

## Ten Thousand Hectáreas

by Farnham Bishop



Author of "Snake Head."

“WHAT are you going to do about it?”

Barstow looked up in astonishment. He had sought the least frequented corner on the third floor veranda of the Tivoli—Uncle Sam’s big hotel in Ancon, the American suburb of Panama City—to think over the problem that had brought him to the Isthmus. After three solid hours of thinking and Smoking he was as far as ever from a solution, when a voice spoke suddenly at his elbow.

“What are you going to do about it, Mr. Barstow?” repeated the speaker.

He was a tall, slender man, blond beneath his tropic tan, with a narrow smile and hard, light blue eyes. His cheeks were deep hollows between the prominent cheekbones and powerful jaw.

The easy erectness of his carriage, the cut and set of his high collared, white duck coat and the cock of his Ecuador hat gave him a distinctly military air. He seemed to have just laid aside his insignia and unpinned a long row of campaign ribbons from across his chest.

Barstow stared at him in bewilderment. He had never seen him before,

this man who seemed to know him and his unspoken thought.

“Pardon my unsought intrusion into your affairs,” said the stranger, bowing stiffly from the hips.

He spoke with a slight foreign accent, impossible to localize.

“But, I could not help overhearing eight of the words you said tonight, when you were dining with your friend the tourist.”

His tone implied that Barstow was not a tourist, but a fellow adventurer and brother in arms.

“Those words told me all.”

“The — they did!” exclaimed Barstow. “What were they?”

“Infernal swindle!” quoted the other. “‘Ten thousand *hectareas*—San Blas country.’ The first two words serve’d to attract my attention as I passed your table, but were otherwise superfluous. Anything involving a tract of land in that part of the Isthmus is invariably a swindle.”

“Have a cigar,” invited Barstow. “I wish I’d known you before, Mr.—”

“—before you bought the concession.” the stranger continued, ignoring the attempt to obtain his name. “That must have been about

ten months ago—”

“Nine.”

“You decided to invest in tropical products; hardwood, possibly—”

“Rubber.”

“Ah, yes; of course; the rubber boom. So you were naturally only too glad to buy good rubber land, “title and quality absolutely guaranteed by the seller, the sovereign Republic of Panama, for one dollar, gold, a *hectarea*, or forty cents an acre.

“If the land failed to grow rubber, you were to receive your money back. If the plantation succeeded, five per cent, of the gross annual profits were to go to the national treasury. Otherwise, the only condition was that if no work were done by you on the land within the first year after the signing of the deed, then the title would be void and your money forfeit.

“Being a good business man, you read the text carefully before signing. But the forfeiture clause gave you no uneasiness at the time. You knew that the Canal was rapidly approaching completion and therefore felt that there would be plenty of labor available; for your own enterprise. So you appointed some one here your agent and awaited developments.

“But nothing developed except vague excuses, until you became alarmed and came down to see for, yourself. Then you learned that no one had been working on your land, because no one was anxious to commit suicide.

“When they first told you that the Caribbean side of the eastern end of the Isthmus, from a little beyond Nombre de Dois down into South America, was in the possession of a ferocious tribe of Indians who allowed no white men to settle within their borders, you were indignant that anybody should think you simple enough to believe such fantastic rubbish. That sort of thing was

impossible, in the year 1912, within fifty miles of the Canal Zone, with its electric lighted towns and model police force.

“They referred you to McPherson, who monopolizes the tribal trade. And he told you that though his schooners had plied up and down the San Blas coast for thirty years, he would not dare try to spend a night ashore, nor would he take you there at any price.

“You went to the Panaman government, and it told you to come back *mañana*. You went to the American minister, and he told you that he had nothing to do with such affairs. You went to the American consul, and he told you that enough title deeds to land in the San Blas country had been granted during the past four centuries to cover the whole place like a snowstorm, and that he wouldn’t give a last week’s lottery ticket for any of them.”

“Those were his very words!” cried Barstow. “How on earth did you know?”

“It is an old story—the consul knows it by heart. The benches in the Cathedral Plaza are full of men whose pockets are full of papers like yours. There they sit and whine because neither of the two governments will pay any attention to them.”

“But it is outrageous!” protested Barstow. “To sell land in a region overrun with savages, and then refuse to give the purchaser any protection!”

“Protection?” repeated the stranger. “If some one were to attack you on the streets of Panama City, would you ask a native policeman to protect you?”

Barstow chuckled. He had been an All-American halfback ten years before, when the game demanded human battering-rams, the bigger the better. Since then, he had put on more flesh than he liked to think of; but there was still plenty of muscle on his huge body. The thought of his asking for help from one of the futile manikins who pretend to police

Panama City was delicious.

“They are very amusing, are they not, those little spiggoty policemen? But if you laugh at the idea of their protecting you in the city, why are you angry because they can not protect you in the jungle?”

“The police are the sole armed force of the republic. Panama has no army. And the United States Army is down here to build the Canal, not to fight another Seminole War.

“Yet you must have an army of some sort behind you, Mr. Barstow, if you are to do anything with your property in the San Blas country.”

“Have you any idea where I can find one?” asked the business man sarcastically. This would make a great story to tell at the club when he was back in New York.

The stranger bowed again.

“I am Captain Kessler,” he said simply.

He said it in exactly the right way. Barstow was impressed, not because he knew about Captain Kessler, but because he didn't. The captain's manner implied a great and enviable reputation, to avow ignorance of which would be to proclaim oneself a tourist—the last thing that any tourist wished to do.

“Ah, yes, yes! Sit down, captain, and tell me some more.”

“I have come to you,” said the captain, “because I could see that you were not like those whiners on the plaza benches. You will not let yourself be robbed of ten thousand dollars without a struggle.”

“Not if I have a chance to put up a fight,” declared Barstow.

“I am here to give you that chance,” answered Kessler. “I, and I alone, know the one weakness of the San Blas—the only way to enter and conquer their forbidden land.

“It is useless to try to land on their coast. They even refused to let President Mendoza of Panama set foot on the soil of his

own republic when he went there on board the *Empire* in 1908. Nor can you go overland from the Zone; many parties have tried, only to be turned back by the guards the tribesmen maintain on every trail and stream leading into their territory. “But the San Blas country does not extend all the way across the Isthmus. Back of it, on the Pacific side, lies the land of the Chucunaque, a negroid people, with whom the San Blas, who are intolerably proud of the purity of their own stock, are constantly at feud. Recently that feud has developed into something like a regular little war.

“The two tribes are fairly even in numbers and fighting ability. But the Chucunaque are handicapped by lack of modern firearms. Their head chief, Pilelé, an old friend of mine, told me that if I would furnish five hundred Winchesters he would raise five hundred picked young men and place them under my personal leadership. Such a force, under my command, would win the war and break the power of the San Blas forever.

“That was a month ago, when I was down there on a little expedition of my own. I returned to Panama City, where no one knows or cares what is going on in that remote part of the interior. I obtained an option on the Winchesters; 1886 model, 45\_90's with fifty thousand rounds of soft nosed ammunition.

“But I had not enough money to buy the rifles and charter a schooner. The Chucunaque were unable to advance me any; their rivers are not full of gold, like those of the San Blas country.” “Gold?”

Barstow could not keep the thrill out of his voice at the sound of the magic word. “How do you know there is any gold there?”

“Nearly every San Blas wears a pair of heavy earrings, and the women wear noserings, hand hammered out of nuggets of virgin gold. The few explorers who have managed to stay there long enough to do a little prospecting have brought back high-

grade specimens and stories of wonderful deposits they dared not stay to work.

“The old Spanish chronicles say the same thing. The San Bias country of today is the Darien of four hundred years ago, less known to white men now than it was when Balboa crossed there to discover the Pacific.

“It is full of abandoned forts and cities: Santa Cruz, Acla, Santa Maria de la Antigua. It is the land beyond the last frontier.”

The land beyond the last frontier! Lost cities—Barstow thought of the ruins of Old Panama, where the tall tower of what was once a stately cathedral still stands between the jungle and the sea.

To find such places and revive them, to rescue a great, rich land from savagery and open it to civilization—what an adventure that would be! Better than tamely pocketing his loss and going back to his bachelor apartment in New York.

To sail on a schooner laden with smuggled rifles; to fight Indians and scale the peaks of Darien for gold! Barstow was the sort of man who rereads “Treasure Island” every year; and he was looking at the moonlight on the Bay of Panama.

“How much do you need?” he asked Kessler.

“Ten thousand more will cover everything. If you can furnish that, I will do everything else, and give you an equal share in the profits of the conquest. You need not even accompany the expedition.”

“If I don’t, then there won’t be any expedition to accompany!”

Oh, a sailor’s life is the life for me,  
On the um, um, um, of the um sea,  
Where the um ums rage and the wild  
winds roar,  
And the billows break on the rock-  
bound shore!

Barstow had got over his seasickness and was walking up and down the dirty deck of the *Cholita*. They were passing the Pearl Islands with a fair wind abeam—a rare thing in the almost windless Gulf of Panama. Presently the breeze would die away, and they would chug chug and drift, chug chug and drift, according to the whims and fancies of their gasoline kicker. But Barstow did not know that yet.

He was as happy as a twelve-year-old on Christmas morning, just, to see the long, smooth rollers burst to foam on the shore of the nearest island, or to watch a pelican dive for a fish. As he tramped the dock, he creaked with much now leather—boots, puttees, belt and holster. The chaste splendor of his whipcord riding breeches and white silk shirt was crowned with the biggest, showiest pith helmet ever, sold in Kingston, Jamaica.

The sight of him brought joy, to the eyes of the Greek skipper and his black-and-tan crew. They rejoicing was mutual, for Barstow had wanted them to look like pirates, and they did.

The Zambo cabin boy shuffled to the lee rail, dumped a pan of sweepings and threw over an empty beer bottle, which floated away in the schooner’s wake. Pulling a shiny new automatic from its shiny new holster, Barstow emptied the magazine, scoring eight clean misses.

Then he heard the crack of another shot, and saw the neck of the bottle fly to pieces. Kessler, wearing pajamas and holding a long barreled revolver in his left hand, grinned at him from the companionway.

“Good thing for me we weren’t fighting a duel,” laughed Barstow. “I know as much about shooting as I do about orchids and bug hunting. Was that why you told the *Star and Herald* I was making this trip to collect botanical and entomological specimens?”

“We had to give some reason,”

answered Kessler. "And if you think you are not going to collect any insects, wait and see."

**P**ILELÉ, head chief of the Chucunaque nation dwelt at San Ambrosio, village on the river of the same name and about five miles above its mouth. The *Cholita* crossed, the bar at flood and chug chugged up the muddy stream, between unbroken walls of jungle.

Long before she came in sight of the town the sound of her exhaust brought the whole population down to the bank. And long before those on board could see the village they could smell it. Aside from the filth, Barstow found San Ambrosio much like the native villages he had seen from the car windows on the Panama railroad. Also, there were fewer walls and less clothing. Children of all sizes ran about naked and unashamed; few adults wore anything above the waistline or overmuch below it.

Four pests, a thatch roof, and a Balboa beer sign seemed to do for a house. The one frame building in the place was the residence of Pilelé.

The chief was on hand to greet the white men as they stepped ashore. Pilelé was a lean, dignified old mixed-blood with Indian nose and cheekbones, but a dark skin and kinky hair. Beside him stood a short, sturdy youth dressed in clay and a few inches of bark cloth, whose big round head seemed covered with horsehair, so straight and coarse it grew.

With phrases of Castilian courtesy, Pilelé led Kessler and Barstow to his house and invited them within. Unbidden, most of the population pressed in after them, till the big room that the chief used for a trading store was packed tight with a stinking, staring throng.

"Tell them to get out of here!" commanded Kessler.

Instead of giving the order himself, Pilelé turned to the young man beside him.

Instantly from the latter's lips came such a snarl of malignant contempt that Barstow, who was near him, fairly jumped.

"*Va, perritos!*" he cried, pointing to the door.

A squad of Zone police could not have cleared the room faster than did those two words of corrupt Spanish. Screaming, struggling, utterly regardless of each other's ribs and toes, the San Ambrosians fled as fast as they could squeeze past each other through the door.

Speeding the last one on his way with a kick from a small, splay foot, the ruler of the exodus leaned against the doorjamb, folded his arms and grinned contentedly.

"Who is that; the new chief of police?" asked Barstow.

Kessler was already putting the question to Pilelé.

"It is a mighty warrior from the hills," replied the old man in a mixture of Spanish and Chucunaque. "He has brought in three hundred of the young men who are to fight under your command. Two hundred more will follow soon."

This was unexpectedly good news to Kessler, who had fully expected to wait for weeks while the promised recruits trickled slowly in. He was an old hand at jungle warfare in South and Central America.

Looking keenly at the Indian's shoulders, the captain spoke suddenly in Spanish. The clay covered savage sprang smartly to attention.

"Where have you served?" Kessler demanded in the same language.

"Colombian infantry, sir—Battalion of Santa Isabella."

"What grade?"

"Sergeant, sir."

"Rest," commanded Kessler, well pleased with his own cleverness as well as his good luck in finding such an assistant.

"What is your name?" asked Barstow,

in the lisping Castilian taught in our universities and spoken nowhere else in the three Americas. He innocently, used the courteous third person, as if addressing an equal. The Indian's eyes were blank, until Kessler put the question in the usual words.

"Enrique Arcilla, señor"

Kessler barked a short, guttural laugh.

"Look at him!" he cried to Barstow. "Plastered with the stuff—and his name is 'Henry Clay'!"

NEVER did an expedition of this kind assemble and get under way more swiftly and smoothly. Kinky haired porters from the coast villages, globe headed fighting men from the hills, canoe loads of fish, plantains and other provisions, all poured into San Ambrosio.

Once there, every one seemed possessed with a most unnative-like desire to be up and away. Barstow, of course, failed to appreciate this, while Kessler took it as a tribute to himself.

"They know better than to play tricks on me," he boasted. "I know how to handle these swine. Go sit in your tent and scratch yourself; I will attend to everything."

It seemed to Barstow, however, that the man who was attending to most things was Henry Clay. It was he who bossed the canoemen who landed the cases of arms from the schooner, and the porters who carried them to camp; Clay who mustered the warriors to receive their Winchesters, which they welcomed as old friends; Clay who brought the war news to Kessler and spurred on Pilelé whenever the civil power showed signs of hanging back.

Yet the busy little Indian found time to act as Barstow's personal servant. He seemed to take a mysterious joy in looking after the big white man's welfare, cooking his meals and skillfully extracting chiggers from under

his toenails and bedbugs from his ankles. Also, he seemed to regard the English form of his own name as a title of honor, for he insisted on being called by it.

Then came the advance into the interior. For the first eight miles they paddled in dugouts to the head of navigation on the San Ambrosio. There they spent the first night. In the morning, relays of *macheteros* at the head of the column began to cut a trail up the jungle choked valley of another stream, a tributary, nameless till Barstow, after splashing through it for the eighth time, christened it Corkscrew Creek.

The stout business man had a tough time of it during the next three days. Overweight and out of condition, he sweated gallons and ached as if he had been beaten. But he was no quitter, and sticking to his desk through ten New York Summers had taught him to endure heat. Luckily for him, he had come to the Isthmus in the "Little Summer of St. John," when the rainy season dies down to a brisk shower or two in the afternoon.

"How much further is it to the San Blas country?" he panted as they made camp on the fourth afternoon. "I'd like a battle for a change."

"You'll have a change tomorrow," answered Kessler. "Beyond that ridge up there lies one of the biggest of all the San Blas towns. We'll drop down on it tomorrow night. I'll see that enough get out alive to carry the word to their war parties who are holding back the Chucunaque along the rest of the border.

"As soon as the warriors hear what has happened they'll drop everything and come back, blind with rage. We'll be entrenched and ready to shoot them down as they try to rush us, until the rest of the Chucunaque come up and spear them in the back."

"But how do you know the San Blas will rush in blindly like that?" asked Barstow, raising a weary leg to let Henry Clay tug off

the boot.

Kessler smiled his narrow smile.

“You know how proud they are of the purity of their race? You’ve heard the Isthmian proverb: ‘No man has ever seen a San Blas half-breed’? Well, I’ve promised our boys free loot—and free women!”

“What! Good Lord, Kessler, you don’t mean—”

Barstow sat up on the creaking cot, his face a study in incredulity and disgust.

“Why, man, that’s vile—loathesome—filthy! We can’t do that sort of thing! It isn’t war!”

“Indeed!”

Kessler’s manner became heavily ironic.

“May I ask where you have acquired such authoritative information on the subject? Myself, I have only served in six wars in this hemisphere, beside the Herero campaign in German Southwest Africa.

“You must have learned a great deal in Sunday-school about the proper Puritan way of waging war on savages—and with them. I shall have you give a little moral lecture to our clay smeared Galahads as soon as I return from inspecting the outposts.”

He turned abruptly away from the tent door and strode down the trail leading to the picket line. Snatching his boot from Henry Clay’s hand, Barstow pulled it on and laced it up himself.

“Blanked dashed cold-blooded beast!” he declaimed to the tent pole and the equally wooden looking Indian. “Talk about savages—he’s the lowest down savage of the lot! The rest don’t know any better, but he—I’ll punch his Prussian head!”

Heaving himself to his feet, Barstow lumbered heavily through the camp and down the trail. He soon overtook the captain, who heard him crashing after him through the undergrowth and was waiting for him at the far end of a little clearing.

“Look here, Kessler,” Barstow began as soon as he entered the glade. “I’m here to fight my property and to bring civilization into this country; but I’m not going to fight foul. I’m paying you, and you’re going to run this business as I say, or shut up shop.

“Either you give me your word of honor, here and now, to make our men leave the San Blas women alone and leave them alone yourself—or we backtrack out of here for the coast tomorrow morning. And I don’t want any more of your sneering.”

“So?” answered Kessler, his smile narrower than ever.

Barstow’s temper exploded, as the other intended it should.

“Wipe that grin off your face or I’ll knock it off!” he said, clenching his fists and starting across the clearing. Then he stopped and stood looking at the muzzle of the long barreled revolver that had flashed out of the captain’s holster.

“So we must backtrack—as you so elegantly express it—out of here tomorrow?” Kessler sneered. “You great pink faced baby; you—”

Here he called the other many evil names.

“Keep your hands and feet where they are—though why I should not let you play with your pretty pistol I do not know. It would be very amusing to see you trying to hit me with it.

“Do you think I am going to let your sniveling, hypocritical squeamishness cheat me out of a Principality? I shall make myself the uncrowned King of Darien, while your bones rot here in the jungle.”

“Do you mean that you intend to murder me?” asked Barstow steadily.

“Do you think that I will let you go to tell tales to the Zone Police?” responded Kessler.

Measuring the ground between them with a player’s eye, Barstow thought

instinctively in terms of the game he loved:

“Third down—ten yards to gain—and half a second left! I’ll never make it before the whistle, but here goes!”

“I have foreseen everything,” gloated Kessler. “I shall stop at nothing, and nothing shall stop—”

**B**OOM! The report of a heavy rifle thundered close to their ears. A cloud of smoke rolled across the narrow clearing midway between the two. Through it Barstow saw Kessler crumple down and disappear into the long grass.

Already set for a rush, he hurled himself across the glade and looked down at the fallen man. What he saw made him very sick.

“Nasty mess, isn’t it?” said a sympathetic voice beside him in well modulated English.

Spinning round, Barstow saw Henry Clay, Winchester in hand, standing at his elbow.

“Takes Kipling to describe this sort of thing properly,” continued the Indian. “Remember that Burmese ballad of his?”

“A Snider squibbed in the jungle;  
Somebody laughed and fled,  
And the men of the First Shikaris  
Picked up their subaltern, dead,  
With a big blue mark on his forehead  
And the back blown out of his head.”

“Who—who are you?” Barstow managed to gasp.

“You wouldn’t know my name. I was in the class after yours, and then I went to the medical school. The tribe sent me there because they wanted that kind of a medicine man. I always sat in the cheering section and thought you were the greatest warrior that ever

trampled eleven enemies into the warpath.

“But I knew you were no scientist after my roommate told me the funny questions you asked him about the paper, when he was monitor in the final exam for that elementary botany course the sports used to take for a snap. I remembered that when I read that item about your expedition in the *Star and Herald*. Taken in connection with Kessler’s last trip to the Chucunacque coast and the war that was going on then, I smelt gunrunning.

“What Kessler didn’t know, old man, was that the war ended three weeks ago with a slashing victory for the San Blas. The Chucunacque will keep their young men from raiding over the border for many moons, I’ll bet!

“And since San Ambrosio was the likeliest port for the *Cholita* to make I took possession of it the day before you; came with three hundred of our army, of Occupation. And I soon scared the truth, or most of it, out of that old four-flusher Pilelé.

“But—hold on—look here—let me get this straight!” cried the bewildered Barstow. “Aren’t you a Chucunacque yourself?”

“Lord, no!” said the Indian emphatically. “I’m a San Blas—all of us are San Blas except the porter. Plastered ourselves all over with this infernal clay to make Kessler think we were a lot of dirty Chucunacque. Enrique Arcilla—Colombian Army—piffle! I learned to drill in the university cadet corps!

“Golly,, what fun it was, to listen to you two and see old Pilelé watching us land his Winchesters and march off with them to our own country! But we’ll let up on his indemnity for it. “I had a nice little surprise all ready for you and Kessler when we reached the border tomorrow. But perhaps it is better so.”

He made a sign and a dozen other Indians stepped out from the jungle and surrounded the dead body. At a word from

Clay one of them brought him the captain's field glasses.

"Take these," he said, handing them to Barstow "and follow me. I will show you something few white men have ever seen."

Forty minutes later the two stood on the crest of the ridge marking the boundary between the territories of the two tribes. Behind them lay the Pacific; before them the sun was sinking into the distant Caribbean. Below them lay a vast expanse of virgin jungle and open, rolling *sabanas*.

Many other ridges, running at right angles to the one they stood on, sloped down to the sea; in the valleys between ran sparkling streams. Here and there, among forests of rare hardwoods, tall groves of coconut palms, and broad green pastures, rose the smoke of village fires, kindled for the evening meal.

Of the white man and his works there was no sign.

"Look at that nearest village," the Indian said to Barstow, who was busily sweeping the country with the glasses and discovering a new source of wealth at every glance. "See the wives and maidens busy about the cooking fires, and the little bare babies running to meet their fathers as they come home from the hunt. See how clean the ground is kept around the long cane houses.

"See if you can find a locked door or a hungry face. You can not, for there is none in all the land.

"Look at that village and remember what Kessler boasted he would do to it. Among you white men there are many Kesslers. Can you blame us for guarding our home against them?"

"No!" said Barstow as they turned away and hurried down the trail to reach camp before dark.

"**B**Y THE way," said the San Blas next morning as he and Barstow shook hands for the last time before the white man and his escort started back to San Ambrosio, "when you get back to the Zone, drop over to Colon and see McPherson the trader. He'll have something nice for you—a fifty-thousand-dollar draft on New York."

"What on earth for?"

"For the Winchesters and ammunition, of course! We must have them, and smuggled goods come high. To think of a white man's forgetting that he could make a profit!

"You're a highly successful filibuster, but I wouldn't boast about it in public. Stick to the naturalist story, tell how you were driven out of the country by the ferocious Indians who shot poor Kessler, and pretend to sell McPherson a gold brick or something for the fifty thousand."

"I know what I'll sell him," answered Barstow. "A perfectly good deed to ten thousand hectareas."