

No. 81.—DETECTIVE TALES FOR EVERYONE.—1^D.

Week ending
Dec. 23, 1916.

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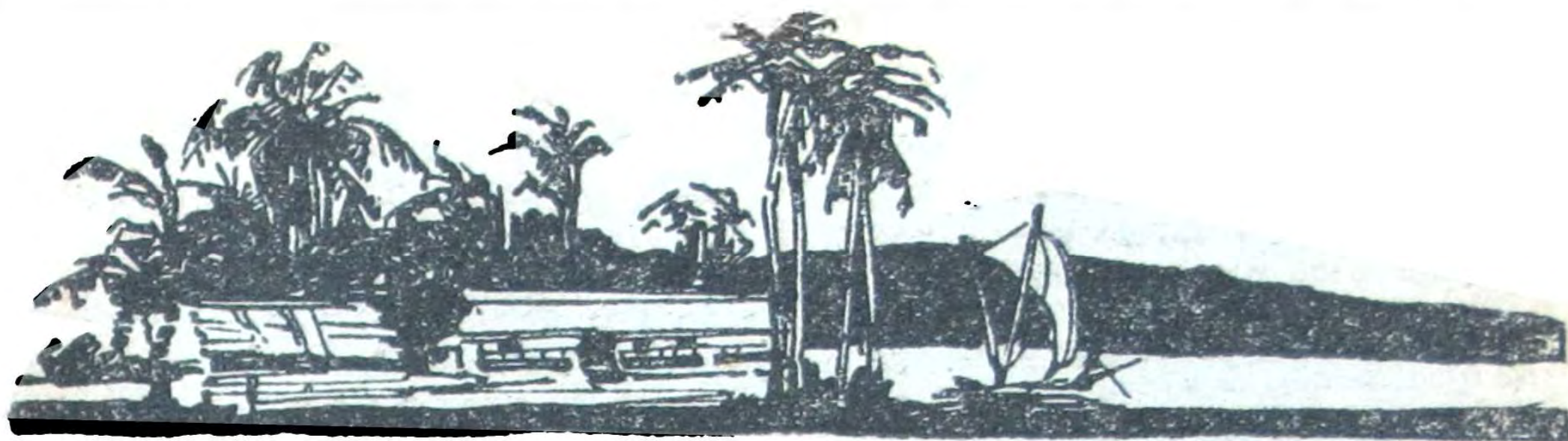
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THE PLANTATION MYSTERY

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CHAPTER I.

Digby Forrester Finds Himself in Difficulties—The Trouble on Patricia Plantation—The Last Straw—The Arrival of Nelson Lee.

IN the screen-enclosed office of Patricia Plantation House Digby Forrester, the manager, sat wrestling with a great mass of notes and figures. Beside him, his young brow puckered up with worry, was his assistant and plantation timekeeper, Jimmy Harrison.

Pinned to the wall over the crude table at which they sat was a blue print plan of the plantation, revealing the sections as they had been surveyed off in narrow lines of white, while criss-crossing these lines were broader white marks, indicating where roads should be located. Beside this blue print was a smaller plan of the plantation tramway. A rather grubby calendar hung on the other side of the blue print, and beyond that the unplastered walls were bare of adornment.

The table at which they sat, two or three chairs of native manufacture, and a rusty typewriter, were the extent of the office furniture. One end of the room had been almost completely done away with, and the area covered with fine copper wire netting, to permit a free circulation of what air there might be and yet to keep at bay the mosquitoes.

Outside the tropic sun blazed down relentlessly. Beyond a cleared circle of about one hundred yards was the edge of the Bananas, stretching clear away to the Matina River. Back of the house was the unbroken line of the virgin forest, against which Digby Forrester had been struggling valiantly for a couple of years.

The house itself was typical of the plantation house in Costa Rica. It had been originally built in sections in the United States, and finally fitted together on the plantation, its foundations being a few small cement pillars of the rough workmanship of the negro. It consisted of the office and three bedrooms, the latter apartments furnished in the most simple manner—plain black iron bedsteads, cedar-wood tables, and rough chairs of the same material.

Adjoining the house at the rear was a small galvanised lean-to, used as a kitchen, and beyond that the line of whitewashed buildings used as stables, and finally the negro huts.

In all Costa Rica, where is to be found the finest banana land in the world, there was no more choice spot than that occupied by the Patricia Plantation. It had the benefit of the overflow of the river, which bounded it on two sides, and which periodically deposited a rich silt over the flats. For, be it known that nothing is more conducive to the growth of the golden fruit than such conditions as these. It had, too, that humidity of atmosphere in which the banana revels, and, on the face of it, Patricia should have been a very profitable plantation. But such was not the case, as the pile of notes and figures, over which Digby Forrester, the manager, was worrying, could prove. And his words to Jimmy Harrison indicated that trouble in a concrete manner.

Both young men were garbed in thin khaki riding-breeches and leather puttees. Khaki shirts, thrown open at the throat, covered the upper parts of their bodies, and wide-brimmed stetsons were at the moment pushed back from their faces.

Digby Forrester finished his last set of calculations, and slamming the pencil down he began to roll a cigarette.

"It's no use fuming," he said, in a tone of resignation. "I can't see any way out unless the company cables more money at once. Ever since we came here, two years ago, and this plantation was nothing but forest, we have been bucking against the same miserable treatment."

"You're dead right there, Forrester," responded Harrison. "As far as I'm concerned, I don't see how you've pulled through the way you have."

"It has been touch-and-go more than once," continued Forrester. "Here we have one of the finest bits of banana soil in Costa Rica. For centuries it has been covered with an annual overflow of the Matina, and the soil is as rich as I have ever seen. Yet here we are, after two years, with only four hundred acres in bananas, and even that area just coming into bearing."

"Four hundred acres out of two thousand—just think of it! Why, Jimmy, if the company had delivered the goods as they should have delivered them, we would have had the whole two thousand coming into bearing, and we'd have been shipping next month. But look at what really is the case. Fourteen hundred acres not even cleared yet, and why? Because the confounded company for which we work won't give us the money to develop the place."

Harrison nodded his young head sagely.

"That's the point to a T," he said. "By the by, Forrester, what is the capitalisation of the company?"

"A hundred thousand," replied the manager, "although I don't know how much stock has been sold. I do know this, however, that if I had known two years ago what I know now, I never should have taken on the contract to put Patricia Plantation on a producing basis."

"I was satisfied with the job I had down in Panama, but they gave me no peace until I threw it up and came along here. The company pledged its word that I should have plenty of money to develop the place properly, and, after two years, look what we have been able to do."

"Out of that four hundred acres coming into bearing, we shall be able to ship perhaps two hundred thousand stems during the coming months. Instead of that, we ought to be shipping a million. It isn't fair treatment, and, putting that to one side, I'm hanged if I see, Jimmy, what we're going to do about the pay-roll to-day unless the funds arrive."

"The post from home ought to reach here by three o'clock, and I'm hoping that they will receive the order on the San José Bank by it. If so, you will have to ride into Matina and catch the up-train there in the morning. You ought to be able to get the funds and come down by the evening train, then we could pay off to-morrow night.

"If we have the actual order on the bank, and the funds are there to meet it, I shall be able to hold the men off for twenty-four hours all right. If not——" And Digby Forrester threw his hands up with a hopeless gesture.

Neither Forrester nor Harrison were exaggerating the conditions at Patricia in any detail. It was, as Forrester had said, one of the finest areas of banana land in Costa Rica. And, with a sufficiency of funds for its development, should have begun by now to reach a profitable producing basis.

Forrester, although a young man, was well known from Honduras to Panama as one of the most able banana producers on the Mosquito Coast. Beginning as a timekeeper with the International Fruit Company in Honduras, he had been transferred to Guatemala as mandador of one of the largest plantations there. He was a perfect marvel for making a plantation yield the maximum, and at the same time in keeping his cost of production down to the minimum.

Another big fruit company had then secured his services in order to develop a large area in the Changuinola district of Panama. His work there had strengthened his reputation, and when, at Bocas del Toro, he had received an offer from a newly formed fruit company to go and develop their land in Costa Rica, he had refused somewhat curtly.

But offer after offer had been made him. The increasing remuneration suggested indicated that for some reason this newly formed company was determined to secure Forrester's services.

Finally he had accepted, had travelled to England in order to arrange his contracts, and then, sending for young Jimmy Harrison, who had been working with him in Panama, made his way to Patricia Plantation.

As has been said, the plantation was bounded on two sides by the Matina River. On the other two sides it joined another large plantation, which was being developed by English capital. And this other plantation was the only thing which lay between the Patricia and the railway. A right-of-way of sorts, however, gave access from Patricia to the platform beside the railway, where the fruit would be picked up.

With funds in hand and the promise of plenty more as he should require them, Forrester had lost no time in getting to work. He had engaged half a dozen negro contractors with their gangs, and an open space was cleared for the buildings. By the time this had been done the sectional house had arrived from the States, and had been erected at once. Then followed the building of the stables and the huts for the negroes—West Indians all of them, and mostly from Jamaica.

Then came the buying of mules and horses and the clearing of the land right to the edge of the river. Even then Forrester found difficulty in getting the funds he desired, but he had plodded on, until now, two years after, he had come to this. The position, instead of being improved, was worse than ever. The previous month the funds, which should have been paid for the clearing of another hundred acres, had been used of necessity for the actual upkeep of the four hundred acres which Forrester had managed to plant.

There had not been a penny left over for further development of the estate, and he had just barely managed to meet the pay-roll.

Now, a month later, when the four thousand pounds for which he had cabled should have arrived, he was at the moment without even the few hundreds necessary to meet this month's pay-roll.

His demands had been met with promises only, and in no case had these promises materialised. He had figured over the matter from every point of view, but could not understand the action of the head office in London.

The four hundred acres he had planted would, bar accidents, yield something like two hundred thousand bunches of fruit during the coming twelve months. Forrester had a profitable selling contract with a big banana shipping firm—a contract which guaranteed him 31 cents, American gold, for all his "firsts," 28 cents for all his "seconds," and 26 cents for all his "thirds."

Forrester had reckoned to produce at a gross cost of production of not over 15 cents a bunch. As a matter of fact he had done even better, for the cost of production sheets of the first cutting had shown the gross cost to be only 13 cents a bunch.

On that basis for the twelve months he would ship something like thirteen thousand pounds' worth of fruit, which would cost him in the neighbourhood of five thousand pounds to lay down at the railway. There was a profit in sight of eight thousand pounds, but under present conditions that would do little good. He needed that amount, and more, urgently. He could not wait twelve months, receiving monthly dribbles. To develop the two thousand acres would cost, he had reckoned, about twenty-four thousand pounds.

Over two years ago, when the company should have sent him this amount, he had received less than six thousand pounds, and, firmly believing in the promises of the head office, he had invested a couple of thousand in laying down a small plantation tramway, which would enable him to get out his bananas more cheaply, more expeditiously, and with less risk of bruising than by the antiquated mule-pack system.

This tramway had been laid down with the expectation that it would feed the whole two thousand acres. But now, with only four hundred acres planted, it made such a hole in the development funds he had received, and created such a tremendous overhead charge, that it would "take the gilt off the gingerbread," so to speak. In other words, it would eat up all the profit on the four hundred acres. That was the position on Patricia Plantation on the day when Digby Forrester and Jimmy Harrison were anxiously awaiting a letter from London.

The negroes should be paid off that night. The pay-roll came to nearly eight hundred pounds, and at the present moment there was in hand to meet it less than twenty pounds. There was, too, a certain attitude on the part of the negroes which neither Forrester nor Harrison could fathom. Their work during the past month had been slack, and on riding through the different sections Forrester had found much of the contract work slurred over or shelved altogether. Yet through him or Harrison not a hint could have been formed of the actual financial position.

Forrester had cabled and had written for more funds, and if, as he hoped, he could this day receive even half of the number of thousands he needed, he would be able even then to carry on. If not—well, the position would be of the blackest. Therefore, it can be readily understood that when a negro, mounted on a mule, appeared out of the timber which lay between Patricia and Matina with a mail-bag thrown over the pommel of his saddle, both Forrester and Harrison watched his approach anxiously.

It seemed to them, as they gazed through the great wire screen towards the trail up which the negro was riding that never before had mule moved

so slowly. To men in their state of mind the leisurely manner in which the negro descended was particularly irritating, and, walking out on the balcony to meet him, Jimmy Harrison snatched the mail-bag from his hands. Half a minute later Forrester was slitting open the envelope which bore the name of the Patricia Plantation Company.

Unfolding the sheet of paper which it contained, he began to read, and Jimmy Harrison watched anxiously whilst the eyes of his chief travelled down the page.

Coming to the end of the letter, Forrester struck the table with his fist, and, pushing the letter across to Harrison, said curtly, "Read."

Jimmy picked up the letter to obey, and this is what he read:

"Digby Forrester, Esq., Manager,

"Patricia Plantation, Matina River, Matina, Costa Rica.

"Dear Sir,—In reply to your last letter, we regret to have to inform you that for the present we shall be unable to send any further funds to you.

"Owing to conditions existing here, and into an explanation of which we cannot enter, it will be impossible for us to provide any more money for some weeks to come.

"We would suggest that you get rid of the bulk of the labourers on the estate, putting them off as you may think best, unless, of course, you have sufficient funds in hand with which to meet their claims.

"The only thing to do then is to mark time until we have arranged something at this end. It seems to us that you might be able to realise on some of the fruit which is coming into bearing. Perhaps the shipping company would advance against crop.

"We shall communicate with you further just as soon as we are able to arrange something.

"We are, Sir, yours faithfully,

"The Patricia Plantation Company,

"W. MORRIS, President."

Jimmy Harrison gaped stupidly at the letter in his hand. It was Forrester's voice which recalled him to a realisation of the crisis which was upon them.

"Did you ever read such utter piffle in your life?" growled Forrester savagely, as he took the letter once more. "Just listen to this: 'We would suggest that you get rid of the bulk of the labourers, putting them off as you may think best, unless you have sufficient funds to meet their claims.' Why, they know we haven't any money on hand out here. They know how I have been pushed for funds ever since I've been here. To-day is pay-day, and those niggers expect to receive something like eight hundred pounds. To meet it we have a beggarly twenty pounds or so in hand, and the head office ought to realise that one charge you can't slide is pay-roll.

"If I had had an order on the San José Bank, I could have staved them off all right until you went up and got the money. But now, what can I say to them? It's been hard enough to keep the whole country from knowing our financial position. And certain things which have happened during the last month or two cause me to think that the niggers have got wind of our difficulties.

"What can I say to them? If I get out there and call them together and say that I can't meet the pay-roll, there'll be a row, you can bet your life on that. There are half a dozen Martinique niggers in that bunch who are just aching for trouble. And then, take this idiotic suggestion that the shipping company might advance money against crop. They know just as well as I do we couldn't get a cent against crop. Why, every banana-tree

on the plantation might be destroyed by a hurricane, and no one is going to take that risk.

"It's ruin, Jimmy. It's bad enough for us, but Heaven only knows what I'm going to say to those niggers out there."

"How many bunches do you reckon we can cut to-morrow?" asked Harrison.

Forrester drew a sheet of paper towards him and began to figure. He lifted his head after a few minutes and said:

"At the outside we should cut four thousand stems. If I could stave the pay-roll off until we got that fruit out, I could get a cheque from the Banana Company at once. That would be between two hundred and two hundred and fifty pounds. With that I might delay the pay-roll for another four days until we cut the next lot. I figure we should get between five and six thousand stems, then, and that would mean, say, another three hundred pounds.

"By stripping every section the following week we might realise enough, with luck, to meet the wages charges. We've got the tramway to get it out by, and that means that we sha'n't have the charge of paying for extra mules. The only thing for me to do is to call the men together and talk straight to them. I've always kept my word to them, and if I pledge myself that they will get every penny due to them, perhaps we can stave things off until we get these three cuttings over. It's the only way out, and after that we can decide what we had better do."

"Why don't you chuck it up, Forrester?" said Jimmy. "There's never been anything in it for you. You've even used your own salary to keep things going."

Forrester's jaw set grimly and his grey eyes narrowed.

"I'll chuck it up when they've got me beaten," he said. "That moment has not come yet. I don't understand what they're trying to do at the head office. Their actions seem to be directed towards weakening the estate rather than developing it. It's absolutely beyond me. I guess this business promotion is a good thing to leave alone if a man understands as little about it as I do. Anyway, Jimmy, let's get the men together and see what happens."

"Aren't you going to read that other letter first?" asked Harrison.

"It's only a local letter," responded Forrester. "Probably only a bill for material. However, we'll see what it says."

Tearing open the envelope, Forrester drew out the enclosed sheet, and Harrison noticed that as he read a heavy frown appeared on his forehead.

"Listen to this, Jimmy," he said, when he had finished. "I'll read it aloud. It's from Alvarado, who is manager of the estate which lies between ours and the railway. He says:

"Dear Sir,—I beg to call your attention to the fact that the course of the plantation tramway which you have built runs for a certain distance through this property. I refer particularly to the link which connects up your main tramway system with the railway.

"Without prejudice, I acknowledge that the strip of land on which you built this part of the tramway was supposed to be right-of-way from Patricia Plantation, but, on looking up the matter, I find that this stretch of land actually belongs to Santa Rosa Plantation, of which I am the manager.

"It is with regret, therefore, I hereby notify you that none of your trucks can be permitted to pass over this section of track, and, furthermore, I am compelled to give you notice that the rails must be taken up within ten

days. Failing that, I shall continue the fence lines of Santa Rosa in order to enclose this strip of land with the estate.

"Should you not accept this notice, I shall be compelled to secure an injunction against you until the matter is settled.

"I am, Sir, yours faithfully,

"JUAN ALVARADO,

"Manager for the Santa Rosa Plantation Co."

That Forrester was greatly upset was clear. After reading the letter aloud he clutched it in his hand, and walked to the end of the room, gazing out across the sea of waving banana-trees.

"This can't be true," he muttered to himself. "There has never been any question about that right-of-way before. When I built the tramway through there to connect ours up with the railway, Alvarado raised no objection. Now he claims to have suddenly discovered it is not a right-of-way, and coolly orders me to tear up my rails. Why, that would mean absolute ruin to this plantation with that right-of-way closed. It cuts us off completely from the railway. Without that means of getting our fruit away we should have to let it rot on the trees. Even if he is in the wrong he can probably carry out his threat to secure an injunction forbidding us to use the tramway until the matter is settled, and with things as they are at present that would kill my last fighting chance.

"I'll have to go and see him to-night. He——"

Forrester broke off his musings as the sound of excited voices reached him from the huts. He knew that sound all too well—knew it for the sound of a multitude of negroes all trying to talk at once.

The next moment he saw over a hundred of them break into view. They were heading straight for the plantation house, and from their attitude Forrester knew they meant trouble.

"We won't have to go to the men, Jimmy," he said. "They are coming to us instead. Come on! Let's go out and see what they want."

Harrison jumped up, and, after one look through the screen at the oncoming mob, followed his chief out to the verandah.

Digby Forrester leaned on the railing, and waited till the mob was within a few yards of the house. Then he held up his hand.

"Stop!" he called. "What does this mean?"

The crowd of negroes halted and looked for guidance towards a huge Martinique black who was in the front rank. He looked up to Forrester insolently, then he said:

"We've come for our money, boss. You pay us now."

Forrester's hands itched to strike down the negro. His voice, his manner, the whole thing was so absolutely out of order. No black should ever have addressed a white man in such fashion. And the thing which puzzled Forrester was, what had encouraged the negro to do so?

To lay him out, however, would have been sheer madness, for that the negroes had primed themselves for trouble by drinking poisonous "white eye" was plain. It behoved him to handle them with diplomacy, if possible.

"You want your pay, and you will get your pay," he said. "Is there any man among you who can stand forward and say that I have ever broken faith with him? Answer me!"

"No, boss!" came a voice from the back of the crowd.

"Very well, then," went on Forrester. "Go back to your huts and your work. I know that your pay is due to-day, but the pay-roll is not ready. There are certain mistakes which it will take a day or two to discover. As soon as they are corrected you will receive your money. In

the meantime, for what you need I will give you orders on the plantation commissary."

Some of the negroes appeared inclined to obey. But even as they wavered the Martinique in front said:

"You speak much, but you will never pay us, boss. You have no money, and you will receive no money. Answer us, boss, and tell us if that is true."

"What do you mean?" snarled Forrester, leaning over the railing and gazing down on the big black. "What do you mean by that statement?"

The negro grinned impudently.

"I mean, boss, that you had word to-day that no more money would be sent. If that is not true, then show us the letter you got."

"How do you know what letters I receive?" asked Forrester.

He was hedging for time now, for the black's remark puzzled him exceedingly. How did he know, how could he know, that Forrester had received a letter from the head office in London that day? And how could he guess, moreover, its contents? The letters would have been put into the plantation bag at Matina, and the bag locked. It had not been forced open, nor had the letters been tampered with. Then how did the black know—or was he merely guessing? Forrester considered his only hope was to move swiftly and with a high hand.

"You are insolent!" he said. "I will give the lot of you just ten seconds to get back to the huts. If you are not gone then I will drive you there!"

For answer the Martinique deliberately turned his back on the white man, and shouted to the others:

"I'm right! He hasn't got the money, and he won't get it! He is afraid to show us the letter! Come on, and let us get it for ourselves!"

"Get ready, Jimmy!" said Forrester quickly. "They are going to rush us. The best thing to do is to try to hold the steps."

Nor was he wrong. For, inflamed by the awful native liquor which they had been drinking, and excited by the words of the Martinique who had dared to insult the white man, the blacks flew into a frenzy, and, led by the Martinique, they rushed at the house.

Forrester and Harrison drew their automatics and stood ready.

"Back, you fools!" shouted Forrester. "I'll shoot the first man who sets foot on the steps!"

The words did not serve, however, to arrest the rush, for the next instant the Martinique was on the lower step.

Forrester's automatic spoke, and the man went down in his tracks. There were others to take his place, however, and now that blood had flowed the last restraint seemed to slip from the negroes. Shrieking and yelling in a peculiar high falsetto, they came on. Forrester and Harrison fired quickly and methodically, and not a bullet was wasted.

Man after man went down, only to be lost to view beneath the feet of those who swept over him. Two men managed to gain the top step. Jimmy Harrison clubbed his weapon and drove it full into the mouth of one, sending the man reeling back with half his teeth choking him. Forrester sent his heel into the other's solar plexus, and he too went tumbling down the steps.

Yet, fast as the white men sent the enemy down the ranks were filled, for there were over a hundred of the negroes altogether. Slowly but surely Forrester and Harrison were driven back, step by step, until they were at the threshold of the door which opened into the office. The verandah was literally swarming with blacks now, and both white men knew they could last out only a short time longer.

They had both emptied their revolvers some time before, and, having

no fresh clips of cartridges, had clubbed them. There seemed no hope of succour either, for the nearest white man was several miles away. All they could do was to hold the office as long as possible, and, if they were overpowered, to go down fighting. They were both determined on that.

When Forrester saw that the blacks were preparing to rush them from three sides at once, he grabbed Harrison by the arm and jerked him back into the office. Then he slammed the door and locked it just as the first wave of the onslaught came.

Several blacks had worked round to the side of the building, and with drawn machetes were preparing to cut through the wire netting. That job would take only a few seconds at most, and would enable them to work both front and rear at the same time.

The situation was certainly desperate, and, backing along the room, Forrester and Harrison were preparing for their last desperate stand, when outside there sounded the sharp staccato bark of automatics, and, following that, the blacks, with yells and screams, turned and fled.

Bleeding from half a dozen machete wounds, Forrester and Harrison staggered to the door, and, jerking it open, peered out to see what or who had so opportunely come to their rescue.

In full retreat towards the cover of the bananas was the mob of negroes. But near the steps were a couple of horses, and in the saddles, still holding their automatics, were a man and a boy.

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Nelson Lee Makes a Proposition—The Arrest of Digby Forrester and Jimmy Harrison.

AS Forrester and Harrison stepped out on to the verandah the man and the youth slid from their saddles and came up the steps, pocketing their weapons as they did so. Forrester advanced with outstretched hands.

"I don't know who you are, sir," he said, "but you have certainly arrived at an opportune moment."

"You are Mr. Digby Forrester?" inquired the other, as he took Forrester's hand.

Forrester bowed.

"Guilty," he said.

"Then permit me to introduce myself," said the stranger. "My name is Lee—Nelson Lee—of London. And I have business with you, Mr. Forrester."

Forrester bowed again.

"As soon as we get these niggers out of the way——"

"Quite so," interposed Lee. "My assistant and I will lend you a hand."

The big Martinique black who had started the riot lay sprawled across the lowest step. Beyond him were four more negroes, two of them wounded by bullets and the other two with broken heads.

Between them the four white men dragged the wounded round the house to one of the stables. Jimmy Harrison got some hot water, and Lee and Forrester bathed the wounds, then bound them up. The other pair they left to come round as best they could. But the Martinique presented a greater problem, for a brief examination revealed the fact that Forrester's bullet had gone through his heart.

He was carried to the stable, and left there until such time as the native

police could be notified. Then the four white men returned to the plantation house, where Harrison dug out some wine and biscuits for refreshment.

The nigger woman who acted as cook had taken to the woods at the first sign of trouble, and had not yet returned.

When they had refreshed themselves and had lit cigarettes, Digby Forrester turned to Lee with an inquiring look.

"Now, sir," he began. "May I ask——"

"I shall come to my business without delay, Mr. Forrester," said Lee. "I have come to Costa Rica as the representative of the minority shareholders of the Patricia Plantation Company. There is among them a keen disappointment that the Patricia Plantation is not going ahead as they feel it should."

Forrester looked at Lee in amazement.

"The minority shareholders!" he exclaimed. "Why, I have always been under the impression that the Patricia Plantation Company was a closed corporation."

"It may have been at one time," said Lee; "but it certainly is not now. For a year or so the shares have been sold steadily to small investors, such as clerks, schoolteachers, clergymen, and widows, all of whom have bought with a desire to turn their small capital into wealth."

"About six months ago, at the instigation of a certain shareholder, a clergyman, these minority shareholders sent a representative to the annual meeting of the company. They were by no means satisfied with the report of the proceedings which took place there. They waited some time longer, however, in the hope that conditions would grow better. But instead of that they seem to have grown worse."

"Under the stimulus of this same clergyman another meeting of the minority shareholders was held, and a levy made in order to send an investigator out here to see exactly what conditions existed."

"I was approached in the matter, and, after looking into things in London, decided to come out. That, sir, is the reason for my being here. I shall now hand you my credentials, and I shall greatly appreciate any information you are able to give me. I know Costa Rica fairly well, and I know that no land in the world can be more suitable for banana growing than this land along the Matina river. Therefore, it is even more of a puzzle to me why the Patricia Plantation is not paying dividends."

Forrester made no remark while Lee drew out his letters of introduction and handed them over. He read them slowly, and when he had finished laid them on the table.

"I hardly know what to say to you, Mr. Lee," he said. "In the first place I did not know that the Patricia Plantation Company was composed of a lot of small shareholders. As a matter of fact, I know very little indeed about the composition of the company. But I do know, and I will say, that while the company follows its present policy Patricia Plantation will never pay a penny in dividends, and ultimately can only go to ruin. I do not know that I should say this to you. I imagine the president and the board of directors would not thank me for doing so, but it just happens that you arrived at a moment when Patricia Plantation has reached a serious crisis."

"I quite appreciate your position," remarked Lee, "and I do not for a moment wish you to tell me anything which you feel you should not. I am here without the knowledge of the president or the directors of the company. I have come, as I have already told you, to investigate matters for the small shareholders, who feel that there is something radically wrong somewhere. If that something is not your management of the estate, then

it is my duty to tell them so. On the other hand, if the trouble is still higher up, I wish to know it.

"In recent years there has been a tremendous amount of money lost by small investors. Company promoters have grown rich out of the gullibility of the widow, the clerk, the clergyman, and the schoolteacher. I do not say that such is the case with this plantation; but I have laid my cards on the table, and I leave it to you to enlighten me."

"And I will do so," said Digby Forrester. "Perhaps in return you may be able to enlighten me on a few points. To begin with, Mr. Lee, let me tell you that you have arrived here at the very moment when it is necessary to suspend all operations on the estate. Two years ago, when I was employed to develop the place, I was assured by Morris, the president of the company, that I should have all the funds I needed. On that understanding I accepted the post as manager and came out here.

"During the past two years I have asked for, and should have received, twenty-four thousand pounds for the work which should have been done. Of that amount what did I receive? I received six thousand pounds only, and on that I have been trying to develop a two-thousand-acre estate. It was an impossibility. As you arrived here to-day, what did you see? You saw a small area of bananas and a far greater area in virgin forest. Every tree should have been cut down by now. A portable saw-mill should have been erected, and the timber sawn up and sold to pay the cost of clearing.

"Instead of having four hundred acres of bananas, the whole area should have been under cultivation. There are in sight during the next twelve months two hundred thousand stems of fruit. There should have been a million stems in sight. For months it has been touch-and-go here. Where the head office should have sent me thousands they have sent me hundreds. I have even turned in my own salary to help make up the pay-roll. But to-day things have occurred which, in my opinion, eliminate all possibility of making Patricia Plantation a success."

"May I ask what are those things?" inquired Lee.

For answer Digby Forrester took up the letter he had received that day from London, and handed it to Lee.

"Read that, please," he said.

Lee read it, and passed it back.

Next Forrester handed him the letter which had been received from Juan Alvarado, the manager of the Santa Rosa Plantation. When Lee had read it he laid it on the table and turned to Forrester.

"You have been extremely frank, Mr. Forrester," he said, "and I appreciate it. I am convinced from what I have seen and from what you have told me that the fault does not lie with you. I may say that when I landed at Limon I made inquiries about you, and in every case heard you spoken of in the highest manner. However, I am convinced, and this letter proves it, that the trouble is in London. But I cannot understand why the company should jeopardise the whole success of the plantation by such a niggardly policy.

"I know for a fact that upwards of fifty thousand pounds has been invested by the small shareholders alone. I simply cannot understand why, during the period of two years you should have received only six thousand for development work. They must know that such a policy means failure."

"I have tried to puzzle it out for months," said Forrester curtly. "But it's absolutely beyond me."

"What was the trouble as we arrived?" asked Lee.

"It was inspired by the fear of the negroes that they would not be paid,"

replied Forrester. "At the same time there are several elements of mystery in that affair which I cannot fathom."

"What do you mean?"

"I will tell you. Although we have been hard pushed for money, we have until this month managed to meet the pay-roll regularly. Neither from Harrison nor myself has a whisper of our difficulties gone abroad. Yet during the past month particularly the negroes have acted in a strange manner, as though they knew something. To-day Harrison and I were figuring how we could manage things if the funds I had written and cabled for should not arrive, and had just decided what we should do, when the mail-bag was brought from Matina. It contained these two letters which you have just read. There was no time to decide anything further, for the negroes had got together and were on their way here.

"I don't profess to know why they should have acted so to-day. It is beyond me. In any case they had no reason to feel nervous until the day had passed. But the queer thing about it all is that they know that I had received a letter from the head office, and, Mr. Lee, they knew the contents of that letter. The bag had not been opened nor had the letter been tampered with in any way; therefore I cannot understand how they knew. It could not have been a guess; their statement was too definite. I am just beginning to think that somewhere there is a treacherous hand at work, but for what reason I don't know."

Nelson Lee tapped the table thoughtfully.

"It certainly does seem queer that they should know the contents of the letter," he said. "And from what you tell me, I am inclined to think that this mutiny was deliberately fomented."

"Who took the leading part in it?"

"The Martinique black whom I shot," said Forrester. "I suppose that will mean a further complication, although I was certainly justified in what I did."

Lee nodded.

"Your case there is flawless," he added. "It was self-defence. I can prove that. And now to take up the matter of this letter from the manager of Santa Rosa Plantation. What will you do about the plantation tramway, Mr. Forrester?"

Forrester threw up his hands.

"What does it matter now?" he said bitterly. "I'm finished. Let the company fight it out."

"I'm sorry to hear you say that," said Lee. "As far as the company is concerned I agree with you. But I am thinking of the scores of small shareholders who have put every penny they possessed into this investment. If the plantation closes down it will mean ruin to them."

"I realise that," said Forrester. "But what can I do? I can't carry on without money, and the company won't give me any. There are about eight hundred pounds in wages to pay to-day, and I have got about twenty pounds to meet it with. Nine men out of ten would have chucked the thing months ago. But I kept hoping against hope that the company would realise their mistake and send the funds before it was too late. Now they've let me down, and, as near as I can see, the nigger contractors can put an injunction on the fruit until they are paid what is owing to them. That means that the plantation must come into the hands of the receiver. Then, I fancy, you could buy the shares of the Patricia Plantation Company for a song."

Nelson Lee looked Forrester straight in the eye.

"Mr. Forrester," he said, "you spoke a few minutes ago of a treacherous hand. Has it occurred to you that someone may be at work with that exact

object in view which you have just mentioned—to drive the shares of the company down to nothing. You know, and I know, that there is everything here to give magnificent results. It only needs the money to develop it. Suppose, then, that someone else realises this, and schemes to get possession for a song. Could they have gone about their purpose in a more cunning manner?"

"But who on earth could it be?" exclaimed Forrester. "The company has held back the funds. They must realise it means ruin. As I said, who can it be?"

"Ah! I don't know that," said Lee, but I am beginning to think that there is some influence at work which has had as its objective exactly what has been brought about. Now let us get down to facts and figures, Mr. Forrester. You have here two thousand acres, I think you said?"

"Yes."

"Four hundred acres of that you have planted with bananas?"

"Yes."

"What additional area has been cleared of timber?"

"About two hundred acres."

"That would leave, then, about fourteen hundred acres in virgin forest?"

"Yes."

"What amount did you reckon it would take to bring the whole two thousand acres into bearing?"

"Twelve pounds an acre, or a total of twenty-four thousand pounds. Of that amount I have received, roughly, six thousand," replied Forrester.

"Of that sum I spent two thousand in building the plantation tramway and four thousand in development. In addition to that, some of my own money and some of Harrison's has been used to tide things over."

"What amount is necessary to swing through this present crisis?" went on Lee.

"There are eight hundred due on the pay-roll alone," replied Forrester. "I wrote the company asking for at least four thousand. As you know, I received nothing. The two hundred acres which are cleared should be planted with suckers at once. Then the clearing of the timber should go ahead without delay. It will take eighteen thousand pounds in all to do what should be done. But if I had the four thousand I asked for, then that would carry me on until I began to receive from the bananas which are now coming into bearing. Of course these figures are based without considering the complications which have now arisen with Santa Rosa."

"If my outlet to the railway is cut off, I'm blessed if I can see how we can get the fruit out. But if the company won't give me the money, I'm shorn of every weapon."

Nelson Lee turned to Nipper.

"My lad," he said, "go and get my saddle-bags, please."

Nipper jumped up and went out to the horses. Unbuckling Lee's saddle-bags, he carried them in and placed them on the floor beside his master.

Bending down, Lee opened one of the bags, and took out a thick leather wallet. He opened this, revealing as he did so that it was literally stuffed with Costa Rican banknotes to the value of twenty colones, each note being worth in English money about two pounds. The notes were done up in bundles of fifty, making the value of each bundle a thousand colones, or, roughly speaking, a hundred pounds each.

Lee counted out eight bundles of the notes, and laid them on the table in front of Digby Forrester.

"There are eight thousand colones, Mr. Forrester," he said briefly, "or,

roughly, eight hundred pounds. That should be enough to meet your pay-roll. I would suggest that you settle this matter at once, then we can discuss future work."

"But—but why should you put up this money?" stammered Forrester.

"Let us say it is just my fancy," said Lee, with a smile.

"But I cannot let you do it," protested Forrester. "While it would stave over this month's pay-roll, I could give you no guarantee that it will be paid back, for, as you have seen, the company holds out no hope of being able to send me any funds for some time to come."

"I am fully aware of that," rejoined Lee. "Nevertheless, I wish to advance it to you. Let us say that I am doing it on the authority and for the benefit of the small shareholders. If you will give me a receipt as manager of the company, that is all I wish. Afterwards perhaps we can come to some arrangement whereby we could still save the situation."

Forrester's shoulders went back, and his eyes filled with a light which had not been there for many months. He thrust out his hand and grasped Lee's.

"You're a white man, Mr. Lee," he said earnestly. "And I'll take the money. Jimmy," he went on, turning to Harrison, "go down to the huts and round up the six contractors. Tell them to come up here at once and get their money."

"I'll go with you, if you don't mind," said Nipper, rising.

"I'll be glad to have you," said Harrison. "And I guess, just in case of emergency, we had better be ready for trouble."

He slipped a fresh clip into his automatic as he spoke. Then the two young fellows departed together.

When they were gone Forrester wrote out a receipt for the money and handed it to Lee. Then he opened his plantation account books and made out a pay-sheet for the six contractors. That done, he ripped the bands off the bundles of notes and divided the money into six portions. He had just finished when footsteps sounded on the verandah, and Nipper and Jimmy Harrison appeared, followed by six blacks, each man looking somewhat sheepish.

They were admitted to the office one by one, and each man given his money. Forrester made no reference to the mutiny, but dismissed them curtly. And when they would arrive at the huts in order to pay their men, it is safe to say the blacks would begin to feel uneasy and to realise that they had been too precipitate.

When they had gone Nelson Lee drew up his chair to the table and said:

"Now, Mr. Forrester, let us go into matters more thoroughly. Exactly what is the next step you would take providing you had sufficient funds?"

Forrester opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again as footsteps sounded on the verandah outside. And the next moment there appeared at the door two native policemen.

Forrester glanced inquiringly at them. One of them stepped into the room, and, bowing slightly, said:

"Good evening, Senor Forrester."

"Good evening," replied Forrester curtly. "What can I do for you?"

"A thousand pardons," said the policeman. "I come upon an unhappy duty."

"What is that?" snapped Forrester. "Come to the point, I'm busy."

"I regret to inform you, senor, that I must arrest you and the Senor Harrison on a charge of murder."

Forrester sprang to his feet.

"Murder!" he cried. "What do you mean?"

The policeman shrugged.

"The charge is murder, senor," he said, "the charge of murdering a Martinique negro. We have already taken charge of the body, senor, and I trust that you and the Senor Harrison will come peaceably. My men are waiting to escort you."

He turned as he finished speaking, and whistled. The next moment half a dozen ragged-looking native policemen swarmed on to the verandah and into the office



CHAPTER III.

Lee Takes Control of the Situation.

IF a thunderbolt had fallen in the midst of them it could not have created more consternation than the announcement made by the native policeman. Forrester and Harrison arrested on a charge of murdering the black! It was too ridiculous.

Lee, who in the short time he had been there had conceived a high opinion of Forrester, realised that there must be something behind this sudden arrest. To begin with, it was less than a half-hour since the negroes had mutinied. Lee and Nipper had reached the plantation in time to see the assault upon the two white men. From a distance they had witnessed the shooting, and, as is well known, they had come on the scene just in time to save Forrester and Harrison.

Lee knew and Nipper knew that Forrester had fired in self-defence, and that if he had not "got" the black the black would have "got" him. Therefore it was absurd to arrest him on the charge of murder.

Another thing: how had the police at Matina known of the affair so soon? From Patricia Matina was about four miles distant. Even had one of the blacks raced off there with the news, he could hardly have done it on foot, and by his report enabled the police to appear at the plantation so soon. Nor would any of the blacks dare to take a horse or mule from the plantation stable.

The police had already viewed the body in the stable and taken charge of it. How had they known a man had been killed? How had they known where the body had been put? How had they known it in order to arrive so quickly? Realising that Forrester must not commit himself to any statement, Lee stepped forward and spoke to the policeman.

"If you wish to arrest the senors, you may rest assured that they will come peaceably. But before they do so you will please state the charge in detail and inform us who makes it."

"That is impossible, senor," replied the native. "I have my orders to arrest the senors on a charge of murder, and I must carry them out. They must come with me to Port Limon, where they will be lodged in the cuartel, and will be given every opportunity offered by our great land to defend themselves."

The native accompanied his words with grandiloquent gestures. His attitude was that engendered by the "opera bouffe" country in which he lived. Lee knew the nature of the Latin American well enough to realise that argument was useless. Forrester must submit for the present. So, with a bow, Lee said:

"Senor, we can do naught but accept your decision. But before the senors accompany you I beg that you will grant me a few words in private with Senor Forrester."

As he spoke Lee took a couple of gold pieces from his pocket and gave them to the native.

"Perhaps you and your comrades would care to refresh yourselves later," he said, smiling.

The native clutched the coins and bowed to the ground.

"Senor, we shall drink your health," he said. "For five minutes you may speak in private with the Senor Forrester."

Lee touched Forrester on the arm, and they moved along to the desk together. Jimmy Harrison and Nipper stood gazing out through the screen, while the policeman and his men withdrew to the verandah.

"Now look here, Forrester," said Lee, in a low tone, "can you possibly find an explanation for this? Whom do you think could have notified the police so quickly? The charge on the face of it is utterly ridiculous. But it seems to me to be a definite attempt to get you out of the way for a time."

Forrester shook his head.

"I simply can't fathom it," he said. "It has come on me like a bolt from the blue. I know these countries, and I know what a charge like this means. It will cost a lot of money to fight the case and get clear of the charge. It means ruin to me. I haven't got the money to fight with, and I know Harrison hasn't. With both of us away from the plantation it means the place will go to rack and ruin."

"You need not worry about the financial end of it," said Lee. "I'll see you through that. I'll start the ball rolling this very night and have the pair of you at liberty again in no time. Moreover, I'll run things here until the case is settled. Have you power to turn the management of the place over to me?"

"No, I haven't," said Forrester. "My contract doesn't authorise me to go that far."

Lee was silent for a moment, then he looked up quickly.

"You have the authority, though, to employ an assistant manager?" he asked.

"Yes, I can do that."

"Very well. Sit down and write me a letter appointing me assistant manager to Patricia Plantation, and giving me full authority to act for you in your absence. That will cover the point."

"I don't see why you should go to such trouble and expense for me," said Forrester, as he began to write.

"Never mind that," said Lee. "I'm going to see this thing through. I'll get my money out afterwards. Don't you worry about that. Now tell me," he continued, after Forrester had written the letter, "what is the immediate work to be carried out?"

For answer Forrester opened the plantation work book, and began to go through several items.

"We cut fruit to-morrow on these sections indicated," he said, pointing to an entry. "That fruit should run to about two thousand stems. It has to be 'bursting' full' for the New Orleans market. It should be cut to-morrow morning and placed beside the railway during the afternoon. If you load it on the trainway trucks and have the trucks pulled through by mules you should manage to get all on the platform by the evening. The banana train will pick it up about eight o'clock the same night. The receiver will give you a cheque for the bunches, which can be cashed in the bank at Port Limon.

"At the end of the week we have an order to cut 'full three-quarter' fruit for the New York market. You want to cut that fruit on these sections that I have indicated, and have it on the platform to be picked up Saturday night. Then next Tuesday we will cut 'plain three-quarter' fruit for the

English market. I have estimated six thousand stems of this grade will be ready by next Tuesday. By the way, can you tell the different classes of fruit on the trees?"

Lee nodded.

"Yes, I think so," he said. "I have had a little experience at it, but if I am uncertain I will depend on the judgment of the contractors. Now don't you worry about the place, Forrester. I'll see that this fruit is got out and shipped, and I'll keep the negroes busy on the new land. Until we straighten things out I'll find the necessary funds, and what I receive from the bananas I'll turn into a temporary working account. We'll pull this thing out of the hole yet.

"As to your own case. I shall get into communication with the British Minister to-night or to-morrow at latest. I know him personally, and we'll have you free as soon as possible. I think that's all. And you can depend on hearing from me some time to-morrow."

The reappearance of the native policeman put a stop to their interview, and, five minutes later, Lee and Nipper stood on the verandah watching Forrester and Harrison as they rode away in the midst of their guard. When the belt of bananas had swallowed them up, Lee turned to the lad and said:

"Nipper, we've got our work cut out here, but we're going to stick to it until we find what is the real trouble and eliminate it. Our first move is to call the blacks together and settle their position right away. Slip down to the huts, my lad, and tell the contractors to bring every man here at once."

Nipper ran down the steps, and, vaulting into the saddle, galloped off in the direction of the huts.

Work for the day was over now, and most of the blacks were lounging about in front of their quarters. He located two of the contractors who had been paid off, and, delivering Lee's orders, turned his horse and galloped back to the plantation house.

It took nearly twenty minutes for the blacks to assemble once more before the steps, and when they did so they gazed in silence at the commanding figure of the strange white man who stood facing them. They all knew that Forrester and Harrison had been arrested. But they did not understand the sudden appearance on the scene of another white man to take charge. Lee did not leave them long in doubt on the matter. Standing on the top of the steps, he spoke in loud, clear tones, which carried to the uttermost ends of the gathering.

"You men," he said, "have to-day done a very wrong thing. You have been punished for it to some extent, and it lies with you whether your punishment shall be still greater. For what he did every man shall be fined one day's pay. But if you obey orders and return to work that fine will be remitted to you at the end of the month. If you do not do so, I shall notify the police, and, in addition to that, I will send a letter to every plantation in Costa Rica, making it impossible for you to find work elsewhere.

"There is to be no more disobedience of orders. There is plenty of money for you all, and there will be. If you return to your work quietly this will be wiped out. If you do not, you know the consequences. Those of you who are in authority, step forward and say which you choose."

Lee fixed each of the contractors with his eye, beckoning as he did so. The six men stepped forward somewhat sheepishly, and then, choosing one as a spokesman, waited for him to reply for them.

The spokesman was a big Jamaican black. He took a step forward, and, after a struggle to find the necessary words, he blurted out:

"We're satisfied, boss. We work for you right."

Lee nodded.

"Very well," he said. "You six contractors come inside. The rest of you get back to your huts."

Laughing and chattering like a lot of children, with an utter lack of realisation of what they had done that day, the blacks moved away, while the six contractors followed Lee and Nipper into the office.

There Lee indicated the sections on which fruit must be cut on the morrow, giving explicit orders for the work to be started at sunrise. Then, dismissing them, he and Nipper began to make a tour of the plantation in order to familiarise themselves with it.

The negress who acted as cook had returned from her place of hiding by the time they reached the house once more, and turned them out a very decent dinner that evening. They had finished the meal, and were sitting on the verandah, when, through the gloom, a horseman appeared.

Lee and Nipper rose as the man threw himself from the saddle and came up the steps. In the gloom they could not see his features, but as soon as he spoke Lee knew the man was a Spaniard.

"I am Senor Alvarado," he said pompously, bowing stiffly. "Might I inquire, senor, who you are and by what authority you are here?"

Lee matched the other's bow.

"When I know by what right you make such an inquiry then I may answer it," he said stiffly.

"I make my inquiry by every right," replied Alvarado. "I am now in charge of this plantation, and, while I do not wish to be inhospitable, I must request that any friends of Senor Forrester leave at once."

"Indeed," said Lee. "Your statements are rather sweeping, senor. I would suggest that you step into the office, where we may discuss this matter."

Lee signed for Nipper to stay outside, and led the way into the office. A single oil lamp lit up the place, and by its light he scrutinised the countenance of his visitor. He saw before him a weedy, under-sized, dark-skinned Spaniard, with close-set, cunning eyes and a shrewd, cruel mouth. His manner had all the cheap pomposity of one who considers his importance far more than the world at large considers it.

As Nipper put it later, in a rather slangy manner:

"If Alvarado could buy himself for what he was really worth and sell himself for what he thought he was worth, he would make a very handsome profit on the deal."

"Now then, senor," said Lee curtly, "you come here with an extraordinary statement. Before we begin to discuss the matter, may I inquire if you are by any chance the Senor Alvarado who is manager of the Santa Rosa Plantation, which adjoins this?"

"I am the same," answered the Spaniard with a leer.

"In that case," said Lee, "I find it difficult to understand your statement. Only to-day a letter was received from you making certain claims regarding the plantation tramway which runs from here to the railway line. Now, a few hours after, and, curiously enough, hot on the departure of the Senor Forrester, you appear with a claim that you have been ordered to take over the management of this plantation. As assistant manager of Patricia Plantation, I must request you, senor, to show me any documents you have to substantiate such a claim."

For answer Alvarado thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out a cablegram, which he laid on the table.

"There is my authority, senor," he said, puffing himself out.

Lee picked up the cablegram in a leisurely manner, and read.

It ran as follows:

"To Juan Alvarado,

"Santa Rosa Plantation, Matina, Costa Rica.

"You are hereby authorized to assume management of Patricia Plantation, on understanding that no steps shall be taken to close tramway right-of-way from Patricia to railway line.

"Forrester, present manager of Patricia, is being notified by cable to this effect. If you wish to retain his services, have no objection. Letter confirming follows.

"(Signed) W. MORRIS, President,

"Patricia Plantation Company."

Lee laid down the cablegram, and eyed Alvarado coolly.

"Senor," he said, "you surely do not expect me to hand this plantation over to you on such authority as that, do you?"

"Why not?" spluttered the Spaniard. "It is the order of the president of the company. Besides, you have no right or authority here. I do not know you. Only the Senors Forrester and Harrison were employed here."

Lee sat on the edge of the table and lit a cigarette.

"Senor Alvarado," he said slowly, "I am afraid that you are under a misapprehension. I am assistant manager of the plantation, having been appointed to that post by Senor Forrester. In his absence I have complete authority. Your cablegram may be from Mr. Morris, or it may not; but I can tell you this—you will never take over Patricia Plantation on any such document as that. I am in charge, and I remain in charge."

"You——" cried the Spaniard, almost choking with rage. "Who are you, and what do you do here?"

"I shall leave you to find that out," said Lee. "And now, Senor Alvarado, I have given you all the time I feel inclined to give you. You will oblige me by getting off Patricia Plantation and staying off it. I will tell you this much, however—no such cable as is mentioned in your message has arrived for Senor Forrester. I suppose, Senor Alvarado, you know that Senor Forrester has been arrested?"

"He will find that he cannot defy the laws of this country," snarled Alvarado. "And you, senor, you will find yourself in trouble, too. Tomorrow I shall cable Mr. Morris, and then you will realise what it means to set yourself against Juan Alvarado!"

The Spaniard turned and stamped out of the office, throwing himself into the saddle and sending his horse furiously through the darkness.

As Lee stood and listened to the rapidly diminishing sound of the horse's hoofs, he muttered:

"Now I wonder if that little rat is responsible for Forrester's arrest? And what on earth is the meaning of that cable from Morris? It simply crowns several inexplicable acts of his which at the moment I cannot fathom. He seems deliberately to have set himself to ruin the plantation and wreck Forrester's career. It looks to me as if someone at the head office in London is playing a double game. At any rate, I am here, and here I stay until I know the truth.

"But I fancy from what I can already see that we shall have further trouble with Senor Juan Alvarado."

CHAPTER IV.

The Fight on the Tramway—The Injunction.

AS the next day promised to be a strenuous one, Lee and Nipper turned in early. Lee, however, did not fall asleep at once, but instead lay staring up into the night, listening to the sounds which came from the forest, and puzzling over the affairs of Patricia Plantation.

It seemed that he had just dozed off, when he was awakened by the old negress. It was still dark when he and Nipper emerged, but by the time they had eaten an orange and drunk a cup of coffee—the early morning meal in Costa Rica—the sun was just rising.

As the great golden ball came up in the east, casting a mighty scimitar of crimson across the heavens, the plantation awoke to life. Down by the huts Lee could hear the negroes laughing and chattering as they went off into the bananas to begin cutting. In the stables the mules and horses stamped restlessly as a couple of blacks distributed their feed.

The leaves of the bananas were still wet from the night's dew, and the tiny globules which lay scattered over their broad surface threw off the shafts of the sun in a thousand facets of pink, green, yellow and purple.

A couple of parrots and a swarm of parrakeets shrieked along their way high overhead. On top of the post to which he had been tethered, a little, whitefaced, black monkey, which Jimmy Harrison had made a pet, chattered noisily, and played a sort of primitive game of hand-ball with an alligator pear which one of the blacks had tossed him.

The panther, which during the night was in the habit of coming close to the plantation buildings, had slunk into the depths of the woods to his lair. A sloth clung to the branch of a breadfruit tree, his legs clasping it and his body hanging downwards in an extraordinary position.

Humming-birds were everywhere, and, at the edge of the timber, like a great scarlet slash against the green, hung a single crimson orchid.

Beyond the bananas one could see the sun sparkling on the broad, turbid waters of the Matina. And in the distance, bringing a touch of civilisation to this primitive scene of Nature's intense green, was the sound of a locomotive pulling a heavy banana train up the grade towards the Matina Bridge.

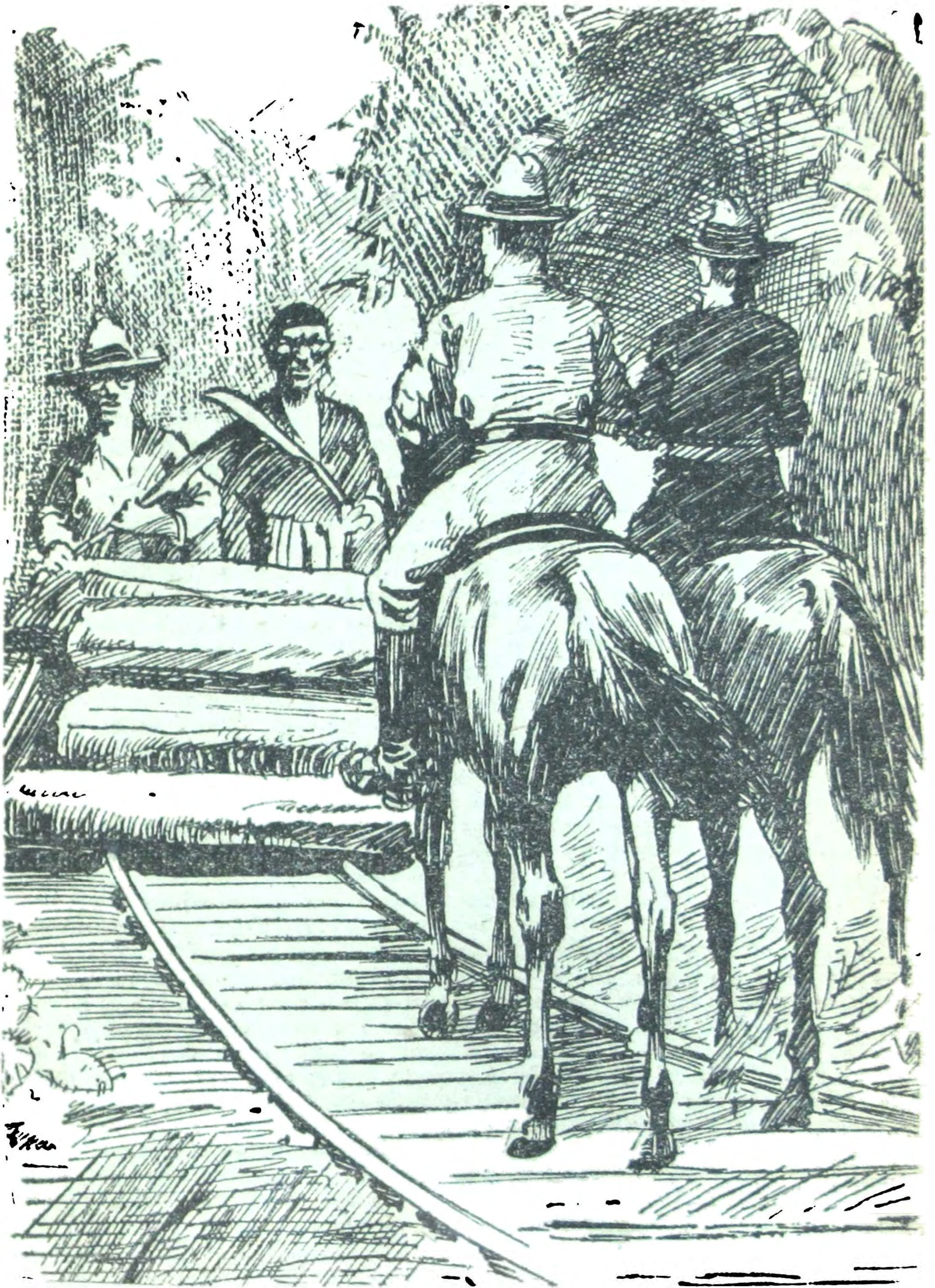
Lee and Nipper waited on the verandah until their horses had been brought round; then, climbing into the saddles, they rode into the bananas to inspect the cutting.

Seeing that the blacks were working industriously, they pushed on to make a detailed examination of the plantation tramway. This tramway, upon which Forrester had expended a couple of thousands, had been planned to feed the whole two thousand acres which comprised the estate. The four hundred acres which had already been planted had feeders from the main artery of the tramway running through each section.

Little open trucks had been provided, and at the moment these had been switched down the spurs which served the sections on which the fruit was being cut. The tramway itself was only a two-foot affair, with very light rails, and the trucks would, of course, be drawn by mules. As the heavy timber was cleared, the main line would be extended, and new feeders thrown into sections as they were formed.

The main artery of the tramway led along the edge of the bananas "in bearing," then, turning to the right, continued to the line which separated Patricia Plantation from Santa Rosa.

Lee and Nipper rode along this main track until they came to the line where the tramway had been continued on through the right-of-way. There



Alvarado's two blacks still stood behind the log barricade with drawn machetes.—(See page 23.)

Lee discovered that Alvarado intended losing no time in carrying out his threats. From the corner post which marked the edge of Santa Rosa proper right across to the heavy timber which lined the other side of the right-of-way, a heavy barricade of logs had been placed, and behind this barricade stood two of the Santa Rosa blacks with drawn machetes.

They grinned over the barricade at Lee and Nipper as they rode up. Lee did not address them, but peered along the green perspective which formed the right-of-way, noting that, so far, none of the rails of the tramway had been torn up. Then he signed to Nipper to follow him, and, turning his horse, rode back to where the cutting was proceeding.

Until early afternoon the negroes worked through the sections, getting every bunch of "bursting full" fruit which they could find.

Such terms, it must be understood, refer to the condition of ripeness in which the bananas might be. For instance, in shipping fruit the shipper must take into consideration the market for which it is intended. New Orleans, being only five days away, naturally takes much riper fruit than, say, New York or Boston or Bristol, in England. For that reason New Orleans receives the most nearly ripe bananas—technically termed "bursting full." Baltimore and New York take the next most nearly ripe grade, which is known as "three-quarter full." Boston receives the next class, which is "full three-quarter." And, finally, England takes the least ripe grade, which is known technically as "three-quarter."

On this occasion Patricia Plantation was cutting "bursting full" fruit for it was intended for the New Orleans market. And by two o'clock in the afternoon there were piled beside the tramway rails, ready to be hauled out to the railway, nearly three thousand bunches of bananas, or almost one thousand more than Forrester had calculated.

Nelson Lee said nothing to the contractors about the barricade which he and Nipper had seen. Instead he and the lad remained on the scene while the trucks were being loaded with the fruit. There were twenty trucks in all, and, each truck having a capacity of fifty bunches, that meant a thousand stems could be transported at one time.

The sections on which the bananas had been cut were fed by five spurs from the main tramway, with four trucks to each spur. Lee watched truck after truck being pushed up its spur towards the main line, and there switched against the others by a small hand-switch.

When the whole twenty trucks were ready to be pulled along they were coupled up in five short trains of four trucks each. Five mules were then rounded up, and a mule hitched in front of each lot of trucks.

Now all was ready for the pull along the plantation tramway to the railway—a mile or so beyond. A negro stood at the head of each mule, waiting to start. But just then Lee called the six contractors together, and said:

"My men, listen to me. Senor Alvarado has erected a barricade at the point where this tramway runs past Santa Rosa Plantation. Senor Alvarado is trying to prevent us from getting our fruit to the railway line. You men must get your gangs together and come on ahead with me. We will tear down the barrier and keep the line free until we have sent through all our fruit. If the men at Santa Rosa Plantation try to stop us, we must fight them. Are you ready to do this?"

The six contractors, who for some reason or other had implicit confidence in Lee, nodded their heads in assent. Then, turning, began moving among their men, telling them what was required of them.

A few moments later Lee and Nipper, with drawn weapons, started off with a rabble of about a hundred negroes behind them, each negro carrying

his machete. Behind them the mules were walking slowly, each mule pulling its little train of bananas.

They followed the course of the rails until they came to the heavy log barricade which Alvarado had caused to be erected. Alvarado's two blacks still stood behind it with drawn machetes. Lee said nothing to them, but, advancing close up to the barrier, ordered his own blacks to remove the logs.

Alvarado's two men hesitated for a single moment, then, considering discretion the better part of valour, they turned and took to their heels through the bananas.

The hundred negroes made short work of the barricade, and soon had the rails clear again. Lee left Nipper with three of the contractors and half the negroes to keep that end of the line open. He himself took the other three contractors with the balance of the men and went on in front of the mules.

As they travelled along the right-of-way he kept a sharp eye on the bananas at the edge of the Santa Rosa Plantation, but they had proceeded nearly the whole distance before he caught sight of anyone. Then he discerned a black face peering out at them from the concealment of the bananas. But it was quickly withdrawn, and Lee's party moved on unmolested until the tramway swung to the left beyond the outer boundary of Santa Rosa Plantation and close to the main railway line which passes through to Matina.

A hundred yards down, the rails ended beside a long, covered platform, on which the bananas were to be piled. The negroes worked rapidly under Lee's direction, piling up the fruit at one end of the platform ready for it to be picked up that night. Then the mules were hitched on to the other end of the cars, and without further delay the return journey was begun.

They reached the spot where Nipper and his men stood guard without being interfered with in any way. Lee left only a score of men with the lad now, and, taking the rest of them with him, hustled the mules down to the sections where the rest of the fruit lay.

Another thousand stems were loaded into the cars as rapidly as possible, and the second journey begun. But even as they approached the spot where the barricade had been Lee heard the bark of a revolver, and a moment later, as he and his men swung into the straight, he saw a mob of blacks rushing Nipper and his handful of men.

Lee ordered the blacks who were leading the mules to pull up and remain where they were. Then, calling upon the eighty odd men to follow him, he drew his revolver and set off at a run to where Nipper was holding the line.

Alvarado's negroes came to grips with Nipper's force a few moments before Lee's men reached the spot, and they were already fighting desperately when he and the main body of the Patricia blacks hurled themselves into the struggle.

At first Lee thought Alvarado himself might be there, but the Spaniard evidently had too much regard for the safety of his own skin to risk joining in the fight.

The Santa Rosa blacks seemed to be under the leadership of a big negro, who looked like a Martinique. From the savage manner in which they fought it was plain to Lee that they were working under definite orders.

The fight at first was more of a mob rush than anything else, but, using strenuous efforts, Lee managed to detach about two score of his own men, and work round on the flank of the Santa Rosa lot. Then, clubbing his revolver, he yelled for his men to follow him, and, dashing into the melee,

began dealing blows right and left. The blacks on both sides were using their machetes with a beautiful disregard for the wounds they might inflict. Blashing and cutting and thrusting, they fought without discipline, without method, but, nevertheless, with considerable effect.

Nipper, with the reinforcements Lee had left him, seemed to be holding his own, if not gaining ground a little. And, after a few minutes, Lee's flank movement bore fruit, for, slowly but surely, the Santa Rosa blacks were driven off the rails and down the shallow embankment towards the edge of the bananas.

When Lee and Nipper and the Patricia blacks had worked their way over the rails, Lee caught hold of one of his own contractors and said:

"Get back and start the mules at once."

The man nodded and sped away. Lee gave a loud shout, which Nipper echoed. Then they both charged savagely, and in an irresistible rush swept the Santa Rosa negroes to the edge of the bananas, where, after a brief stand, they turned and fled.

There were broken heads and bad cuts on both sides, and the Martinique black who had led the Santa Rosa men was lying at the foot of the embankment bleeding from a deep machete wound in the side.

Lee made a rapid examination of his own men, and those who appeared more severely wounded he ordered back to Patricia plantation house for treatment. The Santa Rosa wounded were dragged to the edge of the bananas and left there.

By now the mules had come up with the trucks, and, leaving half the men with Nipper to guard the spot, Lee took the others and formed an escort for the bananas.

At a rapid pace they made their way along until they reached the platform once more. There was no need to leave a guard for the fruit there, for no man would dare to touch it once it was on the railway platform.

They unloaded the second lot of bananas in record time. Then, rehitching the mules once more, they set off on the return journey. As they reached Nipper the lad reported no new developments, and, keeping his men on the move, Lee had the last of the fruit loaded.

The third journey to the railway was made without further incident, and, as he once more came to the side of Nipper, Lee was just congratulating himself on his victory, when, from the bananas fringing Santa Rosa Plantation, there suddenly appeared a body of men.

At first Lee thought the Santa Rosa blacks were returning to the fray; but, as they drew nearer, he was able to recognise that several wore the brown and blue cotton uniform of the native police. With them was Alvarado, and behind him a score of Santa Rosa blacks carrying pickaxes and crowbars.

Lee drew up as his line and theirs converged, but ordered his men to continue on. He was now standing at a point only some thirty yards or so distant from Nipper, and with a gesture he signalled to the lad to be ready for any emergency.

He stood at the top of the embankment watching Alvarado and the native police climb towards him. Then, as Alvarado pointed to him and said something in Spanish to the sergeant of police, the native drew from his pocket a paper, and bowed stiffly to Lee. Lee bowed in return and waited.

"Senor, you claim, I believe, to be in charge of Patricia Plantation?" said the sergeant of police, addressing Lee.

"I am in charge of Patricia Plantation, senor," replied Lee curtly.

"By no right whatsoever," interposed Alvarado. "He holds his position by force; but soon we shall see."

"That is a matter which does not concern me, Senor Alvarado," said the native. "I have simply my duty to perform. Senor," he said, addressing Lee once more, "by the command of the Minister of the Interior and on the authority of the Jefe at Matina, I must inform you that I hold here an injunction to restrain you from using this section of the Patricia Plantation tramway while the dispute between Santa Rosa Plantation and Patricia Plantation is sub judice. I am instructed further, senor, to order several of the rails to be torn up in order to insure that this section of the line is not used. This injunction, senor, will be posted at the point where the land in dispute joins the land of Patricia Plantation. And, senor, you will disobey the injunction at your peril."

Lee, who could see the cunning of Alvarado in this new complication, realised that protest was useless. Alvarado had lost no time in pulling what political strings he might control. And the fact that the Minister of the Interior had granted the injunction so promptly told him that Alvarado evidently stood strong with the powers that be.

For the moment Lee was beaten, and he knew it. There was a keen satisfaction, however, in the knowledge that he had got the last bunch of that day's cutting through to the railway platform for the evening pick-up. The next cutting would come three days later, but, with the only apparent way to the railway closed by that injunction, it looked very serious for the fruit on Patricia. However, where he could fight the Santa Rosa mob, it would be sheer madness to oppose the action of the law. In that move Alvarado had used an effective weapon, and, for the time being at least, Lee was powerless.

However, bowing to the sergeant, he said:

"It is neither the time nor the place, senor, for me to dwell upon the injustice of this decree. That, of course, is a matter for the courts. In the meantime I can do nothing but bow to the inevitable. While the injunction is in force you may rest assured that I shall respect its terms."

"As for you, Senor Alvarado," he went on, turning to the Spaniard, "let me warn you that the game is not yet finished. The next deal will be mine."

Then, with a curt nod, Lee turned on his heel, and strode along to where Nipper stood waiting. And the next moment the negroes from Santa Rosa were attacking the tram-lines.

CHAPTER V.

Lee Leaves for Limon.

LEE said little until they had reached the plantation house once more. There he called the six contractors together, and gave them orders to begin planting suckers on the two hundred acres which were already waiting. One of the contractors he ordered to proceed to the railway platform that evening, and be on hand to receive the cheque when the banana train should pick up the fruit.

Then he called Nipper into the office.

"My lad," he said, "I shall go to Port Limon this evening. I must see Forrester, and also get into communication with the British Minister in order to secure Forrester's release. I fancy I shall be able to bail him out. In the meantime, you will remain here, and it will be necessary for you to be on your guard."

"With that cablegram from London in his possession it is difficult to say what steps Alvarado might take. We have already seen a sample of his cunning, and he is all the more dangerous because he is shrewd enough to establish a technical point of law before he acts. If I can get things cleared up at Limon I shall be back here some time to-morrow afternoon. I shall have to cut fruit again the day after to-morrow, and I must figure out some means of getting it to the railway. But the chief thing is to get Forrester and Harrison free as soon as possible."

"I'll do my best, sir, to look after things," said Nipper. "And I'll keep a weather eye open for Alvarado."

Lee's arrangements were soon made. Packing his saddle-bags, he took leave of Nipper, and, with a mounted negro behind him who would bring the horse back from Matina, he set off.

By the ordinary Patricia-Matina trail he rode, passing through several smaller plantations on the way, until, a little later, he drew up before the Matina commissary. Slipping to the ground and throwing the reins over his horse's head, he took his way leisurely to the Matina station to wait for the train from San José. He had to wait a matter of ten minutes or so before the train drew in at the station.

And a little over an hour later, after passing through Zent Junction and the swampy land at Eighteen Mile and Twelve Mile, he reached Limon.

Lee's first duty was to walk across to the great steel and cement building occupied by the International Fruit Company. There he had an interview with the manager of the company, which enlightened him considerably on several points which before had puzzled him.

Accepting the manager's invitation to dine with him that evening, Lee went along to the corner office, where the company's telephone switchboard is located, and requested to be put into communication with the British Minister at San José. It took only a few minutes to get through, and, luckily, he caught the Minister just as he was departing from the Ministry.

Lee had a long conversation with the Minister, whom he knew personally, and for whom he had once done a considerable service. After expressing his surprise and delight that Lee should be in Costa Rica, the Minister listened to what Lee had to say about Forrester, and, when he had finished, promised to start that very moment and to use all his influence to secure Forrester's release without delay. He arranged to telephone Lee later that evening, and, thanking him, Lee hung up the receiver.

Then, with a letter from the manager of the International Fruit Company, he proceeded to the office of the Commandante of the Port. That grizzled old Spaniard received him politely, and, after reading the letter which Lee had brought, wrote him a note to the governor of the cuartel, or prison.

Lee took leave of the commandante, and made his way at once to the cuartel. There he handed the letter from the commandante to an orderly, who took it to the governor. Lee was received almost instantly, and, after a few formalities had been gone through, he was taken in charge of a native policeman and led along to the cell occupied by Digby Forrester and Jimmy Harrison.

The cell was not so bad as Lee had anticipated it would be. It was large and light and airy, and had been recently whitewashed. A couple of boards on boxes, however, were the only things in the shape of beds which were provided. When he entered the cell Forrester and Harrison were sitting on the boards in a very dejected manner.

They came to their feet, however, as Lee entered, and questioned him eagerly about their chances of being released. Lee gave the native police-

man a gold piece, which caused him to retire. Then he drew out his cigarette-case, and not until Forrester and Harrison had taken a first appreciative puff did he speak.

"I know what you are most anxious to hear," he said, turning to Forrester, "so I shall tell you about that first. I came down to Limon this afternoon, and had a long interview with the manager of the International Fruit Company. I made some inquiries of him about our friend Alvarado, of Santa Rosa Plantation. But I will tell you about that afterwards. The chief thing was to tell the manager about your arrest, and to get him to use his influence for your release. He has promised to do so, and hopes to arrange something either to-night or to-morrow.

"Then I telephoned to the British Minister in San José. He is pulling the wires now, and it is only a question of hours until you will be released. We can't bring too much pressure to bear on the authorities, and that is why I am working at both ends. So cheer up, the pair of you. You will be free again before you know it.

"Now as to other matters. I will tell you first that we finished the banana-cutting to-day all right. You under-estimated the number of stems we should get, for they totalled nearly three thousand bunches of good, sound fruit. It was touch and go, however, whether we should be able to get through to the railway or not, for Alvarado nearly succeeded in preventing us."

"How do you mean?" asked Forrester quickly.

"I will tell you," said Lee. "After you and Harrison went off with the police yesterday, my assistant and I made a brief investigation of the plantation in order to familiarise ourselves with it. We had dinner early, and afterwards were sitting on the verandah talking when a horseman appeared. It was Senor Juan Alvarado, of Santa Rosa Plantation, and, on reaching the verandah, he coolly announced that he had come to take charge of Patricia Plantation.

"He was evidently under the impression that we were visiting you, for he ordered us to clear out. He was rather nonplussed when I informed him that I was the assistant manager of Patricia, and, on my authority, demanded to know by what right he made such a claim. For answer he drew out a cablegram, which purported to come from Morris, the president of the Patricia Plantation Company.

"I think I remember how it ran. I shall repeat as best I can. It was addressed to Alvarado, and said:

" 'You are hereby authorised to assume management of Patricia Plantation, on the understanding that no steps shall be taken to close the tramway right-of-way from Patricia to the railway line.

" 'Forrester, the present manager of Patricia, is being notified by cable to this effect. If you wish to retain his services, have no objection. Letter confirming follows.'"

"And it was signed by Morris. That may not be the exact wording of the cable, Forrester, but it is near enough. And now, can you throw any light on the matter?"

Forrester shook his head.

"I'm all at sea," he said. "I can't see through it, although, of course, there never has been any love lost between Alvarado and me."

"What do you mean?" asked Lee quickly.

"Oh, it was nothing much," responded Forrester. "When I first came out here, Alvarado's father, who, by the way, is Minister of the Interior,

come to me and made certain offers of concessions which, had I accepted them, would have meant that Patricia fruit would have been free of export tax provided I split the 'rake off' with him. It was sheer graft, and I would have nothing to do with it.

"Part of his proposal was that his son should be taken on as assistant mandador of Patricia. I turned the proposition down cold. He never approached me again, but a few weeks later his son appeared as manager of the Santa Rosa Plantation. I have had little or nothing to do with him, and received no correspondence from him until that letter yesterday, which you read."

Lee gave a grunt.

"I wish I had known that before," he said. "Knowing this, I can understand things that, up to now, have been puzzling me."

"What are those things?" asked Forrester.

Lee briefly told him about the fight on the tramway, and the sudden serving of the injunction.

"The injunction was served on the authority of the Minister of the Interior," he said, when he had finished. "I thought Alvarado must have a pretty strong political pull to turn the trick so promptly. But I did not dream that the Minister of the Interior was his father. That explains it. By the way, Forrester, do you know who owns Santa Rosa Plantation?"

"It is owned by a company of which the elder Alvarado seems to be the head, although the money, I have heard, was put up in London."

Lee grew thoughtful.

With this information in his possession he was able to understand more clearly some of the points which had been intriguing him. To begin with, there was the question of the right-of-way through Santa Rosa Plantation. He did not doubt that a thorough threshing out of the matter would settle the dispute in favour of the Patricia Plantation. It was a natural right-of-way, and, had the Santa Rosa Plantation Company any genuine grounds for protest, they would have filed it at the time the tramway was being built. But the work had gone ahead without protest being made, and only now, after many months, was it disputed.

As Minister of the Interior the elder Alvarado could easily lend himself to such a protest without jeopardising his position. Moreover, he had done so, and he had gone still further. He had, on the authority of the office he held, issued an injunction against that section of the tramway, and by this one stroke had cut off the Patricia for an indefinite period of time.

It would mean expensive litigation unless a compromise of some sort were effected. But at that point other questions arose. If one took into consideration the cablegram which Juan Alvarado had received from Morris, the president of the Patricia Plantation Company, then it would seem that Morris must have been for some time cognisant of the Santa Rosa protest, and, moreover, must have been in communication with Alvarado about it. Why, then, had Forrester been kept in ignorance? Why was it that not until the preceding day had he received any notification from Alvarado?

Going back over the events which had happened since he had arrived at Patricia Plantation, Lee found a great deal to cause him to ponder. The sudden arrest of Forrester and Harrison, he now felt certain, was by no chance due to the efficiency of the native police. Behind that sudden descent upon Patricia plantation house he could see a strong political hand, and that hand he now designated as Alvarado's. Furthermore, from what Forrester had told him about his financial difficulties, it seemed certain that

the blacks on Patricia Plantation had been for some time cognisant of the situation.

How did the Martinique black, whom Forrester had killed, know, not only that Forrester had received a letter from the head office in London, but also that the letter had contained a definite refusal to send funds to Patricia? The mail-bag had not been opened, nor had the letter been tampered with. The whole thing made Lee strongly suspect that somewhere there was treachery at work, and deduction from the facts in his possession made him locate that treachery in London.

Was it possible that by the same post which had brought the letter of refusal to Forrester, another letter had come revealing the contents of Forrester's letter to someone else? Who could that someone else be? From the fact that Juan Alvarado had received a cablegram from Morris, it was certain that he was in communication with the president of the Patricia Plantation Company.

To go a step further. Was it possible that Alvarado was the one who had received another letter which revealed the contents of the one Forrester had received? Certainly, if treachery had been at work, and a second letter had come from England, then it must have been sent to someone in the immediate vicinity of Patricia, and this someone, who had apparently been slowly undermining the loyalty of the blacks, had been near enough at hand to pass the information on to the Martinique mutineer without delay. That was proven by the fact that the Martinique had known the truth almost as soon as Forrester himself.

Very well, that being so, what was Lee's only possible inference? It was that the treachery lay at the head office in London, and, if it lay there, the finger of suspicion pointed more certainly towards Morris than anyone else.

Was Morris playing a double game? If so, what was his object? What advantage could he gain by the ruin of Patricia Plantation? For the moment Lee could not guess. But, all the same, considering the policy which Morris had followed ever since the formation of Patricia, and, taking into account the strange events which had followed his own arrival at the plantation, Lee could not but feel deeply suspicious of the man.

Morris knew that Forrester was without money. He had left him in a most difficult position. Was he working in conjunction with Alvarado? Was he in tacit agreement with the steps which Alvarado had taken? If so, then for what reason?

Lee was determined to find out. He was determined, firstly, for the sake of the small shareholders who had sent him out; secondly, for the sake of Forrester; and thirdly, for the sake of the game—to fight things out to a finish.

If Alvarado were working in with Morris, then he would lose no time in getting further authority from Morris to take charge of Patricia, using force if necessary. The best means of fighting such a move as that would be by striking in London, and to that end Lee determined to send a long cablegram to the minority shareholders. While Morris had his hands full with them in London, Lee reckoned he could handle matters at the Costa Rican end.

He was pondering so deeply over the matter that for the moment he forgot where he was, and it was only when Forrester had spoken to him for the third time that Lee dragged himself out of his reverie.

"I am sorry," he said. "What you told me aroused a train of thought which I wished to follow while the facts were still fresh in my memory. I rather fancy, Forrester, that I am beginning to see daylight in this matter."

"How do you mean?" inquired Forrester.

"I cannot say yet," said Lee, as he rose. "I wish to follow up one or two inquiries first, then if I am right I will tell you what I think of the whole situation. In the meantime, the thing for you and Harrison to do is not to worry, and get some sleep. We'll have you out of this to-morrow morning by hook or by crook."

After a few more words Lee shook hands with both the prisoners, then made his way out of the cartel to the street again. It was his intention to proceed at once to the cable office and send off a cable to the clergyman in England who was acting as the leader of the minority shareholders of the Patricia Plantation Company, but on the way a negro boy intercepted him with a message that the manager of the International Fruit Company would be glad if he could come there at once. So, instead of continuing down past the park, Lee turned his footsteps to the right, and, skirting the tennis-court in front of the lodge, made his way along to the manager's office.

The manager of the International Fruit Company was an American, still in the early thirties, a keen, hard-headed business man, who had done much to make the International Fruit Company the power it had grown to be. He jumped to his feet as Lee came in.

"Ah! The boy found you, I see," he said. "There was a messenger here a few minutes ago with a cablegram for you. There seems to have been some confusion over the address, so they inquired if we knew you. I said you were here, and told the messenger to leave the cable with me. Here it is."

He took up an envelope from the desk and handed it to Lee. Lee thanked him, and, excusing himself, tore open the flap. The message, he saw, was signed by Roberts, the clergyman who led the minority shareholders, and this is how it ran:

"To Nelson Lee. Then came a confusion of letters where the name 'Patricia' should have been, with 'Plantation' following, and finally 'Costa Rica.'"

"At extraordinary general meeting of the shareholders, held in London yesterday, president of company announced that Patricia Plantation was a failure. Made statements accounting for this, laying principal blame on Forrester, the manager."

"Stated only thing to do was to reorganise company, and levy ten shillings each share. Even then held out no definite hope of ultimate success, explaining that expensive litigation was in prospect over right-of-way leading from plantation to railway."

"Stated, further, himself and directors willing to shoulder certain amount of loss, and, if shareholders wished, were prepared to buy from them all shares at two shillings per share. The original cost being a pound, either proposition means ruin to small shareholders, most being unable to put up another ten shillings, and if they should sell at two shillings will lose nearly everything."

"What do you advise?" (Cable urgently. (Signed) Roberts."

Nelson Lee read the message over twice, then, asking permission to use the manager's desk, he sat down and wrote a reply, which he worded thus:

"Roberts, The Village, Hampton, Surrey, England."

"Statements made by Morris not founded on fact. Patricia Plantation capable of wonderful and profitable development. Forrester's work been splendid. Accept neither proposition put forward. Am on verge of dis-

covering conspiracy to defraud small shareholders. Play for time until sufficient proof in my hands.

"In addition, keep Morris fully occupied by constant visits of self and other shareholders. Would suggest you and minority shareholders offer to buy holdings of Morris crowd at five shillings share. I could guarantee to find money if they should accept. But from what have discovered feel confident they would not accept two pounds share.

"Will cable further as soon as possible. (Signed) NELSON LEE."

Lee dispatched the cable to the cable office by one of the International Fruit Company's messengers. Then he went upstairs to freshen himself up for dinner.

After dinner, when he and Ferguson were sitting on the wide balcony of the Lodge, listening to the thunder of the surf beyond the sea wall and the whisperings of the palm-trees as the gentle night breeze stirred them, a clerk appeared to tell Lee that he was wanted by San José on the telephone.

It proved to be the British Minister, who informed Lee that he had brought pressure to bear on the Government, and that Forrester and Harrison would be released on parole the following morning. Lee thanked him, and returned to Ferguson. He turned in soon after, however, and the following morning early was at the cuartel ready to greet Forrester and Harrison when they appeared.

All three had a hasty breakfast at the Lodge, and afterwards boarded the mid-morning train for Matina. Lee had wired ahead for horses to meet them there, and, swinging into the saddle, they set off at a brisk canter for the plantation.

It was when they had almost reached the end of the trail, and would soon emerge from the bananas, that Forrester drew up his horse sharply and lifted his hand.

"Listen!" he said.

All three sat motionless in the saddle. Then, sharp and clear on the still air of the tropic noonday, there sounded the staccato bark of a revolver.

The next moment all three were galloping at top speed for the plantation house.

CHAPTER VI

What Happened to Nipper.

WHEN Nelson Lee departed from Port Limon, Nipper climbed into the saddle and rode down the newly cleared patch of two hundred acres to watch the planting of the suckers. He remained on inspection there until almost dusk, and when he reached the plantation house once more the swift tropic night had fallen. By the time he had written out a report of the day's work the old negress announced dinner was ready, and the lad idled over a solitary meal in an attempt to use up as much time as possible.

He had scarcely finished when the contractor whom Lee had sent to the railway appeared with a cheque for the bananas received. Nipper entered the details in the cost of production book, and credited the amount in the journal. Then he locked the cheque away, and, after idling for half an hour or so on the verandah, he turned in.

Fully alive to the fact that he was in sole charge of Patricia, he laid his automatic on the chair beside him, and then, lulled into drowsiness by the myriad sounds from the near forest, he finally dropped off to sleep.

It was probably due to the stirring events of the day that, even after he was asleep, Nipper's mind should still have remained active. His sleep was disturbed by grotesque dreams, until, out of the chaos of nonsense which was being pictured by his subconsciousness, there suddenly emerged a scene, clear and distinct.

He seemed to be standing on the verandah of Patricia plantation house, gazing along the shimmering rails of the tramway. Although it was impossible when standing on the verandah to see the spot where Alvarado had placed the barricade, in dreamland there was no such difficulty. And, as though possessed of X-ray eyes, Nipper was enabled to see distinctly.

He saw in his dream that another barricade had been erected, and, lying beyond, made out the open space in the track where several rails had been torn up. Then he turned his gaze to the left. It appeared to be early morning, and the sun was being reflected in myriad shafts of light from the wet banana leaves, while beyond it sparkled in a broad path of silver on the waters of the Matina. And there, on the bosom of the stream, Nipper saw a curious sight. He saw some crude rafts being poled along by negroes until they reached a spot opposite Patricia Plantation.

The negroes leaped ashore there, and secured the rafts to the banana-trees which edged the river. Then the scene shifted. Nipper saw the plantation negroes cutting fruit industriously, saw the bunches piled beside the tramway track, and then, after being loaded into the trucks, saw the trucks pushed along to the river bank. From there the bananas were loaded on to the rafts, and, when a vast pile had grown, the rafts were cast free and allowed to drift down stream with the current.

Nipper turned once more, but as he did so the sun caught him full in the eyes, causing him to sneeze violently, and, sneezing, he rose up, to find that he had kicked the clothes off him, and that he was in imminent danger of getting a chill. Sitting there in the dark, he sneezed again. But, as he grew still wider awake, he whispered to the night:

"Scott! I believe I have solved the riddle of how to get the fruit to the railway without going through the right-of-way. If we build rafts and float the fruit with the current we could reach the railway platform at Matina that way. By thunder! I'll tell the gov'nor about that as soon as he returns."

And with that the lad turned over and went to sleep again.

Nipper was abroad early the next morning. His first act was to ride down to the area which was being planted with young banana suckers and to inspect the work which was proceeding there. Then, with the memory of his dream still vivid in his mind, he turned his horse and rode through the bananas towards the river.

Now, in order to understand the exact situation, it will be necessary to give a brief description of exactly how Patricia Plantation had been laid out. Allowing for the irregular boundary of the river, the plantation formed an almost perfect rectangle. At the lower end, that is to say, the down river end, and situated within two hundred yards of the lower river boundary, were the plantation buildings. To the left, or, in other words, on the longer river side, were the main acres of bananas.

There were about three hundred acres in fruit there, and this belt continued to the upper boundary of the plantation. There the belt of bananas followed the course of the boundary until it came to the upper right-hand corner of the estate—the corner which joined on to the right-of-way leading through Santa Rosa Plantation to the main railway line.

From end to end of the plantation, but much nearer the river side than the Santa Rosa side, ran the main line of the tramway, following the course

of the belt of bananas and turning to the right at the upper end, as has already been seen.

On the left of this metal backbone several spurs had been carried down through the banana sections towards the river. To the right it was all virgin forest, for on either side were the fourteen hundred acres which Digby Forrester had not yet been able to clear.

Nipper followed the course of one of the spurs on the left, and, on reaching the bank of the river, found a narrow path running just outside the last row of trees.

He rode along this for some distance, examining the stream carefully as he went, until he had passed the power corner of Patricia Plantation, and found himself continuing past the dense forest line beyond.

As the path still remained negotiable, he pushed on until another bend in the river allowed him to see Matina in the distance. He drew up his horse, and raising himself in the saddle, made a careful survey of the situation. And what he saw convinced him that his dream of the previous night had been true inspiration.

The Matina, broad and deep, flowed sluggishly at that point, and it should not be difficult to guide fruit-loaded rafts down its course to Matina. There it would be a simple matter to transfer the fruit to the railway platform, and, as he rode back to Patricia, Nipper flattered himself that he had discovered a way of outwitting Alvarado.

He spent the rest of the morning riding sections, and midday found him at the plantation house once more. He took a short siesta after lunch, but by three o'clock was in the saddle again. For a couple of hours he superintended the work of planting, then turned to the plantation house to write out the day's report.

It was while he was thus engrossed that heavy footsteps sounded on the verandah, and, looking up, he saw the evil countenance of Juan Alvarado peering in at the door. Nipper, scenting trouble, jumped to his feet, and, with a swift motion, dropped his hand to his hip where his holster had been strapped. Just then another Spaniard appeared behind Alvarado, leaning over the latter's shoulder.

"What do you want?" asked Nipper curtly. "You were ordered off this plantation, Senor Alvarado, and were told to stop off. Why do you come back?"

"Where is the other senor?" asked Alvarado truculently.

"I shall not answer that question until you have replied to mine. I ask you again—what do you want here?"

"I have come as I came yesterday," snarled Alvarado. "I have come to take charge of Patricia Plantation, and, if necessary, I am prepared to use force to do so."

"You were told that Patricia Plantation would not be handed over to you on the authority of the document you produced," said Nipper. "That should be enough for you. And if you think you can gain anything by using force you are mistaken. I am in charge here for the present, and I order you again to get off the place and stay off."

For answer Alvarado made a step into the room. In a flash Nipper had drawn his automatic and was covering him with it.

"I shouldn't advise you to come any further," he said steadily. "If you do, I shall fire."

Alvarado, seeing the determination in the lad's eyes, drew up. Then, as Nipper took a step forward, the Spaniard went slowly backward until the lad, by sheer domination of will, had forced him over the threshold.

Now Alvarado's companion said something rapidly in Spanish, to which

Alvarado did not reply. He was still looking at Nipper. But the next moment, with a snarl, he turned and walked down the verandah.

Nipper moved cautiously to the door, but, just as he was peering out, there came a sudden rush down the verandah, and Alvarado's revolver spoke. The bullets whistled close to Nipper's face, thudding into the woodwork of the door behind him. Nipper drew back sharply, then, jerking his arm outwards, he exposed his hand for a brief second, and sent a volley of shots up the verandah.

There was a momentary pause. Like a whirlwind Alvarado and his companion covered the rest of the distance to the door, and before the lad could fire again they were upon him. Nipper fought savagely, but the two Spaniards were fighting with a ruthlessness born of the great proportion of Indian blood which flowed in their veins.

Alvarado's companion, the larger of the two, threw himself upon Nipper in a fury, and, clubbing his service revolver, brought it down on the lad's head with crushing force. From that moment Nipper lost all interest in the proceedings. As he crumpled up in a heap on the floor Alvarado panted:

"Victory is ours, Jose. Possession is nine points of the law. We are in possession, and we shall remain in possession. Come, amigo, let us drag this gringo out of the way."

They were just bending down to lift up the unconscious Nipper when the thunder of hoofs sounded outside. With a startled oath Alvarado and his companion ran to the door. They saw three horsemen drag their animals back on their haunches, then leap from the saddle and dash towards the verandah.

They were Nelson Lee, Digby Forrester, and Jimmy Harrison.

CHAPTER VII.

The Fight at Plantation House—Nelson Lee Comes Upon Some Compromising Material—How Lee Settled the Affair—The End.

EVEN back in the bananas, when they had heard the sound of shots at the plantation house, Lee had felt instinctively that the firing must have something to do with Alvarado. He knew that when, on the previous day, he had gone to Port Limon and had left Nipper in charge, he had taken a great risk. He did not think for a moment that Alvarado would remain quiescent or accept the rebuff which he had received from Forrester the previous night. Yet so urgent was it that Forrester and Harrison should be released that Lee had been forced to take the risk.

The time which, he feared most, would prove dangerous to Nipper was the night. But when no word had come from the plantation, he had hoped that, after all, Alvarado had not become cognisant of his departure from Patricia.

The shots certainly did not mean another rising of the negroes, for, on their way through the bananas, they had passed several gangs working industriously. As they galloped towards the plantation house they could see little. Yet once more the firing broke out, and, as they cleared the last belt of cover, they were able to see two figures dash along the verandah towards the office.

By the time they had thrown themselves from their saddles there was no doubt as to what was going forward. Alvarado and another Spaniard appeared at the door of the office, their weapons held ready in their hands.

Lee came to the ground with his arm already stiffened at his side. A loosely hanging arm can never be brought into action to draw as quickly as one already hanging rigid. A single bend of Lee's wrist, and he would be able

to jerk his automatic from the holster, and this he did, even as Alvarado threw up his arm and cried out in Spanish:

"Halt, gringos! You advance at your peril."

Forrester and Harrison had also drawn their weapons, and, keeping close to Lee, they rushed the steps. It was soon evident, however, that Alvarado's words were no bluff. As Lee and his companions rushed up the steps, Alvarado straightened his arm and began to fire. His companion, with a coolness worthy of a better cause, steadied the barrel of his weapon against one of the uprights of the verandah and pulled the trigger methodically.

At the very moment when Jimmy Harrison bounded up the last step the bullet caught him in the leg. He went down with a sharp cry, but recovered himself, and, laying flat on his face, began emptying his automatic as quickly as he could pull the trigger.

Alvarado and his companion held their ground a single moment longer, then they dashed into the office, slamming the door after them.

"Harrison can hold this end of it," panted Lee. "Come with me, Forrester; we'll get them through the screen at the side."

Lee vaulted the rail as he spoke, and, slipping in a fresh clip of cartridges as he ran, dashed round the corner of the house with Forrester at his heels. As they came within line of the screen, Alvarado and Jose fired again. One of the bullets ploughed through Lee's coat and grazed his shoulder. But the next moment he and Forrester were firing rapidly, bending low as they ran.

Looking through the screen from the outside, the interior of the room could only be seen dimly. Realising that Nipper must be there, Lee was compelled to fire cautiously. But in the gloom, beyond the screen, he saw two figures dash towards the door.

Wheeling sharply, he raced back to the verandah. Even as he reached the rail, the office door was jerked open, and the two Spaniards appeared. Jose must have emptied every chamber in his weapon, for he was not firing now, and, after pumping a couple of bullets at Lee and Forrester, Alvarado fled up the verandah towards the steps.

Jimmy Harrison, however, although wounded, was still in the job, and covered the two men as they ran towards him. Something in his eye must have told Alvarado that if they persisted in their course he would bring them down, for, pulling up, he turned and raced for the office. Lee and Forrester were over the rail by now, and as the two Spaniards dashed along each chose his man, and grappled.

Lee had picked Alvarado. The man fought with eyes full of hate and the sparkling ferocity of the ocelot. In Lee's hands he was like a child, however, for the only method of fighting which the Spaniard knew was with the knife or with the gun. He was utterly ignorant of the Anglo-Saxon method of combat. And as he held the kicking, biting, cursing Spaniard with his left arm, Lee doubled up his right fist and drove a smashing blow between Alvarado's eyes.

Alvarado dropped like a log, and Lee straightened up just in time to see Forrester bring the butt end of his weapon down on the other Spaniard's head. They dragged the two unconscious men into the office, and while Lee set to work to bring round Nipper, Forrester ran along to assist Harrison.

As soon as the two young fellows had been cared for, Lee turned his attention to Alvarado. The Spaniard was still unconscious, though he was beginning to show signs of coming round. Without the slightest compunction Lee opened the other's coat, and brought out several papers and letters which were in the inside pocket. Then he walked to the desk, and in methodical manner began to go through the documents he had just secured.

First he carefully read a couple of type-written documents, after which he turned his attention to the letters. He had hoped to find among the papers some clue to Alvarado's recent activities, but he had little expected to come upon such a mass of incriminating evidence as that which he had before him.

The first document proved to be a detailed statement of the condition of Santa Rosa Plantation at the end of the preceding month. It contained, moreover, a list of all the shareholders in the company, and the proportion of the shares which they held.

A steely glitter came into Lee's eyes as, at the top of the list of shareholders, he read the name "W. Morris," the president of the Patricia Plantation Company. Then followed several other names which Lee recognized as those of the directors of the Patricia Plantation Company. And at the end, with only a few shares credited to him, was the name of the elder Alvarado.

The next document was one which had been drawn up in San Jose, and proved to be highly interesting to Lee. It dealt with what were assuredly intimate understandings between Morris and the two Alvarados.

It began with a long preamble which stated that a halfpenny export duty on bananas would be waived in the case of fruit being shipped from the Santa Rosa Plantation.

In full production, Santa Rosa would ship six hundred thousand bunches a year. On this basis it will be seen that the concession was worth at least twelve hundred pounds per annum to the plantation.

The second clause stated that, in lieu of paying this export tax, Santa Rosa Plantation was to pay to the elder Alvarado half of the amount of the tax, or, in other words, a farthing for every bunch of fruit shipped off Santa Rosa, which would mean a private rake to the elder Alvarado of at least six hundred a year.

The third clause stated that Juan Alvarado was to be made the manager of Santa Rosa at a salary of six hundred a year. There were a few minor clauses, but the first three combined dealt with the agreement, and revealed to Lee the truth of a good many things which had been puzzling him.

The letters he found consisted of five—two personal epistles from the elder Alvarado to his son, and the other three, letters from Morris, the president of the Patricia Plantation Company. And by the time he had read those three letters, Nelson Lee had the whole secret in his own hands.

It was as pretty a scheme as a cunning speculator like Morris would have cooked for the confiding and trusty. Lee called Forrester to him when he had finished, and said:

"I have got the whole facts now, Forrester. Sit down, and let me tell you what it means."

Forrester lit a cigarette and gave his attention to Lee.

"Now listen while I tell you of the mental aerobatics which our friend Morris has been indulging in," went on Lee after a moment.

"Morris and the directors of the Patricia Plantation Company are, it appears, the largest shareholders in Santa Rosa as well. Santa Rosa was bought before they took over this plantation. From their experience on Santa Rosa they saw that this land must prove a fine investment, but they did not propose to develop Patricia with their own money. Oh, no! Morris had a scheme far better than that.

"They organized Patricia as a separate company, and, in order to impress potential investors with the proposition, they secured the services of a well-known banana expert—yourself, to be exact.

"Your record was good along the whole Mosquito Coast. Any timid

investor who took the trouble to investigate would find your record flawless, and that you would not lend yourself to anything which was not strictly above board.

"While they were still selling the shares of Patricia, Morris and his crowd sent you just enough money to carry on a certain amount of development. But, once they had raked in the shekels, they began cutting down remittances, until they thought the time ripe to bring off the coup they had planned.

"In the meantime, Alvarado, on Santa Rosa, was acting as their spy, and when they thought the time had come to deal the last hand they struck from every point.

"Firstly, they stopped all remittances, leaving you in a bad hole. At the same instant Alvarado notified you that he disputed the right of way from Patricia to the main railway-line.

"For a month or more past he has been working surreptitiously among the negroes, raising doubt in their minds about their money. Everything was arranged to come to a crisis at the same moment, and that moment was planned at the time when Patricia should be shipping her first cutting of fruit.

The riot, and your shooting of the Martinique, were, of course, unlooked for, but Alvarado was cunning enough to take immediate advantage of them. No doubt while the riot was on he was watching the whole thing from a near place of concealment. He saw the Martinique shot, and in a flash realised how he might get you away from the plantation, and keep you away until the game had been played out.

"Because his father was so influential, it was not difficult for him to get a small police posse at Matina to arrest both you and Harrison. The presence of myself and Nipper proved a second complication. He could not account for our being here, but finally decided that we must be guests of yours.

"These letters prove every statement I have made so far, and the whole idea of the plot was to make it appear that not only was Patricia a failure as a plantation, and a discredit to you, but also to make it appear that disastrous and expensive litigation was looming ahead.

"What would be the effect of such a report on the small shareholders of the Patricia Plantation Company? What was the effect of this report? The day before yesterday, in London, Morris, under the impression that the coup had been brought off, called an extraordinary general meeting of the shareholders of the company, and, basing his statements, no doubt, on cables sent by Alvarado, made a most pessimistic report.

"Then his accomplices, the other directors, suggested another full reorganisation of the company, with a levy of ten shillings a share; or, with what was intended to impress the small shareholders as magnificent generosity on their part, offered to take up all outstanding shares at two shillings per share.

"Now, what was the situation that the small shareholders were faced with? Most of them were people in a very small way financially. Some of them—nearly all of them—trusting to the statements of Morris and the other directors, invested all they possessed in the company, paying one pound for each share.

"It would be utterly impossible for them to stand a levy of ten shillings per share. Morris and his crowd knew that. They thought, and hoped, that, in desperation, the offer of two shillings a share would be accepted. Had this been so, then you can see that not only would Morris and his crowd have been on velvet regarding the financial development of the

plantation, but at the very moment when it was beginning to produce, with the profit they would have acquired by the outstanding pound shares for only two shillings each.

"After a short lapse of time they would announce that a settlement had been reached in regard to the dispute on Santa Rosa Plantation, and then, no doubt, the two would have been openly amalgamated.

"It was a very pretty scheme, but with these two documents and five letters I rather fancy I have got Mr. Morris and the other crooks of his crowd exactly where we want them."

By the time Lee had finished his explanation Forrester was white with anger as he realised how he had been duped.

"If I had that man and his crew here——" he began.

Lee held up his hand.

"My dear Forrester," he said, "that would do you no good. The only way to hurt men like Mr. Morris is to hit them in the pocket, and I promise you that before I have finished with them they will be a sick lot of men."

"What will you do?" asked Forrester.

"I will tell you," said Lee. "I will exact from them for the minority shareholders of the Patricia Plantation Company exactly what they intended exacting. I will force them to sell all their holdings, not only in the Patricia Plantation Company, but in the Santa Rosa Plantation Company as well, for two shillings per share. We will reorganise the two companies as one, with you as manager out here. When I get to London I can easily find the necessary capital to do this, and I assure you, with the documents I now hold, Morris and his gang will have no choice but to yield. The alternative will be a criminal prosecution, and, if I know that kidney, they won't risk such a thing.

"As for Alvarado senior, I shall make it my business to have an interview with the president of Costa Rica, and place before him proof of what Alvarado has done. With regard to this rat——and as he spoke Lee indicated Juan Alvarado——"we shall run him and his greasy friend off the place, and I do not think you will be worried any more by either of them.

"To-morrow I will send a long cable to the minority shareholders of the company, and another to Morris, which I fancy will keep him on tenter-hooks until I get back to London; that's all. Now let us call up a few of the huskiest blacks, and have these two greasers run off the place. Then I suggest, Forrester, that, in celebration of our victory, we use our most persuasive manner with the cook, and have a little banquet to-night."

And, even as he said he would do, Nelson Lee did, for to-day there is no more profitable plantation in Costa Rica than Patricia Plantation Company, which stretches in one vast area of green banana-trees from the Matina River to the railway.

THE END.

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They meet with many adventures. One day, Alec and Clive are lost in a rocky and cavernous part of the island. They sit down to talk matters over, but immediately become the targets of a troop of huge apes, who throw pebbles at them from the rocks above. Alec examines one of the stones and finds it to be one of those for which the party is searching!

They fall in with a party of blacks led by a stalwart native named OLTRA, and an Irishman—one PETE STORBIN, who warn the treasure hunters against a rascally filibuster—PEDRO DIEGO, and his gang By some means the pirate has got to know the object of the expedition.

— —

Pedro Diego—Filibuster.

THESE were awkward and disagreeable items of information, which gave the worthy doctor a good deal of anxious thought.

It was clear that he would have to provide against an attack sooner or later—and it might be sooner—by a gang of utterly unscrupulous ruffians, who would think no more of appropriating the yacht and all his property than they did of robbing the wretched natives among the islands they visited. And if they succeeded in this, what would be the fate of the explorers themselves? The doctor could guess only too well what it would be, and he shuddered as he thought of it.

Apart from himself, he had to think of those who had entrusted themselves to his guidance—of his two young assistants, and the members of his crew. He felt he could never forgive himself if his leadership should land them in such calamity.

Evidently, therefore, as a prudent man, there were but two things to be done—either he must abandon his enterprise, so far as the search for gold was concerned, and move on to other lands, or he must adopt such measures as to render his party fairly safe from attack.

And here the chance which had led to the meeting with Oltra seemed likely to turn out an event of more than passing interest. If the doctor could gain the native chief as an ally, he might be able to so arrange matters as to be able to proceed with his research in comparative safety.

Oltra, on his side, had a long score to pay off against the filibusters. For years Diego had been a terror to many of the islands in those seas. He had stolen right and left; he had captured men, women, and children, and carried them off, and sold them under the pretended name of "imported

labourers," but in reality as virtual slaves, to the planters and ranchers living on other islands or on the mainland.

And wherever he and his gang had met with resistance to their lawless acts, they had murdered right and left, shooting down ruthlessly the unhappy natives who dared to oppose them, and burning their dwellings.

Then, before the people thus treated could collect a sufficient number of their countrymen to retaliate, the freebooters sailed away to some place where there was a ready sale for their miserable prisoners. After every such haul they would visit some large coast town where others of like character were known to congregate. There Diego and his men spent their gains in gambling and riotous living, returning after a while to their (otherwise) uninhabited island to plan and carry out further raids.

Oltra, as stated, was one of those native chiefs who had a score to pay off. Therefore, he was not unwilling to assist in anything likely to lead to the discomfiture of this murderous gang. But the dusky potentate was somewhat avaricious, and a bit cunning withal. He had heard of the report that the doctor was engaged in a treasure hunt, and had probably formed exaggerated notions of the affair.

He considered that if he helped the white chief to gain the treasure he was seeking, he ought to have a share in the results. And as the doctor on his side could not say that such a condition was not fair, the only trouble seemed to be to arrange terms. And here was where the difficulty came in, for Oltra had at first such inflated ideas that his conditions were out of the question.

By degrees, however, they abated under the cold logic of actual fact which the doctor brought to bear on the subject, and managed, after much patient "parleyvooring"—as Storbin called it—to hammer into the dusky king's rather foggy understanding.

Thus the natives stayed on from day to day, fraternising with the white men, whilst the leaders of both parties met and discussed and haggled over the terms of co-operation.

By the time these were settled the doctor had quite recovered from his accident, and was ready and impatient to carry out the quest which had brought him to the place.

Clive and Alec would have found this interval a rather dull time if it had not been for the continued presence of the natives. The doctor forbade them even more strictly than before to engage in anything in the nature of an excursion inland or among the rocky heights leading to the upper part of the island. He suspected that the freebooters, whose revengeful feelings were now certainly aroused, would be on the look-out for opportunities of reprisals, and he knew how easy it would be to them amid such natural facilities for concealment to arrange an ambush.

So the two chums were enjoined to confine themselves to the shore line, either on land or in boats and canoes.

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THE ISLAND OF GOLD

Amongst the various natives with whom they thus went out there were two who were their constant companions and attendants. They were Menga and Kalma, the two who had thrown themselves between Alec and the shark, and so undoubtedly saved him from a dreadful death.

Following Storbin's hint, Alec had refrained from offering the brave fellows any recompense at the time. He had only shaken hands with them, and addressed a few words of heartfelt thanks, which were duly interpreted by Storbin. But a day or two after, the two were formally enrolled as members for the time being of the doctor's company. Thereupon Alec presented them with a rifle each as part of their equipment, impressing upon them the fact that they were to regard the weapons as their very own, which they would be free to take with them when they finally returned to their homes. And it is needless to say that no surer way of pleasing them and gladdening their hearts could have been found.

Proud warriors, indeed, were they now, and envied of their fellows as they strutted about, carrying their rifles. Thanks to Alec's further liberality, they were provided with plenty of ammunition, with which they could practise and so make themselves good shots.

In return they instructed the two young fellows in many barbaric but warlike sports; and, lastly, they worked very hard to pick up English, that they might be able to understand what their white friends said to them.

As Alec and Clive were at this time both doing their best to learn something of their language, in order to be able to converse with the natives generally, the four were soon able to understand one another fairly well.

Clive and Alec were returning one afternoon from a little excursion in a canoe with their two faithful natives, and they were all busy landing some fish they had caught, and getting their tackle and arms ashore, when the two blacks suddenly left what they were engaged on to take up their rifles and stand at "Attention."

"Hullo!" said Clive, without looking round. "I guess I know what that means. The Irishman walks this way."

"Yes; here he comes," Alec confirmed, laughing. "Here cometh the generalissimo, and of course they must leave whatever they are doing to pay him honour. I do believe he seems to have more swagger this afternoon than ever—if such a thing be possible! Something's up, I fancy! I wonder what it is? Can his royal master have managed to find some fresh post to confer upon him?"

Storbin made it an inflexible rule that all those natives who bore firearms must salute him.

"Sure an' it's only roight, an' it's all for the good av me masther's arr-my," he was wont to say. "It's discipline is sahlutin'. The riflemen are the flower av our arr-my, an' if the gineral can't maintain discipline amongst thim, phwat good is he?" Which proposition both Clive and Alec,

when it was propounded to them, had found so unanswerable, that they both gave it up on the spot.

As to the worthy Irishman's extra swagger this afternoon, it had been no fancy on Alec's part. It was a fact, and the two soon learnt the reason of it. He and his royal "masther" had just concluded their little deal with

(Continued overleaf.)



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the doctor, and Storbin, as one of the High Contracting Parties, naturally laboured under a sense of added importance.

"Surely," remarked Clive, "he has added to his stature as well. What's he been up to?"

As to this, it was only that the "ginneral" had changed the plumes he had been wearing on the top of his helmet for another and larger bunch, which had the effect of making him look somewhat taller, if not, as he himself no doubt imagined, more imposing.

"The crame of the afthernoons to ye, gentlemen," he said affably, after returning the salute of the two blacks, and signing to them to resume their occupation. "It's good news Oi'm bringing ye this day. Oi'm going away to-morrow."

"So!" returned Clive, trying to look properly impressed by the overpowering importance of the announcement. "But why should that be good news, friend Storbin? For my part, I call it bad news. I—both of us—will be sorry to lose you."

"Thruce for you, me bhoys, an' Oi'm sorry to go. The good news is that Oi'm comin' back."

"Oh!" Alec put in. "That's the good part of the news, is it? Well, it sounds better than the other, so why not have put it first?"

"How could I, sorr? Sure, Oi'll have t' go away first afore Oi can come back, won't Oi?"

"That's true enough," laughed Alec. "Well, when do you expect to be back?"

"That Oi can't say. Ye see, we'll have a lot t' do. We're goin' t' bring our war canoes with us."

"The deuce you are! What's up, then? Has some other native king declared war on you?"

"No, it's not that," Storbin returned, with a somewhat pompous air. "It's yerselves as we'll be looking afther."

"It's we, you're going to look after?" Clive repeated, affecting to be greatly astonished. "You're going to bring your war canoes and all your warlike hordes, I suppose, over here, against us? Good news! What have we done?"

"It's t' protect ye, me friends," Storbin explained. "It's t' take yer part we're goin' to aginst yer innemies—Diego an' his pirates."

"Oh, I see. You're going to help us against them. So the doctor has arranged that, has he? Now that's good news. We knew, of course, that something of the kind was in the wind; but I did not know it had been settled."

"Only settled this mornin'," Storbin answered. "An' now we're goin' back t' get our men. An' thin, I think," he added reflectively, "between us we ought t' be able t' wipe out that nest o' vipers!"

(Another thrilling instalment of this grand yarn next week.)

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