

## *Preface*

As the days pass I realise that the only way to exorcise the devils that haunt me is to set this story down as I recall it, writing slowly by candlelight in a hut propped among pine trees overlooking the cold North Sea.

I come down here each dark wintry morning and as I gaze beyond the flickering candle to where the black sea roars on the shingle far below, on an instant I am back under that ruined Mayan temple, where we listened fearfully for sounds of pursuit, and suddenly our torches lit up that huge and hideous face of Itza, the Maya God, staring into the darkness of centuries.

Familiar faces come back to haunt me. Above all, the girl, as if I could ever forget her. Whenever I look out past the candle flame, I see her face staring back at me through the darkness, but as the grey dawn gleams over the grey sea and the gulls begin their mocking lament, her smile fades and it is the eye of Itza that leers cruelly back at me in the glass.

A los viajeros de los mundos

To the wanderers of the world.

Estan ruinas no estan muerto. Son guestas di tiempo.

These stones are not dead. They are gestures of time.

These words are carved on the ruins of Old Panama City, the city that the English buccaneer, Henry Morgan, destroyed on the 28th January 1671.

## ONE

### *A Traveller in Mexico*

I had been in Acapulco three days waiting for Bill Willis to show up. We had arranged to meet outside the supermarket at the back of Los Homos beach. Now in the early morning the tables were being hosed down outside the Colonial Club and fishing boats were setting out on a day's charter. One was preposterously named 'Queen Mary'! By the Pemex gas station an impromptu basket ball game was in progress and some old Indian ladies emerged from the trees to beg. 'Usted, Usted, You, You' they demanded, thrusting out skinny arms.

Suddenly I got fed up with doing nothing and decided to set off in search of Willis myself. At ten o'clock I checked out of my room, bade farewell to the cockroaches, and carried my red duffel bag along the street of tyre-repair shops to the Flecha Rosa terminal. Between pools of sump oil, tired queues stood waiting for their tickets. I purchased one south to Puerto Escondido.

For the next two days I never seemed to be off a bus. Puerto Escondido to Salinas and then inland to the impossible sounding Tetuantepec. I was getting accus-tomed to the sights, the smells and even to the only fizzy drink available - ubiquitously titled 'Squirt'. There was still no sign of Willis, so I decided to head on to Palenque.

All the next day the bus climbed up into the high blue

mountains of the Chiappas. At sunset we reached Tuxtla. After that I fell asleep, waking only when we finally pulled into Los Cristobal four hours later.

Getting off the bus I noticed another 'gringo' couple. The girl wore a black bowler hat and dark glasses. She was only a slip of a thing. Her companion spoke to her in French. Their rucksacks were passed down from the roof, and I followed them up a narrow street to an inn sign, 'Casa del Huespedes' - 'House of foot travellers'. It was very cheap. Tiny cubicles huddled around an open courtyard with a central well to wash in. Los Cristobal was higher than I realised. Not only was it drizzling, but freezing cold as well.

A hard straw mattress topped a narrow board bed. I climbed into my sleeping bag and shivered slowly to sleep while the inn creaked and groaned from the snores of the incumbents, like a galley in a storm.

A cold dawn mist shrouded the yard where the bus was due to leave for Palenque. I noticed the bowler-hat girl and her companion waiting. The driver appeared to be tying the axle on with wire. Finally amid clouds of diesel smoke the engine shuddered into life and we creaked away. 'Bowler hat' was sitting with her friend across the aisle. 'You going to Palenque?' he asked me. I nodded, but with no clear idea why. 'Before Belize we must go to the Maya ruins,' Willis had shouted down a bad telephone line. Then the line had gone dead and no amount of clicking brought it back to life. If I wanted to find out more I had to find out for myself.

Until that message the last I'd heard of Willis was a letter posted from Yemen saying he was about to set out into the Empty Quarter with Boyet Rhodes, an old school chum of his turned mercenary. Then two months ago had come this telephone call saying he was off to South

America and would I join him. The staff at my school had recently come under the axe' and my post made redundant. The fact that it was an extremely raw winter in London, was all the incentive I needed to pack my bag and go. What was irritating, yet knowing Willis, not totally unexpected, was that he had gone on ahead.

Although we were still climbing, the mist was drawing off the mountains revealing a pretty highland scenery of pine forests and rocky peaks. The roadsides stood deep in wild flowers. The small stony fields were being worked, and peasants were constantly flagging down the bus and climbing aboard with bundles of vegetables or hens to sell further down the road.

The hours passed uncomfortably. Mexican buses aren't designed for European knees. The bowler-hatted girl did not utter a word, but her companion was happy enough to draw me into conversation. He had been talking about bandits when he indicated the girl and announced with a wink, 'She's got a flare gun tucked under her blouse'. He chuckled. 'Don't worry, man, these police apes never search women. Hell, they could hide a tank under their skirts and it'd never be noticed!'

By now we were speeding downhill. Tropical forest cloaked the mountains and far below flowed a river the colour of turquoise. We bounced over a wooden bridge and on the far

side the sultry plains of the Yucatan spread away to a hazy horizon.

At Palenque I took a room in the hotel opposite to the bus stop, ate a hurried meal, smiled adieu to the bowler-hatted girl sipping beer at the next table, and caught a crowded truck out towards the ruins. It never occurred to me that I was being watched.

I got off where a path had been cut through to the ruins. They straddled a clearing between jungle-covered

hills and the plains beyond. Brightly-coloured birds soared and plunged through the treetops, but among the empty temples and the crumbling tombs, the stillness was reverential. Unlike Pompeii with its suburban alleys and chattering tourists, Palenque felt like a city designed for gods, except that the gods had departed and only the bellowing shrieks of the howler monkeys mocked the silence.

There was a fairy-tale quality about these ruins, but why Willis had insisted I should go there was quite beyond me. I climbed the two hundred feet or more to the top of the temple of the Inscriptions and sat there wondering what to do next. The sun sank and the shadows lengthened over the plains below. Finally a guard appeared blowing a whistle. Outside on the road I waited in the dusk for a ride back to the village.

Next morning I caught the wrong bus and wasted much of the day holed up in a place called Catazaga de las Playas. The 'playas' consisted of muddy fields sloping down to the shore of a shallow inland lake. White herons pecked the shallows

between rotting dugouts. In the village square, the men sat all day on the shady side, half asleep under their sombreros. For hours nothing seemed to move except the songbirds. Finally at five o'clock a bus arrived and in the early evening we sped north across immense seas of grass, and reached Escarcega at seven o'clock. The bus for Chetumal on the Belize border passed at midnight and there was nothing to do in Escarcega but wait by the roadside until it came.

It finally arrived at 2 a.m. with standing-room only. After the four-hour drive to Chetumal, I stretched out on a bench in the depot and waited wearily for dawn. I must have finally dropped off for I was roused by a tubby Mexican trying to sell me a ticket on the Batty bus for Belize. When he left me I fled outside and sat beside the local statue to 'The Future' where a stone child held a grenade in one hand and a book in the other. Hammock sellers were plying their trade and an old man started warbling for pesos. It seemed impossible that such very loud and very rude warbles could come out of such a tiny old man.

Getting aboard Batty's bus was like entering another country. Everyone was speaking calypso English, and they all knew each other. It was all Mrs. This and Mrs. That and 'How's so-and-so?' and 'Well I never.'

I was sitting up front when the man who sold me the ticket sat down heavily beside me counting his stubs. As the driver started the engine he turned to me. 'You Billy's friend?' he said. 'Listen, go to Mom's Triangle Bar in Belize City, by the swing bridge. Ask for 'Chocolate'.' Before I could say anything

he had climbed down the bus steps and he was gone. A grimy kid beat on the window shouting 'Hey gringo' and then we were off.

TWO

## *Pieces of Eight*

Legend boasted that Belize City was built on smashed rum bottles, and nothing much seemed to have changed in 400 years. Peeling board-shacks teetered on rotting stilts alongside the stagnant canals and mud alleys that crisscrossed the town. Outside the waterfront market live turtles were on sale upside down with their legs flapping helplessly. A sinister group of Rastafarians blocked the end of the swing bridge over Hannover Creek, hassling passersby with offers of 'grass' and 'whores'.

Below the swing bridge, the creek broadened into an estuary, lined with fishing boats, their masts and spars bobbing in the wash. A sign against a lean-to advised 'No one under the influence of alcohol or marijuana taken on'.

I found a room above a sleazy bar, owned by a Chinaman. At 'Mom's Triangle Bar' supper was burnt chicken, hard rice and very dead beans. The ceiling fans creaked listlessly and the messages pinned over the green walls looked as if they had been waiting there for years.

Two red-faced British military policemen pushed through the swing doors and frisked the dim interior with their eyes. No one dived under the tables. The MPs removed their berets, sat down and ordered beer. The waitress swayed across so slowly I wondered if she'd ever

actually reach them! As she drifted by I enquired after Chocolate.

'He out at Caye Corker,' she murmured languidly. Come by 'morrow mornin' bout nine, I expect'.

Next morning, just as I was finishing breakfast at Mom's, a barefoot fisherman came up to my table. He had a friendly smile and trusting blue eyes. He was so lightly tanned it was hard to tell to what race he belonged. His nickname must have been a private joke for it hardly described him. 'I'm Chocolate,' he said. 'Hear you want to get out to the Cayes.'

I nodded and pushed my plate away, but he gestured me to stay put. 'No hurry. Finish your own good time. I've a few errands around town. Meet you other side of the swing bridge at eleven.'

Before I could reply he was padding towards the door, but there was something about him that gave me confidence and sure enough at eleven o'clock I discovered his boat tied up to the wharf on the other side of the bridge. It was a solidly-built craft with two large outboards bolted on the stern. A fair-haired girl was busy stowing things aboard. Presently Chocolate came up carrying sacks of vegetables and a can of oil. He waved me to climb aboard. The girl cast off the mooring lines and we headed out past the fishing smacks towards the open sea. Ahead a low line of green islands smudged the horizon.

We passed several palm-fringed atolls before we reached Caye Corker. Wooden shanties teetered on stilts under the

coconut palms and ramshackle jetties jutted into the sea between clumps of mangroves. Chocolate finally eased up the engines.

'I'll drop you at 'Tom's', he told me. 'If you want anything, just ask. I keep the boat at Martinez jetty.'

He cut the engines and glided in to the shore. I climbed on to the jetty and the girl handed over my bag. 'Mister!' called out Chocolate as he backed the boat away. 'Caye Corker's too small to miss anyone. Don't worry.'

With this reassuring message I set off, picking my way among old lobster pots. Overhead, palm fronds sheltered the entire island like a vast sunshade. Tom's' was full up but I finally got a room at 'Linda's'.

At another shack I treated myself to a lobster salad, costing less than two Belize dollars. Nursing a beer, I watched the sea glinting through the palm trees.

'Hey mister, you finished?' A small Creole boy address-ed me. In a flash he laid my plate on the sand where a little black and white mongrel dog pounced on it. 'Bof, you lick it all up mind.' The boy grinned at me. 'He like it, mister.'

'He eats lobster?' It seemed a rich diet for a dog.

'Sure. Why Bof, he eats almost anythin'. Fish mostly, bread, crabs.'

He frowned and rested his weight on the other foot. I realised he had a limp. The boy transferred his attentions from the dog to me. 'Mister, where you stay?'

I pointed out Linda's hut. 'What's your name?' I asked him.

'Me, Rodriguez. Why you want to know?'

I fished out a dollar bill. 'Listen Rodriguez, I'm looking for a friend of mine. Thin, sandy hair, may have a moustache, smokes cigarettes, bites his nails,' I added.

The boy regarded me suspiciously. 'Who are you. Government, Police?'

'No, believe me, just a friend.'

He tilted his head at me. 'Your friend solo,' he piped. 'No chikita?'

'No chikita.' I shook my head and placed the dollar on the table. Snatching it, the boy darted away with Bof snapping at his heels.

'He's called Willis/ I shouted rashly after him.

Out at sea an old sailing yawl with brown sails was tacking slowly up the island against tide and wind. It headed into the shelter of the shore. The patched sails shivered and the anchor dropped with a rattle and a splash.

I got up and strolled along the shoreline until dense clumps of mangroves blocked the way. At this point a faint thudding noise led me across the island to where I discovered the Caye Corker power house; an old tarred lean-to boxed in by empty fuel drums. From the scrap of beach beside it a jetty ran into the sea. There was an old gaff-rigged cutter tied up at the far end, with a pelican shuffling about on its deck. It looked as if the owner was out fishing in the dinghy leaving

the pelican on sentry duty. I went for a swim and afterwards fell fast asleep on the warm sand.

I woke up with the sun gone and the mangroves alive with squawking birds. The pelican was still strutting up and down the deck of the little yacht. As I walked back across the island, fireflies were flickering under the trees, and unless I was imagining it, I could hear the unmistakable murmur of drums.

"Breakdown" music,' explained Rodriguez, who was waiting outside 'Edith's' with Bof wagging his tail expectantly. Eyeing the kitchen, he nodded hopefully. 'Mister, okay we go to your friend after supper.'

Lobster was the only thing on the menu, but neither the boy nor Bof seemed to mind. Out at sea the breakers roared on the barrier reefs, and closer at hand the island drums throbbed under the trees, as if the old drums of Africa were speaking. From the embers of a cookfire came the smash of a breaking bottle, followed by an oath. Then from the heart of the island, a torrent of wild calypso

singing that stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

I followed the limping boy through the shadows, with Bof at his heels, towards the thudding of the little power house. The palm trees thinned, the mangrove clumps parted and we stepped across the familiar scrap of beach to the jetty. At the far end the outline of the cutter gleamed softly in the darkness. A lantern twinkled in its rigging.

Grabbing Bof by the scruff of the neck, Rodringuez ignored the shuffling pelican and banged down hard on the cabin roof.

From below a voice cried up. 'Hallo, who's there?'

'Friends, Cap'n,' piped the boy, grinning at me in the gloom.

A hatch pulled back and the familiar face of Willis peered cautiously out.

### **THREE**

## ***Council of War***

'James! Good Heavens!' Willis bobbed back out of sight, swore, and reappeared with a torch in one hand. He was rubbing his head ruefully with the other. 'Trouble with bloody boats, never any headroom. Welcome aboard!' He let go his head long enough to pump my hand. The boy laughed, Bof barked, the pelican squawked indignantly and Willis and I grinned foolishly at each other.

'James, it is good to see you,' he enthused. 'I'm sorry I couldn't wait for you in Acapulco. Something cropped up.' He glanced hesitatingly at Rodriguez whom I rewarded with another dollar and sent him away to spend it.

I lowered myself awkwardly into the tiny cabin. Willis was right about the headroom; there wasn't any. In fact there wasn't a lot of room anywhere. A squat table fitted clumsily between the bunks, whilst under the hatchway was what Willis euphemistically called the galley. It consisted of a primus stove and a bucket. Here he busied himself making coffee. 'If you want the loo,' he called out, 'There's an old Chianti bottle plus funnel! I usually go topsides.'

I leaned back on the mouldering cushions. The shelves opposite were crammed with books, charts, a sextant, a Bible. I noticed that among the books were several fanciful titles to do with Latin America; 'Lost World of the Mayas',

'The Inca Empire' - that sort of thing. However, I was rather more curious about Willis himself, for there was something different that I couldn't define.

Stooping low under the cabin roof, Willis placed two steaming mugs on the table and sat down. 'With or without?' he asked.

'Sugar?'

He chuckled, 'No, rum.' And he reached behind for his medicinal supplies. Then he tinkered with the lantern to get a brighter flame and peered across at me. 'You did get my letter? I was a bit worried. And you did go to Palenque?'

I nodded. 'What on earth was that all about? Since when have you been interested in archeology?' I noticed him glance hesitantly up at the bookshelves, as if there was something there he didn't want me to see.

'I'm sorry to have dragged you all over the place,' he said awkwardly, and the mild irritation I had been reserving for him during the past week evaporated. I sipped the rum coffee and grinned. 'It was bloody hot.'

'The Yucatan is hot,' he readily agreed and changed the subject. 'It's good to see you again, James! I can't tell you the times in these past months I wished you were there.'

Willis took a long swig from his mug, laced it with another dose of rum and stared thoughtfully. I suddenly realised what had changed; Willis wasn't smoking.

He grinned shyly, but was pleased nonetheless. 'I've given it up. Had to you know. Something you learn in the desert. Smell, most important.'

He looked leaner than ever, honed down. His hair which he always cut himself was close, if unevenly cropped, so that his ears protruded. Studying him I remembered how he used to hold a cigarette furtively in his fingers, like a schoolboy. He might have given up that habit, but he hadn't lost the wary look in his eye, or the occasional stammer.

'So tell me, what's become of your friend Rhodes. Did he find that Lost City, or whatever it was he was looking for?'

I said it harmlessly enough, but he glanced uneasily through the open hatchway as though the entire island might be listening. I suddenly noticed how very quiet it had become outside. The reassuring thud of the power shed had switched off. Even the wind had died away. The only sound was the tap of wavelets, lapping the wooden hull. There was no moon, and beyond the pale beach, the tumble of mangroves reared up, darker than the night. A shuffling sound startled me, but it was only the old pelican roosting on the foredeck, its beak tucked under its wing.

I suddenly guessed what I should have realised from the outset. 'He's here, isn't he?'

For a moment Willis tried to avoid my eye, then he nodded.

I didn't blame Willis entirely. I really felt angry for allowing myself to be lulled into the careless belief that Boyet Rhodes was safely tucked away with his band of brigands in the

unmapped wastes of Southern Arabia, offering his services to one warring sheik or another. It had never occurred to me that his very particular talents might have drawn him to Central America. 'I'm sorry,' Willis admitted, 'I should never have dragged you out here/

It was as close an admission I was ever likely to get that Willis was worried. Later as I returned across the island to

room I thought every shadow was going to pounce, but by now even the fireflies had long since given up their courting for the night and the island lay tucked up and fast asleep.

Caye Corker woke up early. The half light was beseiged by barking dogs, squealing pigs, shouting children. It turned out to be a fine clear morning with only a light breeze to ruffle the sea, when, an hour later we hoisted the sails on Willis' cutter, the Susan B. Anthony, and headed north, close hauled, for the tip of the island. As we got nearer I realised that the tangle of mangroves was in fact another islet, separated from Caye Corker by a narrow channel.

'That's strange/ said Willis, shielding his eyes against the glare. 'Do you see that smoke? I thought it was deserted, Probably Rastafarians.'

We cleared the mangroves at the end of the island and changed course for the barrier reef, our sails billowing and the timbers creaking as we shouldered the seas. 'Old Susan's a bit stiff in her joints early in the morning,' said Willis affectionately as he dived below to put the kettle on. 'Don't worry,' he called up. 'She can sail herself. Really and truly

I've never known a boat like her,' he added as we drank our coffee. 'Any other boat would luff up into the wind. Look how steady she goes. Almost as if she knows what she's doing.'

I think we were both trying to avoid mentioning Rhodes, as though that might help to keep him safely out of reach. On the foredeck the pelican ruffled its tatty feathers. 'Go on you lazy blighter,' shouted Willis. 'Get your own breakfast for once.' But the bird only yawned its cavernous beak and ignored us. A motorboat coming up fast astern made us look hastily round. Someone waved. I recognised Chocolate and waved back. Of the girl there was no sign.

'I've been sailing out here most days,' Willis continued.

'I don't want anyone to get suspicious when we finally slip away. Don't worry,' he hastened to reassure me, 'She's a sturdy old craft even if she does leak a bit. I've been sailing along the Cayes for weeks now, On patrol,' he added with a grin as he dived below again. I could hear him rummaging about, muttering to himself. He came up with some well-thumbed charts which he spread out on his knees and stabbed at with a greasy finger. 'Ambergris Caye and the North River lagoon here, and south along the lee of the barrier reef to Monkey River and Punta Gorda. The Sus-an's got so little draught you see, you can tuck her in safely anywhere.'

Trying to follow his directions, my immediate impression was that there seemed to be an awful lot of water and very little land. Further away a line of small cayes dotting the

Honduras coast was the centre of pencilled-in bearings. Willis noticed my interest. 'That's Roatan,' he explained. 'Henry Morgan's old haunt. He built a massive fortress there at Port Royal. Legend has it that the treasure they looted from Panama City is still buried there.'

I made the obvious remark, 'So that's what Rhodes is after, Morgan's gold.'

Willis rejected the idea, 'Although you're right about one thing,' he agreed. That's where he's been holed up for ages. I happen to know he's sailing an old Falmouth oyster-catcher. That's a boat you can't miss. It's got a bowsprit a mile long.'

I glanced back towards Caye Corker, now no more than a green atoll in the distance. 'Presumably you expect him to come this way?'

He wriggled like a trapped schoolboy, 'Sort of,' he admitted. 'Look, it's not that I mean to be mysterious, it's just that ... well, I'm not absolutely sure, and it's a bit hard to explain.'

'Oh come off it, Willis,' I said irritably. 'Either trust me or don't.' For a moment I didn't think he would budge then he said 'I'm sorry, James, of course you've every right to know. I'm pretty certain he's heading for one of the ruined Maya cities in the Peten. But which one, and where, I really don't know.'

Shortly after this we came up as close to the reef as Willis cared to go. While he luffed the Susan into the wind and dropped the sails. Willis soon 'drummed-up', as he put it, a

stodge of overcooked rice, boiled egg and a very rusty tin of tuna. 'It's the thing I'm best at cooking,' he enthused with his mouth full.

Afterwards we sat in the cabin and studied the charts again. 'You see,' explained Willis. 'There's any number of places he could put in. And of course there's always the chance he could be aiming here. See that river running back into Guatemala?' Peering hard I read the name 'Livingston'.

'That's at the mouth,' agreed Willis, 'But a shallow boat can get a long way up that river. Right into the heart of the Peten.' The vast unmapped areas of green would have unnerved anyone else, but Willis could not disguise his eagerness. Look, there's only the one track south of Lake Itza and that's impassable during the rains. It's all unexplored jungle and it's the very heart of the Maya civilisation.'

It was almost dusk by the time we tied the Susan up to the jetty, and I managed to persuade Willis to abandon his galley for once, and come ashore to eat. We left the pelican on patrol - his beak bulging with dead fish he'd scooped off the beach - and set off through the twilight.

At Edith's restaurant we sat outside in the firefly dark slowly eating our lobsters. I was determined to make the most of what was likely to be my last good meal in a while

but Willis was uneasy. 'I always get the fidgets when I'm away from the Susan' he apologised, attempting a smile.

'Oh, come off it,' I exclaimed. 'For a start no one could get past your watchbird. You know you really are the most suspicious bastard!'

Willis frowned, and slopped more rum in his glass. He sat there silently brooding.

'Cap'n, Cap'n!' piped a familiar voice. A shadow darted through the trees towards us. 'Cap'n,' panted Rodriguez, 'Come quick. Cap'n, your boat's on fire!'

By the time we reached the shore even the jetty was ablaze, tar bubbling out of the planks in little spurts of flame. As for the cutter, she looked like a Viking funeral pyre. From stem to stern flames leapt into the sky. Even as we stood there, the burning mast toppled, hissing into the sea.

A few fishermen were standing at the back of the beach, but no one moved to help, not that anything could be done. I noticed Willis crouching over something at the water's edge. It was the pelican.

'The bastards!' he exclaimed angrily. He seemed more upset by the dead pelican than the loss of his boat. By now the Susan was burning right down to the waterline. 'Come on, there's nothing we can do here,' I said. For it occurred to me, that whoever may have tried to bump Willis off was most likely still lurking around. Willis took a last look at the boat and made his way up the beach. The islanders parted to let us through and we headed for Chocolate's house near Martinez jetty. No one was in. Willis scribbled a note and tucked it under the door, and we set off back to tny room. I

say 'we' because we still had the boy and Bof m tow. I thought he was waiting for a tip and fished out a dollar, but he frowned. "I don't want your money, Mister/ Then he whispered conspiratorially, 'Men say lantern started fire. But it weren't so. I hear one mutter it were them'Rastas' from Mangrove Island.'

Willis nodded gloomily. 'If Rhodes' put them up to it that won't stop us. Tomorrow we ll get a ride with Chocolate, back to Belize.'

J thought it was a bit careless speaking so openly in front of the boy, but when I cautioned Rodriguez he stretched himself on his good foot and piped back angrily, 'I ain't no tell-tale, Mister, cross my heart.' And peering cautiously into the shadows, he whispered, 'Capn', you get the men what done this?' Receiving no reply, the boy volunteered, 'You want good tracker dog? Capn' you want Bof help you.' On hearing his name, Bof growled excitedly, wagging his tail. 'He ain't for sale exactly,' piped the boy hesitantly, 'But if you wants him, you can have him just so long as I come too.'

That at least, brought a smile to Willis' tense features. 'Thank you,' he said, 'But we don't even know where we're going ourselves.'

'Cap'n, that don't matter,' persisted the boy. 'I ain't got no one here, 'cept for Bof that is. I ran off from Guatemala when the police ...' His voice quavered a fraction, 'take my family. Things real bad nowadays in Guatemala,' he added, attempting an air of detachment. 'Lots of peoples run the

border. First I stay San Ignacio then I come here work on the boats.'

'I tell you what,' suggested Willis, 'You lend us Bof tonight to be our watchdog. Hey ...' But the boy had already vanished. By the time we reached Linda's he was back with an old hammock which he slung between the stilts under the house. Later, with Bof reluctantly tied by a length of string outside our door, we decided a better alarm system didn't exist.

## **FOUR**

### ***The Doomed Island***

By the time I woke up next morning Willis was already on his way out. 'Wait for me on the jetty/ he said, 'I'm going to find Chocolate/

After swallowing a cup of Miss Linda's coffee I settled the bill and walked over to the jetty. Through the trees, the sea gleamed in the early sunlight. There was a boat moored to the pilings and while I was looking at it, two men stepped up behind me. They were thin and very dark with their hair twisted in long braids.

'Hey man, you for Belize? Chocolate he gone over early. You come with us, same price. Your friend, him coming/ and before I could reply he had grabbed my bag and thrown it into the boat. I jumped down to retrieve it, but at that moment one of the men cast off the ropes while his chum gunned the outboard into reverse. When I attempted to leap off he forced me back with a knife.

'Whitey got caught,' he said, at which both of them doubled up in high-pitched laughter. The boat, continuing to reverse at top speed, slewed round out of control. The engine screamed and water poured over the side. I would have jumped overboard there and then, but I didn't relish being minced up by the propeller. Suddenly above the noise

I heard a dog yapping. Looking round I saw Chocolate's boat speeding towards us through a curtain of spray - Willis threatening with a boathook and the boy crouching on the bows.

The Rastafarian in the stern wrenched the complaining outboard into forward gear, tried to cut out ahead, realised he couldn't make it and raised his hands in a placatory manner. 'Take it easy, Cap'n. Just offerin' the man a ride. Just earnin' ourselves a little bread.'

Chocolate nodded grimly, bringing his boat alongside so that I could climb across. The other Rastafarian handed over my bag and we turned out to sea. In the bows Rodriguez grinned and Bof wagged his tail.

I mumbled my apologies to Willis but he just chuckled.

It was a beautiful morning. Across the sparkling sea, the ocean swells pounded the distant reefs and the coral cayes stood out bright with waving palms. But I didn't feel safe until the lighthouse was behind us and we were cruising up Hannover Creek. We moored up beyond the swing bridge. Willis nodded at Chocolate. I guessed that arrangements over the loss of the Susan had been made earlier that morning.

Little Rodriguez shouldered my bag, but he was so slight it almost touched the ground. 'Where you going, Mister? Batty bus?'

I looked enquiringly at Willis. 'I think we'll take the bus up to San Ignacio,' he said. 'There's one that leaves at ten-thirty.'

'Me too, Cap'n/ piped the boy. He pulled a crumpled dollar bill from his torn vest. 'I pay my fare. Up to Happy Valley. Go see my Auntie, in the refugee camp/

Willis frowned. I guessed the boy's fare was the dollar I had tipped him. We had a quick breakfast in Mom's and walked down Orange Street to catch the Batty bus.

It was a nice drive up to Belmopan. Savanna country, dotted with occasional blue pines, sloped towards the

Maya mountains. The dirt road was badly potholed and the planks rattled on the river bridges. I pointed to Rodriguez, sitting a couple of rows ahead with Bof on his knees, his little bundle of belongings tucked under his bare feet. 'Do you believe his story?'

'Why not? Most of these refugees have pretty harrowing experiences. Soldiers smash down their huts, shoot the men, rape the women.'

We reached San Ignacio at noon. Here we said goodbye to Rodriguez, and I slipped him two U.S. dollars. He winked conspiratorially and Bof barked.

A broken-down taxi crawled in a listing fashion the mile or so to the border. Here we swapped our Belize dollars for quetzels with a ragged money-changer, and crossed the river bridge into Guatemala. Guards in dark-green uniforms and scout hats stamped the passports, peered into my duffel bag and let us through.

They told us that, if we waited, a bus or truck might set off for Flores, the Spanish town on Lake Itza. It all depended how bad the road was, and on 'security'.

'They mean,' said Willis, as we waited in the shade. 'That the track is only fit for mules and the rebels have ambushed it.'

I nodded glumly. 'I don't even know what we're doing here. Why aren't we heading for those other places you mentioned?'

He regarded me patiently. 'Because, James, it surely must have occurred to you that if Rhodes had our boat destroyed, it could only mean one thing. We were getting too close for comfort.' He picked up a piece of stick and scratched some lines in the dirt. 'That's Caye Corker, there s Belize and the highway up to San Ignacio, and here s where we are now/

And what's that?' For he had scribbled another line inland, ending in a cross.

'Tikal,' he said in a matter-of-fact voice.

Nowadays just the mention of the name is enough to make my flesh crawl, but at the time, as we sat outside the concrete guard hut waiting for a truck that would probably never come, it meant nothing to me. 'Why Tikal?'

He frowned. 'Probably because Tikal contains the mightiest temple pyramids in the world and most of them are still buried in the jungle.'

Impressive as this sounded, it still failed to explain why Rhodes should go there unless there was something worth

robbing. I also thought of arguing that burning the Susan seemed pointless as a move to stop us coming here. But Willis' logic moved in a mysterious way. I always had the feeling he followed his instincts and then tried to arrange the facts to back them up, but I never had a chance to challenge him because at that moment, amid grinding gears and clouds of diesel smoke, an antiquated bus emerged from a cluster of huts some way ahead under the trees. It backed erratically up the gutted track, exploding to a halt fifty yards away. We picked our way through the mud and climbed aboard.

Rodriguez was the very last person I had expected to see grinning at us from the back seat. He had found a bit of string as a leash for Bof. On his lap he clutched his muddy bundle and he was soaked from head to toe after wading across the Mopan River. He didn't seem in the least perturbed about not having any papers. 'Where we goin' Cap'n?' he asked Willis, with a cheeky grin.

Lumbering forward at a top speed of never more than ten miles per hour like some antediluvian monster we set off into the dense jungle of the Peten. We had been jolting along for an hour or more when we were stopped by an army patrol who ordered the men out. Lining us up along the side of the bus with our hands over our heads they searched us at gun point.

'Don't argue,' said Willis, 'Just keep smiling.' It was when our possessions were flung out that the smile became hardest,

especially as I watched the contents of my duffel bag spilled unceremoniously into the mud.

'Hey, gringo, you no like,' smiled the soldier who was doing the searching. His smile vanished when he discovered my army-style water bottle, prismatic compass and Marks and Spencer jungle green anorak. I was nervously anticipating being frogmarched away into the forest to meet my untimely demise when Rodriguez interceded. 'Gringo mercenary, fat white slug, gringo mercenary, fat white worm,' he bantered like a Neapolitan street urchin, but his mocking laughter won the day. The tension vanished and everyone joined in the joke. Even the officer who was moving down the line checking documents gave only a cursory nod at our passports before dismissing us to troop back on board the bus like erring schoolboys.

In the middle of the afternoon we stopped in a clearing beside a stream. Donkeys were tethered outside some huts, babies lay in hammocks under the smoky eaves, pots simmered and strips of meat roasted over an open fire. A fat jolly woman thrust heaped plates of stew in front of us. An enormous pig snuffled across the dirt floor, grunting for scraps. When we finished everyone went outside to relieve themselves in a line across the hillside.

During the rest of that long afternoon we jolted westwards through the jungle, until in the early evening we emerged beside a vast lake, glimmering in the twilight.

Lake Itza,' Willis informed me. See the tiled roofs on that island with the church on top. That must be Flores.

It's the only town for hundreds of miles/

A narrow causeway joined it to the shore. As we trudged across I was surprised to see that the houses along the shore were half submerged. "There must have been a lot of rain/ I remarked. Willis shook his head. 'It's not that. Two years ago the lake began to rise. There's no logical explanation/

In spite of its predicament there seemed to be neither gloom nor doom about Flores when we finally reached it. Dugout canoes lined cobbled lanes, where stairways and houses stepped sedately down into the water. The first two hotels we tried had already vanished completely into the reedy depths, but the Hotel Santan, its sign awash, still possessed an upper floor. We shared a room with three beds, and a lot of mosquitos.

The coming of darkness was the signal for fireworks to begin exploding over the church. Although the official explanation was a wedding party, Rodriguez decided they were distress flares fired above the sinking town.

Later on, climbing the steep stepways we came on a band playing, and everyone dancing. 'Like the Titanic/ I panted. "The band plays as the ship glides to its doom/

Willis gazed over the dark lake, James, you know what this lake is called?7

'Lake Itza, so you said."

Willis half raised a hand as though in salutation. 'Itza is the supreme Maya God. And it is Itza who has power over life and death/ He looked at each of us with a triumphant glow

in his eye. "Did you know that the old Maya stories, tell of just such a flood long ago?"

So what did they do?" I asked him.

Willis frowned abstractedly. Slowly and deliberately he announced, "They sacrificed thousands of human victims. Horrible isn't it?" he added with a touch of relish.

I sat back to watch the dancing, but Willis hadn't quite finished- 'James/ he said, 'Have you ever seen Poseidon, the God of the Sea, in his chariot, driving his black horses through the waves?'

I was beginning to tire of all this. 'Have you?' I demanded, winking at Rodriguez.

'If you ever sail to Greece, you'll see them. Homer's wine-dark seas. You see, James, what I'm trying to say is that the old gods aren't dead, they're only sleeping.'

'Well,' I joked for the sake of the boy who was watching Willis with not a little alarm. 'I just hope they stay that way a little longer. I certainly don't want to meet your chum Itza when he's angry. Where does he live when he's at home?'

Willis replied, 'Buried, so they say, in a tomb under the old city of Tikal, but no one has discovered where/

We sat there until I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer, and then we stumbled back to our sinking hotel on the water's edge. Last night Willis' boat had burned down and tonight we were stranded on a doomed Atlantis - the unwitting sacrifice to a pagan Maya god. But I was just too

dog-tired to worry about it and I fell instantly asleep, dreaming, for some unknown reason, of the Lady of Shalott, who was drifting downstream in her boat, through the labyrinth of drowned rooms below our own ... drifting down to Camelot. What startled me back to consciousness was the face, borne up among long skeins of floating hair. For I'd seen that face before ...

## *FIVE*

# *Tikal*

The Manager of the sinking Santan Hotel was still snoring in his cot by the door as we left our money on the counter and crept out in search of transport to get us north towards Tikal. Beyond the causeway a ramshackle bus came alive as we reached it, and with the driver bellowing 'Tikal, Tikal' to every sleeping hut, we finally left the lake shore behind and climbed into a cold misty forest. Three hours later the road ended at an Indian settlement.

One might have been excused for feeling cheated. Instead of Willis' towering ruins, stood a hut bearing the sign 'Comodor' (To Eat), and an overgrown airstrip at the end of which some barefoot boys were playing football. The forest closed in on every side. Tacked to a tree was the sign 'Jungle Lodge', pointing up a steep track where a few thatched huts faced a neglected clearing. We finally found someone in charge and went in search of our room.

Once Rodriguez had hitched up his hammock, there wasn't a lot of unpacking to do. Both he and Willis were travelling light, and by now Bof probably looked the smartest of any of us. At nine o'clock we were ready to set out for Tikal.

The narrow path vanished into the green gloom of the forest. Plunging creepers snaked everywhere and ferns

thrust out luxuriant tendrils. The hollow tapping of woodpeckers echoed under the vaulting branches, where flashes of brilliant plumage darted this way and that, and a sudden confusion in the foliage preceded the unexpected bellow of the howler monkey.

With the jungle hemming us in on every side, we could easily have walked within twenty paces of a pyramid mound without spotting one. Willis tried to get his bearings. Earlier he had scribbled out a simple plan of the city, but it didn't help, 'We need to get above the trees somehow/ he declared, striding ahead.

It was Rodriguez who discovered the first mound. We were standing too close to the trees to see it, but I noticed the boy glance upwards and his jaw dropped.

Rising high above the forest and capped by a stone temple was the tallest pyramid I have ever seen. We were all too amazed to say anything. Thankfully even Willis realised we couldn't scale it without ropes.

A few hundred yards away we entered another open space occupied by two giant pyramids, both 'stepped' to the summit.

I avoided looking down during the climb, but when we finally gasped our way to the top, the view was worth the effort. On every side the jungle flowed away into immense distances. Shining in the sun above this green ocean 'floated' the Maya temples.

Looking down I half expected to see a dinosaur lumbering across the clearing. Just then a battered jeep appeared and out of the driving seat climbed a fair-haired girl who peered up at us through binoculars.

'Damn/ cried Willis. He too was watching the girl as she got back into the jeep and drove off. 'Better get down/ Willis declared. 'We re too damned conspicuous here/

The Mayas must have been born with strong knees.

Mine were like jelly long before we reached the ground, Willis never paused, Glancing at his map he strode off along a grassy causeway that led into a rectangular plaza, dominated at either end by slender stone pyramids, a couple of hundred feet high, facing one another like ancient antagonists across a jousting field.

Willis hardly spared them a glance; he was staring under the trees. 'I thought so/ he muttered. 'Come on/

The battered jeep stood parked in the shade of the ruins where to my astonishment Chocolate's girl from Cay Corker was sitting on a rock, studying a book on birds. She pointed up a tree. Do you see the toucan?' Willis muttered something about it being a surprise to see her, but she simply shrugged. 'I often drive over here with friends/

Willis grunted suspiciously. Chocolate's girl shut her bird book and glanced at her wristwatch. 'Heck I really must be going, my friends will wonder what's become of me/ and giving us all a hasty smile she got into the jeep and drove off.

'Rodriguez/ Willis said, 'I have a hunch you'll find that jeep just up the track. Do you mind having a look, if we hold Bof?'

'Sure Cap'n/ agreed the boy gamely and set off at his fast limping pace. Willis borrowed my water bottle and sat down in the shade. James/ he announced, 'I've a damn good idea who that girl's friends are.'

'It's certainly an odd coincidence she's here,' I agreed, and then Rodriguez came hurrying back through the trees. 'You're right Cap'n/ he panted, holding out a crumpled handkerchief. 'Girl left this behind/

It always annoys me having to blunder through bushes when there's a perfectly good track nearby, but Willis was set on his Boy Scout subterfuge, so we had to endure bugs

and scratches before we gained the shelter of an overgrown mound from which to spy down on the parked Jeep. Directly beyond, rising sheer above the jungle, I recognised the tall pyramid that Rodriguez had spotted earlier. 'Look Cap'n', he said, 'If we climb up a bit higher we can hide in that ruin.'

Capping our own mound was another temple bunker, half covered with trees and roots. Clambering up to the squat doorway we entered a dark gallery full of flitting bats. The only light came from three small square windows. We suddenly realised we weren't alone.

A slight figure dressed in black, crouched in the shadows at the far end of the gallery. When it stood up I recognised

something familiar - it was the black bowler hat. Surely this was the girl from the Palenque bus.

'Bonjour!' she said, but Willis merely coughed with irritation. 'You wish to look,' she suggested to him quietly, for he was desperately trying to peer out of the narrow window. 'James,' he whispered urgently, pulling me forward. 'Look up there.'

It was easy to appreciate his excitement. Above the tree tops less than a hundred yards away perched the stone temple we had seen earlier, only now three figures were standing on the outside ledge. Even at this distance there could be no doubt that one of them was Chocolate's girl.

It was the other two that Willis was 'twisting his eyes in pieces' trying to focus on. 'It's Rhodes, I'm certain of it!' he exclaimed, but the trembling air played tricks and even as we stared the figures vanished back inside the temple.

After waiting another hour no one emerged and Willis decided we should return to the settlement. To his annoyance he found the bowler hat girl waiting outside. She had been sketching. Now she put her pad away and joined us on the long trek back through the jungle.

It was dark by the time we reached the settlement. The only lights were those flickering in the Comador, and we went straight there to eat a supper of black beans, fried eggs and tacos. There was no bread and no beer and no other customers. Faded photographs from some ancient National Geographical Magazine decorated the wall.

Beneath the black bowler the girl was a pretty thing, partly oriental I guessed. Willis insisted on speaking to her in his execrable French, but what became immediately clear, was that she knew a great deal more about the Mayas than all of us put together.

The owner snuffed the hut into darkness and we had little option but to return to the Jungle Lodge, where Willis, invited the girl to join us in our room. Rodriguez lit a couple of candle stubs, and while I coaxed a mosquito coil to smoulder, Willis rocked to and fro in the hammock, his long legs dangling over the side, his face creased in thought. I was curious to know how he might begin. At least he abandoned his unintelligible French, 'It's a longish story,' he admitted. 'And I'm not sure if all of it means very much. All that matters is that there is something hidden here in one of the tombs - something utterly priceless, and this friend of mine is after it.'

The girl sat crosslegged, the flare gun in her lap, staring at the floor. She seemed puzzled. 'He is a friend of yours?'

'Sort of,' Willis muttered. It never ceased to impress me how deep the bonds of childhood loyalty went between those two. I thought about it now in the silence of that hut, while outside, the jungle moved and watched and whispered. In a dozen different ways I pictured those childhood exploits, Rhodes the leader and Willis his accomplice. Now as I watched him I wondered how much his decisions were still tempered by those early events.

The girl shrugged. 'I do not understand. If he is your

friend then why this mystery. He tell you, no?'

Willis reddened. Under his breath he mumbled something about friends falling out.

'But if you don't know what it is he's after, how do you know it's important?' she persisted.

'I just do,' Willis muttered obstinately.

I found it easy to understand the girl's apparent bewilderment. I had often felt the same myself with Willis.

The girl came to his rescue. 'If you are so sure your friend is after something important, then the sooner you find out the better, no?' Willis looked up at her in astonishment. She shook her hair back over her shoulder and adjusted the black bowler. 'So what are we doing here? Why are we not out there at the ruins? This friend of yours, he must sleep sometimes.'

Willis continued to stare at her. 'You mean we should go now?'

'Not at night surely,' I objected.

'Perhaps you should wait here, James, if you prefer,' said Willis.

'Oh, shut up. If you want my opinion, I think it's stupid and dangerous marching out there in the dead of night. But if you insist on this hairbrained scheme, I suppose I shall have to go with you.'

Willis could hardly restrain himself from whooping out loud. We gathered our meagre resources, the flaregun, candles,

torches, matches and knives. I cadged a cigarette from the girl to calm my nerves, and shielding its glow from any prying eyes, followed the others silently out of the hut and into the forest.

## SIX

### *The Maya God*

I suppose I should have been wary of the easy manner with which we accepted the girl, but in the looseknit world of travellers, allegiances are as easily made as they are forgotten. One also accepts situations a great deal more readily than one might in different circumstances. Despite any misgivings I may have had about setting out, after a short while it no longer seemed so very strange that we were trudging back through the jungle in the dead of night. Likewise, any doubts I may have briefly entertained about the girl were soon forgotten, for if she were interested in the Mayas, what would be more natural, after visiting Palenque, than to come here to Tikal.

A patchy mist hung under the trees. A jaguar coughed somewhere very close on our right, but Willis never paused. He had a nose for direction - at least he had that night - dodging this way and that along the overgrown paths. Brushing aside damp creepers and glistening cobwebs, we hastened after him.

It came as a surprise, when, forcing our way between some tall ferns, we found ourselves in the great plaza with the solitary pyramids at either end, statuesque and sinister.

While Willis permitted himself a satisfied grunt I collapsed on the nearest stone.

'Come,' said the girl after barely a moment's pause, and set off again.

I caught up with them under the trees at the foot of the overgrown pyramid. 'My God, we're not going up there?' I whispered, trying to hide my panic, but the others ignored me, scrambling one after the other into a nightmarish world of roots and rocks. Twice I clutched things that squirmed out of my grasp, and if Rodriguez hadn't been helping me, I would have toppled back in fright. The only good thing about the climb was that for the most part it was so dark one couldn't see the sheer drop below. The girl's feet scrabbled on loose stones above my head. A rotting fungus poked my eye, and everything I put my weight on gave way.

Suddenly the boy's hand checked me. Willis whispered from above, 'There's a stairway to our right.'

After a bit more scrambling we edged past massive stone blocks onto the steps that had once continued all the way to the ground, but now stopped in mid air, high above the treetops.

We climbed up them into a world of moonlight. Below us, the jungle lay drowned in patches of milkwhite mist, while thrusting up on every side soared the dark temples, silhouetted against the stars.

Willis allowed us no time to consider the view. 'Come on!' he urged loping across the broken platform to the inky shadows of a low doorway. Inside our torches picked out the

familiar empty gallery, but we could see at a glance it was quite bare.

'Damn,' Willis muttered wearily. Like me I suppose he had expected to find picks and shovels. There wasn't even a sweet paper or a beer can. However, it was now that the boy displayed unexpected ingenuity. He pulled out the handkerchief which he had discovered earlier, and thrust it under Bof's nose. The little dog squirmed eagerly in his grasp. 'Rats, Bof, rats,' he urged, letting the mongrel go, and Bof scampered this way and that across the gallery floor, his nose pressed to the paving. Suddenly he stopped, his tail wagging furiously, his paws scratching the dirt.

'Good boy, Bof,' cried Rodriguez. 'What I tell you Cap'n, about him being a good tracker dog.' But I doubt whether Willis heard for both he and the girl were scraping the rubble clear with their fingers, revealing as they did so, a square outline of stoppered holes. The stone bungs prised out easily enough, but there was no way we could shift the slab, until finally, with all of us straining together we managed to lift one corner enough to slide it over the edge.

This time we really did whoop with glee. For when we had managed to slide the paving stone across, our torches revealed steps descending steeply into the hole. 'Well done, Bof, well done,' congratulated Willis, but the dog was already jumping down from one step to the next, looking back at us to follow.

The stairway zig-zagged straight down into the bowels of the acropolis, changing direction every fifty or so steps. We had long since lost track of our progress, when our torches revealed a long cavern.

'Mon Dieu,' said the girl in a hushed whisper.

It was certainly an amazing sight. Along one side of the cavern strode giant stucco figures dressed in archaic costumes.

'They are the nine lords of the night,' murmured the girl, 'Of that I am certain.'

But my attention was taken by an immense stone altar or sarcophagus straddling the width of the chamber at the far end. Beyond it another opening retreated into the darkness. We moved across the cavern on tiptoe to avoid disturbing the solemnity, but when we reached the sarcophagus, it was clear that others had already been here. The stone slab had been carefully cleaned, and when Rodriguez lit a candle, I recognised, with a gasp, the design.

'It's an exact replica of the carving in the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque,' declared Willis thoughtfully. The girl nodded.

The design was carved in the shape of a cigar, with flames leaping out of one end, while inside sat a man in a reclining chair.

'At Palenque it is called the astronaut,' explained the girl quietly.

I was puzzled. 'Why?'

Willis coughed. 'Because some people claim it is the simplified drawing of a space ship. Of course that's a lot of rubbish.'

The girl interrupted, 'James, you see, the Mayas have a god Kukulkan, who will come back to earth in a fiery chariot. Perhaps that is their word for a space ship, no?'

I was completely baffled. The last thing I expected in a Maya tomb was a tale like this. 'James,' she went on softly, 'You must understand how much the Maya priests studied the stars. They even knew the number of days in the year of Venus. They searched the stars. They measured time, not in hundreds of years, but millions.'

'You mean light years,' I suggested.

'Yes, perhaps. Anyway you see they believed in travellers from the stars. So who knows, perhaps they really came here.'

'Well, it's a pretty story,' I said. 'Do you suppose we'll find a Martian inside this sarcophagus?' No one laughed. I added irritably, 'Oh come on, Willis, so this is the hocus pocus Rhodes has been filling your head with. I suppose you're going to tell me he found a Martian message in a bottle in the desert and came here following the instructions.'

He didn't answer me directly. Instead he said, 'If an aborigine found a cassette tape would he believe it contained music?'

But we didn't get the chance to pursue this far-fetched hypothesis any further, for at that moment Bof started barking, and we plainly heard the noise of feet on the steps above.

I've always wondered how differently things might have turned out had we stood our ground and faced our pursuers, but we didn't. Although there was a good chance that they were Rhodes and his companions, what if they weren't? What if they were tomb robbers or armed guards, or plain bandits who had followed us? There was no doubt in our minds that it was not worth taking the risk to find out, and we fled behind the tomb scuttled into the cramped cave beyond.

We found ourselves in a tunnel abandoned by time. Crudely excavated and littered with rubble. Judging by the cobwebs hanging from the low roof, it was clear that no living mortal had passed this way in centuries. Spurred on by the muffled cries of pursuit, we clawed and bumped our way forward.

The tunnel bent sharply this way and that like a maze. We began to wonder if it would actually lead us anywhere at all. And then as we stumbled round a corner, Rodriguez, who was in front, holding the torch, pulled up with a gasp. Barring the way forward, hideous in the glare of the flashlight, stood the imposing statue of a Maya god.

It confronted us across a small cavern littered with human skulls and bones, a grotesque stone body on squat

legs. But it was the face that held us spellbound, The entire head was covered with a green mask of overlapping jade pieces and out of this mosaic the glinting eyes shone back into the torchlight like a demon.

The statue possessed a horrible fascination. After centuries of peering into the dark, waiting for the next human sacrifice, the stone idol seemed suddenly aware of our presence. The staring eyes fixed us with a hypnotic gaze that robbed our resolve and left us weak and mesmerised.

'Itza,' whispered the girl in awe. 'Mon Dieu.'

I could literally feel my senses going numb and then in the last moment, before stupefaction overcame me, I made a final attempt to snap out of the trance. 'Out foul fiend!' I croaked with all the Shakesperian flourish I could muster, pushing the boy forward beyond range of those haunting eyes. The torch clattered to the ground and ducking low I dragged the girl with me across the cavern to the safety of the shadows beyond.

'Run!' shouted Willis. He grabbed the girl's flare gun and headed back towards our pursuers. There was a loud bang and a flash. We didn't wait. Tearing aside cobwebs we raced helter-skelter along the passage. We were all shaking so much from fright that none of us felt the tremors until we burst out of a tangled hole and fell in a heap among roots and creepers. Suddenly the whole ground seemed to be heaving.

'Where's Willis ...' I began, but at that instant he arrived. He had lost the flare gun and was bent double, clutching himself. As I reached out to offer him support, he turned abruptly away. 'I'm alright,' he muttered, 'just a bit winded. I pity those poor bastards still inside. Still I don't expect they would have shown us any.'

The ground was still shaking as we moved off. It was almost as dark in the open as it had been in the tunnel but for once Willis seemed content to let the boy take the lead. None of us knew where we were going and I was very relieved when we finally broke out of the tangled undergrowth into a clearing littered with tombs. Beyond them an avenue led into the trees and we followed it in the hope it might take us somewhere we could recognise. We had gone scarcely a hundred yards when a dark figure loomed up ahead, blocking the path.

Willis shone our remaining flashlight and we were rewarded by the most repulsive creature I have ever seen. A squat toad-like statue with bulging eyes, flared nostrils and huge protruding teeth.

'He is the Death God,' said the girl with a shudder. 'He guards the Sacred Cenote - the reservoir where the human sacrifices were thrown.'

Even though it was only a statue, we edged quickly past, none of us very keen to be grabbed by those fleshless jaws. Beyond, just as the girl suggested, lay a deep dark pool of water.

It was as I stooped down to drink that I glimpsed the face. For a moment the reflection of the moon in the water masked it. Then floating free, borne up by long strands of tangled hair there emerged the face out of my dreams - the face floating through the flooded hotel rooms at Lake Itza, drifting down to Camelot.

The girl screamed.

'Oh, my God,' exclaimed Willis, 'Do you see who it is?'

We didn't drag Chocolate's girl out. The temple guards could do that later. Instead we crept silently away, scarcely daring to breathe in case the Death God would turn his attention to us.

Itza had claimed its first victim. I just wondered how many more would have to follow before it was satisfied.

## SEVEN

### *Checkpoint Chicimula*

A grey dawn was seeping into the night as we stumbled wearily back to the Jungle Lodge. In the half light, the driver and his loaders were clambering sleepily out of the Flores bus, yawning and clearing their throats.

We were all grateful when the bus bounced down the hillside into gear, and thundered off through the settlement without any alarm being raised to stop us. Despite the jolting ride, I soon passed out and it wasn't until we reached Flores that the others were able to rouse me.

The mist was lifting from the lake as we got off by the causeway. I had assumed we were returning to the Hotel Santan where I was looking forward to nothing more exciting than sleep. However, I was to be disappointed. To our surprise, Willis announced that there was another bus going south by the only passable track out of the Peten and that he proposed to take it.

'But what about Rhodes?'

'Oh! Don't worry about him/ he dismissed airily. 'We've seen all we need to, take my word for it. Come on, otherwise we'll miss it/ Grabbing the girl's bag, he herded us across the busy lakeside market to where the bus was waiting. We were on our way before I had a chance to catch my breath.

I suppose I should have realised Willis was hiding something, or up to something, but at that moment I was certainly in no state to make decisions and if Willis did it for us, so much the better. After all if he had decided to let Rhodes go ahead alone, that was his decision. As for myself the more miles we put between us and Tikal, the better.

When I tried to concentrate I heard the girl remark, 'But if he is fighting with the guerillas, then why should he go to Tikal?' Willis said something I didn't catch and then it was the girl's turn again. 'So you think perhaps, he has found something that will help them?'

For the life of me I failed to see any connection between tomb robbing and revolution. I was getting fed up with revolutions. What did revolutions ever achieve, except another revolution?

In the early evening we reached an asphalt road and drove westwards. The setting sun dipped behind distant mountains and the sky darkened into the reddest sunset I had ever seen.

It was quite dark when the bus dropped us at the junction of the road south to Chicimula. A few peasants were squatting patiently beside their loads, waiting for a ridge. Eventually a truck came down the valley and we climbed aboard.

In Chicimula, Willis led us to a pension just behind the plaza, where the owner spoke English. The fans worked and there was a shower. I think we all felt better immediately.

This holiday mood even survived a Chinese meal, and almost content we strolled back to the plaza where lights festooned the trees. Ice-cream sellers blocked the paths and shoeshine boys by the dozen crouched ready to pounce, even on Willis' plimsolls. We sat on a stone

bench, while music blared out of loudspeakers in the branches above our heads. Willis opened the discussion. In the absence of maps, he had to resort to drawing squiggles in the dirt. I noticed that when he bent down he still clutched himself with one hand. 'Your guts aren't falling out,' I joked.

Willis ignored the jibe. 'There are only these two roads crossing into Honduras,' he declared. 'We can either follow the one we are on, south to Esquipulas, or we can take this short cut. It's only a dirt track. Just over the frontier are the ruins of Copan. Maya ruins,' he added offhandely. 'Both routes join up with the main road north to San Pedro Sula.'

'And Esquipulas?'

It was Rodriguez who answered that. Mister, everyone in Guatemala know Esquipulas. Very old church there. Many pilgrims go.'

It sounded as if our only way out of the country was a choice between Mayas and Jesuits. What remained unclear was what we intended to do in Honduras, and why? Willis explained with the help of a few more scratches in the dust. 'This is the Atlantic coast - the Miskito coast — it runs all the way across Nicargus into Costa Rica. Most of it's swamps.'

The girl joined in. James, you know why it is called the Miskito coast?'

'Mosquitos I suppose. Yellow fever, white man's grave,' I elaborated, but it only brought smiles to their faces.

'Clot,' said Willis. 'It's the home of the Miskito Indians. They speak English and are one of the biggest guerilla groups fighting the Sandinistas.'

'It just didn't make sense.' I said, 'If you're suggesting that Rhodes is lending his particular talents to help the

rebels, why on earth should he go to Tikal in the first place. I thought one did one's looting after battle, not before it. I hardly think he went to seek a divine blessing from the Maya gods.' I glared at the girl. 'Don't make the mistake of putting this Rhodes in the Ghandi class. He's no more than a bloodthirsty adventurer. You just don't know him.'

Her reaction was startling. It was as if she were struggling to come out with something and at the same time trying desperately to suppress it. Looking back though, I doubt if her secret would have affected the outcome very much. For by then, unknown to us, Willis had already discovered his destiny. Perhaps it would be truer to say his destiny had discovered him.

For a moment she watched me with a helpless, almost pleading expression, before turning away. Willis inter-rupted the awkward silence. 'I'm off to my bed. Whatever we may decide tomorrow, it's going to be a very long day.'

Willis didn't go to bed. Instead he came into my room on the pretext of borrowing my toothpaste. 'James,' he said, 'If I told you that Rhodes claimed he had found a battery or a silicon chip 4000 years old, out in the desert, what would your reaction be?'

I said, 'Willis, you don't seriously believe rubbish like that, do you?'

He blushed. Of course not. He probably got it out of some science fiction magazine.'

I might have responded differently had I known he was dismissing me. For this was the moment when he realised that wherever his quest was leading him, he had to go on alone. He never actually said I'd failed him. In fact, as he stood there in the shadows, he gave no indication how he felt. But as he stepped back into the light, his expression startled me. For not even his gallant smile could mask the wretched loneliness written on his face and the desperate hunted look in his eyes.

I was on the point of calling him back when he closed the door.

## *EIGHT*

### *The Caribbean Pearl*

Next morning, I woke to find a note from Willis pinned to my door — 'Have decided to try and get across via Copan. You take the southern route through Esquipulas. Meet you in La Ceiba, Hotel San Carlo. Ask for Captain Jimmy. Has an old boat — the Caribbean Pearl — that runs across to the islands.'

Although I was disappointed, I was not particularly surprised. Willis had never been much of a person for consultations.

The plaza was still pleasantly cool in the early sunshine. Paths were being hosed down and shoeshine boys were already drumming up trade. Rodriguez and the girl were waiting under the trees and when I broke the news to them, the boy was delighted. Esquipulas was a place he had always wanted to see.

From a distance it was no more than a white church set in a green plain. When we got there we found the streets choked with souvenir stalls and the floor of the church flickering with hundreds of lighted candles put there by the kneeling pilgrims. Rodriguez joined them. The girl watched him thoughtfully. 'Why do you follow Willis?' she asked me.

'We've been through a lot together,' I started to explain but even as I told her I could see she didn't understand. To please me she said, 'You are a nice man, James.'

'You won't get round me that way,' I jested. 'I'm overweight, selfish, and if I could, I would run at the first sign of trouble. Isn't it about time you told me your name?'

She wrinkled up her eyes in a smile and reaching out her finger, placed the tip affectionately on my nose. 'Call me Ko Sam,' she said.

The remainder of that day was uneventful. Even the Honduran border presented no difficulties. Rodriguez, with his backside hanging out of his shorts, scampered about like any other urchin, carrying people's belongings and whining for tips. The official route took us rather longer, but once our Guatemalan quetzels had been exchanged for Honduran lempiras we all boarded a bus north to San Pedro Sula and spent the afternoon climbing up into high dry mountains and then climbing down again. It was on the bus as I was glancing over someone else's newspaper that I saw the Familiar view of Flores island photographed across Lake Itza. I pointed it out to Ko Sam. From the caption underneath we were able to make out that a 'miraculous' drop in the water level had occurred following the earth tremors in the region. Ko Sam looked puzzled. 'Don't you think it strange that it happen just when we are there.'

'Come off it, Sammy,' I laughed. 'Old Itza probably had a change of heart. You're not seriously suggesting Willis had anything to do with it.'

As we approached the Caribbean coast, clouds massed and rain fell in buckets. At San Pedro the bus station was in a grimy backstreet and the nearby tenement hotel offered cheaper rates the higher one climbed. Next morning at 4.30 we caught a bus out to La Ceiba, which finally halted in a field. A battered taxi ferried us through

a mile of flooded potholes and across a green canal into La Ceiba - the sleaziest seaport of the entire Caribbean coast. The weather-worn shacks seemed to alternate between bars and brothels. Rail tracks ran along the main street, and continued past a tarred warehouse onto the wooden pier beyond.

We made the mistake of enquiring the whereabouts of Captain Jimmy, but the locals were more interested in Ko Sam's appearance. 'What's this chick at, with the effing derby?' they jested, and beseiged with offers of 'weed', we escaped back along the rail tracks, looking for the San Carlo Hotel.

You could hear the noise a block away. Apart from the deafening music, just about every whore in the Caribbean seemed to be shrieking her head off. Two came up to us. 'Hey you want me,' smiled one, I ain't pricey.' 'Nah, she's all poxed,' said her friend. 'Have me, I'm a real sweet fuck.' This directness rather took my breath away. The first one sat down, and toyed with an empty beer bottle. 'Then buy me something to eat,' she whined, I'm hungry.' I gave her a lempira note and asked about Captain Jimmy. She chuckled, 'Ain't no Jimmy. You mean Juni, Cap'n Juni.' And giving me a

lingering smile as a souvenir, she sidled away between the tables in search of more enterprising clients.

But word gets round fast in La Ceiba and a moment later, an ex US marine sergeant type, with a grizzled crew-cut and hands like hams came up to our table. 'You guys looking for Juni? Listen, if you are in a hurry to get out to the islands you'd better fly. There'll be no boats going out till the storm lets up.' He called across to the bar in fluent Spanish and turned back to us. 'Juni hasn't been in for a couple of days. He's a rummy. That's his boat out at the pier.' He moved away through the tobacco smoke, to rejoin his chums.

What with the storm keeping everyone inside, business was so brisk there was only one room vacant. Rodriguez said he was happy where he was, so Ko Sam and I carried our bags upstairs.

As we passed a table by the door, I overheard one of the Americans remark to another, 'He can dodge this way and he can dodge that way, but Central America is like a funnel. The only fucking way out is south.'

There were two beds in the room and by the time I had stretched myself out on the wide one, Ko Sam had already disappeared into the shower. Overhead, the ceiling fan thrashed the air a few degrees cooler and I was still wondering whether the girl took off her bowler hat to wash, when she emerged without it, and only a towel clinging round the rest of her. I admired the delicate way she

stepped across the room and sat on the edge of my bed to dry her hair. She held out a comb. James, please,' she said. I grappled with her hair, piece by piece, trying not to tug, laying it out in silky black strands against her bare back. She gathered it over her left shoulder and nestled down beside me, using my chest as a pillow. I was just getting used to it when she commenced tickling. 'Ouch/ I said.

She laughed. 'James, you are a funny man. You make me laugh.' Then as I stroked her shoulder, she whispered drowsily, James, would you like to love me?'

'Do you say that to every man who combs your hair?' I murmured.

'Perhaps. But would you?'

I couldn't tell whether she was teasing or not. 'After all the bumpy bus rides I just hope I'll still be able to,' I confessed as I nibbled the back of her neck.

She also seemed to find that funny. Then she slipped off the towel, and feeling her naked body snuggling against me, I was happier than I'd dared to hope.

An untimely knock on the door was followed by the announcement that our hour was up. Things got even more confusing downstairs in the bar. Rodriguez was talking to a huge black man with a badly-scarred bald head and filthy trousers hitched up with rope. He introduced himself by proclaiming. I'm Cap'n Juni. What do yer wan' with me, Whitey? Why you spread the word around?' He thrust his bull head closer, I don't know you, man/ he shouted

something to the bar. One of the whores came over with a tumbler of local rum. It smelt like paint stripper. Captain Juni swallowed the firewater in one gulp and squinted through the fumes. 'You/ he said, thrusting a fist under my chin.

'A friend told us to come here. Mentioned your name/ I waved to the bar and the whore swayed across carrying the precious bottle.

His eyes moved shiftily, 'What friend? Gringo?'

I nodded, 'Tall, thin, gingery hair, Willis?'

He shrugged. 'Name don' mean nothin'. How he know me? What you guys at?'

Then I tried a long shot. 'How about Rhodes? Boyet Rhodes, big white man ...?' I didn't get a chance to finish. A strange unsettled look came over him. 'Shit, man!' He slopped down the rest of the rum and stood up. 'What is this, some fuckin' interrogation? Go ask your fuckin' questions some place else/ And with that he kicked back the chair and barged out across the crowded room, the street door swinging shut with a crash behind him.

Outside, a thunderstorm settled over La Ceiba. In minutes the streets became muddy torrents. We decided to stay put and lunched off San Carlo hamburgers - a rare species I'd never come across elsewhere, With lunch over

Rodriguez declared he would take a stroll out to the pier and keep an eye on the Caribbean Pearl. Ko Sam and I signed up for a two-hour siesta. We even got the same room! Despite the ceiling fan threatening to unscrew itself with every

creaking spin, it was one of the nicest siestas I can ever remember. Before our two hours were up Ko Sam lay back smoking one of her local cigarettes. 'James/ she said thoughtfully, 'What does love mean to you?'

I took a puff of her cigarette and nearly scorched my lungs. 'Hate, envy, desire, possession, the usual fun things. Perhaps even friendship/ I said, teasing.

She turned round and bit my shoulder. 'Stop being a cynic/ she said.

I'm not being cynical. I'm being very serious/

'Shall I tell you what it means to me?' Her dark oval eyes gazed into my face. She was so very pretty it almost hurt. 'It means I miss you/ she said rather sadly. 'I miss you even while you are still here. Can you understand?'

'For that/ I said, 'you deserve a second helping of black beans with your San Carlo hamburger/

What with her pounding my chest and Rodriguez pounding the door, I began to wonder whether it wouldn't be safer sitting outside on the pier.

Rodriguez had run back to tell us that Juni had put out to sea. 'He was in a mighty hurry, Mister. Weren't nothing I could do to stop him/

I was amazed he had even dared to try. Juni wasn't anyone I'd wish to argue with. I couldn't pretend I was sorry to see him go either.

After supper we decided we'd better be ready for an early start next day in case Willis turned up. Knowing him he would probably expect us to be ready to leave for God knows where, at a moment's notice.

We failed to negotiate a night rate for the room and had to calculate instead for eight hours occupancy. Rodriguez hooked up his hammock and Ko Sam confined herself to the single bed. What with the fan groaning overhead and the din from the bar it was hard getting to sleep and I began wondering what might have happened to Willis. It was all too easy to picture Chocolate's girl lying in the pool at Tikal and imagine a similar fate befalling Willis at Copan.

Somehow I doubted it. Ever since Tikal, Willis had been hiding something from us. In spite of all his rhetoric and bluster about revolution I remained cynically unconvinced. Disloyal as it sounded I couldn't evade the nagging suspicion that Willis was trying to give us the slip, and landing us in La Ceiba was his way of doing it.

I got up and crept into the shower, thinking I might feel better after a wash. I didn't switch on the light, but as I stood there I was aware of scuffling sounds from the corridor and peering up, clearly made out the shape of a man crouching along the top of the partition wall adjoining the next bathroom. For a long moment we watched each other through the gloom, before he dipped down out of sight.

I wasted no time rousing the others, but even as we climbed out of the open window on the tin roof below, the intruders were rattling the door.

'Come on, Mister/' called up Rodriguez as he dropped out of sight into the alley. Then the door burst open and I hesitated no longer. Letting go the sill I found myself sliding down the roof on my back. Scrabbling unsuccessfully for a hold I pitched into mid air and landed in an overflowing bin of kitchen waste. Half a dozen rats jumped out and Bof went wild, but for the moment, at least, we were out of sight of the cutthroats in the room above. Making the most of this, we scuttled away down

the filthy alley, struggled through some overgrown gardens, crawled under a fence and struck out on a rutted track.

All we wanted to do was to get as far away from La Ceiba as possible. As we peered nervously out of the underbrush, the words of the American in the bar at the San Carlo came back to me. During that momentary lull in the music he had said, 'The only fucking way out is south.'

Like it or not, fate or co-incidence was pushing us straight to Nicaragua.

## ***NINE***

### ***No Vender a La Patria***

(The Country is not For Sale)

We reached the border town of San Marco late the following afternoon. The night before had been spent in a slum hotel on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa. From here a Mi Esperanza bus carried us down through limestone escarpments towards the blue Pacific. The lower we got the drier and windier it became. Finally we limped into the Indian town of Choluteca, whose white adobe walls were pitched beside a stagnant river. The wind was furnace-hot and acrid with dust. Indians in dirty smocks squatted under the walls for shelter. The covered market lay screened from the sun like a Moorish bazaar. Here among the ropes and pots I finally purchased, for twenty lempiras, a soft rope hammock, woven in as many colours as Joseph's coat.

Choluteca was a barefoot town, too poor to support even a single shoeshine boy. As we crouched on our bundles, trying to avoid the smarting wind, a succession of tiny pinched faces and grimy begging hands paraded along the gutter. Yet when the cattle truck for San Marco got up steam, drowning everyone in diesel smoke, they all laughed. The urchins selling flyblown cakes and dusty icecream, the girls holding out pathetic bunches of skinny

onions and shrivelled tomatoes. Choluteca made up for all it lacked, in laughter. The men smiled, the women grinned, dust poured in the slatted sides, the axles creaked through the ruts.

We climbed slowly. All around us golden hills swelled into the pale blue sky. The afternoon sun dipped into the blue Pacific and the mountains purpled against the evening. At seven thousand feet it was cool enough to need a pullover and Rodriguez borrowed one of mine which hung down to his ankles.

San Marco was no more than a cluster of tile-roofed cottages, a pink church, and a plaza full of tall fir trees. It was a village of money changers. Even the schoolchildren produced wads of Nicaraguan cordobas out of their pockets. That night before turning in Ko Sam repacked my bag hiding everything green or military looking at the bottom. Although nothing suspicious had happened since La Ceiba we couldn't put it out of our minds.

'James,' Ko Sam demanded for the umpteenth time. 'The men who attacked us. Why?' But when I started to repeat my theory that they were simply gringo muggers, she shook her head. In my heart of hearts I didn't believe it anyway. 'No, James. I do not say Willis set them on us. But I think he had something to do with it.'

That just made me angry. 'Why Willis? Why not Rhodes?' I was beginning to realise that mention of Rhodes had a strange unsettling effect on her, though for the life of me I

couldn't think why. 'One mention of him, and Juni vanishes over the blue horizon,' I said.

Ko Sam pouted. 'He probably owe him money or something.' Then she produced her trump card. 'Willis was the only person who knew we were going there.'

I could have throttled her. Instead I kissed her. 'Listen,' I said. 'Give me one reason why Willis should want us bumped off.' And I kissed her again.

'Oooof!' She exclaimed, struggling. 'James, please, I can hardly breathe.' Then in a rush she added, 'Perhaps he found something at Tikal he doesn't want us to know about.'

'Found what?' I dismissed airily, 'He wasn't out of our sight. If he had walked off with the statue of Itza I think one of us would have noticed.'

It is funny, now I come to think of it, how close I was to the truth without realising. As it was I merely concluded drowsily, 'Tomorrow we cross into Nicaragua.'

'Perhaps we find him there,' I heard her whisper in my ear.

The next morning we squeezed into the town's only taxi, to get us to the frontier. A Honduran guard stamped us out of the country. When we asked where the Nicaraguan post was he merely grinned. 'Keep walking,' he said. 'You'll find it.'

Ahead the empty road curved away downhill into Nicaragua. The air trembled in the heat and only the insects moved. We hoisted our bags and set off into No Man's Land.

After a few hundred yards we passed the bombed-out ruins of the old frontier post. Crude messages had been daubed on the walls by the rebels. Further on we reached a gutted guard hut and a bent barrier pole. A couple of very young soldiers regarded us suspiciously. As we approached, bursts of firing came from the ridge but they did not seem concerned. 'Wait,' they told us.

For an hour we sat on our bags. No traffic passed either way. One of the soldiers came up and asked if we had any toothpaste. Ko Sam handed him cigarettes instead. 'Has another gringo come across?' she asked, and described Willis' appearance. The soldier shrugged non-committally, and ordered us to set off. 'You must walk 4 kilometres.'

To welcome or to warn us, a volley of automatic fire rattle over our heads from the ridge behind, 'Mon dieu,' cried Ko Sam, clutching her bowler. 'Please do not practise on me.' We certainly must have made a tempting target. A mile ahead the road curved to the south and entered a broad valley, where, through the haze, we could just make out a cluster of huts, which we hoped marked the new frontier post.

Fortunately, we didn't have to walk the whole way. After a prolonged burst of firing, rather too close for comfort, Rodriguez spotted a jeep speeding towards us. 'Vamos, vamos' cried the driver, skidding round in the road. We barely had time to climb in, before he was off again, crouching over the wheel.

Freewheeling the last half mile along the valley, the jeep deposited us at the barrier, collected ten cordobas from each of us and passed us on to a wild-haired soldier, looking every bit like the poster of Che Guevara. There was no chance of Rodriguez avoiding scrutiny, but to my surprise he piped up bold as brass, jabbering away far too rapidly for me to catch more than 'refugee' and 'gringo'. It was the gringo bit that caused the guards who had gathered around to look at me and start laughing. Whatever it was he said, did the trick.

The frontier restaurant consisted of a woman squatting under a crude shelter, selling tin mugs of weak fruit juice dipped out of a bucket, for two cordobas a time. We were so thirsty, we almost drained the bucket dry.

A minibus stood parked on the roadside. It waited there until midday, but no more foreigners appeared down the empty road from Honduras. Finally, with a few peasants aboard and 'Che Guevara' in the open doorway, riding shotgun with his automatic Russian rifle, we sped south

towards Somoto, where Rodriguez ominously informed us we would be searched.

We reached Somoto just as the customs shed closed for lunch. Beyond some antiquated trucks we found a 'comodor', where two huge ladies, clothed in mourning, sweated over blackened cauldrons. Blinking smoke out of their eyes, they dished up platefuls of stew.

At two o'clock we went through a tedious procedure of form-filling, which Rodriguez wisely decided to bypass. In the customs shed our bags were carefully, though courteously, searched. Everything was laid out neatly, but my growing pile of military gear - waterbottle, anorak, windproof, sleeping-bag, to say nothing of Swiss army knife, prismatic compass and maps - looking increasingly suspicious.

'What are you?' joked the customs man, 'A mercenary?'

Rodriguez had discovered there was a bus leaving for Managua in an hour and we toiled up a steep lane to an open field, with a shed on one side and a bus on the other. Waiting in the shed with our tickets, I had time to study a large poster of General Sandino, the hero of the revolution. Across it was written 'Fifty years on, Sandino lives!'

Looking at the face of Sandino, Ko Sam remarked, 'It is easy to admire a man like that.' A man or a legend I wondered, thinking more I suppose of Rhodes and Willis. Across a wall outside was painted the slogan, 'No vender a la patria. The country is not for sale.'

We were lucky to get a seat on the bus. There were so many people standing that the conductor spent the entire trip hanging on the outside. All afternoon we crawled south. Scrubby hills alternated with green valleys and rice fields. In the twilight we reached Lake Managua. Its

purple volcano stood up sharply against the evening sky. The lights of the city were scattered along the shore but we

never seemed to reach the centre. Our border guard chuckled. 'There is no real city anymore. Not after the earthquake. Just all here and there.' He grinned. 'Perhaps the Plaza della Revolucion is the centre. Or maybe the Intercontinental Hotel.'

For the time being our immediate concern was to find somewhere to stay near the Eduardo Catreras market - where the bus pulled in. Although it was midnight the house porches were lined with families in rocking chairs. We trudged to the Fuente Pension — a soldiers' rendezvous. It wasn't exactly a brothel, but the army boots outside the shower doors belonged as much to girl soldiers as to boys.

Next morning we strolled over to the Catreras market for breakfast.

In the open ground behind, flanked by old and battered tanks, stood the Sandino museum.

'It is Sandino's eyes,' remarked Ko Sam. She peered up at me from under the rim of her bowler. 'James, there is something quite remarkable in the eyes.' She added simply, 'I follow him, James. Do you?'

'I'm a little too set in my ways to be a revolutionary.'

She pinched my arm, and then, once we had walked out past the young soldiers at the door, she added, as if it were of no real importance, 'Boyet's eyes are like that. No?'

It was a moment before I grasped exactly what she was implying. She turned to confront me. 'You see, James. Boyet Rhodes is my stepfather.'

*TEN*

## *Ko Sam*

I was too flabbergasted to speak.

She pressed a finger against my lips. James, I tell you. But not here/ And putting one hand in my pocket and the other round Rodriguez, she led us back to the road, to catch the first taxi that consented to stop.

A volcanic crater dominated what remained of the city, and on this choice spot stood the white pyramid of the Hotel Intercontinental. No matter where foreigners asked to go, taxis invariably dropped them here. In front of it, a broad avenue, decked with the red and black Sandinistas banners, ran straight down towards the lake. The road had been constructed no further than the Plaza della Revolucion. Beyond that, an expanse of flattened ruins continued for another half mile to the lake shore.

I was still trying to come to terms with the 'bombshell Ko Sam had delivered about Rhodes, as we entered the packed plaza. However, the sight of hundreds of teenage girls in khaki, sporting rifles as casually as handbags quite took my breath away. Ko Sam must have been aware of it, for she gripped my hand like a jailer. More brigades were arriving every minute and there was no escaping the enthusiasm it all created. One look at Rodriguez/ glowing face was enough to convince me.

We waited bareheaded under the hot sun while a gun-carriage draped in the Sandinista colours was pulled into the square, and then slipped away before the first of what promised to be many long speeches.

'Where are we going?' I whispered, trying to avoid the disapproving looks around us.

Ko Sam pressed my hand. 'Let's go for a swim.'

As we had been warned not to swim in the lake, we walked to the Laguna Tiscona - a deep crater pool behind the Intercontinental. Here the beach was crowded with kids stripping off their uniforms and diving into the water. Rodriguez was already swimming about like an otter with Bof sporting beside him. Ko Sam sat on the sand. She looked unusually tense.

'James,' she said quietly, 'When I see all these young soldiers they remind me of the Khmer Rouge. They also wear red and black; black costumes and red scarves. Just like the Sandinista flag: 'Death and Blood' we say in Cambodia, when the killing starts.' She scratched idly at the grey sand.

I hesitated before replying, unsure quite where to begin. 'You were there when they captured Pnom Peng?' I asked her.

Without looking up she answered, 'My father was a French planter. After Dien Bien Phu he leave Vietnam and settle in Cambodia. He marry my mother.' She tossed away the twig she had been scratching with. 'My father go back to France.

He hate Cambodia. Only things French are good. He love only France.'

Then why did he marry your mother?'

'I don't know. My mother was very beautiful. She take me back to Pnom Peng to her family.' The girl stared moodily at the lake, where the late afternoon sun glared off the black water.

'And there she met Boyet Rhodes?' I suggested.

Reluctantly she nodded, He was a good father though too much away/ She paused. 'During the war I go to France.'

'To your real father?'

She shrugged. 'He was not really a bad man, just proud, very French. When the war came to Cambodia he pay for me to go back to France. He had married again. His wife was very sweet. They had two children. We lived in Compiègne. I go to the Lycee. I am happy there, but after the Khmer Rouge invade Pnom Peng I hear no more news from my mother. Then my father and his wife are killed in a car accident on the autoroute. After that I live in Paris with a Cambodian family. One day there arrives this American. He tells me what I am afraid to hear.'

'That your mother is dead?'

She paused before replying. Bof had come waddling up the beach shaking himself, and she tickled his sandy coat. 'He tell me my mother drown when pirates attack their refugee boat off Ko Samet Island. He says he swim ashore. Earlier,

my mother beg him to find me in Paris and tell me about my brother, Tam.'

'Your brother!'

She shook her head. 'Not real brother. He is my brother when my mother marry again.'

To be quite sure I understood, I said, 'After she met Rhodes, your mother had a son?'

'Yes. Only he was kidnapped by the Khmer Rouge. They make him a soldier. The American tells me this also.'

'But he couldn't have been more than a child,' I protested, glancing round for Rodriguez, only to find him chatting eagerly to the young soldiers. Ko Sam remarked pointedly, 'In my country you become a soldier when you are eight or nine or even younger. Khmer Rouge tell these boys what to think, how to kill. They say boys kill better

than men. You see, James, Khmer Rouge, they kill everyone.' She resumed toying with Bof, lying contentedly on his back with his mouth open. 'This American, Charles Stanley, says he also knows Boyet Rhodes. He tells me that he is with an expedition working on the Maya temples in Guatemala. He says he is looking for something very precious, very important, but he cannot tell me what it is.'

I frowned. It was all a bit too vague. The story was flawed and yet it was easy to appreciate how eagerly the girl must have listened to it. Now she sensed my doubts, for she turned to me and said 'James, I know it sounds very strange, but you see he also gives me the ring of my mother. Look!'

She bent her finger so that I could see it better. I had noticed it before, but never thought of asking what it meant. 'Also he gave me money. My money he says, and with it I come out here.'

In an attempt to appease my curiosity I asked. 'Why didn't he cable Rhodes to tell him he'd found you?'

'James, he didn't know precisely where Boyet was. He admits this. He admit also he too is a collector of rare things and a ... how you say, rival. He tell me that even if I come I may not find him.'

At this point I interrupted her. 'But when you did find him at Tikal, why on earth didn't you go to him? Why run off with us?'

Her eyes revealed nothing. In their depths I wondered how many secrets lay hidden. She said, 'That is my fault. You see, James, I cannot forgive him that he allow my mother to be killed and my brother taken. Why did he not protect them? Why did he not take them somewhere safe?' After a pause she added, 'Instead I decide to spy on him.'

A horrifying thought occurred to me, 'Good Heavens, you weren't thinking of shooting him with that flare gun, were you?'

A faint smile broke through her solemn face, 'The Captain on the boat give me that.'

'What Captain?'

'I work on a yacht that sails to Bermuda. I know that Boyet has an old aunt who live there. He tell me once, that he go for holidays there when he was a boy.' Ko Sam laughed, 'His aunt is very sweet old lady. She live in a beautiful house by the water, with many geese.'

'But no news of Rhodes?'

She appeared surprised. 'Yes, surely. For he also sail there on a boat. I miss him by only a few weeks. I do not tell this lady who I am. I say I am an archaeologist student and I have to join him. I show her his photo. She is called Elsie, this lady, and she tell me that he has gone to Tikal.'

'Did you know that he had been in the desert?' And before that the Phillipines, I almost added, but didn't. She nodded gravely. 'I know now he go to many places. Perhaps one day I find out where he go, when the Khmer Rouge take my brother. Where he go when my mother drown.'

But there was no real bitterness in her voice. Only sorrow, I helped her up and we walked along the beach. I would have given anything to melt away the sadness in her, but her tale had moved her away from me. I didn't even feel sure I could provide her any more with adequate refuge. We sat in silence among the boisterous soldiers. On the rocks below the last swimmers were drying themselves and pulling on their khaki dress and boots.

As we had our bags with us there was no need to return to La Fuente. Instead, a boy guided us to a tumbledown cluster

of wooden huts in sight of the luxurious Intercontinental Hotel.

La Mollinito' was controlled from the porch by a huge woman in a sagging deckchair, with a rifle between her knees. She regarded us in undisguised contempt and spat on the ground with slow deliberation. When she finally spoke, her voice was a deep grunt. 'Why you dare bring this gringo trash?' she accused a bewildered Rodriguez. She shifted the rifle against the other knee and spat again. 'Muchacho, tell them here they pay in dollars.'

The boy shrugged. 'Pay her one dollar each,' he whispered. 'No more.'

La Mollinito was a warren of dirty cubicles. Ko Sam sat on a rusty bedstead and lit a cigarette. 'That woman,' she observed. 'I can imagine her at the French revolution, knitting each day beside the guillotine.'

We ate supper in a crowded comador across the street. There were several young Germans at the next table, volunteers who had come over with the International Brigade to help the revolution.

Assuming we were also working for the brigades, one of the Germans came across to join us. He introduced himself as Hans. He was tall and spare and his hair was a reddish gold almost as if he had dyed it. Apart from spectacles, the obligatory Karl Marx beard covered the rest of his face.

'I was at Espino,' he explained. 'Until the Contras started shooting at us in the fields. Then the Junta move us back to the Cordillera Isabella, near Matagalpa.'

'Why?' Ko Sam demanded. 'Why do you do this here. Why?'

Hans shrugged. 'By profession I am a busker.' He turned to me, 'I even play at London, near Marble Arch, but far better is Edinburgh, especially at Festival time. So I join the International Brigade. They send me to Nicaragua. We are paid like the campesinos, thirty

cordobas a day. Now I take a holiday. I go down to San Juan del Sur on the coast. I am tired of the dysentery and of being shot at.'

'But ...'began Ko Sam.

Hans grinned. 'What more you want to know. My politics. I tell you. Once in Berlin I joined the Marxist- Leninists, but that is becoming bourgeois. I move always to the Left.'

A sudden thought occurred to me. 'Who are these Contras?' I asked him, 'Are they all foreign mercenaries?'

Rolling himself a cigarette, he replied, 'Somozistas, thugs, bandits. Thousands of Somozas men escaped at the end of the war. Now like fleas they come out of the floorboards. With their pockets full of CIA dollars they go into the villages and offer the young men money to fight with them. If they refuse they shoot them. They even raid south of the Rio Tuma.' He turned back to me, 'That is where I was sent, to help a clinic at Matigua. It was run by Cubans and Italian doctors. The other day I even meet an Englishman.' He

chuckled. 'It is very rare to find English helping the revolution. Though which revolution this one help, I do not know. He say he like to go out on patrol with the paramedics, but I think he pass information to the rebels.' He winked at me 'One can never trust the English in a revolution. They have this strange habit of supporting the loser.' He raised his beer bottle in mock salutation. So when you meet one it is an honour.' Then he said something that startled us. 'This Englishman is certainly a spy. He come here in a strange way, north from the Dariense. He claims he get lost.'

'What did he look like?' I asked as casually as I could.

'Why? Maybe you know him? Perhaps you are a spy too!' He winked at Ko Sam, who came to my rescue, saying, 'When you travel you keep meeting the same people.'

'Ah,' he belched lightly, 'So you are travellers, come to enjoy your black-market cordobas. Then I advise you, go to San Juan del Sur. On the beach for next to nothing, you can eat turtle eggs and lobster.' He chuckled, 'That is why I go-'

For someone who despised bourgeois tendencies he clearly enjoyed the good things of life.

'Anyway,' I said, 'Do you remember his name, this English spy of yours?'

He shook his head, 'Names I forget, names I do not ask. He is tall and thin, like a stick. Anyway, if you know him perhaps you meet him. He tell me that he go south to the coast,

either San Juan del Sur or,' and he lowered his voice, 'San Juan del Norte.'

As we stepped back to La Mollinito he confided the truth to us. 'We hear that San Juan del Norte no longer exists. It is said the rebels attacked with fast launches from the sea. Pirana attacks they call them. They use mortars, cannons, armed helicopters sometimes. They invade the town, kill many people and go. It is all over in an hour. Now all the people who were left have been evacuated. Only soldiers remain.' And then he added, 'So your friend won't be going there!'

Rather nonplussed I didn't know what to say.

The German said quietly. 'Don't stay here. Here are too many ears and too many eyes. Better you go to Granada. Wait there. Is possible your friend stop there on his way south.' He thought for a moment, 'Stay at the Caledra. It is on the road to the lake.' He chuckled. 'There is even a green parrot!'

'You don't stay in Granada?'

The idea clearly amused him. 'I can see you do not know Nicaragua. Granada is a bourgeois town of doctors and lawyers. Perhaps there is one Sandinista there, who

knows? Perhaps I see you some time in San Juan del Sur? At the Estrella/

'The Estrella?'

'There is nowhere else/ he laughed. 'But you better go quick. I think they hit it soon, like San Juan del Norte/

Next morning we followed Hans' advice and caught a bus out to Granada.

As we journeyed south over the low cultivated hills, I had two things on my mind. It was just sinking in that I was travelling with Boyet Rhodes' stepdaughter, and the other worry was Willis, running around loose, suspected as a spy. However, that wasn't the half of it, for I couldn't deny I was falling in love with Ko Sam.

The Pension Caledra was situated a hundred yards or so beyond the plaza, on the road running down to the lake shore. Hans was right about the Caledra's green parrot. It squawked its heart out in the shady courtyard outside our room. After a breakfast of black beans and Nescafe, we stepped down to the lake shore. As it was Sunday, the entire population appeared to be enjoying themselves. Lake Nicaragua is really an inland sea and sharks swim into it along the Rio San Juan. This didn't appear to deter the local kids scampering in the shallows. Should the sharks get festive, there were Red Cross tents along the shore to collect leftovers. We lunched at one of the impromptu food stalls at the back of the beach, where leaves served as plates, and strolling musicians passed by under the trees, to entertain the picnickers.

In the afternoon we walked back to the town. The residents were reclining in rocking chairs outside their doors or

queueing for the cinema to see 'All Quiet on the Western Front'!

Later as we were sitting in the courtyard at the Caledra waiting to go and eat, Willis walked in.

## *ELEVEN*

### *The "Black Spot"*

'Cap'n Willis,' Rodriguez cried, but if Willis was surprised to see us he didn't show it. On the other hand, he was hardly in a fit state to register very much at all. Clutching a straw bag he collapsed into a chair, his head lolling back and his mouth hanging open. I sent Rodriguez to fetch a bottle of local brandy and some beers.

'I'm knackered,' he mumbled. He looked it too. Skinny at the best of times, he was now skeletal. Even the green parrot stopped squawking and eyed this apparition with respect! The boy came running back with the medicinal supplies, but although Willis perked up, he had other problems. 'Loo,' he muttered grimly and struggling to his feet, he tottered across the courtyard.

'Dysentery,' declared Ko Sam and went to get her bag of medicines. When Willis reappeared she made him swallow some 'Flagyl'.

'I hate pills,' he complained weakly. 'But I haven't been able to keep anything inside for days/ After a while, however, with the aid of more brandy, he had recovered sufficiently to walk to the restaurant. He ate as though he hadn't seen a square meal since he left us. Tm alright/ he insisted between mouthfuls, Tm just dog-tired that's all. I've been travelling hard for days/

'We meet someone who thinks he see you in Matigua,' Ko Sam remarked casually enough. Willis' reaction was startling. He dropped his fork with a clatter and stared. 'Who?' he demanded, and then making a tremendous effort, pulled himself together and smiled weakly.

I grinned back. 'I don't know what you've been up to, but this chap was convinced you were a spy. Are you a spy, Willis?'

He frowned and resumed eating. 'Tommy rot. They've got spies on the brain up there. If you go for a walk alone in the hills you're a spy.'

I told him, 'This German chap seemed to know your movements. He even thought you'd be coming through here on your way south. He suggested the Caledra.'

There's nowhere else to stay,' Willis snapped.

Anyway, are you going south?'

He nodded curtly, 'Tomorrow. San Juan del Sur. I need a break,' and then for the first time he seemed to remember that we were all together. 'We all do, I expect,' he mumbled.

'It is that I do not understand,' whispered Ko Sam to me later, in bed.

'It is what?' Sometimes her grammar confused me.

'Listen, James, he does not seem surprised to see us, and yet he does not seem pleased either. James, why did you not tell him about La Ceiba? Why didn't you ask him what he'd been doing?'

I nuzzled her hair, 'Didn't seem the right moment. He'll tell us when he wants to.'

She made an irritated noise. 'He never tell us anything,'

She was right, of course. Willis did play his cards close to his chest. But sometimes that had its advantages. Better than shooting his mouth off. 'Anyway,' I told her, 'we didn't tell him anything either.'

She considered this in silence for a while before turning her face to me. 'I think he knows what happened to us.'

If it wasn't for the risk of anyone hearing over the thin partition wall, I would have laughed out loud. 'Oh, come off it. How? Has he got a sixth sense?'

'He knows something we don't know,' she insisted.

'He knows everything we don't - he always has, he probably always will. But I shouldn't worry about it.'

She stared away thoughtfully. 'There is something about him he did not have before; a secrecy perhaps? James, I do not believe he ever went to La Ceiba - I want to know what he was up to in Matigua.'

'Then you'll have to ask him tomorrow,' I told her. But next morning we left early for San Juan del Sur. She was right of course. I should have stuck to my earlier suspicions. Trouble was, I was genuinely pleased to have him back. We had a leader again. It took the responsibility of making mistakes off my shoulders. There again Willis' explanations so far had seemed adequate enough. It was while we were waiting in

Rivas for the connection to San Juan that I finally tackled him about La Ceiba.

'Bad luck,' he agreed sympathetically.

'How on earth did you know!'

It was his turn to look surprised. 'I telephoned the San Carlo. They told me. Said you'd skipped it. I put two and two together and came straight down. Except that I took a more northerly route. I told you that I suspected Rhodes was somehow involved with the Miskito rebels. I needed to find out.' He peered around cautiously. 'I slipped in unofficially, you might say. Good thing there are no checks here. I haven't even got an entry stamp.'

'Then you'll have difficulty getting out, won't you?'

He grinned. 'I suppose I could always slip out unofficially as well.'

I returned to the question of Matigua. 'What exactly were you doing there?'

He regarded me bleakly, 'Recovering,' he said. 'There's a clinic run by an Italian doctor. Tulli s his name. Decent chap. Suggested I came down here for a bit, They were packing up, you see. The rebels are getting too close for comfort. I went out with him a couple of times to fetch soldiers who'd been blown up by booby traps.' He sighed. 'Messy business.'

At that moment the other two joined us, carrying fruit they had bought in the market. For their benefit, I had Willis go over his story again.

Ko Sam was less easily satisfied than I had been. 'But why did Juni leave,' she persisted.

Willis shrugged. 'He's probably been running drugs or guns for years. I expect someone put the heat on.' When I reminded him our room had been broken into, he had an answer for that too. 'Muggers, thieves, rogues. I forgot to warn you. The San Carlo is famous for it. They team up with the whores. It's easier to rob someone when their trousers are down.'

At this point I gave up. Any flaws in Willis' argument were too subtle for me. If I wasn't so fond of Ko Sam I might have been irritated by her suspicions. Anyway I kicked myself for not realising Willis might have tried to contact us in La Ceiba, and for not leaving him a message. But then it's always easier to think afterwards, what you should have done.

Ko Sam still wasn't satisfied. Of course, Willis didn't know who she was, and I didn't know if I should tell him. Not yet, anyway. Peeling her orange, she remarked, 'It was your friend Rhodes you were looking for at Matigua?' For an instant Willis appeared nonplussed. Then he smiled. 'Who else?' he said. He either came down through the Cordillera Isabella, or along the coast. If he chose the mountains he would be bound to cross the Rio Tuma. But after hearing what happened at San Juan del Norte, I'm inclined to think he chose the coast. He was probably in on that pirana raid. Anyway, he's given us the slip for the time being, and what with the clinic packing up and the area becoming a no-go

zone, I decided to hole out down here, try to find you, and decide what to do next/

I said to him, 'Willis, what I don't fully comprehend is why you are so convinced he isn't just going to skidaddle with the Tikal treasure, or whatever you think he'd looted. Don't get me wrong. It's not that I doubt you, only you do seem to have rather changed course/ However, my question was drowned by the roar of the approaching bus and the rush to get on board. Willis gave me a quizzical look, but if he replied I never heard it.

During the next three hours I was far more concerned clinging on to the outside of the bus than worrying about anything else, Willis included. For thirty miles we bumped along the lake shore, to a settlement opposite the volcano island of Biriamba, and then doubled back down wooded ravines to the Pacific coast. In the late afternoon we emerged at a pretty silver sand bay, tucked between steep scrub headlands. Tall coconut palms massed along the back of the beach and behind them were scattered the frame cottages of San Juan del Sur.

In contrast to the rest of the village, there was a faded turn-of-the century splendour about the exterior of the Hotel Estrella. Shuttered windows and decaying wooden balconies peered through the palm trees, to the bay beyond. Inside it was like an empty barn, as though the interior had never been finished or had long since collapsed. There were a dozen or so foreigners staying

there - mostly German and Italian volunteers taking a holiday. The Germans seemed particularly earnest types, but of Hans there was no immediate sign.

The only accommodation vacant was a large balconied room on the upper floor, littered with mattresses and hammocks. There were no chairs. We sat crosslegged, like Bhuddists, on the floorboards and watched the sun dip over the evening sea.

Later, as I padded barefoot along the damp sand in the gathering dusk, my thought turned yet again to this one problem which continued to baffle me; the link - if indeed there was one - between Rhodes, the treasure seeker at Tikal, and Rhodes the counter-revolutionary. What irritated me most was the way Willis dismissed this inconsistency as though it was all perfectly normal. Pacing up and down the shore, I went over the events of the past weeks, with as careful a scrutiny as I could muster, but for all the insight gained, I might as well have banged my head against a brick wall.

At an open-air bar I watched the moon rise over the silver bay. I knew that the answer was staring me in the face, only I couldn't spot it. I didn't even notice Willis until he sat down at the table beside me.

'A cordoba for your thoughts,' he joked. He was already looking better. 'Flagyl' is marvellous stuff for glueing the insides together,' he remarked cheerfully.

'Willis, I'm baffled,' I said. 'It's a bit like reading a book with a dozen pages missing. You must know what it all means, but it's quite beyond my dim brain.'

He chuckled, 'James, you do yourself an injustice. Listen, the difference is that I know our man better than you. I've known him almost as long as I can remember.'

Nodding in reluctant agreement, I studied the big poster of Sandino pinned up on one of the palm trees. I

recalled how Ko Sam said his eyes reminded her of Rhodes. Staring at the face I had the feeling that the future had finally caught up with them both here in San Tuan del Sur. I wondered what it was going to do with them next. And with us.

We woke to a golden morning; palm trees lifting in the breeze, the sea a irridescent blue, and white surf washing the empty beach. Standing on the balcony, I studied the port tucked against the southern headland. It appeared to consist of a couple of warehouses, a solitary fuel dump and a naval patrol-craft moored to the jetty. Nothing else.

'It's a bit more important than you might think,' remarked Willis, coming out to join me. He tapped the headlines of the copy of 'Barricada' which he was holding. They read: 'Brutal y grave agresion. Terrorismo 'YANK1' contra Corinito'.

'The Americans have mined the approaches to Corinth,' he announced. 'That leaves San Juan del Sur as the only remaining harbour left on the Pacific coast.'

Leaving me the newspaper, he went back into the room to rouse the others. Willis had already been to the market and now he insisted we share a fruity breakfast of paw-paw, melon, bananas and oranges. Ko Sam was delighted, but I was less convinced.

'Willis, are you on one of your health kicks?'

'Eat,' he declared. 'It's good for you. Get rid of some of that fat.'

'I only hope your insides can take it,' I told him. Once he had departed I sneaked a cigarette from Ko Sam and indulged in the official Estrella breakfast downstairs; fried egg, black beans and Nescafe.

Ko Sam said to me, 'James, there is something I notice about Willis,'

'What?'

'He never moves without the straw bag. He even sleep with it. Why is it so important?'

'If you'd lost just about everything, as he has,' I suggested, 'you might try to be extra careful with what you have left.'

She frowned, and tossing her head announced that she intended going for a swim. I promised to join her later.

Soon afterwards three Italians arrived carrying back-packs. They had caught the early bus from Managua. Seeing my newspaper, the bearded one enquired if it was true that the Americans had attacked Corinth. I gave him the paper. 'Where are you from?' I asked.

'Italia. Umbria to be precise. You know it?'

'I mean here?'

'Ah, here we work in a clinic at Matigua. Is not far from Matigalpa in the Cordillera Isabella.'

I had to smile. 'One of you doesn't happen to be a Doctor Tulli, I suppose.'

All three looked rather taken aback. But watching me carefully the bearded one grinned. 'I'm Tulli. Francesco Tulli. How do you know?'

Without hesitation, I launched into my explanation, but the mention of Willis didn't produce the friendly response I'd expected. The smiles vanished and Tulli regarded me warily. 'He is a friend of yours?' he enquired.

'Yes, of course. I've known Willis for ...' Then something about their attitude prompted me to adopt a more cautious note. 'He told me he had been rather unwell,' I concluded lamely.

Tulli nodded, but failed to comment. Instead he said, 'He was looking for someone.' He glanced at his friends. I began to wish I'd never mentioned Willis. As breezily as I

could I went on, 'He told me he'd been out on patrol with you a few times. He was very impressed by the work you were doing.'

Tulli scarcely bothered to acknowledge this, merely commenting 'He is a great walker, your friend Willis. Always he walks, out in the hills.'

'Very fit chap, Willis,' I muttered.

'But then he is a botanist. That is what he tell us.' He turned to the others, 'Or was it an entymologist? I think he is always searching for some strange insects. Like Contras, you know!' And all three of them laughed.

I was saved from further discomfiture by the Estrella lady moving in to mop the floor. I decided I had better escape and warn Willis. Unfortunately as the Italians' room was not ready, they followed me into the village. We reached a crossroads to find an impromptu game of base-ball in progress. With a stick in his hands for a bat, Rodriguez confronted a pitcher hardly taller than himself. More surprising, was the sight of Willis, pursued by Bof, haring down the street after the sand-filled sock that served as a ball. The other kids seemed delighted, 'Gringo, gringo,' they shouted approvingly and even Tulli's stern expression softened a fraction.

We sat down at a soft-drinks bar on the street corner - a wooden shelter, commanded by the fattest lady in town. Her great rolls of flesh shook with gusts of laughter as she watched Willis' antics in the street below. She happened to be the mother of the diminutive pitcher.

Willis abandoned the baseball game and came over, mopping his face. 'Mama,' he said, 'Give all the kids a drink.' As they swarmed up onto the platform, he appeared to notice Tulli for the first time. 'Hey Francesco, Benvenuti - welcome. Comme stai-how are you, Doctor?'

Tulli regarded him bleakly. 'After you left, someone came looking for you/

Willis sat down heavily\* He was busy wiping his face on his sleeve as Tulli spoke, so it was impossible to see his reaction. The baseball kids gathered noisily around him, clutching their beakers of juice. 'What did he look like, this someone?' Willis called up\*

Tulli frowned\* 'He was very big. An American with a black beard/

Willis had his back to Tulli, but from where I stood I could tell that he was startled, although he managed to mask it.' 'A beard?' he queried.

'Yes, of course\* Una barba neraZ

Willis grunted. 'No name, I suppose?' he asked without looking up.

'What sort of name would you expect?' said Tulli with a trace of sarcasm. 'He came at night and he had gone by morning. Uno lupo del notte - a wolf in the night. He seemed very disappointed to miss you, so I tell him perhaps you come down here/ Tulli paused and taking something carefully out of the pocket of his tunic, he placed it on the table, in front of Willis\* 'He say, to give you this, if I see you.'

The object was a small fish carved in soapstone, thick-lipped and brutish, but from the way Willis stared at it, it might have been Hamlet's ghost!

'You know what it is, perhaps? This gringo with the beard, he tell me you forget something in Tikal. He tell me you are archaeologist?'

'Sure,' agreed Willis hoarsely, ignoring the intended jibe.

'Yes, of course,' said Tulli, 'But the fish. Does it not look familiar?' He started to say something in Italian to one of his friends, but Willis cut him off\*

Pirana,' he muttered, and by the way he said it, he might have just been handed the black spot' by Long John Silver himself.

## TWELVE

### *Messages in Morse*

We found the girl lying on the warm sand, her back bare and her bowler hat at her side. Rodriguez flopped down next to her and she opened her eyes. 'We swim now?' she suggested, getting up slowly and stretching. She stood poised for a moment like a naiad and then raced swiftly down the beach into the surf. Even the boy was momentarily dazzled by her lissome beauty. She might have been Circe, from the bewitching spell she cast on Willis and me. For a moment he even appeared to forget his other preoccupations.

'Viens, viens/ she called back above the noise of the surf, Bof barked and the three of us stripped off our shorts and chased after her, diving through the breakers, to reach the warm clear water beyond, where she bobbed up laughing, among the sparkling waves.

It was as we lay drying on the sand, that Willis suggested horse riding. "Apparently we can hire them from a 'fattoria' (a stable) across the headland." Notwithstanding that my equine experience was limited to Sunday afternoon hacks on the South Downs and Rodriguez had never mounted anything bigger than a donkey, the idea met with our universal approval. After purchasing more fruit for a picnic lunch, we set off.

Wading across the river, at the north end of the bay, we followed a path between dry scrubby hills. The track divided and horseshoe prints led us past an empty earth reservoir to some fenced paddocks. The house itself lay sheltered beneath spreading mimosa trees. There was a man in riding boots asleep in a rocking chair on the verandah, a sombrero pulled over his face. Inside three men sat at a table playing cards and drinking beer. There was the usual photo of Sandino and the black and red colours of the Junta.

The men regarded us suspiciously. 'Ti quiere - what do you want?'

'Horses,' announced Willis, and with obvious reluctance one of the men led us across to the stables. We collected the gear from a tack room, mounted and set off.

Dry podded trees shaded the path to the next bay. Headlands enclosed it like horns. We urged the horses forward and cantered for the far end, passing some women scraping shellfish off the tidal rocks. There was no one else, nothing.

'I want to see what's on the other side of the headland,' announced Willis.

We picked our way over the slabs of rock until we could go no further.

Willis dismounted and handed me his reins. 'Back in a jiffy,' he said and hopped across the rocks, until he vanished out of sight round a cliff. He wasn't away long. 'Well?' I enquired, but he merely grunted noncommittally and led the way

back, past the beach and shellfish ladies, to the scrub hills behind. The higher we climbed the better the view. Willis peered this way and that, until I jokingly suggested that he was using the ride to survey the coastline.

But fun we did have too! Exhilarating gallops through clouds of dust had us sweating more than the horses by the time we walked them into the fattoria in the late afternoon.

As we waded back across the river to San Juan, white egrets were settling over the mangrove clumps. Upstream, there must have been a bridge, though we never found it. Instead we floundered back through the shallows later that evening, to eat turtle eggs at a tiny 'trattoria' on the far side. I thought Hans might be there. It seemed his sort of place.

The earlier exuberance, brought on by the ride, had vanished. Willis seemed more than usually preoccupied, and as we drifted slowly back to the Estrella, I quietly repeated to Ko Sam our morning conversation with the Italian doctor. As with Willis earlier, it was the mention of the black beard that startled her. 'James,' she whispered, although Willis plodding ahead along the edge of the tide, was well out of earshot. 'James, Rhodes does not have a beard. Unless ...'

'Perhaps it's false,' I suggested.

'James,' she interrupted, 'I wonder.' She shook her head. 'Mon Dieu, but that is not possible surely.' And then gripping my arm fiercely, 'Did this American say he was an archaeologist?'

I agreed. But then Rhodes is an archaeologist, isn't he?'

'No, no, no,' she muttered shaking her head and then clutching it with both hands. I had never seen her so confused. I put my arm round her shoulders. As we neared the lights of the Estrella I suggested cautiously. If it wasn't Rhodes, then who was it?' But she had retreated into one of her stubborn silences.

When we got back, we found Willis setting up his mattress on the balcony. 'Think I'll sleep out here tonight,' he said cheerfully, 'I like the fresh air.'

What with riding and swimming I fell asleep immediately and the next thing I knew was a soft hand over my mouth. I thought it was the girl paying a visit and reached out to embrace her, when an indignant whisper in my ear said, 'Mister, Mister, Cap'n Willis, he signalling outside. Look!'

At first I could see nothing at all. The mosquito mesh acted like a curtain. Then Rodriguez stiffened. Staring hard I could make out the shape of a figure kneeling by the balcony rail. Repeated stabs of light suggested that Willis was not covering the torch too well. It was hard to tell exactly what he was up to. He might have been signalling in morse, but most probably he was just looking for something. I decided to find out.

The flashes began again as I stepped over to the doorway.

Willis looked up startled. 'Oh it's you,' he said, and then rather irritatedly. 'Can't you sleep?'

'I wondered what on earth you were doing,' I yawned sleepily. 'Sending messages to Mars or somewhere?'

'I've lost something. That fish,' he added, as if he had only just thought of it.

'What, your pirana? Don't lose that!' When I returned to my mattress, Rodriguez had already slipped back to his hammock, but I guessed he was wide awake, keeping watch.

The next day was a repeat of the previous one. We ate a late breakfast, lounged on the beach and swam.

In the afternoon we crossed back over the headland and went riding. This time Willis chose a different part of the coast to explore. He was in a changeable mood, one moment buoyant, the next nervy and preoccupied.

There was one thing he did, however - the significance of which did not dawn on me until much later. After we got back I found him pacing up and down the beach. There was nothing very odd in that. I did it myself. The difference was that Willis was pacing across the beach, not along it. As if he were measuring the distance between the palm trees and the sea. When I questioned him, he only laughed. 'Just seeing if we could fit in a cricket pitch,' he said.

We ate supper at one of the places behind the beach and afterwards Willis borrowed a pack of cards and played 'snap' with Rodriguez and Ko Sam. Bof joined in the applause; it was all good innocent fun.

Ko Sam was quiet but affectionate. Later we strolled up through the village to the church. At nine o'clock we returned to the beach and sat on the sand. There was no moon yet and the sea lay black and hidden under a dust of stars.

We had just got to bed when the bombardment began.

## **THIRTEEN**

### ***The Tirana Raid***

The explosions that burst over San Juan del Sur might have been mistaken for a good old-fashioned Guy Fawkes night, but it only took a matter of seconds for the reality of the attack to assert itself. The sky was transformed into a display of streaking comets which looked like 'Star Wars' gone mad. Rockets and mortars by the dozen whooshed noisily overhead and exploded in the village.

'We're sitting ducks!' shouted Willis from the floor, where we were all lying flat on our stomachs. 'Why doesn't someone switch off the bloody lights?'

As if to coincide with the attack, San Juan's few street lamps, which on previous nights had remained blacked out, now suddenly switched on simultaneously as if to illuminate the spectacle.

At that moment an explosion rocked the building. 'Cap'n,' cried Rodriguez, who had crawled to the balcony. 'They've hit the port!'

'It's the fuel dump they're after,' shouted Willis above the din, 'They ... but his words were smothered by a violent bang in the roof, whereupon the ceiling collapsed over us in a shower of beams and tiles.

It was a miracle that none of us was killed. The hotel lights had fused, but street lamps still cast an eerie glow through the fog of dust and debris. 'Get out!' yelled

Willis, dragging Rodriguez and the girl towards the landing.

We doubled down the remains of the stairs into the well of the hotel where pandemonium was the order of the night. Everyone was running about yelling. The German volunteers were busily shouting orders at each other and building tables and chairs into crude shelters. The Italians with equal determination were packing their rucksacks and getting ready to flee for the hills the moment there was a lull.

There was no let-up in the attack. If anything, the bombardment intensified. Another explosion rattled the roof and more tiles rained down. There was screaming. I saw Tulli run back into his room which faced the street, and someone shouted "There are boats landing in the bay."

"Get out of here/ I cried to the girl, and with Rodriguez clutching Bof, we scuttled for the open street. I could hardly have chosen a worse moment, for as we stood there, undecided, a helicopter roared above the rooftops and murderous bursts of gun-fire shredded the coconut palms. In the village street, half a dozen fires were raging and some instinct barred me from going that way. Instead, stupid as it sounds, we ran for the shore, and dived beneath the platform of the nearest beach bar burying ourselves among bottles, fishbones and old tins, as the helicopter stalked like death overhead.

At least we could now see what was going on. The moon was finally rising and the bay glittered silver and black. It was hard to tell whether the shadows were landing-craft or not. From the port, flames licked one of the warehouses, but the fuel dump was still unscathed. Closer at hand, fifty yards from the Estrella, a seafront building near the post office had suffered a direct hit, and was blazing horribly.

'They got the Commandant's house, Mister,' whispered the boy.

By now the street lights had finally been doused and below the palm trees, dark figures were running this way and that. Whether Sandinistas or rebels, it was impossible to guess.

A clue as to what was going on came with burst of rifle fire from the direction of the river. Flares went up in rapid succession, floodlighting, for a few uncanny moments, the long crescent shore.

'They coming across from the other bay, Mister,' hissed Rodriguez. 'See?'

He may have been right, for racing and dodging through the patch of illuminated beach, came running figures, faceless figures of death and destruction, like the horsemen of the Apocalypse heading straight for us, firing as they ran. I didn't need to cry 'Down.' No one could have tried to bury themselves faster than we did.

It was only after we surfaced safely that other concerns presented themselves. 'James,' whispered the girl urgent-ly, 'Where's Willis? You don't think ...'

But she never finished, for at that moment a gun battle blazed across the street. It was over in a minute. Figures darted away into shadowy alleys and overgrown gardens. The half-moon rose above the palm trees, shining on the shuttered facade of the Estrella, revealing for a fleeting instant a strangely familiar figure. I couldn't see the face. It was more the way he stood. The girl beside me gasped. She recognised him also. It was Boyet Rhodes.

He looked this way and that, down the empty street, as though he was searching. As he stood there, despite the racket of the gun battle and the thunder of exploding cannons, I realised he was singing. I couldn't believe it! The helicopter returned, low overhead and he took shelter

in the shadows of the Estrella porch, but when it passed I heard again the familiar strains of 'Onward, Christian Soldiers'. Then the moon vanished behind a cloud and he vanished too. If it hadn't been for the astonished expression on the girl's face, I might have thought I was imagining things.

I'll never know to this day what inspired my next move. I simply found myself getting up and running back across the road. When I reached the Estrella, the door was barred from inside and to my horror I could hear the helicopter gunship coming back. There was no time to retreat to our cover. Instead I tore at the shutters, which fortuitously opened, and dived head first into the darkened room beyond.

To my considerable surprise and embarrassment I landed not on a bed, but on top of the body lying in it.

I'm frightfully sorry ...' I began trying to clamber free, but whoever it was, I had clearly knocked the wind out of him. Then as I got to the floor, I felt a beard - a tough wiry beard. 'Tulli,' I said, but there was no response, for as my hand came away that the full horror dawned on me, for under the beard the neck was wet and slimy.

With the advantage of hindsight, I know what I should have done. But there was a battle raging, and a bomb might have flattened the building at any minute. I was scared out of my wits. I was convinced I had just landed on a body with its neck shot, slit, bayoneted or all three. I tried the door but it was locked, so I clambered out through the window, fell awkwardly to the ground and crawled across to the shadow of the trees, clutching my knee and moaning with fright.

'Mister!' called Rodriguez.

'James,' cried the girl.

Lying there, half listening to the boy's excited

commentary it soon became clear that the intensity of the battle was lessening. Cannons and mortars were crashing less frequently into the village. The rebels were retreating down the beach. The helicopter roared out to sea. From beyond the headland came flashes and explosions, as though a naval engagement was taking place. It may well have been, for although we never saw it leave, the government patrol boat was no longer at its mooring.

There was a prolonged silence, as if the entire place was holding its breath. No shooting, only the crackling of fires, barking of dogs and wailing of children.

We waited five minutes. People slowly and cautiously appeared on the street. The door of the Estrella opened and a light flickered within.

No sooner had we got inside than Willis came hurrying up, out of breath. He claimed he had run back from the other side of the village to find us. As usual, he had his straw bag over his shoulder.

'My God, what a shambles!' he said, gazing at heaps of debris on the floor. The lady who ran the place seemed to have vanished, so Willis went behind the bar and helped us all to tequila. It was the only bottle that had survived the shelling.

'Well, James, where did you all skidaddle off to then?' Willis said with a wry grin.

'We could say much the same to you,' I replied.

He wagged a finger at us. 'Now, now. I turned round and you'd all scarpered. Where were you, by the way?'

'On the beach,' I admitted rather shamefacedly.

Willis paused as he reached for the tequila bottle, and whistled. I noticed for the first time that my hand was bleeding. I said, 'You may be interested to know Rhodes is here.' I glanced at Ko Sam but she simply stared at the floor.

Willis reacted strangely — quite the opposite to what I would have expected. In fact he appeared almost relieved. Which was just as well as I was about to deliver the next bad news. 'And Tulli, or someone like him, someone with a beard, is lying in there.' I pointed to the door. 'His throat's slit.'

'Tulli's throat slit?' Willis repeated slowly.

I swallowed the tequila at a gulp. 'Yes. I don't suppose you murdered him by any chance, did you?'

He watched me with a worried look in his eyes that I mistook for guilt. I suddenly felt mad as hell. 'Oh, come off it Willis! You bumped him off to protect whatever little games you've been up to. Hey Willis was already half way to the door. By the time I reached him he had wrenched it open and stepped inside. The shuttered windows were swinging where I had escaped. There was just enough light in the room to tell at a glance that there was no one there. No body under the bed, in the cupboard, or anywhere.

'I don't make up things like that,' I insisted.

Willis nodded solemnly. 'No, I don't think you do.' He turned to me sharply. 'You say this person had a black beard?'

'I'm not sure,' I said. 'Why?'

'Nothing, nothing,' he muttered, but the strange look in his eyes was harder to mask. In the ruined hall we found some chairs and sat round a dusty table with the bottle.

Ko Sam, who until now had said nothing, watched Willis intently. The boy had fallen asleep. There were some Germans speaking in low voices in the other room. None of the Italians had returned.

'I think,' announced Willis quietly, 'It might be just as well, all things considered, if we left.'

'Left?' I repeated dumbly.

He nodded, 'It's only a few hour's walking down the coast to Costa Rica\* I propose we slip quietly away while we have a chance, before anyone gets any funny ideas about locking up foreigners\* Make no mistake, there are going to be lots of sore heads in the morning, and I for one, don't relish being arrested as a spy/

I watched him evenly, 'It astonishes me that you haven't been picked up long ago\* Tulli didn't believe a word of that twaddle about you being a botanist. It was obvious he thought the only reason you wanted to go on patrol was to pass information to the rebels. The German guy, Hans, said as much/

Willis looked at me hard. 'So that's why you think I killed Tulli/

'Oh, come off it Willis/ I said wearily, 'It's Rhodes you're really running away from, and sooner or later you're going to have to tell us why\*'

'Rhodes!' He uttered the name as though, for a moment, he had genuinely overlooked him. 'Okay, James/ He agreed so readily, that I began to wonder whether I was wrong.

'One day, Willis,' I told him, as we climbed up what remained of the stairs and set about searching for our bags under the rubble\* 'One day, you're going to have to take me out and buy me a bloody good meal, for all this.'

'James/ he jibed, 'I'll treat you to a whole week on a health farm. How about that?'

No one challenged us as we slipped out of the Estrella\* We avoided going past the port, but skirted the village and then headed south across the hills behind.

I have to admit that Willis guided us well that night. In spite of the scrub undergrowth and paths criss-crossing, he seemed to have an unerring instinct for choosing the right direction. From somewhere he had acquired a machete and it proved darned useful to hack through some of the worst places.

Nevertheless, progress was slow and I don't suppose we had gone more than a couple of miles when a fresh 'pirana' attack was launched against San Juan. It was one of those rare moments, when the track we were on crossed an unexposed hilltop.

From this vantage point, we could spot the rebel launches; dark splinters against the silvery sea, coming in fast from a north-westerly direction and firing off their cannons. The helicopter also returned, for another deadly raid, and there was sporadic small-arms fire from the river end of the bay. The attack seemed to follow a similar pattern to the earlier one, but on a much smaller scale.

T don't think they landed anyone this time/ declared Willis thoughtfully. 'I think they are just going home/ He was probably right too, for the attack cut off as suddenly as it had begun, and the dark shadows of the pirana gunboats slipped out of sight behind the next headland.

T should like to see the news tomorrow in Barricada / said Willis. 'More 'Yankee terrorism' no doubt. Some-times I wonder if these raids aren't all a put-up job just to keep everyone on their toes/

The girl sniffed indignantly. I think if Willis hadn't been carrying the machete, she'd have set upon him. 'He's just joking/ I whispered, but it didn't placate her.

I realised later that Willis was using every means at his disposal to goad us on; anger, fear, humour. I had to put up with endless chaff. All I wanted to do was lie down on the path and sleep, but he kept us moving. Blast him, and blast Rhodes too, I thought.

Birds were astir and the sky was lightening when he finally paused to announce 'We should be getting close/ Nevertheless he kept us walking for another two hours before heading inland to find a road.

'The Nicaraguan border is at Penas Blanca,' he told us. 'But there's at least another ten kilometres of No man's land' before you reach Costa Rica.'

'Eh bien, James,' said Ko Sam supportively, linking arms with me and Rodriguez. 'We come in on our foot and we go out on our foot.'

'Feet, not foot,' I corrected her crossly. By now I was limping as badly as Rodriguez. Presently we crossed a ridge and descended through cultivated plots to a small settlement. It was some relief to discover that the flag flying over the settlement was not Nicaraguan. No one stopped us, but when we asked the way from an old man with a donkey, I thought for a moment we had entered the world of 'Alice in Wonderland' by mistake, for after regarding us solemnly, he bowed and declared in faltering English, 'I see sir, that you are citizens of the Queen.' Even Willis was lost for words. The man thought carefully before announcing gravely, 'Sir, please follow this track, and take the first turning on the wrong.'

And that was how we left Nicaragua.

## **FOURTEEN**

### ***Henry Morgan Himself***

We reached San Jose late in the evening and paid one hundred colons for two roach-infested rooms at the 'New Pension Racolta'.

Next morning we all caught a bus up to Cartago in the green hills east of San Jose. Here we changed for a local bus to Paraiso. A mile outside there was a children's village or 'pueblito' which Ko Sam had heard about and where she had the notion of settling Rodriguez. I could tell he didn't approve. Nevertheless, shortly after our arrival he was allocated his new 'family' and it was arranged he would attend the local school in Paraiso next day.

The Pueblito was a nice enough place, but Rodriguez was more downcast than I had ever known him. In the afternoon we all walked through the forest to swim in some hot springs, but this didn't cheer him up. Even Bof's tail was drooping.

'Mister,' the boy pleaded, 'I don't want stay here.'

I tried to explain that he had to stay somewhere and that he couldn't just go on wandering with us for ever.

That night the three of us had to share the guest room floor and we all caught a bad dose of fleas in the process. That, and the surprising shortage of water seemed to be the

Pueblito's only drawbacks. After seeing Rodriguez and Bof off to school, Ko Sam and I bussed into San Jose, leaving Willis to write some letters. We enjoyed a carefree day strolling around, and dusk was falling as we walked back, arm in arm along the lane from Paraiso. Before we ever reached the pueblito I think we both sensed that something was wrong. The moment we got in we were greeted with the news that Rodriguez had run away and Willis, after taking an unexpected telephone call, had been in a great hurry to leave. There was a letter for us, addressed in his untidy scrawl.

Willis' message was brief enough. 'Duty calls' he wrote, 'Better I go alone from here. Had hoped to persuade James to see things my way. Regarding Rodriguez; if he doesn't fit at the Pueblito, I recommend Qu epos down on the coast. Plenty of fishing boats. Should suit him down to the ground. A bit like Caye Corker I gather. Ask the lady at the Linda Vista. It's a brothel but so what.' The letter ended abruptly at this point with a solitary 'W' in lieu of a signature.

Ko Sam stared in consternation. 'James, if Willis gets a telephone call here, you know what it means?'

'We must have been followed,' I agreed.

She frowned. 'Not so very difficult I suppose. They have only to watch the bus terminal. What does the note say again?'

At that moment we were called to supper and for obvious reasons didn't discuss it further until we had munched our way through a healthy vegetarian dish of boiled rice, raw

cabbage and muesli. For once I felt almost nostalgic for tacos and beans.

'That's by far the most exasperating letter I've ever read,' I fumed, once we were back in our room. 'Why all this concern for Rodriguez? He's never given a toss for him before.'

The girl looked thoughtful. 'James, perhaps he needs our help. All these names and places. Has he been here before, do you think? Or did someone tell him all this? You think it could be some kind of message?'

I grabbed the letter from her, glanced at it and hugged her. 'You must get fed up travelling with someone as stupid as me,' I exclaimed. 'Of course it's a message.'

'Ouch 1 James, I feel the fleas 1'

The guest room also served as the Pueblito office. We cleared the table top and climbed carefully aboard. If we didn't roll off there was a good chance we might be above the flea level.

'So what do you think?' I asked her, 'Rhodes is on his trail? Perhaps he's even spoken to him?'

'Or someone!' she murmured, and then, before I could tackle that possibility, she said softly, 'James, tell me about Rhodes. You see, I know so little of him.' Her eyes had such an imploring look, I felt I couldn't disappoint her, so I tried to tell her, as once Willis had told me. In the process I began to assume Willis' mantle, so that it was me that Rhodes' father took on their famous childhood safari across the

drawing-room carpet, up the River Niger. 'Lake Chad, you see,' I explained to her, 'was a patch of spaniel's hair. Here they shot wild duck and heard of the death of King George V on the radio, before trekking back to Kano, between the pedals of the grand piano, where they surfaced for a much-needed glass of ginger beer.'

I relived their schooldays. Only now it was me that Rhodes hauled up the guttering, so that we could explore the Abbey roofs, or steal the Dean's coal, or a dozen other escapades.

When we had fights, they became so vivid in my telling that I actually believed they had happened to me. I could almost feel those blows. From the days of their knicker- bocker romps, to when Rhodes was an Under-Officer in

the School Cadet Force, I pursued him through the critical eyes of Willis, embellishing the incidents with a few added recollections from my own experiences at boarding school.

I don't think the girl noticed. Sometimes she nodded, either in approval or because she had heard the tale before. When Boyet fought a duel with Willis in the little cloisters at midnight, her eyes shone with excitement as I described it, blow by blow. So much so, I almost forgot the reason for the duel in the first place. 'Honour,' I explained, and clearly it puzzled her. I must admit it puzzled me now, although it had not done so when Willis first told me.

I passed on to the years at University when Boyet lived in a caravan on the common, with a tamed falcon with which he used to hunt hares for his supper, and a rifle notched with

the number of terrorists he had killed during his army service.

The more I adopted him in my telling, the more he changed, so that to my surprise I found myself virtually pleading his cause. I could almost hear his mocking laughter.

When I had completely dried up and even my powers of invention had failed, Ko Sam turned her head to one side, as if she was listening to the distant thudding of my heart, and then a small gulping sound made me peer down. For a moment I thought she was chuckling and then I saw tears glistening on her cheek.

'I love him too,' she murmured. 'Only James, I do not understand why he leave my mother to die.'

There was nothing I could say. I simply held her tight until her sobbing eased. We lay marooned on the table top above the jumping fleas. After a while I turned Ko Sam's attention to what we should do next.

Without hesitation she replied, 'We go to Quepos,'

We were waiting in a covered market for the Quepos bus 'El Leon del Pacifico' when a familiar voice accompanied by frenzied barks, called out 'Hey, Mister!'

A grubbier, though none-the-less cheerful Rodriguez came hopping up, clutching a ticket in one hand. 'Cap'n Willis, he say you come,' he panted, 'But he give me the fare for Quepos in case you don't.'

'You've seen Willis?' I said.

'Sure, Mister. Only he in a real hurry. Won't let me come along.'

'Did he say where he was going?'

The boy shook his head. 'Just said to wait for you here, Mister.' He regarded me solemnly, 'Pueblito ain't no place for me. Cap'n Willis, he understand how a man feel. School is for kids. Cap'n Willis say life is only true school.'

Just then the Quepos bus hooted. 'I don't expect Her Majesty's School Inspectors would agree with you,' I said, winking at Ko Sam, as we gathered up our bags. 'But El Leon del Pacifico looks as if it won't wait!'

In fact the El Leon was about the most impatient bus we'd met so far. Plunging down through high green hills, as if it couldn't wait to greet the Pacific surf, the bending palm trees and the distant blue headlands. For the final couple of hours we bumped along dirt tracks through endless palm nut plantations, until finally 'El Leon' rattled over the loose boards of a bridge, and pulled up outside a row of shanty houses. On an upper verandah was tacked the sign 'Linda Vista'. Raucous music blared from the empty bar underneath, and rickety stairs climbed to the upper landing, with cubicles on each side. A baby crawled out of a doorway screaming. Inside a woman sat by the mirror putting her hair up. Her mouth full of pins, she yelled, 'Fifty colons, Room 11!'

I yelled back, 'Tall Englishman, reddish hair When she turned round she looked angry and scared. 'Go, go!' she shouted. I thought she was going to spit the pins at us.

An old Chinaman padding barefoot along the landing accompanied us down the stairs to the bar. He winked reassuringly. 'Some fight, eh?'

We stared at him bewildered.

'Last night. Your friend. Redhead gringo, no? Fight other gringo, barba negra, black beard.' He grinned with admiration. 'Some fight. Bad fight. Pity no one killed.' He shook his head wistfully. 'Bad fight, bad fight.' He grinned. 'Afterwards all good friends. Drink much rum. Sing songs.'

The hardboard partition of our cubicle was peppered with peep holes and the tiny loo-cum-shower was a tin can affair that might have been salvaged from a rusting hulk. Mosquitos crowded its dank corners. A knock on the door revealed the Chinaman. 'Mister,' he said urgently, licking his lips as if they were in need of moistening. I took the hint and handed him ten colons. 'Mister,' he confided in pidgin Chinese-Spanish. 'Go across mangrove creek. Many boats up river. Take dugout. Maybe find your friend there?'

We walked back across the board bridge. Quepos had a lot in common with San Juan. A port at one end, the beach, the river, the palm trees. But here the similarity ended. There was an air of stagnation. Perhaps it was the mangrove swamps. Now the rising tide was slowly filling the channels and flooding the tangled undergrowth. A trail of footprints

led over the mud to the creek, where a tiny girl paddled us across in an equally tiny dugout canoe. Rodriguez chose to swim. I thought we were going to join him every minute. On the far side, some huts

perched above the mud. The fishermen regarded us suspiciously as we made our way through the palm trees to the empty beach beyond. It swept away northwards in a mist of pounding surf.

'They're not here/ I told Ko Sam. 'Where the hell can they have vanished to?'

The same tiny girl paddled us back over the creek in the same tiny dugout.

We discovered a Chinese restaurant, but the moment we sat down they switched off the fans and removed the water, recommending instead that we should drink cold beer. 'Quepos is really like the Mad Hatter's tea party/ I told Ko Sam.

James/ she said/Where can they have gone now?'

It was a question that was to puzzle us till morning. Rodriguez - as usual our eyes and ears - discovered from the boys fishing at the river bridge, that no boats had come or gone for days. There was only the daily bus from San Juan. Then we discovered there was another way out, a track leading inland - passable only when the rivers were low - that ended up on the so-called Pan American High-way, at a place named San Isidrio del General. From there it was only a short hop south into Panama.

I could still hear the words of the American in La Ceiba, ringing in my ears, 'The only way out is South!' It was a hairbrained idea, I knew, but on the other hand, if Willis plus his accomplice hadn't caught the San Juan bus, and weren't in Quepos, where else would they have gone?

When we asked the taxi drivers, they weren't interested. After all it was a five-hour drive. 'Catch a truck/ they suggested, but the only truck had left before dawn. And then we got lucky. Rodriguez discovered that a twice-weekly bus from San Isidrio might arrive later, and might even set off back the same day. It all depended on the rivers.

Fortunately for us, it hadn't rained for a couple of days and the bus - or rather the remains of it - did turn up. There was never any question of leaving Rodriguez behind in Quepos. We rattled across lowland savanna, fording rivers so broad that the conductor waded in front. The 'Plimsoll' line was somewhere between knee and waist. Above that the bus couldn't make it. Finally there was a river which even the conductor didn't attempt to check. This time we had to flounder across up to our necks, while the peasants carted their bundles on their heads. Waiting for us on the far bank was a more modern bus which carried us up into cool highlands. Mists shrouded the tropical forest. In the twilight we passed a boy chasing a pony, before vanishing into a dim world of clouds, from which we descended around tight curves, into a valley with the lights of Isidrio twinkling in the distance.

Isidrio del General may have been a model township twenty years ago when the highway was built, but now the paint was peeling and the potholes spreading. In our room at the Hotel Lola, the cockroaches were waiting for us like a welcoming committee and the mattresses crumbled away at the touch. We spent the evening strolling the few streets looking for tall sandy-haired gringos, although by now Willis may have disguised himself as a Chinese washerwoman, for all I could tell.

We were up at dawn, waiting for a bus to take us south to the border. Waiting seemed to be the principal occupation in San Isidrio. No one appeared to be doing much else. After five hours a bus came along crowded to the roof, and with no more than a foothold in the doorway, we were carted unceremoniously south to the frontier, where Rodriguez limped across with other people's bags, while we were subject to more formal

obligations. It came as a surprise to find the almighty dollar reigned here as the official currency.

A minibus took us to David, where we bought fresh milk in the supermarket and boarded a bus south to Panama City, where we arrived at midnight.

Across the bay the lights of the modern city shone like Broadway. Closer at hand loomed the overhanging alleys of the old Spanish town. A cab took us to the Hotel Central, situated on the far side of the plaza, opposite the Spanish cathedral.

Verandahed and shuttered, the Hotel Central rose tier upon creaking tier like an old Mississippi river boat. Inside, a ballroom stairway swept grandly up from one balconied gallery to the next, where half the whores of Panama City appeared to be loitering. Allocated a room high up amid the bordellos and balconies, we solemnly creaked our way skywards in an ancient lift operated by a handle with just three positions; Up, Down and Stop. They might just as easily have read Full Ahead, Stop, Astern.

The key we had been handed was hardly necessary. The door opened at the slightest rattle, and we stepped inside a large airy room overlooking the bay. Ko Sam stiffened. In the pale moonlight, a figure of a man was clearly visible. He sat tilted back on an upright chair, his feet propped up on the bed. Although the face was blacked out by shadow, I had no doubt at all who it was.

'Willis,' I called but when Rodriguez switched on the light, Ko Sam gasped. It was not Willis who sat there grinning at us. It was Boyet Rhodes.

## *FIFTEEN*

### *The Ferryman*

I was completely stunned. Rhodes was the last person on earth I ever expected to meet face to face in a hotel room. His was a face that haunted the temple at Tikal and for a fleeting moment the bombardment of San Juan del Sur.

As my head steadied and I gazed cautiously across to where he was sitting, it seemed somehow appropriate that here in Panama - where the continents divided, where the first part of our unpredictable journey was over, and the second half still to begin — Rhodes should be waiting for us, like the ferryman, to guide us across the River Styx to the next world.

The tension was broken in the most surprising way. Ko Sam stepped across the room, bent over Rhodes and kissed him on the forehead.

I expected her to bombard him with questions, but she asked nothing. Not even news of her brother. As for myself, all I could manage to say was, 'How on earth did you know where to find us?'

He grinned, 'There's only one hotel where cab drivers bring gringos to, in the Spanish town, and this is it.'

'And Willis?'

His forehead puckered, 'You may well ask.'

James,' said Ko Sam, 'Tell Boyet what happened in Quepos.'

So I told him about our futile chase down there. 'Everyone down there seems loopy,' I said. 'Who might this black beard be anyway? Any idea?'

Rhodes nodded. 'Unfortunately, yes.' He took the girl's hand gently in his great paw, 'His name is Charles Stanley.'

'You knew!' I accused her, 'You knew all along.'

'No, James, I only guess in Managua, when Hans tell us. But I do not believe it. Stanley, you remember, James is the American who come to me in Paris. The same one ...' Her voice faltered and then picked up, 'The same one on the boat with my mother.'

'But he sent you out here didn't he?' I stared back at Rhodes. 'He's supposed to be a friend of yours.'

Rhodes pursed his lips. His rugged face broke into a slow smile. I knew what Ko Sam meant when she said the photo of Sandino reminded her of him. 'James,' he said slowly, 'We could be here till daylight discussing Charles Stanley. However, I'm chiefly interested in your story, as it confirms ...'

I didn't allow him to finish. 'But what does this guy Stanley want with Willis? After all you've got ...' I hesitated, 'Or you're supposed to have the whatever it was you nicked from Tikal.'

Rhodes smiled and held out both hands. 'I haven't got a thing! It's Billy, not I who has the jade mask of Itza. He's had it ever since you all escaped from Tikal. What amazes me is that you never guessed.'

I felt myself going red with embarrassment. 'Mister, the straw bag,' exclaimed Rodriguez.'

'Oh, James,' added Ko Sam, 'Remember how he hold himself when he comes out of the tunnel ...'

Rhodes chuckled, 'It's easy enough to be blind to things that are staring one in the face.'

All sorts of confused images were running through my mind; Willis clutching at himself outside the tunnel, gasping that he was winded, sending us off on that wild goose chase to La Ceiba. Turning up half-starved in Grenada. Flashing morse code messages out to sea. Fighting some black-bearded Stanley who he'd been seeking in Matigua and from whom he was now running away. The whole thing was mad. 'Why?' I demanded. 'Will someone tell me what the hell this is all about?'

Rhodes nodded more somberly. 'Let's be clear on one point. It's not Billy who is in possession of the Mask of Itza. It's the mask that is in possession of Billy. And Itza is only going to use him as long as he needs him.'

I looked at him amazed. 'Do you seriously believe that?' God, I thought, if people like Rhodes start believing such rubbish, what hope is there left for sanity?

'And what's more,' Rhodes went on, 'Charles Stanley knows it too. He's no fool. He wants the mask as much as I do. There's got to be a very special reason for him allowing Billy to hang on to it.'

'How do you know he has? How do you know that he hasn't knifed Willis in some back alley and cleared off?'

Rhodes nodded forebearingly. 'For one thing, Stanley is still in Costa Rica. He's too heavily involved with the counter revolutionaries to quit. That's probably how he had you followed, the moment you walked over the frontier.'

I gasped, 'You know that too!'

Rhodes shrugged. 'It wasn't exactly difficult to surmise what had happened when you vanished from San Juan.' He raised a hand. 'Listen, James, I have no intention of withholding anything from you. I want to find Billy as much as you do. In fact, more than ever now. For the further south he gets with that damned mask, the more

deadly his danger becomes. That's the cunning twist. Stanley knows it.'

'This Charles Stanley must be very convinced that there is more to the mask than treasure trove, to take risks like that,' I argued.

'Surely/ Rhodes agreed willingly. 'But think how much greater would be the value of the mask if he discovered its secrets.'

I objected, 'But he can hardly do that, while plotting revolution in Nicaragua.'

Rhodes waved dismissal of that argument. 'Then he's put a minder on to Billy's trail. Someone he trusts. Someone we know nothing about. And remember,' he added, 'These days

one is rarely further than a 'phone call or an airline flight away from anywhere.'

I woke up next morning, with all the questions I hadn't thought of asking the night before. But they had to wait. Rhodes had gone off with Ko Sam, leaving the boy and me to make the obligatory tourist trip out to the Miraflores Lock, to watch the boats come through the canal.

My opportunity to challenge Rhodes didn't come until later that evening. After supper together, in the noisy Hotel restaurant we strolled the narrow streets. These were as crowded as Woolworth's on a Saturday. Everywhere music blared out loud and lively. Ornate palaces mingled with seething tenements. Teetering wooden balconies and alleys rigged with amazing tangles of power lines, all added to the bizarre scene.

As we sat on the point, overlooking the ocean, I couldn't delay my questions any longer. 'Rhodes,' I said, 'Before we go any further, there are a few things I need to settle. For a start the burning of Willis' sloop at Caye Corker and ...'

'Listen, James, I swear I had nothing whatsoever to do with that boat of Billy's. If you want my opinion — it was the gang of Rastafarian ruffians who lived at the end of the island. I expect they thought Billy was a government agent spying on them.'

'And Tikal?'

Rhodes raised his hands. Don't blame me if the guards get trigger happy. We all thought you were temple robbers. In point of fact, we weren't far wrong.'

I ignored the jibe. 'Then what about Chocolate's girl,' I demanded. 'How do you account for that?'

For a moment, he seemed puzzled, then his face cleared. 'Oh, you mean Claire. That was tragic, wasn't it? Said she felt too dizzy to make the climb, went off for a stroll. We'll never know what really happened. She didn't die from drowning you know, she died from shock!'

'Shock!' I said, startled.

He nodded somberly, 'The way her hands were clenched and the expression on her face - it was almost ...' He hesitated for a moment, Almost as if she'd seen a ghost.' He added, 'She was a good kid, bloody fine archaeologist.'

I hadn't expected that. I asked him, 'Then what on earth was she doing on Caye Corker?'

Rhodes replied, 'Taking a break. She needed one. She'd been working on sites in the Quintana Roo for over a year. 'I told her to keep an eye on Billy. Try to stop him getting into any more mischief. That's the trouble with Billy,' he added, 'Means well, but he leaves a bloody trail of disaster behind him. We used to call him "'Rogue Elephant z at school/

"Good Lord/ I said, "He once said exactly the same thing about you/

Rhodes chuckled.

As we walked back to the Hotel I had my first chance of a few words alone with Ko Sam. I didn't plan how to put it. I simply found myself saying, 'Has he told you why he left your mother in Pnom Peng?'

She pressed her head against my shoulder. 'He says he trust her to Charles Stanley. Oh, he know he is a how-you-say, cowboy; guns, opium, gems. But he think he can trust him. You see, James, the Khmer Rouge kidnap the children at my brother's school. Boyet says he pay Stanley to take my mother to Thailand, while he go off to search for my brother/

'He didn't find him?'

She shook her head.

'And you believe him?' It was a cruel question.

'Yes, James,' she said simply. 'I believe him.'

'How's the interview proceeding?' Rhodes asked me cheerfully, once we were back at the Hotel. 'Have I passed?'

You know/ I observed, 'After the Susan B burned out, Willis swore he would get even with you, Perhaps you feel the same?' It wasn't that I believed it, I just wanted to test his reaction.

In fact it didn't bother him in the least. 'I don't believe in revenge,' he said. 'This eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth business. Why, we'd all have been blind and toothless long ago/ He asked Rodriguez if he'd go down and fetch some

beers. Turning back to me, he said, 'Well, James, what's next on your agenda?'

I returned his gaze. 'For a start, what were you doing in San Juan del Sur the night of the pirana raid. When you've thought about that you can tell us all about Captain Juni at La Ceiba. Who was he waiting for? You or Willis/

Rhodes seemed surprised. 'Me, I hope. He was my exit visa from Honduras if I had the mask. Trouble is it doesn't do to shoot my name off in front of the local CIA hoods.'

I said, 'Willis always claimed you were as right wing as Ghengis Khan.'

Rhodes laughed heartily. 'One thing he probably didn't tell you. Billy once joined the Communists. It was while he was living in Venice one winter. But it was for purely economic reasons. He was as poor as a church mouse and party members got a thirty per cent discount in Da Pio's restaurant.'

At that moment Rodriguez came in with a tray of beers.

Rhodes prised open a can and tilted back his chair. 'Billy's an orphan, didn't you know? Brought up by an uncle as mad as a March hare. Still thought he was out in the Bundu. Colonial shorts and a masai staff, even in the middle of an English winter. Housekeeper was just as batty. Called herself Madame Zara and haunted the local fetes, with Billy carrying her Woolworth wigwam. It was to save him from that sort of 'indaba' that we took him in.'

Outside in the corridor there was screaming and yelling. Doors banged, walls shook, beds creaked. I sat there, sipping my beer and thinking that for all our travelling together, how little I really knew about Willis. I heard Rhodes explain, You see, his dad had been my father's adjutant. Served with him on several expeditions, though he was never much of an archaeologist by all accounts. Got himself killed down a crevasse on South Georgia. His mother never got over it, hurled herself over the cliff.'

You' ve still not explained how you came to be at San Juan/  
I challenged him. "What were you doing outside the Estrella/  
Rhodes appeared surprised. "Waiting to nab Charles Stanley. 'Christ, I'd have thought you'd have realised that. I assumed he was coming ashore under cover of the raid to collect the mask from Billy/

It was my turn to be astonished, 'How did you know he was there?'

Rhodes laughed. 'If someone starts flashing messages out to sea, it's not unlikely that someone out on the headland may start to get inquisitive. I still don't know what went wrong. Did they really miss one another or did Billy change his mind at the last minute and decide to cling on to the mask? I'm not even certain if Stanley actually landed/

'James!' cried Ko Sam. 'You don't think perhaps ,./ She started to tell Rhodes about the bearded body in the ground floor room.

Rhodes sipped his beer thoughtfully. 'My guess is, whoever it was, wasn't dead at all. Either you wined him or he was faking/ He laughed bitterly. 'Hell, I'll bet a penny to a pound it was Stanley. And all the while I was outside his bloody room. The clever bastard/

In the plaza the cathedral bell chimed one o'clock and Rhodes stirred from his reveries. 'I think we'd all better get some shut-eye. Tomorrow we fly south to Cali/ In an offhand manner he added, 'Billy has already left. He flew to Bogota yesterday/

'Yesterday!' I exclaimed. 'Then what the hell have we been wasting time here for?'

Rhodes strolled to the window and surveyed the glittering lights of new Panama City across the bay. His voice was crisp. 'For one thing, I needed time to decide whether to take you with me. Secondly, Billy has flown to Bogota, whereas we'll be going to Cali, which is a day's ride further south. Thirdly,' his voice slowed, so that not a syllable would be lost, 'I have no intention of catching up with him yet. I'm as interested as Stanley is in seeing what secret this mask of Itza may or may not possess!'

I was too bewildered to get much sleep that night. Not so Ko Sam. She slept as sweetly as ever, snuggled up at my side. I rather resented her slumbers. I needed her to help sort out the mess of conflicting possibilities.

Everyone was after this mask. Yet only Willis seemed able to discover its secret. If indeed there was one. And both of

them - Stanley and Rhodes - were prepared for him to chase on ahead - God knows where — under the ridiculous assumption that the mask was actually guiding him.

Suddenly out of all this muddle I could see Willis on his own. Abandoned by his friends, betrayed by his enemies, loping south alone, like a long-distance runner. A lanky schoolboy on a cross-country course, bent forward, clutching his straw bag. A lonely figure outlined against a distant horizon. 'You poor bugger/ I thought.

## SIXTEEN

### *Cali to Quito*

For an hour we flew south above a sea sparkling with tropical islands. Upon crossing the Columbian coast our flight path followed a river snaking inland through uninterrupted jungle. A barrier of forested peaks and hostile gorges rose to greet us. It was a relief to descend to the broad plains of Cali.

It was Sunday afternoon in Cali, and we walked along the river, in company with courting couples, ice-cream sellers and shoeshine boys, at the same time keeping a watch out for Willis.

An old woman sang for coins in the Plaza de Cayzedá. In an avenue of tall palm trees, Rhodes bought hot cheese rolls from one vendor and pineapple slices from another. We sat consuming them by the statue to Simon Bolívar.

'Well/ said Rhodes, dusting his hands, 'I expect we've already looked at Billy half a dozen times without recognising him/ He beckoned to a boy selling fried bananas, 'If there's one thing Billy can do, it's disguise himself! Give him a blob of glue and in half a jiffy he can turn himself into virtually anyone he chooses. He's a darned good mimic too, you know. Used to take off the school chaplain a treat/ Rhodes surveyed the passing crowd. 'Do you suppose that old crone singing is Billy?'

'He's far too lanky/ I objected, unaware he was winking.

'Oh, he's got a marvellous ability for shrinking,' said Rhodes getting up. 'Let's get back. I want to check on the buses going south to Ipiales.'

I dare say Rhodes could sleep happily in the middle of a battlefield. That's how the Residencia sounded that night, what with the metal grille banging at all hours, the drunken owner bellowing down the telephone outside the door, and the radio blaring full volume. We all shared a room and Rhodes merely curled up on the floor, with a towel wrapped round his head. It was a relief when four o'clock came, and we left to catch the bus. Rhodes was fresh as a daisy. 'Hold onto your bags,' he insisted, 'The thieves in these bus stations could rob you without you knowing it.' It was advice I was to remember bitterly in La Paz.

In the dawn light, we drove south across a high grassy plateau dotted with clumps of bamboo. Grey mountains rose solemnly beyond.

At Potupla, Indians in ponchos and high hats crowded aboard. Afterwards the mountains closed in and the road became a muddy track, threading between landslips.

We climbed stubbornly up to a high plateau speckled with conifers and reached Pasto, where we changed buses for the border town of Ipiales. The dusk quickened. We climbed over the gorge to reach Ipiales in a flurry of sleet and snow. On a mud street by the main square we found the Hotel New York. The rooms were threadbare but there were plenty of

blankets. Rhodes bargained for a poncho for Rodriguez, who was shivering with cold. We were all too tired and hungry to care much about looking for Willis. Next morning we walked across a bridge into Equador.

A mile beyond the frontier was the town of Tolcan, where we caught a bus south to Quito. Sitting at the front of the small bus was a lanky, shock-headed German who looked vaguely familiar. He introduced himself as Fritz from Freiberg. He claimed to represent the Freiberg *Nachrichten* newspaper, and explained that the heavy black suitcase at his side was full of cameras. I wondered how his articles were received back home, as he freely admitted copying them lock, stock and barrel out of a battered copy of the *South American Handbook*. 'What I am really interested in,' he told us, 'is the martial arts.'

Ko Sam whispered to me, 'James, does he remind you of anyone?'

'Who?' I asked.

But she wasn't sure.

At first glance, Ko Sam decided Quito was one of the prettiest cities she'd ever seen. Surrounded by gloomy mountains, the whitewashed buildings, and the narrow cobbled lanes could have been somewhere in Bavaria. Freiberg Fritz felt at home immediately. He unloaded his large black suitcase and set it on its casters. 'Come along now, Fifi,' he commanded the suitcase, tugging it behind him on a length of cord. Fifi was obedient enough on the level,

but had the wayward habit of charging off on its own, the moment we went downhill. 'Come back, Fifi, come back!' cried Fritz frantically chasing after it. The crowds of colourful ponchos and felt hats parted to let the mad gringo through.

We finally caught up with him, out of breath, castigating Fifi at the bottom end of Rocafuerto. There were plenty of cheap hotels, but they were all full, until we reached the Grand which didn't exactly live up to its name. On the top floor a little birdlike lady watched us through a crack in her door.

'Little old lady you are better watchdog than Fifi, I think,' Friz called to her through the crack. Amid peals of mad laughter, he set about securing his own room with a padlock and hasp.

'I wonder if Fifi is really full of cameras?' remarked Rhodes.

That evening I was delegated to keep an eye on Fritz. It was hard work. He twirled the karate sticks under the noses of every policeman we passed, and then proceeded to attack an innocent lamp post. The restaurant we chose emptied very quickly. I called out to the neighbouring tables, 'He's quite harmless,' but I didn't know how to say it in Spanish. Perhaps it was a good thing no one there understood English, or rather Fritz's version of the language. For him, politics and the martial arts were inseparable. 'I believe in jackboot philosophy,' he told me. 'I am the leader of the Freiberg Neo Nazi movement. What the West needs is discipline.' He glared wildly around the shabby restaurant for someone to practise on, but the solitary waiter wisely retired behind the hatch as Fritz outlined his policies for

improving the species. Or rather his' species. He was not very sure that the English would even pass the test! 'That's all right,' I reassured him, 'I'm Scots.'

'The Scots,' he thundered, twirling his sticks, 'Why they are all Barbarians. I do not even understand their language.'

I could have said the same about his! Frowning with distaste over his unsweetened coffee, he exclaimed. 'Mein Gott, it hangs in the hole!' Which we finally translated into, 'It sticks in the throat.'

Back at the upper landing of the Grand, he amused himself making 'monster' noises through the crack in the old lady's door.

'It's not fair,' I complained bitterly to Ko Sam, as I stretched out on the bed. 'I could have been put in jail

because of that moron.'

'James, we know who he is,' she said, stroking my head. 'He is Hans. You remember Hans in Managua.'

'He's not a bit like Hans in Managua,' I said frowning, but apart from the beard and the glasses I couldn't remember what Hans had looked like. 'Anyway,' I told her, 'Hans was a marxist. This one's a fascist. He even approves of genocide.' It was a careless thing to say. Even hugging her closely couldn't extinguish the pain. The Khmer Rouge also believe in genocide,' she murmured bitterly.

'Listen, James,' she said a minute later, 'We broke into his room, this Hans or Fritz. The suitcase is full of Maya

treasures. The things that tomb robbers sell to collectors. We also find an envelope with the name Charles Stanley on it.'

I whistled. So he must be the one Stanley sent to find Willis. 'What's our next move?'

It was a question Fritz resolved for us the next day.

## SEVENTEEN

### *The Nazca Lines*

At daybreak the little old lady alerted us. 'The madman is gone/ she muttered - 'loco,' tapping her head, 'Mucho loco.'

Our departure was so hurried, I was still half asleep when we arrived at the terminal to catch a bus south to Cuenca. There were several small buses leaving at that hour, so it was very likely that Fritz had gone on ahead of us. This was confirmed when Rodriguez came back with an Indian who claimed to have seen him.

'He'd probably claim to have seen anyone you care to name for a few more sucres,' commented Rhodes dourly, handing over the expected tip.

Through breaks in the overcast sky, snow-covered mountains kept us company as we headed south. We climbed through wooded highlands, and deep gorges.

The sky cleared and the sun shone brilliant gold as we dropped into a broad valley beside a tumbling river. Cuenca was bigger than I'd expected and there was no sign of either Fritz or Willis.

'You don't suppose Willis could have taken a plane?' I suggested at supper. But Rhodes had no such doubts. 'Billy will never fly if he can get there any other way. Anyway - he's in no hurry.'

'You sound as if you know where he's going,' I said.

He glanced sharply at Ko Sam, but she shook her head. That annoyed me. 'So I'm being kept in the dark am I? Thank you very much.'

It was Rhodes who spoke. 'Do the Nazca lines mean anything to you, James?' he enquired.

I shook my head.

'Apart from the Great Wall of China, they're the only feature on this globe visible from outer space.'

'What are they?' I asked, 'Temples?'

He peered at me closely across the table. 'Lines scratched in the desert, straight as a ruler and miles long.'

'Good Lord! And Willis is going there?' I felt utterly baffled. Ko Sam said, 'There are those who believe they were a landing site for ships from outer space.'

'Oh no,' I cried, with such alarm that the waiter hurried up to us. He hadn't moved so fast all evening. 'You're not suggesting ...' It was too incredible even to consider. Willis, alone in the desert, carrying his Mask of Itza in a straw bag and waiting for a spaceship to come and take him home.

Ko Sam pouted, 'Now you see why we didn't tell you before. When we do tell you, you don't like it.'

I pressed my eyes tight shut. Were we all mad?

That night my dreams were haunted by the chase; Willis loping ahead over the mountains, followed by Fritz tugging

his suitcase, calling, 'Come along Fifi, come along.' And bringing up the rear, the rest of us; a whole jerking cavalcade of Maya priests, Spanish conquistadores, campesinos, Sandinistas, counter-revolutionaries - Ourselves to the fore - swarming over the landscape, yelling, 'No vender a la patria, no vender a la patria.'

In the end, the noise blotted out everything else and I woke to discover Ko Sam tugging to wake me up.

We set off soon after dawn. The first part of the journey wound through meadows and pine forests. Then we reached a pass and exchanged the alpine scenery for bleak windswept uplands, where proud Indians, in black knickerbockers and long pigtails, stepped down off the bus and strode away into nowhere.

The ribbon of road unwound in a spectacular descent to a hutted village, where, sitting on a rotten verandah, we ate bean soup and chewed boiled maize cobs, before climbing up again, past sepulchral white rockfalls, to vanish into the mist and clouds. All day we 'switchback- ed' across deep valleys, until in the late afternoon we made a final tortuous descent onto the plains of Loya.

'By this time tomorrow,' claimed Rhodes, 'We should be well inside Peru.'

Loya was a primitive little town. There was nothing much to do except go to church or queue outside the only cinema. We turned in early, in order to be up by 5 a.m. to catch the bus out to Macara.

No sooner were we clear of the town than the driver stopped the bus, took a collection and deposited the proceeds at a shrine to the Madonna, half a mile up the road. Everyone in the bus crossed themselves.

'That's means we're in for a rough ride/ commented Rhodes.

I kept my eyes tight shut for much of it. Whenever I opened them we seemed to be cruising in mid air. Gradually the road descended. The warmer it got the more layers of clothing we shed but we were dripping sweat as we finally cruised into Macara where the mud lay ankle deep and the entire population seemed to be sleeping. Even the pigs snored. Rhodes eventually roused a driver long enough to get us to the frontier in the back of his truck.

As we stepped across the bridge over the Rio Macara, into Peru, I half expected to hear a familiar voice urging 'Fifi', but there were only a couple of bored frontier guards who stamped our passports.

It was stifling hot. The track disappeared up a steep defile between crumbling cliffs. We sat on a makeshift bench, under an awning, where a big woman cooked us fried eggs, and sold us a large bottle of tepid beer. The flies settled so thickly, it was hard not to swallow them.

Rhodes enquired about transport and Rodriguez sought news of Fritz. The woman was happy to oblige with both demands. Fritz plus Fife had come over earlier in time to catch the truck through to Sullana. However, there might be another later - if we were lucky.

'How the blazes could he have made up so much time?' argued Rhodes, as we sat in the shade swatting flies.

'You go to Sullana?' enquired a man who had crossed over the bridge from Equador with a bundle of brand-new spades. Rhodes nodded.

Long before it reached us, we could hear the truck creaking and backfiring over the boulders. Rhodes frowned, 'How many hours to Sullana?' he asked the spade man, pouring him a beer.

He shrugged, 'It depends on the rivers. There are many rivers and not many bridges.' He laughed and spat deliberately in the dirt.

'They can't have all been washed away?' I suggested.

This received a chorus of amused laughter from the other waiting merchants. 'No, signor, the terrorists have blown them up.'

The truck stopped only long enough to pick us up before returning along the tortuous track to La Tina where it halted outside the police station and everyone filed inside. The Equadorean merchants placed small bundles of banknotes on the table. No documents were asked for.

The officer in charge swept the money into an open drawer and smiled at us. 'Americans?' he asked.

'English,' said Rhodes.

'Aha, Signora Thatcher. Fuerte, fuerte. Strong, strong.' After handshakes all round he released us back to the truck. The

driver swallowed a litre of warm beer at a gulp and we set off. Dusk settled over the green hills. Fireflies darted under the trees. Everyone started singing.

'This is all guerilla country,' Rhodes shouted in my ear. 'Sendera Luminosa - the Shining Path; Maoist revolutionaries. They don't like foreigners! They kill any they catch!'

Comforted by that cheerful thought I watched nervously for ambushes, as we slowed down to cross the first river. All that remained of the bridge were two girders. Far below a torrent cascaded over a waterfall. The Indians got off and stepped along one of the girders.

'Close your eyes, James,' laughed Ko Sam, as the truck nudged forward. There was about half a turn of free play in the steering wheel, but the driver didn't seem unduly bothered. He even turned round to grin at us. On the far side, the Indians climbed back and everyone resumed singing.

Darkness brought a shower of light rain. After three hours we reached the scattered huts of a village, twinkling with hurricane lanterns. At a roadside shelter we quenched our thirsts on warm beer, while the lady-of-the-hut hacked strips of raw meat which were hanging from the rafters and threw them onto the open fire. After they had burned for a few minutes she poked them off, pounded the charred remains with a large round stone and handed the suppers around.

We reached Sullana at midnight and swapped jungle for desert. Next morning we caught a bus south to Lima through the driest barest desert imaginable. Immense dunes threatened the road and the only signs of life were black nomad tents flapping in the unrelenting wind.

We reached Lima the next morning. A short walk down Ancash brought us to Plaza San Francisco and the Hotel Europa where - as Rodriguez had been informed - all the gringo travellers stay. Everyone, that is, except Fritz and Willis.

Later, we walked across the Plaza des Armas, pestered with offers of cocaine by zealous drug-squad policemen eager to make an arrest. In Union street the banks were offering 120% interest per annum. At the Tepsa bus terminal Rhodes secured seats for Nazca the next morning.

We slept through the afternoon and woke up to discover the city had become a carnival, the streets crowded with entertainers.

A lame woman blessed us and limped away chanting a mournful dirge. We ate fried chicken and 'papas' (chips) from a vendor. As we strolled back a contortionist was smoking a cigarette held in his toes, and two boy comedians wearing wigs were wrestling, surrounded by an appreciative audience of ragged street waifs, happy for the opportunity to laugh.

The road south to Pisco ran along the desert coastline, between miles of disused hen coops.

Leaving Pisco behind we climbed steadily up to the Nazca plateau. Each tortuous hairpin bend was marked with a cluster of crosses. On the plateau itself a notice by the road in English read, 'Nazca lines, don't stop'.

The stony desert was flat as a billiard table but we couldn't spot any lines. So I asked Ko Sam.

'James,' she explained, 'You cannot see them from the ground, you must be high above/

I squinted up at the sky. 'Then what was the point? The people who designed them couldn't fly.'

She sighed. 'Oh James, don't you see, they make these great drawings for the Gods.'

'I thought you said they were runways.'

Rhodes interrupted. 'James, Itza was the supreme God on this earth. There was another God, Kulkanin who dwelled in the distant galaxies. He was expected to return in a fiery chariot; a spaceship as some people suggest. These lines make up huge designs of birds and animals. Some more than a mile wide. They were drawings to welcome him. The runways were for him to land on.'

When we finally spotted the lights of Nazco twinkling in the purple dusk, I fully expected to find a settlement out of Star Wars. But it was nothing more than a small oasis town beside a shallow stream.

The Hotel Nazca was a friendly place. The rooms opened onto an airy patio full of shrubs. To our surprise it was

packed with German students. Even Rhodes was taken aback. It's because of Maria Reiche,' he explained. 'She's a very old lady now, but she's spent the last fifty years of her life studying the Nazca lines. As an archaeologist she is very highly regarded in Germany.'

Famous or not, Maria Reiche presented us with a problem she could never have foreseen. Just about every one of the twenty or so German students looked like, spoke like and were called either Hans or Fritz.

Even Ko Sam was bewildered. 'Then it's Fifi we have to find,' she suggested.

This would have been a relatively easy matter to resolve in any other gringo hotel in South America, where the locks fell off in your hand. Not so the Hotel Nazca, for it was managed by a German lady married to a Peruvian.

We were more successful in discovering the where-

abouts of Willis. His familiar scrawl confronted us in the Hotel register. He had arrived two days ago. He had even spent twenty dollars to be taken up in one of the tiny charter planes which fly visitors over 'the lines'. All we had to do, surely, was wait for him, and wait we did, until midnight but he never showed up. When Rhodes asked the German lady, she was unperturbed. 'Sometimes the students stay out on the lines for days.' She peered at the register. 'Your friend has paid for one week.'

Next morning, we held a council of war in the plaza. It was decided that Rodriguez should pal up with the children of

the Hotel and try to gain entry to the rooms. Meanwhile Rhodes hired a battered taxi and set off with Ko Sam to visit as many parts of 'the lines' as they could reach by track. I was to keep watch in the town.

The morning ticked by. In the plaza the men sat on the shady benches reading yesterday's newspapers from Lima. A photographer set up his tripod and waited, just as he waited every day. A humming bird darted trembling from flower to flower - sipping nectar with its tiny beak. A man walked over from the town offices and stuck up a large notice urging the women of Nazca to register for the forthcoming elections.

The long slow day continued. The sky never varied its shade of blue. Only the shadows changed. Once I heard a small plane, but the sound faded into stillness.

Rodriguez joined me in the square. He had managed to peep into half the rooms, but some of the Germans had set off into the desert early and taken their keys with them.

I was rapidly losing faith that Nazca would provide the finale to our chase.

The others got back at dusk. 'It is hopeless,' said Ko Sam wearily, after she had showered. 'James, we need a helicopter.'

As you may imagine we were a rather dispirited group sitting down to eat. Afterwards we alternated between checking at the Hotel and watching the plaza. At ten o'clock a drunk carefully picked himself up and tottered solemnly away. We were getting so stupefied by the pace of Nazca life, that

when things started happening, even Rhodes was caught unprepared.

## **EIGHTEEN**

### ***The High Andes***

I was strolling slowly back towards the hotel with my arm round Ko Sam's shoulders when the silence was shattered by the noise of an engine. Fifty yards down the street a truck manoeuvred out from a side turning and shuddered slowly away through the potholes. At the same moment Rhodes, yelling 'WILLIS!' at the top of his voice, burst out of the hotel and set off in hot pursuit.

'Go it Capn'!' piped Rodriguez who had limped out after him. Down the dark street Rhodes continued to close the gap. There were only yards in it when slowly the truck began to pull away, and in a final desperate attempt Rhodes launched himself at the tailboard.

Rodriguez cheered, for Rhodes had secured a grip and was now in the process of dragging his feet up onto the chassis. I really thought he had succeeded, when suddenly the truck lurched wildly, sending him off balance. He still had one hand clutching the frame but the rest of him was hanging.

'Stick on, Cap'n, stick on,' called the boy, but as the truck thundered through another hole, Rhodes lost his grip and fell sprawling into the dust. Rodriguez was half way to him, as he pulled himself upright.

'The bastard,' he growled, wiping the sand off his face. 'The cunning bastard,' he repeated, but not without a

trace of admiration. 'I only passed that spot a few minutes earlier and I swear there was no one there.'

'Then how did you know?' I asked.

'Lady tell us,' piped the boy. Say our friend come back, and run out again.'

By God!' added Rhodes, Billy can shift when he's a mind to.'

After a moment's reflection I said, 'I wonder why the driver didn't stop? Do you think Willis bribed him?'

Rhodes dusted down his jeans. 'I don't expect the bugger even heard me above the racket his truck was making.' He grinned. 'I'll tell you one thing, for what it's worth, I wouldn't want to be in Billy's shoes, driving over the mountains in that crate.'

'You know where they're going?' asked Ko Sam.

Rhodes nodded. 'Cuzco. The truck had Cuzco markings on it.'

'So what do we do now?' I asked, as we made our way back to the deserted plaza, Rhodes limping from a twisted ankle.

'Follow the bugger,' he said cheerfully. 'If we can.'

At the Nazca, the lady sympathised. with us over missing Willis. 'There is a bus that comes through tonight from Lima.' She looked doubtful. 'I must tell you it is a very unreliable bus company - Morales Moralito. I do not know what to advise.' She frowned. 'And if the roads are washed away, you will be stranded.'

Rhodes shrugged off these objections as if they were nothing. We settled our bill and as quietly as possible carried our bags down the empty street to the office of the bus company.

At the back of an otherwise bare room, a clerk lay snoring on a bench. The only indication that it was an office was the telephone and a couple of old passenger lists

from previous journeys. An Indian crouched between two heavy bundles. He didn't look like Fritz.

The telephone tinkled erratically and the clerk finally woke up. A look of surprise spread over his face as he listened into the receiver. He beamed at us. The bus has left Pisco. Only three hours late. It will be here at 1 a.m. Morales Moralito - very reliable.' And he promptly went back to sleep. In fact it rolled into Nazca at 2.15 a.m.

There was a nightmarish quality to that drive into the high Andes. By dawn we had reached the bleak uplands, the "altiplano". Mist and clouds wrapped the grey peaks. The narrow track, potholed and rutted every yard of the way, wound across barren moorland grazed by small herds of llama. The few Indian villages we passed were no more than squalid clusters of stone huts, buried beneath mud-thatched roofs.

It was another miserable long night in the bus. Blanketed by mist, dawn found us slithering up through steep forests, the track a quagmire of red mud. Ahead of us, bogged down to its axles, an open truck blocked the way. The mud rose over

our knees as we struggled to free it and the spinning wheels splattered us all generously from head to foot. Everyone laughed at everyone else. It helped to relieve our discomfiture.

We came down to a temperate valley, cultivated by patches of maize and beans, and stopped at an inn where platters of llama stew and potatoes were set out on rough tables. Outside, the bus refused to start. Whatever was wrong with it, no amount of tinkering could bring it to life.

When an hour later, the truck we had earlier rescued arrived, Rhodes bundled us on board and we set off again, into a gorge the size of the Grand Canyon, with a red river roaring through far, far below.

If I ever think of mountain journeys I remember that track. Scratched across the face of those mile-high red cliffs, it hung perilously between life and certain death, crumbling away behind us as we passed. Then rounding a bend we saw something that made us forget even this danger. Just ahead a torrent had washed away the track. Fifty yards beyond this stood another truck. What held our attention was the tall thin figure, stooping beside the back wheels. There was no doubt in our minds who it was.

'Willis!' we all shouted at once, but the sound was swallowed by the roaring torrent.

At precisely this moment the truck rumbled into life, and Willis, with never so much as a glance in our direction, leapt back on board. He was only in the nick of time, for just as

the truck pulled away, a shower of loose stones cascaded down the cliffside.

Instantly the rocks became boulders. An entire section of cliff began to slide, plunging over the track and dropping a thousand feet into the river below. The avalanche only lasted seconds, but in that time the track was completely blocked and Willis had vanished out of sight round the next bend.

It took us an hour to clear the landslide. Bit by bit we toppled the boulders over the edge until eventually, with its offside wheels nudging the drop, the truck inched to safety.

Apart from a few bouncing boulders, the rest of the drive down the gorge was child's play. A police post guarded the Bailey bridge crossing over into Cuzco province. We were only inside the hut a matter of minutes, but it was long enough to acquire a rich harvest of fleas.

The truck dropped us in Cuzco, opposite the railway station. It started to rain as we walked along Santa Clara

and we sought shelter under the colonnades of the Plaza des Armas, where Indian women dressed in ponchos and white bowlers were setting out their knitted woollens. Facing us across the square stood the imposing facade of the cathedral. In "Inca days" it had been the Temple of the Sun and Rhodes was busy explaining to Ko Sam and the boy, how on feast days the mummies of the dead Inca kings were brought out to sit alongside the living king, when I recognised an all too familiar voice calling, 'Fifi, come along!'

Fritz made no attempt to avoid us. Quite the contrary. Beaming cheerfully, he strode up, tugging the black suitcase behind him. 'Come,' he said, 'where are you staying? I am at the Pension Familiar. It is wonderful. The courtyard is full of gnomes.' He gave us all the benefit of a mad wink and proceeded up Saffi Street, diving for shelter under the dripping eaves, of the old houses, All the time he was chatting enthusiastically over his shoulder. 'I fly here, you know, I do not want to sit on a bus for a week. Too many thieves. Perhaps Fifi might even be kidnapped. In Quito I am robbed.'

'That's too bad,' said Rhodes. 'What did they take?'

Fritz merely shrugged. 'Not much. My only regret,' he went on 'Is that I do not see Nazca. I read so much of the discoveries there made by Maria Reiche. Did you go there? How was it?'

For a moment I was almost - though never completely - convinced that he hadn't been one of the students after all. It was certainly true he may have bussed back to Lima and caught a flight up, to get here before us. He didn't try to disguise the fact. 'I see you stay at the Europa, in Lima,' he told us. 'I also. Tell me, did you find your friend.?'

'Which friend was that?' enquired Rhodes.

Fritz stopped abruptly and peered in my direction. 'Did you not tell me you look for a friend, a tall Englishman?' He shrugged again. 'Perhaps I make mistake. Perhaps I think of someone else. Come along Fifi,' and he set off again at his

brisk pace to the Pension Familiar, whose overhanging eaves, wooden balconies, grinning gnomes and large stone toadstools would have brought tears to the eyes of Snow White.

'Signora,' Fritz called up to the balcony, but it was no comely Disneyland maiden who stepped out. A large intimidating woman with a haughty look frowned down on us. 'Lady,' called Fritz, 'I bring to your wonderful happy gnome house, my friends. Please to give them some rooms and also hot water. For they travel in a bus from Nazca.'

Two keys clattered down on the cobbles. I thought the woman was going to spit. Instead she grunted, 'Aguacaliente. Un ora (hot water, one hour)' and stuck up a solitary finger.

It had stopped raining by the time we had taken our showers and scrubbed off the fleas. We made our way through back alleys until we came upon an inn at the back of a smoky yard full of llamas. The inn 'La Chola' hadn't changed much since Inca times. It was crowded with Indians swigging chicha - the cloudy maize beer and shouting in quechua-inca language. The menu was limited to bowls of steaming broth and knuckles of llama meat. Roast guinea pig was the favoured delicacy of the house.

'If we've got anything to discuss,' urged Rhodes, beaming across the table, 'We'd better tackle it now. We won't be sober long at this rate! I'll tell you one thing, Fritz wants us to think he has been out to Macchu Picchu. I wonder if he really has - he'd hardly have had time. But at least we know

where Billy will be going. My head had begun to spin and I stared at him, trying hard to focus.

He added helpfully, 'Everyone comes to Cuzco for one reason only.'

But it was Ko Sam who explained. 'You see, James, Inca and Maya gods were one and the same, although sometimes the names were different. If Willis has the Mask of Itza, if ...' she paused slightly. 'If Itza has taken possession of his mind, there is only one place they would go.' She glanced across at Rhodes and he nodded. 'It is the Temple of the Sun at Macchu Picchu.'

I felt myself swaying unsteadily and the next thing I remember was being helped back through the narrow alleys watching stars jerk past overhead. Then we were sitting in the Plaza des Armas where the cathedral emblazoned in golden lights, shone like a gilded treasure ship. Suddenly, thunder roared and cracked, and as we ran for the shelter of the colonnades, the rain fell in a deluge. In minutes the cobbled streets were awash with flood water. Cars and carts slid helplessly out of control downhill. In their thin shirts the ragged shoeshine boys crouched shivering under the stone arches and the Indian women hastily packed away their wares. We went inside a cafe and waited until the rain stopped and the flood subsided.

As we plodded back up the Pension Familiar, I experienced a sense of utter hopelessness. I felt that Willis also - the old Willis — the real Willis, had been entirely washed away by

events beyond his or our control, and was now beyond the reach of any help we could offer him.

In Avenida Saffi the downpour started again, softer this time, for it had changed to snow, falling so thickly that it buried our footprints completely, leaving no trace whatsoever.

## **NINETEEN**

### ***The Temple of the Sun***

Whenever I think of Cuzco, I hear the sound of Indian flutes - haunting cadences from another world, another time. Every kid in Cuzco had these bamboo pipes to sell complete with their poignant tunes. However, when we tried them ourselves, the music died stillborn at the first attempt.

The other sounds, early next morning as we set off to catch the local train to Macchu Picchu, were the solemn tolling of the church bells and the clatter of footsteps hurrying along Santa Clara to Mass.

The train shunted back and forth up the steep hillside above the town, before setting off over a high plateau. Pigeons soared out of the green corn and poplars glowed yellow in the pale dawn light.

At a wayside halt, little boys swarmed aboard chanting songs in Quechia, while their sisters sold flagons of chicha. On the platform women were laying out colourful handiwork in readiness for the tourists' train, but seeing us, they rushed forward crying 'Compra me' (buy me), and thrust bracelets, carved idols, embroidered braids, clay dishes into our laps. 'Compra me, compra me!' they continued to shout as the train pulled slowly away.

Mountains loomed overhead as we left the plateau and switchbacked into the deep gorge of the Urubamba river

where the track ran beside a boiling torrent. Above us snowcapped peaks vanished into grey clouds.

Deep in the bottom of the gorge, overshadowed for most of the day, stood the village of Agua Caliente (Hot Springs). Here most of the travellers got off. The village was no more than a cluster of smoky hovels built on the rocks. The train whistled, the buffers clanked and we shuddered away. A couple of miles further on, the next stop was marked simply 'Ruinas' (ruins). Above it, black cliffs blocked out the sky. It was difficult to imagine anything but misty peaks up there, let alone an entire Inca city.

'No wonder the Spaniards never found it,' commented Rhodes, as we set off, following the hairline track zigzagging upwards.

It must have taken two hours to make that climb. 'But at least we know we're ahead of the others,' Rhodes said encouragingly, as we stepped wearily round the hundredth hairpin.

'How can you be so sure?' I gasped. At fifteen thousand feet my heart was thudding a merry fandango. After last night's chicha, my head wasn't doing too well either.

'James, there's no road. The old Inca trail from Cuzco takes three days, and I don't believe Billy would have been in time to catch a train out yesterday afternoon. Being here early will give us time to familiarise ourselves with the place before the tourists arrive.'

At the top of the climb, a stairway led through the cliffs. A guard stopped clearing his throat long enough to confirm no other gringo had come up that morning, a tip encouraged him to add, 'There is no other way in Signor, except perhaps by the old Inca bridge and that is far off over the mountain.'

We followed the path through a narrow defile in the rocks and emerged on the far side into the Lost City of the Incas.

Above us on a hillslope were stone terraces. These were the first terraces I had seen in South America. It seemed amazing that at this height there was not just a city, but also cultivated fields to provide its food. Ahead, stone houses spread across the saddle of the mountain.

It was the setting that made Macchu Picchu so spectacular. Perched like a prayer among the soaring peaks of the Andes, it had no need of great temples. In fact at first glance the thatch-roofed stone houses might easily have been lifted straight off a Hebridean island. Above the city a massive pyramid of rock rose a further thousand feet into the sky, while below on every side black cliffs plunged far, far down into the encircling gorge.

'What a marvellous outlook!' exclaimed Rhodes, gazing at the rocky pinnacle. 'You'll enjoy clambering up there, won't you James?'

Only Ko Sam remained unimpressed. 'It is like a place the people ran away from only yesterday,' she shivered, 'It is too silent.'

Rhodes clapped his hand on her shoulder. 'Don't fret, Sammy,' he laughed. 'The tourists will soon make up for that. Come on, now, we've got work to do.'

It took us a couple of hours to make a hurried exploration of the city, but we could easily have spent two days there and still not have seen it all. What we were chiefly interested in, lay beyond the great plaza. On the far side of a steep terraced hill stood the Temple of the Sun, Above it a row of steps cut into the rock led us up to a stone dish several feet in diameter. Rhodes instantly recognised it. 'It's the Holy of Holies!' he exclaimed.

'What?' I asked, 'Is it an altar?'

'Something like that/ he agreed. 'The Inca sundial.'

I peered cautiously down. From where we stood it was a sheer drop into the gorge. Far below roared the flooded Urubamba river. Ko Sam gripped my hand. 'James, this is where Willis will come with the mask. I am certain of it/

'So when should we expect our ace pupil?' I asked him. Rhodes peered up at the sky, where a pale sun was trying to break through the clouds. 'Too late today. The tourists will be here soon, and Itza will want to have the place to himself/ He paused thoughtfully. 'Now I know where things are/ he continued, 'I would expect Billy here at sunrise/

Although I nodded, I still didn't entirely believe him.

'And Fritz?' I asked.

'We'll have to deal with friend Fritz as the occasion demands/ he replied. 'One thing is for sure. We'll have to spend the night here/

Like a magnet, I found my gaze drawn instinctively to the lookout peak. Rhodes nodded. 'Oh my God, I whispered.

The tourists arrived soon afterwards, drawn up from the station in a convoy of minibuses. They brought noise, colour and activity to the mountain top. Ko Sam clearly approved. 'Now it begins to live again/ she smiled.

Rhodes was keen on keeping as low a profile as possible. All afternoon we lay up in the damp undergrowth on a hillside above the path leading to the Inca bridge. From this vantage point we could keep watch, not only over the city, but also on the look-out beyond, where from time to time the more intrepid tourists attempted to climb.

'Why do we have to get up there?' I complained. 'We can see very well from here. It'll be a lot easier to jump Willis from this point. And, I added, 'We can also keep watch on the Inca trail.'

But Rhodes was adamant, and once the tourists had left he led the way back to the base of the pinnacle.

Perched on the summit stood a couple of thatched huts that Rhodes thought would do us very nicely for the night.

Until twilight, the four of us took turns keeping watch over the city, taking care to remain out of the sight of anyone with prying eyes or binoculars. At dusk a damp mist blotted

out the view altogether, but at least Rhodes judged that we could light a small fire.

As I stared into the flames I couldn't help thinking of Willis and wondering where he was at that moment. 'You don't suppose he's out there now?' I said. I pictured him clutching the mask at the edge of the precipice. 'Rhodes?' I asked him, 'Willis wouldn't jump would he?'

Rhodes was amused. 'Listen, if nothing, else, Billy is a survivor. He has to be, considering the scraps he gets himself into.'

That remark seemed rather unfair to Willis to allow it to pass unchallenged. 'And you regard this as one of his better escapades?' I enquired somewhat bitingly.

He squinted at me through the flames. There was a gleam of irritation in his eyes, but he kept it well under control. 'No, not entirely,' he said.

'That's just as well,' I retorted hotly 'For you can't hold yourself entirely blameless.'

Rhodes laughed. 'Me! What ever gave you that idea?'

'All this nonsense about the mask, for instance. I can't believe you didn't put the idea into his head in the first place.' I sensed Ko Sam and the boy watching me intently from each side of the fire.

'Then all I can say is, you're wrong,' said Rhodes curtly. 'I'm afraid there's a great deal you don't know about Billy. And as for the mask, James, I have to admit I'm not so

sure that it is all nonsense.' There followed an awkward silence. Finally Rhodes shifted his position and spoke out. 'Listen, James,' he said, making an effort to be reasonable. 'These old religions are a store of untapped power. Of that, I am sure.'

'Why?' I asked.

'For the very simple reason that in those days they put more into their religion. All these sacrifices! It wasn't coins in the collection plate. It's blood we're talking about. Thousands upon thousands of human sacrifices. Offerings to the God. Libations of blood. And then there is the power of prophesy. You may have been to Delphi. Oh, I know it's not the same any more. They bugger up all these places with fences and turnstiles. But I tell you, James,' and his eyes were gleaming through the flames, 'I tell you this for what it's worth. You can still go out in the moonlight and drink the waters of Lethe — the waters of forgetfulness — where they gush out of the mountain.' He checked himself. Another moment and the pull of his words would have mesmerised even my practical objections. 'What I mean is, it's still there if you look for it. At least Billy was convinced of that.'

But you haven't explained anything,' I protested.

He frowned. 'The truth is, James, I don't know. And even if old Itza gets up out of his grave in the morning and takes Billy with him I still won't know. Will you?'

I woke up in the gloom to find the boy crouching beside me, a finger pressed to his lips. The others were already outside

the hut peering cautiously over the edge. Ko Sam gave me an anxious glance as I wriggled alongside her. She didn't have to say anything. Far below, barely visible in the half light of dawn, a lanky figure was picking its way down the very hillside where we had been hiding the previous afternoon.

Willis was making sure he was alone. Frequently he stopped and looked around him. Once he waited so long I began to doubt whether he was going to continue at all. But he did. And it quickly became clear where he was heading. Slowly and decisively he was making straight for the terraced knoll, on the far side of which stood the Temple of the Sun.

"Mister!" The boy nudged me, Rhodes and Ko Sam were already starting their descent and silently we followed them. The darkness in the gorge hid the full horror of the yawning drop beneath us.

The plaza lay drowned under a lake of mist, muffling our steps. We hurried across the wet grass and climbed the stairway beyond, leading to the temple.

Rhodes held up his hand. Then his hand waved and we crept forward after him, over the paved stones between the empty houses. Directly in front of us the path dipped down to the small amphitheatre facing the Sun Temple. And there in the centre stood Willis.

He had his back towards us and it only took a moment to realise what he was staring at. In the hurry of our descent I hadn't noticed how fast the daylight was growing, and now

as we crouched breathless behind a terrace wall, a glow of sunlight lit up the surrounding peaks. It was a spellbinding moment that brought a gasp to Ko Sam's lips.

It also brought a dramatic change to Willis! From the straw bag slung over his shoulder he drew out the precious jade mask and held it up carefully in front of him,

Ttza/ he cried in an uncertain wavering voice. Ttza/ he repeated more boldly this time, stepping slowly forward.

Crouching low, Rhodes and the others were already moving back the way we had come. I assumed that they meant to clamber up the blind side of the rocky knoll and surprise Willis at the top, but as I started to follow, Rhodes motioned to me to stay put. 'James/ he whispered, 'I want you to watch him. Do you understand?'

As he hurried away I turned back to the amphitheatre. Willis seemed to be in a trance. He walked with slow deliberate tread across to the foot of the rock and began climbing the narrow flight of hewn steps.

When he reached the top, I could see him clearly silhouetted against the light. He stood there beside the great stone dial, on the very edge. As the light bathed him, a look of triumph flushed his face. He wasn't looking down at all. He was staring straight ahead across the gorge to where, between the opposite peaks, the first rays of the morning sun were breaking through.

'Itza/ he shouted triumphantly, the cry echoing back across the gorge. 'Itza', he proclaimed. He raised the mask above

his head, held it aloft a moment and then pulled it over his face.

A shaft of sunlight gleamed on the gem eyes, but it was no trick of light that persuaded me that the figure standing there by the altar at Macchu Picchu was no longer Willis. I had no doubt that something had come back from the past, something risen finally from its entombment of centuries. Something gaining strength with every second of warming, life-giving sun.

'Itza' boomed a voice that was no longer human, but even as the sound reverberated around the immense gallery of the gorge, another cry, or chorus of cries rent the air, breaking the spell. I heard Bof's frenzied yelping and then a frantic shout from Rhodes as three figures came leaping and scrambling over the crest of the rock.

They rushed at Willis and with one blow, grabbed the jade mask and came hurtling down the stepway straight towards me.

'James, stop them!'

When Rhodes shouted, I didn't know if Willis had fallen over the edge or not. I lunged forward, head down, arms flailing. I think I must have clobbered Freiberg Fritz somewhere sacred for I heard a very indignant highpitched 'Mein Gott,' and when the boots and bodies cleared there was one winded villain lying poleaxed against the wall, and the other two back on their feet, scurrying off along the track, towards the Inca bridge.

There are moments when you find a strength you never thought you possessed. God knows how I managed to sprint after Fritz and his pal. Probably blind fury had a lot to do with it. I was damned if anyone was going to 'collar' the mask at this stage, certainly not 'Freiberg'.

There was an open gate beside a thatched rest house on the perimeter of the ruins and after that, the path zig-zagged steeply down to the bridge.

'Freiberg' and the scar-faced Indian were nearly half way across as we ran out onto the bridge after them. Rhodes had overtaken me on the way down and our combined weight caused the fragile suspension to shudder so violently that the other two had to clutch at the ropes so as not to fall off into the river below.

It was now that they made their mistake. Seeing we were unarmed, they stopped running and turned menacingly back towards us, Fritz twirling his karate sticks and the bandit brandishing his machete.

The only thing in our favour was that the narrow bridge prevented more than one of them at a time facing us. Fritz, who had been in front, held the mask, but when they turned, it was the squat Indian who faced Rhodes.

He never knew what hit him. One moment he was lunging forwards with his machete and the next he was tumbling backwards, bringing Fritz down in the process. 'Go for their feet,' yelled Rhodes.

I was down on my knees anyway, trying not to fall off. In the confusion I might have grabbed the wrong feet, for Rhodes went down on top of the other two; a frenzied heap of bodies scrabbling for a hold on the loose planks. For an instant I glimpsed the green mask, then it vanished. I was sure it had dropped off, when suddenly I saw Rodriguez clambering past, grasping the rope support with one hand and clutching the mask with the other. He had darted in and darted out again. It was the neatest manoeuvre you could imagine.

'Got it Cap'n/ he sang, 'Got it!'

Rhodes simply grunted. He was trying to back off without getting himself stabbed. Bof too played his part although in his enthusiasm he sometimes mistook friends for enemies. Fritz was yelling like mad. Trapped under the Indian, his leg must have been wedged between the planks, for as we retreated down the bridge, the pair of them were still trying desperately to free themselves.

If it sounds a bit like 'Keystone Cops' I can assure you that was simply our considerable luck. Luck that I regret to say wasn't repeated. However, at least we had the mask, and when we had hauled ourselves breathless and battered back up to Macchu Picchu, the other bandit had made himself scarce and we found Willis unhurt but dazed, with Ko Sam kneeling beside him.

He didn't take any notice of us. 'Will's!' I called as we clambered up to them. 'Willis we've got ...'

A hand gripped my arm. 'Don't!' hissed Rhodes. 'Better he doesn't know.' Instead he announced cheerfully, 'We've put the rogues to flight Billy. How are you?'

Willis turned His head slowly and regarded us in a dazed speechless way. It was clear that he was taking none of this in. I doubt whether he even recognised us. His eyes were lifeless. Whatever they saw at that moment, it was certainly not the four of us standing on that rocky pinnacle high above the Urumamba river. In space and time Willis was further away than any of us could reach.

The sun had vanished behind lowering clouds and a cold drizzle fell over the mountain top. Rhodes stared back over the ruins to where the track wound up the gorge. Soon the tourists would be arriving. It couldn't be too soon for me. 'Come along Billy,' said Rhodes. 'It's high time we got you back to Cuzco.'

To me he muttered, 'Now the hard bit begins, make no mistake, those rogues haven't finished with us yet by a long chalk.' As we helped Willis up, I couldn't resist saying, 'Well, at least you've got what you came for.'

But he said nothing.

## TWENTY

### *Night Train to Puno*

The temperature plunged that evening. We came out from La Chola - to discover snow up to our ankles. Willisf who hadn't uttered a word all the way back from Macchu Picchu, remained oblivious to everything.

Leaving the Plaza des Armas, with the cathedral gleaming like gold through the snowflakes, we turned up into Procadures - a narrow alleyway running parallel to Sapphi, but offering rather more shelter. At the corner there was a shop crowded with space-invader games, and we were watching them when I distinctly heard someone call Tifi'. A sudden lull in the storm revealed a stooping figure, trudging up the alley twenty yards ahead, bent double against the snow and dragging something behind it. Tifi' I heard again, and then the flurries blinded us. It couldn't have taken ten seconds to reach the spot, but whoever it was had vanished. On either side narrow unlit lanes threaded between the houses, but the snow had already covered up any tracks.

Willis gazed bleakly ahead. The stubble on his chin was frosted with snow. Between us we dragged him slowly up the lane to the Pension Familiar.

The train south to Puno left from the station at the foot of Avendida Sol at 6 a.m. Half an hour before that we were sheltering in the yard outside sipping mate tea dosed

with anis. A bowler-hatted lady served it from a steaming bucket at 100 soles a mug. In the rain-drenched darkness, it went a long way to keep out the cold.

Once on board, the train turned into a kitchen. All the bowler-hatted cooks of Cuzco seemed to be toiling up and down the carriages with tubs of chicha, and buckets of llama stew and rice.

Outside it grew lighter. There were patches of blue sky, sombre red cliffs, grey mountains and distant snowy peaks. At every wayside halt more food sellers came aboard. A lady with a white topper sold us bread rolls, a ragged boy passed with a basket of peppers, a girl offered bunches of narcissi. Along the carriage passed a parade of cherries, onions, corn cobs and steaming plates of 'cau-cau', otherwise known as tripe. A man staggered through with half a Hama carcass over his shoulder and a hatchet to chop off joints. A woman offered a pair of bleeding rams' heads with curly horns. There were butchered sheep selling at a few dollars each, and whole cheeses. 'Quesos, quesos/' cried the cheese sellers. 'Chicha, chicha,' called the beer girls. In the drab afternoon twilight we reached Juhaca and changed trains.

Indians in woolly caps were spading snow off the platform as we trudged through a blizzard to the three unlit carriages destined for Puno+ Inside it was both pitch dark and very crowded. We were lucky to get seats at all.

As we jolted out of the station, snow started flying in through the broken windows. It was freezing cold and I was grateful to have Sammy snuggling beside me. All I could

think of was getting to Puno and finding somewhere warm to sleep.

Willis was sitting two rows in front of us. Easy to keep an eye on, as he was a head taller than anyone else. At least he had been when I last looked. Now the familiar

head had disappeared, I thought he'd nodded off, when I felt an unfamiliar hand slipping down inside my coat accompanied by a reek of garlic breath. Even then I didn't realise what was happening until I heard Rodriguez cry, 'Lookout, Mister!'

In the crowded confusion of the carriage I had no idea what was going on except that we were being robbed. A lot of things flashed through my mind simultaneously, but the main one was a sense of helplessness; the knowledge that even if our attackers chopped our heads off there wasn't a soul in the entire carriage who would lift a finger to help the gringos.

'Billy/ I heard Rhodes shout. "Hang on, old lad." He dragged off the man who had been trying to rob me, and pushed us all forward. "Clutch your bags close to you," he shouted.

Suddenly an eerie flash of moonlight lit up the carriage, revealing for a brief moment the white face of Willis at the end of the compartment. There were several bulky shapes grappling with him, but he seemed too dazed to offer much resistance.' 'Help the poor bugger!' panted Rhodes, shoving for all he was worth. "Help him!" But as we finally got there,

the door from the next compartment burst open and more men pushed in.

"Slam the bloody door/ Rhodes bellowed. "Stop "em, James." But it was the train which saved us, with a sudden braking jolt that flung the intruders off balance and had us all hurtling forwards.

"Get out!" Rhodes shouted. He didn't give us time to think. With a single heave he flung Willis across at me and bundled us all into the open doorway. "Jump, for God's sake, jump/ But I couldn't let go. Perhaps it was the rushing wind and snow, or the sparks flying from the screaming rails, but instinct told me to cling on for dear life.

Rhodes yelled 'Sammy, you jump!' I felt her push past me, Rhodes grunting as he heaved her out. Then he dragged Willis uncomplaining and bundled him into the night. 'Come on, Mister,' I heard the boy pipe. After that I just closed my eyes, clutched my bag and jumped. Next moment I was plunging head first through the snow, rolling over and over, gasping for breath, snow filling my mouth, eyes and nostrils. I felt I was going to suffocate, and then something huge squashed me, and my tongue was thick with blood and grit.

After a moment, the mass on top shifted. 'Sorry old lad,' chuckled Rhodes from somewhere above. 'Happy landings, eh?' A welcome hand helped tug me back up the bank beside the track, where I saw the dark shapes of Ko Sam and the boy peering down.

'You okay, mister?'

Spitting out some of the snow I sat down on the rails beside Willis. He didn't say a word. The train rattled away into the howling blizzard. Every moment I expected a dozen bandits to leap out and chase us up the track, but the frozen snowswept wilderness lay empty and unpossessed on either side.

After examining his bag, Rhodes uttered a rousing cheer. 'My lucky lads, that's scotched the blighters.' And vigorously dusting himself down, he burst into the opening bars of the Lincolnshire Poacher. 'Oh it's my delight on a shining night in the season of the year'.

The man was quite mad, but it made the boy laugh. Ko Sam squeezed my hand. Between us we hauled Willis upright and stumbled off down the track in the direction of Puno.

That was all we had to do, according to Rhodes; 'Just follow the railway. If we don't freeze to death first,' he added cheerfully.

Tripping over frozen sleepers, at an altitude of sixteen thousand feet and with the temperature about thirty below, isn't my idea of a gentle night's stroll, although that's precisely what Rhodes encouraged us to think it was. I believe he could have founded a glee club on the moon! The succession of hearty tunes which he forced us to sing with him alternately made me love and hate him. On balance, there was more hate, especially when he got round to thumping us like punchbags whenever we dawdled.

Bowed forwards against the storm, with Willis clinging to my shoulder, I even heard him faintly croaking out the familiar words of 'Jerusalem', of all unlikely mountain ditties.

By midnight even the singing faltered. We were too numb and miserable. For some time Willis had been mumbling under his breath, and now he suddenly started chanting out loud. I thought that he really was going potty, but then Rodriguez whispered, 'Mister, you know what Cap'n Willis sayin'?'

'Of course not,' I snapped, 'He's off his rocker, I suppose.'

The boy shook his head. 'Mister, he's speakin' in Quechua tongue. It ain't English, it ain't Spanish. It's Quechua, for sure. How he know to speak Inca language. Mister?'

That was something I could not answer, either then or now. However, it soon became clear that Willis, in contrast to the rest of us, was actually gaining in strength. Despite the appalling conditions, he started to walk without our help, clutching his poncho around him, and peering ahead, where the faint lines of the track dipped and curved across the snowbound 'altiplano'.

We reached Lake Titicaca at 3 a.m. It was an awesome sight. The blizzard had died out some time earlier and now, trapped between giant snowy peaks the vast lake glowed, dark and sepulchral in the moonlight.

The lights of Puno showed faintly ahead but Rhodes was against continuing along the railway track in case the bandits

might be waiting. Instead we clambered down until we reached the shore.

'Mister/ shrilled the boy, 'Cheer up. Ain't no more snow/

My face was too stiff with cold to say anything, except nod gratefully. Rhodes, meanwhile, was striding to the far end of the beach. What had caught his attention were two reed canoes pulled up on the shore, but I couldn't believe it when he turned to me and said, 'I want you and Willis to take this one. We'll paddle the other/

That at least restored my powers of speech. 'Where on earth are we going?'

Rhodes grinned. 'Nowhere on earth, James.' He pointed into the lake. 'The reed isles of Urus - the best hiding-place in the world. That's where we're going.'

## TWENTY-ONE

### *The Reed Islands of Urus*

Between us we dragged the two canoes into the water. They were the oddest things I had ever set my eyes on; long bulbous bundles of reeds bound together at each end, bellying out in the middle. We climbed in gingerly, expecting to step straight through the bottom, but the canoe took our weight, wobbling in a rather water-logged manner.

The others got into the second canoe. Rodriguez was standing in the back punting, while Rhodes paddled.

'Get a move on,' he said, 'We've got to get out to the reed islands by dawn.' They glided ahead of us into the open lake.

Fortunately we didn't have to go very far to reach the first outlying bands of tortura reed. As the sky paled behind the distant mountains, we were already paddling up a broad channel between tall banks of reeds. An hour later, we rested, cooling our blistered hands in the clear, cold water. Reaching down, Rhodes pulled up several reed stalks. He chopped off the bottom six inches, peeled one with his penknife and popped the end in his mouth. 'Chew it,' he recommended, handing the pieces round. 'Tastes a bit like celery.'

The sun glared off the surface and we were soon sweating beneath our thick coats. Rhodes urged us not to

take them off. 'It's easy to forget how cold the air is up here,' he insisted.

A long way off, something metallic dazzled above the reed tips. Rhodes immediately changed course towards it. We entered a wide lagoon of clear water. On the further side men were fishing out of reed canoes. They glanced up as we passed but took no more interest in us. Beyond them, a cluster of reed huts faced the open water. Spindly children, clad in the shabbiest of rags were already racing along the reed banks to greet us. We moored the canoes and climbed ashore.

It felt as if the decks were dancing under us. The reed island sagged and wobbled at every step. We crossed over to the shiny tin roof that had acted as our beacon and found a sign proclaiming 'Adventist Church'. The ragged children jabbered around us, plucking at our clothes and whining for coins. Peering up from beneath manes of matted black hair, they showered us with impish grins, runny noses and rotted teeth.

The women were sitting outside the crude reed shelters, knitting with brightly-coloured wools. 'Compra me, compra me,' they pleaded.

The entire island was less than a hundred yards wide. The few patches that had been covered with soil sprouted a paltry crop of potatoes. On bamboo screens hundreds of tiny lake fish were curing in the sun.

All we wanted to do at this stage was to rest in peace, but it was impossible to avoid being pestered. We crouched on a patch of dried reed and decided what to do next.

All this time Willis had been acting quite normally. It was only his silence that set him apart. By mutual consent we refrained from pestering him with awkward questions. He sat in the circle listening and glancing about him. I may have been imagining it, but several times I noticed a peculiar glint in his eye as he gazed towards Rhodes' duffel bag, where the jade mask lay wrapped. I had no doubts that he knew it was there.

From where we were sitting, we had a clear view south over the vast waters of the lake to where a line of snowy peaks spiked the horizon.

'That's Bolivia/ Rhodes pointed. 'Eighty miles south of here, the entire lake narrows between two headlands, just a few hundred yards apart. It's called the Straits of Tiquinis. Isn't that so Billy?'

Squinting southwards, Willis nodded slowly.

Rhodes went on, 'The land frontier is much nearer. And if you want my opinion, the sooner we're across it the better for all concerned/

I can't see frontiers making much difference to bandits/ I objected, but Rhodes had a ready answer.

'If we can get across without their knowledge they won't know for sure that we haven't headed to Arica on the coast

and gone south into Chile. It should delay them long enough for us to catch a flight out of La Paz. One day is all we need/ I was unconvinced. 'They've only got to scout out here in a motor boat, and they'll catch us like sitting ducks/ I said morosely.

To my surprise Rhodes agreed. 'Exactly!' he exclaimed, clapping a hand on my shoulder. 'So tonight we paddle back to the mainland, find the track that runs south along the shore to Yunguyo - if the rains haven't made it impassable - and dodge across into Bolivia. A little further on there's the resort town of Copocabana where I daresay we'll find a bus to take us on to La Paz.'

We set out, as the sun dipped over the lake. Black clouds of mosquitos descended to torment us. For an hour it was insufferable, but finally as the temperature plunged, the mosquitos vanished. Now we had only the long cold night to contend with.

There was also the problem of hunger. Our efforts to obtain food on the islands had failed miserably. Apart from chewing tortura reed we had eaten nothing for two days, and we were all as weak as kittens, But despite cold and hunger, at least we had a clear windless night and a bright moon for which to be thankful.

Hour after hour, we paddled slowly across the still surface of the lake. As it was too deep to punt, we used the poles as steering oars. I would have preferred to switch boats and go with Ko Sam, but Rhodes insisted that we stayed as we were.

Fortunately for us, there was a southerly current inshore. When at last the dawn mist cleared off the lake, we found ourselves past the headland we had been aiming for, and less than a mile out from the shore. By the time the sun was up we had beached the canoes and were struggling inland across soft boggy slopes towards the track. After less than an hour's wait Rodriguez spotted a truck in the distance, ploughing slowly through the deep pools which flooded much of the track. The driver was going through to Copacabana and while Rhodes settled the price we climbed over the tailboard to join the other travellers crowded in the back. In two hours we reached the frontier.

We had no trouble getting out of Peru, but the Bolivian border post, a little distance further on appeared completely deserted. Undeterred, our driver briskly escorted us into the empty police hut and fished around in drawers until he found an entry marker. He spat on the ink pad, tested the result on the back of his wrist and expressing a satisfied grunt stamped our passports one by one. He also obliged us by changing our Peruvian soles into wads of Bolivian pesos, and then deciding to forego customs formalities, gathered his flock together and drove off down the track towards Copacabana.

In summer Copacabana may resemble a bustling resort village, but now in the winter it stood deserted. In the shady plaza, the iron benches under the mimosa trees were occupied only by chattering schoolchildren and old men. A dusty bus waited in the midday sunshine. Christened rather

elaborately 'The 2nd of February', it left for La Paz two hours later. Among the passengers were several Bolivian "Hari Krishnas" who spent the journey chanting mantras.

After climbing through dry hills for an hour, we dropped steeply down to the shallow straights of Tiquinia. Here the bus was nudged onto a raft and poled across the narrows to the farther shore. Southwards the lake spread out again, vast as ever.

We reached La Paz at dusk. Twinkling with lights, the city hung suspended below us in a deep bowl between overhanging mountains. Our '2nd of February' bus circled lower and lower into the busy depths, until we finally 'touched down' close to Plaza San Francisco.

Although the Hotel Republica in Avendida Comercio had recently been renovated, it retained the charm of an old inn. Neat balconied rooms overlooked cobbled courtyards, Rhodes and Rodriguez guarded Willis on the ground floor while Ko Sam and I shared a room next door.

'All we have to do now,' claimed Rhodes cheerfully, as he and I shared a nightcap in a bar further down the street, 'Is catch the next flight home. In fact,' he added, permitting himself a yawn, 'Our only problem now, is what to do with Rodriguez.'

I nodded. Taking the boy back to Europe was out of the question. It was one thing sneaking him through South America. Quite another trying to evade Immigration at Heathrow.

Next morning was crisp and cold, until the sun rose above the mountains and warmed up the city. Rhodes left early to visit the travel agencies and check on flight times and fares. He took Willis with him, leaving us to wander around on our own. When we changed money, we found ourselves left with supermarket bags full of 1000 peso notes - the only denomination printed. Inflation was so high that the banks didn't even bother to announce their interest rates.

At the far end of Avendida Comercio, a path led down to an amusement park, where the chief attraction was an immense metal slide. Half the juvenile population of the city - Rodriguez included - were flying down it on old sacks.

Ko Sam and I lay in the grass and watched the mountains through half-closed eyes.

We met the others back at the hotel, in the early afternoon. Rhodes was in one of his bantering moods and even Willis appeared a lot happier than I had seen him look for ages. As if a responsibility had been lifted from him. Perhaps it was the airline tickets Rhodes was waving around. Everyone seemed cheerful, apart from Rodriguez. Rhodes didn't say what he had planned for him.

At three o'clock we were drinking coffee in the sunny courtyard of the Hotel Republica. Shortly after that, Ko Sam and I went to our room for a siesta, where both of us promptly fell fast asleep. Somehow in the next half hour, Willis succeeded in gaining Rodriguez' confidence and immobilising Rhodes. With the jade mask safely under his shirt and a plastic bag brim full of Bolivian pesos, he, the

boy and Bof slipped away to the bus terminal in Avendida Peru.

By the time Rhodes staggered into our room, clutching his head, they were already several hours out of the city, on the evening bus to Cochabamba,

My skull felt as though it was filled with lead. Willis must have slipped enough sleeping pills into our coffee to put the passengers of an entire jumbo jet to sleep.

It was a change to see Rhodes outwitted. He even acknowledged Willis' cunning with good grace. 'Clever bugger!' he muttered more than once. 'It's not difficult to see how he persuaded Rodriguez either/ he admitted after a pause. 'The kid must have known we would have to leave him behind. I suppose he decided he was better off taking pot luck with Billy/

I couldn't tell whether he was holding his head to fend off his throbbing headache or the pangs of remorse. 'So where have they hopped to?' I queried. 'Even the kid wouldn't agree to going back to Macchu Picchu.'

'It's not Macchu Picchu/ Rhodes muttered grimly.

I turned to Ko Sam, but she was watching Rhodes.

'It reminds me/ he began wearily, 'Of another occasion when Billy tried it. It was in the Solomon Islands/

'Tried what?'

He stared abstractedly in front of him. 'To reach the source of the river, to find the home of the Gods, to discover his own lost tribe — wherever or whatever that may be/

## TWENTY-TWO

### Reaching the River

There was no way out of the city that night. The train line south had been blocked by a landslip, and all the long-distance buses had already left.

Next morning the worst effects of the excess of sleeping tablets had dissipated, and although I still felt a bit fuzzy around the edges, we were alert enough to persuade the bus companies to let us see yesterday's passenger lists, on the easy pretence of looking for a friend,

Willis hadn't even bothered to disguise his name. Perhaps he really wants us to follow him/ I suggested to Ko Sam, but she only shrugged non-committally. Although I let the subject drop, it returned to worry me throughout the long day, as we waited impatiently for the evening buses. Willis had left a trail as clear as daylight. I couldn't believe he would willingly lead us into a trap. Mesmerised as he was, he must surely have realised by now, that the path he had set out on could only lead to his doom. Like the clutching hand of a drowning man, he was still hoping we would come to his rescue.

I'm convinced of it/ I persisted to the others, but Rhodes was still too hopping mad with himself to take much interest.

And then the next blow fell. Having booked our seats on the Cochabamba bus earlier, we returned with our bags up the steep Avendida Peru, in the late afternoon. At that

altitude the streets of La Paz were a test for anyone's stamina, and by the time we reached the terminal, I was winded and dizzy. Panting my way to a bench I flopped down, guarding our luggage beside me, while the other two went to check up on the bus.

It was very crowded in the terminal, everyone pushing through with bundles. I felt a tap on my shoulder but it was only as I turned back that I realised with a sickening shock how I had just fallen for the oldest trick in the game. In the twinkling of an eye, my red travelling bag and Rhodes' big duffel had both vanished.

As I leaped up the crowd parted just a fraction and I spotted a familiar large black suitcase but before I could get there, it vanished in a sea of bodies.

Grabbing the remaining bags, I rushed across to where Rhodes and Ko Sam were still patiently queueing. 'We've been robbed,' I cried and set off in a desperate pursuit, spurred on by the knowledge that the thieves were only seconds away. I even burst into the lavatories thinking they might be hiding in the cubicles. As the seconds became minutes, a feeling of hopelessness came over me, and although I kept on searching, I knew it was useless. Our bags could have been dropped into sacks and spirited away under our very noses. I collapsed on a bench, utterly miserable.

To my surprise, Rhodes accepted the loss very well. 'They'll be as mad as hell when they discover there's no mask.'

I looked at him in astonishment. 'I thought they were just thieves.' Then I remembered the black suitcase and he nodded grimly. 'Friend Fritz no doubt. But I wouldn't give much for our chances of spotting him in this mob. The best thing we can do is press on and keep our eyes skinned.'

As we sat in the bus, waiting for it to pull out, Ko Sam sympathetically put her arm round me. "James, if someone tap you on the shoulder your turn round, okay?7

"But I should have had my foot through the bag straps."

She shook her head. "We manage, you see.' But I knew it wasn't going to be that easy. Worst of all was the loss of maps. I only hoped that Rhodes had memorised where we were heading after Cochabamba.

Perhaps Cochabamba is a pretty town by daylight. All we saw of it were the shabby streets close by the market and these, were piled high with refuse. Outside an all-night bar, a crowd of drunks shouted after us. Men lay snoring in the gutter. In the market, two tea ladies were already setting up their buckets of mate tea. They told us we might find a bus or a truck leaving for the rivers.

From earlier discussions, we all knew that beyond Cochabamba the mountains dropped down to the sultry Amazonian basin. Somewhere to the east, flowing northwards for a thousand miles and more, were the tributaries of the river Marmore. Willis, Rhodes had insisted,

must be making for this watershed. Beyond it he could not go, for beyond it there was nothing but jungle.

So here we were in Cochabamba, trying to get a lift on anything going east towards the rivers. In La Paz, we had been informed that all the roads heading further north were impassable, but that we still might be able to reach a settlement on the headwaters of the Ichito river. The place was called Puerto Villerhoel. It was the last name we had and we guarded it preciously. Lose it, and we had lost any hope of ever finding Willis or the jade mask.

Turning a corner, in the dim half light of that chill dawn, we came on a curious group of young men, loading what looked like ice-cream boxes onto a dilapidated minibus. 'Puerto Villerhoel?' suggested Rhodes, and to

our surprise they nodded, though not entirely convincingly, for when we asked the driver, he didn't seem to know how long the journey would take, or how much it would cost. However, he was very bullish about getting us aboard. 'Okay, gringo, okay!' he cried. And while the last of the ice-cream boxes was tied on the roof, their vendors squeezed up to make room for us in the back, and we set off. They were going to a Sunday market. They threw out a place name but it meant nothing to us.

Meanwhile we were descending steadily down forested gorges, the road becoming a slithery river of mud which we squelched through up to the axles. It was difficult enough going downhill, so how they would ever get back I couldn't imagine. By mid-morning we reached the lowlands, and an

hour later stopped at a bustling roadside market in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere. The track was completely blocked with old trucks, donkey carts, tents, shelters, and a crush of people. The sun blazed down and the lush undergrowth steamed out. Sweating profusely, we stripped off our mountain clothing and pushed our way half a mile to the far end of the market, to wait for a truck going east. A man with a basket of bread rolls, and a little girl were also waiting for a lift. He nodded when we said 'Puerto Villerhoel?' but he didn't know where it was.

After two hours, a truck emerged unsteadily from the melee of the market. The driver was affectionately cradling a flagon of chicha beer. We all climbed in the back, and he took us twenty kilometres or so, pausing to replenish his chicha at a forest shack on the way. He forded several fairly treacherous streams, with one hand on the wheel and the other nursing his beer, bellowing out songs all the while. Finally we reached a wide and sandy river, where in midstream, he seemed to lose his nerve,

crying on the saints as the water level rose over the wheels. Somehow we lurched forwards, but at the far bank the driver declared he would go no further, and vanished into a shack, in search of chicha.

An hour later another truck wobbled across the river. Although it was packed tight, we managed to squeeze on board and continued eastwards to yet another Sunday market.

Those trucks we could see beside the track were all broken down. Indians had been camping beside them for days, waiting for a ride. In low spirits we sat in the stifling heat of a food shelter, trying to force down stale rice and beans, when suddenly I heard the unmistakable rumble of a truck engine, and hurrying through the crowd we came upon a decrepit bus, with threadbare tyres, trying to get under way. Enveloped in clouds of diesel smoke and rocked by erratic explosions from the engine, the bus was so packed that there was not even standing space. We were lucky to be able to cling on the roof.

Frequently during the next few hours we had to climb down and help push the bus through mud and floods. At other times the low branches threatened to sweep us from the roof, but at last, as the sky reddened over the forest and the evening mist smoked out of the soggy ground, we reached a clearing of low huts and shuddered to a final halt on the bank of the Ichito river.

## TWENTY-THREE

### Papamanchua

Stepping off that bus was like entering another world - the river world. It greeted us with a damp, brackish breath. Mosquitos whined thick as fur over our faces, marsh frogs piped underfoot. Below the steep mud bank, half drowned in the deepening twilight protruded the outlines of rafts capped by rickety wheelhouses, some sporting washing-lines, others a flickering lantern.

In the settlement itself, figures flitted through the darkness like pale ghosts. Rickety planks bridged stagnant pools leading to dimly lit shacks. The humid dark was alive with flitting bats, and the cackle of roosting birds. From the dark wall of forest, across the river, echoed the shrieking bellow of the howler monkeys.

More neighbourly by far, sounded the clink of beer bottles from the bar of the Hotel Hanover, a cluster of huts sinking slowly into the swamp. The room we were allocated sloped so steeply that we had to rope the beds to the front to stop them slipping downhill to the back, where a large hole in the wall suggested previous misadventures.

It was while we were waiting for supper that we had our best news yet. A group of beer drinkers shouted across the room to tell us about the last gringo to stay here. A tall red-bearded missionary accompanied by a small boy and a dog. They had left earlier today on a trading craft named the Cruz del Sur. Mention of this boat produced grins from the other drinkers. The Cruz, it seemed, was the leakiest craft on the river. In fact, the crew had spent the previous week up to their necks in water, trying to caulk the seams with river mud. Anyone who willingly paid to travel on her must be mad.

Later, as we sat around a solitary candle in our room, I felt prompted to ask the question which had been in-triguing me, since the night in La Paz. When Willis had escaped with the mask, Rhodes admitted that he had attempted

something similar before. 'You said it happened in the Solomon Islands?' I reminded him.

Rhodes nodded. 'He was helping out down the coast at a mission school.' He paused to smack a mosquito. 'Billy had built himself a hut beside the river. From there he had a fine view of Papamanchua.'

'Papamanchua?'

'It's the volcanic peak that dominates the entire island. Local legend claims it's the home of the Gods. Billy tried to climb it.' Rhodes twisted round to face us. 'It's not like a Sunday stroll up Snowdon. There's forty miles of impenetrable jungle. The only way inland is along the river banks. There are tribes in the interior who have never seen a white man and will hurl a spear through you because they believe you are spirits of their ancestors come back to haunt them. No one had ever succeeded in climbing Papamanchua. The last government survey team that tried were all murdered.'

'And Willis. Did he get there?'

'He set off with a couple of kids as guides, a sack of yams and a machete. Three days later an earthquake shook the island, followed by a tremendous storm. Thunder and lightning lit up the peak like a bombardment. We had virtually given up Billy for dead when out he staggers more dead than alive. "The Gods were angry/' he said.'

The candle spluttered and went out. None of us moved. Outside the moonlight bathed the river.

You sound as convinced as Willis, that the gods exist,' I said cautiously.

He shrugged. 'That I never doubted. What worries me, knowing the bloodthirsty nature of Itza, is just what sacrifice he may demand. Billy might not get off so lightly next time.'

I didn't have to close me eyes to see the scaly mask of Itza staring at us in the Tikal cave, I couldn't supress a shiver. 'So if Willis manages to get Itza back to his tribe, what will happen to him.'

Rhodes moved out of the shadows. His face was white in the moonlight. 'They will sacrifice him, just as they sacrifice any white men they find, but what they do to them first I would rather not say. Except that you wouldn't wish it to happen to your worst enemy on earth.'

## **TWENTY-FOUR**

### ***The Stranger and the Enemy***

The river bank scene that greeted us next morning, had all the hustle and bustle of a Mississippi levee in the days of the slave trade. The deserted craft of the previous evening had come alive. Lines of half-naked Indians, sweating under huge loads, toiled back and forth down the mud bank where those trucks that had made it through from Cochabamba were busy unloading. In the open river, dugout canoes slipped past on the current. A girl stepped down the mud bank to rinse her hair, then her breasts. An old lady, with goitres the size of melons, sat on a raft combing out nits from her husband's hair into her lap. In midstream, a huge fish somersaulted above the water and vanished.

At the Hotel, we learned that a boat named Eli was due to leave that day and we hurriedly picked our way along the bank looking for her. The raft names were tacked to the wheelhouses and the Eli lay at the end of the line.

Three men watched us from a table set beneath the wheelhouse. The nearest was a massive barefoot Indian with long tousled hair, clad only in a pair of filthy shorts. His skin was embellished with faded tattoos, and his left arm stamped with a regimental insignia. At the far end of the table, with his back to the gleaming mysteries of the powerful diesel engine, sat a chubby Bolivian holding a

Bible. However, it was the third man who commanded our attention. A tall, spidery character with a shaven skull and snake-slit eyes, who regarded us with a lazy, cunning smile. One of his teeth was capped with gold and a wispy beard sprouted from a long tapering chin. Never taking his eyes off us for a moment, he sliced a splinter from the table edge with a black clasp knife and proceeded to pick his teeth. The mixed blood of a dozen pirate forebears flowed through his veins. White rape, black slavery and bastard Chinese were printed across his features, but it was the oriental that predominated. He could have stepped straight off the deck of a Siamese raiding junk.

I glanced back at the man holding the Bible, half convinced that we were about to witness some terrible oath-making ceremony. If Rhodes hadn't been there, I would have bowed out gracefully with Ko Sam and hopped it back to the Hanover - provided it hadn't capsized into the swamp in the meantime. But Rhodes seemed completely at ease. This was the world in which he thrived.

'Buonas Dias, Capitan,' he said cheerfully to this 'Ho Chi Min' character, and went on to explain that we wanted to get down river, and could he take us?

Ho Chi Min didn't say no, but he didn't say yes either. Come back later,' he said dismissively. When Rhodes enquired whether it was true the Eli was leaving that day, he just watched us. The smile still lingered around the edges of his mouth, but his narrowed eyes were as hard as gemstones.

Leaving Ko Sam to keep watch on the Eli, I was delegated to act as Rhodes' bearer while he made the rounds of the Chinese stores, bargaining for hammocks, mosquito netting, and an assortment of extra food to help us out on the journey. Stale bread rolls, bananas, oranges, tins of sardines and a large chunk of very hard cheese that smelt like soap. Then he visited each store again, seeking out the smaller items - needle and thread, toilet paper, aspirins, lined paper, string, insect repellent and some cheap packets of loosely-filled cigarettes, at a couple of pence a time. It amazed me what one could acquire in these stores if one haggled long and persistently.

We were all three drinking beer back at the Hanover, when a small boy ran up shouting, 'Barca Eli leaving, Barca Eli leaving.' Clutching our bags we hurried along the bank, to discover the gangplank already up and the engine churning. Fortunately the nearside pontoon was still close enough for us to scramble aboard, just as the Eli, backed noisily out into midstream. The wheelhouse bell tinkled furiously and we changed course, thumping our way laboriously upstream, towards the other shore.

Our expectations were dashed when, once the pontoons were moored to the far bank, the little tug raft nudged free and headed back across river to the busy waterfront, leaving us behind.

A young Indian remained to guard the cargo:- sacks of cement stacked under canvas tarpaulins, with a gap amidships to allow baling.

In the afternoon, we chopped down some palm fronds, to lay over the pontoon frame and hitched our hammocks in the shade. Afterwards we helped bale out the bilges with old tins.

At five o'clock, as the sun glared low across the brown river the Eli detached itself from the waterfront boats and came swinging back across the river. She nudged in between the pontoons, and the engine cut.

'Hey gringo!' It was Ho Chi Min beckoning us from the wheelhouse.

Apart from the Indian crew, there were several new additions to the boat. Manning the wheel beside Ho Chi Min stood a tall Bolivian with short black hair and a friendly smile who introduced himself as Captain Tonino. When he told us he was going to Guayajamerin, Rhodes couldn't have looked more pleased, especially as the fare was only 30,000 peso, less than seven pounds! It seemed a ridiculous sum. He even refused to take our money. 'Pay for cargo when it get there,' he stated.

Ho Chi Min nodded. 'Clara! (understood)' he added, dismissing us. But despite his sinister smile, my earlier fears had diminished. The Bible man, Gonzalo, was a self-appointed evangelical missionary on a one-man crusade, to the tribes along the river. There was even a woman aboard to do the cooking.

Gonzalo shook our hands and tried out his English. 'Me sailor, many times visit Panama,' he beamed.

Rhodes promptly dubbed him 'Ship's Chaplain'.

Ho Chi Min said we were leaving in the morning and ordered the crew over the sides, to caulk the seams with mud. While the cook was busy lighting a fire in half an oil drum, at the back of the pontoon. Ho Chi Min invited the three of us to join him and Captain Tonino, in a trip back across the river to Puerto Villerhoel in the Eli's dugout.

We paddled slowly upstream in the twilight using the current to push us to the other side where we stumbled ashore for a final beer at the Hanover while Tonino went off in search of an aluminium cookpot.

'Why your friend 'red beard' not wait for you?' demanded Ho Chi Min suddenly, watching us carefully over the bottle of beer he was drinking.

'What friend?' Rhodes enquired blandly. 'Not all gringos are friends.' Ho Chi Min smiled artfully. 'This gringo, your friend, or your enemy. He in great hurry to get away.' He paused. 'Almost as great a hurry as you are.'

In a more matter of fact tone he added 'You know Cruz del Sur leave without permission of the Commandante? She leak too much. Three days they put mud in her holes.' His eyes flicked to each of us in turn, seeking a reaction. Finding none, he tried another tack. 'A red-beard gringo with no luggage, a 'muchacho' with a twisted foot, a small dog. Why they insist to travel with the Cruz? Cruz del Sur stop everywhere.'

'Beats me,' said Rhodes, smiling broadly.

Ho Chi Min' shook his head. 'You not know he wants to visit the Indians? He is a missionary like Gonzalo.'

Rhodes shrugged.

'Perhaps ...' 'Ho Chi Min' frowned. Whatever he had been about to say, he thought better of it. Just then Tonino came back with a new cookpot. You eat supper on the Eli?' he asked us.

The crew boys' on the raft were crouching round the embers of the cook fire. At the head of the table, squeezed between fuel drums Gonzalo bowed his head and said 'grace'. Ho Chi Min smirked at us.

One of the boys' appeared with a plastic jug of river water. Tonino poured out a beaker for each of us. 'Bolivian whisky,' he announced with a grin.

After supper the three of us sat on the cement sacks and stared across the river to the faint lights of the settlement. A half moon shone patchily between night clouds.

Rhodes was staring at the river. I heard him mutter, 'The stranger and the enemy, we see him in the river.'

'Why do you say that?'

He looked at me dubiously. 'Something Billy misquoted once. He misquoted everything of course, but I remembered this just now.' Rhodes straightened up. 'It was while we were traipsing around Greece once, many years ago when we were students. Ever been to Delphi?'

I nodded,

"The Sacred Way up past the Temple, from the Waters of Lethe - the waters of forgetfulness. Best to do it by moonlight to get the full effect. You don't have to buy a ticket either, just climb over the fence. That's what Billy did. Full moon too. Went on his own/

"Better him than me/ I said.

Rhodes frowned. I didn't know he'd gone. I was drinking in the taverns with an American we'd just met. Charles Stanley.

I gasped.

Rhodes peered at me. 'Funny how a drink can change your lives/

'What about Willis.'

'Once we realised where he'd gone we set off after him. Found him staggering down the mountainside babbling to himself, half out of his wits. He was spouting Plato of all things. The Appolonian Hymns/

'Willis!' I exclaimed.

Rhodes agreed. 'Except of course he got it all wrong. "If the soul is to know itself it is into a soul it must look. The stranger and the enemy, we see him in the mirror." But he said river. Perhaps that's what made me think of it just now.'

For all my weariness I couldn't sleep. The overhanging forest seemed to grow more and more menacing, the black river ever more evil. Somewhere downstream Willis was lying in a hammock clutching the jade mask of Itza. What dark

currents flowed through his dreams, I wondered. 'The stranger and the enemy, we see him in the river.' Those final words haunted me throughout the long restless night.

## *TWENTY-FIVE*

### *The River Run*

Ho Chi Min woke us before dawn. 'Mister!' he hissed at me. 'Come!'

In the half light, dim shadows were silently clambering over the damp pontoons, dragging the flywheel rope up the muddy bank. Even Gonzalo abandoned his bible to join in. A grey mist shrouded the oily river. The crew hacked a passage through the wet undergrowth and the rest of us lined up like a tug-of-war team. Tonino cried, 'Vamos!' and we charged forward, snagging bare feet on the slippery roots. At the third attempt our efforts were rewarded by loud thuds and puffs of diesel smoke as the engine thumped slowly into life. We hastened back on board. Mooring ropes were cast off, the wheelhouse bell tinkled and the Eli backed slowly out into the stream. We swung majestically around, and with a series of siren hoots, gathered momentum and headed down river past the first bend, and out of sight of Puerto Villerhoel for ever.

Had we known exactly what the next few days might bring, I daresay we wouldn't have been so anxious to get away, but now with the banks slipping past, we felt only exhilaration. White herons, wading the mudbanks, paused to peer at us, birds rose squawking above the trees. Overhead, streamers of orange cloud trailed across the

faint blue sky.

Ho Chi Min stepped to the front of the raft, holding a toothbrush. After cleaning his teeth, he laid it ceremoniously on a baulk of timber, and there it remained for the entire voyage. On his way back, he paused to regard me for a moment, stuck a sliver of bamboo between his teeth and grinned, 'Okay, Mister.' Up on the wheelhouse Tonino surveyed the channel ahead.

Now that we were off, there was a relaxed air about the boat. Someone was whistling, someone chopping wood. Over the open fire in the stern, breakfast was cooking.

We passed a clearing with thatch huts scattered under the trees and trickles of smoke rising. The river was already narrower, and the current fiercer. The forest overhung the steep banks, sand bars thrust out into midstream and the snags of sunken trees poked treacherously above the surface.

Two Indian boys stood at the front of the raft with long poles, prodding for the bottom. Suddenly we hit an underwater snag. The offside pontoon we were on, lurched under us, the raft snapped and creaked. As we dropped down beyond it, one of the older crew members was already baling with the lard tin.

We stopped early that first day and went out fishing in the dugout, nosing up a narrow creek through dense forest while two Indians stood poised in the bows with wooden spears. The moment the sun went down the mosquitos

massed in a biting black cloud. Even the Indians slapped at their skins. At the same instant something large swirled under the surface and both spears flew.

It was pitch dark when we paddled back to the raft with our twenty pound prize. Gonzalo was lathering himself all over indifferent to the swarms of bugs. After supper

everyone hitched up their mosquito nets. For appearance sake Ko Sam slept apart. I failed to see why when even the crew boys were doubling up. I fell asleep to the sound of them chanting their prayers like a Sunday school class.

Next morning we were moving down river before dawn. Howler monkeys bellowed along the banks while against the paling sky a flight of herons flapped slowly overhead.

Breakfast consisted of sweet greasy hunks of fish and black coffee. Ho Chi Min paid his daily visit to the toothbrush up front, where the 'boys' stood ready with their probing poles.

For miles we glided through dead, drowned forest, the withered branches haunted by black cormorants.

Rhodes washed his clothes in a baling tin. Ko Sam stitched a button on my shirt. I lay in my hammock wondering how far ahead the Cruz might be. Suddenly, we rounded a bend, and there she was.

'Cruz del Sur/ called one of the look-out boys.

A dilapidated raft lay moored up to the only raised piece of land for miles. Thatch huts stood half hided among the trees. Indians were toiling back and forth with supplies. Both

the raft and its pontoon seemed to be listing. Washing, and empty hammocks hung about the wheelhouse, but of Willis or the boy, there was no sign.

Our attention was so taken up with the Cruz that we failed to spot the motorized canoe speeding astern. There were three Bolivians in it, burly men with unshaven faces. They climbed aboard carrying a shabby suitcase and several large bundles. Although they showed no interest in us at all we were immediately on our guard.

By the time we turned back to the Cruz, it was out of sight. I don't suppose even Rhodes had expected to catch up with it so soon. Still, as we remarked, it was better to be ahead of Willis for once, than behind him.

We spoke too soon. An hour later Ko Sam gripped my hand and pointed astern. Although the river twisted and turned, each time she came in sight, the Cruz drew closer.

I was surprised that such a rickety craft could go faster than us. I forgot she was pushing only one pontoon. When I asked Ho Chi Min he smirked, "Mister, your friend on board the Cruz?"

Making no attempt to slow down, the Cruz del Sur forced us to swerve sharply to avoid being driven onto a sandbank. As she roared past, commandeering the deeper water, the Indians aboard her cheered. We looked hard for Willis, but he must have been keeping well out of sight.

"Who are these men from the dugout?" I asked Ho Chi Min once the Cruz had disappeared ahead.

He glanced back to where they were sitting in the stern section of the pontoon, playing cards. "Mister," he asked me, "you carry guns?"

"No/ I said.

He nodded thoughtfully. "They are smugglers. Cocaine, Mister. By river into Columbia. You carry any cargo, Mister? Anything they want?"

Despite my vigorous denials, from that moment the other end of the pontoon took on a more sinister appearance. Gonzalo, Bible in hand beckoned us to come and eat. The table under the wheelhouse was getting crowded. Lunch consisted of a mess of fried rice, mashed banana and some boiled knuckles of very old donkey. Ho Chi Min sprinkled ground yucca on his plate, "Chivel, Mister," he explained when he saw me watching curiously. "You like?" The sour taste was rather worse than the food. One of the smugglers made a crude gesture and cried "Bocca negra!" Everyone laughed. "Makes you crazy for

woman, Mister/ Ho Chi Min smiled softly at Ko Sam and deliberately spooned more of the powder over my food!

After lunch, the smugglers chewed dried coca leaves and snored in their hammocks, guns on their laps, and the sacks of contraband coralled safely between them.

We were rudely awakened when the Eli hit an underwater snag. The pontoon leapfrogged into the air, tossing us out of our hammocks. The engine stopped and the raft drifted out of control in the current.

It took only seconds for the flywheel rope to be passed along the deck, but our first charge was a failure. The engine refused to fire and we were heading straight for shoals of breaking water. At our second try no one stopped and the three 'boys' at the rope end ran straight overboard, but the momentum spun the flywheel. The engine fired, the bell tinkled and the steersman spun the wheel hard over. As we picked ourselves up, the Eli clawed its way slowly back on course. The crew boys emerged wet and grinning from the river.

An hour later the channel cleared, green banks rose on both sides. The forest was as lush as ever. A great grey heron winged ponderously overhead.

In the late afternoon we rounded a bend and met the Cruz, unexpectedly moored out in the stream. There were dugouts ferrying back and forth to the shore and Indians labouring cargo up the banks, but no sooner had we passed, than her engines burst into life and she started after us.

By now, the sun was going down fast and evening shadows trailed over the river. The Cruz was still several hundred yards behind, when to our disappointment, Tonino gave the order to moor up for the night. As we turned slowly into the bank, we had a clear view of the Cruz surging down towards us. Suddenly she hit a snag

and lifted clear out of the water. For an instant the entire raft - pontoon and all - hung at a perilous angle. As it crashed down, the pontoon snapped free and careered into the current.

We found ourselves onlookers at two simultaneous dramas. The crippled Cruz, listing badly, and enveloped in smoke, was swinging heavily towards us close inshore. The pontoon was already flying past. Billy,' yelled Rhodes. For there was Willis, standing in the stern, trying to stamp out the cookfire. The pontoon deck was a chaos of spilling fuel drums.

Steering the raft for the bank, Tonino yelled at the crew to unlash the pontoons. The instant the raft was free he wrenched the wheel over, banged the bell, and with Rhodes fending off, spun round and went tearing down river in pursuit of Willis. At the same time, two of the smugglers leapt into the dugout and roared upstream to the stricken Cruz. Twice the Cruz threw out a line. The first time it fell wide, the second time it snapped as the dugout took the strain. Like a slowly-spinning top, the listing tug-raft bore down on us, everyone on it yelling. The smugglers in the dugout vainly tried to make fast, and drag her clear. Unless she sank first, collision seemed imminent. Twenty yards, fifteen, ten. She was coming straight for us. We braced ourselves for the shock.

In the last second before she struck, the Cruz began to bear away. Her bows missed by inches, but the stern swinging across smacked the side of the pontoon with an almighty crash, throwing us off our feet.

Having done its damage the Cruz lurched across the width of the river and plunged to a stop on a sandbar.

Although we weren't actually stove in, every seam had split wide open and water was spurting in. Even Gonzalo put down his Bible with alacrity and joined in the baling.

Grabbing a tin, I happened to glance down river, just in time to see the pontoon explode in flames.

'Mister!' One of the boys grabbed my arm and pointed overboard where three of the crew were already struggling to caulk the splits with rags and mud. I could think of nothing I dreaded doing more. 'Sammy!' I shouted vainly, as I jumped.

A rope trailing along the side gave me something to grab hold of. As I blindly pressed mud into the cracks I could feel unpleasant nibblings on my legs and inside my shorts. The boys on each side pointed down into the brown water. Swarms of tiny fish were darting about. 'Pequeno pirana, (little pirana)' they teased.

I've never jumped so fast in my life. The crew laughed hysterically and even the baling stopped. 'Tirana like gringo blood,' they shrieked. Fortunately by now the worst of the leaks had been stemmed. In between baling out the remaining water I watched the Eli making her way slowly back from the blazing pontoon. Closer at hand the crew of the Cruz del Sur were wading round their raft, morosely surveying the damage.

As the Eli got nearer, I could see it held three more passengers. Beside Willis stood little Rodriguez clutching Bof in his arms.

Any embarrassment at our meeting was overcome, partly by the unusual circumstances, but largely by Willis' cheery matter-of-fact manner. 'Hallo, James,' he greeted casually, as if we had bumped into each other in Regent Street, instead of on a raft in the American jungle.

I immediately noted - as I am sure Rhodes had - that Willis though dripping wet, still carried his precious straw bag. Only now, it was tied round his neck. In the deep gloom - for the overhanging forest blotted out what little light remained - it was difficult to judge his real feelings.

He had singed his right hand during the escape, but apart from wincing when Ko Sam examined it he showed no reaction at all to the change of circumstances. Rodriguez on the other hand eyed us warily. I was grateful to see Gonzalo taking him under his wing.

Downstream the pontoon was still burning like a beacon, but now the immediate dramas were over there were more pressing matters to consider. Food was the chief one. Two of the smugglers were despatched upstream in the dugout to see what they could barter from the last settlement we had passed. Despite the mosquitos everyone else tried their hand at fishing. Meanwhile a tribe of howler monkeys started squabbling overhead. There was one old fellow who wouldn't quit bellowing. To silence him the remaining smuggler fired blindly into the branches and to the astonished delight of the crew a monkey dropped stone dead in the river alongside. Rodriguez scooped it out just in time, for the water around it became alive with snapping

fish. Ho Chi Min baited a piece of fresh meat onto a rusty barb as big as a butcher's hook, and promptly fished out a large thrashing pirana.

I couldn't believe my recent lucky escape earlier. The crew hadn't been teasing after all! Ho Chi Min even had the temerity to pinch my cheek and snap his gold tooth an inch from my ear. 'Tirana, Mister. Clara!' he winked, to the general merriment of the crew.

Howler monkey meat tastes strong, at least the 'old gentleman' we chewed that night did. But not half as strong as the two smoked carcasses brought back in the dugout, along with a load of paw-paws, sugar cane and green bananas.

Those howler monkeys lasted us the entire trip, for a little goes a long way, especially in that climate. Every

morning 'Cordon Bleu', as Rhodes called the cook, rinsed the carcasses in the river and then hung them up to dry in the sun. By noon the smell was so strong even the flies left them alone! Lunch consisted of rice savoured with slivers of 'high howler'. An astonishingly putrid flavour. I even welcomed the addition of Ho Chi Min's dried yucca. As for fishing - we seemed to give that up - apart from a final expedition in the dugout the next evening, when we speared a great white-bellied stingray. Once the sting was hacked off the rest was kept to be bartered at the next settlement. This habit of stopping at settlements was a good thing in more ways than one, as it turned out - otherwise we would never have suspected the whereabouts of Fritz.

I have to admit that I was rather taken aback by the delight Willis had shown at seeing us. He couldn't have been more affable. As for the events at La Paz, he seemed genuinely to be at a loss to explain them. 'Brainstorm' was the word he favoured. If we delved further back, he resorted to the suggestion of amnesia. 'James, it's all rather like a dream/ he volunteered, 'I can remember some bits quite clearly, but nothing in any sensible order/

'And did you not perhaps wonder what happened to us?' enquired Ko Sam. 'Or were we too a part of your 'amnesia'?'

Willis regarded her bleakly. 'You won't believe how miserable I was when I realised I'd lost you. I knew that somehow I was to blame, even if I couldn't remember exactly how. It was only when I reached the river that my head cleared. At that point there didn't seem much sense in turning back - after all I had no idea where you'd be - so I pressed on. There was also Rodriguez/ he added. 'Considering I had dragged him along in the first place.'

Later, when I had the chance to chat with Rhodes in the bows, I found him less convinced. 'It's all a bit too pat, isn't it, James?' he muttered. 'A bit too convenient - though I daresay like everything else there's some truth in what he says.' He peered closely at me in the gloom. 'We'd better keep an eye on him I think. And watch out if those smugglers start getting too pally. No picnic trips up river in their dugout for Billy boy. A bit too easy to lose him with all these piranas about. I'm surprised he wasn't eaten alive when he jumped the pontoon. Probably his socks,' he added glumly.

Later that night, trying to get comfortable on the cement sacks without much success, I smuggled my face close to where I judged his ear to be and whispered through the netting, 'Willis, I'm not sure if you're supposed to know this, but I ought to tell you. Those smugglers in the dugout...'

'What of them?' he muttered.

'It's possible they're after your jade mask.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' he answered after a slight pause.

'For heaven's sake, Willis/ I hissed. 'Everyone's after your bloody Itza mask. They've already robbed us for it in La Paz, It'll be your turn next. By the way you clutch that bag of yours, they must know there's something pretty important in it.'

I sensed his face turning my way, but to my surprise, all he said was, 'James, when do you think we'll reach the Yacuma River?'

'The Yacuma. Why the Yacuma?'

'Oh nothing.' He shrugged the question off. 'I was just wondering that's all.'

We all knew that Trinidad was the next port of call. Judging by the expectations of the crew it must have been quite a place. 'Trinidad,' they murmured eagerly,

trimming each other's hair with, the ship's scissors and picking out the nits, 'Trinidad/ they crooned, plucking off facial hair with rusty tweezers in front of a cracked piece of

mirror, borrowed from the cook. 'Trinidad/ they laughed with eager eyes squatting round the cook fire, scorching their fingers, as they roasted bananas over the embers. The other phrase that was popular was 'Bocca negra'. 'Bocca negra, Mister, you like?' they asked me, convulsed with giggles.

Ho Chi Min had the tattooed Indian shave his skull until it gleamed. He glanced at me slyly. 'Bocca negra. Mister,' and glanced back critically into the mirror to study his pate.

The trouble with years of teaching is that it can confine one's point of reference. The mention of Bocca negra, brought to mind the black hole of Calcutta. It came as a surprise to discover that the 'black holes' the crew were discussing with such highpitched glee, were none other than the celebrated whores of Trinidad.

The next two days slipped by uneventfully. We no longer moored up for the night. In the clear evening air we could see snowcapped mountains rising far away to the west. Ducks flighted out of the sunset, heading for unknown swamplands. For a few moments the water turned to liquid gold and then, as the light faded, the rising moon bewitched the river to a silver thread, snaking between the dark forested banks.

Breakfast these days was stodge. A curious 'bubble and squeak mixture of chopped-up bananas and onions, fragments of mouldering potato, bits of tow rope, and any cockroaches who failed to escape the pot in time! This was rinsed down with scummy river water or coffee thinly

sweetened from the Eli's sugar jar - otherwise home of the 'Ship's cockroach'.

By this time, our own private stores were finished, apart from the hunk of 'cheese', which I managed to swap with one of the boys for a length of sugar cane. I was rather surprised when, instead of eating it, he used it to wash with!

The smugglers played countless games of dice at their end of the pontoon. Rodriguez had transferred his allegiance to the engine room and was busy oiling and polishing. Gonzalo, shaded by an immense sombrero, consulted his Bible like an almanac.

A school of dolphins snorted their way upstream. I saw Willis watching them. He always watched the river these days. For hours and hours.

## *TWENTY-SIX*

### *Rio Yacuma*

At 8.30 a.m. Tonino moored the Eli at the mouth of a muddy creek. Three thatch roofs poked above an overgrown swamp. This was Trinidad - or all we were going to see of it. The Indians muttered mutinously when Tonino boarded the motorised dugout with two of the smugglers and vanished up the creek, leaving Ho Chi Min to guard the Eli, and the remaining smuggler to guard the cocaine.

We learned that Trinidad lay fifteen kilometres up the creek. The crew sat sullenly along the pontoon, staring at their reflections in the water. Even Ho Chi Min had lost his crafty smile. Gonzalo was the only one who didn't appear put out. Rolling up his trousers and clutching his Bible he waded across the swamp to evangelise the three huts. Feeling too down in the dumps to stay on board, I followed Gonzalo's toe prints through the undergrowth, to discover him preaching enthusiastically to a huddle of ragged Indians, plus assorted piglets and hens.

Two hours later the dugout returned at speed and to our surprise the smugglers wasted no time in loading their contraband and setting off alone once more down river.

Ho Chi Min watched them depart. 'Mister,' he muttered, 'Cocaine.'

'I know.'

His eyes flickered in Willis' direction. 'What he got, your friend?'

I tried to shrug off his curiosity, He's just a traveller like us.' But I knew he didn't believe me.

Although we hadn't tasted the dubious delights of Trinidad, at least, with the smugglers gone, we didn't have to be constantly on our guard, and more of a holiday mood took over. Much to the approval of the ship's 'Chaplain', Rhodes began singing hymns. Ko Sam scrubbed her black bowler. Only Willis continued to brood. He might have been in a trance the way he stared at the river, sitting hunched up, clutching his precious straw bag closer than ever.

'He's getting worse again,' I told Rhodes.

He nodded glumly, 'It's that bloody mask!'

'Then get it away from him, throw it away, drown it. Can it be worth so very much?'

'Yes, James, it can,' was all he said.

That afternoon a canoe came chasing after us, and following a hurried discussion with those on board, Tonino, swung the Eli round and steered back across a vast lake spreading for miles through empty swampland.

It was dusk by the time we reached the raised patch of land that contained the settlement. Apart from the usual dugouts, there was also a small missionary boat moored up to the bank; a cat's cradle of hammocks strung across its

cramped cabin. Gonzalo donned his sombrero and strode purposefully aboard.

After supper I went for a stroll with Ko Sam across the island', where to our surprise we discovered an enormous 'Ark' in the process of construction. When completed this big raft-pontoon would have been sufficient to evacuate the entire population, animals and all, if the water level rose much higher.

It was only by chance that I learned news of Fritz. We returned to the Eli just as Gonzalo clambered back after his 'synod' meeting with the other brethren. 'The Catholic Church has abandoned these settlements/ he claimed. 'Also the government. Only the missionary boats bring doctors or people to help them. Sometimes foreigners even. There is a famous German woman missionary, who has been travelling the rivers for many years. A few days ago, another young German missionary came here. He take plenty photographs to send back to Europe, to help get money for these people. This he promise/

'What was he called, this German?' Ko Sam asked Gonzalo. 'Perhaps we know him/

Gonzalo shouted something across to the other boat and after a few moments' muttering, the answer drifted back softly over the water. 'Hans/

'Did he have a large black suitcase called Fifi?' I asked Gonzalo urgently. He stared at me with surprise, but nevertheless repeated the question, which caused con-

siderable mirth in the other boat. 'Kommen sie, Fifi, kommen sie,' we could hear them mimicking.

'So now we know/' said Rhodes when I told him.

T gather he was travelling in a big motorized canoe with three Bolivians. Heading downstream/

'He would be/' Rhodes muttered grimly.

We set off at dawn and soon after midday we finally came to the junction with the Rio Yacuma. It was like being back in the Ichito. The channel twisted sharply this way and that, between overhanging trees. Thick coils of creepers looped down like lost rigging. We had no notion to what height the Yacuma had flooded, but at least the water was clear and sweet for a change. There were no snags visible, and although the forests on either side were drowned, they were still living.

For five hours we chugged up river against a fast current until in the late afternoon we entered a reedy lagoon with rafts and pontoons drawn up in the shallows. Dugouts buzzed around like water beetles. Shielding our eyes against the dipping sun, the first impression of Santa Anna was that it was entirely submerged. An avenue of tile roofs, flooded up to the eaves, led back from the river. Before we had moored, we were besieged by housewives in dugouts brandishing wads of pesos and demanding to purchase whatever supplies of food we were carrying. Their disbelief turned quickly to anger when Ho Chi Min said our cargo was cement.

The crew patted their bellies and grinned. "Cement, you like eat, Mister?"

Leaving Ho Chi Min to defend the Eli against invading housewives, Tonino set out with us in the dugout. We passed a half-drowned church on our left, a pig swimming morosely outside the porch. After several hundred yards, the land shelved slightly and the dugout grounded. Wading up to our knees we continued, until we reached terra firma.

The part of Santa Anna still above water was far from deserted. The muddy streets were crowded with evening strollers. Hurricane lanterns hung in the cottages, food vendors were busy cooking fish suppers in a patch of muddied park, pigs scratched in the puddles, cows wandered about like hermits. Outside the single-storey cinema, crowds were clamouring for a film they had seen a dozen times already. Across the main plaza the solemn chants of the evening mass crackled from loud-speakers under the mimosa trees. For all the frantic hectoring of those housewives in the canoes, nobody appeared unduly hungry. There was bread, fruit and rather old tins of sardines on sale in the few stores. Only beer appeared to

be at a premium. Neither of the two bars, we discovered, had any on offer. Strolling down a muddy sidestreet, Ko Sam spotted the crude sign of a bottle painted above the low colonnade.

'Cerveva?' Rhodes queried, expecting to be disappointed. Instead a friendly little girl led us inside. We sat there drinking warm beer while darkness cloaked the flooded

town. Four of us - Rodriguez preferred to stay on the boat helping Ho Chi Min with the engine.

Later, as we sat on board the Eli, a violent thunderstorm broke over the forest to the east. It was like watching a distant battlefield: eerie flares and flashes of lightning followed by cracks and rolling explosions of thunder.

I was busy helping Rhodes rig up some sort of shelter before the storm reached us, when I noticed Willis sitting at the stern of the raft, staring ahead unconcerned, as the first bursts of rain sheeted across the river.

'Willis!' I shouted above the roar. 'Get under cover!'

A flash of lightning illuminated his face, revealing an eager innocent smile, and the next moment the rain lashed down.

'Willis!' I yelled angrily at him. 'Move, you crazy idiot!'

But he didn't hear. I struggled back to where Rhodes had raised a flap of tarpaulin into a tent.

Next morning the cargo was shifted. It appeared, after all, that we were carrying some stores; sacks of sugar and flour and even crates of Chilean wine. All of these were paid for by the various merchants who paddled out in their dugouts and paddled precariously back, laden to the brim.

Chaplain General' Gonzalo in his official conversion outfit — white shirt, grey slacks and brushed sombrero - was paddled off into town, where he was due to preach over the local Santa Anna radio station. The rest of us

idled around the plaza until it was time for lunch. This we enjoyed in the shady courtyard of the one remaining restaurant. Later we paid another visit to the house selling beer.

Unloading was completed that afternoon and later, the remaining cargo of cement was distributed evenly among the pontoons. Ho Chi Min told us we would leave next morning and set the crew free for a night on the town. 'Bocca negra,' he grinned, but I found that difficult to believe in such a place. Nevertheless the 'boys' paddled off in high spirits, followed by Ho Chi Min himself, after the tattooed Indian had shaved his skull once again until it gleamed.

That night the storm broke yet again, and as the lightning played over the forest, Willis seemed awakened from some immemorial slumber. He stood in the stern smiling and muttering to himself, clutching the straw bag, while the storm lashed around him.

'He can sense something out there,' Rhodes muttered, as we peered out from under the dripping tarpaulin.

The rain squalls passed by, the lightning continued. Each flash silhouetted the figure of Willis, standing there, his arms outstretched.

Watching Willis I wondered what was passing through his mind, what other worlds stirred within his soul. As he gazed at the stars that were now spreading over the sky, what ancient Mayan thoughts animated his waking dreams? Was there a part of him up there among the galaxies that could

never return? Each one of us, I know, would have given anything to reach out and guide him back to our own world if that were possible.

Any hopes for an early start next morning were dashed, when the crew failed to return,

'Perhaps ail that hair plucking and nit picking paid off.' commented Rhodes. 'Hope so for their sakes!'

Eventually we paddled the dugout back into town and waded along to Tonino's house. 'We leave at three,' he declared.

To our surprise, we did too. After a leisurely lunch wo found the dugout missing and had to wade up to our chests in order to reach the Eli, which was on the point of departure. The engine rope was laid out. Rodriguez, who seemed to have become unofficial third mate, sang out 'Vamos!' And we tugged and heaved and tripped over until the bloody thing fired. Minutes later we had backed round in the lagoon, and were setting off once more down the Rio Yacuma. Only Gonzalo was missing. He had elected to stay behind and preach the Word in Santa Anna.

Our eagerness to be away was tempered by the thought of at least three more days of monkey meat. It had been impossible to obtain fresh food supplies in Santa Anna. Willis alone seemed removed from such considerations. He stared eagerly down river, his face flushed as an excited schoolboy.

'What do you think he knows that we don't?' I asked Ko Sam.

Later, when Ho Chi Min came to visit his toothbrush I questioned him about the Indians. At first he failed to understand. He kept thinking I meant the crew. 'No, Wild Indians, savages,' I persisted, pointing to the forest.

'Bocca negra, mister?' he queried, and the boys roared with laughter.

The moon came up early. A full shining moon, rising unannounced in the late afternoon sky.

The ambush took us completely by surprise.

## **TWENTY-SEVEN**

### ***The Eye of Itza***

One minute we were gliding along in the deepening twilight twenty yards from the dark tangled mass of trees. The next minute three dugout canoes shot out from the shadows and started to board us. Even the crew were taken off guard, assuming them to be coming out to trade. Then we glimpsed their faces in the moonlight. Eyes peered at us through gleaming war paint, hands clutched spears, hatchets and long blow pipes.

'We're being attacked!' cried Rhodes.

A furious fight had already broken out on the nearside pontoon. As the Indians scrambled across onto the raft, the crew fought them off. Already the advantage of surprise was being matched by the familiarity our boys had of the boat, as they launched themselves at the attackers.

The noise was one of total pandemonium; attackers and attacked screaming at each other with equal ferocity. Above the grunts and yells and clashes of machete blades, I could hear Tonino yelling instructions from the wheelhouse, while, the lithe figure of Ho Chi Min slipped this way and that, defending the engine room with wicked thrusts of his knife, Rhodes grasped a blazing brand from the fire and swung it energetically round his head, as he charged into the fray. To

my horror more canoes closed around the pontoon. Ko Sam smashed down left and right with the baling tin.

The Eli crew; outnumbered and less well armed, were putting up a desperate fight, but even so, the sheer weight of numbers was forcing them slowly back. More warriors seemed to be scaling the pontoon at the time. Up on the wheelhouse, Tonino was fighting a losing battle to stop them climbing up from the fuel barrels. God knows where little Rodriguez was. I glanced towards the stern to see if our dugout was still there in case we might be forced to flee, when Ko Sam shrieked James!

I turned back just in time to forestall two painted savages leaping down on me from the rickety pontoon shelter.

God knows I'm a coward, but sometimes sheer panic gives my lacklustre strength a welcome boost. It did so now. As I butted, kicked and scrambled free, I knocked one of the fighters backwards, so that he tripped and plunged over the side. The gleaming river was instantly transformed into a thrashing fury. The Indian surfaced, his painted body arched over and a hideous scream issued from his mouth.

There was no time to pause. So many Indians were fighting on the pontoon, they scarcely had room to use their machetes. The one facing me, was taller and thinner than the rest and moved differently. He raised his foot in a high-kicking karate chop but lost his balance between the slippery cement sacks, and I managed to thrust my knee in. 'Mein Gott/ Fritz cried, through his war paint.

A deft poke by Rhodes caught him broadsides and he toppled slowly overboard. If he had only pulled himself up there and then, he might have survived with only a few loose ends missing, but grabbing down in the water to protect himself, he lost his grip and floundered. The surface boiled over with greedy piranas. A look of utter shock showed on his face and then as the Eli continued downstream, he vanished in the glinting water.

Come back, Fifi, come back/ I heard little Rodriguez pipe. There wasn't time for pity. At least I knew better now than to try to swim for it,

Suddenly over the muddled roar of the fight I recognised a new sound, a fearful, wavering cry that rose and fell in urgent hissing pants 'Itza, Itza, Itza.'

The painted eyes of the savages stared past us to where, stark in the moonlight, the tall spare figure of Willis faced us from the back of the pontoon. His face was hidden by the green jade mask of Itza. Like a foul fiend he watched us impassively, biding his time.

'Itza/ they gasped, their eyes rolling, their warpainted bodies shuddering in uncontrollable spasms, 'Itza!'

'Willis/ I yelled, but it wasn't Willis. Not any longer. Heaven knows I regard myself as the most rational person alive, yet I am as convinced now, as I was then, that whatever was standing there, it was not Willis.

A glance at Ko Sam was enough to tell me she felt the same. Whatever we had glimpsed in the cave at Tikal and on the

Altar of the Sun, was nothing, compared to the force that radiated out of this gaunt figure of the night. From within the dark eclipse of the mask the eyes glowed like blinding fires of hell.

'Don't look/ I heard Rhodes shout, but if, in my exhausted state I hadn't slipped and pulled Ko Sam with me, no power on earth would have persuaded me to turn away from that awesome sight. For the Indians the result was far more dramatic; gasping and howling, they cringed on their knees, clutching forward in desperation.

All I could see was the silhouette, but that was enough.

The God of Itza had manifested itself in its Kingdom. God of the Sun and Moon, the river and the forest, the daylight and the darkness. The supreme power of life and death. In silent horror, I watched the shadow grow, bigger and bigger, with claws for arms, a massive head and hanging pendulous ears.

'ITZA!' chanted the Indians.

A peal of thunder rolled majestically overhead. Lightning flashed across the treetops and swooped and crackled about the boat.

'TTZAI' boomed across the river, as if the night and the forest had taken up the cry 'ITZA!'

The shadow moved. Slow imperious steps carried it silently forward, everyone cringing low as it passed. At the bows it stepped over the cluster of dugouts into the leading canoe and set off across the moonlit river. A stark outline against the glittering water. At once half the attackers melted away.

Jumping back into their war canoes they paddled swiftly after the black shadow of the leading dugout. 'Itza,' they panted, 'Itza, Itza, Itza.'

On the pontoon the spell snapped. As if waking from a trance, the remaining warriors started slashing viciously about them, intent on massacring everyone on board. To my surprise Rhodes quit the fight.

'Billy,' he yelled. 'Billy.' Without hesitation he raced to the stern of the pontoon, leapt into the dugout, and chased after the cluster of Indian canoes, by now half way across the gleaming river.

'Boyet!' screamed Ko Sam. 'Don't!'

But it was a useless plea. For Rhodes, with some superhuman strength was driving that dugout single-handed at a speed faster than I would have believed possible. Ko Sam clutched my hand. Spellbound, we saw the distance dissolve. There were no longer two separate shapes. The dugouts had merged and towering above them, struggling like two Colossi, Rhodes and Willis fought, as they had never fought before in their lives.

James/ cried Ko Sam, but she never finished, for at that instant, with the sound of a whipcrack, a bolt of lightning struck midstream. When our eyes cleared, the canoes had vanished. Only the empty dazzling river remained.

Helpless to do anything, we could only peer down at the treacherous currents, imagining the two of them swimming deeper and deeper, gripped in a remorseless embrace, an

embrace that would never be released, while they wrestled for that jade mask of Itza, unto the very gates of doom.

God knows why, but in those rare moments I couldn't help wondering about their thoughts whilst they were engaged in that desperate struggle. Love, loyalty, greed - all three intertwined perhaps, as they plunged to their deaths.

Suddenly, I sensed someone coming at me and glanced up to see a brutal painted face - the mouth split in a rictus of savage hatred - and a club swinging violently down. It was almost with a sense of relief that I knew instinctively, I could not avoid it. I hardly even felt the blow that sent me spiralling dizzily down into a great empty abyss of darkness.

## ***EPILOGUE***

If I think of Guayajamerin, I remember only rain and mud, sheeting rain and streams of red mud flowing in rivulets over the low lush hills behind the town. The shabby buildings along the waterfront were all submerged to their red tin roofs.

Ko Sam had gone. Little Rodriguez - who didn't seem quite so little any more, repeatedly told me how carefully she looked after me as we swept on downstream, while a storm turned the river into a surging maelstrom.

"She look after you alright; Mister/ Rodriguez defended stoutly. 'She never leave you a moment when your head broken and you sweatin' there in that crazy fever. An' all the time she thinking over Cap'n Boyet an' . ./ And then he started snivelling too and I had to curb my impatience and wait for the jumble of facts to assume some sort of order.

He dried his face on the back of his grimy hand. "When they both fell in the water, an' after the storm broke we couldn't do nothin' more.'

'Why didn't you go back?' I asked.

'We was driftin' downstream/ he replied indignantly. 'The engine stopped, half of us bleeding. Rainin' so hard you couldn't see before your face/ He went on busily explaining, but I was no longer listening.

They're both dead, I thought. Even if the Indians pulled them out before the piranas got them, they would both be dead by now. Strung up in some hideous sacrificial orgy, while the mask of Itza gleamed wickedly from a carved idol, I peered out of the dripping window, to where the rain squalls lashed the grey river. I had been staying at the Hotel Littoral three days, sharing a room with an Israeli soldier. Dead, of course they were dead, but was Ko Sam dead too? 'When did she go?' I asked the boy for the umpteenth time. 'After we got the engine going/ he explained. 'We stopped at a settlement. Alexandria, it was called. Mister, you was better then. When you was bad, she never leave you. But now she begs Cap'n Tonino to go back. He won't. Tells her it not possible. Not with the river as it is now. Better not go back, he tells her. Nothing to find there by now/ He paused for breath. 'That night she whispers to me that she is going. Tells me to look after you, Mister.' His voice was cracking under the strain. 'Mister, I want to go back with her, really I do, but she won't let me/ He looked so utterly forlorn that I put my arm round his shoulders and drew him up to the window beside me. I could feel his pathetic frame heaving under the same emotions that I also felt.

'How did she get a boat?' I asked him quietly. 'If Tonino wouldn't take her.'

'Mister, there was a small mission raft going upstream. Small boat with a powerful engine. There was a lady missionary on it. It was going back to that village we stopped at before

Santa Anna, remember Mister?' Only now Rodriguez could hold back his flood of tears no longer. For the day after Ko Sam left, an even more violent

storm had broken. The river became wild. Huge trees floated down like sticks. And worst of all for him, Bof had been washed overboard,

Rodriguez turned his tear-stained face up to me. 'Mister, there was waves and whirlpools and torn out trees. And bits of broken raft floatin' past/

Together we stared out at the bleak squalls of rain. There was no consolation we could offer each other.

'How long did you stay at Alexandria?' I asked him.

'Three days, Mister, before the rain get less and Cap'n Tonino say we better try get down here/

That night and for many more, I lay thinking of Ko Sam setting out up river on her own, wearing her black bowler, Just as I had met her that very first time on the bus, rattling over the hills to Palenque. I could hear her saying James, I miss you even when you are here/ And then I couldn't hold back the tears. They were tears of bitter regret too, that I didn't love her enough while she was there. To the end of my days I will hate myself for that, and I will never be able to do anything about it.

On the other bed the Israeli soldier snored under his mosquito netting. He was a quiet competent fellow. The only other foreigner in Guayajamerin, which I suppose is why Rodriguez delivered me into his care. For the past week

he had been trying to get an entry stamp on his passport. He had come over from Guaja Merin - a mile away on the Brazil bank of the Guapore, hoping to get to Peru, but the lady who stamped the passports was away looking after her sick mother. When she returned, we visited her home where she kept the entry and exit stamps in a drawer beside her bed.

As for Rodriguez, he had finally found a home. Tonino had agreed to take him on as an apprentice. Who knows, one day he may even own his own Eli.

When I think of Willis and Rhodes, perhaps it was cruelly appropriate that the boys who had grown up together, playing and fighting, should go down the same way. Who knows? Perhaps Willis had finally come to his senses and had been using the mask as a gigantic bluff to enable him to escape. Perhaps Rhodes chased after him, not to rescue him but just to get hold of the mask. Yet somehow I doubt it.

About Itza, I'm still undecided. I picture those piercing eyes glaring out of the green mask, as it flipped over and over, sinking slowly through the deep and muddy waters of the Guapore river. Considering all the mischief it caused, it is probably just as well that it should lie buried for another thousand years.

In the unlikely event of a memorial ever being erected somewhere on the banks of the Guapore river, before the termites or the weather ravages or rots it, I would like to inscribe the following words as a fitting tribute.

'There are men who, when you ask them 'How it was?' will say nothing. Their eyes alone hold the trackless wastes over which they travelled. In those eyes you may glimpse the remote snowbound passes, the roaring oceans and the empty deserts they gazed upon; journeys that for most of us are impossible even to imagine.

Rhodes was one of that rare breed of men. Willis too. For both of them, in their different ways, had travelled to the last places on earth.'