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an Amsterdam dealer, who does not tell me. They are not so carelessly rolled as you would think. The leaves are precisely graded, every vein running straight. That's why they burn. There must be a dozen thousand in the Vatican—so try to like them, please."

When I spoke of being eager to strike a vein of personal usefulness in the valley, the old Master smiled and said I must be a guest first. . . Huntoon now reported himself:

"I don't know much about anything except soldiering,—and I haven't any papers as to that. I've been a fool in garrison, but a bit of a success afield. I've been drunk in a good many places, but I know how to get a fight out of a bunch of men, up to a battalion,—or squadron, as we call it in the cavalry."

I began to see how Huntoon had caught on with Orion. A trained soldier was the ranking need of the land. His entirely uncalled-for confession was the result of a troubled spirit, and the increasing fascination of the old Master.

"If it were absolutely known whether Tropicania lay in Ecuador or Peru there wouldn't be a fight on," Romany explained presently. "Peru says the Calderon marks the boundary; Ecuador denies this, and rather aggressively. It's a remarkable state of affairs. The two republics have been grumbling over the borderline since the beginning. Years ago, I brought knowledge, labor and ingenuity to bear—first to believe, and then to prove, that there was gold in the Calderon. Up to the moment of discovery, both republics treated with me, through their agents; and all our dealings were garnished with an exquisite Spanish courtesy. When I planned to operate, however, this proved the existence of gold in the river, and I met with obstacles, that finally sent me to China in despair. This time I've just slipped in and taken possession, ordering shooting irons pound for pound with mining machinery, to protect the investment. Of course, I knew the position."

Romany laughed a little. "I never get tired observing how gold-news travels," he went on. "This is a golden age, but in a different way than is usually meant. First Libertad jerked up when the word passed of big gold in the Calderon. Then Guayaquil sent down prospectors and gamblers and girls. Up the Magdalena from town to town to Barranquilla, from isle to isle, quickening sleepy Mexico and even New York money interests cabled. Some ugly force was turned upon these mountains. The men who came took on a haggard, glaring look. Then I heard first from Orion. The fact is, Orion is a free-lance, just as I am, but he didn't discover an eldorado. He didn't spend a fortune for mining machinery."

Had I come to him, a stranger, this quiet master of the gold game, I think, would have driven straight to my heart that night. The years had taken him over the rough places. He had no hate burning, no time nor energy to spend in execrating his enemies. He placed the situation, which seemed to me most dramatic and absorbing, with the calmness of a man in any office work. Here was a republic on either flank, and while he temporized with each in turn, he kept the dredge at work.

My concentration increased as he continued:

"If I could treat finally with Orion, with Ecuador, or with Peru, no complication could set in, to render this gold-fever fatal. I could even pay any one of these powers, what would seem to the world a prohibitive rate of tribute. The Calderon is rich enough for that, but not for three tributes. Again, if I badly whipped Orion, it would only hasten the organization of other forces. Tropicania is placed admirably to develop into a buffer between two republics. You see, we have a careful game to play, though I am well pleased with the way it is unfolding. There'll be another fight at the Headland presently."

Romany tossed a cheroot through the open doorway. From one of the nearer huts below, a rousing good baritone set the night to thrilling with Posti's Good-bye: ". . . Lines of white on a sullen sea."

"That's Maconachie—one of our civil engineers—a fine young Scotchman"—the old Master whispered.

The whole environment, the song, the torrid night, the glowing stars, the thick walls of stone, the slow soft pressure

of a breeze upon the candles, the thought of two animated republics and their ancient exchange of hatred, the river flowing silently below,—all blended into a mysterious enticement about the figure of this gaunt elder, with the kindly voice and tolerant mind. The picture challenged me in a way I can hardly express. I seemed to be admitted to the borders of the wonder-world from which Mary Romany had come.

Did I imagine a queer smile, lingering about her father's mouth, as he spoke of the other headquarters at the Headland? Guns and ammunition pound for pound with mining machinery—why, therefore was he watching for a ship-load of ammunition? Was he not holding Orion at the Headland?

I thought I saw it clearly now—the old fighter dividing his force, one part to watch the sea and to keep the main force of the enemy there; another swiftly probing for gold nuggets in the stony tissue of the Calderon, and a secret third keeping communications open with Libertad—possibly getting the gold out. A big playful, masterful game, this, while another would have been at blood-letting with his own and the hostile force. And now every day was a fine winning for Romany.

His daughter's lustre was upon the old Master for my eyes. I saw where she had drawn her splendid capacity to wait. I was glad I had come, glad to serve. Huntoon was stupefied, not with wine but with the quality of the gamester to whom he had come—from a common little disturber like Orion.

Romany added: "There's some real men down below on the river. I picked a boat-load up in the States. The others came in with the gold craze, and of course don't mean so much to me. But these of the original party are white men, who have staked all they own on this venture and on my chance to win against big odds. There are other golden rivers. I have lost many times before. I won't cut my throat if we lose the Calderon and the dredge—but these few white men don't live by ventures as I do. I can't bear to see them lose. They're out on the main venture of their lives—to make a stake once and for all."

"I told them there'd be a big fight, that there always is with raw gold. But they wouldn't turn back. You'll see them, a clean-jawed lot of boys. They've stood pat so far, sick with work and gold-fever; wounds, some of them have, and all are worn down with the tension and the pull of home. . . . Why, many a woman back in the States is planning lace-curtains and carpets and cottages against the return of these fellows—"

Huntoon gulped a glass of wine. "Looks a trifle complicated at times," Romany added softly, "but I don't think it's in the cards for us to lose this trip. . . I'll give you bunks in here to-night, and we'll get together on the main trend in a day or two."

Presently, he called his factotum, Leek, who took Huntoon off to bed in the adjoining quarters. . . We stood together. I'm a bit over-size, yet the old Master looked down at me:

"And so you're all new again?"

"Yes."
"That's lucky for me. Little Mary thinks well of you, sir. I have reason to respect her judgment. It's even a bit better than her mother's, I think. . . I'm glad you've turned up. I've talked a lot of congestion out of my head. The boys leave everything to me—so there isn't much talking here in the valley. . . Good-night, Ryerson."

He led me to a cot apart from Huntoon's and I lay for hours under the mosquito canopy, thinking in the darkness of the daughter, the father and the Year.

To be continued.

It is said that eighty-three and one-half per cent. of the transportation of the United States is still done by horses. The statement is true that but for horses we should soon starve to death. Yet in road-building it is the automobile and not the horse that is considered. No doubt the percentage in Canada is still greater.

"I've often seen a cord of wood,"
Remarked the tramp, a raw one;
"I've often seen a cord of wood,"
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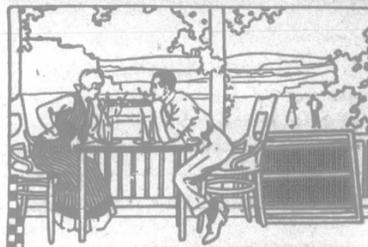
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