more reserved and realistic type of modern fiction, that I have frankly cast the whole narrative into fictional mold, always presupposing, however, a mental attitude in the reader as toward an ordinary fact article.—T. S. S.

*See *A Naturalist on the Upper Amazon*, Hindshaw's *Wier & Duffing*, 16, Piccadilly Circus, London, 20s. 6d.



WANDERLUST and a touch of poetry led Charles Lassiter into the service of the Stendill Steamship Company of New York, Guayaquil and Rio de Janeiro; an unsuspected business ability kept him there and smothered whatever adventurer lay in the lad.

By the time Lassiter saw the only possibility of romance in the Stendill offices lay among the girl stenographers, the size of his pay check had tethered him to his post. In point of fact, he never did marry a typist, slough his poetry and make another swallow's nest in the cañons of New York. A certain Jack-a-Dreams mood, a shimmer of fancy, always floated between him and the comfortable commonplace of marriage.

The women in the office resented Lassiter's bachelorhood. The sex instinctively looks upon a man as a possible easement of life's roughnesses. The unattached male is

at once a criticism upon their collective charms and a slacker. Once a typist snapped out in Lassiter's presence something about "the big stiff spells 'soul' with a dollar mark."

She would have been surprized, and no doubt further irritated, had she known that when the women employes of Stendill filed out into Maiden Lane at four o'clock, Lassiter always leaned out of the window and watched their tiny figures lose themselves in the roaring traffic. There was something vaguely alluring about them, thus vanishing—as seen from a top view, ten stories removed.



DURING this period of his life Lassiter attended evening classes of Spanish, commercial law, the custom differentiations of the various South American countries, because he saw, as every one else saw, that the future of

American trade centered largely in its own hemisphere. In course of time he became one of the Spanish correspondents in the office. In this position the letters he received from the South Americans, their leisurely rhetoric and ornate courtesy painted sun-shot Utopias before his wistful fancy. Sometimes a sort of despair filled the clerk that mere slips of paper could travel to and from such a favored land while he remained rooted at his desk.

Lassiter had been in the service of the Stendill Company for four and a half years when Henry Stendill, its organizer and first president, died and was succeeded by the present incumbent, M. L. N. Morrow.

This is no place to go into M. L. N. Morrow's extraordinary shipping career. All railway and steamship wiselings, all students of the development of America's sea-borne trade, are familiar with the great impetus the Morrow plan gave the Stendill service, and, by reaction, to every other American ship corporation.

Not to dally over threadbare material—when Morrow took control of the Stendill fleet, those steamers were sailing back from South America in ballast, or at best, half laden. Morrow developed the idea of owning industries to freight his own bottoms. Today the Stendill tri-color floats over copper mines in Bolivia, ivorynut plantations in Peru, cacao forests in Ecuador, rubber camps in Brazil, coffee plantations around São Paulo and packing houses in Buenos Aires.*

In this burst of development, there arose in the Stendill offices a strong demand for Spanish-speaking men to be used in the South American service. Notwithstanding the fact that Lassiter lacked what may be called the belligerency of the usual successful American business man, nevertheless he was tried out, first as traveling auditor, later as traveling business representative of the Stendill lines on the South American West Coast.

It really turned out a fortunate choice. About Lassiter hung a shadow of wistfulness that softened everything he said or did. It ameliorated his American *brusquerie* into something closely akin to the courtesy of the Latins themselves. Chance had tossed Lassiter into his *milieu*. For example, one of the Bustamentes of Santiago

in closing a deal to ship government nitrates in Stendill bottoms, remarked with a smile:

"Señor Lassiter, an acquaintance of mine once swore to me there were no gentlemen in America—I am sorry he did not find you at home."

And the South American agent had the aplomb to parry the thrust at his countrymen's *gaucherie* by saying—

"It was unavoidable; at the time I was studying how to avoid provincialism in Santiago." The *riposte* through the cloak of a compliment entirely delighted Bustamente.

Lassiter never forgot his sailing out of New York harbor on his first commission south. The tang of adventure that had landed him in the Stendill offices four and a half years previously, reasserted itself in his blood. It seemed the life was coming to him in his thirty-second year.

He stood on the weather side of his steamer, facing a half gale that beat in from the Atlantic. It seemed to him that the spume and wind blew out of his life the musty years of his office work, his cocoon-period. He was sailing into a new and wine-y dawn.

What he expected that dawn to bring him he could never have formulated. There was a woman in it, certainly. A brunette, since he was a demi-blond and as yet, had not known brunes. A woman fairer than he had ever seen, a bit nebulous, if the truth be told. In the visioning of every bachelor gleams the rondures of a woman real or feigned, just as in the memory of a benedict glows the dalliance of unmarried days. These are the morning and evening stars of a man's life.

To any one at all familiar with South American West Coast traditions, Lassiter's *naïveté* must appear amusing. Lassiter would have no opportunity of knowing the exclusive upper-class Spanish-American families. Lassiter not only did not belong, his work made him impossible. To the South American aristocracy commercialism is tainted. The Latin clings to the medieval idea that wealth should be wrung from the sweat of the unwilling, not from the purse of the unwary; he prefers peonage to commerce. It is more glorious—and less fatiguing. Lassiter was damned before trial and never had his day in court.

Moreover the sort of romance with which

*For complete list of Stendill holdings in South America, see "American Penetration of South America": *Marine Review* (N. Y.), August, 1919.

Lassiter titillated his fancy does not obtain south of the equator. The American-Spaniard's idea of romance is marriage and mistresses. It is somewhat akin to the Peruvian shop-keeper's idea of business, where he has three or four prices on every article in his *tienda*.

Spanish-America's slogan seems to be, *Caveat emptor et mulier*.

The whole ensemble lacks a certain high cold wind that blows through the Anglo-Saxon idea of romance.

In time Lassiter learned these things, and the bars of his prison slowly enfolded him again. The West Coast of South America became an extension of the Stendill offices in Maiden Lane.



M. L. N. MORROW'S greatest feat at the head of the Stendill millions was his organization of the Zeppelin passenger service from Quito to Rio de Janeiro, and the establishment along the Amazon and across the Andes, of a line of hangars, supply depots, and big tourist hotels at favorable locations. At present, it is the world's most ambitious aerial achievement.

In formulating his plans, Morrow called Lassiter from Lima to New York for a conference. The president presented the idea in a block to Lassiter for the South American agent to elaborate it.

It was this:

At that time the transcontinental railway from Buenos Aires to Valparaiso which connected with the Antofagasta line into Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, held a monopoly on travel across South America. Valparaiso was twenty-six days from New York, by way of Buenos Aires. Morrow's projected line from Rio to Quito would cut this schedule to sixteen days with the advantage of flying over some of the richest tropical scenery in the world. Underneath the traveler would unroll the mysteries of the Amazon, the grandeur of the Andes, and the beauties of ancient Spanish cities. As a tourist attraction, such an aerial tour would be unequaled on the globe. Moreover the price that could be quoted would be almost as low as the longer and more grueling journey by train across the monotonous plain of the Argentine.

Morrow estimated the cost of such a project at from fifteen to eighteen millions. It turned out in fact to be sixteen and there-

quarters. When he laid this outline before his subordinate, he impressed upon Lassiter the need of absolute secrecy in the preliminary survey. The Chile-Argentine railroad would not be indifferent to such rivalry. No doubt they would install a duplicate service. Moreover, having a railroad as a base of construction, they could launch their dirigibles before the Americans could get into the air.

"Therefore," pointed out the president, "I would suggest that your preliminary survey be conducted as inconspicuously as possible. Why not be engaged ostensibly upon some other venture, say prospecting for copper, or seeking a soil that will produce this new South American drink, *mate*. Use your judgment about the color of your expedition, select your own personnel, choose your own route, and do it all unobserved."

Lassiter remained in New York upward of three weeks after this consultation, preparing for his journey of exploration. During this period there stuck in his head the problem of an entirely inconspicuous survey.

Here was the difficulty. Lassiter was well known, almost noted, along the West Coast of South America for the many enterprises he had promoted. Latin-American financiers had come to watch him as a commercial weathercock pointing the winds of fortune.

The Latin-American is not a man of action in the American sense. He is deliberate, but highly observing; he is indolent, but full of chicane. He is an extremely difficult man to beguile. Lassiter knew if he launched any sort of expedition into the interior of South America from any point along the coast, half a dozen men in his employ would be agents of the Argentine-Chile railroad.

That formed his problem. The Stendill agent required no ordinary deception. He needed something enigmatic, impenetrable, absolute—there he stuck.

Life has a surprising way of presenting to the seeker exactly what he is looking for. It seems almost as if mind fashioned matter in its own image as Berkely claims it does. To wish is to possess.

This, of course, is no new truth. It was promulgated two thousand years ago by a certain wise man, whose teachings, unfortunately, have fallen in disrepute with the human race. This seer expressed it—

"Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."



THE manner in which Charles Lassiter came to know Ezekiel Birdsong is a case in point.

In New York the South American agent had few acquaintances, because he was in that city only once or twice a year, and in New York an acquaintanceship seldom persists for more than from ten minutes to fourteen or fifteen days. So Lassiter always found himself alone in New York, the city of his birth.

To amuse himself he usually strolled a little after dinner up and down Broadway or Fifth Avenue, watching the dinner parties, the theater-goers, the crowds. To the theaters themselves he did not go because, like most men with a touch of romance in their make-up, the drama is too fore-ordained, its movement too metronomic, its action too logical. When logic comes in at the stage door, romance takes to its wings.

After the hour of dinner and theater movement, Lassiter liked to sit in Bryant Park. This is an impersonal bit of pavement with a few iron benches, and hopeless trees, where of Summer evenings office men, newspaper hacks, lawyers, yeggs, Chinese laundrymen, Jap curio dealers and vaudevillians come out and sit for a while to breathe the air.

The presence of the library gives this park a certain informed atmosphere. Loiterers here are knowing gentlemen who discuss the topics of the earth—bolshevism, the secret treaties suppressed in the *Evening Post*, the Egyptian art of preserving mummies, the vice problem, the best methods of blowing safes, the composition of the varnish on Cremonas, whether Dr. Cook reached the pole.

High against the sky-scrappers flash and fade acres of electric signs advising the midget philosophers below to "Smoke Madelains," "Eat Whateley's Wheat Waffles," "Chop Suey," "Tell Her With Flowers," "Goldstein's Detectives Never Sleep."

Motors and trucks honk; the beetle creeps down an antiquated street car track; the snore of the subway trains rises to a buried thunder; the pavement trembles, the benches quake, the fetor of dust, oil and breathed air floats up out of its man-

holes. The skyscrapers pulsate heat. The crowds flow past in well-defined drifts.

Bryant Park always appealed to Lassiter as the first movement of some great confused drama that would never know a curtain.



ON THE evening before he was to sail for South America, Lassiter strolled down to Bryant Park and found a seat in this air-hole of the crust of New York. The bench-mate chance dealt to the promoter was a short sturdy man in a black suit, which needed pressing, who wore a felt hat with a brim a trifle wide for Broadway.

He was sunburned, and presently, when he took off the hat on account of the heat, Lassiter noticed he had a suit of jet-black hair oiled down to a piano finish over the left side of his head, while on the right side it was piled up in large, exact, scroll-like curls. It was the coiffure of some rustic Brummell. The man himself had the look of a youth who had ridden his years into hard places.

As Lassiter absorbed these details, his bench-mate turned to him with perfect spontaneity and asked the name of the Bush Terminal Building. His voice had the slurring, nasal twang of an uneducated Southerner. The promoter gave the information with a faint sense of amusement.

The man drew a deep breath, made a move with his hat as if to fan with it, but seemed to apprehend some social mistake and restored it to his glossy head.

"New York may be a way up north," he volunteered, "but it appears about as hot as Arkansas to me."

"Come from Arkansas?"

"Ezekiel Birdsong, from a town of the same name."

He used the phrase with a patness that suggested many repetitions, at the same time he turned and held out a hand to Lassiter.

This seemed to be in the nature of an introduction. The South American agent shook hands, gave his own name, then asked a little uncertainly—

"Do you mean you live in a town named Birdsong?"

"That's right—Birdsong, Yell County, Arkansas. Named after my daddy. He moved us out there from Blue Ridge, Tennessee, Sequatchie County when I was

just a shaver. He staked off a claim to a hundred and sixty acres of fine bottom-land and jest naturally squatted on six hundred more. When they come and tried to put him off, glory to God, they'd waited too long and it belonged to the old man."

Mr. Birdsong dropped his phrase of laudation with perfect simplicity and with no trace of irreverence.

The South American agent looked up at the sign which assured him Goldstein's detectives never slept; then after a moment, observed in a casual voice that Arkansas lands had advanced sharply in value.

Mr. Birdsong nodded.

"Yes, God has sure blessed our fam'ly, and I thought I would pay back His many mercies by spreaden the Word."

Out of this sentence, the phrases "many mercies" and "spreaden the Word" each wore the cadence of much use.

The Stendill financial agent looked at his man carefully—

"By—by what?"

"Spreaden the Word," repeated the Arkansan, not realizing the words could involve any obscurity.

"You came to New York to—to—spreaden the Word?" groped Lassiter.

"Oh, no, not in New York. I guess there's plenty of Bibles in New York. I'm going to South America. That's my chosen field." His faint accent on the words "chosen field" told Lassiter this, too, was a favored *cliché*.

The South American agent nodded, still slightly at sea—

"I see—you are going to South America to sell Bibles——"

"Give 'em away," corrected Birdsong.

"To give them away?"

Mr. Birdsong nodded—

"To make my calling and election sure, brother."

Lassiter took a moment in an effort to construe this olio of politics and theology, but after a moment resigned.

"When do you sail?"

"That's just up to the Lord," drawled Mr. Birdsong. "I'm working for Him now."

He spoke as concretely as if he knew the Deity's street address and telephone number.

"I come up here to sail on the *Brazilian* tomorrow. I thought I come up in plenty o' time, but they tell me down at the office all the rooms are sold on the *Brazilian*.

Not only that, but all the rooms are sold for the next six months to come. I went down to the *Brazilian* herself to ask and make sure, but down there they said the office men knew more about it than they did.

"Well, after I done all I could, I jest went back to my room and put my case before the Lord. I been wrastlin' with Him all day in prayer; tellin' Him, if it's His will, to lead me to a stateroom on the *Brazilian* somehow. Well, I wrestled all day. About a hour ago, I felt like I got a answer, so I jest let Him direct me, and took a little walk and come out here and set down."

Lassiter stared at the fellow.

"You don't really mean you are sitting here waiting for—for the Omnipotent to send you a berth on the *Brazilian*?"

Birdsong straightened with a faint beligerency—

"Why man, you don't doubt He could, do you?"

Lassiter abandoned the point hastily.

"How are you going to get along in South America—do you speak Spanish?"

"Why, no," admitted the Arkansan simply. "God may send me a Spanish interrupter, or He may cause me to speak in tongues. He's running this shebang, not me."

The conversation was again slipping out of the Stendill agent's grasp. He cast about for another topic and observed that he himself was sailing on the *Brazilian* the next day.

Birdsong sprang up, a sudden light pouring into his sunburned face.

"You are! Well, bless His holy name! I knowed He wouldn't desert me here in New York! Praise the Lord!"

Lassiter held up a protesting hand:

"Hold on! Wait, Mr. Birdsong. I don't want you to build any false hopes—I can't take you——"

"Why, I'll bet you do!" cried Birdsong. "What have we been led together here for? Fount of Mercy!"

"I am not aware of being led, although——"

Lassiter hesitated as the amazingness of the coincidence thrust itself upon him.

"—although it is extraordinary that you should have stumbled upon anybody at all billeted for your steamer. Come to think about it, it's really astounding—six million people in New York; three hundred passengers on the *Brazilian*—six or seven

hundred squares in New York where crowds foregather; perhaps fifty of those passengers are out in the squares tonight——”

“Brother Lassiter, what are you doing?” inquired the Arkansan ingenuously.

“I was trying to calculate how many chances out of a billion you had of meeting a passenger on the *Brazilian* when you walked out, took this seat and waited for one to come along.”

“My brother,” said Birdsong with a warming smile, “don’t worry your head about the mysteries of God. I used to try to reason things out till I jest th’owed myself on His holy promises—ain’t you got an extry bed in our room on the *Brazilian*?”

“No.”

“Ain’t you got no space on the floor where your trunks ain’t settin’ where I could lay down at nights?”

“Well, yes,” admitted Lassiter, “I have a whole suite of rooms, but——”

“Praise God!” ejaculated Birdsong in a conversational tone.

“But hold on,” protested Lassiter with an uncomfortable feeling that his moral supports were slipping.

“Sure, I’m holding on,” a certain twinkle in his black eyes signaled a sense of humor; “I ain’t goin’ to let go. The Lord’s done His work, and I’ll do mine. Now look here, Brother Lassiter, you won’t even see me in your sweet rooms. I’ll slip in about ten or half past at night—long after you’ve gone to bed; and I’ll yave out by three or four in the morning long before you get up.”

The Stendill agent felt himself thawing, a little unwillingly. Then, too, Birdsong’s faith appealed to him as a sporting proposition. The man had taken a chance of about one in ten million (he had managed the figures roughly) and was about to win. It gave Lassiter a sort of thrill. It was a bit of genuine romance, a touch of the wildly improbable, a gesture of the lawless gods who make laws, but who disport themselves above laws.

“What are *you* going to do when *you* get down there, Brother Lassiter?” Birdsong’s accent included himself in the voyage.

The promoter was amused.

“Why I’m going to——”

Here he stopped. For some reason he did not want to tell Ezekiel Birdsong a lie.

“I hope it ain’t nothin’ to get you into no trouble,” observed the Arkansan simply.

“I think not.”

“I’ve heard of smugglers and gamblers and such like. I hope you ain’t none of them. If you’ve got any secret sin on your heart, Brother Lassiter, you can tell it to me.”

Lassiter laughed.

“It’s a secret, but not a secret sin; it’s a trade secret.”

“I’m used to trade secrets,” said Birdsong. “My daddy was a moonshiner in Tennessee before he got religion.”

“My trade secret is this: I am wondering how it will be possible for me to make a journey across the Andes from Quito and not allow my trade rivals to know what I am doing?”

Birdsong studied a moment.

“Are there any lost sinners on that route, Brother Lassiter?”

“Sinners are not lost in South America, Mr. Birdsong; you can lay your hand on them anywhere.”

“Glory to God,” observed the colporteur conversationally; “then why couldn’t I take the route you want to go, Brother Lassiter, and you could come along as my Spanish interrupter?”

Lassiter looked at the Arkansan as he proposed this exceedingly simple method of gaining complete obscurity. He had never thought of making his explorations in South America in a humble rôle. Like most well-to-do men the thought of leaving his own sphere never occurred to him; yet it was the easiest, most natural device possible.

The colporteur scrutinized Lassiter’s face closely, and saw that he had gained.

“You see, Brother Lassiter, the Lord has sent me a berth on the *Brazilian* and a Spanish interrupter all at one whack, bless His holy name!”

His drawl held a genial triumph.

Lassiter’s mind came back to the matter in hand, and a certain human duty he owed Birdsong.

“I must warn you, Mr. Birdsong, I am going into an unsettled country.”

“That’s all right, Brother Lassiter, I come from an unsettled country.”

“There may be even danger.”

“They tell me the martyrs wear the brightest crowns of anybody in the New Jerusalem, Brother Lassiter. I only hope I’ll be considered worthy to die in His cause, bless His holy name!”

“All right, we’ll try it.” He arose briskly.

"Meet me tomorrow at nine at Pier 19 on the Brooklyn side. We sail at 11:30."

Birdsong extended a brown hand and shook hands on the bargain after the fashion of Arkansas horse traders. Lassiter had an impulse to tell Birdsong how to get to Pier 19, but he did not. Somehow he had an impression, that if Birdsong should walk out and jump on the first car passing, it would be a limited express for Pier 19.

So Lassiter gave no direction, but offered a cigar to the colporteur, which is the New York fashion of sealing a compact. Birdsong looked at the pigskin case curiously, took out a cigar, inhaled its aroma, then put it back.

"No, I put away the filthy weed when I turned to God, Brother Lassiter—" Here he hesitated a moment, then went on resolutely: "Do you think it's right to smoke, brother? Suppose the Lord should call you home, would you like to enter the pearly gates smellin' like a tobacco factory?"

The South American agent pressed his lips together in a sudden quirk and looked up to consult a flare of Goldstein's Detectives who Never Slept. These wide-awake sleuths restored the agent's poise.

"Mr. Birdsong," he queried, "just what perfume do you suppose the Lord would prefer?"

The Arkansan pondered seriously.

"I always imagined lilac—there's a lilac bush growing right in front of our cabin—me and Mollie was married under it."

II



TWENTY-THREE days after the *Brazilian* sailed from New York, Lassiter and Birdsong were in Quito, Ecuador, buying muleteers' outfits for their trans-Andean junket. The Stendill agent bought thoroughly; his purchases extended right down from brightly colored ponchos, high sombreros, wide trousers to the tasseled goad used by the muleteers.

Lassiter believed, no doubt, that he donned the costume purely for the purpose of guarding his identity and his business secret, but the gay clothes flattered the poet and the masquerader wrapped up in the financial agent. He put them on in the back room of the *tienda* where he bought them. When he glanced into a dusty mirror, the image he saw caught and held his eye. It gave him a queer sense of having

stumbled, quite unexpectedly, upon that youthful, romantic Charles Lassiter who had entered the Stendill offices in Maiden Lane thirteen years prior. Thirteen years—then he was twenty-six. Now he was thirty-nine—

As he stood and looked into the glass, came that strange realization that his youth, his immortal youth, had slipped from him like a worn garment.

Here Birdsong drawled that they must go to San Francisco Plaza and hire some mules.

As for the colporteur, his yellow and purple poncho, his sombrero with a band of silver lace, his trousers, affected him not at all. The man might have been born a *mulero*. But Lassiter's costume affected him both physically and mentally. The loose freedom of the poncho lifted his spirits; in the wide trousers his legs felt fit for running and jumping.

As he walked along the heavy Spanish streets of Quito, kinship of costume made him realize that the *mestizos* and Indian muleteers he met were human beings like himself—which is a remarkable realization for an upper-middle-class man. He understood their supple swinging walk and the way they carried their goods along their arms. He shifted his to that position.



PLAZA SAN FRANCISCO, the live stock grain market of Quito, is a colorful, noisy place set in the cold brilliance of mountain sunshine. A babble of bastard Spanish, Aymara and Quichua dialects fill the air. The air is rank with the smell of animal ammonia, straw, droppings, mules and burros. Buyers and venders come and go with strings of donkeys, mules and high-necked llamas. Over the plaza are ponchos of every color, greens, yellows, oranges, reds, stripes, checks and fanciful designs. There is much sombrero tipping and courtly address between all men, rich or beggarly. In this land where work is held in low esteem, men realize best the dignity of simple existence apart from the ability to grab.

On the south side of Plaza San Francisco is a heavily built feed stable of adobe, fronted by an arcade. In the western end of the long arcade half a dozen Indian girls, wrapped in brilliant mantillas, sold *piquante* at little tables. Beside them on the bare packed earth boiled caldrons of the peppery stuff.

They fired their pots now and then with dried droppings, and no sooner had they finished that task than they scooped up a double handful of peppers to throw into the stew, and next moment ladle out fiery portions to their customers.

A little way from the *piquante* tables, out in the plaza, a Colombian jockey rode a bucking mule. The fellow had on a green velvet jacket. He sat the animal carelessly, and in the midst of its leaps and stiff-legged falls, he extolled to a prospective buyer how well broken the animal was, what an amiable disposition the mule possessed, how it would work from *alba* to *tardecita* (dawn to twilight) without so much as backing an ear, a willing mule, a sincere mule—

Amidst this oratory and bucking, he found time to flash a smile of brilliant teeth at the *piquante* girls. Lassiter wondered vaguely if he were too old to ride like that. The jockey was some twenty-three or four. Then the financial agent's attention wandered to a llama that was hissing like a snake; then to a man tying a stone to a jack's tail to keep it from braying.

As a background for this kaleidoscopic scene arose the cone of Pichincha far to the east in flashing silver and purple. Against this arose the spires and domes of the city, the twin towers of the cathedral, the weather observation bureau on top of the Prensa building, the monastery of the Gray Friars. From the height of the volcano there swept down great ridges of tufa that embraced the city in vast bluish arms. Lassiter's attention to the landscape was diverted by Birdsong's calling him.

The colporteur was bargaining with the man in the green jacket to hire his mules for the expedition. The jockey's English had flickered out among the higher numerals. Lassiter walked over and picked up the conversation in Spanish.

"What do you want for your mules, *señor*?"

"Where do you wish to go, *señor*?"

"East, through Corriente, past the Rio Vampiro—"

The expression on the vender's face stopped Lassiter.

"Not the Rio Vampiro?"

"Yes, on through the Ticunas into Brazil."

The Colombian looked at Lassiter with a loose jaw.

"The *señor* is mad!"

"I was never clearer-headed."

"Then you have never been to the Rio Vampiro."

"No."

"I have."

"Then you'll make the very guide."

The Colombian stroked a polished black mustache and broke into a nervous laugh.

"*Señores*, the man who has been in the Rio Vampiro makes no guide at all. He has learned his lesson. I would not go there again for two hundred *suces* a month."

"I'll give a hundred-and-fifty."

The man in the green jacket frowned and pulled hard at his mustachio. His black eyes seemed staring at something disagreeable.

"But, *señores*, I warn you," he flung out, "that is a vampire country—in that country—"

"I've heard so," interrupted Lassiter indifferently.

"It is not hearsay with me," declared the Colombian warmly. "Look—"

He stepped nearer Lassiter, bringing with him the odor of mules and of his own unwashed body.

"Look—"

He tipped his head to one side and the movement drew the skin of his neck up from under the greasy collar of his green velvet coat. This drew a peculiar withered spot on the skin into view.

Lassiter looked at it uncomprehendingly.

"A vampire, *señor*, right over that big vein," explained the vender. "My *camarado* discovered it just as I lay stretched out breathing my last. The beast was as big as an eagle. It was fluttering over me, fanning me deeper into my last sleep, when he rushed up and beat it off with a stick. Ah, *señores*, many a time has Balthasar Nunes gambled with death, but never before—never before—pardon me, *señores*, *un momento*, I think the *señoritas* are listening. I will explain to them. I could not rest in Heaven if I thought the gentle bosom of any woman held a question unanswered by Balthasar Nunes—"

Here he made rather a fine bow to the Americans and withdrew to the *piquante* stands.

Just how Balthasar discovered the women were listening, Lassiter never knew. Balthasar's back had been to them. Lassiter

turned and watched the Colombian display the withered spot on his neck. To observe it, the cream-colored women moved past Balthasar in a line, like sightseers at a side-show. One of them touched the place with the tip of her finger.

During the procession, Señor Nunes gave a new and enlarged version of his adventure with the vampire. After a five minute description of how he skirted death, Lassiter heard him say that his last thoughts, just before he lost consciousness were that a dark-eyed, adorable Indian madonna was stooping over him, lifting him, pressing him to her bosom with kisses like *piquante*—”

The girls blushed and gasped—

“*Piquantel!*”

“*Si, señoritas, piquantel!*” cried Nunes with hand to heart. “And my miserable *camarado* waked me from a dream like that! *Mio Dios!* How I wish I could have died in such a dream! When I gained strength I was furious! He tried to appease me. I would not hear him. We divided the gold—for the Rio Vampiro is lined with gold—and parted—”

Balthasar cast liquid eyes at the *piquante* venders—

“Can you blame me?”

“It was a very impious wish, *señor,*” trembled the one who had touched the scar.

Señor Nunes smote a hand on his brow. “A man’s brain is a furnace, *señorita,* when he looks into such black almond eyes; the holy saints do not hold his words against his soul.”

He gave a great sigh as if he were about to melt into the *piquante* girl’s arms, then shrugged and said:

“Now I must go back and dicker over the mules with those *Americanos*. No doubt they are *caballeros* (gentlemen) in their cold fashion, but they think of nothing but mules.”

All the girls lifted their eyes to the foreigners and smiled faintly before they returned to their task of collecting droppings for their pots.

Balthasar’s philandering vaguely annoyed Lassiter, yet the agent was a trifle amused at Balthasar’s Latin notion that kisses in Heaven tingled with *piquante*. When he thought it over, he was forced to admit that it was more interesting than the idea diffused through American theology that kisses in Heaven were chilly and infre-

quent—if, indeed, they were permitted at all.

The Colombian returned from the *piquante* girls with a beaming face. For some reason Lassiter began a little brusquely:

“I will give you a hundred and fifty sucres a month, Señor Nunes, and no more.”

Balthasar seemed a little surprised at such brevity, which is not in accord with Spanish-American traditions. He paused a moment, then asked—

“What do you want packed, *señor?*”

“Bibles.”

Balthasar stared.

“Bibles—pack Bibles out in that devil’s country?”

Birdsong caught the drift of these Spanish words.

“Brother Nunes,” he interposed, “where is a better place for spreaden the blessed Word than in a land of sin and wickedness?”

Balthasar looked at the man from Arkansas.

“Oh—you want the Bibles packed!” as if he did not find that so incomprehensible.

“Yes, I hope I am one of His chosen vessels, Brother Nunes.”

“And what do you want packed?” inquired the muleteer of Lassiter.

“I am his helper,” said the Stendill agent.

“You are what?”

“This gentleman’s assistant,” repeated Lassiter with a certain pointedness.

Nunes looked from one to the other, plainly incredulous, and also speculating. Presently he began again.

“It is a noble work— May I ask, *Señor* Lassiter, how long you have been in the business of selling Bibles?”

“We don’t sell them—”

“We’re spreaden the Word and sowen the seed,” interpolated Birdsong earnestly.

The Colombian nodded.

“Certainly—spreading the Word—*muy bien*—”

Here he took each of his prospective employers by the edges of their ponchos, and with a confidential nodding of the head led them farther away from the crowd. The smell of mules again wafted to Lassiter. When at a safe distance, the muleteer glanced around and began in a half tone:

“*Señores,* men do not risk their lives in the Rio Vampiro without a cause. You come from America to go to the Rio Vampiro—to distribute Bibles—that is your cause, is it not?”

"Yes," agreed Lassiter impatiently, "if you want to take us——"

"*Un momento*—You are *Americanos*. You come to Ecuador, dress up as *muleros* and go to the Rio Vampiro—to distribute Bibles—that is your cause, is it not?"

"Look here!" snapped Lassiter. "If you'll take us, say so, if you won't——"

"Do not feel nervous, *mi amigo*," soothed the muleteer. "All is well. You are most fortunate—Ah, you are most fortunate to fall in with Dom Pedro Balthasar Nunes, a man of infinite discretion. Any other *mulero* would wonder why two Americans disguised themselves as *muleros* to carry Bibles into the Rio Vampiro country—They would be curious——"

"To save lost souls," interposed Birdsong.

"Whose lost souls?" asked Balthasar cryptically.

"Why—just any lost soul," replied Birdsong, a little at loss. However one of his pet phrases came to his aid and he added, "The harvest is white, but the laborers are few."

Nunes nodded with a faint dry smile, pulling down his mustachios.

"Surely—What simpler?—I am discreet. I do not ask what is in your Bibles. I do not ask what you are going to do with them——"

"We're going to give them away," said Lassiter.

"*Precisamente*—give them away in the Rio Vampiro—trust my discretion. I have never been any too good friends with the police myself, and—I shoot very well with a *pistolete*."

Here he reached into the back of his green jacket, pulled the lining around and cautiously displayed the butt of a very modern automatic.

"I'll go for five hundred sucres a month," he concluded.

"Look here," cried Lassiter, caught off guard at this jump, "we're not afraid of the police!"

"Neither am I, *señor*." Nunes tapped the tail of his jacket.

"I mean the police are not after us."

"And they will not be, *señor*—trust my discretion—if you hire me."

This last phrase was put so significantly that Lassiter thought it best to put down his rising temper. It was clear the Colombian was prepared to bring down the Quito

police on them unless they came to his terms. An investigation undoubtedly would expose Lassiter's identity. The fact that he was traveling incog from Quito would be headlined up and down the West Coast. He would have to give over his plan or reconstruct it with an infinity of precautions.

Balthasar watched the Stendill agent's face.

"Only five hundred sucres," he suggested, shrugged, spread his hands. "What is five hundred sucres to *Americanos*, who are rich—and always in a hurry?"

Lassiter decided this was the cheapest secrecy in sight.

"All right, we start tomorrow."

"But wait," interrupted Birdsong. "I can not afford to pay two hundred and fifty dollars a month just for mules——"

"I'll fix that," said Lassiter.

"Yes," nodded Balthasar, "your assistant Bible giver will fix a little thing like that, Señor Birdsong."

"Praise the Lord," said Birdsong.



BALTHASAR'S bit of blackmail turned out, on the whole, rather a stroke of luck for the expedition.

The Colombian was very useful in translating the Quichua dialect of the Indians. When the mules and their Bible packs were in the mountains, Lassiter found his Castilian of little service. Not only did the Indians not understand pure Spanish, they distrusted every one who spoke the language. Four centuries of slavery, peonage and inquisition have crushed out of the Indian the last shred of faith in the Spaniard.

Undoubtedly the Quichuas are the most wretched human beings on the globe. The villages through which the colporteurs passed were mere kennels of adobe and stone stuck up on the mountainsides. Along the more abrupt heights in these villages were strung rudimentary stone fences to keep the children from dashing into space and being killed below.

The houses themselves were dug partly in the earth and were without windows, so the observer looked down into black kennel-like holes. Smoke poured from these holes, because there were no chimneys. Such excavations formed the home, stable, poultry house, sty and dog-kennel all rolled into one.

It pleased Ezekiel Birdsong to buy a hand bell in Quito and he made a processional

through these miserable villages, and sometimes singing the hymns so popular with rural revivals.

The Arkansan's penetrating nasal yowling and his bell formed a clamorous introduction to these villages. As he passed through at the tail of his mules, anything was likely to pop out of the huts to view the disturbance—a pig, a milk goat, a dog, a game-cock, an Indian woman followed by the rest of her tenants, for all held equal tenure in these motley domiciliaries.

The Indian housewives who heaved themselves up into the cold mountain sunshine were invariably shapeless creatures, weaving ponchos for their lords out of vicuna wool, or a Panama hat, with the fibers spraying off at the point of labor.

The housewife was always ugly with an ugliness that was appalling, but among her brood, there would be almost surely two or three dark-eyed, sad-faced girls, who came out with the pigs and goats and stood staring at the strange procession.

It was these girls coming out of the crevices in the rocks that made this groveling existence human to Lassiter. Often these girl faces held that strange quality of wistfulness that belongs to youth and maidenhood. Of what they dreamed, Lassiter could not imagine. What they were to become, he saw too plainly: Hags in a hole, used and shapeless, flowers crushed in a sty.

And Zeke Birdsong came along and gave them little Spanish Testaments.

The futility of the gift, the fanatical earnestness of the giver always struck Lassiter with a sad irony. Sometimes he would wonder if by any possible means the little Testaments could be of the slightest moral or intellectual value to these girls.

He never thought of any of the other denizens except the girls. Their faces always gave him the impression of something delicate and precious being wasted.

Birdsong, however, had much wider sympathies, no doubt because he was a father of both boys and girls. Between villages, trudging at his mule's tail, he would talk of his beneficiaries.

"That was a fine chunk of a boy," he would say. "I hope he will read that Testament and grow up into a preacher." Or—"That was a good-hearted old woman with the red shawl. I hope she sees the light and I meet her in Heaven."

Birdsong used this last phrase so much,

one could say he tramped at a mule's heels through the Andes, extending invitations to Indians to meet him in Heaven.

Lassiter looked on Heaven as medieval nonsense, but Birdsong, through his interpreter, talked of it so earnestly, so concretely—apparently he was acquainted with the pearly gates down to their hasps and hinges—that at intervals a strange fancy drifted across the financier's mind, that maybe, somewhere, there was such a place—somewhere—and he would look up at the icy peaks freezing against the abyss of the sky.



WITHOUT Balthasar not one Bible could have been given away. The first village they entered refused to accept a single book. The Indians thought it was some new trick of priests to bring down on their heads new and devastating ecclesiastical dues. However, Balthasar's eloquence reassured them. He explained that these men were good American bank robbers who were giving away Bibles as a penance for their sins. The Indians, thus assured that they were dealing with simple cutthroats, gained confidence and took the little books.

By the time the expedition had camped two nights on the trail, word, somehow, had passed ahead of their penitent and benevolent mission, and the colporteurs found the Indians eager for the Testaments. In fact, on two occasions, the little books themselves had been passed on ahead of the expedition.

In one village, the men found an Indian who had a bullet wound in his arm. He had bound one of the Testaments tightly over the place. He declared to Balthasar that all pain left him when he applied the book. On the following day they discovered an Indian woman, who was expecting confinement, drinking a tea made of Testament leaves.

Birdsong caught these patent miracles to his heart, and overflowed with thanksgiving in both prayer and song. He saw himself an evangel attended by the hosts of Heaven. He would stretch a string of miracles through Ecuador and prepare the way for—as near as Lassiter could get the idea—for an enormous revival.

For a while Lassiter argued mildly with Birdsong about the authenticity of these miracles. He attempted to explain to Birdsong that the patient was probably healed

by the workings of their own subconscious minds—but in the gulf of the subconscious, Lassiter quickly lost his own bearings.

As for Birdsong, he had no idea what subconscious meant. He rebutted everything by his unassailable argument—

“If the Lord wanted to work miracles with His Testaments, He could, couldn't He?”

After that, Birdsong recommended his books as a nostrum for all the ills of the flesh.

As Lassiter trudged day after day, behind his mule, goading it on under its pack of Bibles, there were times when he felt that he was moving in some kind of delirium and would presently awake, with a high fever, no doubt, in his New York apartment.

At the end of eight days' journeying, the expedition was widely advertised. At each camp came Indians bringing gifts—*olla podrida*, chickens to cook, potatoes, mangoes, or cakes of ice brought down by the donkeys from snow fields five thousand feet higher up.

As they journeyed farther and farther east, the villages became more widely scattered, for they were reaching the fringe of Ecuadorian civilization, which is the department of Corriente.

At the village of Canelos, an Indian boy offered to carry a sack of Bibles over to Bujeo, the last civilized village toward the east, and allow the white men to turn back. The men of Canelos told strange tales of the country beyond Bujeo. It belonged, they said, to a tribe called the Jivaros, who fed strangers to their gods.

Birdsong interrupted these tales with pious ejaculations:

“Lead me to my chosen field, O Lord! Show Thy power to the heathen Jivaros!”

The more terrible were the stories of the men of Canelos, the more determined Birdsong was to go on. On the ninth morning the white men reached Bujeo. A handful of wretched Indians lived here, and by some miracle the white men's coming was known to them. The whole village met the colporteurs.

After each person had received a testament of medicinal and spiritual value, the Bujejans implored the three men to go no farther. They would surely be lost in the infernal land of the Jivaros.

By this time, Birdsong was harrying his mule in his eagerness to reach a post of

genuine danger and miraculous service. The expedition was soon on its way again.

One of the Bujejans, an Indian named Chombo Meone, attached himself to the colporteurs for several hours. As they ascended the rising slopes of the eastern range of the Andes, Chombo told Lassiter a most fantastic tale, which he hoped would turn back the adventurers. This was the tale:



WHEN Chombo was a boy his mother died. He consulted a monk as to the state of her soul and was shocked to find that she was probably still in purgatory. Ten masses might win freedom for her.

Unfortunately, Chombo did not have enough money to pay for ten masses, so he took three.

Now every one in Bujeo knew that the Rio Vampiro was lined with nuggets of gold the size of a man's head, but the difficulty was, it all belonged to the King of the Jivaros, or that is to say, the devil.

Chombo explained his predicament to the monk, and the good man told Chombo if he would learn a prayer to subdue the devil, he could probably go to the Rio Vampiro, get the gold and return in safety.

Chombo agreed to this, so the monk, who knew all sorts of prayers, taught him a prayer, and the Indian set out. Sure enough, he found the valley of the Rio Vampiro scattered with gold. He filled his packs so full his poor donkey could scarcely crawl. He goaded the beast at every step and cursed it by all the saints in the calendar, but unfortunately black night fell upon him before he was clear of the land of the Jivaros. So he camped, refreshed himself with cocoa leaves, said the prayer seven times, then wrapped himself in his poncho and fell asleep.

He had the most horrible dreams.

When he awoke, his bags were gone, and his donkey hung to a tree by a cord, strangled as if it had been a sparrow. Who could pull a donkey up a tree by a cord except the devil?

Chombo had the presence of mind to cut off a piece of the cord as proof of his story and then fled the place.

At the conclusion of this extraordinary narrative, Chombo drew from under his poncho his embroidered bag of ashes and cocoa leaves, opened it and displayed the

bit of cord he had salvaged from the tragedy. It was a piece of silk cord about an inch and a half long, greasy from years of handling.


The Stendill agent looked at the shred of silk around which Chombo had woven such a fantasy. He avoided expressing his skepticism by inquiring after the present state of Chombo's mother's soul. Chombo hoped the good woman had been in Paradise for several years.

During the last mile or two, Chombo had talked with a certain nervous haste and many glances out over the boulder-strewn mountainside. Now that he had finished, he walked on a bit farther with some desultory conversation, then made his adieu and turned back to Bujeo.

At first he moved off on the return trail with sufficient dignity, but the farther he got from the white men the more quickly he stepped. At seventy-five paces, he began to trot. At a hundred yards he was in full flight, running as if the very King of the Jivaros were on his heels.

The white men watched him curiously, until his poncho diminished to a bit of fluttering red far down among the gray stones, and he vanished around a turn in the trail.

III

 CHOMBO MEONE'S flight down the mountainside lent a certain authenticity to his story which his words had failed to convey. For several moments, Lassiter stood looking down the trail, speculating on what the Bujean could have seen years ago that sent him homeward today at such a scamper. Then, too, the fact that Chombo possessed a piece of silk cord grew upon the promoter as rather inexplicable. Troglodytes, such as the Quichuas, are not given to silks.

Birdsong accepted Meone's narrative in word and substance. The Indian had adventured with the devil, and straight ahead lay the battle-ground where he, Ezekiel Birdsong, would meet and conquer the infernal hosts with the sword of the spirit. He prodded his mule forward. What daunted the Indian spurred the zealot.

The terrane up which the expedition toiled smacked of Chombo's narrative. It was of volcanic origin and it stretched upward as scoriated as the slopes of Hinnon

itself. It was a formidable landscape. It appeared to Lassiter as if a vast, gray flood had been transfixed in stone in the instant of tumultuous descent. In one place its stony waves still lashed at the sky; in another, huge swirls from some long cooled maelstrom still held its contour; in yet others washes of vitreous green slag simulated the troughs of a stormy sea. This huge and strange terrane led upward, apparently to a plateau, which formed a pass through the snowy barricade of the Andes.

A cold wind swept down from the snow fields and worried at the men's ponchos and at the Bible packs. The trail which they had followed so far ceased to exist on the lava field. They worked upward by guess and chance. Their progress upward became a tortuous ant-like twisting with endless hesitations, back-turnings and retracings.

Indeed the hugeness of their surroundings dwarfed men and mules to the proportions of insects. They might very well have been a little string of ants creeping upward on the obscure and twiddling errand of such creatures.

It all must have affected Ezekiel Birdsong's imagination as the very outlands of hell. He was a Parsifal riding against the battlements of Klingsor, or rather, since the Arkansan's mind was untouched by the Wagnerian cycle, he was a child of the living God challenging the regents of Sin and Death.

Lassiter often looked at him, a short, compact, sun-burned man with oily black hair, shoving at his mule, steadying his pack and shouting his lugubrious hymns—Lassiter often looked at him, and the thought came to the Stendill agent more than once that the apostles of Christ, the fishermen and publicans who had made these Bible packs possible, must have been just such tough, sun-browned, indomitable rustics.

At other times the promoter in Lassiter asserted itself. He thought of the tourist trade. He visioned these cyclopæan scenes unrolling beneath the hull of a dirigible. What a tourist-catcher it would be! It would soon instate itself in the world's imagination as one of those obligatory tours, such as the Alps, the Yosemite, the Pyramids, the Grand Cañon, Stratford on Avon, which all real personages perform,

thereby dispersing any doubt as to their culture.

So absorbed became the financier in this idea, that he would lose consciousness of his struggle upward, of his slippery charges up glazed redoubts, of his shovings at his mule's flank. In imagination he would be floating in a Stendill air-liner high above these discomforts. The ant meditated wings.



NEAR sundown the exploring party reached the level of the pass. Once up, their going was easier. Here the lava had weathered to a soil, and even a little grass broke out, like a sort of greenish skum on disturbed waters.

The relief from climbing and the color of the sunset picked up the spirits of the expedition. Balthasar, at the flank of the lead mule, broke into whistling a gay incontinent fandango. He supplied the castanets by snapping his fingers, and then, charmed by his own music, fell to twisting and swinging his hips as he walked, or rather capered along.

Birdsong, who followed the Colombian, stopped his hymn singing at this lickerish pantomime and watched his fellow muleteer in righteous disapproval. Condemnation was written in the Arkansan's very back and stride.

Lassiter, who brought up the van, was tired from his climb, but this little dumb show amused him. He walked beside his own mule with heavy legs. Also he tilted his foot a little to one side, to protect a new blister that had formed on his left great toe. However, the color of the dying day presently weaned his mind both from the little comedy and from the trifling discomforts of his own body. The sunlight streaming through the mountain defiles behind him gave him the impression of enormous hoses playing streams of gold upon the peaks ahead, while to the eastern sides of the mountains clung the night like a blue bubble.

Presently Lassiter's attention was drawn from this splendor by the sound of Birdsong exhorting Nunes in a queer mongrel of English, Spanish and Quichua. In the rarefied air, their voices came to him thinly.

Like so many well-meaning persons, Birdsong had endured the dance, and had suppressed his irritation to the breaking point; it had now become impossible for

him to request the Colombian courteously to stop.

The first sentence Lassiter heard was Birdsong's nasal explosion—

"Look here, Brother Nunes, don't you know the devil is firing up his grill this minute, for such sinners as you are!"

The Colombian stared around at this thunderbolt out of an evening sky.

"Why is he, Señor Birdsong?" he inquired in a most amiable mood.

"To roast them dirty dances out of you!"

The Colombian drew a bit of shuck and tobacco from his green jacket and gravely began a cigaret.

"I know persons, Señor Birdsong, whom the devil himself couldn't roast a dance out of—"

The colporteur looked at him hard.

"If you are trying to throw slurs on my soupleness, Brother Nunes, I'll have you understand there ain't a man in Yell County, Arkansas, that can tear down 'Cotton-Eye Joe' slicker than I can."

"I'd enjoy seeing it done, wouldn't you, Señor Lassiter?"

Lassiter was too wary to be led into the discussion.

"Brother Nunes, I wouldn't shake a leg in 'Cotton-Eye Joe' or 'Turkey in the Straw,' not for all the filthy pleasure this world can hold."

Nunes lit his cigaret and inhaled luxuriously.

"Señor Birdsong," he said, in a muffled voice, talking the smoke out of his mouth and nostrils, "if you really could dance, you would not be so prejudiced against it. That is always the way. Fat men dislike the fandango; stiff men abominate the waltz; awkward men—"

"Look here, Brother Nunes, when I say I can dance, I can dance."

"Still, it's easier to talk than to dance."

The colporteur looked straight at the muleteer, seemed to make up his mind, and next moment began humming one of those monotonous jumbles of sound such as the fiddlers among the hill-folk of Tennessee and Arkansas evoke. Next moment he gave a whoop, leaped into the air, clicked his heels together three times and landed on the tufa in a southern backwoods breakdown.

Amid the majestic surroundings, his stocky dancing figure formed a grotesque

spectacle. Birdsong squatted on his heels, shooting out his legs like pistons.

"This is 'Layin' Off Corn!'" he shouted at the skeptical Colombian. Suddenly he half rose, and retained the posture with hands and feet criss-crossing in a flurry of agility.

"'Plantin' the Seed!'" he yelled.

When this was established to a machine-like virtuosity, he shifted and began switching in his toes.

"'Kiverin' the Row!'" he called. "And now I'm 'Layin' By!'"

Here he fell into a motion of such swiftness that he jiggled up and down like a marionette. He seemed to blur. He seemed to have four flying legs and two shadowy heads.

It was the most remarkable exhibition of strength and agility Lassiter had ever seen. At first he was amused and amazed. Then his amusement ceased.

Jigs or breakdowns among the mountaineers of Tennessee, Georgia and North Carolina are really expressions of their harsh, arid lives. They are awkward, fantastic, and are based on a sort of grim travesty of the labor of the hill-folk, or the movements of animals; such as turkeys scratching in straw, hogs dashing through canebrakes, men and women stooping in weariness over sterile, stony soil. But the dancing of these grotesque steps is a feat of strength.

Lassiter was too sensitive not to catch the bleakness of soul among a people who could evolve such a dance. That bleakness was written not only in Birdsong's steps and furious leaps and jerks, but it was in the rigid staring face which he maintained throughout the performance.

It was a dance of desolation, of blind graceless reaction against suppression. It formed an illuminating commentary to Lassiter on all the mouthings of hell-fire, Satan's power, eternal damnation, everlasting flames, and a hundred other revivalistic catch-phrases he had heard fall from Birdsong's lips. The jig held a spiritual tragedy in its unloveliness.

What Balthasar thought of this gringo dance, he gave no indication. His Latin courtesy probably repressed a smile, or a shudder.

Birdsong stopped as abruptly as he began, dripping with sweat. His thick-barreled chest heaved. For a moment he stood staring at his audience of two.

"Señor Birdsong," began the Colombian, "that was a—an unusual dance, a remarkable——"

He broke off because Birdsong's face underwent a queer change. The colporteur whitened under his sweat. Amid his panting he gasped out:

"My God, what have I done? Merciful Redeemer—what have I done? Me, a vessel of the Blessed Truth——"

He lapsed into the silence and the stoicism of his kind.

Lassiter looked at him. Such remorse was written even in his hard-lined face that the agent was moved to express a doubt whether such an acrobatic performance was a dance.

Birdsong shook his head gloomily.

"I know you mean well, Brother Lassiter, but the devil is using your tongue to lead me to destruction—The devil is right here, watching us this minute—he's here! Right now! Just as shore as when he choked Chombo Meone's mule!"

The colporteur's gesture, the look of the huge, igneous pass, and the memory of Chombo's tale, all helped produce an illusion of some veritable malign presence. Birdsong caught his mule, which had backed away from its master's uncanny performance. The little company started ahead again, but the incident completely removed all lilt of gaiety that had inspired them.

Balthasar resumed his lead. He seemed to be pondering something, and presently he said—

"Señor Birdsong, you have a queer religion—mostly about the devil."

"He is our arch enemy, Brother Nunes. See how he tempted me to pride in my strength—lowly worm of the dust that I am."

"Surely there is no harm in kicking one's legs?"

"Suppose my blessed Redeemer had called me home while I was jiggling like that, don't you know I would have gone as straight to hell as you'll go when you die, heathen though you be, and child of the living God though I be."

Birdsong's continual contrast of his own righteousness to Nunes's sinfulness pricked the skin of the easy-going Colombian. He seemed about to retort when he broke off abruptly and the forward mule came to a halt; then it began to back away with that down-dropping of its haunches characteristic of frightened mules. Balthasar

remained staring downward. Birdsong came up with him and fell into the same transfixed gaze. Lassiter hurried forward and a moment later joined their amazement.



BEFORE the trio, the plateau dropped away into a vast chasm. The abyss was as unheralded as the Grand Cañon, and appeared more prodigious. How deep it was, Lassiter could form no idea because night already had curtained its profundity. Its width, he was equally unable to gauge because the yellow haze of sunset veiled its eastward reach. Although Lassiter was twenty feet from the brink, a sense of vertigo caused him to back away.

After a long gaze, Nunes said—

“Señores, this is the end of the trail.”

And Birdsong replied—

“If we are forced to stop here, brothers, it is because I have just proved myself an unworthy vessel.”

A faint mirth stirred in Lassiter’s brain.

“I fancy this chasm would have been here, Birdsong, if you hadn’t danced.”

“That may be true, Brother Lassiter, but God in His foreknowledge must have foreseen that I would fall from grace just where I did, and He prepared this huge holler as a signal of His divine displeasure.”

“Preparedness,” said the Stendill agent soberly.

“If He don’t show me the way across this bottomless pit tomorrow,” said the Arkansan somberly, “I’ll know my name ain’t recorded in the Book of Life.”

At that moment from far down in the darkness of the abyss there shot up into the eyes of the travelers a beam of scarlet light. It looked as if it were shining out of immense depth. It stared out of the very bowels of the earth.

Balthasar gasped and crossed himself. A shivery sensation went over even Lassiter himself. Only Birdsong entirely kept his courage. He advanced to the margin of the abyss calling on God to burn the filth and wickedness out of his heart.

At that moment the light winked out as abruptly as it had sprung into view. It gave Lassiter the impression that the bowels of the earth had closed over it. The promoter stood looking down into the blackness.

“How deep is it?” he asked of nobody. A thought came to him. He drew out his

watch and marked the second hand in the yellow light. “Heave over a stone, Balthasar, I’ll measure its depth by seconds.”

The Colombian shook his head. “No, señor, I’d heave over a stone and crush a man’s head at once, but when the King of the Jivaros stares up at me—that’s different.”

“Chuck something in, Birdsong.”

The man from Yell picked up a ten-pound boulder and flung it into the abyss. Balthasar backed away as if expecting some monster to emerge from the emptiness. The two Americans stood listening ten—fifteen—twenty seconds—but no sound ever returned from their plummet. Lassiter slowly restored his watch to his pocket.

“I don’t guess it’s got no bottom, Brother Lassiter,” said the Arkansan, who took such a phenomenon quite simply.

The trio set about pitching camp. With this friendly task, the Stendill agent shook off somewhat his feeling of the abnormous. He and Birdsong put up the tent, unrolled the bedding and picked up wood for a campfire while Nunes tethered the mules and gathered grass for their provender.

By the time the three men got down to their own supper, the last touch of carmine burned on the peaks and a few pale stars glittered over the shoulders of the mountains.

After supper the men sat speculating on the light they had seen in the profound. The beam had not suggested fire. The financial agent ran over a list of possibilities, a phosphorescent display, a searchlight, a signal fire, even a vent in the volcano.

Nunes was convinced that he had looked into the baleful eye of the King of the Jivaros. Even to Lassiter, Chombo Meone’s story did not seem so improbable now as it did in Bujeo.

Birdsong was the gloomiest of the three companions. He had seen the gates of hell gaping at him as a reproof because he had driven another spear into the side of Christ by his wicked dancing.

From what the agent could gather, Birdsong believed that the abyss and the mysterious light were created by the Supreme Being for the single and particular purpose of rebuking his ungainly antics.

Such vast and unconscious egotism amazed Lassiter. He tried to show the colporteur the infinite disparity between a man’s ephemeral tenure of life and the ageless foundations of the earth.

"Brother Lassiter," drawled the revivalist, "I'll be resting in the bosom of Abraham when these here mountains are washed down in the bottom of the sea." He looked up at the immemorial peaks standing dark against the star-powdered sky.

The Stendill agent sat looking at the fellow with his oily black hair gleaming and winking in the gleam and wink of the fire-light. He was warming himself by a couple of fagots—and forecasting his existence for æons to come. The essential irony of it filled the promoter with a kind of melancholy.

"I hope He forgives my sin, Brother Lassiter."

"I hope so, Birdsong."

"I'm going to wrestle with Him in prayer tonight. I'll wrestle all night or git my answer. If He sends His miraculous power and helps me down into this bottomless pit tomorrow, so's I can spread His holy Word, I'll know He's received me as His child again. I'm sorry I displeased Him, Brother Lassiter."

The promoter allowed the conversation to lapse, and smoked a cigar to dull his thoughts for sleep. As the camp-fire died down, the promoter wrapped himself in his blankets and settled himself for the night. Birdsong got up and went outside to his prayer.

The Stendill agent lay awake for upward of an hour, looking at the coals, watching sparks flare into tiny brilliance and die, listening to the drone of the colporteur's prayer as he prayed never to die.

Lassiter never knew quite when he fell asleep, or whether he fell asleep at all or not. It seemed to him that one moment he heard the colporteur outside praying, and the next, Birdsong was by his side, shaking his shoulder and flashing an electric torch in his face. Birdsong was undressed and evidently had been in bed. Now he leaned down and whispered to Lassiter that something was bothering the mules.

The Stendill agent got to attention with difficulty and after some blinking reflection managed to inquire what the mules were bothered about.

The man from Yell did not waste speech, but aroused Nunes by flashing the light in his face. The Colombian sat up suddenly, gasping out—

"Señores, she is innocent—do not imagine—"

The Arkansan hustled his companions

into their faculties and bade them listen outside. The men listened. In the direction of the mules they heard a queer scratching and a padded bumping.

The New Yorker was not impressed that anything could be done until the colporteur opened the flap of the tent and motioned his companions to follow him. Lassiter crawled out of his blankets without enthusiasm, found his shoes, then followed shivering into the cold night air.



THERE was no moon. The conformation of the lava lay uncertain in the starlight. The colporteur walked toward the mules playing his light in front of him. It illuminated the burned ground for twelve or fifteen feet, then faded into darkness. Lassiter shivered from the chill. Presently the three dark figures behind the spurt of light could see the bulk of two mules lying down.

By this time all unusual sounds had died down. Lassiter was inclined to get back to his blankets. But with a countryman's persistence, Birdsong stood switching his light here and there, looking for the third mule.

"H-He can't hobble far in his tether," chattered Balthasar.

"Yes, but he may fall over the cliff."

Birdsong turned his light in this direction and peered into the darkness.

The three stood for several moments, listening, trying to locate the lost mule when with a sense of relief Lassiter saw the animal's eyes shining some fifty feet back toward their camp. He pointed it out.

"Now we got to round it up careful," cautioned the Arkansan. "A mule's a plumb fool at night. We don't want it loping off that cliff. We better spread out and git between it and the jump-off."

The men accepted the directions and began a deploying movement around the stray. Lassiter kept his eyes fixed on the glowing points and knocked his shins against cusps of lava in the darkness. His climb the preceding day had made the inside of his thighs and his shoulders sore. He kept sidling around his quarry, mentally querulous of his discomfort, when he chanced to observe another pair of eyes glowing beside those of the mule.

For a full half minute, Lassiter kept sidling among the stones, so near asleep was he, before the significance of these new eyes

dawned upon him. By this time he had stepped into a refractive angle where he saw still another pair of sparks glittering at him from the blackness.

The Stendill agent stopped stock still. A curious tickling sensation flowed from his scalp to his toes. With much crisper steps he got back to Birdsong and the light. He reached out and took the Arkansan by the arm.

"Zeke——"

"Yeh."

"Did you know there was something else . . . something . . ."

"Yeh, I see its eyes."

"What is it, Zeke?" asked Lassiter nervously. "You—you understand about stock——"

"Something layin' flat on that old mule's neck."

"But what?"

"I got to ketch her and see," whispered the man from Yell, and next moment he strode briskly forward.

At Birdsong's approach the glints withdrew at the rate of the man's approach; then a strange thing happened. A heavy bumping and thumping set up not at the glints at all, but about ten feet to one side of the stalkers. Lassiter was startled. Birdsong switched his light on the commotion.

Next moment, in the harsh black and white light appeared the body of the third mule dragging and bumping over the stones.

At the same instant Balthasar opened fire with his automatic. Its spurt of flames stabbed the darkness, and by the position of each flash, Lassiter saw the Colombian was charging whatever man or creature lay before him.

The promoter shouted a warning about the cliff. At that moment the automatic was exhausted. An abrupt silence took the place of its hard chatter.

Lassiter stood staring into absolute blackness, shivering violently.

"Balthasar!" he called. "Balthasar!"

Birdsong whisked the light about and after a few seconds picked up the Colombian on his knees, jamming cartridges into his pistol's butt. He suddenly began cursing a string of Spanish oaths.

"What's the matter?" cried the Stendill agent.

"He tried to lariat me, —— him! He

threw me down! I'd have got him, *señor!* I'd have got the devil himself, —— him!" The two men ran up, and sure enough there was a rope around Balthasar's legs. He got out with some difficulty. Then they took the flashlight and examined the edge of the abyss for eighty or a hundred yards up and down in front of their tent. It was quite empty. They went back to the rope which had tripped Balthasar. It was heavy silk. Then they walked over to the body of the third mule, and found a similar cord attached to it. This must have been a sort of tow rope used to drag the brute's carcass toward the abyss.

The mule itself was quite dead. A little further investigation showed the other two mules had also been killed.

IV



ON THE following morning, the three men held a sort of inquest over the dead mules. Lassiter examined the top side of one of the brutes, the men then heaved the body over and the promoter set to work on that side. He made a minute examination, brushing the hair the wrong way to get at the skin. He did not find a single cut or puncture or scratch. The three mules lay intact.

After some half hour's investigation, he glanced up as Nunes—

"What about strangulation?"

"Not that, *señor*, its tongue is in its mouth, its eyes are in their sockets, there are no marks on the neck."

Lassiter arose stiffly, brushed his palms together in an effort to rid them of the film of oil left by touching the animal.

"Suppose they were poisoned?"

"A mule will not eat at night, *señor*."

"Then what could have killed them?"

The Colombian stared.

"Perhaps they were scared to death, *señor*."

Lassiter looked up at the muleteer to see if he were jesting,

"What could scare the life out of a mule?"

The Colombian shrugged—

"*Quien sabe, señor.*"

Ezekiel Birdsong, who was over among the mule packs reassembling his Bibles into man-sized bundles, called out—

"It must have been a man with a lariat, brothers, a man on horseback. We saw that much."

"We saw their eyes only, Señor Birdsong," corrected Nunes.

"And I saw six eyes," put in Lassiter wearily, for they had gone over the horse-man theory several times.

"But you were excited, Brother Lassiter, no doubt you imagined the extra pair."

"Of course that's true, I may have," admitted the promoter, getting out a cigar and biting its end with a nervous snap, "but where did a horseman come from—out of the abyss, through the air, or up the trail?"

"It could have been a man riding up from Bujeos, who killed our mules and fled, *señor*."

"But how did he get away?" cried Lassiter. "Did he ride down the abyss, because whatever it was vanished in that direction right under Balthazar's pistol fire? A man couldn't ride down through space. No horse—no horse in the world—I tell you fellows it was a—a——"

Lassiter's fancy wandered vaguely among condors, wyverns, dinosaurii—he recalled that the American newspapers recently carried reports of a post-diluvian monster discovered in Africa. It was a prodigious thing— Perhaps here in South America— Then he thought of the silken lariat and dropped the theory.

"It's bound to be a *gaucho*," drawled Birdsong with irritating complacency, "because nothing but a hoss could drag a dead mule and nobody in South America can throw them lariats without nooses except *gauchos*."

Both Colombian and financier turned on the man from Arkansas.

"Who ever heard of a *gaucho* with a silk lariat, *señor*?"

"What would a *gaucho* be doing among the Andes, Birdsong?"

"Why should a *gaucho* kill our mules, *señor*?"

"And try to drag them over such a devilish high precipice at night, Birdsong?"

"You needn't get riled because I think it's a *gaucho*, brothers," placated the colporteur as he tied a bundle.

"Well—no, certainly not——"

"Pardon, *señor*, but—but the man who killed our mules must have come through the air, *no es verdad*, Señor Lassiter? And he went back the same way, *absolutamente*, I saw him go."

The Stendill agent relighted his cigar and coned this new hypothesis—a flying man—

a man who could fly noiselessly— The idea began to paint a new fantasia before Lassiter's mind. :

"Besides that," droned out Birdsong, "I saw this *gaucho* laying right down on his horse's neck."

The Stendill agent turned in irritation.

"Look here, Birdsong, *gauchos* live in the Argentine. How can you imagine one would be riding over the Andes at midnight?"

"And Señor Birdsong, how could a horseman come out of a chasm and go back into it again?"

"Brothers," drawled the colporteur, "if God saw fit to punish my filthy dancing by bringing a——"

"*Mio Dios!*" from Nunes.

"——," snapped the financier, "I might have known you thought——"

"Brother," explained Birdsong mildly, "last night, as I wrestled with God to get forgiveness for my filthy dancing, I asked Him to send down a miracle, if He would receive me back as His son."

"Well—you got one," agreed the Stendill agent, a little ashamed of his irritation. And he walked slowly back to the tent.

This carried him past the mule with the rope on its foot. It too lay scatheless, without a hair turned from ears to fetlocks except where the silk rope ruffed its right fore ankle. Lassiter looked at the attachment of the rope. It was simply wrapped around the dead mule's foreleg, *gaucho* fashion, as Birdsong had said. He stooped, cut off a piece of it, and continued toward the tent, examining it. At first it seemed an ordinary cord of silk composed of four strands, but when he unwound a strand and attempted to ravel it, he found to his surprise, that it was not composed of smaller threads, but it was of a colloidal nature and resembled a string of glue or celluloid.

The New Yorker looked at it curiously. It was not silk. It was a rope manufactured, so far as he knew, out of some entirely unknown substance by some unknown method.

This discovery brought back to his mind the idea that had been edging in when Birdsong's remark had interrupted. Was it possible some man had visited them during the night with a noiseless airplane? Did an unknown civilization exist in the hinterlands of the Andes that manufactured a silken cordage out of some unknown colloid?

The moment Lassiter hit on this theory, the various threads in this snarl of facts began to straighten. The killing of the mules, the selection of the spot, the light he had seen in the abyss, all became amenable to human motives.

"Besides that," drawled out Birdsong, evidently continuing some soliloquy, "them *gauchos* may have silk lassoes, I don't know——"

Lassiter was so pleased over his idea, this did not annoy him. He called back cheerfully—

"This isn't silk."

"Oh, it ain't," drawled the *colporteur* calmly. "I thought you said it was."

"I did, but it isn't."

Lassiter expected the man from Arkansas to ask its material; instead, Birdsong merely remarked—

"Then you see, maybe God did send a *gaucho* after all."

Lassiter burst out laughing.

"No, I don't. This is a new sort of rope, unknown to commerce. I am sure because the Stendill lines handle every sort of cordage from sisal to manilla hemp, from Egyptian——"

Balthasar Nunes turned and was staring at the *colporteur's* assistant.

"The Stendill lines, *señor*—what are the Stendill lines?"

Lassiter collected his wits.

"It's a rope factory in America where I used to work and—er—make lines—er—ropes and all sorts of cordage."

Nunes stroked his black mustache, cast an eye around at Birdsong and nodded agreeably.

Birdsong pursued the topic.

"Brother Lassiter, maybe the Lord provided that *gaucho* with a miraculous rope to get me past this bottomless pit made by the devil."

"No doubt—no doubt——" and he returned to his study of the rope.

The Colombian joined Lassiter and helped him study the new find. The two men walked into the tent to sit and smoke and talk. Birdsong continued his work outside.

"This will explain Chombo Meone's story," began Lassiter. "Take the supposition of the Jivaros, a small, but highly civilized people here in the Andes. If they wished to discourage contact with less cultured tribes, such as the Bujans, would they not post guards in these mountains

and kill the stock of travelers in an effort to frighten them?"

"Why wouldn't they kill the travelers themselves, *señor*?"

"Because they are civilized. You and I, for instance, we would avoid murder to the last extremity."

"Oh—*certainemente, absolutamente*," Balthasar nodded, strongly, "but, *señor*, why do you think the Jivaros are highly civilized?"

"This cordage suggests it. I never saw anything like it in the Stendill factories——"

The agent was rather pleased at the casual way in which he corroborated his own story.

"A noiseless airship would prove it; it would explain why we saw that searchlight in the abyss last night; it explains why our own lives were spared— Just think, they have flying machines which they can use indifferently as a tractor to draw a dead mule, or to sail away into the void. It will be many a year before our civilization duplicates that, my dear Balthasar."

Lassiter had a tenable theory now, and he felt good. He was hitting his conversational stride.

"But, *señor*, I thought the Jivaros were the fiends of hell."

"Natural enough, my dear Balthasar. No doubt the Jivaros have been working for years trying to inculcate exactly that belief among all the surrounding savages. It's high time some civilized person was getting in touch with these people, negotiating trade relations— Why, great goodness, man, think of the tonnage from an entirely untouched territory—ships could sail right out of here——"

"Ships! Ships sail out of here, *señor!*" cried Nunes in genuine alarm. "Surely, *señor*, last night's adventure has not turned your——"

The Colombian paused, staring at the American.


"I mean the ships of the Jivaros—the airships," explained the promotor, after a moment—"the sort we saw last night."

Nunes looked away over the chasm before them, then glanced back at Lassiter, then at the chasm again.

"I see," he nodded.

By this time, both men felt that the other was not talking frankly, and they dropped the subject of the Jivaros. The muleteer turned to neutral topics.

"I wonder what Señor Birdsong is going to do?"

 LASSITER watched him. The short blocky rustic was carrying his newly made parcels one by one to the very edge of the abyss. Both Nunes and Lassiter jumped up and started toward him.

"Hey, Birdsong, what you want done?" called the promoter. "We make two hands, you know."

The colporteur turned about.

"Well," he said with his uncomfortable frankness, "I'm getting ready to go down into this place. I know you two fellows don't take much stock in the Lord's work. I didn't want to call on you to do anything."

"I don't like that," cried the New Yorker. "I'll admit I'm not the enthusiast you are, Birdsong, but when I start with a man I mean to see him— Say, how are you going to get down?"

Birdsong looked at him.

"I hate to tell you, Brother Lassiter."

"Why?" cried the agent, greatly surprised.

"Because when I mention anything about my Lord and Master, it seems like it kinder throws you and Brother Nunes in a bad temper."

Birdsong's drawl was monotonous as usual, but his words painted clearly enough his loneliness of soul. A qualm of self-reproach went through Lassiter.

"I'll help you carry the Bibles to the edge, Zeke," he proffered fraternally, "and you can tell me how you are going to get down if you care to." He followed the man from Yell to his bundles, picked up one and started to the edge.

"Well—it's just this," began Birdsong with a certain humble boldness, "I'm doing my part in spreaden the blessed Word among the heathen and I know the Lord'll do His. He'll git 'em down there somehow—"

"You—you expect a miracle to lift these books to the bottom of the cliff?"

"Yes, and me too, Brother Lassiter," agreed Birdsong simply; then he added, "You needn't carry none unless you want to, Brother Lassiter."

"Oh—I—I'll help—"

The steamship agent's nerves teetered on the edge of mirth, pity for, and wonder at this indomitable monomaniac. Then, with

a queer feeling, Lassiter recalled how Birdsong had simply walked out into Madison Square and waited for a berth on the *Brazilian*—and it had come. Now he was just as simply lugging his Bibles to the brink of the precipice— However, there was this difference between the two events. In New York, Birdsong had one chance in about a million. Here, he had none at all.

He had no chance because the expedition had been stopped by the crater of a volcano. Not exactly a crater either, but the sides of a volcano whose top had crushed in some millions of years ago. The ruins of such cataclysms are fairly frequent in Ecuador. This one had left a vast circular hole in the earth which appeared to be about a mile or a mile and a quarter in depth and about eighteen or twenty miles in width.

In daylight it did not appear so enormous as at sunset, but Lassiter realized that at this hour it was really larger than it seemed. He judged it must be wider than the Grand Cañon, and perhaps deeper. It was huger than the crater of Kilauea in Hawaii because it was not a crater, but the circular ramparts of a volcano truncated by its summit crashing into its base. That long-gone catastrophe left a vast concavity, with walls five or six thousand feet high that leaned strongly inward. Into this impossible place, Birdsong expected to be translated.

The walls of this enormous barricade were colorful with a red cast that varied into grays and blues. And the vast circuit was molded into strange architectural shapes, something like the mesas of New Mexico and Utah.

Its bottom was lined with a verdure which showed vividly green, even from that great height. This green expanse was broken only in a place or two, and by a lake near the center of the volcano, and a stream that led away to its eastern side. No doubt, this lake, which slept so tranquilly in the heart of the great inclosure, furnished the steam, millions of years ago, which demolished one of the smoking Andes and left this splendid ruin in its stead.

Lassiter did not mention this probable geologic history to Birdsong, because he knew the colporteur would instantly affirm that that explosion æons ago had been staged for the express purpose of testing his, Ezekiel Birdsong's, faith in this day of grace.

And Lassiter knew if Birdsong said that, he would get angry and they would quarrel again.

The Stendill agent was just hefting the last pack to a tired shoulder when Nunes, who was walking about the rim, admiring the view below, paused, bent over, and after a moment called Lassiter to come there, that he had found some more rope of the Jivaros.

The financier veered and approached the spot with his last bundle. He laid it down wearily, wriggled his shoulder in relief and asked Nunes where. The Colombian pointed to a bit of the stuff just protruding over the inner scarp of the precipice.

The American was afraid to walk down and look at it, but he laid down on his stomach, told Nunes to hold his legs, and inched forward until his head protruded over the edge.

The vast depth, the lean of the wall on which he was poised gave Lassiter a swift sickening feeling of lurching forward in a mile-long plunge. He shut his eyes tightly, and drew a shivery breath, but for a full half a minute he could still feel himself falling inward with the swing of the wall. Presently he saw nothing except the red light filtering through his closed eyelids. He opened them in a tiny crack.

By eliminating the vastitude of the abyss, he overcame his sense of falling given by the concave walls. So he lay and looked with nerves more or less steady. To his surprize, then to his amazement, he saw that a strand of the Jivaros rope extended from the rim of the crater downward and inward for about a hundred and fifty feet and attached to one of the huge irregularities or folds in the stony circuit that gave the opposite side of the great palisades its peculiar sculptured appearance.

How the rope ever became connected between the two places, Lassiter could not imagine, because a plumb line would have missed the ledge below by a good fifty feet. Then he saw that the upper end of the rope, immediately under his eyes, was merely glued to the rocky face of the precipice.

Lassiter could scarcely believe his senses. To attach a rope to anything by gluing—it was fantastic. Yet, brief reflection told him this would be the only method of anchoring a line on bare stone. He reached down gingerly, and pulled at the rope. It was tightly drawn from point and his

pull did not budge the glue in the slightest degree. Indeed, it held with the same sort of firmness as does a wire rope anchored in a suspension bridge. While Lassiter was making these investigations, Nunes drew him back by his legs. The promoter made no objections. In fact, he felt a sense of relief when good solid stone shut off the vertiginous depth beneath him.

Nunes pulled him in and asked anxiously, "Are you well, *señor*?"

"Yes, why?"

The fellow seemed shaken.

"I—I was talking to you, *señor*, and you did not answer—why, you are as white as a ghost. What did you see?"

"A rope."

"A rope! *Mio Dios*, is that all? Do you lie half an hour stretched out looking at a rope!"

"Half an hour—" Lassiter stared at the Colombian, then realized, with a queer sensation, that he had fainted.

V



EZEKIEL BIRDSONG'S second man-sized miracle, sent a certain thrill of conviction down Lassiter's spine. Against all probabilities, the colporteur had found a method of descent. It began really to look as if circumstance molded itself around the fellow's convenience. This upset the Stendill agent in an odd manner.

Indeed, one may generalize and say that miracles are abhorrent to humanity at large. The inexplicable wears a sinister countenance. It is abhorrent because a human being is essentially a calculating creature, and a miracle connotes an incalculable power. All primitive religious rites are efforts to placate that power to regularity.

Later human sophistication added a moral tinge to religion. That is to say, Man promises to exercise stability of character if he can rely upon the Deity to use the same self control. The relation thus becomes contractual and both parties are bound. By dint of setting a good example before Heaven, modern clergymen have almost entirely suppressed the miraculous. They have regularized the pantheon—almost.

At any rate they have been so successful that a certain school of men has sprung up

who claim there never was and there never will be such a thing as a miracle. This, of course, is not only folly, it is ingratitude. They do not consider the trouble the sacerdots have taken to suppress these aberrations.

These scientists claim to believe in law. Smite a scientist with a miracle and he clings with a sort of pathetic trust, that it all happened through law—an unknown law, that would work *ex post facto* if ever discovered. This, surely, is madness. Laws are not allowed to work *ex post facto*; the United States Supreme Court is very clear on that point.

Scientists may justly be called a sect of men exercising blind faith and wilful disregard of the truth against all the cañons of reason. Yet among them may be found many lovable and child-like characters.

However, Lassiter was not a scientist. He had no such sustaining faith in a mythical law. He was a hard-headed financial agent, a promoter, an opportunist, who seized on the passing face of circumstance and made the most of it. He acknowledged a miracle grudgingly when he saw one.

And this was a miracle, this rope leading down into emptiness. In an effort at rational explanation, his brain attacked the problem with rat-like persistence. Even if the rope had been of the most ordinary human origin, the probability that the expedition would have stumbled upon it was remote—but for a horseman to bring a lariat, glue it to the cliff and disappear thus leaving Birdsong a mode of descent—

Lassiter stared around the vast burnt pass up which he had clambered; the enormous scarp of the volcano became tinged with a nightmarish quality.

Ezekiel Birdsong, on the other hand, was not even curious about what his comrades were investigating. He accepted it as a matter of fact. He simply said to the Colombian—

"Praise the Lord, Brother Nunes, you've found the way down." Then he walked to the edge and sized up the situation from a mechanical point of view and said—

"We'll have to tie loops on these bundles and slide 'em down. I can't climb back for every pack."

Nunes and Birdsong cut up the harness of the dead mules to make traveling loops for the packs. Lassiter sat and smoked and tried to Euclidize the problem before him.

The man who killed their mules escaped by means of this rope. He did not use a flying-machine. The theory of a wonderfully advanced civilization was probably false.

The assailant probably came up out of the abyss—with his horse. Killed the mules and retreated back into it—with his horse? Was dragging a dead mule to the abyss—what for? Was mule an article of diet down there—?

The Stendill agent flung away his cigar. He was getting nowhere.

At this moment Nunes looked up from his work on the loops.

"I don't see how Señor Lassiter will climb down if the precipice gives him the vertigo?"

Mere thought of such a climb threw the promotor into a sort of panic. He began casting about for objections.

"How'll we get out after we get in?"

"Ride out, *señor*, just as the man did who killed our mules."

"Ride up this precipice?"

"*Señor*, you know the man did not ride out up this cliff. He came out by some trail to attack us, and slid down the rope quickly because I was firing at him."

This was a more nearly reasonable explanation than Lassiter's own.

"How did he know we were just here?"

"No doubt he saw our camp-fire last night."

Lassiter thought up another objection.

"I'm afraid that rope won't hold us. It's merely glued to the stone. That's all—a little pat of glue."

"You know, Brother Lassiter, it's bound to hold one man up, if it will lower a *gaucho* and his horse."

"But look here, Birdsong, how under high heaven could a man and a horse get down that rope?"

"Just leave that mystery to God, Brother Lassiter, and accept his blessings—"

"Confound it, we're leaving too many mysteries—this thing's getting on my nerves—"

He stood staring into the emptiness of the crater, and presently added—

"No man on earth could lower a horse a hundred-and-fifty feet without a derrick!"

"But, *señor*, we watched him do it—Ehue. If I live to get back to Quito it will be a proud day when I can say that I, Dom Pedro Balthasar Nunes, saw the King of the

Jivaros pick up his stallion by the horn of the saddle and lower it a hundred-and-fifty feet into a volcano."

Lassiter walked over and ventured to lie down on his stomach and peep over the ledge again. Once more the height made him feel squeamish, but he held his eyes resolutely to their task. To lower a horse to the ledge beneath him, even a derrick would have failed. It would have been necessary to swing the animal inward about fifty feet, land it with precision on a ledge too narrow for a horse's footing. And after that—what went with the horse?

Nobody went down into the abyss with a horse. Yet something had attacked their camp and had escaped down this rope. It had appeared to be a man on horseback. It had used a lariat.

If not a human being, then some monster, some devil, some centaur spawned in the Andes came up with ropes, with a swift and inscrutable method of inflicting death—His head ached with this endless, futile reasoning that went in circles and got nowhere.



THE Stendill agent lay on his belly and stared around at the encircling cliffs. They slept in the brilliant sunshine like some vast amphitheater awaiting the first movement of its tragic games.

Nunes also appeared to be thinking hard. He tied the loops with a preoccupied air and sat with head tilted to one side, so the smoke of his cigaret would not trail up into his eye, long after the fire had gone out. With the tying of the last loop, he threw away the stub, arose and cleared his throat a trifle self-consciously.

"Well, señores, my mules are dead."

Both Americans looked up at this unnecessary announcement.

"Yes, Brother Nunes?" interrogated Birdsong.

"So I suppose—since my mules are dead why—" he spread his hands and drew down his lips, Latin fashion—"I suppose you have no further use for me."

Lassiter was discomfited—

"Sure we will! We want you to go along. We can easily arrange a new salary basis."

"The harvest is white, Brother Nunes, but the laborers are few."

The Colombian did not look at his protesting friends, but brushed at a speck on his greasy green velvet jacket—

"I am a muleteer, Señor Birdsong, not a priest."

"But look here," put in Lassiter, "we need a cook——"

"Nor a cook."

"Then somebody to help with the packs."

"I am a muleteer, Señor Lassiter, not a mule."

"You are not going to turn back on us, Brother Nunes?"

"Well—*si*, Señor Birdsong." And after a moment's hesitation—"It does no good to give away the little books."

"That rests with God, Brother Nunes."

"*Si—certainemente——*"

There came a pause. Nunes stood frowning at the deserted tent and the dead mules.

"There is no way to carry on the books, Señor Birdsong, without the mules."

"We'll find more mules ahead, God willing, Brother Nunes. If we don't, I'll carry them pack by pack a hundred yards at a time until I have spread the blessed Word clear into Brazil."

Nunes nodded solemnly.

"*Si—si*—I have heard of saints, Señor Birdsong—the *padre* has told me of the blessed saints, but—I am a muleteer."

"So you will turn back, Brother Nunes?"

"My mules are dead, Señor Birdsong."

The colporteur stood looking at the Colombian with his expressionless face.

"May the grace of God go with you, Brother Nunes, and may He keep watch over you! Now I'm going down, and I'll ask you to shoot down my packs, one by one, so I can get them off without tearing them."

"*Si, señor*, with all my heart!"

Nunes was evidently ashamed of himself, but when the muleteer cut himself off from the expedition, it occurred to Lassiter this was really the most sensible thing to do. The promoter was surprised he had not thought of it himself. So assuming a diplomatic manner he began:

"Look here, Birdsong, Nunes hasn't a bad idea. Why shouldn't all of us go back to Bujeos, fit out more mules and find a better route through the mountains?"

"He that putteth his hand to the plow and turneth back, Brother Lassiter——"

"Aw, here now——" the Stendill agent was annoyed at once at this Biblical quotation—"there's got to be some reason to this thing. We can go back, start over——"

"Brother Lassiter, do you suppose I'd let

my Lord and Master stretch a miraculous rope down this bottomless pit for me, and then refuse to go down it? Ain't that a sign my work's down there?"

The Stendill agent made a gesture of protest.

"Our mules are dead."

"He slew our mules to try our faith, Brother Lassiter."

"A man in my business," said the promoter drily, "doesn't work by faith—he goes after what's in sight."

The colporteur considered him.

"Does that mean you are deserting God's cause, too, Brother Lassiter?"

The word "deserting" annoyed the New Yorker. It seemed ill-chosen and unnecessarily harsh.

"I don't think it wise to go on."

"The wisdom of men is foolishness with God, Brother Lassiter."

"I don't mind saying your plan looks like bally foolishness to me—relaying a lot of Bibles into Brazil— It's mad!"

The colporteur's hard-molded face betrayed neither pique nor regret. Lassiter felt uncomfortable under the stare of his wide-open black eyes. After a moment he arose, walked over to his clothes pack and got out a package of letters.

"Let us part friends, Brother Lassiter," he said in his perpetual even-tempered drawl. "If we part now, I don't believe we'll ever see each other again on this earth, but I hope I'll meet you in——"

"Yes, yes," interposed the promoter uncomfortably.

"I hope you don't mind taking these letters back to Guayquill with you, Brother Lassiter, and posting them to Mollie—" He handed over the pack. "Let's see, the postage will be thirty-four cents—" He reached in his pocket and drew out a greasy purse and started to count the exact change.

The Stendill agent made an annoyed gesture.

"For ——'s sake, Birdsong, put up your money—I swear, you have the least sense of proportion—I don't want you to pay me thirty-four cents!"

Birdsong handed over the bundle without further words. The letters evidently had been written at different times. The top one bore the address in almost illegible pencil writing—

Mrs. Mollie Birdsong (saved and sanctified) Birdsong, Ark.

Birdsong shook hands with the two men in a wooden way. Then he asked Nunes to hold his feet and lower him until he could reach down and catch the rope below the glue.

The Stendill agent watched the feat. Notwithstanding all the strange things that had come up on this journey, the lowering of Birdsong over the cliff was one of the most fantastic.

The colporteur was short and had to be lowered a long way. The two men worked with the nonchalance of steeple jacks. The saddle-colored Colombian, holding the heels of the Arkansan, inched him farther and farther over the brink. Birdsong's head, shoulders, then his whole torso sank out of sight. By this time Nunes was braced heavily to prevent his man from plunging a mile straight down.

"A leetle furdur, Brother Nunes," drawled the colporteur.

"An inch more, *señor*," squeezed out the Colombian in a strained voice, "and you'll pull loose!"

"An inch more, Brother Nunes. God'll strengthen yore grip."

Lassiter stared as the straining muleteer gave another inch. Sweat stood out on his face. Prickling sensations went up and down Lassiter's back. He wondered if the glue would hold——

"All right, Brother Nunes," came the drawl.

Next moment Ezekiel Birdsong vanished head foremost over the ledge.

As he went out of sight, the question formed in Lassiter's mind, how was it possible for that other man, the slayer of the mules, to reach the rope in black darkness, in a moment's time, if it required such exertions from two such athletes—it would require monkeyish activity—monkeyish—a new possibility flickered before Lassiter. Was the crater a land of great anthropoid apes—an ape on horseback—an ape that could make these strange lariats——

Every explanation that Lassiter could conjure up held a delirious quality. The breath of the ice fields high overhead breathed down on the brooding man. He shivered.



WHEN the Bible packs had been shot down to the Arkansan, Balthasar and Lassiter remained on the cliff, their labors at colporteurage come to an end. Neither of them peered over the

cliff at the tiny ant-like figure toiling at the bundles far below them. But although he refused to look, Lassiter saw the little orange-striped man distinctly.

The men on the cliff avoided each other's eyes. Nunes rolled himself a shuck cigaret, then sat tapping and tapping it on his thumb nail. Lassiter drew out his pigskin case, and his fingers automatically went through the performance of choosing and applying a cigar to his lips, and lighting it. High overhead, about two-thirds of the height of the mountains, circled three or four black specks inspecting the motionless forms of the mules, and the equally motionless men.

The flavor of Lassiter's cigar reminded him of Birdsong's remark in Bryant Park that God did not like the odor of tobacco, that He preferred lilac, because Ezekiel and Mollie had been married under a lilac bush in Arkansas. How anthropomorphic!

The promoter visioned that marriage—the circuit rider in rusty black; the bride and groom with rustic finery concealing their vital bodies, while above and behind them glowed the lilac—a certain sense of futility, of emptiness, that comes at times to all unwed men, fell over the promoter.

Here he was, thirty-nine, sitting on this vast infernal lava drift, and there was not a person in the world to whom he could send letters, if he meditated plunging to destruction, except his resignation to M. L. N. Morrow. Perhaps he ought to have married one of the stenographers—

And he was soft, with a core-reaching softness that comes of thirteen years at paper work. He was so soft that he was allowing a fanatical colporteur to scramble down alone into an extinct volcano, along sinister ropes, toward a murderous agency that inflicted death in the most mysterious manner, that dragged dead mules and vanished down enormous cliffs at midnight—and this colporteur was a kind of friend, too; crude and annoying, but still a friend—so this was the knight errant, the adventurer, who, thirteen years ago had entered the Stendill offices seeking romance! This desalter.

Lassiter tossed away his cigar and arose.

"Balthasar," he said briskly, "I think I've made a business mistake. I've really got to go down—" he flipped his thumb toward the chasm—"after all. Pure business with me—"

The promoter hesitated. The saddle-

colored green jacket sat appraising him. After a moment Lassiter went on:

"I'm going to tell you why I came out here—I'm looking for locations to open supply depots for airships."

Balthasar nodded casually—

"Airships—"

"Yes, did you think I was a muleteer?"

"No, *absolumentement*—I wondered—"

"Well, that's it, and it just struck me that this crater would make a wonderful hangar and tourist depot. No heavy winds can strike a ship down there. The place is large enough to maneuver in. It is one of the most magnificent scenes to be found on earth—"

Balthasar nodded soberly:

"*Si, señor*, I have been thinking about Señor Birdsong, too. I am like you, *señor*; never before did Dom Pedro Balthasar Nunes desert his *camarado* for man or devil."

The promoter was faintly piqued when he saw the Colombian placed no credence in his account of the aviation project. However that was of no moment; Lassiter set about getting certain belongings of his down the rope; then he would rejoin his fellow adventurer. He shouted this news down to Birdsong. From far below he heard an indistinct—

"Praise the Lord."



NUNES contrived a sort of ship's ladder made out of harness to get the Stendill agent over the lip of the precipice to the rope. Then the Colombian put loops around Lassiter's chest and knees and looped him to the line as if he had been another bundle. He fixed leather guards for Lassiter's hands and showed him how to hold the rope. Lassiter backed down to the ladder, and by looking carefully at the pat of glue, kept his head.

Then he loosed the little companionway, and the glue and cliff rushed upward pulling a long silky rope through his hands. It seemed to Lassiter he was descending with the speed of a free fall. The little ledge sprung at him and struck him a jarring blow. He sat there, tied to his rope, jolted and somewhat stunned until Birdsong loosed him.

Nunes sailed down as gracefully as a swallow. He held the rope with his legs and one hand while he waved his sombrero with the other. Birdsong took occasion to

speaking a word of warning about "the filthy vanity of the flesh."

For some queer reason this stricture rather pleased both the friends. They were warm from the glow of self-sacrifice.

Birdsong had cached all his Bibles except one pack. Now he chose two more packs, a little one for Lassiter. The caching was simple, a mere piling of the books in the *cavetto* of this vast entablature that ringed a twenty-mile circumference.* There was no danger to the Bibles from rain or snow on account of the overhang.

Lassiter hefted his pack, got it on to his shoulder and moved tentatively down the ledge he had seen from the rim.

It was considerably wider than he had thought, and it caused him to renew his speculation concerning the possibility of landing a horse on its surface. The horse might have stuck, but the question arose why any one would want a horse in such a place. It did not seem to be a road down after all. Lassiter was forced to walk with his pack of Bibles on his outer shoulder, and to hold on to the cusps, or air pockets, in the outswEEP of lava above his head. The ledge dwindled to a shelf, and after forty or fifty yards, the shelf became a mere wrinkle in the face of the mile-high wall.

It occurred to Lassiter, as he inched along that this little fold could very well slant back up the *cavetto*, or turn straight down, or tail out to nothing in the vast concavity. He had assumed, since a rope led to it, that it was a path down. But as the way grew less and less practicable, he realized that he was down there, and he could never re-climb that hundred and fifty feet of rope and regain the rim.

His fingers grew tired of clinging to the abrasive lava, and sore. If the thing that attacked the camp were a monkey, how could three men with packs hope to duplicate its simian descent? A kind of amazement grew in Lassiter that he had followed Birdsong so rashly. On the heels of his amazement followed the repentance of a man who has committed a generous, impulsive act.

There is a *cliché* current in moralistic circles that no one ever regrets an unselfish act. In reality few deeds bring more bitter penitence. When a man acts selfishly and loses, he has the consolation of knowing he did the best he could for himself.

It was a mistake of the head, not of the heart. But when he acts charitably, he is nearly always motivated by some unaccustomed impulse that springs abruptly into action, moves him to some rash goodness, then cooling, leaves its victim to meditation and remorse.

So Lassiter crept along, abusing himself for having wandered into this vertical *cul de sac*, for marooning himself, on the face of a gigantic cliff. Birdsong on the other hand footed the wrinkle with entire self-confidence. And even that displeased Lassiter. Why had he followed such a goatish fellow? So profound was his disgust, it actually tickled his pneumogastric nerve into the first faint flutterings of nausea.

Around a turn in the precipice, sure enough, the unevenness they followed smoothed out, but at its end, another silken rope dropped to a thread-like walkway sixty or seventy feet below. It became evident, after all, they were following a hazardous, but defined trail down this mile of concavity.

The two men passed their packs to Birdsong, who shot them down, then the colporteur went; Nunes strapped on Lassiter's loops, and the promoter followed the missionary. After them came Nunes with a flourish.

Along this crease Lassiter was forced to lift his inner foot high and bend his knee outward before it had room to pass between his outer leg and the cliff. His Bible pack raked the wall and pressed him gently outward.

The Stendill agent kept his eyes rigidly on his footing, its ups and downs, and inequalities. He tried to receive no impression of the landscape far below him.

But he could not avoid sensing the illumination of his situation. The cliff that swung out over his head shut off all sunshine, but a strong greenish reflection beat up from the landscape below on the under side of the cliff. It poured up through his legs. He could see it shining under the brim of his sombrero.

No matter how rigidly he avoided seeing the landscape, that up-beating brilliance


* The circumference of the truncated volcano, Motobati, is twenty-two miles and one hundred and seventy yards at the rim, north and south, and three hundred yards less than that figure, east and west. At its base it is exactly twenty-four miles north and south; twenty-three, two hundred and thirty east and west. Mr. Lassiter's descriptions are necessarily impressionistic. This and other corrections are made in no spirit of captiousness, but merely to give any interested reader or traveler correct details.

registered the enormousness of his height in every nerve of his body. He could feel the chasm in the calves of his legs, along the inner sides of his arms, in his diaphragm. He could imagine himself falling—falling interminably down this abyss of light. His head felt queer.

He was not sure whether his fingers had found a cusp and were holding to the cliff. It came to him as a sort of discovery that he had stopped climbing and was standing unsteadily clinging to something. His hands and feet seemed detached, and a long way from him.

Then he heard Nunes and Birdsong shouting from vast distances. Birdsong's voice said:

"Take his pack, brother Nunes, and lean him right forward on mine—Lemme run my right arm through that loop—all right, careful now—If anything happens to us, brother Nunes, I hope I'll meet you up yonder where they ain't no more sorrow nor troub—"

 SYNCOPE produces no perceptible hiatus in the flow of consciousness, merely a jump, a dislocation, a picking up of ordered impressions out of nowhere.

When Lassiter regained his senses, he discovered first that the temperature had greatly increased. When he gained a little more concentration, he saw he was far down the side of the cliff, and the flat green at the bottom of the crater had resolved itself into the crests of trees with cultivated plots up near the northern half of the circle. The lake near the center of the vast amphitheater was of considerable size and lay beneath him, as blue as sapphire.

Birdsong arose from where he sat and was about to pick the promoter up again when he saw Lassiter's eyes were open.

"Are you all right?" he asked cordially.

The Stendill agent was thoroughly ashamed. He got himself weakly together.

"This is a — of a stroke I pulled," he said in a sick man's aspirate.

"You'll be O. K. pretty soon. Not so high here."

"Don't see how you ever got me down?"

"I never could have, Brother Lassiter, if the Lord hadn't strengthened my arm, bless His holy name!"

Lassiter looked up. He had evidently been shot down a tremendously long silken

rope that had landed him here. He was now at the top of the detritus that had fallen from the overhang and the going from there down was rough but not dangerous. He picked himself up presently and started shakily down through the huge boulders.

The three men disturbed an eagle nesting among the stones. The great bird launched itself into space with a whistling of feathers and flapped with slow strokes through the diamond-like sunshine toward the forest below. A few hundred feet down, they observed two young vicunas playing among the cliffs. Later, they stopped at a spring set with ferns and drank.

They were just climbing down into a subtropical country. After the bleak Andean scenery this kindliness of nature was as grateful as sunshine to beggars.

Lassiter's spirits began to revive. The commercial possibilities of the situation impressed him. Here were the temperature, the sunshine and glamour of the Riviera in an Alpine setting. Almost involuntarily he began projecting a tourist folder describing the place. He could see a clump of royal palms on the southern edge of the lake that would make a good picture.

On the front of his folder, he would have a picture in color showing the great reddish height of the volcano's wall with mountain peaks towering above its rim. The beauty and vastness of his surroundings went through his nerves like a cold wind, and yet at the same time he continued thinking of his brochure. He thought of it just as an artist thinks pictures when looking upon magnificence. It was his profession. He would call it, "See the Riviera in the Andes."

Lassiter surveyed the scene with a sort of exaltation. Out near that lake he would construct an enormous tourist hotel. There would be sailing and fishing on its waters. Golf links would ring its blue expanse. A motor drive would follow the sixty-mile circuit of the cliffs—

By this time they were approaching the sunshine that lay beyond the shadow of the overhang. Birdsong and Lassiter were abreast with Nunes a little distance ahead.

Birdsong walked so sturdily and was so much shorter than Lassiter that the promoter felt a return of shame that he had forced this little man to carry him down the cliff.

"How far did you pack me, Birdsong?" he asked after a moment.

"Not far, Brother Lassiter, from about right up there—" he pointed at a distant indeterminate spot in the towering cliffs—"to about there"—the top of the detritus.

The promoter stared up and shivered.

Birdsong noted the rigor and proceeded in his nasal drawl:

"Why don't you make ready to meet your God, Brother Lassiter? You're a sinner and you know it."

Lassiter looked around impatiently at the question. Birdsong continued:

"The only sure thing in life is death, Brother Lassiter. All of us has got to die. Your time may come before morning; hadn't you better get ready to meet your Maker?"

It annoyed Lassiter to have Birdsong talking of death. Death, whose black robes he had brushed half an hour ago, had again withdrawn itself to a respectful distance. In his heart, Lassiter felt that death would show a certain consideration for the worth and consequence of Charles Lassiter. Death would come at the end of a long and useful life. It was crude of Birdsong to bring up such a remote unpleasantness. So he changed the subject by asking—

"What is that droning sound, bees?"

Birdsong listened.

"It sounds like Mollie spinning."

They were rounding a huge fallen boulder. Nunes, who was in front, came to a stop just beyond the obstruction. With a gesture he drew the attention of his comrades.



ABOUT fifty feet down the slope, among a scarlet grouping of poinsettias stood a vast brown man. His back was to the trio.

His huge tun of a body had the hump-backed look characteristic of the exceedingly obese. He had no neck. A great head fitted down into an expanse of shoulders. His straight black hair was done up into a sort of knot on top of his head, and was decorated with a blue heron feather.

At first he seemed to wear no clothes, but as he made certain bending movements in his work, a breech clout became visible among the rolls of flesh about his hips and buttocks. The invisible clout, quipa-palm sandals and the feather formed his raiment.

He sweated prodigiously. Drops of

sweat trickled down his brown bulk as if he stood under an invisible fountain. In the brilliant sunshine these trickling drops gave him the appearance of being sequined with moving jewels. When he bent his arms, his elbows were but the gentlest of curves.

The colossus was engaged in an operation as delicate as he was gross. He was tying, or rather sticking, a long glistening cord from one flaming poinsettia to another. He had quite a network. Among the flowers droned dozens of humming birds. They made a blur of color moving about among the scarlet racemes.

While the men stared, one of these living jewels settled on a cord to rest. It stuck. The fat man waddled to it and picked off the little captive before it had time to gum its wings. He bit off its head. Then he pressed in his abdomen with a grunt, stooped and laid the beheaded bird in a basket. The basket glowed with other humming birds. It was half full. Its brilliancy was greater than that of jewels.

As the mammoth straightened, he caught a side glimpse of his audience. He came to a stand, took four paddling steps to turn his bulk and face his observers.

The eyes that regarded Lassiter were shining black slits in a rolling brown expanse. His jowls spread out over his chest. Yet with it all there was a poise, a dignity about the naked brown man as ponderous as his corpus.

Nunes removed his sombrero and began in his usual Quichua:

"*Señor*, you see before you three almsmen of God, not priests but honest thieves who come begging you to receive a little book of miraculous virtues. This holy book is good for aches, wounds, sores, scalds, boils, ulcers, carbuncles, the dengue, miasmus and the calentures. A tea made from its leaves removes the discomforts of pregnant women. Balky donkeys have been known to labor willingly when the dust off of this sacred volume was blown into their ears. A long drought was miraculously broken by——"

There was much more to Nunes' oration and the vast man heard it to the end with a mountain-like patience. When the Colombian came to a definite stop, the behemoth disregarded it all with a completeness that was droll and turned to Lassiter.

"Where did you men come from?" he asked in a queer sort of Quichua.

"From over the rim, *señor*," Lassiter made an upward gesture.

The colossus nodded—

"A man came over the rim once before, *señor*; no doubt he was a kinsman of yours."

Lassiter was amazed at this deduction and was about to answer when the giant proceeded in his purring baritone—

"He was pale, like you, a kinsman, no doubt—"

Again Lassiter started to demur, but the purr wandered on:

"No doubt he was your kinsman, and that you are now searching for your kinspeople here in Motobat. I am sorry to say, *señor*, you will find few of your kinspeople left. There is only your kinsman's great grandson, a great granddaughter, your eighth cousin; his third nephew once crossed, your seventh cousin twice removed; his great niece, Prymoxl, who, poor woman is now heavy and sad with her sixteenth child, and there is Prymoxl's daughter, Tilita, your seventh prima—if you will follow me, I will show them all to you and allow you to hold long conversations with your kinsfolk. Just follow me."

Here the vast man lifted his voice and called—

"Quiz-Quiz!"

A little hunchbacked Indian came out of a tangle of flowers, where he had evidently been asleep.

"Bring my basket."

Then, with a sort of elephantine courtesy he motioned the men to follow him and moved off through the poinsettias into a park of tropical trees.

This deluge of genealogy left Lassiter entirely at loss. It was too detailed for a sweeping denial. Then a thought crossed his mind that perhaps there was some covert reason why he would do well to enter this strange place as a kinsman. If they were the Jivaros, being kin might save him from being cooked. He could make nothing at all of it. Finally, he said tentatively, over the dripping brown shoulder, as a sort of straw to test the wind:

"I'm afraid I shan't have time to see so many kinsmen. Tomorrow, I go on east into Brazil."

The behemoth honored this communication by stopping dead still, making six rotating shuffles and facing the New Yorker.

"Go east?"

"Yes, *señor*."

"Out of Motobat?"

"Into Brazil, *señor*."

The colossus stood staring at Lassiter out of an impassive face. After several moments he said:

"You are indeed a kinsman of that ancient man who came into Motobat one-hundred-and-ninety-seven years ago. He too, desired to get out of Motobat. I have his whole story knotted into a quippus by my great grandfather, Gogoma, whose name I have the honor to bear."

Here he made a slight bulbous bow.

"My great grandfather gave your great grandfather thirty-three strands from the center of the web of the Sun in order that your great grandfather might lime eagles and fly out of Motobat. Your great grandfather limed eagles for five years. He was a joyful man during those years, so says the quippus, and when he captured an eagle, he would come to my great grandfather and say, 'Holy Gogoma, I am a happy mortal, I am another eagle nearer home.'

"In five years he caught twelve. Then he bade my grandfather adieu, took his eagles up to a high cliff and leaped off. But the eagles struggled in different directions, and your grandfather fell and was dashed to pieces. That is why he never returned to his people, and why you are here."

During this grotesque recital, the modern Gogoma panted heavily ahead, sweating profusely. Whether the whole anecdote were concocted for the occasion or not, Lassiter did not know, but it expressed an alarming state of fact—or fiction.

"Do you mean, *señor*," he asked blankly, "that there is no way out of Motobat?"

"There has not been, *señor*," purred the fat man casually, "since the priests carved the temple of the Sun. How warm it is today."

VI



IT REQUIRED ten, perhaps twelve, minutes for Gogoma's information that no man had ever escaped from Motobat really to register on Lassiter. A sort of shocked questioning formed in the New Yorker's mind. He felt he had not heard distinctly.

"No man ever got out?"

"Your kinsman failed, *señor*."

"And no one else tried?"

"No one."

Lassiter stared at the head set down in the immense shoulders. The promoter drew in a breath to ask if there were any way to communicate with New York. The query was too idle. He let the air out softly.

The ponderous brown man waddled on into a grove of immense trees. It was really a jungle partially cleared of undergrowth. In some places were park-like clearances canopied with leaves, hung with lianas and columned by those huge and grotesque boles into which trees contort when forced by the perpetual stimulus of an equatorial sun.

Here a paddlewood flung out radial buttresses twenty or thirty feet from the huge core of the tree. There a kind of palm piled up a series of swollen nodules. A banyan drove a hundred piles into the earth; a ceiba flung out a hollow circle of wood that preempted the space of a city lot. A hot, green smell filled the air, bird shrieks and the whine of insects. Gnats flew into Gogoma and drowned themselves.

For about an hour the great fleshy blob of a man led the way among the foot paths and at last paused before a huge tree so much like a baobab that Lassiter believed it to be one. The vegetation about the tree was worn smooth, and a kind of mud oven stood to one side. Red peppers and some big drying calabashes were hung up on the outside.

The place smelled of garlic. A fairly large hole, squared into a door by human labor led into the hollow trunk. Gogoma drummed on this entrance and waited. Came a shuffling from the interior and a moment later a baggy old woman appeared in the opening.

Gogoma made a gesture of salutation; the fat of his arm swayed and dripped.

"A kinsman of yours, Prymoxl. He has come to inquire about your grandfather, who was his great-grandfather."

"A kinsman—" She looked at Lassiter out of rather fine old eyes set in a sadly withered face.

"A cousin of yours, your *primo*."

"How did he get here?"

"Over the cliff, as your grandfather came, Prymoxl, and he already speaks of going back as your grandfather spoke—you can talk to him yourself. I commend him to your care."

The woman approached Lassiter curiously, and when she came quite close, he saw,

after all, she was not aged. She had the withered sagginess of women whom the tropic sun has forced into intense fruition, and swifter caducity. Indeed, in her decay, she retained traces of her fugitive blossoming.

Her eyes were finely set; her ears maintained their delicacy of design; her hair was more finely spun than that of the unmixed Indians. All this, no doubt, harked back to that Spanish ancestor who dropped by a miracle into Motobatl a hundred and fifty years ago, and today gave Lassiter a spurious claim to her kinship.

The old woman shrugged as Lassiter appraised her shapelessness.

"I am afraid, *señor*, you will find little of your blood in my veins."

"Kinship lies in the heart, *señora*," flattered the agent of the Stendill lines.

It pleased her.

"I am a Spaniard here." She tapped her withered breast. "Do you see in me the sister you seek, *primo* (cousin)?"

There was a kind of raillery in her cackle.

"I only hope I am not disappointing, *señora*."

The old crone quacked in laughter, came closer with that familiarity a sense of kinship lends, seized his arm and drew it about her waist.

"Behold us, Gogoma," she paraded in ironic gaiety, "brother and sister from a line of brave men and beautiful *señoras*!"

She shook with laughter at her own satire, and the American perceived with surprise that his shapeless companion was again about to become a mother.

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, Sister Prymoxl," quoted Birdsong with comforting intent.

The old baggage ceased laughing abruptly at this kindly meant apology for her ugliness.

"*Primo*, your *criado* (servant) is insolent."

Gogoma smoothed her temper over with a massive gesture.

"I begged you to preserve your wonderful beauty, Prymoxl, just as I ask you to preserve Tilita's loveliness. She is as like her beautiful grandmother as two tamarinds—"

He wagged his fat jowls and said in a different key:

"What I came for, *señora*, was to show you your kinsmen. I have them a sleeping place, and you can send their fare."

The crone turned with the duty of a kinswoman in her manner.

"Surely, *señores*, my daughter Tilita will bring your *cena* (supper)."

Lassiter began the usual protest; Prymoxl smothered it with the usual generosity. It was no trouble. The pot was boiling. Tilita would be curious to see her fair, tall kinsman. She would need some excuse for coming to see the *señores*. She was a pretty child, quite a woman—

"How many children have you, *señora*?"

She cast up her fine black eyes at the leaves and fell into a calculation. After some computing and silent nods of the head, she said—

"This will be my sixteenth, *señor*."

Lassiter did a little problem of his own. She had been married sixteen years. So she was thirty or thirty-one years old—this ancient creature, while he, Lassiter, her youthful kinsboy, was thirty-nine. There was something grotesque about it. To say something he asked—

"Do they all live with you, *señora*?"

"Only one is here in Motobatí, *primo*."

The agent dropped his small talk and became alert. "Where do the others live?"

"My others—my thirteen—" the hag glanced at Gogoma, then raised her eyes to the glitter of light high up in the baobab top—"why my fourteen little ones are in the sun, *primo*."

"The sun," repeated Lassiter blankly.

"*Si, primo*, my fourteen *niñas* (babies) are in the sun."

This queer statement left the promoter out of the small change of conversation. He couldn't get his mind back to trifles. Gogoma told the hag where he meant to bed his guests, and the four men presently made their adieus.



THE place Gogoma had in mind proved to be a paddlewood tree not far from Prymoxl's abode. Its radial buttresses looked like a dark cone spread under a cloud of verdure. Nearer they saw that thin partitions divided the space around the trunk into eight triangular cubicles. Gogoma evidently had passed word by the hunchback of the newcomers' arrival, for these cubicles were already furnished.

Mats of yellow nipa cloth were over the earthen floors. Jars carved out of the porous lava sat full of water, and a slow

transpiration kept the liquid chilled. Hammocks swung across the acute interior angles of the triangles.

Overhead, on top of the thin buttresses, stretched another roll of matting that could be loosed by pulling a string and would roll down and form a roof. Even a jar of flowers, on a little table, garnished each of these *al fresco* apartments. The whole ensemble held a Japanese simplicity and charm.

Gogoma introduced his guests to their compartments with much polite quivering on his part and many protests of satisfaction on theirs, and presently took himself off, looking like nothing so much as a huge jelly man that had spewed out of the taproot of some tree in this fantastic forest.

The Stendill agent chose the cubicle on the western side of the tree in order not to be awakened by the morning sun. Birdsong and Nunes piled their Bible packs in the colporteur's cubicle which lay toward the south.

As Lassiter made his little house-keeping arrangements, he could hear his companions talking through the thin partitions.

They were discussing whether Gogoma was the man who had killed their mules. The Colombian thought he was, and that he had said there was no way out of the crater in order to prove an alibi. Birdsong thought that Gogoma may have been miraculously translated to the rim to slay the mules in order to bring down the blessings of the gospel on Motobatí. Nunes cleared his throat at this. Birdsong inquired rather sharply if he doubted God could perform this miracle.

"No doubt He could," agreed the Colombian after a pause, "but it is easier for me to believe the old yellow bag's a liar. You see, Señor Birdsong," he added apologetically, "I've seen so many more liars than I have miracles."

"Then how did Gogoma get down that cliff right under our eyes, with his horse too?"

This rather empty discussion was interrupted by a girl coming through the forest with a platter balanced on her head. It sat her polished black hair without assistance from her hands, which were engaged with two jars. The thing most observable from a distance was the grace of her carriage, and a tight-fitting bodice of such luminous green that it seemed it must originate its own brilliance.

Closer, the Stendill agent saw that her face was of the vivid Spanish type, a sallow paleness against jet hair. Her cheek bones were rather high, and her lips were as scarlet and her eyes as black as her jacket was luminous.

Lassiter got up out of his hammock, knowing quite well it was Prymoxl's daughter, and annoyed with himself because he had forgot her name. He stood on the nipa mat, thinking hard, trying not to subject the girl to the slight inhospitality of having to make herself known, when Nunes came out of the southern cubicle making a deep bow.

"Señorita Tilita," he gushed, "allow me to present my fortunate comrades, Señor Don Carlos Lassiter, Señor Don Ezekiel Birdsong, and lastly, your servant, Don Pedro Porforio Balthasar Nunes, late muleteer of Quito, now by the grace of the Virgin, a fellow citizen of Motobat'l with yourself—allow me to relieve your burden."

He was quite close to her when he finished this harangue, replaced his sombrero and lifted the platter from her head.

The girl seemed rather abashed at such an ornate introduction. She said simply:

"I am Tilita—"

Then glancing from one to the other, she asked of Lassiter—

"Are you my kinsman, *señor*?"

Nunes laughed:

"No, *señorita*, this *caballero* has not a drop of Spanish blood in his veins. Now I am of Castillian descent, I am your real—"

It had been Lassiter's intention all along to disaffirm the extraordinary kinship thrust upon him by Gogoma. This seemed a most natural opportunity. Therefore, he rather surprized himself a moment later by bending over the girl's hand, pressing it warmly and saying—

"I cannot express how pleased I am to greet my *prima*."

When Birdsong was presented he greeted her as "sister Tilita," so the girl must have received a mixed idea of her relationship.



THE *mestizo* girl placed her platter on the little table in Lassiter's cubicle, and the three men sat on the nipa rug eastern fashion. The *plat du jour* was a baked fish garnished with some sort of transparent red berries of just the required sourness. Maize bread accompanied the fish. Around this were grouped tama-

rinds, kumquats, bread fruit, melons and a jar of cow-tree juice, that queer sap that reproduces exactly a very rich dairy milk.

It was Tilita's task to collect this sap for seven families living near Prymoxl's baobab. Bearing jars of *arbol de vaca* sap on her head had given the girl her splendid fluent walk.

"Where are the cow-trees?" inquired Lassiter.

"Down by the lake, *primo*, near the web of the sun."

"What is that?" inquired the promoter curiously.

"The place of sacrifice to the sun, *primo*."

Lassiter paused in peeling a tamarind with an odd sense of pleasure in the fact that this vivid girl worshiped the sun. The faith seemed to complement her shining green jacket which was made of feather-work.

Birdsong put down a calabash of cow-tree milk and straightened.

"Sister Tilita," he began in his solemn drawl, "I hope you do not offer sacrifices to the sun—"

The girl's dark eyes widened.

"*Señor*, I could not refuse my gifts and prayers to one who gives me life and food and warmth—"

Birdsong arose.

"My dear sister," he cried, "the true God has sent you a messenger—just wait a moment—" He turned and started for his own cubicle.

This turn of affairs disturbed Lassiter oddly. He got to his feet with a word of excuse to his hostess and followed the colporteur. He found him getting into his Bible packs. The Stendill agent stood by, a little at loss what he wanted to do. He cleared his throat and began uncertainly—

"Eh—Birdsong, don't you think we'd better go over this matter carefully before beginning your work?"

The colporteur looked up at him astonished.

"You!"

"Y-Yes, don't you think we'd better plan this carefully before starting our actual missionary campaign?"

"That's not what Philip told the Ethiopian, Brother Lassiter."

"Perhaps not. I—I don't exactly recall what Philip did tell the Ethiopian, but this Tilita is a girl. She might get a garbled account of what you tell her, spread it and prejudice a great many important persons

against the true religion to start with."

"The Good Book says a little child shall lead them, Brother Lassiter."

"Yes, yes, that may be true," agreed the promoter, annoyed by the ease with which Birdsong sniped him with these quotations, "but doesn't it say—lemme see, doesn't it say something about taking counsel together—" He looked appealingly to Birdsong to pilot him through unfamiliar waters.

The colporteur hesitated—

"Well, the Bible does say take ye counsel one with another—" he laid down his packs uncertainly—"I want to do what's right, Brother Lassiter."

The Stendill agent drew a breath of relief—

"I know you do, Birdsong—so do I," he added as an afterthought.

Charles Lassiter was surprized at the sudden opposition that had risen up in him against Birdsong's attack on the girl's faith. In reality, it was the artist in the promoter striving to prevent Birdsong from spoiling the picture. The thought of this warm, vivid girl kneeling to a tropical sun was a harmony in violent values. It warmed Lassiter's heart like a draft of rum.

As the two returned empty-handed to the dinner, Lassiter was saying a little hap-hazardly—

"We'll go over these plans carefully—this is a day of specialization—want to make a success—"

As they walked into the western cubicle, Nunes was showing the girl the withered spot on his neck and was saying:

"—and my dying thought, *señorita*, was that a beautiful *arbol-de-vaca* gatherer was stooping over me, lifting me, pressing me to her bosom with fiery kisses when my — *camarado* beat off the vampire with a club and saved my life!"

Tilita shivered and touched the withered spot with the tip of her finger.

"How fortunate for you, *señor*!"

"Fortunate! Fortunate!" cried Balthasar, leaning toward her. "*Señorita*, to continue such a dream of such a girl, I would give the vampire the last drop of my blood. I never forgave my *camarado* for waking me. I wish now some vampire—"

"Oh, *señor*!"

"Indeed I do!"

Tilita's face was flushed when the Ameri-

cans interrupted the *lêle-à-lêle*. A little later the girl took her platter and jars to go home. Balthasar sprang up and relieved her of all her burdens and went with her.

Lassiter watched them walk away with clear-cut distaste. It seemed odd that the girl did not see through the absurdity of Balthasar's tales and the grossness of his flattery. He attributed to the girl his own sensitiveness. In fact, a man always sees a reflection of his own qualities in any woman he admires. A man's love is about two-thirds self-esteem.


The satisfying dinner and the hush of noon sent the promoter back to his cubicle and into his hammock. Lassiter had been too long in South America not to have adopted the luxury of the siesta.

When he returned into the hammock he saw the hooks were of silver, and the ropes of the same silken colloidal material that was used by their assailant on the rim of the abyss. Another cord of the same stuff was attached to the bole of the tree. He was to use this to swing himself. He took it and began to oscillate gently.

He meant to think out the endless conundrums his situation imposed upon him. —Where were Prymoxl's fourteen children? —Had Gogoma or any of his men climbed up on the cliff to slay their mules? —All of this suggested there was a secret road out of Motobatl. —He was vaguely ashamed of having stopped Birdsong in his effort to proselyte Tilita. —He yawned. —If there were no escape from Motobatl, such a girl as Tilita would greatly ameliorate the—

Overhead stretched the green gloom of the paddlewood, through which penetrated a ray or two of noon-tide fulgor. He stared hazily up into the green caverns. The leaves nearest him were green-black against luminous yellow-greens farther aloft.

An insect hummed somewhere, and presently he saw it above him. It was a steely blue fly that poised so steadily he could see the articulations between its head and thorax and abdomen. It lowered itself very gently until it touched a tassel of the hammock spread over Lassiter's breast. Then it flashed upward with a zing, as if the devil of insects had pounced at it. This odd play aroused a sleepy curiosity in Lassiter's mind. This changed to a thought of Tilita kneeling to the sun. Next moment he slept.

 WHEN the promoter awoke, the sun was deep in the west. Weariness from his climb and a good dinner had kept him asleep longer than usual. He turned out briskly, with an odd sense of having some sort of engagement. He washed his head and neck in the water and arranged his tie by peering down at his reflection in the jar. He was meticulous with the tie. A little later he set out at a brisk stride toward old Prymoxl's baobab.

When he came in sight of the crone, she was sitting in front of her tree home with a mass of vicuna wool under her arm, spinning it into thread. She worked automatically with her eyes fixed in the direction of the declining sun. Lassiter was quite upon her before she observed his coming. Then she turned with a little start out of some reverie.

"Ah, *primo*," she mumbled, "it is you."

"Are you alone, *señora*?"

"Oh, no, *primo*, I was just watching my *niñas* go to rest."

"Your *niñas*?"

"My fourteen."

"I thought they had gone——"

"They are in the sun, *primo*." She fixed her eyes on the sunset again. "I know they are signaling to me now with their little hands."

As Lassiter listened, the old woman's faith translated itself into his sympathy. She was really watching her fourteen children sink to rest in a world of gold. They were as real to her as his own person standing beside her. He started to ask her how they had died when she continued:

"I am an old woman, *primo*, and my beauty has gone, but I had no heart. Sunrise and sunset meant nothing to me until my *niñas* were taken from me."

There came a pause. In his heart, Lassiter was surprized and moved at the naturalness and simplicity of the old crone's faith. It seemed neither strange nor exotic, but a most natural tenet for so simple a soul. Presently he inquired the way to the *arbol de vaca* forest. Prymoxl pointed the path toward the lake and returned to her maternal brooding on the sunset. Lassiter walked on quickly, and with a certain sense of buoyancy and pleasure that was unwanted.

Within half an hour the American had reached the lake, a considerable expanse of water with three or four reedy islands dot-

ting its surface. Far down the lake one of those reed boats, or *bolsas*, such as Lassiter had seen on Lake Titicaca, trailed a long golden "V" across the purple mirror. In the sunset, the naked torso of the fisherman looked like a little copper figure leaning back and forth at the oars.

Toward the extreme east, the lake narrowed to a stream and flowed apparently straight into the eastern escarpment of the crater.

The whole scene, the lake, the duplication in its depth of the encircling palisades, and the glittering peaks beyond, brought the promoter a keen sense of his own frustration. What an ironic end for his expedition—imprisoned by the magnificence he sought!

A point of royal palms extended from the forest to the water's edge some little distance down the beach, and Lassiter strolled toward them, attracted by the nervous beauty of the trees. When he rounded this point, he saw straight on ahead of him, carved in the face of the eastern rampart, the façade of an enormous temple.

He stood looking at it quite astounded. It was the *teocalla*, the temple of the sun, of which Gogoma had spoken. The whole mile-high cliff had been wrought into a vast columniation, crowned by an immense entablature. The natural stripe in the crater had been seized on by the architect and carved into a frieze of colossal proportions.

The interior of the cliff evidently had been hollowed by immense labors because the façade was penetrated by circular-rayed windows, thus introducing the sun motif into architecture. Between the vast columns arose a maze of heroic figures, foliage, geometrical designs in high relief. It reminded Lassiter of the triumphal sculpture on the heights of Baghistan in Persia, or the cavern temples of Elephanta in Bombay harbor. However, this was on a mightier scale than those heroic works.

Only when Lassiter moved toward the hypogeum did he fully realize its dimensions. He was more than a mile distant, yet the vast façade seemed to tower over his head. It arose in the sunset, a golden miracle. As he moved toward it, his utter inability to exploit this wonder in the currents of world travel filled him with gall. It sickened him. Right before his eyes stood the coup of all modern tourist agencies.

It meant millions, ease, luxury— The promoter flung out his arms in a kind of rage at his own helplessness— If he could just get one word to New York— He blew out his breath like a sick man and stood staring at the vast temple with a sagging face.*



PRESENTLY he became aware that some one was walking down the sand behind him. He turned and saw Balthasar Nunes and Tilita leading a young vicuna lamb by a cord. The girl evidently had seen Lassiter's gesture and heard his groan, for she called in a concerned voice—

"Primo, what is the matter?"

Only after several moments did the promoter collect himself sufficiently to reply that it was nothing.

Tilita came over to him with sympathy in her eyes and the curve of her lips:

"Señor, I see the sunset brings sadness to you also. No doubt you have loved ones there—"

She glanced toward the setting sun.

"I was thinking—" And then he grew ashamed of the covetousness of his thoughts and added—

"Are you going to the temple?"

"Si, señor."

"I will go with you."

Tilita assented by a movement and turned to Nunes for the leading string of the young vicuna.

The Colombian stared, puzzled, at the maneuver.

"But, *señorita*, I thought you said no man could accompany you to the sacrifice!"

Tilita looked at Nunes surprized:

"I said only a kinsman, *señor*. He is my primo."

"Primo! Primo!" cried Balthazar with an amazed face. "Why he is not half so much a primo as I!"

"But he is! My *madre* said so!"

Nunes turned to the promoter.

"Señor, you are not going to poach on

my preserves in an *affair del corazon* on such a pretext as being a primo!"

"My dear fellow," said Lassiter in English, and rather amused, "I am doing nothing. I am simply standing here—"

"Yes, but you permit it!" snapped the Colombian in the same tongue.

"But she wouldn't have let you go with her anyway," smiled Lassiter.

"You can tell her you are not her primo!"

"And cause a *señorita* to lead her goat for herself? Do you think I am so unmanly?" Lassiter reached for the leading string, and it was surrendered him.

The Colombian whirled on his heel.

"Voy, señor, you insult me before my *inamorata*—and call yourself *mi amigo! Mio Dios!* What sort of a friend is it that seizes—that seduces your *querida! Carrambal!*"

Lassiter preserved a straight face with an effort.

"What are we going to do with this lamb, primo?" With a faint accent on the "*primo*" for Balthasar's benefit.

"It is to feed my brothers and sisters, primo."

"Oh—the fourteen?"

"Si, primo," said the girl solemnly.

The fitness of the girl's faith gave Lassiter a queer but intense satisfaction. It seemed as decorative mentally, as, physically, were the curves of her body or her fluent step. Nunes and his irritation faded from the promoter's mind.

They followed the sandy beach with the vicuna making little runs past them and being drawn up short by the cord. A small headland of stone broke the swing of the sand and projected out into the lake three or four hundred yards ahead of them. A stony, irregular path led from one of the entrances of the *teocalla* down to this headland.

This headland seemed to be Tilita's objective. When, presently, they walked up the little rise, Lassiter saw that it extended two arms out into the water and formed a small stony bay. Stretched over the bay, the New Yorker was sharply surprized to see a kind of fireman's circular net.

The whole inlet of water was not more than twenty-five feet wide. The net was moored to the rocks that formed a rough crescent about the bay. The supporting guys were glued to the stones and converged to a center like the spokes of a wheel.

* As a set-off to Mr. Lassiter's impressionistic eulogy of the great Motobati *teocalla*, the reader should consult Murray's *Guide to Motoball*, pp. 167-201; Barrao's *Arquitectura de los Incas*, and Boisson's *L'anti-quité de Motoball*: Greystone Pub. Co., London.

The learned Frenchman very justly says, "While in actual dimensions the work of these last Incans greatly exceeds in magnitude any of the primitives known to man, yet their baroque style can not be mentioned in the same breath with the restraint and dignity of the rock-cut tombs of Persepolis and Nimrud, or the tomb of Midas at Dogan-Lu."

Upon these guys were laid the woof of the net or hammock, circling round and round in ever increasing whorls. A certain geometrical precision about the hammock impressed Lassiter that great care had gone into its construction.

"Is that the web of the sun, *prima?*" asked the man curiously.

"*Si, primo.*" (Yes, cousin.)

"Now what do we do?"

"When the sun dips behind the cliff, *primo*, toss the lamb into the hammock."

"Won't it fall out?"

"No, it will stick."

Then Lassiter observed the glister of bird-lime on the central cords of the netting, similar to Gogoma's humming-bird trap. Such elaborate paraphernalia interested Lassiter. Then he turned to the girl and with a certain feeling of intimacy, began to delve into the intricacies of her curious faith.

"How will your brothers and sisters get the lamb, *prima?*"

"The boat of the sun will swim under the lake and take my offering," explained the girl simply.

Lassiter continued his attentive attitude and the girl continued.



"YOU see, during the day, the sun climbs over the heavens on a great cord, such as you see in the web. By night it slides down behind Motobatí and sails under this lake and comes out in the *teocalla*. Now if my brothers and sisters in the sun are hungry, our sacrifice will vanish as the sun passes under the lake; but if they are not hungry, it will remain and the priests will eat it because it is holy meat."

The New Yorker repressed a smile at this naïve method of replenishing the sacerdotal table.

"When you toss the lamb in, *primo,*" went on the girl gravely, "kneel at once by me with your back to the hammock and your face to the sun and pray."

"Yes, *señorita.*"

"That is very important," she assured, large-eyed. "If you should see the god come out in the net, you would die."

"Yes, *prima.*"

Tilita looked at the dipping sun.

"Now, *primo*—"

And she knelt on the stones.

The American picked up the lamb with

a queer sensation, at this, the first religious rite he had ever performed in his life. The pet vicuña lay in his arms and began nuzzling at his poncho after the fashion of lambs.

The little animal's trust sent a faint repugnance along his nerves at sacrificing it to Gogoma's table. He glanced around. The watery smell of the lake at evening, the deep orange note of the sunset over cliffs and peaks and temple, the kneeling girl, brought a sort of wistful melting into Lassiter's breast.

There was no other human creature in sight except the small dark figure of Nunes far up the sand. They were alone. As the sun disappeared, Lassiter turned and tossed the lamb into the center of the net. The lime gripped it in a twisted attitude and held it immovable. It rested quietly, without a struggle. The man turned and knelt at Tilita's side.

He could faintly hear the girl whispering her vesper prayer. Her face wore the ecstatic expression that he had seen on the faces of Catholic girls in the Venezuelan cathedrals.

At that moment he heard a ripple in the water behind him. Surprise and curiosity pulled him about when Tilita's hands caught his face, covered his eyes and held his head against her shoulder. Her palms were small and firm and smelled of milk.

She held him in a flattering captivity for ten or fifteen seconds. Then came another rippling behind them. She loosed him with a shuddering breath. Her face was chalky against her black hair.

"Oh, my dear cousin," she shivered, "how you frightened me! If you had moved, Pachacamac would have snatched you from me!"

Lassiter stared at the bloodless face. He arose a little nervously and helped her up. Then he looked into the web of the sun. It was empty. The lamb was gone.

When he raised his eyes, he saw darkness covered the mighty face of the *teocalla*, but out of its rayed windows poured a brilliancy as if the sinking sun had risen again inside the cliff. A veritable fountain of light beat outward from the interior. The round windows glared down on the man and the woman in the falling darkness. In a few minutes the light winked out as swiftly as it had sprung into being.

VII



THE disappearance of the lamb from the net registered a shock on the promoter's nerves which he did not realize until night. Then, however, it asserted itself in his dreams and troubled his sleep.

The moment he lost consciousness he fancied himself back at the lakeside with the vicuña in his arms ready to throw it into the net. Every detail was precisely as he had experienced it during the evening, except, just when he was ready to throw, the little vicuña changed into Tilita.

He was under some horrible compulsion to fling the girl into the net. She was clinging to him, beseeching. He could feel her form pressed against him, her milky palm against his face; then just as he swung her into destruction, he awoke with a violent start, gasping for breath, with a hammering heart and a sweating body.

Time after time he was startled awake by this nightmare. The night seemed endless. At his last awakening, he saw, with a great sense of relief, the first silver of dawn whitening the jungle. It came over him like a balm, for he knew if he fell asleep again, it would be dreamless.

The dull silver strengthened in the airy chambers of the paddlewood. Dew, dripping from the leaves made a faint wide pattering. A belated firefly glowed and paled against the dark bole of the tree. The promoter lay looking at the fly, its delicate yellow fire on the verge of sending him to sleep again when gradually he became aware that some one had entered his cubicle.

Without looking he knew it was Birdsong. The colporteur retained his rustic habit of rising during the latter hours of the night, to what purpose Lassiter never could discover.

Lassiter closed his eyes and wooed the sleep the firefly had promised, but the knowledge that Birdsong was standing beside him frustrated his inhospitable design. Finally, without looking or moving he said—

"Well?"

"Are you awake, Brother Lassiter?"

"I haven't slept all night."

The promoter opened his eyes.

The colporteur had a pack of Bibles on his back evidently just ready to set off on his crusade.

"J'want anything?" slurred the New Yorker at last.

The colporteur fumbled in his packs, moved uneasily and at last blurted out.

"You got more education than I have, Brother Lassiter——"

The promoter let that pass.

"But I've read the Bible more than you have."

"You certainly have," yawned Lassiter.

"And you could easily—er—quite easily—ah—fall into sin and not know it, Brother Lassiter."

"Sin!" The promoter opened his eyes fully and looked at the colporteur with a faint amusement in them.

"Yes, sir, sin," he repeated doggedly.

"What kind of sin?"

"You bent your knee to Bal."

The promoter lifted his head.

"To—what?"

"To Bal."

"Birdsong, what are you driving at?"

The revivalist plucked up his determination.

"God have mercy on you, Brother Lassiter, have you fell into sin unbeknownst?"

"But when—where—what——"

"Why, yestiddy evening!" cried the colporteur. "I saw you kneeling beside that idolatrous woman down yonder by the lake joining her in her filthy and idolatrous worship of Bal!"

The promoter stared at the stocky little man with a growing amusement.

"Why that didn't amount to anything, Birdsong—I didn't pray."

"But you bent the knee."

The definite article before "knee" increased Lassiter's mirth.

"Yes, I bent the knee," he admitted in faint burlesque.

"Was it in mawkery?"

"Well—no. It wasn't exactly in mockery either."

Birdsong shook his head.

"Brother Lassiter, to bend the knee to Bal is strickly against God's holy Word. I hope God'll touch your heart, Brother Lassiter——"

From this the colporteur glided into an invocation:

"Oh, Lord, do touch his hard heart! Look down on this idolatrous and adulterous man, Lord, and smite him with conviction. He don't know you, Lord, but he has let a strange woman lead him to the altar of Bal.

Save him, God! Save Brother Lassiter from consorting with idolatrous women! Saye him from his filthy lusts! Save——”

All this was in true backwood revival style where the praying heaps every form of abuse and contumely on the audience, but the promoter was not accustomed to any such blanket pleas for pardon. He sat up sharply.

“Look here,” he interrupted. “Where do you get all that stuff about filthy lusts? A prayer is a prayer, but——”

The colporteur came out of his sing-song and looked steadily at his friend.

“Didn’t you kneel down by her side because she was a woman, Brother Lassiter?”

The promoter was angry.

“I did it just as I would with any sincere worshiper, Birdsong. I hope I am broad-minded enough in my views not to allow creed or——”

“Brother Lassiter,” drawled the colporteur unruffled, “I’ve been praying to Jesus Christ for your soul every morning and night for over a month and a half. You’ve seen me lots of times, but you never have knelt down by my side——”

The promoter reached up and scratched his jaw. “Well—I—I overlooked it——”

“No, you didn’t, Brother Lassiter.”

This ushered in an uncomfortable pause. During the pause, Lassiter pondered which would most become his dignity, to answer this reflection with quiet denial, or with that restrained sarcasm, of which Lassiter, in common with most other men, considered himself a master, or simply to say nothing. Further reflection convinced him there was little to say.

It was Birdsong who began again.

“Do you know what old Nehemiah said about Solomon in his blessed thirteenth chapter and twenty-eighth verse, Brother Lassiter?”

“No, —— it, I don’t!” snapped the promoter, forming an instant prejudice against the remarks of old Nehemiah on any subject whatever.

“Well, he said there was no king like Solomon, who was beloved of God; nevertheless did outlandish women cause him to sin.”

The colporteur stopped flatly on the word “sin.”

“So that’s what he said!”

“That’s what he said, Brother Lassiter,” responded the Arkansan unruffled, “and if

your intentions are honorable, Brother Lassiter, as I hope they be, I will quote you the next verse, which may fit your case to a tiddyumptum.

“In the next verse old Nehemiah says, ‘Hearken ye unto this great evil!’” Here Birdsong shook his finger at the promoter. “‘Hearken ye unto this great evil, ye, who transgress against our God in marrying strange wives’ — strange wives — hearken ye — Are you harking, Brother Lassiter, if that fits you any better?”

To Lassiter’s relief, Birdsong took down his finger and adjusted his Bible packs.

“Well, I got to be going now,” he said in a casual tone, “You think them things over, Brother Lassiter. It’s for your good I’m saying ’em. You see, Brother Lassiter, we’ve got souls—both of us. If it wasn’t for that, I’d fade your sin and go you one better, Brother Lassiter.”

And the colporteur moved away with his pack on his back and presently was lost in the faint morning light.



FOR several minutes the promoter sat rather stunned at this onslaught.

It was so utterly undeserved. Then the humor of the thing seeped in to him and he began smiling; presently the phrase “strange wives” revisited his imagination.

One of the distinctive differences between the Orient and the Occident, between pessimism and optimism, is that to one the word “strange” connotes something sinister; to the other, something glamorous.

There is little doubt that when the prophet Nehemiah wrote his celebrated thirteen, twenty-eight, and nine, which Birdsong had so ably quoted, he was far from meaning any flattery when he used the word “*nokri*,” “strange wives.”

To his Hebrew hearers, steeped in oriental pessimism, it would have carried no commendation. But the spirit of peoples change with their geography, and this changing spirit is very likely to breathe new connotations into one and the same word.

In Lassiter’s ears, the expression, “strange wives” carried a certain lure. So he sat musing in his hammock and repeated aloud two or three times—“a strange woman—a strange wife—an idolatrous woman——” and the phrases spread colorful intentions before the dreamer. They suggested bizarre wooings, gorgeous and barbaric ceremonies and exotic satisfactions—a strange wife——”

He fancied himself marrying Tilita in the vast baroque temple of the sun. He could see himself kneeling with her before a golden altar. Above them stood the vast naked Gogoma, dripping with sweat—and anointing with perfume—the beat of barbaric music—then their return to one of these vast trees—the slow luxury of day and night—the springing up of children about them—many children, such as old Prymoxl bore, and of whom, only one remained.

But theirs would not fade. They would be gay, laughing, half arboreal little cherubs and they, in their turn, would come and kneel in the temple of the sun—and so life would go on.

The flare of color suggested by this vision shivered through the poet.

He arose briskly, shook off his absurd reverie and dressed himself, for it was now plain day.

The thought of Prymoxl's children somehow suggested the web of the sun. In the more rational daylight, the promoter made a shrewd guess as to the function of the net. It was merely a priestly device for collecting tithes and meats for the sacerdotal table.

The mysterious disappearance of the lamb, which had given him a turn the preceding evening, no doubt was nothing more than some priestly hocus-pocus. He decided that he would walk down and look more closely into the mechanism of the contrivance.

The promoter set out lakeward and after some thirty minutes' brisk walking reached the lake and the stony inlet where the net was stretched. The agent clambered down the stones for a more detailed inspection of the hammock.

It was an ingeniously made contrivance. The whorl of limed cords in the center were a marvelous mechanism. Each strand was made of two hollow tubes twisted together and filled with a viscous limy material. This limy liquid oozed out through the colloidal tubes and constantly renewed their sticky surfaces. Instead of drying in the hot sunshine, the net grew stickier and stickier.

Lassiter took a bamboo from a bit of jetsam at the edge of the lake, then went back and touched it to this viscid center. When he tried to pull it away the strands untwisted and resisted his pull with the flexibility of limed rubber. If a captive

drew out one foot, it would surely thrust the other into a deeper viscosity.

It was such a powerful and devilish gin that Lassiter's surprize expanded to wonderment. This was far too much craft to expend on a mere priestly device for gathering alms. It held sinister implications.

The priests of the sun would not construct a club to kill a midge. This net was far beyond the strength of a vicuna lamb, or a vicuna—the thing would have held a tiger. Such preparations suggested a far grimmer purpose than holding a lamb for Gogoma's table.

The promoter stepped gingerly on the first transverse cord, and then from cord to cord toward the limed center. He stood, balancing himself, speculating on the thing. No doubt the hot climate developed this contrivance. Meat for the temple must be kept alive or it would spoil. So this extraordinary fabrication had been evolved by necessity, that fecund mother of all inventions. The same ingenuity turned toward aviation would have flown over the encircling cliffs to freedom!

The water over which the net was suspended was a profound blue and appeared of great depth. It was full of shadows and half forms. Amid the reflections of rocks and palms and distant palisades, he saw the slow sway of undergrowth; then presently made out a sort of pale blob that protruded from some subaqueous cavern. He shaded his eyes with his hands and peered down.

It was confused with the reflection of a solitary cloud. At last he decided he would thrust his bamboo down and punch the thing. It might be the clew to the whole contrivance. He was addressing his pole for this purpose when a voice on the bank called to him sharply to desist.



SURPRIZE brought Lassiter up, and he saw a tall raw-boned brown man with the priestly heron feather in his hair. Besides, he was armed with a long pole with an obsidian blade on it, something like an elongated scythe. Coiled around his arm was a great loop of the colloidal rope used in the net.

The fellow looked as if he might have been sent down from the temple to mow down the trespasser on the net, so Lassiter got ashore and asked what was the matter.

"It is dangerous there, *señor*."

"What's the danger?"

The fellow drew down an ironic mouth—
"One does not care to rush into the bright mansions of the sun, before it is absolutely necessary, *señor*."

A certain cynicism about this remark caused the promoter to look him over carefully.

"I am Jagala," said the man, "a priest and a rope gatherer—" he shook the coil on his arm—"and the holy Gogoma told me of you, a Señor Lassiter."

The promoter acknowledged the introduction.

"A rope gatherer?"

"*Si, señor*."

"Don't you mean a rope maker?"

"I make this rope?" Jagala had a long face, and now the lift of his pointed brows gave him a Mephistophelean look.

"Well, some one makes it!" cried Lassiter.

"No one makes it, *señor*. I gather it from the cliffs."

"How does it come there?" exclaimed the promoter.

Jagala shrugged.

"It is the gift of the sun, *señor*. When the sun climbs down the side of the cliff into the lake—"

"I've heard all that."

"If you don't believe it, *señor*," defended the rope gatherer, "just look at this rope and tell me if any man can make such a rope!"

Lassiter took the rope and reperused it for the hundredth time.

"You really mean to tell me you find this cordage hanging from the cliffs?"

"*Si, señor*."

"And you have no idea how it came there?"

"*Señor*," snapped the priest, "I have told you twice that the sun in its climb down the sides of the cliff leaves this rope as a gift to his people!"

The promoter nodded, "Yes, yes," and stood studying the rope, with an occasional glance at the web of the sun.

As he stood looking first at one, then at the other, he saw something slowly rising through the water beneath the net. The priest also saw it for he walked down to the margin of the lake, thrust his pole and hook under the net and drew the object to him. He swung it out on the stones. To Lassiter's amazement, it was the very lamb

he had thrown into the net on the preceding evening.

The little creature was stiff and water soaked. Its legs were bound tightly to its body by several turns of the mysterious rope. Jagala clipped one end of this binding cord with his obsidian blade, tossed the little animal back into the water, and unwound the cord by letting the cadaver revolve in the water. As he salvaged the line, he wound it on his arm with the rest of his findings.

When Jagala finished, the promoter took his bamboo and fished the dead body out on the stones. Jagala strolled on back toward the temple. After the carcass had dried out somewhat, Lassiter settled himself for a careful study of the dead animal.

Its throat was not cut. The region over the heart where butchers stick their kills was intact. A painstaking search over its whole body failed to discover the slightest blemish to its skin. Its death duplicated the slaying of the pack mules on the cliff. Apparently the priestly contrivance could destroy at a distance—or else some athletic fellow like Jagala climbed the cliff.

The promoter was considering which of these clues he would pursue when he started to arise, and pressed down on the cadaver to lift himself. His hand crushed into the body as if it had been an empty sack. Lassiter drew out his knife and opened the vicuna.

The viscera of the little creature seemed dried up. Its heart was a blackish knot; its entrails might have been tripe. If some one had turned a tinner's blow-pipe into the lamb, it would have produced the same desiccated appearance. It was another link in the chain of enigmas that surrounded existence in Motobat.

By the time Lassiter finished his inspection it was high noon. Profound silence and a fulgor of sunlight lay over lake and temple. The vicuna was spread open before Lassiter, and the brilliance of the light upon its withered entrails accented its sinister significance.

A vast loneliness fell over the promoter. With all these grim riddles accumulating about him, there was not one person in all the crater from whom he could expect even a sensible discussion of the matter.

Nunes was superstitious, and besides had been rather grum toward the promoter since their little tiff over Tilita. Birdsong solved

every riddle by a fiat straight out of the blue. If the priests knew, they retained their knowledge; and as for old Prymoxl and other ordinary Indians, they were in as hopeless a welter of theological explanation as Birdsong.

And Lassiter's own brain had come to a complete balk; yet he had a profound feeling that it was because he had no human contact by which he could orientate himself. He felt, in his heart, if he had just an ordinary man-on-the-street, picked up off of Broadway, a man who would think straight, whose brain did not skid at once into absurdities—he would solve it.

Moreover the solution must be hovering almost in sight. One isolated conundrum may prove insoluble, but half a dozen, all focusing on the same point, are mutually explanatory and suggestive. He was amazed; he was chagrined that the web of the sun lay under his eyes as inscrutable as the first time he ever saw it.

PRESENTLY into the promoter's self disgust crept the murmur of distant voices. They were just audible and for several minutes did not interrupt Lassiter's brooding. Indeed, this slight human touch somehow helped the agent to his first tenable theory. It was exceedingly simple. An underground tunnel led from temple to net. The priests had watched him from the window and had timed the thrusting out of the vicuña under his eyes to help mystify him. It was the simplest of ruses; worthy of an intelligence such as Jagala's.

Then he attacked the problem of the peculiar condition of the lamb, but just here the voices he had heard became so loud as to distract his thought. It was a man and a woman quarreling. He became attentive and could distinguish the edged tilts of a woman's soprano, and the peculiar monotonous buzzing of a man's baritone which mark the sexes in anger.

He looked over the crest of the little knoll and presently saw two figures emerge from the palms coming toward the beach. The woman carried a calabash. Both were gesticulating angrily. Their voices reared at each other.

Suddenly the man seized her free hand. The woman screamed, tried to wrench loose, when her companion caught her in his arms and began one of those dodging struggles

to kiss her. She dropped the calabash, clawed at his face and twisted her head from side to side to escape his lips.

Had Lassiter been a younger man, he would have rushed to the assistance of assaulted beauty, but he was wise. He watched the love fight with the amused tolerance of a bachelor of thirty-nine. The grand passion often takes the form of blows and resisted kisses. The result of these hostilities would be another tree commandeered for housekeeping in Motobat!— At that instant Lassiter saw the girl was Tilita.

The promoter leaped to his feet with a kind of spasm in his chest. Next instant he was in full charge down the slope and up the sand. The glare of the sun went red. The man's back was to him, but Tilita saw him and screamed—

"Primol!"

Next moment the fellow whirled. For an instant, Lassiter saw Balthasar staring at him with bloodless face. The Colombian made a grab for his pistol. Tilita's arms prevented. Lassiter jumped in with a furious swing at the brown man's chin. Nunes yelled and dodged. Next moment the two men went down on the sand together.

The promoter fell on top, but his attack was ineffective from its very fury. He grabbed the Colombian's ears and jounced his head against the ground. He loosed a hand to seize the wretch's mustache and yank his mouth into monstrous shapes. He mauled at the eyes, trying to smash the yellow countenance.

The muleteer used only one hand for defense; with the other he grappled under his hip for his automatic. He wriggled and pitched and sputtered Spanish oaths. He almost threw Lassiter over his head by heaving up his stomach, but the promoter lunging and lurching, pounded the saddle-colored face with every blow raising a splotch.

It was a mere spurt of fighting, but Lassiter tired as swiftly as he fought. He was soft to the core. In two minutes his head was roaring and his mouth so full of slime he could hardly breathe. He seemed in a furnace. Sweat ceased to flow on him. He was burning up.

Suddenly he saw Balthasar was drawing his automatic. He grabbed the muleteer's elbow. During the pause, Nunes caught Lassiter's right. They came to a straining impasse. The promoter stared into

Balthasar's bleeding face. Gradually the yellow man's pistol arm strained out. Lassiter flung all his failing force against it, but the muleteer's sweaty skin slipped through his hold. A panic seized Lassiter.

He suddenly realized he would be killed. In three minutes he would have his brains blown out over a half-breed girl's kiss! It was absurd! He tried to pant out some words through his slimy mouth, to reason before—he clenched desperately—

"Nunes——"

At that moment, a third hand was laid on Balthasar's pistol arm and stopped it absolutely.

"Here, gentlemen," called a cheerful voice. "Have you forgot what the Good Book says, 'How good it is for brethren to dwell together in unity?' Git up, brother, leave off this scuffling and rejoice with me!"

As Birdsong's fresh strength had complete control of the situation, both men let go. The colporteur lifted Lassiter by one arm and got him to his feet, then he picked up the maltreated muleteer, keeping one hand casually on the pistol arm. He brushed aside the whole affair as trivial.

"Brothers, rejoice with me!" he cried. "I have garnered three souls into the blessed fold of the master!"

The promoter stared unsteadily at the jubilant colporteur. The blood pounded in Lassiter's ears and his head was splitting. It was all he could do to keep from falling.

The Colombian spat out a mouthful of blood, touched his raw face, but said with a certain return of his habitual courtesy—

"*Señor*, that is good news!"

"Glorious news!" pæaned the colporteur. "And it was all accomplished, my dear Brother Balthasar, in the twinkling of an eye, through a miracle!"

"A miracle," repeated Nunes, starting toward the lake to wash out his mouth.

"Yes, a miracle, with the aid of ordinary parlor matches! I never saw a more divine manifestation. I'll ask you two brothers now, to give me all the matches you happen to have in your pockets."

Both the fighters fished out their lucifers and handed them over. Then Lassiter got unsteadily to the girl where she stood clinging to a palm. Every nerve in the man jangled. He could not make heads or tails of what Birdsong was saying.

"Come on, Tilita—come on!"

Before he could say more, he spat out rosy saliva.

The two started off aimlessly through the jungle. Birdsong and Nunes walked on down to the lake. Birdsong was drawling away with great enthusiasm about his miracle.

VIII



PRESENTLY the promoter drew on Tilita's arm and moderated what was a flight down to a walk. He could not hurry so fast; his head was aching too badly. The girl slowed up trembling and glanced back through the jungle. Her breast rose and fell sharply under her green bodice.

"H-He is a terrible man, *primo*," she panted.

Lassiter glanced down at his companion. The struggle with Nunes had left red welts on her neck and breast and cheeks. One of her ears was crimson where his beard had scraped. Such tangibility of her outrage renewed Lassiter's fury. The pressure in his aching head increased.

"I—I ought to have killed him!" he gasped remorsefully. "I—I wonder why I didn't kill him——"

He tried to think. The fight was blurred in his mind. He plodded on trying to reconstruct it, trying to discover why he had failed to kill the Colombian.

Tilita moved at his side through splotches of shade and sunshine. Presently it gave her the appearance of moving under some some sort of luminous tapestry that rose and fell with her gliding progress. She gave Lassiter brief side glances and presently said, quite unexpectedly—

"I mean, *primo*, that Señor Birdsong is a terrible man."

Lassiter looked around, quite taken aback.

"Birdsong!"

"*Si*, I hate him!" she accented the word with a narrowing of her black eyes.

"And not Nunes!"

"O-h—no——"

She shrugged and evidently dismissed the Colombian's case with slight concern.

"After what he's done——"

"The poor fellow could not help himself."

"Couldn't help himself!"

"He *said* he couldn't help himself, *primo*——" defensively.

A foolish feeling came over Lassiter. Apparently he had been attempting murder over a foible, over mere bad manners—such as the Stendill typists used when they buffed their finger-nails in public. Lassiter felt trifled with.

"Tilita," he said grimly, "if you didn't object to his—"

"I *did* object, and fight every time!" defended the girl sharply.

The number of times implied left Lassiter blank and simple. Tilita proceeded with some embarrassment:

"He said he couldn't help—er—the way he did. He said every time he looked at me, a—a sort of—well, I—I don't know, *primo*, I don't understand it— He said a sort of wild fury—"

"Oh, good Lord!" groaned the promoter, "has he been telling you that sort of stuff—and you believing it—"

"Well, *primo*, he *acted* as if it were true—" Her voice tilted up in a clear note on "true," which signified that while she deferred to Lassiter's wider experience, to the best of her knowledge and belief, an amorous mania certainly seized Dom Pedro Balthasar Nunes when he came into her presence.

Lassiter was utterly disgusted, and yet somehow obscurely pleased with her innocent stupidity.

"Tilita," he remonstrated, "you can't believe what a man says—no pretty girl can. Good Lord, I can hear him now, buzzing away, working himself up, explaining how he has been dreaming, yearning, burning for a beautiful *arbol-de-vaca* gatherer, and how the sight of you causes a madness to rush upon him—then I suppose he made a dive at you for a strangle hold—"

A chastened nodding affirmed these deductions.

"Well, take it from me, Tilita, no man ever gets so far but what he can turn around and walk off if he wants to—just turn around and walk off—like that—" he snapped his fingers—"they can all do it—if they want to. The trouble is, getting them to want to—"

Here he broke off. His head throbbed too badly for talk. He kicked out of his path a scarlet and purple orchid which he could have sold for a thousand or two to the New York greenhouses as an unknown variety.

Tilita rolled her black eyes around at him,

and he was unable to tell whether his counsel had impressed her or not. It irritated him.

"Look here," he burst out, "how many times has he—no—don't answer that— It's none of my affair— We'll drop the subject."

"Two times."

Lassiter drew an easier breath. It eased his head somewhat. But nevertheless he wondered why women would listen to such piffle. It was amazing in a girl of Tilita's intelligence! It seemed to him that the most inexperienced female could penetrate so impudent an—

He became aware that the girl was smiling to herself. The whiteness of her teeth lit up her black eyes and scarlet lips in a lovely way. The smile somehow vexed the dignified Stendill agent.

"Tilita," he suggested, "it seems to me after what has occurred—"

She became serious again—almost serious.

The girl had a fruity look. Her skin absorbed sunlight like a ripe pear and then glowed gently at the New Yorker. She looked as if she had soaked from the jungle its fulgor, its intensity of color, its pressure of vitality. Undoubtedly man is the modest sex. Men spend much cleverness in trying to veil their women, and women spend much more cleverness in getting unveiled.

Lassiter fumbled through his clothing and found a pin; he handed it to her.

"Your jacket is torn," he suggested briefly.

The girl took the pin, tested its strength curiously. Evidently it was the first she had ever seen.

"How small and strong it is," she admired.

"Fasten your jacket with it," said the promoter.

The man studied the fall of light through the jungle while she fixed the rent.

"How old are you, Tilita?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Thirteen, *primo*."

Lassiter was thunderstruck.

"Thirteen!"

"*Si, primo*— Why?"

Lassiter was constrained to make another calculation in regard to old Prymoxl's age. She was probably not over twenty-six or eight.

"I just wanted to know. You seem older."

The girl looked at him anxiously.

"Do I look old?"

"No-o—not the way you mean—you look developed."

"Oh—y-es—" She colored faintly.

Lassiter appraised her, unable to understand it. How was it possible in thirteen little years to fashion such a creature? Then, too, her swift flowering foretold her swift decay. He thought of Prymoxl—that rag. Only a little time ago she must have been as beautiful as her daughter. The promoter pursued his queer calculations. When he himself was thirteen years old, the ancient Prymoxl was born.

When he was studying Spanish in the Stendill offices, Tilita came into this world. Now here he was at thirty-nine on a love stroll with the girl through the jungle—The thought gave him a queer feeling of being a sort of human mountain and watching flowers bloom and perish on its slopes.

It cast a sort of pathos over the girl. Her beauty would be so brief. It was the grace of a swallow sailing against the evening sky, that vanished in the making. Lassiter looked at her and wondered if she were up north would the higher latitudes preserve her volatile loveliness?

He thought of Maine—a Maine coast cottage in the Summer, and—say the Carolinas for the Winter. If he were married to Tilita and could escape this human hot-house of Motobat, he would domicile her in—say Charleston—one of those old mansions down on the Battery. A sun-worshiper in the remote conservatism of Charleston's Battery!

The incongruity of such an idea set the promoter laughing. The girl was surprized and wanted to know the reason. The promoter could not hope to explain his mental meanderings to the girl, so he asked—

"How came you to be so angry at Birdsong, Tilita?"



THE smile on the girl's face vanished abruptly, and Lassiter discovered that her countenance had that extraordinary quality of seeming to look its best in whatever mood it wore. About one woman out of three or four million possesses this charm.

"He—but he is your friend, *primo*."

"In a way."

"Then let's not talk of it."

A grotesque suspicion filtered through Lassiter's brain.

"You don't mean that he—and Nunes both——"

"Oh no-o-o!" cried Tilita, outraged at the thought of Birdsong caressing her. "I know what he said to you this morning."

The promoter stared at her.

"To me?" he asked blankly.

Tilita's lips quivered.

"He was talking about me——"

The promoter looked at the girl trying to think back to the morning.

"Señor Nunes told me," she added.

Just then Lassiter recalled Birdsong's Biblical discussion.

"Oh—that——"

The girl nodded sharply, searching his face.

"That was nothing."

"He said evil things against me," declared Tilita hotly. "He said you were wicked even to know me."

From her wrath it was evident that Nunes had informed her fully of the conversation and all its implications. It embarrassed the promoter.

"Why did you let him say such things of me?" she pressed.

"Really, Tilita, you—you can't very well tell what a man's going to say till he says it——"

"You let him talk on."

"I couldn't stop him."

"Why?"

"He's a sort of preacher."

"A preacher——"

"Yes, a—a preacher is a man you pay to say disagreeable things; you can't take offense at a fellow, you know, when he's on his job."

Lassiter hoped this little skit would make her smile. Instead she grew angrier, opened her eyes wider and seemed taller.

"If you pay him to say such things of me," she declared passionately, "you believe him!"

"Why, I don't pay him!" cried the promoter astonished.

"You said you did."

Lassiter was upset.

"Believe what? I was talking in a general way about preachers, a sort of joke. What do I believe? What are you talking about?"

"You believe it!" cried the girl curiously moved. "He said I was a strange woman—a wicked woman—that your God forbid our marriage—that I would be a strange wife—strange—strange— What is there *strange*, about me?"

She flung out her arms in a passion of self-revelation. She was on the verge of sobbing. The pin he had given her pulled loose.

The word "marriage" on Tilita's lips set up a surprizing emotional resonance in the white man. It amazed him that she held the same thought that he had just indulged. A sudden hammering filled his chest.

"Why—Tilita—" he said shakenly, "I— I don't think you are strange——"

"But that man said——"

"It makes no difference——" His voice was cut off by a sort of stricture in his throat. "My little *prima*," he said huskily. He reached out toward her. At the touch of her flesh, a sort of languor flowed up his arms and filled his body.

The notion that she was "strange," that any atom of her was "strange" to him! With his lips to her ear, he whispered shakily—

"Tilita, *carissima*, the blood in my heart is not more——"

He wavered into silence as her warmth and softness filled his arms. He could feel her trembling. He, himself, was so shaken he could hardly stand. The smell of milk on her lips and throat was headier than wine.

"I was so afraid I would be a strange wife——"

Heaven only knew what construction she placed upon the word "strange."

They remained clinging to each other. To stand became a burden. By common impulse they moved across to a tree.

By glancing down the man could see her black lashes outlined against her cheek and the irregular lift and fall of her bosom. A sun splotch fell through a rent in her bodice and filled it with half lights.

Because he meant to marry her, Lassiter fumbled, trying to close the tear. At touch of her a great weakness seized him. It beat in his chest, it throbbed in his neck, it swam in his brain. And yet it was a kind of rest.



HOW long Lassiter experienced this transfiguration, he never knew. It was a moment; it was an eternity. It had no connection with Time. Time was a pipe organ chanting its processional and its recessional, but in its midst, Time ceased.

It came vaguely to Lassiter that such

ecstasy was the goal of life; that all life was like an ocean and this wave of divinity moved through its floods. For an instant it lifted all men and all women to its iridescent crest. Then passed on. Other droplets would take their places, but that man and that woman would never again know ecstasy.

Yet the wave was perpetual. It rode on and on through existence, leaping at the sky, shot with rainbows, scattering jewels, a delirious immortality, composed of instants, a Buddha of bliss, composed of fading entities.

Very slowly the jungle reformed about the lovers. The trees dripped with light. The silhouette of a monkey passed across their luminous background. A little bird flung out a triumphant phrase over the capture of a worm.

The promoter watched the little gladiator idly. It was a striped bird with a yellow breast. Lassiter had seen such songsters in Central Park. Such tiny creatures drift from the arctic to the tropics with the shifting seasons, a migration of jewels.

His musing brought the promoter a notion of tying a message to one of these birds and communicating with the outside world. If he should send numbers of these messages out year after year, surely some one would salvage one and learn the strange secret of Motobatl.

Tilita moved as if conscious that their two thought currents had separated one from the other. She sat up, drew a little way from Lassiter, blinked her eyes and smiled at him as if aroused from a deep sleep. They began talking of their marriage. The girl told Lassiter of the wedding ceremony in Motobatl. When they were married, Lassiter would have to run after her and catch her against the combined efforts of all her kinspeople.

"All of them?"

"Oh, yes," she nodded brightly.

"Will they try hard to stop me?"

Tilita broke into the most decorative laughter.

"Indeed they will! Oh, it's exciting! You'll get knocks with sticks and stones; you'll be tripped——" Then she noticed his lengthening face and comforted him, "Oh, it will make no difference to you, *carissima*. You will feel nothing. No groom does. Once a man came out with his head all

bloody, but he felt nothing at all—absolutely nothing. He said he felt nothing at all—and you are so tall and strong—”

Tilita evidently anticipated a great social triumph.

But unfortunately, nature had bestowed upon Lassiter the dignity of a Portuguese. That was why he had succeeded so well in South America. He realized the respect due from one human being to another. Temperamentally he was akin to the inhabitants of Rio Janeiro, who never touch each other even in crowded streets.

Now the thought of marriage with this orchid of a girl in the hurly burly of football utterly dismayed the South American agent. He sat looking at her.

“Can’t we live together without that, Tilita, somehow?”

The girl’s eyes widened. A slow crimson flooded her face and throat.

“Live together without being married—” she gasped.

She made a movement, evidently about to jump up and run away. Lassiter reached for her with a sharp fear of loss. She was as offended as an American girl at an improper proposal.

“Wait—wait—hold on—it’s all right—any sort of marriage, slapstick or grand opera—”

“Then what made you say—” began Tilita about to weep.

The promoter was afraid now even to criticise the form.

“Oh—I—of course I didn’t mean—”

The girl searched his face and at last asked slowly—

“Perhaps Señor Birdsong will not allow you to marry me?”

The promoter broke into unaccustomed expletives. Birdsong had nothing to do with him. Nothing whatever. Birdsong was simply a fellow traveler and a fanatic and a fool—

“But don’t you pay him?”

No, no, that was a sort of joke—just a little joke to put her in a good humor. When they were married, and living in a tree, she would have to watch these little bursts of wit and take no offense. He was quite a wag—in his way.

In saying all this Lassiter was under the impression he was steering away from dangerous ground into the broad safe highway of humor. Tilita sat nodding faintly. At last she asked—

“But doesn’t his God forbid our marriage?”

Lassiter broke off his discourse on humor. He thought over the girl’s question. He really didn’t know whether the Bible forbade his marriage with Tilita or not. He supposed Birdsong was right. The fellow seemed to know a lot about the Book.

“Why—perhaps it does, Tilita—but—”

“Isn’t his God your God?”

For some time the promoter sat considering how to answer her. He did not want to tell her of his fundamental lack of all religious faith; that God was to him a mere apprehension of a Something behind this cinema of existence, and that he felt this only occasionally; the greater part of the time he sensed only vacuity. It was no faith at all. It held no concrete creed. It was merely a vague emotion directed toward nothing.

But Lassiter was far from admitting such nihilism to Tilita. The artist in him loved a pretty faith in a woman. Somehow it harmonized with a woman’s affection and sweetness like a flower in her hair. He looked upon an agnostic woman as he did upon the bearded lady. It made no difference to him what faith they confessed; Christianity, Mohammedanism, the pretty ancestor worship of Shintoism, or the worship of the Sun—anything with a lilt to it.

When Tilita repeated her question he came to himself with a little start.

“To tell you the truth, Tilita,” he said by way of preface to his divarication, “in America, my country, the women attend to—er—believing in God and—er—all that sort of thing. It’s our national custom.”

The girl stared at him in amazement.

“The women!”

“Yes, the men, of course—back ’em up in it, and—ah—pay the bills—”

Tilita was amazed at such a custom. She leaned forward and sank her chin in the corolla of her fingers. In this pretty attitude she thought it over, staring away through the sun-soaked jungle.

“I wish it were that way in Motobatí,” she mused wistfully, “then we women would keep all our babies.”

She was so alluring, sitting thus, musing on her religion, and on their children yet to be, that a great melting filled Lassiter. He was constrained to fondle her again.

He felt that he understood her perfectly.

IX



IT IS a misfortune, indeed, almost a calamity for the province of biographical literature, that Charles Lassiter's passion for the Indian girl estranged him from Ezekiel Birdsong. This estrangement unfitted Lassiter for writing a sympathetic, or even a veridical account of that remarkable man.

Many other Birdsong writers have attempted to reconstruct Birdsong's amazing career in Motobat. The Motobat Indians have been interviewed. Birdsong's letters to his wife have been studied and analyzed. Every *genre* of journal, from the stridor of the New York yellows to the basso profundo of the English quarterlies, has devoted fascicles to what may be termed the Birdsong myth.

But of Birdsong himself, little is known save those harsh and unsympathetic glimpses given of him in Lassiter's narrative.* That the very story of his greatness should be confided to so adverse a pen is the final touch of irony in Ezekiel Birdsong's life.

Of the beginnings of Birdsong's bold undertaking, Lassiter knew, or expressed nothing more than that it disturbed his morning sleep in the paddlewood.

He was annoyed by the revivalistic hymns; and during the last days of the promoter's co-tenancy with the revivalist Birdsong's sunrise prayer-meetings forced Lassiter to abandon late morning hours in his hammock.

The promoter formed the unwilling habit of rising betimes. Then he would walk down to the *arbol-de-vaca* forest where he would meet Tilita. The two would then spend the remainder of the day in agreeable courtship, and in liming birds and starting them with messages to civilization begging rescue.

One morning curiosity sent Lassiter down to one of the meetings to see what Birdsong and his converts were doing. The sunrise services were held under a banyan

not far from the paddlewood. Lassiter joined the little congregation and sat down on one of the rude seats that had been extemporized between the boles. Some dozen Indians were there, and Birdsong stood on a dais with a pulpit beside him.

The whole service was as near a reproduction of the ordinary sunrise meeting as Birdsong could contrive. The colporteur had chosen a "topic" and cognate texts. Nunes translated these into Quichau from Birdsong's shocking Spanish. The Indians understood Quichua because this tongue is only a slight variant of the old Incan. After all this twisting through three languages, the new converts would arise and repeat their memory verses.

Lassiter, who possessed exceptional linguistic facility, could follow the text through all their metamorphoses, and he heard some extraordinary renderings of King James' version.

Birdsong himself, standing on his dais, sweated under this mental struggle. Only his black oily hair remained unruffled. The left half and top of his hair had an ebony finish; over his right eye and ear, it broke into a gleaming scroll of large polished curls, greatly aided by a cow-lick over the right temple. It was the tonsure of a rustic arbiter elegantiorum, and Lassiter was always amazed to see such hair on such an indomitable fellow.

Prolonged Ecuadorian sunshine had burned the colporteur quite as dark as Nunes, but it was the reddish brown of an Anglo-Saxon, not the yellowish brown of a native. During the services, three transverse wrinkles in the thick skin of Birdsong's forehead filled with sweat. This reflected the foliage of the banyan above and drew three bright green streaks above and parallel with his eye brows.

The colporteur exhorted his hearers to quit their sins and to give their hearts to God. He talked of God's desires, preferences and predilections with convincing intimacy. He had the power of a prestidigitator to visualize the impalpable.

His absolute conviction that there was a power above him, looking down on him, with whom he was in immediately personal touch, at last produced an illusion of reality even in Lassiter. The promoter received a very concrete impression that up in the banyan above them sat a very irascible old gentleman, who watched the worshippers

*Interested readers may consult any digest of current periodicals, under the caption, "Birdsong" or "Motobat." For fuller accounts, see "Life of Ezekiel Birdsong," by Ralph Fenhope; Weatherall Printing Co., Glasgow; Bishop Langhorne's "Myth or Man," Starnes & Sykes, Richmond, Va.; "The Great End," by Humphrey Daniels, Pelton Pub. Co., Boston; and Philip Werner's more imaginative and therefore more nearly correct account, "The Man of Motobat," The Collingwood Press, N. Y. For complete bibliography, consult card index of Congressional Library. This lists everything except a few pamphlets privately printed in Assamese.

closely, reading their thoughts, and who was on the *qui vive* for their every little fault, which he meant to punish terrifically.

At the conclusion of the address, Birdsong called upon his hearers to testify to the experiences through which they had passed in gaining salvation for their souls, or, as Birdsong expressed it, how did they know they had made their calling and election sure?

They arose one at a time. Some had seen visions, others had dreamed dreams. One fisherman avouched that a fish in his net had spoken to him. Birdsong greeted each new testimonial with fervent ejaculations and vigorous shakes of the hand.

In the midst of these felicitations, a middle-aged Indian arose and said that his wife would soon bear him a baby, his eighth child. He wanted to know what he should do in order that it should go to Heaven, instead of to the Sun.

Birdsong advised him to bring it to the banyan for baptism.

"Then what must I do with it, Brother Birdsong?"

"Train it to serve God and keep His commandments."

The Indian, whose name was Chacala, seemed astonished.

"Train it here in Motobat!"

"Certainly!"

"My eighth child?"

"God numbers the hairs of your head, brother Chacala," said Birdsong, "but I never heard of him numbering a man's children, or caring what number it was. He loves 'em all."

Chacala sprang up with a glowing face.

"Then I may keep my child! Your God lets me keep my child! Praise God! You will excuse me, Brother Birdsong, I must hurry to my wife! She may be delivered of a boy while I sit here talking! Praise God!"

And to Lassiter's amazement, Chacala turned and ran from the banyan, going northward toward the lake.



CHACALA'S explosiveness ended the meeting. The colporteur and Nunes joined Lassiter and walked with him out of the banyan. Birdsong said Nunes had just joined his congregation and was doing a great work as an interrupter. He was anxious that Lassiter should be reconciled to Balthasar in order

to aid the muleteer in his Christian life. The colporteur interlarded this with many quotations such as how good it is for brethren to dwell together in unity, blessed is the peacemaker, etc., etc.

So accordingly the two men shook hands and became friends.

The Colombian began an apology for his violence on Tilita.

"My dear Brother Carlos, as a Christian man, awakened to a new sense of duty, I crave your pardon for——"

Lassiter assured him he had it.

"And the pardon of the *hermosa señora*——"

He had that, too; Lassiter granted it.

"Certainly the devil of temptation is wrapped up in a woman, Brother Carlos," moralized Nunes.

Lassiter agreed briefly.

"You have felt it, Brother Carlos, you understand——"

The promoter made no reply.

"So you can excuse me more readily if I went beside myself—*Mios Dios!* I swear to you, my brother, the mere memory of it——" He gave a little shiver, checked himself, swallowed. "But that is all over now, put behind me by the help of the Blessed Virgin."

"Redeemer," prompted Birdsong.

"*Si, si,*" nodded Balthasar, "a man—you cold *Norte Americanos.*"

"Amen," drawled Birdsong fervently.

"God has taken away your filthy lusts, brother Nunes."

"That's all over now; let's drop it," suggested Lassiter.

"*Si,* it's all over now—now I spend my time on my knees praying—praying——" He fell to shivering violently. "Ugh, Brother Carlos, it's cold work, I tell you, on your knees praying to the Blessed Virgin when you know another man holds your *querida* wrapped in his arms, kissing—hugging—fondling—and she kissing back—*Mios Dios*—It's chilly, chilly work!"

Balthasar's teeth chattered even in the heat of the sun.

The men walked on in silence for a few paces, then Lassiter said, to fill the void:

"Birdsong, you are having nice weather for your meetings."

The colporteur was beginning to thank the Lord for the weather when Nunes interrupted:

"My dear brother Carlos, may I ask as

a friend, when you are going to marry Tilita, or—do you mean to marry her at all?”

A slight perspiration broke out on the promoter's face. He went on resolutely with his conversation with Birdsong.

“However, you must look out for a bit of bad weather, Birdsong. The ‘*inviernillo*’ comes soon, ‘little winter’ right in the middle of the dry season.”

“Because if—if you are not going to marry Tilita,” shivered Nunes, staring at the mold under their feet, “my dear brother Carlos, I think it is quite wrong—*Mios Dios*, I know it is quite wrong to be nuzzling her like that—quite wrong—”

“Confound it!” cried Lassiter, wheeling on the muleteer. “Yes, I’m going to marry Tilita—I asked you to drop the subject!”

“I—I didn’t intend—”

“But you do!”

“*Perdon!*”

“You are pardoned, but — it, quit talking!”

Another silence ensued with Birdsong trudging along, staring at the promoter.

“Brother Lassiter! *Brother* Lassiter, is it possible that you are going to form a sacred union with this idolatrous—”

The promoter sweated that Nunes had set Birdsong off on one of his endless harangues.

“Yes,” he said briefly.

“After I read you old Nehemiah’s blessed thirteenth—”

“I have nothing to do with Nehemiah. Never heard of him till you dug up a lot of insults and told me he—”

“Insults! Out of the blessed gospels! Why, Brother Lassiter, that is a book of sweetness and peace, of love and affection—”

The promoter remained silent, abusing himself for ever going to Birdsong’s meeting. He might have known it would lead to some unpleasantness.

The colporteur walked on, studying the New Yorker with his expressionless eyes.

“Do you realize, Brother Lassiter, that you are an old man and she is a child? You are an older man than I am, Brother Lassiter.”

“Maybe I am in years,” agreed Lassiter with poor temper, “but what’s age here in the tropics—a man’s as old as he feels.”

“And while you are too old for her now,” pursued Birdsong relentlessly, “do you

realize, Brother Lassiter, in a few years she’ll be too old for you?”

This last reasoning revived Lassiter’s specter of old Prymoxl, a hopeless ancient at twenty-six or thereabout. What would he do when this luscious girl fell into decay?

“Of course I’ve thought about it,” frowned the promoter.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Marry her, I told you.”

“And live with her, Brother Lassiter, when she is old and flabby and brown, like her mammy?”

The words set Lassiter to probing his own intentions, and he found unflattering connotations in their depths. He wanted to defend himself before Birdsong. An argument floated to the surface showing the inevitability of polygamy in tropical countries. He thought of the Latin-Americans and the code which they accept. The whole question was a matter of geography—of where a man lived on the surface of the earth—

Now—he did love Tilita—but old Prymoxl—if he could only get Tilita up North away from this heat. Then he realized that Birdsong could appreciate none of these arguments. He knew nothing of geography, of ethnology—a hard-headed bigoted rustic—

“Birdsong,” he said, “I must decline to discuss so delicate a topic with any man.”

The trio walked on in silence over the deep leaf mold toward the lake. Nunes shivered occasionally in the hot sunshine. Birdsong moved stolidly with his expressionless face. Lassiter was sweating. He was ashamed and sad, filled with that queer, bitter flavor of unfaithfulness in the midst of passion, of the hopelessness of permanency, of the sneer on the face of Time.

Presently the colporteur drawled—

“Brother Lassiter, have you tried to lead her into the blessed fold?”

The question set off Nunes into discordant laughter.

“*Si, si*, Brother Birdsong, he’s been wrestling—”

He broke off shivering.

“No, I haven’t,” snapped the promoter.

“Why haven’t you, brother?”

“Because—well, simply because I didn’t want to.”

“You don’t want to!”

“No.”

Birdsong stared.

“Do you want me and Brother Nunes to go and labor with her?”

"No!" cried the promoter. "No, I don't! I want her just as she is. She has a pretty faith. It—it suits her!"

"Her faith suits her!" the colporteur broke into unwonted temper. "You say it suits her—it's graceful and pretty! That's while *she's* graceful and pretty!"

"Here, Birdsong, don't go too far!"

"But when *she's* wrinkled and old, it won't be so graceful and pretty," rushed on the revivalist angrily, "then you'll take up with a new girl, Mr. Lassiter! You know you will! I know you will! You ain't got no set principles about neither women nor God! You don't care what happens s'long as it panders to the filthy lusts of your——"

A flush ran over Lassiter.

"Birdsong, you say another word——"

"I'll say this," drawled Birdsong, grimly, "I'm going to do what I can for the pore child's salvation. I don't believe you believe *she's* got no soul!"

"Confound you, I don't know and I don't care!" cried Lassiter beside himself. "She'll never pay any attention to you! She despises you already!"

A look of horror came over Birdsong's face.

"Mr. Lassiter, I do believe you're Anti-Christ! My God, I do believe you are! That Beast that sets on the hill with the blood of saints dripping from its jaws! You are Dagon! You're the Brute with Seven Horns! You'll swoller this girl, God ha' mercy! I'll pray God to rescue her from you! Oh, merciful God!"

The colporteur's earnestness was terrific. His face grayish. He turned from Lassiter as if from contamination, and veered north-west to circle around the lake to his missionary field. Nunes followed his teacher, shivering.



THE promoter continued to the *arbol de vaca* forest furiously angry. The colporteur had insulted him with fantastic insults, and yet, strangely enough, Lassiter found himself in a defensive mood. Birdsong's reference to the Beast, the Dragon and Dagon disturbed Lassiter. They were disturbing anathemas.

Lassiter had never attended a country revival in the southern United States. He was not aware what a treasury of maledictions the rustic evangelist heaps upon the slightest object of his disapproval.

Besides being unnerved at Birdsong's

vituperation, Lassiter thought twice as to what effect the colporteur's prayers might have on the girl. Experience had taught him that the colporteur did not pray in vain. Certainly all the answers Birdsong had received were purely by chance, but it was chance grown into a sort of habit.

The thought of losing Tilita went through Lassiter's midriff with a sort of spasm of pain. He began to sweat. He was so agitated that he hurried on down to the cow-tree forest, peering through the boles long before he could possibly have seen her.

His anxiety mounted as each empty aisle stretched itself before his eyes. At last, with very real relief, he saw her standing near the tapped trees, drawing the milk into the calabashes. She was leaning this way and that, peering through the forest for him, because he was overdue.

Lassiter waved and shouted at her. So she had not been caught up in a chariot of fire, or a whirlwind, or translated away. He hurried up and kissed her far more fervently than usual. He asked with a certain concern if she were feeling well. Under the subterfuge of caressing her hand, he secretly felt her pulse. It was going a trifle fast, but under his extra gust of caressing, that was natural.

With his anxiety appeased, the promoter made himself comfortable and sat watching the girl drive an obsidian chisel into the cow-trees, then insert a joint of cane and catch a tiny rill of vaca sap. The liquid would flow for ten or twelve minutes and then dribble out. Tilita might have had a dozen canes dripping at once, but she contented herself with one. She was as unhurried in her work as the movement of the sun in the sky.

Her deliberation always spread a certain impatience through the New Yorker, and yet, somehow, it was provocative, too. As he watched her, his own nervous force always concentrated itself in a desire to sweep her into vehemence. Usually after an hour or so of such observation, her dilatoriness goaded him into one of those outbursts of fondling that occur with a certain regularity among lovers, and are based, no doubt, upon some nervous periodicity.

Lassiter was in the midst of one of these ebullitions; he had just lifted Tilita in his arms when he glimpsed the figure of a man at some distance, half hidden behind a cow-tree.

The promoter eased his sweetheart to the ground, after the manner of dignified men when discovered in an unconventional-ality. He stood with one arm, consciously—one might almost say conscientiously—around her waist, because not to touch her at all would admit a fault.

The newcomer proved to be Nunes. Whether he had been spying or simply passing by, Lassiter could not be sure. However, the tone of Nunes' conversation a little while before suggested the former.

A certain woodenness seized all three as Nunes passed by. To touch Tilita's waist became an effort. Likewise it was clear by the way the Colombian walked that he wanted to stop and say something, but he could find no leg to stop on. He bid fair to be carried past by dint of his own mechanism.

Then the ludicrous quality of the situation came, to Lassiter's relief. Certain lines from "Hamlet" twinkled into his mind and seemed to fit the Colombian:

"—where be your jibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment?—quite chop-fallen—"

Then the absurdity of treating like this a man who had goaded one of his mules across the Andes thawed out Lassiter. He called—

"I thought you were going around the lake with Birdsong, Nunes?"

The Colombian whirled around and went through a great show of having seen them for the first time.

"Ah, Señor Lassiter—and the *señorita*, too!"

Lassiter removed his arm with a certain sense of relief.

"I was just thinking of you," proceeded Nunes, continuing his air of discovery, "I was just thinking of you, *señor*. I wanted to say, I do not follow my dear brother Birdsong in condemning you."

"That's very good of you, Nunes."

"Indeed, it is a matter of principle with me, *señor*. Between ourselves, religion is a lonesome thing—I don't blame you at all—I—" All this while he had kept his eyes painstakingly off of Tilita. Now he glanced at her, shivered and forgot what he meant to say, for he repeated empty, "I don't blame any one for—for anything—"

"Are you going to assist Birdsong in his

work?" inquired the New Yorker to help him out of his difficulty.

"N-no, *señor*. I—er—I am working on—I'm working on a fishing boat now—that's how I came to be passing by here—I'm working on a fishing boat now."

He was evidently manufacturing the explanation of his presence out of thin air.

"So you are going to fish?"

"Si."

"Where is your boat?"

Nunes nodded vaguely up the lake.

"Are you building it yourself?"

"Si."

The situation was beginning to develop into a comedy.

"I'd like to see it."

Balthasar spread a deprecating hand.

"Oh, it—it's an ordinary boat—"

"Just to see what sort of a boat you could make—Would you like a look, too, Tilita?"

The girl was curious at once to see Balthasar's boat. Both of them started toward the muleteer.

"It's a long way through the sun, *señorita*," warned the saddle-colored man uncomfortably.

Lassiter bit his lip. He was not sure whether the girl saw the joke or not.

"Oh, Tilita likes the sun—she soaks it up."

Balthasar shuddered.

"I am complimented if the *señorita* cares to see my poor boat—"

He saw they were going to follow him and he moved vaguely off up the sand.



THE promoter followed his rival with unsmiling mirth. Then, he was still more amused at Balthasar's plan out of the difficulty. The Colombian proceeded straight up the shoreline through the sun and hot sand. Necessarily they would find a boat sooner or later. Presently they did come in sight of something far away on the sand. After a little while Nunes called over his shoulder.

"I was just revamping an old *bolsa*, *señor*."

When they reached it, sure enough, there was an old boat for which some one was making a sort of reed cover. Balthasar's eyes had been better than Lassiter's.

The promoter looked at it idly.

"What are you going to do with such a cover, Nunes?"

Nunes looked at the cover.

"It will keep in the fish, *señor*—"

"Keep in the fish!"

"And the waves out—in a storm, *señor*."

Lassiter could hardly remain sober.

"If the storms get too bad, Nunes," he said gravely, "I believe I would row to the bank, if I were you—How do you weave it?"

The Colombian sat down among the bundles of reeds and cords of nipa palms and began bundling them into the long strakes of which the queer top was composed. He did exceedingly well at it for a first attempt.

The promoter complimented the muleteer's work and got away in time to keep from laughing and spoiling the farce. As he walked back down the beach, he looked back over his shoulder once or twice. As far as he could see, Nunes was still seated in the hot sand, twisting somebody's reeds and cordage, keeping up his pretense.

The promoter asked his companion how fishermen ever used a top to a *bolsa*. Tilita had never heard of a *bolsa* having a top.

When they were well away, Lassiter explained the joke to his companion. To Lassiter's surprise she seemed not at all amused.

"*Sí*. I saw it was not his *bolsa*," she answered gravely; and a little later, "He can't help creeping after me, *primo*; he told me so himself—" And she glanced back at the solitary figure in the long glare of yellow sand swinging around the lake.

After that, the incident somehow lost zest in Lassiter's own eyes. Apparently he had overrated its humor.

Lassiter and the Incan girl did not stop at the cow-trees, but continued down the lake to the temple of the sun. The lake itself narrowed to a stream in its eastern part, flowed toward the enormous façade, then turned and swept north and eventually fell into some subterranean cavity in the side of the crater.

It was in the long "f-shaped" neck of land thus cut off that Lassiter and Tilita had strung their limed cords for birds. The place was a perfect aviary, perhaps because the water cut off, to some extent, vermin and small animals that prey on nestlings.

It was a full three miles to their trapping grounds and the lovers followed the edge of the forest to escape the ardor of high noon. As they wound in and out, they caught full glimpses, and partial glimpses of the enormous façade of the *teocalla*. In the fierce white light of the meridian, the great

alto relief appeared harsh, almost forbidding.

When they were within perhaps a mile of the temple, the girl paused and stared through the dancing heat, then pointed excitedly, directing Lassiter's eyes. After some blinking, the promoter made out what appeared to be a little string of ants crawling out of the main entrance. Naturally, they were priests, quite a band of them. Their almost imperceptible line of march across the façade renewed the Standill agent's shock at its prodigious reach.

Tilita was quite excited.

"Come, let's hurry down and see whose it is!"

"Whose what is?"

"*Niña*."

"Those things aren't babies—they are priests!"

"Certainly they aren't babies—certainly—" She tried to keep from laughing, colored slightly, then controlled herself and said very sedately—

"A new *niña* has come to Motobat—I wonder who its *madre* is?"

She stared a moment longer with the engrossed eyes of a woman over the thrill of a new life; then suddenly she seized Lassiter's arm, snuggled a moment to his side, and next instant went skipping down the beach toward the temple.

The promoter was put to it to keep up with the nymph. Within fifty yards he began to weary.

"Hold on," he panted, "the baby's parentage will keep—I fancy it's Chacala's."

Tilita gave him a backward nod.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure it's Chacala's and old Xauxa's."

"Old Xauxa's—"

"Yes, old Xauxa's," chirped the girl. "She must be twenty-two or maybe three."

Lassiter slowed down abruptly.

"Here," he said in a different voice, "there's no use running."

He walked deliberately to the margin of the sand where the grass kept his feet from sinking into its hot depths.

Tilita slowed up obediently and joined him.


"Why, what's the matter?" she asked, looking curiously into his face.

"Oh, nothing—nothing at all—" He made a little gesture and stood looking with a kind of ache at this brief voluptuousness before him. The child—the girl—the young woman—whatever she was, became grave, and then concerned.

"*Primo*," she divined, with a little wringing of her brows, "*Primo*, is—is it I—Don't you love me?"

The man bent over her in a kind of anguish. He pressed his mouth to her lips. The fragrance of the cow-tree milk surrounded him. She lifted herself to him and held him with extraordinary passion, no doubt with the *niña* motif drumming in her heart.

It was rather a bizarre performance, such a flux of erotic despair in the furnace of sunshine.

 THE girl pursued the man's unhappiness with a hundred hurried questions. What was there about her that made him sad? Was she not beautiful? Her grandmother, who was a fourth Spanish blood, was beautiful. She was very like her grandmother.

They talked on about the grandmother. When asked how she knew, the girl said she could see her *abuela* (grandmother) any day that her beautiful *abuela* did not journey through the sky in the mansions of the sun.

"You can still see her?" queried the promoter curiously.

"Oh, yes, any one can—there is a little crevice in the temple. When the sun passes through the *teocalla* at sundown, perhaps my *abuela* may get out of the sun and remain for a day in the temple."

Such a quaint notion pleased Lassiter. He glanced up at the solar faculence. When he took down his eyes, dark splotches swam over the landscape.

"Do you suppose she is in the temple today?"

"Had she known we wanted to see her she would have remained in Motobatí," assured Tilita, also looking up at the sun.

Lassiter smiled at such an easy loophole.

"Of course, if she isn't in the temple—she didn't know."

"But if we want to see her she will know—dwellers in the sun know all we do and think," pronounced the girl reverently.

This closed the loophole.

"Then she will be there?"

"If we want to see her and ask her blessing."

At Lassiter's desire they decided to see the grandmother, and set out with a renewed object for the *teocalla*.

They walked quickly, and by the time

the sun had declined into the west, they were walking across the vast approach to the temple. This was a pavement that fronted the temple like the piazzas before Italian cathedrals. It was a clearway paved with hexagonal blocks of tufa and fronted some three quarters of a mile of vast pilasters. Certain routes were worn in the spread of pavement where endless feet had tramped its breadth. Of these human traces worn in stone, the deepest path led to the main entrance; two more approached the two side entrances; and one pursued its way straight across the field of masonry.

Such endless ashlar work, such worn footways connoted a once vast population in Motobatí. The people gathered together in its bowl must be but a remnant of a human ant-like nest that wrought such labors. Whither had they gone? It was the query of the sphinx.

The vast façade was utterly deserted. The priests who had gone forth left no tenders. Lassiter walked on up through the heat to the great carved structure. The bases of the main pilasters were some thirty feet in diameter, but they arose to such heights they were drawn out to airiness. Looking up, Lassiter saw the ancient architect had mastered some new principle of proportion that prevented the façade from appearing to lean outward.

The whole structure vibrated with heat. The crowns of the columns far above the piazza were blurred. Heat filled Lassiter's clothes. Sweat stung his eyes and trickled down his skin like insects.

Along the outer edge of the piazza flowed the stream from the lake. North of the long pavement, a slender triangle of jungle set in between the river and the cliffs and continued to the point where the stream debouched into the palisades. From the pavement before the temple, they could just hear the faint murmur of its violence.

When Tilita passed the northern entrance of the *teocalla*, she diverged from the beaten path toward the jungle and turned to a little fault in the great façade. It was so well masked by an accident of the gigantic carving, that Lassiter never would have observed the aperture. It was evidently the result of some modern earthquake and was not designed by the sculptor because the vertical carvings on the exterior did not correspond exactly with the crack.

The swell of the scroll on the capital of one of the columns had been split in two. The solid stone radiated tangible heat when Lassiter approached it.

"Now, if my *abuela* has not gone up to heaven with the sun," began Tilita, placing her face in the aperture. A moment later—

"No, there she is."

She drew back and gave place to Lassiter. He placed his hands on two great projections of sculpture and peered through solid stone, some twenty feet thick.

As soon as his eyes grew accustomed to the softened illumination, he saw he was looking into a chamber filled with many-colored lights. He sensed the color value of the light by the nude statue of a woman that knelt in direct line with the aperture. A dozen subtle reflections from the statue bespoke the colorful illumination. Its blanched surface was touched with pinkish, mauve and pavonine tints.

The remarkable beauty of contour held Lassiter. The hair of the statue was done with actual human hair, after the fashion of the un-Hellenized Indians. The lips were scarlet. The eyes seemed to be inset of dark stones. Even a faint pilosity was suggested under the uplifted arms. In short, the sculptor of this kneeling Venus lapsed from splendid inspiration into over-detail.

Lassiter was just regretting this slight disfigurement of a genuine triumph in sculpture when the eyelids of the statue seemed to close.

Lassiter leaned forward with a slack jaw. He turned and encountered Tilita's face almost touching his.

"My God!" he aspirated. "She's alive!"

The girl gave a little restrained laugh, for she was in a holy place.

"*Certainemente*—She is my *abuela*—"

Lassiter looked back. The face of the statue was as like Tilita's as a reflection, except it was paler.

While the promoter was looking he saw the eyes were open again.

X



ALTHOUGH a marionette would have been of much service to the priests in the *teocalla*, to lend an aura of reality to the fantastic faith of the sun-worshippers, two reasons convinced Lassiter the figure was a woman. The promoter

did not believe that any sculptor on Motobatl could handle the human figure with such mastery; and last, a school that could produce such art would condemn the vast baroque façade in which it was housed. The two were incompatible. The figure was a woman.

No doubt she knelt in some sort of trance. Primitive peoples are often skilled in such occultism: the *fakirs* of India, the *Aissaqui* of North Africa, the snake-dancers of New Mexico. He turned to the girl—

"How long has your *abuela* been like that, Tilita?"

"Ever since my *madre* was a tiny *niña*. Her husband, my grandfather, was drowned in the lake, so my *abuela* joined her lord in the Sun." She paused, then added, "My grandmother has thirty-nine years now—sixteen in the sun."

The number registered on Lassiter with odd emphasis. The Venus in the *teocalla* was, or had she lived, would have been, precisely his own age. By some means it had been possible to preserve a beauty such as Tilita possessed even in Motobatl.

The two lovers were now walking up the jungle in the angle between the river and the cliffs. The sound of rushing water was so pronounced as to make conversation difficult. In the jungle were their bird snares, and Tilita ran before to examine each one before Lassiter reached it. One had caught a bird, a tanager. The girl beckoned gaily for Lassiter to come and hold it while she tied on a message to the outer world.

She did it gaily, as a sort of game, because Motobatl was not a prison, but a universe to her who knew nothing else.

The two worked their way through the jungle to the bank of the river where it debouched into the cliff. The stream was about forty yards wide at the place of its disappearance. The volume of water rushed down its stony bed, struck the opposing wall, piled up, was deflected in a great whorl back on itself, then spun around a hole in the center of the flood and vanished with a gigantic sucking sound.

The whirlpool stirred a cool breeze on the sultriest days. The green fronds and flowers along its banks waved in a perpetual blast. But what always held and amazed Lassiter was the hole in the maelstrom. From the shore, it seemed a yard or two in width. It swung here and there in the wheeling waters. Its glassy funnel twisted and bent

with that strange sucking sound that ranged from a ground bass to a shrill cacophony. Once every hour or so the hole would close with a sort of gulp; would ensue a confused roaring, a spouting, a coughing up of tons of water as if some monster were suffocating. After some minute or two of this confusion, the hole would suck open again and take up its spin.

All water seems alive, but the debouchment of MotobatI river with its sucking, gasping, swallowing and renewed sucking gave the most ferocious impression that Lassiter had ever observed.*

While Lassiter watched the green whorl, another bird was entangled on one of the limed cords. Tilita saw it and hurried to get it before it smeared its wings. Presently she came pushing back through the undergrowth with some sort of goldfinch in her hands. She held it aloft jubilantly for Lassiter to admire its bright orange body and black wings. She put the bird in his hands to hold while she bound the message to its leg. Tilita had a child's instinct for divination. Now, to test the fate of the message, she tossed it in the air to see what direction it would take. This infallibly showed what course the bird would fly. Lassiter entered into her little superstition and entertained her by telling what cities the bird would find in that direction. This always led to a description of trains, ships, buildings, theaters, bull fights—thus in a way, every message Tilita sent forth carried her fancy on wonderful journeys.

This time the bit of paper danced in the air and sailed toward the brink of the whirlpool. The girl darted to its rescue. She leaned so far out that Lassiter was frightened. The paper eluded her, went over a little bank of stone down to the very water's edge. Tilita was after it instantly, with a girl's limberness. She was out of sight under the bank for only an instant when Lassiter heard her shriek above the suck of the maelstrom.

The man leaped to the bank and looked over. To his relief, he saw the girl just beneath him. She was apparently in no danger at all, but was stooping and staring into the water.

* The whirlpool of MotobatI is today in danger of being transformed into a hydro-electric power plant. A public protest against such vandalism might induce the developing corporation, The Stendill Steamship Company of New York, to forego their plans to destroy a natural wonder second to none. This company is peculiarly sensitive to the criticism of tourists.

"Lord, Tilita, what a turn you gave me—What is it?"

At his voice, the girl suddenly began shrieking, flew up the bank with monkeyish agility, and landed in Lassiter's arms. She cuddled there, still screaming and staring back at whatever had frightened her.

The promoter received her with the immense compassion of a lover. He began that rapturous soothing and petting which a man lavishes on his sweetheart, but which changes so unaccountably to sarcasm when the same trait appears in his wife.

"Is it a snake?"

He moved toward the river peering down. The girl stayed close to him, shivering and half crying and staring backward.

"I-It's a man," she gasped at last.

At the same moment Lassiter saw it for himself. In the edge of the whirlpool floated a man. His head doddled and his legs waved idly in the current, but his arms were bound tightly to his side by many wrappings of cord. A loose loop of this cord had tangled in some roots and moored the body.

A moment longer Lassiter's thoughts continued on the girl.

"It's just a drowned man, sweetheart. Don't be frightened. He can't hurt you—"

"I-It's Chaca-Ch-Chacala!" And the girl sobbed irrepressibly.

Lassiter looked again. Sure enough it was the Indian who had thanked God so joyously that morning that he might rear his child in MotobatI. The cord that anchored him to the roots was the same sort of gleaming rope that Jagala, the priest, unwound from the body of the dead vicuna. It was what had drawn Lassiter's dead mules on the top of the rim; it was what Chombo Meone had preserved as a souvenir of his ghastly adventure in the Rio Vampiro.

This slow accumulation of horrors struck at Lassiter's nerves. He loosed the girl and stood looking down at the drowned man with a sort of tickling in his chest, throat and the palms of his hands. He caught hold of a wild lemon bush and lowered himself a little unsteadily to the water's edge. He drew in the cadaver by a loop. He knew quite well what he would see before he pulled it from the water. But as he lifted the body, a pressure on its stomach crushed it in like an empty sack.

Lassiter had forgot that, and now he

loosed it with a violent shudder. The corpse dropped half in and half out of the whirlpool.

The Stendill agent stood with a shaken heart. He stooped and washed his hands. The mystery that had formed over his party on the rim of MotobatI seemed weaving itself about them. Its inscrutability appalled him. It seemed to Lassiter that the very brilliancy of the sunshine wove a shining web to veil some murderous power. He looked down at the ill-starred Chacala, at the ashen corpse—

At that moment the whirlpool choked, re-gurgitated with a roar. Tons of water leaped up and flowed bankward. It caught Lassiter to his knees. Tilita cried out and reached down to help him up the bank. Chacala's body went with the ebb. The vortex opened again with its endless sucking. The body spun about the green funnel, spun about, drawing closer, and at last dived downward and disappeared, a dim greenish shadow with flying legs, as if some swimmer were stroking downward into the maelstrom, bent on self destruction.

The goldfinch was gone; whether Lassiter accidentally loosed it, or squeezed it to death in his excitement, he never knew.



THE death—the murder of Chacala—brought Lassiter a presentiment of some wide disturbance in MotobatI, and somehow, the promoter sensed that the colporteur was in the midst of it. Lassiter and Tilita set out homeward in an effort to learn more about the tragedy that had shocked them.

As the two entered the northern edge of the great plaza fronting the *teocalla*, the promoter was not surprised to see a distant figure running in from the southern boundary of the piazza toward the main entrance. At such a distance he could tell nothing about who it was; perhaps a priest hurrying to the temple for aid in some new assassination.

Both the man and the girl hurried forward past the series of immense pilasters when Lassiter saw that the person hurrying in from the south was a woman, an old woman. The promoter guessed it to be Xauxa, Chacala's wife. She ran with the labor of gravid women; her effort must have inflicted severe punishment. Apparently she meant to run straight into the temple, and now as she came, Lassiter could hear her calling the

names of the priests in a desperate voice—
“Gogoma! Jagala! Quiz-Quiz! Caxas! Gogoma!”

With his quick sympathy, Lassiter hurried down, with some hope of relieving the old woman's trouble or despair, when Tilita gave a gasp and cried out:

“It's my *madrel*! Oh, what has happened? Perhaps the *niña*—” She went flying down the vast tufa pavement screaming—
“*Madrel Mi madrel*! What has happened? *Madrel*!”

Lassiter followed running. As he drew near the entrance of the *teocalla*, he saw Gogoma standing in the archway. The entrance and façade were so huge the priest was diminished to a mere brown blob guarding the passage.

“What is it, Prymoxl?” he called in the short-breathed voice of the exceedingly obese.

“My *niñas*!” screamed the old crone. “Where are my *niñas*, Gogoma? What have you done with my *niñas*?”

As Lassiter hurried toward the entrance to aid his future mother-in-law, Gogoma's brown spot swelled to a vast dripping body.

“Your *niñas* are in the sun, Prymoxl—”

“My *niñas* are dead! They are dead!” shrieked the crone. “You killed them! You!” she shrieked and rushed at him with curved fingers.

The fat man put out the bulk of his arm with unshaken dignity and allowed her to carom against it. It was shocking, the collision between the ancient crone and the behemoth. Both were fairly helpless.

“Be quiet, Prymoxl— Why do you come screaming to the temple that your children are dead— Why—”

“The man Birdsong swore it! He swore they were dead—he swore by his god!”

“He knows everything!” wailed the crone. “He works wonders to prove it! He struck the bark of my baobab and it caught fire!”

Gogoma widened his slit-like eyes and swung his bulk a little forward to stare at the virago.

“He struck *fire*—with his hand!”

“Oh, *sí, sí, sí!*” The old woman seemed to grow weak. “Fire spurts from his hand! That proves he told the truth! My *niñas* are dead—my little *niñas* are dead—” Suddenly the old woman's wrinkled face broke into a twisting; her flabby breasts heaved to a sort of choking; her old eyes had no tears. It was the hideous sobbing

of the aged. Her very repulsiveness touched Lassiter. He took the creature by the arms.

"Hush, Prymoxl. You can't believe Birdsong! There is nothing to what he tells you—" he began, guiding her gently back in the direction she came.

"But—but it must be true," gabbled the crone, "to strike fire——"

"Why, dear Prymoxl, what has fire to do with your *niñas*?"

"I— It is a miracle, *señor*——"

"Well, a miracle—Good Lord, what's a miracle? Something you don't understand— How can one thing you don't understand prove something else you don't understand? Don't you see, Prymoxl, it isn't proof at all; it is irrational; it is proving the unknown by the unknown! It is the blind leading the blind and they shall all fall into the ditch!"

Lassiter delivered all this in great heat. For a moment or two the old hag seemed to listen, but within a dozen words she lost the connection of what the promoter was saying, and started swaying first on Lassiter and then on her daughter, wailing again—

"My *niñas*! All my pretty *niñas*—dead—all—dead——"

She flung up her arms and broke into another paroxysm of weeping. She slumped down on the hot tufa pavement, and stared up at the sun with her desolate, contorted face. She would have beat her head against the stones, had not Tilita and Lassiter lifted her bodily and moved on homeward.

"For God's sake, Prymoxl!" panted Lassiter under his burden. "Your 'old eyes deceived you! Birdsong can't strike fire! He——"

"But I tell you, I saw him!" choked the grimalkin. "It snapped, and sputtered and burned——"

Suddenly it dawned upon Lassiter what Birdsong had done.

"Why, that was a match!" he cried. "Anybody can do that! Here! Here!" He shook her to gain her attention. "That was a match, Prymoxl, no trick at all—none at all——"

The old hag looked at him and straightened her face somewhat.

"Can you do it?" she shivered.

"Sure, sure!" And he searched his pockets. Then he remembered he had given Birdsong the last lucifer he possessed.

"I haven't one right here," he said easily.

"But come with me to the paddlewood, I'll show you.

His confidence was so obvious that the old baggage got weakly to her feet, and the trio crept forward in order that Lassiter might duplicate Birdsong's miracle and restore Prymoxl's babies to the sun.

A certain gall-like humor seeped into the situation for the Stendill agent. Apparently he was being forced into the rôle of defender of the faith, champion of the Sun. The three walked very slowly, for Prymoxl was spent. On the way, they saw Nunes' *bolsa* lying on the beach with its top completed.

Lassiter left Prymoxl at her baobab and went on alone to his paddlewood for the matches. The old crone was very doubtful.

"You are sure you can do it?"

"Oh, yes, I'll butt miracle against miracle!"

She clung to his hands.


"Be sure and come back, *señor*, and show me this very night. I shall not sleep, *primo*, until you come back and show me."

Tilita followed him outside the door and kissed him with a curious wistfulness.

"Can you really strike fire out of a tree, dear *primo*?" she asked trembling.

"Can I strike a match?" Lassiter began to laugh.

Tilita peered into his eyes, and kissed him again, slowly, doubtfully.

 DEEP in the afternoon, Lassiter reached the paddlewood just in time to see Birdsong start north through the jungle. On his back were a pack of Bibles and the promoter knew that his pockets were full of the wonder-working matches. And to what unfortunate and cruel use he would put the matches! A realization of the unhappiness Birdsong would cause moved the promoter to shout at his man. The colporteur turned around and saw who it was.

"What is it, Mr. Lassiter?" he inquired briefly. "I'm in a hurry."

The significance of the change from "brother" to "mister" was not lost on the promoter.

"I just wanted a moment, Birdsong."

"Well, that's all I can give you; my brothers are in trouble."

The promoter walked up and saw a bandage around the Arkansan's head. It shocked the agent.

"You haven't been fighting?"

"The battles of the Lord, Mr. Lassiter—I'll have to ask you to talk fast——"

Birdsong fighting amazed Lassiter. It switched him from the main issue.

"I'll walk with you so you won't lose time. Who were you fighting?"

"The priests of Bal."

"What for?"

"They wanted to take Chacala's baby. I told 'em they couldn't because my Master had said, 'Suffer little children to come unto me.' So we had a little scrimmage. They got Chacala, but I kept his baby and now I'm hurrying back to baptize it before we hitch into 'em regular."

There was something grotesque in this stocky little man hurrying back to baptize a baby before he massed his forces for an attack on the priests of the Sun.

The promoter strode along at Birdsong's side through the heavy greenhouse smell of the jungle. He was trying to think of some means to stop this coming strife. He had a business man's hatred of violence.

"Why not arbitrate this affair, Birdsong?"

"Arbitrate it!" Birdsong gave the promoter a sharp glance.

"Yes. Is this exactly a Christian act, to be fighting and killing men and setting a whole people by the ears?"

"Mr. Lassiter," drawled the Arkansan, "do you know what old Saint Matthew says in his blessed tenth chapter?"

With a sinking heart, Lassiter admitted he was not familiar with the saint's remarks in his tenth or any other chapter. He also had the uncomfortable conviction that Matthew would bolster up Birdsong in his fire-eating and the fight would proceed. These reflections were interrupted and justified by the colporteur quoting.

"Here's what he says in his blessed tenth chapter, thirty-fourth and fifth verses, 'Think not that I have come to send peace but a sword. For I come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. He that taketh not his cross and followeth after me is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.'"

The promoter forsook that branch of his argument.

"What I really called to you to stop for," said Lassiter, "was about upsetting the faith of these old women with matches.

You tell them their children are dead and in hell, and then strike a match and they believe it. That's a cruel thing to do, Birdsong. It's a fiendish thing to do. You might just as well have stopped in and murdered Prymoxl's fourteen children. She's wild. She's nearly crazy. She came howling and shrieking— Oh, it was pitiful, Birdsong!"

The colporteur straightened belligerently.

"Well, her children are dead and in hell!" he declared stoutly.

Lassiter knew there was no use arguing that point.

"Yes, but why tell *her*?"

"So the rest of her children'll be saved, and her own soul won't be lost, Mr. Lassiter."

He spoke briefly, as though it were a waste of words to argue with such a man.

The promoter was irritated. If he conceded Birdsong these grounds his logic was as unshakable as Gibraltar.

"But look here," cut in the agent testily, "when these old women don't believe, you prove you are right by striking a match. Now, that's a —— of a miracle—striking a match! Aren't you ashamed of yourself, running poor old ignorant women crazy by striking matches!"

"Do you say it ain't a miracle?" demanded Birdsong grimly.

"Certainly it isn't! Nobody but a mountebank would stoop to——"

"Hold on, Mr. Lassiter, don't you admit God knows ever'thing?"

With a certain uneasiness, Lassiter admitted this thesis.

"He saw I was going to need a sign and a wonder down here in Motobat! didn't He? So years before I was born, He inspired some man to make matches so when I got down here in Motobat!, I might have a sign and a wonder to spread His blessed kingdom. Ain't that just as much a miracle as me finding you in New York, and finding a rope to climb down the cliffs?"

Lassiter was already turning away. What argument could be brought, to bear on a man whose profoundest conviction was that the whole universe and all the ramifications of life that had gone before were but the supers that made ready for his triumphal entrance on the stage of Motobat!

As Lassiter turned away, Birdsong called.


"If you don't believe a match is a miracle, Mr. Lassiter, try making one."

Whether the colporteur had any inuendo tucked away in this invitation or not, Lassiter did not know. But when he reached his paddewood he found his bags had been opened. Further search showed not a match remained. The packs of both Nunes and Birdsong revealed the same state of things. The colporteur had cornered miracles in Motobat'l.

In the last light of day, the agent for the Stendill lines fumbled through his belongings hoping one match might have been overlooked wherewith to soothe the old crone in the baobab. At last, in the bottom of his pack, his fingers stumbled over his flashlight. He picked it up and flashed it to make sure it would work.*

Then he started back for the baobab with an easier heart. He had found a somewhat different sort of miracle, but he felt sure that with it he could convince old Prymoxl that her fourteen *niñas* were leading blessed and profitable lives in the bright mansions of the Sun.

XI

 IT WAS so dark when Lassiter reached the baobab that he was forced to use his flashlight to find his way, thus, naturally weakening the force of his miracle. He found Tilita and her mother standing outside the baobab watching the sky. He exhibited his flashlight with rather a foolish feeling, directing its ray here and there. He even made the mistake of explaining its mechanism to Tilita the best he could.

Old Prymoxl said that Birdsong had acted quite differently. He had struck her tree with his hand and fire had flamed up; he had nothing to strike with except his hand and flames had leaped out; and as for Lassiter, making a light and no fire, a firefly could do that much—Here the talk drifted away from the flashlight, which got no further attention, although Lassiter continued snapping it on and off in an absent-minded way.

Both women were in a state of perturbation. They had been watching a light far to the north that reddened the sky. They

could see glimpses of it through the trees.

Lassiter joined their observation. He found the girl's hand in the gloom, and stood looking at the light with that sense of comfort her touch always brought. Very gradually the illumination increased and spread. The jungle became filled with a reddish glow. From here and there came the call of a bird or the chatter of some animal at this untimely radiance. Strange delicate perfumes became sensible in the air from the burning of aromatic trees.

The lovers slipped their arms about each other and speculated in whispers on the origin of the light. Tilita thought it was the sun climbing down the western palisades to avenge Birdsong's impiety.

As they stood, something crashed into the baobab high over their heads, followed by a falling through the leaves. An eagle, half stunned, hit the ground within twenty feet of the watchers. No doubt it had been driven from its aerie by the flames, and had blundered into the crest of the baobab.

The huge bird filled the jungle with its shrieks when Lassiter turned his flashlight on it, and finally scuttled off through the underbrush like any turkey. From the lake came the distant laughter of loons.

A confusion of sounds so faint as to be nameless seemed gradually to arise from all over the crater. The glow increased. Presently, at some distance away, Lassiter saw three figures hurrying through the jungle toward the *teocalla*.

In the hope of finding some information, he ran toward them, calling and flashing his light. His answer was three shrieks, the whisper of an arrow past his head, and the fugitives vanished like partridges in a covert.

The wide commotion seemed to focus on the temple of the sun, and the first real knowledge of what was taking place came to the watchers from a man hobbling through the jungle from the west. The stranger carried a bow and arrow and featherwork shield of an Incan warrior. He had a bullet wound in his thigh. He stopped when he saw the women and old Prymoxl tied a cloth around the leg to stanch the blood.

The wounded man was still dazed. He told an uncertain tale of a terrible man who pointed his hand at him; came a flash of lightning and a terrific thunderbolt which struck him in the leg and brought him down.

*This portion of Lassiter's record explains the marvels worked by Birdsong in his evangelization of Motobat'l. He is credited with striking fire from stones and trees by the simple blow of his hand. This, of course, was fathered from the Motobat'l Indians who at present implicitly believe this to be a fact. Bishop Langhorn, in his "Man or Myth" does not seem to apprehend Lassiter's explanation. See "Man or Myth" Bishop Langhorne, Starnes & Sykes, Richmond, Va.

His comrades broke, and the Christians charged over him after the fugitives. Then he had hobbled toward the *teocalla*.

"There was no use in staying," he shivered, "for who can fight the gods?"

The promoter and the girl each gave a shoulder to the wounded warrior and they set off toward the lake. Presently they found the jungle was full of refugees. Dozens of persons, some to the right, some to the left, overtook and passed them. It seemed all Motobatl was converging upon the *teocalla*. All were fearstruck. Each party avoided all others as if fearful of enemies everywhere.

When the promoter reached the lake, he saw scores of boats paddling in toward the temple from the north. The flying craft were silhouetted in black against the red reflections in the water.

The promoter found Nunes' *bolsa* with the queer top to it. It suddenly struck him that Birdsong had planned an attack by water, too, and the top to the *bolsa* was meant as a sort of armor. Lassiter put the soldier and the women in this little battleship of reeds and joined the flying flotilla for the last two miles. Every boat pulled for the great piazza with a sort of silent desperation.

Out of the whole throng flying templeward, not a sound was heard save the dip of oars. In the north the fires multiplied and spread. Here and there tips of flame leaped above the northern horizon flinging up volumes of smoke, red of bottom and black of top.

Toward the east, the great façade caught the crimson light. In the piazza swarmed crowds of fugitives; their continual drone came over the water, punctuated now and then with a cry, or by the sound of sobbing.

Along the strip of sand in front of the great piazza Lassiter saw three or four men running to and fro, meeting every boatload of fugitives that came ashore. When the promoter's *bolsa* drew to the sand, a little hunchback splashed into the water to pull the craft ashore, at the same time calling shrilly:

"*Señor* Lassiter, Gogoma wants to speak to you, if you will have the kindness. He has sent runners for you everywhere——"

Lassiter recognized Quiz-Quiz. Lassiter agreed, got his crowd ashore, and the four with their guide set out across the piazza.

Along a center line of the pavement stood a regiment of men in marching order. Their spears and the color of their featherwork shields gleamed dully in the crimson light. They formed a strange picture, and as Lassiter started for the *teocalla*, these men marched away toward the west.

Quiz-Quiz watched the soldiers go.

"That is our second army," he said. "The first has been cut to pieces. Nobody can stand before men with thunder in their hands."

As the army marched away, the murmur of the fugitives fell to silence. Here and there a woman shrieked and clung to one of the warriors. During the interlude, from far across the lake came the faint staccato of Nunes' automatic.



QUIZ-QUIZ led the way to the northern side entrance. Lassiter entered a hallway cut through solid stone and lighted by several tapers suspended in bowls of oil. The ceiling itself was so high it was lost in gloom. Here and there, in the long corridor, a priest moved about on some obscure errand.

The moment the great shutters clanged shut after the promoter the tumult of the piazza was muffled to a whisper. Quiz-Quiz directed Tilita and old Prymoxl to a stone bench carved into the side of the passage; then he conducted Lassiter forward and left the women sitting in the dim light, oppressed by the peculiar desolation of a vast public building.

Off each side of the hallway gave doors. One of these the hunchback opened and bowed Lassiter into a sort of audience chamber. At one end of the chamber spread a tapestry of featherwork, rising to a frieze of dull yellow metal. All the color was subdued in the light of some dozen tapers, but Lassiter could imagine how vivid would be the seen by day.

On a dais, against this background, overflowing a huge chair, sat the naked, yellow bulk of Gogoma. The priest and his surroundings produced such a rich decorative effect that into Lassiter's mind came the immobile figure of the woman. He became dubious, after all, whether it were not sculpture. That piece of art could not be beyond the hand that lifted Gogoma's saffron bulk into such a decorative ensemble.

The air of the cavern was neither close nor stuffy, although it held the chill of all

caverns. Nevertheless sweat beaded the priest's great form.

A third man was in the room, an old Indian who stood in front of what might be called the archiepiscopal throne. Lassiter's entrance caught him amid sentence,

"—fire from a tree with his hand, O holy Gogoma, and the tree burned up. Then he promised that all the children of my son's wife should live in Motobatí. And I asked how would there be room for all the children born to live in Motobatí, and he said his God would push back the walls of Motobatí, and unroll the mountains into a vast and fertile country, and—and—" Here the Indian struck his head with his hand "—and perhaps he could, holy Gogoma, for he dashed fire from a tree—"

"My son, who already has his one child, took up his lance and joined this wonder-maker. But I am old, holy Gogoma. All my *niñas* are in the Sun. I must join them. I ran into the jungle. The other man, who stood persuading my son's wife, lifted his hand and hurled thunder after me. It struck off this finger—" The wretch held up the stump of a digit, still bleeding. "I turned. I ran—"

The high priest interrupted the narrative with a wave of his pendulous arm.

"You may go, Maulo."

The Indian backed away, prostrating himself* at every step, and gripping the stump of his severed finger to prevent bleeding.

Gogoma then dismissed the hunchback and waited impassively until the door was closed. Then he turned to Lassiter.

"*Señor*," he said in his unruffled, furry voice, "I sent for you because I overheard your words to Prymoxl concerning miracles, and I knew, at last, another man of intelligence had come to Motobatí—"

The Stendill agent acknowledged the naked man's compliment with a slight bow.

"So I ask you, *señor*, to tell me how does Señor Birdsong strike fire and hurl thunder."

"With sulphur matches and a pistol, Gogoma." On afterthought he added—"They are usual, much less miraculous than grass and babies."

The behemoth nodded slightly.

"I knew they were usual, *señor*. What I wanted to find out was whether you possess matches and pistols?"

"No," admitted the promoter. "I had some matches, but Birdsong took them all."

"Can you make more matches or pistols, *señor*?"

"I haven't the materials, or the skill, Gogoma."

The high priest looked at Lassiter.

"Are you so poor a man, *señor*, as not to be able to make what you consume?"

"Wait, don't judge me hastily. In my country, Gogoma, each man does one thing well, and nothing else. Take my shoe, for instance—" the promoter held out his foot—"the labor of five thousand men went into that shoe. One man killed the cow, others stripped the hide, a whole tannery of men cured it, thousands of men worked over it in a shoe factory. Still another army of men grew the cotton and made the laces for the eyes. Look at the metal tip on this lace. It requires three men at machines to put the tip on the lace; that is all three men do, put tips on strings. So that is why I cannot make matches nor pistols."

Certain faint movements of the hairs of the behemoth's nose and brows betrayed the astonishment he felt at his first glimpse of the highly specialized labor of a modern factory.

"By Pachacamac!" he rumbled. "Your countrymen must be as the leaves of the jungle to have so many workers. Just see what can be accomplished with the lives of many children—your priests must let all your babies live."

Lassiter looked curiously at the mountain.

"Don't you?"

The bulk shook a jellied negative.

"That is another point I wished to speak about, Señor Lassiter."

"About babies?"

"*Si, señor*."

The promoter stared at the vast man curiously.

"What do you want to say about babies?"

"I wanted to show you why it is impossible for all babies born in Motobatí—to live."

Lassiter's regard slowly filled with horror.

"Do you mean you—"

The bulk nodded impassively.

"Thousands every year, *señor*."

As the promoter gaped at the vast man, slowly there dawned upon him the significance of many riddles in Motobatí—old Prymoxl's babies living in the sun—the

joy of the ill-starred Chacala at the promise of life for his child—the insurrection that at this moment fired Motobatí.

It was because many babies were not allowed in Motobatí. This huge brown polyp of a priest forbade life to children. He must have destroyed hundreds, thousands of innocents. The priest swelled in Lassiter's eyes into a vast Moloch.

As all the implications of this murderous gelatinous creature struck home at Lassiter, horror tickled his throat with its nasty feather; saliva formed in a little pool under his tongue, and he swallowed sickly. The cool air of the cavern grew clammy—the murderer of thousands of babies—it reminded him of the New York apartments, where landlords forbid children—sweat broke out on his forehead.

Gogoma, who sat watching the promoter, heaved his bulk slowly out of his chair, took a waddle to the American's side, then lifted him bodily and seated him in the huge seat. The promoter's slimness occupied perhaps a fifth of it. The behemoth clapped his pulpy hands. Quiz-Quiz appeared. The priest ordered a goblet of wine and gave it to Lassiter.

The Stendill agent drank. The enormous brown man stood studying his guest's face until its color flowed back. Then he continued standing beside the archiepiscopal throne and began one of the strangest, and not the least adroit, pleas that had ever been made at that seat of power.

"Señor Lassiter," he purred, "your heart does you honor, but all men have hearts and few have brains. I wish to touch your brain.

"Look at Motobatí, *señor*, a little space, the width of a stride cramped in moveless bounds—and yet it is a place of sunlight and flowering, of amorous days and teasing nights.

"In Motobatí, *señor*, our maidens wed at thirteen years; and thereafter at each nine months or ten, their *niñas* nuzzle them with milky mouths. Within each ten months, *señor*, our population adds a half. Within thirteen years our people would be eight times as numerous as at present. During the fourteenth year, with new marriages, our people could increase three fourths our whole number; the next year it would double, and so with increasing strides to twice, thrice, fourfold—and Motobatí is but a little space, the width of

a stride, imprisoned in moveless bounds. "How could we house or feed or clothe so huge a press of life?"

The rhythm of the naked man's address held Lassiter's ear, and now the wine had restored his poise sufficiently for him to follow the thread of the argument. He was not sure whether this were a rhetorical pause or a question to be answered. But presently he said—

"Gogoma, the civilized way, the merciful way to deal with the question of population is to allow lack of food to starve—" And then the hideousness of his own solution brought him to silence. Never before had Lassiter put the conditions of modern life simply and frankly before himself.

The sweating tun agreed with an oscillation of the fat that draped his arm.

"That is true, Señor Lassiter, and for many years such was our custom in Motobatí. We allowed hunger to reduce our numbers, but hunger is much more cruel, Señor Lassiter. Moreover it demoralized our people. It made of them murderers, liars, lechers, beggars. The strong ill-used the weak. Armies rose up and fought for food and starved other armies. Starvation became part of military tactics.

"Such horrors took place that no human being could imagine it, had not our forefathers knotted all this lore in the *quippus* which you or any literate man may unknit for himself. When our forefathers saw all these terrible things, *señor*, the priests made a law that all babies, save the first, should die."

Lassiter had leaned back against the archiepiscopal chair. He nodded faintly.

"But it was a crude law. Our women hid their babies, and when found they fought the priests; they tore their flesh, and when their babies were destroyed, some [sat on their babies' graves and wept, some drove to the stars, some flung away all modesty and stalked the day as naked as I, and many died.

"And then the high priest, Vaihue, prayed to Pachacamac to send some means to take our babies to the bright mansions of the Sun and keep them there until the mothers came. One morning he awoke to find the web of the sun spread where it is today—a miraculous net, *señor*, and as the sun dips beneath the lake, babies in the web are transported to its effulgent halls—and the women are content—"

"They believe it?"

The high priest lifted his hands.

"*Señor*, they must, else they would go mad and die. All humanity must have some religion, or the horrors of life will overcome them. Pachacamac is the god of the living, not the god of the dead."

A silence fell between the men. From out on the piazza came the tumult of the people clamoring for their babies. It might have been the roaring of the sea against the coast.

"Why have you told me this, Gogoma?"

"So you can tell your friend, *Señor* Birdsong."

"Birdsong?"

"*Si, señor*. Tell *Señor* Birdsong that he may become the high priest, that his God may become the God of Motobatí, if he will only preserve the web of the sun. That alone is necessary. *Señor* Birdsong would make a good high priest. He is hard and cruel, and unmarried. He seems to have no desire for marriage."

"Why shouldn't a priest marry?"

"Because no man can have children of his own and attend the sacrifices."

The South American agent sat in the huge chair and brooded over this strange request. He looked at the sweating brown man.

"Birdsong would not listen to me, Gogoma."

"Will he not listen to reason?"

"No—he goes by a book."

"Does his book permit babies?"

"Yes, it is a book for an open country—and a cool country."

"But is Birdsong not a priest in his own country?"

"No, just a follower."

The naked ecclesiast shook his head slowly.

"Such is the danger of lifting ignorant men to the priesthood—they believe what they teach. They serve the letter of the law, not its spirit. They serve the god of the dead, not the god of the living—"

The high priest seemed to shake off some settling dependency.

"Go to him, *señor*—all you can do is to go to him and explain—"

"He will probably kill me."

"Very likely, my brother—I will pray—"

"To whom?"

"I, Gogoma, the high priest, will pray, my brother."

Lassiter got slowly out of the priestly seat. He felt queerly weak. It seemed hardly worth while to walk out of the door, or to speak to Birdsong, or to do anything. Somehow Gogoma's talk had stripped the veil off of things that were best left veiled. He walked out into the corridor.

On the stone bench, Tilita still sat. The taper over her head had guttered out.

Somehow the sight of the maiden seated at the door of the temple melted some frozen thing in Lassiter's heart. Suddenly, he understood why women, always, were the religious moiety of mankind. They have so much more at stake.

A great tenderness ached in his throat. He ran to her and caught her in his arms. He kissed her with an intolerable compassion on her womanhood. His tears dropped on her neck and bosom.

The girl herself sobbed in sympathy, not knowing why.

Beside them, old Prymoxl snuffled, thinking of her *ninas* in the Sun. She was no obstacle to their fondling. So much of the masculine had she held in her that she was epicene; so many children had she borne that her personality was scattered; she was life's point of departure, an old caravanserai without traffic, deserted—

Here and there through the vast dimly lighted corridor moved a priest of the Sun on some obscure errand.

XII



AS LASSITER crossed the great piazza on his strange mission as an advocate of infanticide, he was amazed that he had not discovered long before the existence of that practise in Motobatí. Every incident he could now recall pointed so simply in that direction. On every hand he had heard the sun myth, which veiled the custom with the thinnest drapery.

Moreover Lassiter had known that almost every barbarous people indulged in the practise: China, Japan, India, the South Seas; the history of the Jews record it; America feels prenatal infanticide; France taxes childlessness. And yet with the solution of mystery of Motobatí written across every page of history, Lassiter had not seen it. The promoter was chagrined at himself.

It was dawn now, and as the gray light

increased, the glare of the burning trees gave way to an atmosphere filled with smoke. The vast walls of the crater were hidden and revealed by the accident of the smoke. It hung over the lake in long draperies that stirred with the breath of day. It was aromatic with the odor of unknown resins, and now and then, by some fortuity of the breeze, he obtained a view of the whole of Motobat, a vast censor among the Andes.

On his way westward down the beach, Lassiter paused for a moment beside the net of the Sun to speculate for the hundredth time on its enigma. This time he attacked the problem with a certain freshness, because the discovery of infanticide suggested the net must be just as simple if he could only lay a finger on the clew.

So he stood studying the net, reviewing critically every incident connected with it—Chombo Meone's tale; his own mules on the rim; the vicuna; the murder of Chacala; the winding of the unearthly cord about the victims; and at last, the ghastly dried shells of the murdered. And alongside this there popped into his mind the immobile figure kneeling in the cavern. But certainly that had nothing to do with the others—

No doubt it was all perfectly simple—as simple as infanticide. When it was explained to him, he would be just as chagrined, just as amazed at his own stupidity— He went over the phenomena minutely — rope — glue — sheep — mules — men—

His brain seemed on the very fringe of the solution. He could feel the answer formulating. Just one more tiny advance. An adumbration came, a sort of indistinct horror. It grew clearer. He had it! The truth of the net was—then, just as he was deciphering the shadowy solution, there came that miserable sensation as if something just in sight had silently faded. He felt as if something inside his head which was opening, had gently closed. Such profound exasperations are familiar to every thinker.

Lassiter stodged forward fighting obstinately to recapture the flair, the mental connection. But it was gone. That cell of his brain was closed and lost; that picture in his mind was faded and vanished. He tramped on still struggling. There was something sinister, almost tragic in this near-illumination, in this warning he had

almost heard, and which had died in silence.

The promoter moved on toward the tumult in the west. That noise he heard was swinging Birdsong into power, it was transforming an Arkansas squatter into an equatorial hierarch. For the first time it dawned on Lassiter that he was witnessing one of those marvels of history that crowned Brooke in Borneo, that created Clive, Cortez, and the Emperor of the Sahara— For the first time he suspected himself of having overlooked an opportunity to study at first-hand one of those men about whom history gossips.

It was with some idea of rectifying his oversight that Lassiter hurried forward, when, some two hundred yards down the beach, a group of men appeared palely drawn in the midst of the smoke. They were marching up the beach toward Lassiter, and at the head of the column, under guard, walked a man with his hands tied behind him.

The New Yorker moved on down to meet them, not knowing quite who were the captors nor who the captured. He peered through the smoke, trying to make out to which side the god of battles leaned, when to his amazement, he saw the prisoner was Nunes.

The promoter stopped stock still at this abrupt reversal of what he had fancied. These, then, were Gogoma's men who had captured the Colombian and his automatic. What the warriors of the sun would do with Nunes was too easy to guess. Thought of the Colombian being cast into the net horrified Lassiter. Certainly the muleteer was no favorite with the New Yorker, nevertheless he decided he would use his influence to obtain clemency.

The promoter was about to turn back to the temple, when still other soldiers streamed into sight out of the smoke; long ranks of spearmen, slingers, archers, followed by women and children in the van. The warriors wore the feathered armor of the Incans, and their polychrome hues made a fine show of color through the drifting smoke.

A spearman in front lifted his weapon, waved it like a long baton, and suddenly the whole throng broke into singing. This was extraordinary, but to Lassiter's further amazement, he recognized one of the colporteur's songs. The Indians chanted it like thunder:

"Red gushed the tide from Jesus' side,
He bled for me, so red for me;
Wide flows the flood of Christian blood,
Let us bathe in that go-o-ory sea."

These words were sung to the dismal tune of Old Hundred, but instead of adhering to the major scale of the Anglo-Saxon, the Indians fell into their own wierd mode. It filled jungle and lake with an unutterable melancholy. It was the folk music of an imprisoned people, of infanticides wounded to death by their own vital pressure.

In the midst of this chanting army, the promoter caught sight of Birdsong. The colporteur was not singing, but was threading his way to the fore ranks of his victorious army.



THE whole situation was incomprehensible to Lassiter. He hurried down to intercept the chieftain. A number of lances made way to admit the promoter to their ranks. The song continued without interruption.

Birdsong glanced up and nodded at Lassiter in the midst of the chanting. The colporteur's face was ashen under its tan, and there were lines in it that Lassiter had never seen before.

The Stendill agent waited impatiently for the singing to cease, curious to know what had brought Nunes to handcuffs. The Colombian was in no wise downcast. He strode along among his guards, chin up, swinging his green velvet shoulders from side to side. From a side view, Lassiter thought he was smiling. The whole affair might have been a play in which Balthasar refused to take his part seriously.

After many stanzas of the scarlet song were finished, Birdsong spoke first. He sounded less as if he were starting a sentence, than continuing aloud some troubled train of thought.

"I want to do what's right and merciful, Brother Lassiter. It's my hope and prayer—I want to act exactly like Christ would——"

The promoter surmised this referred to Birdsong's future treatment of the priests of the sun.

"The difficulty is, Christ set you no precedent there, Birdsong; He lost, you won."

"I was talking about Brother Nunes, Brother Lassiter."

"Oh—I was wondering about Nunes. That's the queerest reverse I ever heard of—Did he run from the enemy?"

"Oh no, no indeed!" cried the colporteur. "He was the lion of Judah, Brother Lassiter; he saved my life twicet from the priests of Bal!"

"Then what *did* he do?"

Birdsong tramped silently for several minutes. Once he lifted an arm and wiped the corner of his eyes with the back of his hand. Finally he said—

"He misused the power God gave him, Brother Lassiter."

"The automatic?"

"The matches."

Lassiter looked at the colporteur, then at the muleteer trying to construe this information into sense. He repeated the word, "matches" carefully, as if some secondary meaning might pop out of it.

"I mean, Brother Lassiter, that Brother Nunes with his matches convinced some of the wives of my men that he was an angel from heaven, and he—he—didn't use them right, Brother Lassiter——"

"You don't mean——"

And the promoter broke off with a slack jaw.

And yet, now that it had happened, it was as much like Nunes as his own picture. Just what one might have expected. But it was such a fantastic sacrilege!

"The men who are guarding him are the husbands," explained the colporteur somberly.

Lassiter looked at the seven guards around the gallant.

The muleteer himself maintained his jaunty swagger. Now and then he glanced around at the women in the rear ranks. Once he caught Lassiter's incredulous eyes. He waved gracefully, called a brilliant "*Buenas dias, señor*," and smiled.

It was evident that his position at the head of the column as prisoner, the crimes he had committed, and whatever punishment was in store for him, preened his vanity. He was by far the jauntiest man in the ranks. His call to Lassiter aroused a twitter among the women in the van.

"What are they going to do with him?" asked Lassiter at length.

"Chuck him in the net, Brother Lassiter," the colporteur nodded woodenly up the lake.

"Birdsong, you are not going to allow that!"

"It's the law of Motobat, Brother Lassiter."

"What if it is!" cried Lassiter in horror. "You are in charge of Motobat! now. You've won!"

"'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's,' Brother Lassiter."

"But, man!" cried the promoter aroused. "I tell you it's horrible! You should have seen Chacala. He was a shell, a crust. I fished him out of the whirlpool—" The New Yorker shivered. "Make 'em shoot the poor devil with his own automatic, Birdsong."

The colporteur tramped on with the thick skin of his brow corrugated into three wrinkles. It was the cool of the morning, but sweat beaded his face.

"Brother Lassiter," he said at last, "this is the worst stump I ever plowed into—I don't know what to do— The Good Book says that David was the same kind of a man that Brother Nunes is—Uriah's wife—and David was a man after God's own heart—Aye me, Brother Lassiter—I dunno what to do—"

He crooked his forefinger and flung the water from his forehead with a plowman's gesture.

The marching men rounded the point of palms and came into sight of the huge façade of the temple. Over the line ran a breathing, an audible tribute to the wonder and hugeness of that façade wrung even from an apostate army. They were in sight, also, of the cumulus which hid the sinister net of the sun.

Lassiter looked at it with dry lips. He could feel the muscles of his legs as distinctly as if he himself were to be thrown onto its limed and twisted ropes. He made one last mental effort to fathom the secret of the contrivance, and for the last time, failed.

The muleteer strode ahead in his soiled green jacket, and all that Lassiter knew of that gay, irresponsible roué revisited his mind. He thought of the *piquante* girls in Quito, of the Indian girls along the trail, of the fact that he, Lassiter, had persuaded Nunes to come down into the crater, of how Nunes had helped carry him down the precipice, and of how they had fought over Tilita. And as he stared at the condemned man, Lassiter realized that something in his heart had wrapped itself around this capering irrepressible animal. He could hear the fool saying—

"*Señorita*, when I look at you, I have

a yearning, a wild, uncontrollable—"
Poor devil, perhaps he had!



AT THE foot of the hummock the guards halted their prisoner. The army filed past and took up a semi-circle around the executioners and the condemned. Lassiter glanced at the great piazza. It was deserted save for a shapeless brown form in the great entrance. It was Gogoma waiting for Birdsong's men to come and slay him.

Nunes mounted to the top of the hillock and struck a fine pose against the sky. His eyes barely rested on the net, then swept over lake and palisades to the peaks beyond. Lassiter thought again how he had persuaded the Colombian to come down into the crater.

"*Señors*," said the captive to the archers, "if you will permit it, I would like to jump into the net myself with free hands. It is for the sake of the *señoras*. I have friends—" he made a graceful gesture toward them—"who would prefer to see me go a freeman—"

Birdsong walked up the little acclivity and stood beside the muleteer. The way he laid his hand on Nunes' shoulder made Lassiter realize there was a bond between the muleteer and the son of the moonshiner that he had never suspected. He was much the same size and build as Balthasar. Lassiter thought he was going to cut the rope. Instead, Birdsong said very simply:

"Soldiers of God, this brother ain't ready to die. I know it is the law in Motobat! for adulterers to be thrown into the net, so I'm going in Brother Nunes' place."

A gasp of horror, a breaking out of protest along the ranks. Men left the line and came running in with dissuasions.

The colporteur waved them all down.

"I tell you!" he cried in his nasal voice, "Brother Nunes ain't ready to appear before his God! He'll go to hell shore, forever and ever! He saved my life twicet. He stood by me when every man-jack left me—"

A woman wailed.

"But Gogoma will kill our *niñas*!"

"No, he won't sister. Our men have won. If I am necessary for the salvation of Motobat!, you know God ain't going to let nothing happen to me in that net!"

"But, *señor*, nobody ever has escaped—"

"And nobody ever come out of a lion's den

neither till Dan'l done it; and nobody ever walked through a f'ary furnace, neither, till the three Hebrew children done it. Don't you know our God that made Moto-batl, an' all it contains, can save me from a few ropes and some glue if He wants to?"

Lassiter was by his friend's side.

"Listen, Birdsong," he begged, "you are not fooling with matches now. Don't risk that — thing— Turn Nunes loose!"

"Brother Lassiter, if God had to crucify His only begotten Son to save the human race, don't you know there ain't no sich thing as jest turnin' a sinner alose? Sin's got to be paid for."

The fundamental difference between the two men angered Lassiter for the last time.

"But how? Why? What good does suffering do? — it, man, there's no connection between one man's guilt and another man's suffering. It's not only unjust, its shameful, its revolting! Stop! Stop! I tell you a man in a rage wouldn't kill a friend because his enemy had— For God's sake, Birdsong!"

"—a debt—"

Birdsong was striding down to the net.

"But hell *isn't* a debt!" yelled Lassiter. "Punishment is simply corrective or revengeful— Don't— Don't go on that— thing—your whole — scheme is as immoral as—"

Suddenly the promoter gave up howling and ran to Nunes, whom his captors had reluctantly loosed.

"Get your automatic, Nunes!" he yelled in the confusion. "Those priests are not going to work their burning trick on Birdsong!"

Nunes motioned toward one of the spearmen. Lassiter jumped at the man.

"Gimme that gun!"

He had it before the Indian could assent or object. He thrust it into the Colombian's hand and hurried with him down to the water's edge.

"Now, sit right here, with that gun drawn! Shoot any — fired thing you see move!"

By this time Birdsong was in the limed meshes. He was trying to walk across the viscous strands. When he pulled up a foot, the cord untwisted but stuck and stretched. As he tried to go forward with both feet fast, he lost his balance and his hands went down. He shoved with one hand and tried to loose the other. At every straining effort other parts of his body inevitably

touched the viscid tubes. He seemed to be pulling the unearthly ropes up over himself. It held his clothes and the struggles of the gigantic little man ripped the seams. His clothing slowly parted and tore off. The stuff laid its grip on his white skin. He was prone with one arm outspread and the other twisted under him. His efforts distorted the net. His muscles balled up. The thing gave to his efforts. He struggled against nothing.

Lassiter could endure it no longer.

"Get a pole," he shouted, and as nobody made a move, the promoter leaped up and sprinted over the little rise toward a bamboo that had drifted ashore.

Then he realized that all the army were kneeling toward the rising sun droning the prayer that Tilita had taught him.

The promoter reached the pole. He flew back up the slope. The net was empty. He rushed to Nunes who sat, with automatic still outstretched, staring white-eyed at the empty strands.

"Did he get out, Nunes?" chattered Lassiter. "Did he get out? Where is he?"

He shook the man with the poised firearm. Nunes closed his mouth, wet his lips and stared at Lassiter.

A great horror came over the promoter—

"Nunes—my God!—where is he?"

The Colombian seemed dazed.

"S-Señor," he chattered.

"Didn't you see him? Didn't you see what went with him?" Nunes shook his head.

Lassiter looked at the net; then back at Nunes.

"I—I—took my eyes off just a second—only an instant—"

"God in heaven, man, what for?"

Nunes moistened his lips and suddenly fell to sobbing—

"I—I was looking at a w-woman—"

XIII



FOR upward of an hour, perhaps two hours, Birdsong's men remained near the hillock, moving about aimlessly, talking in whispers, staring at the net wherein their leader had disappeared. Some wept. The sun arose and stretched long fingers of light through the smoke. At last, tired out with fighting, marching, and lack of sleep, apprehensive of the priests, and leaderless, the colporteur's disciples

began to dribble away by twos and threes. The last to stay by the mound were three women—Motobat's Mary Magdalene, Mary and Joanna— And so Birdsong's mission ended.

The promoter watched them go with gray thoughts. Although he had never liked the colporteur; although throughout their adventure together, he had felt the revivalist was a fanatic, following the craziest cosmogony, still, his abrupt taking off left the Stendill agent troubled and shaken and somehow aimless.

A breeze sprang up out of the east and cleared away much of the smoke. It stirred lines of silver over the blue water and blurred the reflections of the peaks. The sunshine grew warm. Lassiter got slowly to his feet and walked down the beach toward the great piazza. Lying in front of the immense pavement, he saw Nunes' *bolsa* with its queer top. It was a discarded little battleship that would never fight for its designer. It still lay half-drawn out on the sand where Quiz-Quiz had pulled it. Little waves broke against its stern with a continual sobbing.

The great piazza lay cool in the morning shadows. It was entirely deserted. From the north came a barely heard sucking and choking of the distant whirlpool. Lassiter thought of Birdsong, a gray cadaver, spinning round and round and taking a last plunge. Perhaps the body was spinning at this moment, or would soon, or had. The promoter felt profoundly weary, old, burned out.

He was turning south, with some vague intention of going back to his paddlewood and lying down, when he saw the bulk of Gogoma push out of the jungle toward the north. The high priest carried a basket on his great arm and Lassiter knew it held birds.

The Stendill agent was about to turn on away when the behemoth made a gesture asking him to wait. Lassiter walked over and leaned against one of the vast pilasters. The fat man waddled toward him with his breech clout entirely concealed in rolls of flesh. The blue heron feather fluttered in the breeze.

A disgust came over Lassiter at the thought of waiting and talking with the priest so soon after Birdsong's murder. He was about to go on after all, but a second thought came and told him that it had been

war, that Gogoma was again in power, that he, Lassiter, was doomed to spend the remainder of his life on some sort of terms with the murderer— It was simply a question of policy. After all, the whole of life was a question of policy—

So Lassiter remained leaning against the pilaster, one foot cocked up against its cylindrical surface which was flat in relation to so tiny an object as a human figure.

The fat man came up sweating profusely. He stopped with a slight gesture of salutation.

"A very pretty morning," he puffed and gave his head a shake that sent down a little rain.

"You have a lot of birds."

"I got them off your limes, *señor*. You chose an admirable place." He looked up at the rim of the crater high above, "I wonder if your message will ever bring help?"

Lassiter did not look up.

"I don't know— It doesn't make much difference."

The behemoth regarded him gravely out of pin-point eyes set in the expanse of brown face.

"You are thinking of your friend, *señor*."

"Certainly."

Gogoma meditated.

"Well—it is true. It makes little difference who comes or goes— We are but scum caught in the Web of the Sun—" He paused a time and finally added—

"Still we try to hold our places—"

The promoter stood moving his foot against the surface of the pilaster with a slight nervousness. The movement made about as much sound as the murmur of the whirlpool to the north. At last the New Yorker asked the question forever nibbling in his mind,

"How did you kill Birdsong in the net, Gogoma?"

The wide face was unmoved by so much as a quiver.

"I did not kill him, *señor*."

"Your men, then?"

"They had nothing to do with it, *señor*."

Lassiter saw the priest meant to reveal nothing of the terrific mechanism of the net. There was no need trying to probe by indirection, for Lassiter already sensed the behemoth's mind was subtler than his own. To his surprize the priest proceeded.

"If Señor Birdsong had greased his hands and feet he could have walked on the net

without fear of sticking. That is the method we priests use in collecting our alms—it is a great miracle. The people flock to see it. It refreshes their faith in other things they know nothing about.”

Lassiter was moved to smile, but his smile flickered out in the aura of Birdsong's death.

“It really helps prove those things, *señor*,” proceeded the priest gravely. “Belief in the Sun is the truth for my people; without it they could not exist.”

Lassiter leaned against the pilaster musing and presently said:

“I dare say that's right. Religious truth is any theory with sufficient coherence to satisfy man's inquisitiveness, and yet at the same time offer him sufficient inducement to bear the ills of life.”

The behemoth opened his slit-like eyes. Like all men, he was vastly impressed with the promoter's wisdom because he had repeated his own theory in slightly different words.

“*Señor*, you are the man I have been praying to come to Motobatl.”

Lassiter regarded him curiously.

“You must become high priest in the temple of the Sun.”

Lassiter did not know whether this were a jest or not.

“I am in earnest, *señor*. I have prayed for such a man. None of my acolytes can take my place. Neither Jagala nor Quiz-Quiz. They do not comprehend that the temple is for man and not man for the temple. Until you came, I was the only skeptic, the only disbeliever in Motobatl. I alone could administer the holy rites purely for the benefit of my people, without the corruption of faith or credulity or idolatry or useless sacrifice.”

“You really want me to become high priest?”

“Indeed I do!”

Lassiter stood staring at this monstrous proposal, and yet as he thought it over, he perceived that its monstrosity was really superficial. Back of it lay a genuine love for his people.

churches, still they preached them to their congregations, because the business man, the professional, the man around town were not prepared to receive the recondite learning of the study.

Also he had heard laymen admit that they could not allow their minister to know exactly what they believed because he led too secluded a life to receive the full glare of truth such as they found in the market place. Such stewardship of spiritual values always impressed Lassiter as a beautiful and a thoughtful attitude.

Now he was a little surprized to find himself shocked over the same condition in Motobatl. Moreover, the notion began to appeal to him. It touched the streak of romance, of play-acting that had always lain at his heart. It promised his life a certain dramatic completion—high priest, hierophant in the hugest and most ornate temple of the earth.

“Would it be necessary for me to become an acolyte until your death?”

The high priest raised a pulpy protesting hand.

“You would be installed at once, within a week. I wish to devote the remainder of my life to my own immortality, brother.”

The promoter looked at him curiously.

The high priest touched the brightly colored birds in his basket.

“Immortal—the birds?”

“*Señor*,” intoned the high priest solemnly, “only one thing is immortal on earth, and that is beauty. Our philosophies change with the years, history is a forgetting, science is man's last guess, but a work of beauty, *señor*, lives on and on. It is immortal—”

Lassiter had never before seen the high priest aroused.

“What do you do?” he asked curiously.

“I paint with feathers.”

“Did you do the tapestry in your audience chamber?”

“That was my master Vaihue's work. If you love color and form, *Señor* Lassiter, if the rainbow bent over your mother's couch when you were foaled, then come—”

He started moving his bulk impulsively toward the great entrance, then hesitated and stopped. It was the only impulsive movement Lassiter ever saw him commit.

He reconsidered.

“No, there will be time after you become the high priest, brother. We will hurry



NOR were Gogoma's motives entirely without parallel in Lassiter's own experience. In America Lassiter recalled conversations with ministers who frankly admitted that while, personally, they did not accept all the tenets of their

and ordain you high priest tomorrow or next day, but, *señor*, to look at my picture, you should have preparation, you should fast—and pray.”

Sweat dripped from Gogoma under his emotion. A condition of the priesthood suddenly came into the promoter's mind.

“Didn't you tell me, Gogoma,” he asked suddenly, “that priests were not allowed to marry?”

“*Si, señor.*”

Then the fat man interpreted the look that crossed Lassiter's face and went on persuasively:

“*Señor*, what a man loves in a woman is her loveliness. Touch it, and it wilts like a flower, but, *señor*, if—if you could hold the woman you love in perpetual youth, then—then—” the behemoth held up his finger and spread his pin-point eyes—“then, your love becomes immortal. She becomes part of your immortal idea, and the sense of sight is the sense of touch infinitely refined—”

This last, uttered in a tone of revelation, meant nothing at all to the promoter. He took his foot down from the pilaster and moved southward toward Tilita.

“After all, I can not become high priest, Gogoma. I shall marry. Not immediately, not so soon after Birdsong's death, but I shall marry.”

Signs of animation faded from Gogoma's bulk. He fell in at Lassiter's side and waddled in unison to his step. Dwarfed by their surroundings, the two men moved southward across the vast piazza.

On his homeward walk Birdsong's tragedy reenveloped Lassiter. The promoter attempted to free himself of it. He told himself he had not loved the colporteur. They were hardly friends; they had never agreed on any point, and finally had quarreled and separated. But his sense of personal loss continued. Somehow Birdsong's taking-away changed the whole atmosphere of Motobat'l for him. The colporteur had somehow spread an air of ordinariness, a feeling of the conventional moral values over the whole crater. Now Lassiter felt adrift.

As he approached the baobab the odor of garlic and pepper drifted to his nostrils through the jungle. When he stepped into the clearing he saw old Prymoxl stirring at a huge pot on her oven, while near by lay heaps of plantains, guavas, palm cabbages and red bananas. On the other side stood

calabashes of palm wine and cow-tree milk. The tang of wine, fruit and pepper smelled like a banquet.

Lassiter stood in the edge of the open space looking at these preparations when the crone saw him. She proved in the height of good spirits. All her bedraggled gaiety had returned. She gave a little croak of pleasure at seeing Lassiter, dropped her work and bundled over to embrace and kiss her future son-in-law. The embrace was close and pervasive. Lassiter could feel the dry wrinkles of her lips, her flaccid dug and her protuberant abdomen. Her breath stank of wine and garlic.

For the first time, the promoter realized that his mother-in-law was merely an old Indian slattern living in a tree. Birdsong's death, somehow, had given her this new objectivity. The colporteur was no longer in existence to rate the old slattern as an immortal soul on equality with Lassiter and himself.

Prymoxl patted the promoter gleefully on the back.

“Well, *yerno* (son-in-law), he is dead!”

The Stendill agent nodded mechanically.

“Wasn't it droll—died on the very spot where my *niñas* were lifted to the sun—after he had worried my heart out of me—well, it proves Pachacamac is stronger than his God and my *niñas* are safe.”

She cackled maliciously at this vindication of her faith.

The promoter released himself gently.

“Your *niñas* are quite safe, *señora.*”

“And he will no longer oppose your marriage with my Tilita?”

“No— He is gone.”

“And good riddance!” The grimalkin paddled back to her work well content. Her babies were safe; her daughter was about to be married; her religion had triumphed; old Prymoxl's universe was again pat. She took a gourd of palm wine and sipped it with a smacking.

“Well—” she soliloquized, “he who mocks the gods mocks himself. Old Gogoma taught me that when I was a *muchacha.*”

Here she smacked complacently and recalled another *chiche*—

“The gods give us life, and if we do not serve them they take our life away, eh, *yerno*—”

She drained off her gourd, and began a great stirring.

There was something supremely ironic

in this old baggage repeating with such gusto the high priest's veiled cynicisms. By good fortune she dropped into her more usual strain.

"Ah, well, I shall have a fine *yerno*, and he will get me a fine grandson to hold on my knees—as white as a Spaniard—perhaps two—perhaps three—perhaps the priests will allow all of Tilita's *niñas* to remain here in Motobatí— They have enough in the Sun, *señor*, quite enough——"

The palm wine was making her optimistic. She looked around at Lassiter in the midst of her garrulity.

"Why, what is the matter?" she cried amazed. "This is a fine way for my *yerno* to look when he is about to be married——"

The promoter realized that his face betrayed the horror with which the old woman's words had filled him. Only her gabbling had brought to him personally the abomination of the sun-worship, that his own children, the fruit of his and Tilita's love would be——

"What is it? What is it?" cried the ancient in growing alarm. She dipped her gourd and shuffled toward him, spilling wine as she came. She watched him drink it with satisfaction.

"Holy Pachacamac, but you are not at all gay for a *novio* (bridegroom), *señor*. You are not ill?"

He denied all illness, and when she pressed him to know what was the matter, he hesitated for an explanation that would conceal his thoughts.

"Gogoma has asked me to become the high priest."

The old woman stepped back. Her mouth dropped open.

"The high priest!"

"*Si, señora.*"

"But—but a priest can not marry——"

Her voice was an aspirate.

"No——"

"Then—then my daughter—my little Tilita——"

Her words wavered off. Lassiter saw that she was about to fall into the shocking grief of the aged. He put an arm around her.

"It's just an offer, *señora*—just a proposition——"

The old baggage stood staring up at him, drawing short uneven breaths.

"Oh, *señor*, my daughter—my little *hija*——"

Her fine old eyes grew dark and fear-struck.

"Merely a proposal, *señora*, a tender, an overture," he repeated emptyily.

The old woman looked around her with dazed eyes at the boiling pot, piles of fruit and jars of drink. The Stendill agent stood for a space and then, in exquisite discomfort, he touched his sombrero, wished her a "*buenas dias*" and moved away toward his paddlewood on self-conscious legs.

When a turn in the jungle mercifully shielded him from Prymoxl's eyes, the Stendill agent paused to wipe his face. He was surprized at the finality the old woman had construed into his first hint that he should become priest of the Sun. He had not realized how mandatory in the lives of the Incans was the slightest suggestion from the temple.

As he walked slowly toward his tree home, a curious thought came to him— Had Birdsong lived and completed his revolution, he could have married Tilita with a clear heart. He began to suspect that he had lost far more than the rebel army in the colporteur's death.



WHEN Lassiter reached the paddlewood, he saw Nunes seated just outside his cubicle on one of the little benches cleaning his automatic. The Colombian had the firearm in pieces beside him wiping each piece with a greasy rag. As he wiped, he whistled daintily and now and then he lifted and squinted through the barrel to admire the shine of its rifling. His wrists were still ringed with blue bruises where he had been tied.

The promoter nodded to the gallant without speaking and walked on into Birdsong's cubicle. The Colombian watched him and called after him cheerfully.

"I've taken everything Señor Birdsong had of value, Señor Lassiter—to pay for my mules."

Sure enough the colporteur's packs lay scattered here and there in the cubicle, quite gutted. Bibles and his private papers were flung over the nipa matting. Among this wreckage, Lassiter saw the bundle of letters which Birdsong had written to his wife. The promoter picked these up together with one of the Testaments.

Nunes continued talking cheerfully through the thin partition.

"You can't fancy my surprize, *señor*,

when I looked down and saw he was gone. I was quite startled, and I assure you, *señor*, it requires no small thing to startle Dom Pedro Balthasar Nunes."

The promoter slipped these keepsakes of the dead man into his pockets with some vague idea of forwarding them to Mollie Birdsong. There was something pathetic in the worn little Testament which Birdsong had toiled to bring to Motobatí.

"And do you know, *señor*, I've wondered what could have whisked a man away like that when he was stuck so tight; and think, there was absolutely nowhere for him to go—and he went so quick—I'm a hard man to puzzle, *señor*, but this puzzles me——"

Lassiter came out buttoning the flaps of his pockets. The muleteer looked up curiously.

"It's a Bible and a package of letters."

The muleteer nodded.

"The reason I took everything, *Señor* Birdsong had," reexplained Nunes apologetically, "is because I need it and you don't, *Señor* Lassiter. As a rule I act generously, but now I can not. In the war you played the wise part—a friend to both sides, but I made enemies—of both sides—" he shrugged lightly—"quite *declassé*."

"What are you going to do?" asked Lassiter curiously.

The Colombian began reassembling the firearm with the expertness of much practise.

"I will try to get what I want, *señor*," he glanced at Lassiter with a smile that lifted his glossy mustache and showed his thick red lips. He arose, drew some greasy cartridges from his greasy pockets and clucked them into the automatic.

"Nunes," said Lassiter gloomily, "you are going to get yourself thrown into the net after all."

The muleteer laughed aloud.

"My dear *camarado*, to hear us talk any one would think I was the bridegroom and you the unhappy suitor. I swear you haven't the face of a man who will act as *novio* to the sweetest girl in Motobatí tonight."

"I'm not."

"Not what?"

"Not going to marry Tilita tonight."

Balthasar paused in addressing his pistol. "You are not going to marry Tilita tonight?"

"No."

"You—are—not—going—to—marry—Tilita—

tonight?" he spaced his words with blank incredulity.

The New Yorker made a gesture.

"Why?"

The promoter stood looking at his muleteer.

"Well, I'll tell you— You're the only man I can tell since he's gone. It's this—this sun-worship stuff— It's merely a system of infanticide. Why, Nunes, this — place is simply a huge baby farm— It's hellish, it's diabolical— It's—" He broke off with a shudder and stood staring.

The Colombian was nodding a courteous, "Sí, *señor*," at each of these denunciations. Now at the interruption he waited a moment and finally prompted amiably.

"But you haven't said why you weren't going to marry, *señor*?"

Lassiter looked at him, came to himself.

"What?"

"Why aren't you going to marry?"

"Good —, do you think I could marry in such a hole as this?"

The mule driver stared blankly, but presently ejaculated—

"Oh—no—no—certainly not——"

"You wouldn't, would you?"

"If—if somebody else—er—killed the babies?"

"Somebody else——"

"The priests, didn't you say?"

The two men stood staring at each other, both completely at sea. The Colombian finally said—

"Anyway, you are not going to marry Tilita tonight?"

"No, I am going to the temple."

Nunes nodded solemnly.

"We are much alike, *Señor* Lassiter, that is what I would do." He pondered a moment; then for some reason drew out his pistol again and carefully removed the cartridges from the chamber, one by one. He placed the automatic in one pocket, the cartridges in another, touched his sombrero and moved off toward the baobab. Before he was out of sight, he broke into his airy whistling again and did a little skip-step, like a boy impatient for some sport.



WHILE Lassiter talked to Nunes he had decided to become a priest of the Sun. Something within the man had determined upon cloistering in the *teocalla*. What it was that determined, when it had determined, the promoter did

not know. The decision had come to pass in the blind alleys of his subconsciousness.

The first hint the man received was when he spoke tentatively to old Prymoxl. Now he had announced a definite decision to Nunes. He walked back into his cubicle and began packing his bags with a kind of thirst for the quiet and abnegation of the temple.

As he packed, the surroundings of the paddewood brought Birdsong before his mind. He thought of how he had run after the little man for their last talk, of how Birdsong had warned him against idolatrous women, and had prayed that he should never marry Tilita. His present action and that prayer were a last strange coincidence.

Just around in the southern cubicle lay scattered Birdsong's Bibles where they would lie and mold until time and insects reduced them to dust. This was the outcome of the price of land advancing in Arkansas, and a squatter's gratitude to God for the law of adverse possession—this pitiful sacrifice for a callous muleteer.

Lassiter was stowing away the last of his things when he heard a step outside, and then a little gasp. He straightened with the deliberation of thirty-nine years and saw Tilita standing with his dinner in the sunlight of the entrance. She seemed breathless from hurrying, and now stood looking at him with frightened eyes. She put the platter on the table mechanically, and then stood mute, regarding first the man, then his packed bags.

The promoter remained motionless with the peculiar outspread, hanging hands of a man who is caught under suspicious circumstances. Mentally he blasphemed that he had packed his bags so hastily. He should have let the girl come and go. They advertised his decision. They shouted it without finesse. He had meant to consult with Tilita, to win her over gently, but his packed bags damned him.

She moistened her lips.

"My *madre* told me th-that perhaps—"

Her composure which depended on her silence failed on this sentence. She began another—

"I r-ran all the way. I—I was afraid you would b-be g—"

Suddenly she dropped to her knees with her arms across the platter—

"Oh—oh, *primol!*" she sobbed. "Th-this was our w-wedding supper—"

She lay sobbing violently with her arms stretched among the fruits and wine and bowls that were meant to grace her wedding feast.

Lassiter crossed to her with a melting pity. He wrapped her in his arms.

"Oh, Tilita, beautiful, hush, don't cry, sweetheart—"

He was patting her cheek; he lifted her blue-black hair and pressed his lips to the whiteness of her neck. The smell of her hair, the spice of the wine and the soft rondures of her form filled Lassiter with the vastness of his resignation.

One lobe of his brain set up a desperate pleading for this luscious woman; another began framing some excuse that would protect her from the devastating knowledge that had come to him. The old excuse of religion came to his mind, that mental buffer to interpose before the edge of reality. It was the first and last use Lassiter ever made of the science.

"Tilita, a man's religious duty should come first of all—"

"Tilita, both of us owe our lives to Pachacamac who made us—"

"Tilita, both of us will live forever as bride and groom in the bright mansions of the Sun—"

With long sighs, the man mouthed the old, old *dichés*. The ashes, the emptiness of it filled his mouth with salt. He circled her breast and face with his arms and pressed his face to hers. He could feel her wet cheeks against his.

"Oh, Tilita, Tilita—" he shuddered.

His pain brought the girl some self control. She began mothering him and lifted herself, and partially lifted him. She stood with wet face, with one arm about his neck, and one hand on his breast. She glanced down at her platter, and lowered an arm to offer him some wine.

Her arm bent a little backward and dimpled at the elbow, with the soft flexibility of a woman's arm. Every move she made wrought upon the priest. He wondered desperately if it would be possible for them to live childlessly in Motobat, but her very wealth of charm jeered at him. Her babies would be as dimpled and lovely as she. He could not touch the wine. They went together slowly to the hammock and sat.



SHE was so wretched that Lassiter prevailed upon her to lie at full length and he sat at the slenderness of her waist. They remained thus in silence, and presently the strange comfort that lovers give each other crept slowly over them both. It dulled their sadness. It hushed the trickle of minutes in a pool of timelessness.

The man looked sadly at the shadows about her eyes, at the little hollow at the base of her throat. Her hair seemed dark as if she were sick, and her eyes remained steadfastly on his.

Presently she whispered with a faint smile that she had prayed every evening since they first knelt by the web of the sun that he should come to believe in Pachacamac—and now he had.

"I shall become a vestal of the Sun," she told him.

Their mood fell into a sort of adagio. The flattery of the cloister came to Lassiter pensively. He thought of himself as high priest, and of vestals, unused, holding a sort of faint violet sweetness. The possibility of a sort of happiness began to limn itself even on the murderous background of Motobat. No doubt that mood laid hold of the girl even more strongly, for she was a child with a child's dreaminess.

He sat looking down at her, holding her hands, filled with her sweetness. A ray of the declining sun sifted through the paddlewood and its pool of light wore slowly across the floor. The perfume of the jungle breathed in upon them. A fly droned above the cordage of the hammock, and a last, when it settled on the strange rope of which the bed was made, it zinged away as if again the devil of insects were in pursuit.

The girl's gaze grew dreamy. Her breathing became quite regular. Her eyes drooped. Her anxieties of the preceding days, the torments of a girl's first love, the sleepless and terrible night she had spent in the temple, all rushed upon her as she lay relaxed and at peace with the man she loved.

She looked dewy in her sleep. Her eyes were like pale blue water-lilies above the crimson flowering of her lips. Now and then her fingers clutched Lassiter's at some impulse of her nerves.

The promoter realized that now was the painless time for him to go. He loosed his fingers gently from her hand; he lifted his

weight carefully from the hammock and stood clear. It swung the hammock a little, but she slept with the limp soundness of thirteen.

The promoter stood looking down at her. The little cubicle seemed filled with light and perfume emanating from the sleeping girl. A great sadness came over the man. Had Birdsong lived, in this sweet flower garden he would have found rest and peace, the sweet communion of long nights and tenderness by day—

He picked up his packs guardedly and for another moment hung looking at her with his burden. He was doing her a great, great kindness to preserve her beauty from the pain and murder of child-bearing in Motobat; he was doing her a great, great goodness to preserve her faith and to resign her heavy bosom to the chill purity of the temple. This was the great kindness and the great goodness of Charles Lassiter's life.

On his way out, his eyes rested a moment on his untouched portion of the marriage feast.

XIV



THE chronic suppression of society prevents a man from bewailing his griefs openly and sanitarily. Probably ages of fighting and military training has taught the mind the wisdom of the generalissimo who stands off cool and collected, thinking what best may be done in the emergency, even while his army breaks and perishes.

Charles Lassiter deliberately ceased thinking of the *mestizo* girl almost as soon as he left the paddlewood. He avoided things that would remind him of her. He made a quarter of a mile circuit through the steamy jungle around the baobab where Prymoxl still toiled at the wedding feast. He struck in toward the lake at an angle that would miss the cow-tree forest. His bags were heavy; the afternoon painfully bright and hot. The glare hurt his eyes, and he felt weary and old.

He kept his mind on the surface of things, so thinly on the surface of things that it was a sort of vacancy. When he looked at the palm fronds, at the reach of the lake toward the *teocalla*, these things simply were. With an effort he banished all mental association or aura of beauty. A cow must look at a landscape in some such fashion.

From the lake shore he saw some white

rolling clouds drift up out of the Amazon valley above the eastern rim of Motobatl. Their whiteness turned the sky above them to an indigo and the palisades to a cardinal. His mind did not combine these three brilliancies into a harmony.

The hillock which hid the Web of the Sun lifted its mystery between him and the temple. His eyes rested on it with a stunned man's quietism. Only when he passed it and waded through the hot sand around the swing of the lake did the memory of Tilita assail him. In this blistering place he had kissed and embraced her. An ache struck through his mind, like the start of a broken tooth. The promoter made a hurried movement. He swung his bags to his other shoulder and scrambled back to the surface of things.

He looked behind him. The sun was an hour and a half high. A fisherman rowed his boat toward a reedy island. Far up the beach Lassiter could see the black dots of two human figures coming toward him. No doubt it was some of Birdsong's men bringing a sacrifice to atone for their impiety.

So he walked on, considering Birdsong's murder very quietly, without the faintest condemnation or approval. It was war, a move in a chess game. The pawns of life took first this position and that. Birdsong was dead; he was stepping into the archiepiscopal chair; Gogoma would paint—it was a — hot day.

Quiz-Quiz, the hunchback, stood at Nunes' *bolsa* with its queer top where it lay at the edge of the piazza. Whether the acolyte were waiting for him or not, Lassiter did not know. The crooked little man took one of the bags and the two proceeded across the vast piazza that quivered in the heat.

The columns of the façade seemed to tremble. The hexagonal tufa blocks stung Lassiter's feet. The sun stuck a hot brand to the back of his neck. The piazza seemed endless. The hunchback piloted him toward the southern side entrance.

Half-way across the piazza the Stendill agent peered back through the flame of sunshine. The distant figures had enlarged. They were almost to the net, and were running.

With vast relief, Lassiter stepped out of the heat into the chill hypogeum. Its gloom and chill fell like a lotion on his eyes. As he

moved inside he thought he heard a distant shouting, or, more likely, it was some variation in the coughing and sucking of the whirlpool far to the north.

The southern entrance let into a mere tunnel that penetrated inward twenty or thirty steps, then led into another tunnel that ran north and south at right angles. This passageway gave on an endless row of cenobitic cells parallel with the cliff outside.*

The hunchback led the way to one of these cells, put Lassiter's bag inside, glanced about for a moment to see that everything was in order, then explained that this would be the novitiate's room and retired.

The promoter stood looking about him. A hole through ten feet of stone admitted a ray of light into the chamber. The only furnishing was a sort of stone couch or table. The walls of the cell were roughly hewn, but the surface of the couch was not only polished, but into it was worn the impression of a human form. How many anchorites for how many centuries had stretched themselves on it to hard repose!



LASSITER put his bags in a corner and stood looking around the expressionless hole. The floor, also, was worn into distinct grooves by the tramping of feet. The thought of such a stream of life eddying out of the warmth and sunlight of the crater to stagnate in this chill hole oppressed Lassiter. To what dull end they had gravitated.

The promoter sat down on his couch and looked at his bags. He did not open them, nor make any of those little arrangements of housekeeping which a man performs even to camp for a night. It seemed not worth while. Indeed, the mental basis of every home-keeping gesture in man are a mate and children. By his desertion of Tilita, this had been torn from Lassiter's brain.

So he sat on the couch in silence. The air shaft gave a yellowish circle of light on the opposite wall. It showed the grain of the volcanic stone. Presently the promoter became aware of a faint odor of the cow-tree milk in the close air. Lassiter straightened and savored the air almost in surprise. It was the odor of milk. Then he realized

*The temple of the Sun in Motobatl was probably the most populous cenobite known to history. Twenty-two hundred and sixty-five cells honeycomb the cliff. The whole object of this vast institution was to reduce the birth rate of the imprisoned nation by celibacy.

that the scent of Tilita's body had clung to his clothes.

It annoyed Lassiter sharply. A vision of the girl asleep in the hammock passed before his eyes. He shook his shoulders sharply, got up, walked over to the air shaft and looked out. The shaft gave on a circle of saffron western sky. The promoter stood breathing at the intake, thinking he should have changed his clothing.

His hardly suppressed thoughts began breaking in on his brain. He could see her asleep in the hammock. On his fingers he could feel the warmth where her hands had clung. It seemed that he had, at that moment, stepped away from her side.

He let his curbed imagination go. He wondered wistfully if she were still asleep; and what would she do when she awoke? Go back to the baobab? Back to old Prymoxl and the empty wedding feast? What a raw, lonely vigil the night would bring her! And had Birdsong lived, what rapture they would have known! This very sunset that sent a splotch of crimson light down the air-shaft would have drawn curtains about their wedding couch!

A pulse began throbbing in his neck. He could feel a faint warm line along the closure of his lips. Blood murmured in his ear. In the vast stillness of the cliff, he could hear the functioning of his heart. Its systole and diastole formed a gurgling that sounded almost like an external voice. He imagined it said his own name over and over—

"Señor Lassiter! Señor Lassiter! Señor Lassiter!"

It might have been Tilita's voice repeating the watery syllables interminably.

As the man sat listening, the faint calling seemed to detach itself from the murmur in his ears. It seemed to come from the corridor. It was distinctly from the corridor, far down toward the south, in the opposite direction from the entrance.

That any person should be whispering his name in this distant wing of the hypogeum amazed Lassiter. He went out into the passageway. He could not see beyond fifteen or twenty doors owing to the curve of the passage. But the whispering of his name came closer and closer.

It sounded as if some spectral voice were moving through solid stone from cell to cell calling him. It was impossible to say whether it was man's or woman's. Now it was only a few doors above him. The

corridor remained empty. The voice passed into an adjoining cell. Suddenly it was in his own cell.

The promoter wheeled back inside.

"What is it?" he asked of emptiness. Then he saw that his air-shaft was darkened.

He stepped to his shaft, looked through and saw the Colombian's face at the other end. The man's eyes were staring.

"By the Holy Virgin!" gasped the fellow. "I thought I'd never find you—the girl, Tilita—you're a priest—perhaps you can—"

Balthasar's excitement communicated itself to the neophyte:

"What is it?" he asked sharply. "What's happened to her? Answer me, man!"

A sudden premonition roughened his skin.

The Colombian suddenly lifted his voice to a whispering wail:

"Oh, Mother of God! She's in the net! Jumped in! Run! *Mio Dios, señor, run!*"

Lassiter whirled. As he rushed out of his cell, he still heard that wailing whisper pursuing him:

"Run! Run! Oh, Holy Mary!"

Quiz-Quiz was at the door. Two or three priests were flying northward down the corridor that led toward the main temple. Lassiter shouted at the hunchback to open the door. The crooked little man began pointing and screaming for Lassiter to run with the other priests—to grease his feet. The promoter stormed the door through which he had entered. He flung his weight against the bolts. They clashed back. The portal inched open. Quiz-Quiz clamored a warning as Lassiter shot through the opening.

Furnace heat and a blare of golden light smote the troglodyte as he leaped out of the cavern. Nunes was waiting in a quiver at the entrance. At sight of Lassiter he whirled and bolted across the wide pavement. He began explaining in staccato:

"Mother of God! Quiz-Quiz wouldn't let me in! I had to shout in a thousand windows! She must be swallowed up—gone—"

He tore along through the heat. The promoter panted after him. A hot breeze beat against the American's face; his heart pounded. The piazza was so huge his feet seemed to patter up and down in one place. Nunes gradually crept up on him.

By the time they reached the *bolsa* at the edge of the piazza, the muleteer was abreast. He drew out his automatic and

stuck it butt foremost to the flying New Yorker. Lassiter got it without breaking his stride.

Beyond the pavement, the sand slowed him up. His feet slipped, his shoes filled. Both men were reduced to a miserable trot. Lassiter stared ahead through his dripping sweat. The sun was just sinking behind the western palisade. It was the hour of sacrifice, when things flung into the net vanished. With a last effort the promoter plowed up the mound, gasping for breath.



IN THE limed circle lay the Incan girl. At the sound of Lassiter's sobbing breath she turned her head, saw him and screamed—

"*Primol!*"

She struggled violently to loose herself. The man plunged down the stones toward her.

At that moment a section of the landward stones opened. Something huge, leggy and bristly flashed out. Its spindling legs covered a twenty foot circle. Its body was a globular bag mottled with spots the size of a man's head. In a sort of spiked plate on its front were set six staring black eyes. The plate and bag were borne on the huge spiky legs at about the height of a man's head.

The thing flashed on the girl with a sort of rubbery snap. It caught her on the movable spikes of its frontal plate, and next moment flashed back. It was so swift, so silent, so horrible, Lassiter had neither time nor mind to raise his firearm. A mere stab, a flash—and the net hung empty save for the girl's clothes still sticking to the limed cords.

The Stendill agent climbed down to the net shakily, like an old man. He set his feet on the cords and moved carefully around the limed center toward the unstable stones. He heard Nunes shouting at him from the hillock.

What he pushed was not a stone but a sort of silken flap that swung back easily. Inside it was dark. He could see only the white blur of the girl, and the glint of eyes, such as he had seen on the rim of the crater. He drew out his flashlight with queer deliberation and switched it on.

Under its spurt, the cavern glowed all over with a pale sheen. It was lined with silk. The place stunk of insects and rotting flesh.

Under the hard light of the electric torch, the creature gave the girl's body a delicate

kiss, a mere touch with a hair-like lancet that slipped into the lower margin of her right breast over her heart. At the touch, the girl curved up her body, her right arm dropped among the spikes on the frontal plate, her left swung limply down.

Lassiter risked a shot at the eyes above her body. During the very flash of the shot, the monster vanished and reappeared sticking to the silken roof over the promoter's head. Its great bag hung downward from a spread of legs. The white body of the girl was still in its mandibles. The promoter lifted his automatic to shoot again.

Suddenly down through the electric glare fell coils of shining viscid cables. They fell in a sort of horrible shimmering beauty around his neck, arms, legs. He could see the stuff spewing out of eight spinnarets at the end of the abdomen. Fortunately the man had his pistol trained on it. He fired deliberately, three times, into this downpour of limed silk. At the third shot Tilita's body fell from the roof to the silken floor. The thing itself vanished. Amid the gummy silk Lassiter contrived to twist his light this way and that. The cavern was empty. The thing had escaped with such suddenness his eyes did not register the motion.

The sound of voices and the flare of torches came from the further end of the cavern and presently Gogoma and four other priests of the sun appeared crawling out of the end of a tunnel which evidently connected with the temple.

The naked behemoth glanced about, then waddled over the silken carpet to the woman's limp form. In the flare of the torches he balanced his bulk carefully, stooped and lifted the flexuous figure. He straightened and laid it across the sweating expanse of his chest and shoulder. He stroked her curves with puffy fingers in profound satisfaction. After a moment he thought to ask—

"I hope you are not injured, Señor Lassiter?"

The Stendill agent made some answer amid his smother of limed tubes. Two of the priests ran over and began stripping the viscous stuff from his body with their greased hands.

"In your zeal to save the girl from being consumed, Señor Lassiter," purred the high priest, "I hope you have not caused her to be

imperfectly anesthetized and preserved."

The promoter made no answer. The words Gogoma used seemed to mean nothing.

"This body," proceeded the high priest, "will be a rare addition to my gallery." Again he stroked her rondures with swollen fingers. "After all, Señor Lassiter, we have preserved the immortal part of this girl—her beauty—this sweet modeling of flesh. That is what all men love in a woman, Señor Lassiter, beauty. The lover clasps beauty in his arms and it vanishes even while it lies upon his heart. But the artist, Señor Lassiter—ah, the artist really enjoys his love.

"With his eye, that subtle sense of touch, infinitely refined, he embraces the whole woman in a sort of kissing gaze. How gross the passion of a lover, Señor Lassiter, how cool and sublimated the rapture of an artist. Beauty is the thought of God. In the temple we will return thanks reverently for this little sleepy flower—"

The priests were picking their way back through the tunnel to the temple of the sun. They came out in a great chamber into which the last of the sunset fell through a huge rose window. Opposite the window was a rayed plate of burnished gold. The yellow light falling on this mirror filled the chamber with an intense fulgor.

The apartment was lined on all sides with a brilliant tapestry of featherwork. The vivid green of parrots vibrated against the lory's yellow, the crimson of a humming-bird's throat flared against the cream of a pelican. Such an irisated palet no paint ever produced.



THE picture was of the rising sun spreading its web of light. In its shining gossamer were woven animals, trees, insects, naked men and women, babies, spiders, loathly worms. On the right wall the shining beams raveled out into a myriad human shapes, belly-gods gorging, warriors slaughtering, lovers em-

bracing, law-makers judging, thieves stealing, murderers stabbing, and yet it was all sunlight. The whole vital realm, the artist was saying, is nothing but a rainbow froth of love, lust, rapine, pain, weariness, joy and ecstasy where sunlight impinges on matter. All of it is somehow bound up in sunlight, all of it somehow, is spun out of the web of the Sun.

In the center of the room knelt the naked forms of Tilita's grandmother and of the colporteur. The Spanish woman's sensuousness and the Arkansan's powerful physique and hard face formed a subtle harmony with the figures in the featherwork. Birdsong's scroll of polished black hair was still intact. On the other side of the revivalist, old Gogoma arranged Tilita's body in an attitude of adoration.

Lassiter stood looking at the three figures kneeling to the golden image of the sun. Their bodies were preserved, their hearts barely beat in the immortality of a spider's poison. They would never die; they would never live. Their bodies would persist on and on, exactly as if they were netted in the spider's web, waiting for a return of the monster to suck out their juices.

Lassiter wondered dully if any consciousness lay behind their slow-batting eyes. If they felt pain or discomfort or nothing.

The light died with the suddenness which the promoter had noted from the rim of the cliff. Then all the new ecclesiast could see were three dim figures kneeling in the gloom. As Lassiter marched out with the other priests, a curious fear assailed him. He was afraid that a rat might gnaw Tilita in the night.*

XV



AT SOME time during the night the solution of his whole career in Motobatl became clear to Charles Lassiter. The promoter paused in his pacing to and fro in front of the air-shaft in gray relief. It was very simple.

*The discovery of the immense trap-door spiders (*Cteniza gigantea hindshawensis*) in the Amazon valley by Sir Cecil Hindshaw in 1918 makes comment on the above passage in Charles Lassiter's narrative unnecessary. However, the transcriber takes the liberty to refresh the reader's recollection of Sir Cecil's noteworthy contribution to entomological literature. On page ninety-two of his book† the author says:

"These large spiders imitate almost perfectly with their trap doors, the stony environs of their dens, reproducing even the coloration of the stone and its stratification. Among the Jivaros we found a fully developed spider worship, resembling the 'mantis worship' among the

African Bushmen, or a similar spider worship called 'ananzi' by the negroes of the West Coast of Africa.

"These enormous spiders are, no doubt, the most formidable creatures in existence today. They go on long forays and can kill and drag a bullock to its den. My guide declared he saw one capture a jaguar in its toils. These large spiders seem to equal, proportionally, the ordinary spider in speed and agility. The common *Cteniza* can move twenty times its own length in a second. The *Cteniza gigantea* which I succeeded in killing had a spread of fifteen feet. This would give it a speed of three hundred feet per second. Certainly I made no measurements, but on the two occasions when I saw this *Cteniza* before I obtained the killing shot, the creature simply disappeared from our vision. We had not the slightest idea of the direction of its flight until the trailers found its track.

†"A Naturalist on the Upper Amazon," Hindshaw. Wier & Duffing, 16, Piccadilly Circus, London. 20s. 6d.

The shaft itself was now a small circular blur in the utter blackness of his cell. As Lassiter paused at the end of the intake, the wet smell of rain breathed in upon him.

For a moment the agent stood reckoning the position of his bags, but as he started to move toward them, he remembered that he would not need them again. The thought brought a passing sense of queerness. Always he had carried his bags; now he was deserting them. It seemed strange to think that he was about to walk away and never come back for the leather cases stacked in the corner of his crypt.

He moved carefully toward the door, holding out his arms, fingers spread. When finally he touched the wall, he did not find the door where he thought it should be. But at last he found it, passed through and began feeling his way down the long curving passage of the hypogeum.

The turn of the corridor was at a greater distance than he had expected, but after that he got quickly to the door. His management of the bolts a few hours before aided him in the blackness and a few moments later he drew the great shutters a little apart. A current of spray drifted in out of the night, and the rain whispered in the black ear of the *teocalla*. *Inviernillo*, little Winter, had descended on Motobat! at last.

Lassiter shivered at the thought of exposing himself to the rain at night. He felt an impulse to return to his cell for his poncho and sombrero, and then he reflected that he would remove both before he entered the water, and that they would lie on the edge of the piazza all night in the rain. Oddly enough, the thought of leaving a soaked coat and a shapeless hat was distasteful to the agent.

He closed the portals softly behind him, paused for a moment in the recessed arch of the entrance, and then stepped out into the slow cold rain.

The drizzle chilled Lassiter, but it brought him a certain composure and sequence of thought that he had not known in his cell. The wide murmur of the rain filled the night, and through it he could hear the suck and gasp of the whirlpool in the north. That lullaby should soothe away his too constant thoughts. Beyond the piazza toward the west, he could see the sheen of the lake and the pale narrowing of the river as it swung in toward the *teocalla*. He could even make out the shimmer of the sand where he and Tilita had—the thought broke into the old trickle of pain.

The strangeness of what he was about to do gradually grew on Lassiter. It seemed amazing that presently he, by his own will, would flicker out like a picture on a screen. It seemed fantastic that his own legs, his own eyes would guide themselves to nothingness. They had served him so long—and now they would turn traitor to themselves—

The lift and fall of his feet over the wet pavement; the play of his muscles under his soggy clothes; the trickle of water through his hair; the very functioning of his eyes in the gray night took on a sort of marvel. How strange that all this elaboration that moved and breathed and grieved could, in a moment, by its own will, become a stringing of mud and a blowing of dust!

His death would be the strangest, the most enigmatic gesture of his life. Then a queer thought came—

Would blotting out despair ease it? In the shimmer of the lake he would find neither peace nor pain—he would find nothing. Could becoming nothing rectify his wrong to Tilita? His remorse was a kind of unbalanced force, and forces cannot be blotted; they can only be counteracted. Was it possible for his sin toward Tilita somehow to escape his body? It was a sick man's notion, absurd, feverish. A shiver went over him.

I need hardly say the slaughter of one *Atenisa gigantea* furnished more thrills than a dozen tiger hunts in India; nevertheless, I do not predict that it will become a popular sport."

When Motobat! was occupied by workmen in the employ of the Stendill lines in the construction of the hangar and tourist hotel now in the crater, the three unfortunate victims of the spider were found in the great *teocalla*. Much discussion arose what disposition should be made of the bodies. At last two were sent to scientific institutions for medical examination. London College of Physicians and Surgeons received a man, and Johns Hopkins of Baltimore received a woman. Under a microscopic examination, it was discovered by Dr. J. Edward Westmoreland of London, that the spider in paralyzing human

victims inserts its poison lancet over the heart, into the back of the neck and through the umbilicus into the viscera. The poison produces profound coma and seems also to act as a preservative against cellular degeneration.

The third victim, a girl, which is thought to be the Tilita mentioned in Lassiter's narrative, fell into the hands of a Professor Waldrup, a tourist flying through Motobat!. When last heard from, oddly enough in Arkansas, Professor Waldrup was giving hypnotic performances with the body, allowing it to lie all night in the show-windows of village drug stores, sticking it full of hat pins and such like, catering to the scientific mind of America. It should be a matter of national pride how we Americans derive culture and refinement out of the most untoward circumstances.



THE dark blur of Nunes' *bolsa* still lay at the foot of the piazza; as Lassiter approached it, he heard a scraping and presently saw a movement in the mass of the boat. As he came closer, he saw it was a man bailing out the boat with an oar. The promoter walked on past the stranded *bolsa* into the water when Nunes' voice called, "Is it you, *señor*?"

The promoter answered and paused at the depth of his knees.

"*Mio Dios!*" gasped the Colombian. "And you escaped the spider! You escaped—I heard shots——"

The promoter agreed wearily.

"You see I'm out." And he waded on into the river.

There was a pause; the muleteer came to the edge of the water and peered after the vanishing man. He cleared his throat, then called with a certain politeness through the rain.

"If you will wait a moment, *señor*, I am going your way. We have been *camarados* all the way through, *señor*——" The promoter peered at him through the gloom.

"Do you mean——"

"*Sí, señor*, and the whirlpool will be more dashing than still water, more fitting for *caballeros*——"

"It's all the same, Nunes."

"But—but, *señor*," pleaded the muleteer in a queer voice, "I hate going down alone—I hate it—I was standing here thinking—I will tell you——"

"I meant to take the girl down with me in this *bolsa*. Ah, *Señor Lassiter*, that would have been a death! To be sucked down the whirlpool in her arms. *Madre de Dios!* What a death for a *caballero!* Kissing her scarlet lips, pressing her soft body! What a death!"

He broke off shuddering in the drizzle. Lassiter watched his frustration with detached eyes. Suddenly the Colombian broke out in a sort of rage.

"Mother of God! You *Norte Americanos* feel nothing! You are stones! I loved the girl! She hated me just enough to be fire—flame! May the fiends——"

He shook his oar at the dripping skies, flung it into the *bolsa*, seized the prow and heaved at the clumsy vessel. It grated a few inches on the sand.

The muleteer heaved again, damning himself, the world, the girl; as he damned, he worked the *bolsa* into the river. When

it floated he left off his cursing with his pushing and swung up on its gunwale. As he floated past Lassiter he reached down a hand.

"Come on, *camarado*," he said in the dull backwash of his violence. "Let us perish like *caballeros* in the maelstrom, not drown like pigs in a pool——" As he heaved the promoter aboard, he panted between heaves——

"It is true—I meant to murder you—on your bridal couch, Don Carlos—and seize your bride—but not as an *enemigo*—not so, *mi amigo*—but as one dear friend—who murders—for the woman they love——"

Lassiter got himself into the stern of the *bolsa*. The smallness, the triviality of the Colombian's lust, this final melodramatic gesture, this assertion of his entity—how pigmy-ish it stood against the impersonal drizzle of the skies, the rising wail of the maelstrom and the vast blankness of death.

The Colombian pulled down the cover of his *bolsa* which he had designed to protect him and Tilita for a little space. It shut out the rain and the gray night. Then Lassiter heard him crawling along the sides adjusting some sort of fastenings.

The promoter shifted his seat on the reed bottom until he had gained some sort of repose. The little nerves of his body demanded their due attention on the eve of extinction. They were like tiny burghers functioning, unconscious and unalarmed while a tornado rushed upon their dwelling.

Presently the Colombian said quietly:

"I watched you when you left her in the paddlewood, Don Carlos. I went in at once and waked her and yet—I let her be—there was something so terrible in her eyes—I could not do it. You can well imagine my amazement, Don Carlos, when I found that I, Dom Pedro Porforio Balthasar Nunes, a muleteer and a *caballero*, was really so weak as to hold off my hands, to let her go— Do you think, *señor*, that He—He Who looks down upon us and reads the good and evil of our hearts—do you think that in a moment He will say to me, 'My son, Porforio, for this great renunciation you shall have the highest seat in——'"

The *bolsa* touched a stone and jarred heavily. The coughing and sucking of the whirlpool overcame the muleteer's voice. The increasing clamor of the waters brought back with a last despair Lassiter's days with Tilita at the bird limes. Against the intense darkness, the girl arose before him with the intensity of tropical sunlight, her

sweetness, her eagerness, her rich earnest of love and children—the odor of milk suddenly filled the *bolsa*—

The roaring of the water drowned every thought but the image. The *bolsa* swung up on the piled water and swung round and round with narrowing and increasing spin. Came a vast sucking in Lassiter's ears. The front of the *bolsa* tipped up crazily. Lassiter, in the stern, felt himself being drawn down backward. Water came squirting

down on him through a hundred interstices of the top. It covered the spinning figure of the man with a swishing sound.

The promoter suddenly began struggling for air. He strove to pull himself up. His chest made spasmodic efforts to inhale the water roaring about his head. The form of Tilita flamed brighter, then flickered—a deep gratitude filled the brain of the drowning man. He knew beyond the maelstrom lay nothing.

Addenda by the Transcriber

AN ENGINEERING party which made a recent survey of the outlet of Motobatl lake in behalf of a hydro-electric company, discovered that the shell of the crater at the whirlpool is only one hundred and twelve yards in thickness, and that the racing water accomplishes its passage through the hole in exactly fifty-two and three-eighths seconds.

Two tourists have emulated Lassiter's passage through the whirlpool by having themselves nailed up in barrels and launched into the maelstrom. No harm came to them, although a swimmer who attempted to dive through the outlet was killed.

Of Lassiter's passage, nothing could be learned from the man himself, as he has no recollection of it. The Stendill agent's memory picks up its narrative at a hospital in Iquitos, Peru. At this place Lassiter found himself suffering from a cerebral trouble. Nunes had disappeared, although the house physician stated that a Colombian, giving the name of Balthasar Nunes, brought the sick man to the hospital.

This Colombian told the doctor that he had brought his comrade down the Rio Nanay, which had its fountain-head in the mountain of Motobatl. For several days the Colombian had been very attentive, calling each day at the hospital, and even asking to help nurse his American friend, which, of course, was not permitted. However, before Lassiter became normal, Nunes' visits to the hospital stopped and nothing further was ever heard from the muleteer.

At Iquitos Lassiter made a bundle of Birdsong's letters and the Testament and forwarded them to Mollie Birdsong, Birdsong, Arkansas. He told her simply that her husband had perished in the service of his religion and that he had intrusted these letters to him, Lassiter, for her.

Iquitos, Peru, is the headwater of ocean navigation on the Amazon. Two weeks after Lassiter's convalescence, a Stendill steamer made port and the promoter set sail for New York.

On the first day down the river, the invalid picked up a copy of the *Diario*, a local paper of Iquitos. Across the front page were spread the headlines of an execution. Lassiter read it under the awning on the afterdeck. The article wound about in magniloquent Spanish fashion. At the conclusion, Lassiter read:

The accusation against Señor Nunes was that he followed Señora Altagracia from the *paseo* where he first saw her to her magnificent *casa* on Calle de la Virgin Immaculata, entered her boudoir in the sable watches of the night, and there attempted to misuse his prodigious strength and activity. When the *policia* burst into the mansion at the call of her husband, Señor Dom Tomas Altagracia, Caballero Nunes admitted his intent and was arrested.

Señor Dom Tomas Altagracia is a retired coffee exporter, and his wife, the beautiful Dona Purita Altagracia, has only nineteen years. They have always appeared to live together very happily.

The trial of Señor Nunes has aroused great interest and sympathy in Iquitos, especially among the *señoritas*. An admiring and distinguished anthology of beautiful damsels and charming wives attended the execution, which was admitted to be the most magnificent held in Iquitos for years.

When an opportunity was given the condemned to address his hearers, Señor Nunes pronounced a graceful tribute to "woman." Not a dry eye remained in his concourse of beautiful and distinguished hearers. Flowers were thrown upon the *banquillo*; dozens of *señoritas* climbed up to embrace the prisoner. It was an ovation.

Señora Dona Purita Altagracia pinned upon his lapel a blood-red rose, and printed upon his lips a kiss and upon his heart a long embrace—as a signal of her forgiveness.

The *señora's* husband, Dom Tomas, was too old to attend the execution in person.

Dom Balthasar Nunes met the fire of his unwilling executioners with an open breast, a smile upon his face and a graceful salute to the *señoras*. Four balls pierced his noble heart.