

Gods of Fury

By JOHN CARLISLE

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WITH startled eyes, Allan Brant, high over the Aguacate mountains in Costa Rica, eyed the oil pressure gauge, then the terrain thousands of feet below. His ears waited for the metallic clunk of dry bearings. An oil line in the motor had broken within the past few seconds. And with a broken oil line, a high speed airplane engine may run for five minutes, or only one.

He turned to his mechanic, Hugh Wiley. "Get set, you're going over, I'll follow when you're clear."

"I've never baled out before," the tensed and

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*Off-trail adventure and romance in the
savage volcanic jungles of Central America*



Barbaric civilization, weird primitive gods, a beautiful native princess – all part of the Costa Rican jungle prison into which those two intrepid American fliers plunged!

apprehensive Wiley, burdened with harness and parachute, edged toward the cabin door, “but it’s okay, Brant, if you say so.”

“Wait—” Brant’s eye searching the chaotic masses of mountain had caught sight of what appeared to be an open glade. He banked, lost altitude and the ground was a thousand feet

nearer. “By George, Hugh,” he muttered, “I’m sure there’s enough room to land—” he jabbed a thumb at the shimmering green vista below, “see that level place. Get seated and hold tight. “We may crack up, but I’m setting her down.”

Wiley’s sigh of relief was echoed by a boiler room racket from under the cowl. The bearings were burning up.

Brant cut the ignition and in a long downward glide headed for the open space. It was a miracle, finding that lone spot in thousands of square miles where a safe landing might be made. The geography of Costa Rica is like that of its sister central American republics: masses of

mountains arranged without regard for symmetry—and luck had had the oil line go out over what at first had seemed the ruggedest topography they'd sighted since leaving San Jose in the morning.

"Look out!" Brant yelled. The next moment the ship struck and the two men in a tangle of arms and legs smashed into the instrument board.

Brant disentangled himself and crawled into a sitting position. "Are you all right, Wiley?" he asked.

"Yeah," Wiley grunted, "I think so."

"Look!" Brant jiggled a thumb. A rosewood not discernible from aloft had torn off the right wing.

They crawled from the wreck. Brant breathed a sigh of thanksgiving. That open glade was not open at all. It had just seemed that way. It was simply the surface of a close mat of living green verdure, bush, trees and vines. On all sides was an impenetrable forest of mahogany, rosewood and cedar.

It was a gripping feeling standing there in that forest, primeval as it was before man existed. They were where life teems and new forms develop—alone among millions of strange living creatures. It is one thing to be shipwrecked at sea or to be stranded in the desert, but quite another to have the same thing happen in the jungle, buried in the very bosom of the great something out of which all life has come.

"What now?" Wiley asked in a curiously hushed voice.

"Start for one of the coasts," Brant replied. He pointed to a snow capped mountain to the southeast. "That's Mount Blanco. If we head west we'll come out near the Rio Grande de Terraba. East is Boca del Torro and the Chiriqui Lagoon. Not much difference either way. A hundred miles of uninhabited jungle. And nothing on either coast when we do get there. A little further north we'd find a few coffee plantations, but here," he shrugged his shoulders, "I'll give it to you straight, Wiley, we're in a hell of a pickle!"

The chain of events leading up to the hell of a pickle had begun before Allan's birth, namely on the day his father, John Brant, had landed in El Salvador to amass a fortune in the exploitation of the alluvial gold deposits of that land.

BORN and reared in San Salvador, educated in New York, Allan had never learned to call the United States home. With the death of his father he found himself heir to a fair income with a yen to return to Latin America.

Just what the precise reason for the trip had been, he couldn't have explained even to himself. He had the urge to visit the land of his birth and the money to indulge the urge. Although he hardly realized it at the time, perhaps his archeological interest in Central and South America was really at the bottom, because Brant, though still in his late twenties, was acknowledged by archeologists all over the western hemisphere to be an authority on the Aztec and Mayan civilizations. His monograph: *THE INTELLECTUAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF ANCIENT AMERICA*, a systematic exposition of the hieroglyphic inscriptions on the monuments in the ruined cities of Mexico, Guatemala and the Honduras, had been accepted by the savants as the most advanced work of its kind.

An ardent airman, it was logical that he should combine his two hobbies and plan a trip by air over the very heart of the countries where the early American culture had bloomed, withered and died.

The jaunt so far had been easy. With Wiley as his only companion, he had flown to Mexico City. Then a series of short hops had taken them to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Costa Rican city of San Jose. The next stop would have been at Colon in Panama.

Brant was not scholastic in appearance. He looked more like an outdoor professional, an engineer, a surveyor or an explorer. Big, strapping, husky, his six feet two, and two hundred pounds of bone and sinew left an indelible impression on all who met him.

"Lucky," Brant told Wiley, "nobody in Colon's expecting us. They'd be disappointed. It's a tossup as to which way we start." He pulled a silver dollar from his pocket, flipped it and grinned. "Heads, the Atlantic coast, tails, the Pacific." He caught the coin. "Heads, we start for the Chiriqui Lagoon."

Leaving their baggage in the wrecked ship, retaining only holstered Colt pistols, they pointed east.

The cover was so thick that their progress was painfully slow. It had been about noon when the plane had crashed and at five thirty, an hour before sundown, they'd made hardly more than three miles. Both men were dog-tired.

Inasmuch as the hop from San Jose to Colon would have been a short one, the ship had carried no food.

"Lord, I'm hungry," Wiley grunted as he pushed after Brant's tall form.

"You'll be a lot hungrier before we hit the coast," Brant returned. "However, if we keep our eyes open we may be able to bag a monkey or an iguana."

"You mean one of those big lizards?" Wiley asked.

"Sure—" Brant was grinning.

"Thanks—" Wiley made a grimace of disgust, "you can have my share."

The terrain became more difficult to traverse. With the coming of dusk, the jungle came to life, including its myriads of insect pests: black flies and hordes of mosquitoes. Close to the equator, the twilight was short and before they'd realized it, darkness had fallen.

"We'll only fag ourselves out," Brant said when it was apparent that no further progress could be made. "Might as well bed down right here."

"Suits me," Wiley sighed. "If we only had something to eat."

Before a fire, more smoke than flame, the wood was damp, they stretched weary forms and tried to sleep.

Mosquitoes, bugs, swarms of creeping, crawling, humming creatures, made that impossible, even though every nerve and muscle in their bodies clamored for rest. And from the jungle came the furtive pad of cushioned feet, the slinky rustle of a lithe sinuous body. Brant knew what it was. A jaguar. He got up, kicked the fire into as much life as it would show, and drew his Colt.

"Why—why the gun?" Wiley asked.

Brant jabbed the muzzle at the noise. "Jaguar, el tigre," he said reassuringly. "Scented us and is taking a look. However, he won't attack. If he did, we'd have something to eat. It's not the cat that has me worried. It's the bugs. If we're eaten alive, it'll be by these damned mosquitoes."

He slapped viciously at the cloud about his head.

El tigre, having had his look, went his way. The bugs buzzed, sinking sharp drills into every inch of the men, through shirts, through trousers. The fire smoked and the two sat silent, too weary even, to slap at their tormenters. One hour—two hours passed. Brant felt his head nodding. He stretched out and covered his face with his jacket. Sleep at last—and to hell with everything else.

II

BRANT had dropped off and was dreaming of french fries and porterhouse when he felt a tug at his arm.

"Allan, Allan," it was Wiley, "wake up—take a look."

Yawning, Brant sat up. "Lord, man," he growled, "why don't you go to sleep?"

"Look!" Wiley jabbed a finger toward the southeast. "There it is—see—" as a flash of light flickered for an instant. "I thought it was lightning at first, but it's not."

Thoroughly awake now, Brant waited for a recurrence of the light. It came. Though it was similar to flash lightning, he knew it wasn't. There was no rumble of thunder and the sky was bright with starlight. Somewhere, a mile away, perhaps ten, was a fire.

"Come on," he growled. "I don't know what it is, but I'm hoping it's people. Indians."

Threading the jungle in the daytime was bad enough, but it was a hundredfold more difficult at night. Creepers, roots and vines impeded their progress. Nettles scratched at their arms and faces. Once, Brant's groping fingers grasped what he thought was a vine. He felt the spasmodic ripple of muscles and a long writhing shape threw a loop over his arm. A head the size of a small dog's reared in front of him. A forked tongue whipped out and two beady eyes reflected the light from the pocket flashlight, now growing dim from overuse. Without showing the tremor of fear that swept over him, he shook off the thing. With a hiss that sounded like a steam engine exhaust, the boa slid into the foliage.

Wiley plodding in the rear, did not see the snake. Nor did Brant mention it. The mechanic's nerves were already at the breaking point.

After an eternity of struggle, the jungle

thinned out and they emerged into an open glade. The flashes of shimmering light were not quite plain. Cautiously, the flashlight battery was completely exhausted, they advanced. A premonition of lurking danger warned Brant. Poised for a forward step, he halted. A deadly void loomed before him. He stood on the brink of a precipice, of what nature, he had no way of knowing, except that the light came from somewhere far, far below. One more step and he would have plunged into a yawning abyss. He retreated a few yards.

Wiley had dropped in his tracks. "I can't take another step," the mechanic groaned. "I'm all in."

Brant told him of the drop and while the fagged man rested, Brant crawled to the edge and watched the fireworks display below.

It was a curious sight. Almost as though a huge bonfire was shooting up flames as new fuel was added. The fire would flicker down, then with astonishing suddenness flare skyward again. The depth of whatever it was, gorge, pit or chasm, was tremendous. Brant estimated it as from fifteen hundred to two thousand feet below the glade.

A glow of hope surged through him. It was a fire. And man-made at that. The moving figures of men were discernible. A camp fire. Chicleros probably, though Brant didn't know of any chicle in that part of Costa Rica. But whoever they were, it meant food, meant that there was a trail out of the jungle. And perhaps a guide could be obtained. He crawled back to Wiley and told him of what he had seen.

"I'm too damned tired to even think," the mechanic mumbled.

THE sun was up and the jungle boiled when the sleep drugged Brant awakened. Alongside, Wiley snored like a planing mill. The man's mouth was open and a stream of tiny red ants dipped antennas into the saliva drooling from its corners.

Brant grinned. He reached over and shook Wiley. The mechanic awakened, wiped away the insects and made a wry face. "Somebody poured vinegar into my mouth," he grunted. "At least it tastes that way."

"Come on, fellow," Brant smiled, "and we'll find something more substantial than ants to put in our innards."

They stood on the edge of the cliff and surveyed the country before them. It was a huge depression, a bowl sunk in the jungle. In the distance its far rim loomed stark in the morning shadows. The bottom of the depression, a thousand square miles in area, was a hodge podge of landscape. Grassy savannas dotted with palms lay just under the precipice. Further on, mountains reared jagged peaks of mottled lavender shades, turning to shimmering green as the sun mounted.

The fire of the previous night had come from one of the savannas, for there in orderly squares, were buildings, doll-house dimensioned from the distance. Ant-size figures moved about. It was some sort of a village.

Brant's eyes swept the side of the cliff. "There ought to be a trail somewhere," he said.

They searched for two hours, but it might have been the sides of the Colorado Canyon, for nowhere did a means of descent show itself. Hungry and disheartened, they returned to the glade.

Suddenly, Brant snapped his fingers. He'd noticed a spur of rock two or three hundred feet away, a spur jutting a sharp flat point fifty or sixty feet over the edge. "I've an idea, Wiley, come on."

They examined the rock. The point overhung the depression. From its tip, the drop was a sheer two thousand feet, but it was a clear drop. Brant rolled over a good sized boulder. It fell without touching the scraggly growth clinging to the cliff's sides.

"Get it, Wiley?" he asked. "If we hunt for a trail it may mean days and days. And by that we'll have caved in—starved to death. The other way—" he was searching the mechanic's face—"means a trek back to the plane."

"I don't get the connection," Wiley said.

"Chutes, man. We get the 'chutes and jump off this rock. A pull of the rip cord—and presto, we're down!" He waited Wiley's reactions. If the mechanic wouldn't jump, they'd have to continue the search for a trail. Brant was responsible for Wiley being there and he couldn't desert him if he wouldn't risk the leap.

Wiley crept to the tip of the rock. He looked at the depths below. "All right," he agreed, white-faced. "I'd sooner die all at once than starve."

It took them all day to make the trip to the

plane and return, lugging the heavy parachutes. It was not until almost nightfall again that they stood on the overhanging rock.

Brant repeated minute instructions.

Wiley nodded. "I understand," he groaned. "Go on. I'll follow if I don't faint."

"Here goes," Brant leaped straight out as far as he could. He turned over twice and pulled the ripcord. He caught a last glimpse of Wiley's terrified face, then the silken parasol opened over him. The harness jerked hard as the 'chute abruptly checked his descent. Swaying, twisting, he floated downward.

He landed in a small savanna dotted with banana trees. As he freed himself of the harness, he scanned the sky looking for Wiley. Far above, the head and shoulders of the mechanic appeared wart-like on the edge. Wiley had not jumped.

Brant waved his arms and yelled. The yell was picked up by the cliff, echoing and reechoing weirdly.

The wart on the rock moved. It hurtled into the air. A few seconds later fabric billowed against the sky and the mechanic floated earthward.

Brant freed him of the 'chute. Wiley's face was ashen and he could not stand on his feet. Brant half carried, half dragged him to a small rivulet. He bathed the man's face and head. After a minute or two Wiley's face had regained some of its normal ruddiness.

"I'm vowing here and now," he panted, "never to make another parachute jump. Not even to get a bellyful of grub."

BRANT smiled and pointed to a banana tree heavy with bunches.

Wiley shook his head. He watched Brant eat bananas with the same expression that a seasick passenger on a liner might have, watching a good sailor put down a slab of fat pork.

Brant wiped his mouth and lit one of his last cigarettes. Wiley didn't smoke. "If you're equal to it," he said, "we'll try to locate that village."

Twilight had fallen and they were still floundering through a succession of grassy savannas. Troops of monkeys, ready for bed, made faces at them from palm trees while flocks of macaws added splashes of color to the somber dusk.

"We won't find it tonight," Brant sighed. "Our best bet is to wait here until morning. If there's a fire again we may see its reflection. The town can't be very far away. Suppose you build a fire, Wiley, while I knock off a monkey?"

He unholstered his pistol and stalked a chattering creature who scolded from the fronds of a banana. The pistol cracked and the monkey dropped.

Brant skinned and dressed it, spitted a hind quarter on a green stick and held it to the fire. As the odor of roast flesh permeated the muggy air, the look of disgust on Wiley's face faded away. Over his nausea from the parachute drop, his whole being craved food. By the time Brant began gnawing on the hind quarter, Wiley was searching for a greenstick.

Brant grinned. "So you've overcome your anthropophagous squeamishness!" he said as the mechanic spitted the other hind quarter.

"Anthro—what? Wiley grunted. "Speak American."

"Which means you no longer object to monkey meat," Brant explained.

"It smells all right," Wiley admitted, "if it didn't look so damned much like cat. I wish we had some salt."

The meal over they sat near the flare. Brant smoked another precious cigarette.

"Say, Brant, Wiley said apprehensively. "Suppose these people in here—" he waved a vague hand, "don't like us. Then what?"

Brant glanced at the fire. He shook his head reassuringly. "If they're Indians they're probably Talamanca. And the Talamanca Indians know that to harm a white man would bring swift reprisal from the government. Or they're chicle pickers or egret hunters. In either case, some of them will be white. There's no danger, Wiley, we'll find out just where we are and hire a guide to take us out."

III

WILEY stirred the fire. A shower of sparks flew up. From out on the savanna came a child-like wail, long drawn, mournful.

Wiley snapped erect, a shiver creeping up his spine. "What the devil was that?" he muttered.

Brant smiled. "*El tigre*," he said consolingly. "A jaguar, Wiley, but that's all he'll do. Yowl."

The long grass rustled as if the wind was blowing it—and there was no wind.

“Mebbe that’s what you think,” Wiley snorted, jerking out his Colt, “but me, I’m taking no chances—”

“Hush—” alarmed, Brant held up a hand for silence.

The ominous rustling continued. Close in, drawing nearer. Brant too drew his Colt.

The wail was repeated, this time coming from the opposite side of the fire. The alarm in Brant’s face was obvious. “Lord,” he growled, “two of them.” He threw dry palm fronds on the fire. “If they rush, Wiley, take the one on that side. I’ll handle this one—lookout! They’re coming?”

His speech trailed off. The pistol came up, wavered, fell. The figures emerging from the savanna were not animals—not jaguars, but men brandishing *maquahuittls* and spears.

Before Brant could decide if it was an attack, it was decided for him. A club crashed down on his head. As he went out, he heard the crack of Wiley’s pistol.

When consciousness returned to him, he found himself on his back staring into a starlit sky. He tried to touch his aching head, but found his hands tied. So were his feet.

“Wiley,” he groaned, “where are you?”

“Here,” came a muffled voice from alongside.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, but I’m tied so tight I can’t budge.”

“Who are they?”

“I don’t know. There’s a whole mess of them. I pulled a bead on one, but I don’t think I got him. The next moment about a dozen of them tackled me and trussed me up.”

The fire had died down and in the dull glow from its embers Brant could not identify the figures that loomed in the darkness. Only that they were men. Nor did he understand the language of the attackers, gutturals and jerky syllables.

He was yanked to his feet. So was Wiley. The thongs on their legs were cut and a line of some sort passed through their wrist lashings. A jerk that said plainly, come along, and they were herded eastward.

“So the Indians know that the spiggoty government would give ‘em the works if they

touched a white man?” Wiley growled sarcastically as he shuffled along. “That’s a laugh. Here we are, trussed up like a couple of those big lizards we saw at San Jose. And we don’t know what’s next. Mebbe they’ll eat us like they do the lizards.”

“I deserve the razz, Wiley,” Brant admitted, “but this is a new one on me. And remember, I’ve spent the most of my life here in Central America. I don’t know if these fellows are Indians. There’s nothing Indian about their speech., at least, any Indian tongue I’m familiar with.”

“Then who the hell are they?”

“We’ll have to wait and see. One thing certain, they saw us come down or heard the shot when I killed the monkey. They stalked us using the jaguar scream to signal each other with. It may be that they’re a band of *chicleros* or egret hunters—and we’ve barged in on some of their private shenanigans.”

At midnight the column entered a village, apparently the same one the Americans had observed from above. Before the captives had a chance to do more than take a hurried glance at their surroundings, they were pushed into a *carcel*, a squat low stone building. Their bonds were cut and the door, also of stone, hung on some sort of a device that permitted its easy swinging, banged its ton of weight shut, enclosing them in almost utter darkness.

Although Brant had tried to talk to their captors in both Spanish and Indian, he had been met by stolid silence or impatient gutturals. Nor had he had a full view of a single face. All that he knew was that the attackers wore loin cloths of some light material and that egret feathers adorned their heads.

THEY examined the room in the dark, feeling along the wall with groping hands. It was about twelve feet square, smooth walled and escape proof. Besides the door, a long slim aperture about six inches in diameter pierced the foot thick wall. Through this a faint bit of starlight filtered.

The hope of finding an exit fading, both men lay down. One by one, Brant exhausted all theories as to who their captors might be. Not one gave a single plausible clue.

Brant had been sleeping for an hour or so

when a loud exclamation from Wiley awakened him. He sat up. The interior of the cell was feebly lighted. At the orifice in the wall he saw the head and shoulders of the mechanic.

"For God's sake," came in Wiley's tremulous voice, "take a look!" He stepped aside allowing Brant a full view of what had startled him.

A hundred yards away, on a stone platform raised ten or twelve feet above the ground, blazed a huge pyre of wood. But it was not the fire that had startled Wiley. Nor was it the assembly of feather adorned spectators in the plaza. It was something else. A convex surfaced stone—an altar—on the same platform with the fire—and arched back downward on it, the nude body of a human being. So fierce were the flames, so bright the light they cast, that the bonds holding the person to the stone were clearly visible.

Over the man, giving the spectators full view of what was taking place, was a tall individual wearing a jaguar head mask and a feather cloak. In one hand he held a naked blade. As Brant watched, conscious that he was witnessing something he had thought long gone from the American continent, the knife came down. The victim squirmed as the knife pierced his breast. The executioner—or priest, inserted a hand in the incision. He withdrew it, holding a dark object, dripping blood. Holding it in both hands, he faced to the cardinal points of the compass five times, beginning and ending with the east. Then to a mass chant coming from the feathered fiends who watched, he cast the pulsing heart he had torn from a living body into the flaming pyre.

"Good God!" Brant breathed. "An old Anahuac rite. A living sacrifice to Huitzilipochtli. And in Costa Rica."

"The light wakened me," Wiley explained. "I crawled over and watched. The fellow they just gave the works to was the second I saw. At first I thought I was dreaming."

Brant nodded. Thoroughly familiar with Mexican and Mayan history, he visualized not only two, but perhaps a score of victims out there on the stone platform, the stairway of which, no doubt, was plentifully besprinkled with blood. Of what race the victims were, he had not the slightest idea.

"I don't know what we've stumbled into, Wiley," he told the mechanic, "but I'm afraid that

pickle I mentioned has turned into a whole barrel of pickles. We've witnessed a repetition of last night. You'll remember it was about this time when we first noticed the fire. How many more nights of it depends on the number they're going to kill. It's a religious festival. These people saw us come down. They captured us, perhaps," he tried to keep the doubt out of his voice, "to keep us from throwing a monkey wrench into the proceedings, or—well, they may need more candidates for that stone slab!"

"God! Allen, you don't mean—Why—"

"I don't know, Wiley. In the morning, if we're still here, we can try to plan something. Right now, sleep is the most essential thing. Grab a few winks if you can."

"I'll try, Allen. I'm so damned near all in—"

Ignoring the things that were taking place outside the two stretched out on the hard stone floor, captives of a people who adhered to or had adopted the ancient religion of Anahuac with its bloody rituals: human sacrifice, ceremonial cannibalism and God only knew what else.

IV

DIM light coming through the aperture awakened Brant. He was stiff and sore and a bump on his head the size of an egg told where he had been clubbed the previous night. Even as he roused Wiley the ponderous door swung open.

Apprehensively, the two watched. Were they going to be led out to that blood stained platform?

The door was open. Silent, *maquahuitl* armed men stood in the opening. One carried three earthenware bowls and a platter. He thrust them inside and the door was closed. Brant investigated the dishes. One contained water, two of the others were filled with black beans, *frijoles*, and the platter held a stack of *tortillas*.

"They don't intend to starve us," Brant said helping himself, "and another thing, these people whoever they are, are not a lost race. The *frijoles* and *tortillas* prove that."

A half hour after eating, the door swung open again and a feather ornamented man with gold bracelets on both arms beckoned. Any attempt to have made a dash for freedom would have been useless. A dozen men armed with obsidian toothed clubs stood behind the man with the

bracelets.

As the Americans emerged from the carcel, the guards closed around and the whole group pointed its steps down a stone paved street.

As Brant's eyes became accustomed to the bright glare of the sun, he almost forgot the peril they were in. An archeologist's enthusiasm replaced it. Never had he seen men like those guards. They were tall, straight, well proportioned, with a curious combination of Semitic and Mongolian features. They had high, intelligent and strong foreheads, well spaced brown eyes and remarkably light skins. Only he of the bracelets seemed to be a pure blooded Indian. Mexican or Mayan.

As for the town, it reminded him of the dead cities of Yucatan, except that it was in a better state of preservation and no jungle overflowed into its streets as in the case of the latter.

Brant thought of the pleasure that would be his if allowed to browse through this city at will, but his thoughts were short lived. The guards directed them up a flight of stone steps into a long cool room filled with vines growing from pottery vases. Great stones inscribed with hieroglyphs stood against the walls.

On a low couch along one side sat a lean faced man of about fifty with pronounced Semitic features. His only dress was a loin cloth of white and a band about his head into which was thrust an egret feather. A flat faced fellow of about thirty-five, showing a predominant Indian strain in his coarse black hair, swarthy skin and dark eyes, stood near. He held a jaguar head mask in one hand. Brant needed no second glance to tell him that here was the functionary at last night's blood letting. The priest.

The prisoners were prodded before the two men. The escort saluted and withdrew to the entrance.

"I am Maxica, King of Ixtlop," the Semitic featured man said in labored Spanish. "Who are you, and from where do you come?"

"Ahhh," Brant's sigh of relief was audible. He smiled, but no answering smile creased the stern lips of the king.

"We are Americans," Brant replied, "on an airplane flight from San Jose to Colon. Our ship crashed back in the hills. We saw your fires night before last—and, well, we thought it might be

chicleros or egret hunters. Your men captured us before we could make ourselves known."

The king spoke in the strange syllables to the priest. The man nodded. His eyes narrowed.

The king turned to Brant. "It is unfortunate—for you—that you came here," he stated. "Ixtlop is not the white man's enemy, but we wish to remain in the peace we have known for five hundred years and to keep secure the repository of the ancient wisdom of Anahuac which we know from bitter experience would be destroyed if our existence and whereabouts became known. No one, not of Ixtlop may come here and ever leave again!"

A MOVEMENT near a lush growth in a huge vase and Brant became aware of another person in the room. His eyes widened. The import of what might be death sentences upon him and Wiley just uttered by the king was lost.

The person was a girl—a beautiful creature in her early twenties. Like the king's, her features were softly Semitic. Her eyes were large and lustrous. Her golden skin, soft as peach down, pulsed with life. She wore little clothing. Only a short cotton scarf about her hips and a narrow strip of the same material about her breast. A thin strip of beaten gold ornamented each forearm and an egret feather plumed her headband.

The king's eyes followed Brant's gaze. "My daughter, Margo," he said softly. "Our ancestors came out of the west thrice a thousand years ago to bring to Anahuac the wisdom of the gods. But the Aztecs migrated from the north and subdued our nation. Not content to bow to the barbarians a handful of my fathers fled Tenochtitlan in the year Flint 5 during the reign of Tizoc and came here. But as the Aztecs lived by the sword, so too, did they perish. The Spaniards came. Worse than the Aztec, the Spaniard destroyed everything. And that is why we of Ixtlop keep the whereabouts of this, the last stronghold of the gods of Anahuac, a secret."

The archeological interest in Brant was in the ascendancy. So far as he was concerned, he cared little right now if he ever saw the outside world again. That statement of the king's: "our ancestors came out of the west thrice a thousand years ago," meant that a pet theory of Brant's might be substantiated, that the people who gave to

Mexico, Central America and Peru, their early culture, were Phoenicians. The Lord only knew what historical treasures might be found in the stone buildings of Ixtlop.

"I was born in Salvador," he told the king. "I have long been interested in the lost cities of Maya. How comes it that you, a survivor of that civilization, speak the Spanish tongue?"

The king smiled. "My house sends its sons into the world. As a youth I traveled in Guatamala, Nicaragua, Honduras and the home of my ancestors, Anahuac. There I learned to speak Spanish."

There was another question Brant wanted to ask. A delicate one. He looked at Maxica thoughtfully and asked it. "It is known to me," he said, "by the stone writings of Tenochtitlan that human sacrifice began in the year 5 Flint, the same year your people fled here. It is also known to me by the same writings that prior to the reign of the Emperor Tizoc, the Anahuac did not indulge in human sacrifice. Why then do the people of Ixtlop tear the hearts out of living men?"

The king cast an apprehensive eye at the priest. "It is true," he admitted, "that my fathers had no human sacrifice. However, on their flight to this land they brought with them a number of Aztecs. Guat," he nodded at the priest, "is of that race. As the centuries passed, we of the west became fewer in numbers while those of the Aztecs increased. Today, Ixtlop numbers three score of the west, the Aztec ten times that number. We retain the kingship and a few military posts. The priesthood and all else is given over to the Aztecs. And that is why human sacrifice is the custom here. To save our heritage we condone the rite."

"Your victims," Brant asked. "Of what race and from where do they come?"

The king waved a hand eastward. "From the saltwater. Once a year our warriors go forth to seek captives for the sacrifice."

The answer, Brant thought, to the mysterious raids on Indian villages in the region of the Chiriqui Lagoon. For years the Costa Rican government had known that something strange was happening there. But as its sovereignty over the district was only nominal, nothing had ever been done about it. The authorities had dismissed

the matter as inter-tribal warfare.

"What will be done with us?" Brant asked at last, brought to the present by the fidgeting of Wiley who, not understanding a word, was betraying impatience.

"You will stay here," the king answered. "You may come and go as you please. The only exit from Ixtlop is a narrow pass in the mountains guarded day and night. You cannot escape. Had we taken you two days ago, you would have gone to Guat's altar, but last night the rites came to an end until another year rolls around. You, senors, will be fed and cared for. But the day will come when you will be placed on the stone of sacrifice. Until that time, peace."

There was one consolation, Brant thought as they were led from the palace. The girl Margo had smiled at him. A sympathetic and understanding smile. "Don't lose heart," it seemed to say.

THE prisoners were taken to a stone building a few hundred yards from the palace where by signs they were told they were to be quartered.

The room they were assigned to was large, cool and pleasant. Green leaved vines rooted in pottery vases covered the walls and on one side were two jaguar skin couches. The escort gave instructions to an old woman and withdrew.

Brant surveyed the crone. "*Vamoose, madre,*" he said in Spanish, waving her away. She may not have understood the words but she did the tone. Submissively, she disappeared into the cavernous depths of the stone pile.

Brant explained to Wiley his conversation with the king.

"What are we going to do?" Wiley snorted. "Sit down and wait?"

"Our best bet," Brant returned, "is to drift with the stream for a time. We'll find a way to escape. The girl, Wiley, did you see her?"

"Yeah. Pip too. Tried to get her eye, but she kept looking at you."

V

SUMMER passed, autumn rounded the corner and the rainy season came. Six months now had Brant and his mechanic been prisoners of the Ixtlopians. But not an unpleasant captivity. Free to move about in the city and its environs, the men

were turned back only when they approached the pass of Telpucan, a narrow defile ten miles distant, a pass which led from the great depression and was the gateway to the Chiriqui Lagoon hinterland.

Brant had reveled in the wealth of archeological material he unearthed. Even Wiley had succumbed to the languor of Ixtlop. This too, in spite of the fate that waited them at the end of another six months. However, this seemed more and more remote as time went on. Maxica, for all his superstition, was a kindly man. He sympathized with Brant's archeological zeal. Long hours the two spent in discussion. Brant was now sure that his premise was correct. That the people who had brought civilization to early America came from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. That a Phoenician ship, trading perhaps, in savage Britain for tin, had been blown off her course at sea and forced across the Atlantic to make a landfall on the Mexican coast. Then the slow building of a civilization which in time combined with the aboriginal into an indigenous Mexican-Phoenician culture with roots in both the east and the west.

"You are a learned man, Museo," Maxica said gravely, calling Brant by the name he had given him. "Had the Aztecs and Spaniards been as you, Anahuac today might still be the great empire my fathers founded."

And as had Maxica admitted to friendly relations with his captives, so too had Margo. Brant had mastered the Ixtlopian gutturals, idioms, constructions and particles. Margo could speak a few words of Spanish. Thus they had a vocabulary. The American spent long hours with Margo, and never, so he told Wiley, had he met a woman with a tenth of her unspoiled charm.

"The dame's got your number," Wiley grinned. "Anybody with half an eye could see that."

Brant admitted it. "The only fly in the ointment," he said seriously, "is the priest, Guat. Guat and the end of the year."

"It's not a bad place, this Ixtlop," Wiley returned, "but you and I have people back in the states. And by this time they're wondering what the devil's become of us. I'm not so hot about staying here on the chance that someone will change their minds about that stone. It's time we

were going over the hill."

Brant put the question to the king. "Six months have passed since we came, Maxica. Are you still of a mind that I and my friend must perish on the stone of sacrifice?"

"I am only king, not high priest, Museo," the king returned painfully. "Guat would raise the people in rebellion if I interfered. I am not the law—"

"Then, Museo, you must escape," Margo cried.

A surge of feeling swept over Brant. This strange girl of a strange race meant much to him. Wiley was right. The dame had his number. And from her outburst, he had, to use Wiley's colloquial, her number as well.

Brant, open, frank, generous, made no secret of the depths to which he had been stirred. He placed an arm about Margo's slender waist. "When I escape, Margo," he asked, "will you go with me?"

"To the great cities of the north I have told you of?"

"Aye, I will," Margo looked half defiantly, half sorrowfully at her father.

"Had any other man of a foreign nation said that, Museo," Maxica said at length, "I would have given him over to the executioner at once. You, however, I know to be a man. And a brave and intelligent one. I also know that measured by the standards of your people, you are wealthy. My daughter loves you—Well, it shall be arranged for the three of you to pass the guards in the gorge of Telpucan."

BRANT and Margo urged Maxica to go with them—to leave Ixtlop.

"Look, Maxica," Brant reasoned. "Men have machines that fly. Every day the numbers of these machines increase. It is only a matter of years, perhaps months, until great birds will soar over Ixtlop on regular routes between the cities of the Americas. No longer will it be possible to maintain the secrecy of this land. Then will come the winged warships of the Costa Rican government to blast you out of existence in retaliation for the killing of the Chiriqui Lagoon Indians. The sacrificial altars will tumble into dust. The priests and executioners will be shot or hanged. Your city will be given over to

archeologists who will dig and delve into its ruins and marvel that such an intelligent people were wanton murderers. Come with us while there is still time. We shall go to the government at San Jose and tell them of Ixtlop. A way will be found to protect your secrets, the land will be opened to commerce and an end made to human sacrifice."

Maxica shook his head. "I shall stay. When Ixtlop goes down to dust under the winged warships, Maxica will go with it. I cannot desert my people. Now go. I will send word when all is in readiness."

Guat had long cast covetous eyes on Margo. With the advent of the two white men and Margo's fraternization with the tall fair one, Guat's jealousy had flared to fierce heat. But he bided his time. The traditions of kingship weighed heavily on the Ixtlopians. Not yet would Guat risk an open break with Maxica.

But when Guat's spies reported that the strangers were preparing to flee and that Maxica was aiding them, the priest acted at once. He convoked the great assembly as was his right, bidding the seven-hundred odd inhabitants, the king and the nobles to attend.

A messenger from Maxica brought word to Brant of the sudden turn in affairs. "The king thinks evil is afoot," the messenger concluded. "You are to disguise yourselves and mingle with the throng. You would not be safe here if Guat determined to seize you."

Brant clapped his hands. "Marianna," he called. A daring idea had shot into his head.

The old crone who looked after them shuffled into the room. Brant talked to her long and earnestly. She nodded.

It was sundown. There was a thrill of excitement about the stone platform in the *plaza mayor*. Spectators, their heads gaudily decorated with coronals of egret plumes sat on stone benches or squatted on the ground below the platform. Every man, woman and child in Ixtlop who could walk, hobble or crawl was there. Only the guards in the pass of Telpucan were absent. A fire kindled for light shed a lurid glow over the whole crowd.

Brant and Wiley with coronals of plumes on their heads, their bodies stained yellow with an herb juice secured for them by Marianna, sat lost in the mass of Ixtlopians. If it came to a

showdown they were prepared to fight to the finish. Just before they had left for the plaza another messenger, this one from Margo, had brought a bundle to their quarters. When Brant opened it, their belts, holstered Colts and clipped ammunition tumbled out. The guns now bulged under their white cotton loin cloths.

On a raised dais near the stone platforms at Maxica, Margo and a number of Ixtlopians nobles, Margo's eyes searched the crowd intently. Brant felt a warm glow inside. He knew she was looking for him.

The babble of voices increased. Guat would make his appearance shortly.

A hush fell over the plaza. The priest had emerged on the stone platform and had taken a stand to one side of the sinister stone slab.

TALL, the jaguar mask over his head accentuated his height, his copper skin gleaming, the priest was an imposing figure. He raised a hand and called for silence. When it had been established so that not even the dropping of a pin could have been heard, Guat launched into his talk.

Brant listened closely. And while listening his eyes searched the faces of the Ixtlopians. For on their reactions would depend his counter-maneuver.

Guat did not attack the king. Nor did he mention that he had unearthed the captives' plan for escape. He simply demanded that the two foreigners be put to the sacrifice at once. Huitzilipochtli had appeared to him, so he said, and told him that the two must die. Unless the god's command was carried out, then would Irazu to the northwest, Guat pointed dramatically to the great mountain, throw out its streams of molten fire to cover and burn Ixtlop to a cinder.

Guat was logical. Many times had the *volcan* with its accompanying earth tremors taken heavy toll of lives. All over Costa Rica mothers frightened their children with Irazu. But never had Ixtlop suffered from Irazu, although the Ixtlopians had seen it in eruption and had felt its rumblings.

VI

GUAT concluded and stood waiting for the thunderous vote of concurrence he expected.

It did not materialize. For before Ixtlop could give vent to the yell it had on its collective lips, a man, golden skinned, with yellow hair and blue eyes that glinted fiercely in the firelight, sprang up. He stood on a bench and waved a hand.

"Listen to me, o people of Ixtlop," he boomed in their own tongue. "Guat is a priest of Huitzilipochtli and the reign of that god is over. Quetzaleoatl of the white skin and yellow hair has sent me, his messenger to Ixtlop. And this is the message I bring: The white men shall not die. And no longer shall the Ixtlopians make war on the Indians of the Chiriqui Lagoon. Never again shall they tear the hearts from human beings. No longer shall they sacrifice to Huitzilipochtli. If Ixtlop heeds not the commands of Quetzalcoatl, then shall his mountain—" Brant was taking a cue from the priest; he pointed to the white capped peak of Mount Blanco in the southeast—"spew death and desolation over the land!"

There was a deathly pause, a stillness broken only by the labored breathing of seven hundred people. Brant's voice had carried to all parts of the plaza. Nobody, perhaps with the exception of Margo, recognized in the stalwart figure, the captive Guat wanted to put to death. Even the priest was at a loss. Then with his prestige at stake, Guat found his voice.

"What proof have you that you are from Quetzalcoatl?" he thundered.

"This, o priest of Huitzilipochtli," Brant returned, "that you and I wage combat to the death on the platform where you stand. Huitzilipochtli and Quetzalcoatl. Then may all men truly see that I come from the golden haired one."

The crowd roared approval. Guat would dare not refuse the challenge.

"Oh—oh, you horse's neck," Wiley groaned. "You've put your foot in it now—"

"It's the only way," Brant whispered, "to save our skins." He unbuckled the belt and pistol from under the loin cloth and gave them to Wiley. Then he strode through the throng to the sacrificial platform. Some of the Ixtlopians reached out and touched him. To see if he was real. The god's messenger.

Brant mounted the platform. "*Maquahuits!*" he thundered. "And see that they be of the same length and weight."

A pause and a man brought the weapons

forward and thrust them up. Brant offered Guat his choice. The priest, recognition dawning in his eyes, took one. He knew now who faced him. He was satisfied. Deceitful, cunning as he was, he had the courage of his race. Once he had killed Brant, he would keep the secret forever. He would gain great fame in vanquishing the representative of Quetzalcoatl. He raised the *maquahuilt* and shouted.

Brant braced himself for the onset. Just as determined as the priest was the American. When he had killed Guat, he and Wiley would return to their quarters, wash the stain off their bodies and pretend ignorance of what had happened. With the new laws brought by the supposed messenger of the sun-god would come the end of human sacrifice. They would be allowed to leave. With them would go Margo.

His thoughts were left suspended in midair. Guat's club whistled. The stone blades imbedded in its head flicked the hide from Brant's hand as he sidestepped. He swung his own club. It met the priest's. Sparks flew as the flints ground together. Brant's hands stung from the impact.

Up and down the length of the sacrificial platform, across its breadth, the two men advanced, retreated, sidestepped, lunged and parried. Brant swung high and hard at the leering jaguar mask. Guat interposed his club. Brant's met it with a terrific impact and the *maquahuilt* shattered into a thousand splinters. Only a foot of the haft remained in Brant's hands. The priest yelled triumphantly. Baleful murder gleamed in the beady eyes under the hideous mask. As Guat rushed, his obsidian toothed weapon swinging in a tremendous arc, a spectator on the king's dais screamed. It was Margo.

But the *maquahuilt* never reached Brant. He jerked the stump of his club over a shoulder, poised it an instant, then hurled it with all his strength into the leering mask. The hardwood smashed home. The priest staggered. Brant rushed him. Striding to the edge of the platform, he hurled the priest down the stairway. Guat's head crunched into a stone step ten feet below. His body carried by its momentum, turned a complete somersault. It thudded to the ground, stirred, twitched and was still. Guat, priest of Huitzilipochtli, was dead.

THE Ixtlopians were on their feet, yelling, screeching, howling. They surged toward the platform to pay homage to the victor. But Brant, rounding the fire, dropped into the shadows on the other side. A moment later he rejoined Wiley.

"Nice work," the mechanic grinned. "Listen to them, will you," as the Ixtlopians implored the sun-god's messenger to reveal himself, "sounds like an opener at the Yankee's stadium."

Brant belted on his pistol. "Come on," he snapped, "let's get away from here."

VII

BRANT and Wiley never again saw the stone pile which was their quarters. Just as they gained the street leading from the plaza, a blinding glare flashed over the sky. A glare so bright that all Ixtlop was revealed as at midday.

"Now what—?" Brant muttered.

A thunderous concussion, a quivering, a rocking, a detonation of a thousand pieces of heavy artillery answered him. His eyes sought the lighted horizon. Mount Irazu had turned incandescent. Awestruck, the two men watched. As they did, the whole top of the mountain blew up. Coronal light leaped through the dark clouds of vapor which had replaced the incandescence.

"Earthquake and volcano," Brant groaned. "And Guat foretold it. A coincidence, Wiley, but bad for us. The pickle goes from a barrel to a hoghead. They'll be after us in ten minutes and we'll be torn limb from limb!"

There was a spattering on the street and in the trees lining it. Something like fine sand stung Brant's almost nude torso. He held out a hand, drew it back and examined it. It was full of gritty particles: volcanic ash—pumice stone.

The hail of the stuff grew in intensity. The air was full of sandblasty shot. It rattled in the streets and against the buildings. Its velocity and volume increased. Soon it was in their nostrils. It clogged their eyes.

"We'll be buried in an hour if it keeps up," Brant gasped. He turned about and made for the plaza.

"Hey—where are you going?" Wiley yelled.

"To get Margo."

"You're crazy—" Wiley bawled, "—they'll murder you!"

"Can't help it—" Brant was leaning into the hail of ash. "You're on your own, Wiley. Head for the pass. I think this is the end of Ixtlop. If I get through, I'll look for you there. Good luck!"

"Nuts to you—" the mechanic squawked. "You're crazy, but I'm sticking with you." He ran after Brant.

The ash settled down like a black mantle of death. Mount Irazu was a seething, blazing mass. Hades had come to the surface and was burning up the world. As the Americans worked their way into the plaza, screeching Ixtlopians ran wildly about like ants on a burning log. Some were on their knees imploring the gods to save them. Others were stricken as if with paralysis. They faced toward the *volcan* with Indian fatalism. The earth rocked. Down came the stone platform and its sacrificial slab tumbled to earth.

The dais on which Maxica and his nobles had sat was almost deserted. Only two figures remained. Margo and her father. As Brant recognized and called to them another quake brought the dais down. Margo screamed and Brant plunged forward. A stone weighing a ton just missed him. Then he was in the wreckage. Frantically, he searched for the girl. A coronal of feathers caught his eye. He tore his fingers as he pulled away the timbers. It was Margo. As he carried her to the open plaza he felt her arms tighten about him. "I am not hurt, Museo," he heard her say. "Help—help my father—"

Telling Wiley to stay with her, he plunged into the debris again. Five minutes of search and he found Maxica. A slab of stone was on his chest. The king of Ixtlop was dead.

He returned to Margo. "Your father has gone to Quetzalcoatl," he said sadly. "Ixtlop is a fitting tomb." He snapped a finger toward the pass of Telpucan. "If we don't get away we'll be buried alive. Come on."

It was morning. Wiley, Margo and Brant stood above the pass. To one side was the trail to the coast. With passable luck they'd be able to make the Chiriqui Lagoon. They still had their pistols and sufficient ammunition. Monkeys were plentiful on the Caribbean side of the mountains.

The hair of all three was filled with volcanic ash and their eyes were red rimmed from sulphur fumes. So far as they knew, they were the only survivors of Ixtlop. The Ixtlopians had died with

their city. Even the guards at the pass had fled back to their wives and children. In the night as the three had toiled up the defile, frantic guards had passed them on their way home.

THE entire depression was a scene of desolation. Smoking ash covered Ixtlop. Palms and savannas had disappeared. Over all was a layer of crusting clinker.

To the northwest, Irazu still vomited smoke, but the fury of the *volcan* had diminished. Brant surveyed it with watery burnt eyes.

“If Irazu didn’t have a bad reputation,” he said to Wiley, “one might think that the priest did

have an inside track to Huitzilipochtli. Kind of funny though, Irazu had erupted many times before, but it has always blown off toward Cartago!” He turned toward where Ixtlop had been.

“There’s a wealth of archeological stuff there,” he said slowly. “It’s a pity.” He slipped an arm about Margo; “but the greatest little thing Ixtlop ever produced has been saved. I have it here—and I know one thing sure. It won’t be exhibited in any museum. Come on, Let’s go. The Chiriqui Lagoon and home.”

“Correct,” Wiley echoed.

They trudged down the trail.