MURRAY LEINSTER

MURDER MADNESS

Seven United States Secret Service men have disappeared in South America. Another is found—a screaming homicidal maniac. It is rumored that they are victims of a diabolical poison which produces "murder madness."

More and more South Americans are stricken with the horrible "murder madness" that lies in The Master's fearful poison. And Bell is their one last hope as he fights to stem the swiftly rising tide of a continent's utter enslavement.

Charley Bell of the "Trade"—a secret service organization which does not officially exist—discovers that a sinister system of slavery is flourishing in South America, headed by a mysterious man known only as The Master. This slavery is accomplished by means of a poison which causes its victims to experience a horrible writhing of the hands, followed by a madness to do murder, two weeks after it is taken.

The victims get relief only with an antidote supplied through Ribiera, The Master's Chief Deputy; but in the antidote there is more of the poison, which again in two weeks will take effect. And so it is that a person who once receives the poison is forever enslaved.

Ribiera kidnaps Paula Canalejas, daughter of a Brazilian cabinet minister who, on becoming a victim, has killed himself, preferring death to "murder madness." Bell rescues Paula, and they flee from Ribiera in a plane. They find The Master's hidden jungle stronghold, and Bell destroys it with a bomb attack from the air. As he is getting away his motor quits. Paula jumps for her life, and shortly afterwards Bell follows, drifting straight down towards his enemies below.

CHAPTER XI

Bell was falling head-first when the 'chute opened, and the jerk was terrific, the more so as he had counted not the customary ten, but fifteen before pulling out the ring. But very suddenly he seemed to be floating down with an amazing gentleness, with the ruddy blossom of a parachute swaying against a background of lustrous stars very far indeed over his head. Below him were masses of smoke and at least one huge dancing mass of flame, where the storage tank for airplane gas had exploded. It was unlikely in the extreme, he saw now, that anyone under that canopy of smoke could look up to see plane or parachute against the sky.

Clumsily enough, dangling as he was, Bell twisted about to look for Paula. Sheer panic

came to him before he saw her a little above him but a long distance off. She looked horribly alone with the glare of the fires upon her parachute, and smoke that trailed away into darkness below her. She was farther from the flames than Bell, too. The light upon her was dimmer. And Bell cursed that he had stayed in the plane to make sure it would dive clear of her before he stepped off himself.

The glow on the blossom of silk above her faded out. The sky still glared behind, but a thick and acrid fog enveloped Bell as he descended. Still straining his eyes hopelessly, he crossed his feet and waited.

Branches reached up and lashed at him. Vines scraped against his sides. He was hurled against a tree trunk with stunning force, and rebounded, and swung clear, and then dangled halfway between earth and the jungle roof. It was minutes before his head cleared, and then he felt at once despairing and a fool. Dangling in his parachute harness when Paula needed him.

The light in the sky behind him penetrated even the jungle growth as a faint luminosity. Presently he writhed to a position in which he could strike a match. A thick, matted mass of climbing vines swung from the upper branches not a yard from his fingertips. Bell cursed again, frantically, and clutched at it wildly. Presently his absurd kickings set him to swaying. He redoubled his efforts and increased the arc in which he swung. But it was a long time before his fingers closed upon leaves which came away in his grasp, and longer still before he caught hold of a wrist-thick liana which oozed sticky sap upon his hands.

But he clung desperately, and presently got his whole weight on it. He unsnapped the parachute and partly let himself down, partly slid, and partly tumbled to the solid earth below.

He had barely reached it when, muffled and many times reechoed among the tree trunks, he heard two shots. He cursed, and sprang toward the sound, plunging headlong into underbrush that strove to tear the flesh from his bones. He fought madly, savagely, fiercely.

He heard two more shots. He fought the jungle in the darkness like a madman, ploughing insanely through masses of creepers that should have been parted by a machete, and which would have been much more easily slipped through by separating them, but which he strove to penetrate by sheer strength.

And then he heard two shots again.

Bell stopped short and swore disgustedly.

"What a fool I am!" he growled. "She's telling me where she is, and I—"

He drew one of the weapons that seemed to bulge in every pocket of his flying suit and fired two shots in the air in reply. A single one answered him.

From that time Bell moved more sanely. The jungle is not designed, apparently, for men to travel in. It is assuredly not intended for them to travel in by night, and especially it is not planned, by whoever planned it, for a man to penetrate without either machete or lights.

As nearly as he could estimate it afterward, it took Bell over an hour to cover one mile in the blackness under the jungle roof. Once he blundered into fire-ants. They were somnolent in the darkness, but one hand stung as if in white-hot metal as he went on. And thorns tore at him. The heavy flying suit protected him somewhat, but after the first hundred yards he blundered on almost blindly, with his arms across his face, stopping now and then to try to orient himself. Three times he fired in the air, and three times an answering shot came instantly, to guide him.

And then a voice called in the blackness, and he ploughed toward it, and it called again, and again, and at last he struck a match with trembling fingers and saw her, dangling as he had dangled, some fifteen feet from the ground. She smiled waveringly, with a little gasp of relief, and he heard something go slithering away, very furtively.

She clung to him desperately when he had gotten her down to solid earth. But he was savage.

"Those shots—though I'm glad you fired them—may have been a tip-off to the town. We've got to keep moving, Paula."

Her breath was coming quickly.

"They could trail us, Charles. By daylight we might not leave signs, but forcing our way through the night...."

"Right, as usual," admitted Bell. "How about shells? Did you use all you had?"

"Nearly. But I was afraid, Charles."

Bell felt in his pockets. Half a box. Perhaps twenty-five shells. With the town nearby and almost certainly having heard their signals to each other. Black rage invaded Bell. They would be hunted for, of course. Dogs, perhaps, would trail them. And the thing would end when they were at bay, ringed about by The Master's slaves, with twenty-five shells only to expend.

The dim little glow in the sky between the jungle leaves kept up. It was bright, and

slowly growing brighter. There was a sudden flickering and even the jungle grew light for an instant. A few seconds later there was a heavy concussion.

"Something else went up then," growled Bell. "It's some satisfaction, anyway, to know I did a lot of damage."

And then, quite abruptly, there was an obscure murmuring sound. It grew stronger, and stronger still. If Bell had been aloft, he would have seen the planes from The Master's hangars being rushed out of their shelters. One of the long row of buildings had caught. And the plateau of Cuyaba is very, very far from civilization. Tools, and even dynamos and engines, could be brought toilsomely to it, but the task would be terrific. Buildings would be made from materials on the spot, even the shelters for the planes. It would be much more practical to carry the parts for a saw mill and saw out the lumber on the spot than to attempt to freight roofing materials and the like to Cuyaba. So that the structures Bell had seen in the wing lights' glow were of wood, and inflammable. The powerhouse that lighted the landing field was already ablaze. The smaller shacks of the laborers perhaps would not be burnt down, but the elaborate depot for communication by plane and wireless was rapidly being destroyed. The reserve of gasoline had gone up in smoke almost at the beginning, and in spreading out had extended the disaster to nearly all the compact nerve-center of the whole conspiracy.

Presently the droning noise was tumultuous. Every plane in a condition to fly was out on the landing field, now brightly lighted by the burning buildings all about. There was frantic, hectic activity everywhere. The secretaries of The Master were rescuing what records they could, and growing cold with terror. In the confusion of spreading flames and the noise of roaring conflagrations the stopping of the motor up aloft had passed unnoticed. In the headquarters of The Master there was panic. An attack had been made upon The Master. A person who could not be one of his slaves had found his stronghold and attacked it terribly. And if one man knew that location and dared attack it, then....

The hold of The Master upon all his slaves was based on one fact and its corollary. The fact was, that those who had been given his poison would go murder mad without its antidote. The corollary was that those who obeyed him would be given that antidote and be safe. True, the antidote was but a temporary one, and mixed with it for administration was a further dosage of the poison itself. But the whole power of The Master was based on his slaves' belief that as long as they obeyed him abjectly there would be no failure of the antidote's supply. And Bell had given that belief a sudden and horrible shock.

Orders came from one frightened man, who cursed much more from terror than from rage. Ribiera had advised him. To do him justice, Ribiera felt less fear than most. Nephew to The Master, and destined successor to The Master's power, Ribiera dared

not revolt, but at least he had little fear of punishment for incompetence. It was his advice that set the many aircraft motors warming up. It was his direction that assorted out the brainwork staff. And Ribiera himself curtly took control, indifferently abandoned the enslaved workers to the madness that would come upon them, and took wing in the last of a stream of roaring things that swept upward above the smoke and flame and vanished in the sky.

Bell and Paula were huddled in between the buttress roots of a jungle giant, protected on three sides by the monster uprearings of solid wood, and Bell was absorbedly feeding a tiny smudge fire. The smoke was thick and choking, but it did keep off the plague of insects which make jungle travel much less than the romantic adventure it is pictured. Bell heard the heavy, thunderous buzzing from the town change timbre suddenly. A single note of it grew loud and soared overhead.

He stared up instinctively, but saw nothing but leaves and branches and many climbing things above him, dimly lighted by the smoky little blaze. The roaring overhead went on, and dimmed. A second roaring came from the town and rose to a monstrous growling and diminished. A third did likewise, and a fourth.

At stated, even intervals the planes at headquarters of The Master took off from the landing field, ringed about with blazing buildings, and plunged through the darkness in a straight line. The steadier droning from the town grew lighter as the jungles echoed for many miles with the sounds of aircraft motors overhead.

At last a single plane rose upward and thundered over the jungle roof. It went away, and away.... The town was silent, then, and only a faint and dwindling murmur came from the line of aircraft headed south.

"They've deserted the town, by God!" said Bell, his eyes gleaming. "Scared off!"

"And—and we—" said Paula, gazing at him.

"You can bet that every man who could crowd into a plane did so," said Bell grimly. "Those that couldn't, if they have any brains, will be trying to make it some other way to where they can subject themselves to one of The Master's deputies and have a little longer time of sanity. The poor devils that are left—well—they'll be camaradas, peons, laborers, without the intelligence to know what they can do. They'll wait patiently for their masters to come back. And presently their hands will writhe.... And the town will be a hell."

"Then they won't be looking for us?"

Bell considered. And suddenly he laughed.

"If the fire has burned out before dawn," he said coldly, "I'll go looking for them. It's going to be cold-blooded, and it's going to be rather pitiful, I think, but there's nothing else to do. You try to get some rest. You'll need it."

And for all the rest of the dark hours he crouched in the little angle formed by the roots of the forest giant, and kept a thickly smoking little fire going, and listened to the noises of the jungle all about him.

It was more than a mile back to the town. It was nearer two. But it was vastly less difficult to force a way through the thick growths by daylight, even though then it was not easy. With machetes, of course, Bell and Paula would have had no trouble, but theirs had been left in the plane. Bell made a huge club and battered openings by sheer strength where it was necessary. Sweat streamed down his face before he had covered five hundred yards, but then something occurred to him and he went more easily. If there were any of the intelligent class of The Master's subjects left in the little settlement, he wanted to allow time enough for them to start their flight. He wanted to find the place empty of all but laborers, who would be accustomed to obey any man who spoke arrogantly and in the manner of a deputy of The Master. Yet he did not want to wait too long. Panic spreads among the camarada class as swiftly as among more intelligent folk, and it is even more blind and hysterical.

It was nearly eleven o'clock before they emerged upon a cleared field where brightly blooming plants grew hugely. Bell regarded these grimly.

"These," he observed, "will be The Master's stock."

Paula touched his arm.

"I have heard," she said, and shuddered, "that the men who gather the plants that go to make the poisons of the Indios do not—do not dare to sleep near the fresh-picked plants. They say that the odor is dangerous, even the perfume of the blossoms."

"Very probably," said Bell. "I wish I could destroy the damned things. But since we can't, why, we'll go around the edge of the field."

He went upwind, skirting the edge of the planted things. A path showed, winding over half-heartedly cleared ground. He followed it, with Paula close behind him. Smoke still curled heavily upward from the heaps of ashes which he reached first of all. He looked upon them with an unpleasant satisfaction. He had to pick his way between still smoking heaps of embers to reach the huts about which laborers stood listlessly, not working because not ordered to work, not yet frightened because not yet realizing fully the catastrophe that had come upon them.

He was moving toward them, deliberately adopting an air of suppressed rage, when a

voice called whiningly.

"Senhor! Senhor!" And then pleadingly, in Portuguese, "I have news for The Master! I have news for The Master!"

Bell jerked his head about. Bars of thick wood, cemented into heavy timbers at top and bottom. A building that was solid wall on three sides, and the fourth was bars. A white man in it, unshaven, haggard, ragged, filthy. And on the floor of the cage....

There had been another such cage on a fazenda back toward Rio. Bell had looked into it, and had shot the gibbering Thing that had been its occupant, as an act of pure mercy. But this man had been through horrors and yet was sane.

"Don't look," said Bell sharply to Paula. He went close.

The figure pressed against the bars, whining. And suddenly it stopped its fawning.

"The devil!" said the white man in the cage. "What in hell are you doing here, Bell? Has that fiend caught you too?"

"

Oh, my God!" gasped Bell. He went white with a cold rage. He'd known this man before. A Secret Service man—one of the seven who had vanished. "How's this place opened? I'll let you out."

"It may be dangerous," said the white man with a ghastly grin. "I'm one of The Master's little victims. I've been trying to work a little game in hopes of getting within arm's reach of him. How'd you get here? Has he got you too?"

"I burned the damned town last night," snarled Bell, "and crashed up after it. Where's that door?"

He found it, a solid mass of planks with a log bar fitted in such a way that it could not possibly be opened from within. He dragged it wide. The white man came out, holding to his self-control with an obvious effort.

"I want to dance and sing because I'm out of there," he told Bell queerly, "but I know you've done me no good. I've been fed The Master's little medicine. I've been in that cage for weeks."

Bell, quivering with rage, handed him a revolver.

"I'm going to get some supplies and stuff and try to make it to civilization," he said

shortly. "If you want to help...."

"Hell, yes," said the white man drearily. "I might as well. Number One-Fourteen was here.... He's The Master's little pet, now. Turned traitor. Report it, if you ever get out."

"No," said Bell briefly. "He didn't turn." He told in a very few words of the finding of the body of a man who had fallen or been thrown from a plane into the jungle.

They were moving toward the rows of still standing shacks, then, and faces were beginning to turn toward them, and there was a little stir of apathetic puzzlement at sight of the white man who had been set free.

That white man looked suddenly at Paula, and then at Bell.

"I've been turned into a beast," he said wryly. "Look here, Bell. There were as many as ten and fifteen of us in that cage at one time—men the deputies sent up for the purpose. We were allowed to go mad, one and two at a time, for the edification of the populace, to keep the camaradas scared. And those of us who weren't going mad just then used to have to band together and kill them. That cage has been the most awful hell on earth that any devil ever contrived. They put three women in there once, with their hands already writhing.... Ugh!..."

Bell's face was cold and hard is if carved from marble.

"I haven't lived through it," said the white man harshly, "by being soft. And I've got less than no time to live—sane, anyhow. I was thinking of shooting you in the back, because the young lady—"

He laughed as Bell's revolver muzzle stirred.

"I'm telling you," said the white man in ghastly merriment, "because I thought—I thought One-Fourteen had set me the example of ditching the Service for his own life. But now it's different."

He pointed.

"There's a launch in that house, with one of these outboard motors. It was used to keep up communication with the boat gangs that sweat the heavy supplies up the river. It'll float in three inches of water, and you can pole it where the water's too shallow to let the propeller turn. This rabble will mob you if you try to take it, because it'll have taken them just about this long to realize that they're deserted. They'll think you are a deputy, at least, to have dared release me. I'm going to convince them of it, and use this gun to give you a start. I give you two hours. It ought to be enough. And then...."

Bell nodded.

"I'm not Service," he said curtly, "but I'll see it's known."

The white man laughed again.

"'Some sigh for the glories of this world, and some for a prophet's paradise to come,'" he quoted derisively. "I thought I was hard, Bell, but I find I prefer to have my record clean in the Service—where nobody will ever see it—than to take what pleasure I might snatch before I die. Queer, isn't it? Old Omar was wrong. Now watch me bluff, flinging away the cash for credit of doubtful value, and all for the rumble of a distant drum—which will be muted!"

They were surrounded by swarming, fawning, frightened camaradas who implored the Senhor to tell them if he were a deputy of The Master, and if he were here to make sure nothing evil befell them. They worked for The Master, and they desired nothing save to labor all their lives for The Master, only—only—The Master would allow no evil to befall them?

The white man waved his arms grandiloquently.

"The Senhor you behold," he proclaimed in the barbarous Portugese of the hinterland of Brazil, "has released me from the cage in which you saw me. He is the deputy of The Master himself, and is enraged because the landing lights on the field were not burning, so that his airplane fell down into the jungle. He bears news of great value from me to The Master, which will make me finally a sub-deputy of The Master. And I have a revolver, as you see, with which I could kill him, but he dares not permit me to die, since I have given him news for The Master. I shall wait here and he will go and send back an airplane with the grace of The Master for me and for all of you."

Bell snarled an assent, in the arrogant fashion of the deputies of The Master. He waited furiously while the Service man argued eloquently and fluently. He fingered his revolver suggestively when a wave of panic swept over the swarming mob for no especial reason. And then he watched grimly while the light little metal-bottomed boat was carried to the water's edge and loaded with food, and fuel, and arms, and ammunition, and even mosquito bars.

The white man grinned queerly at Bell as he extended his hand in a last handshake.

"'I, who am about to die, salute you!'" he said mockingly. "Isn't this a hell of a world, Bell? I'm sure we could design a better one in some ways."

Bell felt a horrible, a ghastly shock. The hand that gripped his was writhing in his

grasp.

"Quite so," said the white man. "It started about five minutes ago. In theory, I've about forty-eight hours. Actually, I don't dare wait that long, if I'm to die like a white man. And a lingering vanity insists on that. I hope you get out, Bell.... And if you want to do me a favor,"—he grinned again, mirthlessly—"you might see that The Master and as many of his deputies as you can manage join me in hell at the earliest possible moment. I shan't mind so much if I can watch them."

He put his hands quickly in his pockets as the little outboard motor caught and the launch went on down-river. He did not even look after them. The last Bell saw of him he was swaggering back up the little hillside above the river edge, surrounded by scared inhabitants of the workmen's shacks, and scoffing in a superior fashion at their fears.

CHAPTER XII

It took Bell just eight days to reach the Paraguay, and those eight days were like an age-long nightmare of toil and discomfort and more than a little danger. The launch was headed downstream, of course, and with the current behind it, it made good time. But the distances of Brazil are infinite, and the jungles of Brazil are malevolent, and the route down the Rio Laurenço was designed by the architect of hell. Raudales lay in wait to destroy the little boat. Insects swarmed about to destroy its voyagers. And the jungle loomed above them, passively malignant, and waited for them to die.

And as if physical sufferings were not enough, Bell saw Paula wilt and grow pale. All the way down the river they passed little clearings at nearly equal distances. And men came trembling out of the little houses upon those fazendas and fawned upon the Senhor who was in the launch that had come from up-river and so must be in the service of The Master himself. The clearings and the tiny houses had been placed upon the river for the service of the terribly laboring boat gangs who brought the heavier supplies up the river to The Master's central depot. Men at these clearings had been enslaved and ordered to remain at their posts, serving all those upon the business of The Master. They fawned abjectly upon Bell, because he was of os gentes and so presumably was empowered, as The Master had empowered his more intelligent subjects, to exact the most degraded of submission from all beneath him in the horrible conspiracy. Once, indeed, Bell was humbly implored by a panic stricken man to administer "the grace of The Master" to a moody and irritable child of twelve or so.

"She sees the red spots, Senhor. It is the first sign. And I have served The Master faithfully...."

And Bell could do nothing. He went on savagely. And once he passed a gang of camaradas laboring to get heavily loaded dugouts up a fiendish raudal. They had ropes

out and were hauling at them from the bank, while some of their number were breast-deep in the rushing water, pushing the dugouts against the stream.

"They're headed for the plantation," said Bell grimly, "and they'll need the grace of The Master by the time they get there. And it's abandoned. But if I tell them...."

Men with no hope at all are not to be trusted. Not when they are mixtures of three or more races—white and black and red—and steeped in ignorance and superstition and, moreover, long subject to such masters as these men had had. Bell had to think of Paula.

He could have landed and haughtily ordered them to float or even carry the light boat to the calmer waters below. They would have obeyed and cringed before him. But he shot the rapids from above, with the little motor roaring past rocks and walls of jungle beside the foaming water, at a speed that chilled his blood.

Paula said nothing. She was white and listless. Bell, himself, was being preyed upon by a bitter blend of horror and a deep-seated rage that consumed him like a fever. He had fever itself, of course. He was taking, and forcing Paula to take, five grains of quinine a day. It had been included among his stores as a matter of course by those who had loaded his boat. And with the fever working in his brain he found himself holding long, imaginary conversations, in which one part of his brain reproached the other part for having destroyed the plantation of The Master. The laborers upon that plantation had been abandoned to the murder madness because of his deed. The caretakers of the tiny fazenda on the river bank were now ignored. Bell felt himself a murderer because he had caused The Master's deputies to cast them off in a callous indifference to their inevitable fate.

He suffered the tortures of the damned, and grew morose and bitter, and could only escape that self torture by coddling his hatred of Ribiera and The Master. He imagined torments to be inflicted upon them which would adequately repay them for their crimes, and racked his feverish brain for memories of the appalling atrocities which can be committed upon the human body without destroying its capacity to suffer.

It was not normal. It was not sane. But it filled Bell's mind and somehow kept him from suicide during the horrible passage of the river. He hardly dared speak to Paula. There was a time when he counted the days since he had been a guest at Ribiera's estate outside of Rio, and frenziedly persuaded himself that he saw red spots before his eyes and soon would have the murder madness come upon him. And then he thought of the supplies in Ribiera's plane, in which they had escaped from Rio. They had eaten that food.

It was almost unconsciously, then, that he saw the narrow water on which the launch floated valiantly grow wider day by day. When at last it debouched suddenly into a

vast stream whereon a clumsy steamer plied beneath a self made cloud of smoke, he stared dully at it for minutes before he realized.

"Paula," he said suddenly, and listened in amazement to his voice. It was hoarse and harsh and croaking. "Paula, we've made it. This must be the Paraguay."

She roused herself and looked about like a person waking from a lethargic sleep. And then her lips quivered, and she tried to speak and could not, and tears fell silently from her eyes, and all at once she was sobbing bitterly.

That sign of the terrific strain she had been under served more than anything else to jolt Bell out of his abnormal state of mind. He moved over to her and clumsily put his arm about her, and comforted her as best he could. And she sat sobbing with her head on his shoulder, gasping in a form of hysterical relief, until the engine behind them sputtered, and coughed, and died.

When Bell looked, the last drop of gasoline was gone. But the motor had served its purpose. It had run manfully on an almost infinitesimal consumption of gasoline for eight days. It had not missed an explosion save when its wiring was wetted by spray. And now....

Bell hauled the engine inboard and got out the oars from under the seats. He got the little boat out to mid-stream, and they floated down until a village of squalid huts appeared on the eastern bank. He landed, there, and with much bargaining and a haughty demeanor disposed of the boat to the skipper of a batelao in exchange for passage down-river as far as Corumba. The rate was outrageously high. But he had little currency with him and dared go no farther on a vessel which carried a boat of The Master's ownership conspicuously towed behind.

At Corumba he purchased clothes less obviously of os gentes, both for himself and for Paula, and that same afternoon was able to arrange for their passage to Asunción as deck passengers on a river steamer going downstream.

It was as two peasants, then, that they rode in sweltering heat amid a swarming and odorous mass of fellow humanity downstream. But it was a curious relief, in some ways. The people about them were gross and unwashed and stupid, but they were human. There was none of that diabolical feeling of terror all about. There were no strained, fear haunted faces upon the deck reserved for deck passengers and other cattle. The talk was ungrammatical and literal and of the earth. The women were stolid-faced and reserved. But when the long rows of hammocks were slung out in the open air, in the casual fashion of sleeping arrangements in the back-country of all South America, it was blessedly peaceful to realize that the folk who snored so lustily were merely human; human animals, it might be, with no thought above their farinha and feijos on the morrow, but human.

And the second day they passed the old fort at Coimbra, and went on. The passage into Paraguayan territory was signalized by an elaborate customs inspection, and three days later Asunción itself displayed its red-tiled roofs and adobe walls upon the shore.

Bell had felt some confidence in his ability to pass muster with his Spanish, though his Portuguese was limited, and it was a shock when the captain of the steamer summoned him to his cabin with a gesture, before the steamer docked. Bell left Paula among the other deck passengers and went with the peasant's air of suspicious humility into the captain's quarters. But the captain's pose of grandeur vanished at once when the door closed.

"Señor," said the steamer captain humbly, "I have not spoken to you before. I knew you would not wish it. But tell me, senor! Have you any news of what The Master plans?"

Bell's eyes flickered, at the same time that a cold apprehension filled him.

"Why do you speak to me of The Master?" he demanded sharply.

The steamer captain stammered. The man was plainly frightened at Bell's tone. Bell relaxed, his flash of panic for Paula gone.

"I know," said the captain imploringly, "that the great fazenda has been deserted. On my last trip, down, senor, I brought many of the high deputies who had been there. They warned me not to speak, senor, but I saw that you were not what you seemed, and I thought you might be going about to see who obeyed The Master's orders...."

Bell nodded.

"That is my mission," he said curtly. "Do not speak of it further—not even to the deputy in Asunción."

The captain stammered again.

"But I must see the Señor Francia," he said humbly. "I report to him after every trip, and if he thought that I did not report all that I learn...."

"It is my order," snapped Bell angrily. "If he reproaches you, say that one who has orders from The Master himself gave them to you. And do not speak of the destruction of the fazenda. I am searching especially for the man who caused it. And—wait! I will take your name, and you shall give me—say—a thousand pesos. I had need of money to bribe a fool I could not waste time on, up-country. It will be returned to you."

And again the captain stammered, but Bell stared at him haughtily, and he knelt abjectly before the ship's safe.

Asunción, as everybody knows, is a city of sixty thousand people, and the capital of a republic which enjoyed the rule of a family of hereditary dictators for sixty years; which rule ended in a war wherein four-fifths of the population was wiped out. And since that beginning it has averaged eight revolutions to Mexico's three, has had the joy of knowing seven separate presidents in five years—none of them elected—and now boasts a population approximately two-thirds illegitimate and full of pride in its intellectual and artistic tastes.

Bell and Paula made their way along the cobbled streets away from the river, surrounded by other similarly peasant-seeming folk. Bell told her curtly what had happened with the steamer captain.

"It's the devil," he said coldly, "because this whole republic is under The Master's thumb. Except among the peasants we can count on nearly everybody being on the lookout for us, if they so much as suspect we're alive. And they may because I burned their damned fazenda. So...."

Paula smiled at him, rather wanly.

"What are you going to do, Charles?"

"Get a boat," said Bell curtly. "One with three or four men, if I can. If I can buy it with the skipper's money, I will. But I can't take you to go bargaining. It would look suspicious."

They had reached the central plaza of the town. The market swarmed with brown skinned folk and seemed to overflow with fruits. A man was unconcernedly shoveling oranges out of a cart with a shovel, as if they had been so much coal. A market woman as unconcernedly dropped some of the same golden fruit within a small pen where a piglet awaited a purchaser. To the left, there were rows of unshaded stalls where the infinitely delicate handmade Paraguayan lace was exposed for sale.

"I—think," said Paula, "I think I will go in the cathedral. I will be very devout, Charles, and you will find me there when you return. I will be safe there, certainly."

He walked with her across the crowded plaza. He should have known that your peasant does not stride with head up, but regarding the ground. That a man who works heavily droops his shoulders with weariness at the end of a day. And especially he should have realized that Paraguay is not, strictly speaking, a Latin-American nation. It is Latin-Indian, in which the population graduates very definitely from a sub-stratum of nearly or quite pure Indian race to an aristocracy of nearly or quite

pure Spanish descent, and that the color of a man's skin fixes his place in society. Both Bell and Paula were too light of skin for the peasant's clothes they wore. They aroused curiosity at once. If it was not an active curiosity, it was nevertheless curiosity of a sort.

But Bell left her in the shadowy, cool interior of the cathedral which seems so pitifully small to be the center of religion for a nation. He saw her move toward one of the little candle-lit niches in the wall and fall quite simply on her knees there.

And he moved off, to wander aimlessly down to the river shore and stare about and presently begin a desultory conversation with sleepy boatmen.

It was three hours and more before he returned to the Cathedral, and Paula was talking to someone. More, talking to a woman in the most discreet of mantilla'd church-going costumes. Paula saw him in the doorway, and uttered a little cry of relief. She came hurrying to him.

"Charles! I have found a friend! Isabella Ybarra. We were schoolmates in the United States and she has just come back from Paris! So you see, she cannot—"

"I see," said Bell very quietly.

Paula was speaking swiftly and very softly.

"We went to school together, Charles. I trust her. You must trust her also. There is no danger, this time. Isabella has never even heard of The Master. So you see...."

"I see that you need someone you can trust," said Bell grimly. "I found that the captain of the steamer had gone to The Master's deputy here. While I was talking to some boatmen a warning was given to look out for a man and woman, together, who may try to buy a boat. We're described, and only the fact that I was alone kept me from being suspected. Police, soldiers—everybody is looking out for us. Paraguay's under The Master's thumb more completely than any other nation on the continent."

The figure to which Paula had been talking was moving slowly toward them. A smiling, brown-eyed face twinkled at them.

"You must be Charles!" said a warm and cluckling voice. "Paula has raved, Señor. Now I am going to take her off in my carriage. She is my maid. And you will follow the carriage on foot and I will have the major-domo let you in the servants' entrance, and the three of us will conspire."

It was incongruous to hear the English of a girl's finishing school from the mantilla'd young woman who beamed mischievously at him. She had the delighted air of one

aiding a romance. It was doubly incongruous because of the dark and shadowy Cathedral in which they were, and the raucous noises of the market in the plaza without. Bell had a sense of utter unreality as Isabella's good humored voice went on:

"Do you remember, Paula, the time the French teacher caught us in the pantry? I shall feel just like that time."

"This is dangerous," said Bell, steadily, "and it is very serious indeed."

"Pooh!" said Isabella comfortably. "Paula, you didn't even know I was married! A whole year and a half! And he's a darling, really. I'm the Señora Isabella Ybarra de Zuloaga, if you please! Bow gracefully!" She chuckled. "Jaime came all the way to Rio to meet me last month. I'm wild about him, Paula.... But come on! Follow me humbly, like a nice little mestizo girl who wants to be my maid, and I'll let you ride with the cochero and Charles shall follow behind us."

She swept out of the Cathedral with the air of a grande dame suppressing a giggle, and Paula went humbly behind her.

And Bell trudged through the dust and the blistering sun while the highly polished carriage jolted over cobble stones and the youthful Señora Isabella Ybarra de Zuloaga beamed blissfully at the universe which did not realize that she was a conspirator, and Paula sat modestly beside the brown skinned cochero.

It was not a long ride nor a long walk, though the sun was insufferable. The capital of Paraguay is not large. It is a sleepy, somnolent little town in which the most pretentious building was begun as the Presidential Palace and wound up as the home of a bank. But there are bullet marks on the façade of the Museo Nacionál, and there is still an empty pedestal here and there throughout the city where the heroes of last year's revolution, in bronze, have been pulled down and the heroes of this year's uprising of the people have not yet been set up. Red tiled roofs give the city color, and the varying shades of its populace give it variety, and the fact that below the whiter class of inhabitants Guarani is spoken instead of Spanish adds to the individuality of its effect.

But the house into which the carriage turned could have been built in Rio or Buenos Aires without comment on its architecture. It had the outer bleakness of most private homes of South America, but if it was huge and its windows were barred, the patio into which Bell was ushered by a bewildered and suspicious major-domo made up in color and in charm for all that the exterior lacked.

A fountain played amid flowers, and macaws and parrots and myriad other caged birds hung in their cages about the colonnade around the court, and Bell found Paula being introduced to a pale young man in the stiff collar and unspeakably formal morning

clothes of the South American who is of the upper class.

"Jaime," said Isabella, beaming. "And this is Charles, whom Paula is to marry! It is romantic! It is fascinating! And I depend on you to give him clothes so that all our servants won't stare goggle-eyed at him, and I am going to take Paula off at once and dress her! They are our guests! And, Jaime, you must threaten all the servants terribly so they will keep it very secret—that we have two such terrible people with us."

Paula smiled at Bell, and he saw that she felt utterly safe and wholly at peace. Something was hammering at Bell's brain, warning him, and he could not understand what it was. But he exchanged the decorous limp handshake which is conventional south of Panama, and followed his unsmiling host to rooms where a servant laid out a bewildering assortment of garments. They were all rather formal, the sort of clothing that is held to be fitting for a man of position where Spanish is the official if not the common tongue.

His host retired, without words, and Bell came out later to find him sipping moodily at a drink, waiting for him. He wiped his forehead.

"Be seated, Señor," he said heavily, "until the ladies join us."

He wiped his forehead again and watched somberly while Bell poured out a drink.

"Isabella...." He seemed to find it difficult to speak. "She has told me a little, but there has been no time for more than a little: I do not wish to have her tell me too much. She does not understand. She was educated in North America, where customs are different. She demands that I assist you and the senorita—it is the senorita?"

Bell stiffened. In all Spanish America the conventions are strict. For a man and woman to travel together, even perforce and for a short distance, automatically damns the woman.

"Go on," said Bell grimly.

His host was very pale indeed.

"She demands that I assist you and the senorita to escape the police and the government. Provided that you do not tell me who you are, I will attempt it. But—"

"I wonder," said Bell quietly, "if you have ever seen red spots dancing before your eyes."

His host went utterly livid.

Zuloaga looked down at his hands, as if expecting unguessable things of them. And then he shrugged, and said harshly:

"I have, Señor. So you see that Isabella, who does not know, is asking me to risk, not only my life, but her honor."

Bell said nothing for a moment. He was a little pale.

"And your honor?" he asked quietly.

The pallor on the face of the Señor Jaime Zuloaga was horrible. He tried to speak, and could not. He stood up, and managed to say:

"So much I will risk, because you have been my guest. Until to-morrow morning you are safe, unless the Señor Francia has his spies within my own house. I—I will attempt, even to procure a boat. But—"

Something made Bell turn. The major-domo was moving quickly out of sight. Like a flash Bell was upon him, and like a flash a knife came out.

Bell's host gasped. The fact that his servant had spied was more than obvious, and he had spoke treason against The Master. He leaned against the table, sick and trembling and mumbling of despair, while there were crashes in the room into which Bell had plunged, while bodies thrashed about on the floor, and while stertorous breathing grew less, and stopped....

Bell came back, breathing hard. The front of his coat was slashed open.

"He's dead," he said harshly. "He'd have reported what you said, so I killed him.... And now we've got to do something with his body."

He helped in the horrible task, while his host grew more and more shaken. No other servants came near. And Bell could almost read the thoughts that went through Zuloaga's brain. One servant had spied, to report his treason. And that meant assassination for himself, as the least of punishments, and for his wife....

But there would be no punishment if he went first to the deputy and said that Bell had killed the major-domo.

Bell left the house before dusk, desperately determined to steal a craft of some sort, return for Paula, and get away from Asunción before dawn.

He returned after an hour. In the morning a man would be found bound and gagged, with five hundred pesos stuffed into his pockets. His boat would have vanished.

But there was a commotion before the house where Paula waited fearfully. A carriage stood there, with a company of mounted soldiers about it. Someone was being put into it. As Bell broke into a run toward the house the carriage started up and the soldiers trotted after it.

Paula was taken.

CHAPTER XIII

That night Bell turned burglar. To attempt a rescue of Paula was simply out of the question. He was entirely aware that he would be expected to do just such a thing, and that it would be adequately guarded against. Therefore he prepared for a much more desperate enterprise by burglarizing a bookstore in the particularly neat method in which members of The Trade are instructed. The method was invented by a member of The Trade who was an ex-cabinet maker, and who perished disreputably. He killed a certain courier of a certain foreign government, thereby preventing a minor war and irritating two governments excessively, and was hanged.

The method, of course, is simplicity itself. One removes the small nails which hold the molding of a door panel in place. The molding comes out. So does the panel. One enters through the panel, commits one's burglary, and comes out, replacing the molding and the nails with reasonable care. Depending upon the care with which the replacing is done, the means of entrance is more or less undiscoverable. But it is usually used when it is not intended that the burglary ever be discussed.

Bell abstracted two books, wrapping paper and twine. He departed, using great care. He walked three miles out of town and to the banks of the Paraguay. There he carefully saturated the pages of both books in water, carefully keeping the bindings from being wetted. Then he tore one book to pieces, saving the leaves and inserting them between the leaves of the other book. Then, with a brazil nut candle for illumination, he began to write.

You see, when two thoroughly wetted pieces of paper are placed one above the other with a hard surface such as the cover of another book under them, you can write upon the top one with a stick. The writing will show dark against the gray of the saturated paper. You then remove the top sheet and end the writing reproduced on the bottom sheet. And then you can dry the second sheet and find the marking vanished—until it is wetted again. It is, in fact, a method of water-marking paper. And it is the simplest of all methods of invisible writing.

Bell wrote grimly for hours. The book he had chosen was an old one, an ancient copy of one of Lope de Vega's plays, and the pages were wrinkled and yellow from age alone. When, by dawn, the last page was dried out, there was no sign that anything

other than antiquity had affected the paper. And Bell wrapped it carefully, and addressed it to an elderly senora of literary tastes in San Juan, Porto Rico, and enclosed an affectionate letter to his very dear aunt, and signed it with an entirely improbable name.

It was mailed before sunrise, the necessary stamps having been filched from the burglarized bookstore and the price thereof being carefully inserted in the till. Bell had made a complete and painstaking report of every fact he had himself come upon in the matter of The Master and his slaves and appended to it a copy of the report of the dead Secret Service operative Number One-Fourteen. He destroyed that after copying it. And he concluded that since he had been given dismissal by Jamison in Rio, he considered himself at liberty to take whatever steps he saw fit. And since the Senhorina Paula Canalejas had been kidnapped by agents of The Master, he intended to take steps which might possibly bring about her safety, but would almost certainly cause his death.

The report should at least be of assistance if the Trade set to work to combat The Master. Bell had no information whatever about that still mysterious and still more horrible person himself. But what he knew about The Master's agents he sent to a lady in Porto Rico who has an astonishingly large number of far ranging nephews. And then Bell got himself adequately shaved, bought a hearty breakfast, and, after one or two heartening drinks, was driven grandly to the residence of the Señor Francia, deputy of The Master for the republic of Paraguay.

The servants who admitted him gazed blankly when he gave his name. A door was hastily closed behind him. He was ushered into an elaborate reception room and, after an agitated pause, no less than six separate frock-coated persons appeared and pointed large revolvers at him while a seventh searched him exhaustively. Bell submitted amusedly.

"And now," he said dryly, "I suppose the Señor Francia will receive me?"

There was more agitation. The six men remained; with their weapons pointed at him. The seventh departed, and Bell re-dressed himself in a leisurely fashion.

Ten minutes later a slender, dark skinned man with impeccably waxed moustaches entered, regarded Bell with an entirely impersonal interest, took one of the revolvers from one of the six frock-coated gentlemen, and seated himself comfortably. He waved his hand and they filed uneasily from the room. So far, not one word had been spoken.

Bell retrieved his cigarette case and lighted up with every appearance of ease.

"I have come," he said casually, "to request that I be sent to The Master. I believe that he is anxious to meet me."

The dark eyes scrutinized him coldly. Then Francia smiled.

"Pero si," he said negligently, "he is very anxious to see you. I suppose you know what fate awaits you?"

His smile was amiable and apparently quite friendly, but Bell shrugged.

"I suppose," he said dryly, "he wants to converse with me. I have been his most successful opponent to date, I think."

Francia smiled again. It was curious how his smile, which at first seemed so genuine and so friendly, became unspeakably unpleasant on its repetition.

"Yes." Francia seemed to debate some matter of no great importance. "You have been very annoying, Señor Bell. The Senhor Ribiera asked that you be sent to him. It was his intention to execute you, privately. He described a rather amusing method to me. And I must confess that you have annoyed me, likewise. Since the Cuyaba plantation was destroyed my subjects have been much upset. They have been frightened, and even stubborn. Only last week"—he smiled pleasantly, and the effect was horrible—"only last week I desired the society of a lady who is my subject. And her husband considered that, since the fazenda was destroyed, The Master would be powerless to extend his grace before long, in any event. So he shot his wife and himself. It annoyed me enough to make me feel that it would be a pleasure to kill you."

He raised the revolver meditatively.

"Well?" said Bell coldly.

Francia lowered the weapon and laughed.

"Oh, I shall not do it. I think The Master would be displeased. You seem to have the type of courage he most desires in his deputies. And it may yet be that I shall greet you as my fellow deputy or perhaps my fellow viceroy. So I shall send you to him. I would say that you have about an even chance of dying very unpleasantly or of being a deputy. Therefore I offer you such courtesies as I may."

Bell puffed a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"I'm about out of cigarettes," he said mildly.

"They shall be supplied. And—er—if you would desire feminine society, I will have some of my pretty subjects…."

"No," said Bell bluntly. "I would like to speak to the Senhorina Canalejas, though."

Francia chuckled.

"She left for Buenos Aires last night. The Senhor Ribiera sent a most impatient message for her to be sent on at once. I regretted it, but he had The Master's authority. I thought her charming, myself."

The skin about Bell's knuckles was white. His hands had clenched savagely.

"In that event," he said coldly, "the only other courtesy I would ask is that of following her as soon as possible."

Francia rose languidly. The revolver dangled by his side, but his grip upon it was firm. He smiled at Bell with the same effect of a horrible, ghastly geniality.

"Within the hour, Señor," he said urbanely. "With the guard I shall place over you it is no harm, I am sure, to observe that The Master is at his retreat in Punta Arenas. You will go there to-morrow, as I go to-night."

He moved toward the door, and smiled again, and added pleasantly:

"The Senhorina was delivered to the Senhor Ribiera this morning."

Matters moved swiftly after that. A servant brought cigarettes and a tray of liquors—which Bell did not touch. There was the sound of movement, the scurrying, furtive haste which seems always to imply a desperate sort of fear. Bell waited in a terrible calmness, while rage hammered at his temples.

Then the clattering of horses' hoofs outside. A carriage was being brought. Soldiers came in and a man beckoned curtly. Bell stuffed his pockets with smokes and followed languidly. He was realizing that there was little pretense of secrecy about the power of The Master's deputy here. Police and soldiers.... But Paraguay, of all the nations of the southern continent, has learned a certain calm realism about governmental matters.

The man who has power is obeyed. The man who has not power is not obeyed. Titles are of little importance, though it is the custom for the man with the actual power eventually to assume the official rank of authority. Since the President in Asunción was no more than a figurehead who called anxiously upon the Señor Francia every morning for instructions concerning the management of the nation, Francia indifferently ignored him whenever he chose and gave orders directly. There would be very little surprise and no disorder whatever when The Master proclaimed Paraguay a viceroyalty of his intended empire.

The carriage went smartly through the cobbled streets with a cavalry escort all about it. An officer sat opposite Bell with his hand on his revolver.

"I am receiving at least the honors of royalty," Bell commented coldly to him, in Spanish.

"Señor," said the officer harshly, "this is the state in which the deputies of The Master were escorted."

He watched Bell heavily, but with the desperate intentness of a man who knows no excuses will be received if his prisoner escapes.

Out of the town to a flying field, where a multi-engined plane was warming up. It was one of the ships that had been at The Master's fazenda of Cuyaba, one of the ships that had fled from the burning plantation. Bell was ushered into it with a ceremonious suspicion. Almost immediately he was handcuffed to his seat. Two men took their place behind him. The big ship rolled forward, lifted, steadied, and after a single circling set out to the southeast for Buenos Aires.

The whole performance had been run off with the smoothly oiled precision of an iron discipline exercised upon men in the grip of deadly fear.

"One man, at least," reflected Bell grimly, "has some qualities that fit him for his job."

And then, for hour after hour, the big ship went steadily southeast. It flew over Paraguayan territory for two hours, soaring high over the Lago Ypoa and on over the swampy country that extends to the Argentine border. It ignored that border and all customs formalities. It went on, through long hours of flight, while mountains rose before it. It rose over those mountains and passed over the first railroad line—the first real sign of civilization since leaving Asunción—at Mercedes, and reached the Uruguay river where the Mirinjay joins it. It went roaring on down above the valley of the Rio Uruguay for long and tedious hours more. At about noon, lunch was produced. The two men who guarded Bell ate. Then, with drawn revolvers, they unlocked his handcuffs and offered him food.

He ate, of exactly those foods he had seen them eat. He submitted indifferently to the re-application of his fetters. He had reached a state which was curiously emotionless. If Paula had been turned over to Ribiera that morning, Paula was dead. And just as there is a state of grief which stuns the mind past the realization of its loss, so there is a condition of hatred which leads to an enormous calmness and an unnatural absence of any tremor. Bell had reached that state. The instinct of self-preservation had gone lax. Where a man normally thinks first, if unconsciously, of the protection of his body from injury or pain, Bell had come to think first, and with the same terrible clarity, of the accomplishment of revenge.

He would accept The Master's terms, if The Master offered them. He would become The Master's subject, accepting the poison of madness without a qualm. He would act and speak and think as a subject of The Master, until his opportunity came. And then....

His absolute calmness would have deceived most men. It may have deceived his guards. Time passed. The Rio de la Plata spread out widely below the roaring multi-engined plane and the vast expanse of buildings which is Buenos Aires appeared far ahead in the gathering dusk. Little twinkling lights blinked into being upon the water and the earth far away. Then one of the two guards touched Bell on the shoulder.

"Señor," he said sharply above the motors' muffled roar, "we shall land. A car will draw up beside the plane. There will be no customs inspection. That has been arranged for. You can have no hope of escape. I ask you if you will go quietly into the car?"

"Why not?" asked Bell evenly. "I went to Señor Francia of my own accord."

The guard leaned back. The city of Buenos Aires spread out below them. The tumbled, congested old business quarter glittered in all its offices, and the broad Avenida de Mayo cut its way as a straight slash of glittering light through the section of the city to eastward. By contrast, from above, the far-flung suburbs seemed dark and somber.

The big plane roared above the city, settling slowly; banked steeply and circled upon its farther side, and dipped down toward what seemed an absurdly small area, which sprang into a pinkish glow on their descent. That area spread out as the descent continued, though, and was a wide and level field when the ship flattened out and checked and lumbered to a stop.

A glistening black car came swiftly, humming into place alongside almost before the clumsy aircraft ceased to roll. Its door opened. Two men got out and waited. The hangars were quite two hundred yards away, and Bell saw the glitter of weapons held inconspicuously but quite ready.

He stepped out of the cabin of the plane with a revolver muzzle pressing into his spine. Other revolver muzzles pressed sharply into his sides as he reached earth.

Smiling faintly, he took four steps, clambered up into the glistening black car, and settled down comfortably into the seat. The two men who had waited by the car followed him. The door closed, and Bell was in a padded silence that was acutely uncomfortable for a moment. A dome light glowed brightly, however, and he lighted nearly the last of the cigarettes from Asunción with every appearance of composure as

the car started off with a lurch.

The windows were blank. Thick, upholstered padding covered the spaces where openings should have been, and there was only the muffled vibration of the motor and the occasional curiously distinct noise of a flexing spring.

"Just as a matter of curiosity," said Bell mildly, "what is the excuse given on the flying field for this performance? Or is the entire staff subject to The Master?"

Two revolvers were bearing steadily upon him and the two men watched him with the unwavering attention of men whose lives depend upon their vigilance.

"You, Señor," said one of them without expression or a smile, "are the corpse of a prominent politician who died yesterday at his country home."

And then for half an hour or more the car drove swiftly, and stopped, and drove swiftly forward again as if in traffic. Then there were many turns, and then a slow and cautious traverse of a relatively few feet. It stopped, and then the engine vibration ceased.

"I advise you, Señor," said the same man who had spoken before, and in the same emotionless voice, "not to have hope of escape in the moment of alighting. We are in an enclosed court and there are two gates locked behind us."

Bell shrugged as there was the clatter of a lock operating. The door swung wide.

He stepped down into a courtyard surrounded by nearly bare walls. It had once been the patio of a private home of some charm. Now, however, it was bleak and empty. A few discouraged flowers grew weedily in one corner. The glow of light in the sky overhead assured Bell that he was in the very heart of Buenos Aires, but only the most subdued of rumbles spoke of the activity and the traffic of the city going on without.

"This way," said the man with the expressionless voice.

The other man followed. The chauffeur of the car stood aside as if some formality required him neither to start the motor or return to his seat until Bell was clear of the courtyard.

Through a heavy timber door. Along a passageway with the odor of neglect. Up stairs which once had been impressive and ornamental. Into a room without windows.

"You will have an interview with the Señorita Canalejas in five minutes," said the emotionless voice.

The door closed, while Bell found every separate muscle in his body draw taut. And while his brain at first was dazed with incredulous relief, then it went dark with a new and ghastly terror.

"They know yagué," he heard himself saying coldly, "which makes any person obey any command. They may know other and more hellish ones yet."

He fought for self control, which meant the ability to conceal absolutely any form of shock that might await him. That one was in store he was certain. He paced grimly the length of the room and back again....

Something on the carpet caught his eye. A bit of string. He stared at it incredulously. The end was tied into a curious and an individual knot, which looked like it might be the pastime of a sailor, and which looked like it ought to be fairly easy to tie. But it was one of those knots which wandering men sometimes tie absent mindedly in the presence of stirring events. It was the recognition-knot of the Trade, one of those signs by which men may know each other in strange and peculiar situations. And there were many other knots tied along the trailing length of the string. It seemed as if some nervous and distraught prisoner in this room might have toyed abstractedly with a bit of cord.

Only, Bell drew it through his fingers. Double knot, single knot, double knot.... They spelled out letters in the entirely simple Morse code of the telegrapher, if one noticed.

"RBRA GN ON PLA HRE ST TGT J."

Your old-time telegrapher uses many abbreviations. Your short-wave fan uses more. Mostly they are made by a simple omission of vowels in normal English words. And when the recognition sign at the beginning was considered, the apparently cryptic letters leaped into meaning.

"RiBeRA GoNe ON PauLA HeRe SiT TiGhT Jamison."

When the door opened again and a terribly pale Paula was ushered in, Bell gave no sign of surprise. He simply took her in his arms and kissed her, holding her very, very close.

CHAPTER XIV

Paula remained in the room with Bell for perhaps twenty minutes, and Bell had the feeling of eyes upon them and of ears listening to their every word. In their first embrace, in fact, he murmured a warning in her ear and she gasped a little whispered word of comprehension. But it was at least a relief to be sure that she was alive and yet unharmed. Francia had been in error when he told Bell of Paula's delivery to the

Brazilian to be enslaved or killed as Ribiera found most amusing. Or perhaps, of course, Francia had merely wanted to cause Bell all possible discomfort.

It was clear, however, blessedly clear and evident, that Paula's pallor was due to nothing more than terror—a terror which was now redoubled because Bell was in The Master's toils with her. Forgetting his warning, she whispered to him desperately that he must try to escape, somehow, before The Master's poison was administered to him. Outside, he might do something to release her. Here, a prisoner, he was helpless.

Bell soothed her, not daring either to confess the plan he had formed of a feigned submission in order to wreak revenge, or to offer encouragement because of the message knotted in the piece of string by Jamison. And because of that caution she came to look at him with a queer doubt, and presently with a terrible quiet grief.

"Charles—you—you have been poisoned like the rest?"

The feeling of watching eyes and listening ears was strong. Bell had a part to play, and the necessity for playing that part was the greater because now he was forced to hope. He hesitated, torn between the need to play his rôle for the invisible eavesdroppers and the desire to spare Paula.

Her hand closed convulsively upon his.

"V-very well, Charles," she said quietly, though her lips quivered. "If—if you are going to serve The Master, I—I will serve him too, if he will let me stay always near you. But if he—will not, then I can always—die...."

Bell groaned. And the door opened silently, and there were men standing without. An emotionless voice said:

"Señorita, the Señor Ortiz will interview the Señor Bell."

"I'm coming," said Paula quietly.

She went, walking steadily. Two men detached themselves from the group about the door and followed her. The others waited for Bell. And Bell clenched his hands and squared his shoulders and marched grimly with them.

Again long passages, descending to what must have been a good deal below the surface of the earth. And then a massive door was opened, and light shone through, and Bell found himself standing on a rug of the thickest possible pile in a room of quite barbaric luxury, and facing a desk from which a young man was rising to greet him. This young man was no older than Bell himself, and he greeted Bell in a manner in which mockery was entirely absent, but in which defiance was peculiarly strong. A

bulky, round shouldered figure wrote laboriously at a smaller desk to one side.

"Señor Bell," said the young man bitterly, "I do not ask you to shake hands with me. I am Julio Ortiz, the son of the man you befriended upon the steamer Almirante Gomez. I am also, by the command of The Master, your jailer. Will you be seated?"

Bell's eyes flickered. The older Ortiz had died by his own hand in the first stages of the murder madness The Master's poison produced. He had died gladly and, in Bell's view, very gallantly. And yet his son.... But of course The Master's deputies made a point of enslaving whole families when it was at all possible. It gave a stronger hold upon each member.

"I beg of you," said young Ortiz bitterly, "to accept my invitation. I wish to offer you a much qualified friendship, which I expect you to refuse."

Bell sat down and crossed his knees. He lit a cigarette thoughtfully, thinking swiftly.

"I remember, and admired, your father," he said slowly. "I think that any man who died as bravely as he did is to be envied."

The younger Ortiz had reseated himself as Bell sat down, and now he fingered nervously, wretchedly, the objects on his desk. A penholder broke between his fingers and he flung it irritably into the wastebasket.

"You understand," he said harshly, "the obligations upon me. I am the subject of The Master. You will realize that if you desire to escape, I cannot permit it. But you did my father a very great kindness. Much of it I was able to discover from persons on the boat. More, from the wireless operator who is also the subject of The Master. You were not acting, Señor, as a secret service operative in your attempt to help my father. You bore yourself as a very honorable gentleman. I wish to thank you."

"I imagine," said Bell dryly, "that anyone would have done what I did."

He seemed to be quite at ease, but he was very tense indeed. The bulky, round shouldered figure at the other desk was writing busily with a very scratchy pen. It was an abominable pen. Its sputtering was loud enough to be noticeable under any circumstances, but Bell was unusually alert, just now, and suddenly he added still more drily:

"Helping a man in trouble is quite natural. One always gets it back. It's a sort of dealing with the future in which there is a profit on every trade."

He put the slightest emphasis on the last word and waited, looking at young Ortiz, but listening with all his soul to the scratching of the pen. And that scratching sound

ceased abruptly. The pen seemed to write smoothly all of an instant. Bell drew a deep breath of satisfaction. In the Trade, when in doubt, one should use the word "Trade" in one's first remark to the other man. Then the other man will ask your trade, and you reply impossibly. It is then up to the other man to speak frankly, first. But circumstances alter even recognition-signs.

Ortiz had not noticed any by-play, of course. It would have been rather extraordinary if he had. A pen that scratches so that the sound is Morse code for "Bell, play up. J." is just unlikely enough to avoid all notice.

Ortiz drummed upon the desk. "Now, Señor, what can I do that will serve you? I cannot release you. You know that. I am not the deputy here. There has been a set-back to The Master's plans and all the deputies are called to his retreat to receive instructions and to discuss. I have merely been ordered to carry out the deputy's routine labors until he returns. However, I will be obeyed in any matter. I can, and will, do anything that will make you more comfortable or will amuse you, from a change in your accommodations to providing you with companions. You observe," he added with exquisite bitterness, "that the limit of my capacity to prove my friendship is to offer my services as a pander."

Bell gazed at the tip of his cigarette, letting his eyes wander about the room for an instant, and permitting them to rest for the fraction of a second upon the round shouldered, writing form by the side wall.

"I am sufficiently amused," he said mildly. "I asked to be sent to The Master. He intends to make me an offer, I understand. Or he did. He may have changed his mind. But I am curious. Your father told me a certain thing that seemed to indicate he did not enjoy the service of The Master. Your tone is quite loyal, but unhappy. Why do you serve him? Aside, of course, from the fact of having been poisoned by his deputy."

Internally, Bell was damning Jamison feverishly. If he was to play up to Ortiz, why didn't Jamison give him some sign of how he was to do it? Some tip....

"Herr Wiedkind," said Ortiz wearily, "perhaps you can explain."

The round shouldered figure swung about and bowed profoundly to Bell.

"Der Señor Ortiz," he said gutturally, and in a sepulchral profundity, "he does not understand himself. I haff nefer said it before. But he serfs Der Master because he despairs, andt he will cease to serf Der Master when he hopes. And I—I serf Der Master because I hope, andt I will cease to serf him when I despair."

Ortiz looked curiously and almost suspiciously at the Germanic figure which regarded him soberly through thick spectacles.

"It is not customary, Herr Wiedkind," he said slowly, "to speak of ceasing to serve The Master."

"Idt is not customary to speak of many necessary things," said the round shouldered figure dryly. "Of our religions, for example. Of der women we lofe. Of our gonsciences. Of various necessary biological functions. But in der presence of der young man who is der enemy of Der Master we can speak freely, you and I who serf him. We know that maybe der deputies serf because they enjoy it. But der subjects? Dey serf because dey fear. Andt fear is intolerable. A man who is afraid is in an unstable gondition. Sooner or later he is going to stop fearing because he gets used to it—when Der Master will haff no more hold on him—or else he is going to stop fearing because he will kill himself."

To an outsider the spectacle of the three men in their talk would have been very odd indeed. Two men who served The Master, and one who had been his only annoying opponent, talking of the service of The Master quite amicably and without marked disagreement.

Ortiz stirred and drummed nervously on the desk. The round shouldered figure put the tips of its fingers together.

"How did you know," demanded Ortiz suddenly, "that I serve because I despair?"

Bell watched keenly. He began to see where the talk was trending, and waited alertly for the moment for him to speak. This was a battlefield, this too luxurious room in which young Ortiz seemed an alien. Rhetoric was the weapon which now would serve the best.

"Let us talk frankly," said the placid German voice. "You andt I, Señor Ortiz, haff worked together. You are not a defil like most of the deputies, and I do not regret hafing been sent here to help you. And I am not a scoundtrel like most of those who help the deputies, so you haff liked me a little. Let us talk frankly. I was trapped. I am a capable segretary. I speak seferal languages. I haff no particular ambitions or any loyalties. I am useful. So I was trapped. But you, Señor Ortiz, you are different."

Ortiz suddenly smiled bitterly.

"It is a saying in Brazil, if I recall the words, 'A cauda do demonio e de rendas.' 'The devil's tail is made of lace.' That is the story."

Bell said quietly:

"No."

Ortiz stared at him. He was very pale. And suddenly he laughed without any amusement whatever.

"True," said Ortiz. He smiled in the same bitterness. "I had forgotten. I am a slave, and the Herr Wiedkind is a slave, and you, Señor Bell, are the enemy of our master. But I had forgotten that we are gentlemen. In the service of The Master one does forget that there are gentlemen."

He laughed again and lighted a cigarette with hands that shook a little.

"I loved a girl," he said in a cynical amusement. "It is peculiar that one should love any woman, señores—or do you, Señor Bell, find it natural? I loved this girl. It pleased my father. She was of a family fully equal to my own: their wealth, their position, their traditions were quite equal, and it was a most suitable match. Most remarkable of all, I loved her as one commonly loves only when no such considerations exist. It is amusing to me now, to think how deeply, and how truly, and how terribly I loved her...."

Young Ortiz's pallor deepened as he smiled at them. His eyes, so dark as to be almost black, looked at them from a smiling mask of whiteness.

"There was no flaw anywhere. A romance of the most romantic, my father very happy, her family most satisfied and pleased, and I—I walked upon air. And then my father suddenly departed for the United States, quite without warning. He left a memorandum for me, saying that it was a matter of government, a secret matter. He would explain upon his return. I did not worry. I haunted the house of my fiancée. The habits of her family are of the most liberal. I saw her daily, almost hourly, and my infatuation grew. And suddenly I grew irritable and saw red spots before my eyes....

"Her father took me to task about my nervousness. He led me kindly to a man of high position, who poured out for me a little potion.... And within an hour all my terrible unease had vanished. And then they told me of The Master, of the poison I had been given in the house of my fiancée herself. They informed me that if I served The Master I would be provided with the antidote which would keep me sane. I raged.... And then the father of my fiancée told me that he and all his family served The Master. That the girl I loved, herself, owed him allegiance. And while I would possibly have defied them and death itself, the thought of that girl not daring to wed me because of the poison in her veins.... I saw, then, that she was in terror. I imagined the two of us comforting each other beneath the shadow of the most horrible of fates...."

Ortiz was silent for what seemed to be a long time, smiling mirthlessly at nothing. When his lips parted, it was to laugh, a horribly discordant laughter.

"I agreed," he said in ghastly amusement. "For the sake of my loved one, I agreed to

serve The Master that I might comfort her. And plans for our wedding, which had been often and inexplicably delayed, were set in train at once. And the deputy of The Master entertained me often. I plied him with drink, striving to learn all that I could, hoping against hope that there would be some way of befooling him and securing the antidote without the poison.... And at last, when very drunken, he laughed at me for my intention of marriage. He advised me tipsily to serve The Master zealously and receive promotion in his service. Then, he told me amusedly, I would not care for marriage. My fiancée would be at my disposal without such formalities. In fact—while I stood rigid with horror—he sent a command for her to attend him immediately. He commanded me to go to an apartment in his dwelling. And soon—within minutes, it seemed—the girl I loved came there to me...."

Bell did not move. This was no moment to interrupt. Ortiz's fixed and cynical smile wavered and vanished. His voice was harsh.

"She was at my disposal, as an act of drunken friendship by the deputy of The Master. She confessed to me, weeping, that she had been at the disposal of the deputy himself. Of any other person he cared to divert or amuse.... Oh! Dios!"

Ortiz stopped short and said, in forced calmness:

"That also was the night that my father died."

Silence fell. Bell sat very still. The Teutonic figure spoke quietly after the clock had ticked for what seemed an interminable period.

"You didt know, then, that your father's death was arranged?"

Ortiz turned stiffly to look at him.

"Here," said the placid voice, quaintly sympathetic. "Look at these."

A hand extended a thick envelope. Ortiz took it, staring with wide, distended eyes. The round shouldered figure stood up and seemed to shake itself. The stoop of its shoulders straightened out. One of the seemingly pudgy hands reached up and removed the thick spectacles. A bushy gray eyebrow peeled off. A straggly beard was removed. The other eyebrow.... Jamison nodded briefly to Bell, and turned to watch Ortiz.

And Ortiz was reading the contents of the envelope. His hands began to shake violently. He rested them on the desk-top so that he could continue to read. When he looked up his eyes were flaming.

"The real Herr Wiedkind," said Jamison dryly, "came up from Punta Arenas with

special instructions from The Master. You have talents, Señor Ortiz, which The Master wished to use. Also you have considerable wealth and the prestige of an honorable family. But you were afflicted with ideas of honor and decency, which are disadvantageous in deputies of The Master. The real Herr Wiedkind had remarkable gifts in eradicating those ideas."

Jamison sat down and crossed his knees carefully.

"I looked you up because I knew The Master had killed your father," he added mildly, "and I thought you'd either be hunting The Master or he'd be hunting you. My name's Jamison. I killed the real Wiedkind and took his identification papers. He was a singularly unpleasant beast. His idea of pleasure made him seem a fatherly sort of person, very much like my make-up. He was constantly petting children, and appeared very benign. I am very, very glad that I killed him."

Ortiz tore at his collar, suddenly. He seemed to be choking.

"This—this says.... It is The Master's handwriting! I know it! And it says—"

"It says," Jamison observed calmly, "that since your father killed the previous deputy in an attempt to save you from The Master's poison, that you are to be prepared for the work your father had been assigned. Herr Wiedkind is given special orders about your—ah—moral education. In passing, I might say that your father was sent to the United States because it was known he'd killed the previous deputy. He told Bell he'd done that killing. And he was allowed to grow horribly nervous on his return. He was permitted to see the red spots, because he was officially—even as far as you were concerned—to commit suicide.

"It was intended that his nervousness was to be noticed. And a plane tried to deliver a message to him. Your father thought the parcel contained the antidote to the poison that was driving him mad. Actually, it was very conventional prussic acid. Your father would have drunk it and dropped dead, a suicide, after a conspicuous period of nervousness and worry."

Bell felt his cigarette burning his fingers. He had sat rigid until the thing burned short. He crushed out the coal, looking at Ortiz.

And Ortiz seemed to gasp for breath. But with an almost superhuman effort he calmed himself outwardly.

"I—think," he said with some difficulty, "that I should thank you. I do. But I do not think that you told me all of this without some motive. I abandon the service of The Master. But what is it that you wish me to do? You know, of course, that I can order both of you killed...."

Bell put down the stub of his cigarette very carefully.

"The only thing you can do," he said quietly, "is to die."

"True," said Ortiz with a ghastly smile. "But I would like my death to perform some service. The Master has no enemies save you two, and those of us who die on becoming his enemies. I would like, in dying, to do him some harm."

"I will promise," said Jamison grimly, "to see that The Master dies himself if you will have Bell and myself put in a plane with fuel to Punta Arenas and a reasonable supply of weapons. I include the Señorita Canalejas as a matter of course."

Ortiz looked from one to the other. And suddenly he smiled once more. It was queer, that smile. It was not quite mirthless.

"You were right, just now," he observed calmly, "when as the Herr Wiedkind you said that I would quit the service of The Master when I ceased to despair. I begin to have hopes. You two men have done the impossible. You have fought The Master, you have learned many of his secrets, and you have corrupted a man to treason when treason means suicide. Perhaps, Señores, you will continue to achieve the impossible, and assassinate The Master."

He stood up, and though deathly pale continued to smile.

"I suggest, Señor, that you resume your complexion. And you, Señor Bell, you will be returned to your confinement. I will make the necessarily elaborate arrangements for my death."

Bell rose. He liked this young man. He said quietly:

"You said just now you wouldn't ask me to shake hands. May I ask you?..." He added almost apologetically as Ortiz's fingers closed upon his: "You see, when your father died I thought that I would be very glad if I felt that I would die as well. But I think"—he smiled wryly—"I think I'll have two examples to think of when my time comes."

In the morning a bulky, round shouldered figure entered the room in which Bell was confined.

"You will follow me," said a harsh voice.

Bell shrugged. He was marched down long passageways and many steps. He came out into the courtyard, where the glistening black car with the blank windows waited. At

an imperious gesture, he got in and sat down with every appearance of composure, as of a man resignedly submitting to force he cannot resist. The thick spectacles of the Herr Wiedkind regarded him with a gogglelike effect. There was a long pause. Then the sound of footsteps. Paula appeared, deathly pale. She was ushered into the vehicle—and only Bell's swift gesture of a finger to his lips checked her cry of relief.

Voices outside. The guttural Spanish of the Herr Wiedkind. Other, emotionless voices replying. The Herr Wiedkind climbed heavily into the car and sat down, producing a huge revolver which bore steadily upon Bell. The door closed, and he made a swift gesture of caution.

"Idt may be," said the Germanic voice harshly, "that you and the young ladty haff much to say to each other. But idt can wait. And I warn you, mein Herr, that at the first movement I shall fire."

Bell relaxed. There was the purring of the motor. The car moved off. Obviously there was some microphonic attachment inside the tonneau which carried every word within the locked vehicle to the ears of the two men upon the chauffeur's seat. An excellent idea for protection against treachery. Bell smiled, and moved so that his lips were a bare half-inch from Paula's ears.

"Try to weep, loudly," he said in the faintest of whispers. "This man is a friend."

But Paula could only stare at the bulky figure sitting opposite until he suddenly removed the spectacles, and smiled dryly, and then reached in his pockets and handed Bell two automatic pistols, and extended a tiny but very wicked weapon to Paula. He motioned to her to conceal it.

Jamison—moving to make the minimum of noise—handed Bell a sheet of stiff cardboard. It passed into Bell's fingers without a rustle. He showed it silently to Paula.

We were overheard last night by someone. We don't know who or how much he heard. Dictaphone in the room we talked in. Can't find out who it was or what action he's taken. We may be riding into a trap now. Ortiz has disappeared. He may be dead. We can only wait and see.

The car was moving as if in city traffic, a swift dash forward and a sudden stop, and then another swift dash. But the walls within were padded so that no sound came from without save the faint vibration of the motor and now and then the distinct flexing of a spring. Then the car turned a corner. It went more rapidly. It turned another corner. And another....

In the light of the bright dome light, Bell saw beads of sweat coming out on Jamison's face. He did not dare to speak, but he formed words with his lips.

"He's turning wrong! This isn't the way to the field!"

Bell's jaws clenched. He took out his two automatics and looked at them carefully. And then, much too short a time from the departure for the flying field to have been reached, the car checked. It went over rough cobblestones, and Bell himself knew well that there had been no cobbled roadway between the flying field and his prison. And then the car went up a sort of ramp, a fairly steep incline which by the feel of the motor was taken in low, and on for a short distance more. Then the car stopped and the motor was cut off.

Keys rattled in the lock outside. The door opened. The blunt barrel of an automatic pistol peered in.