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Black Towers to Danger

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

Hostility from Camp Jaguar

BILL MURPHY had no premonition of danger when he turned down the slimy trail which wandered through the engulfing jungle above Lake Maracaibo.

He pulled up on his small horse, hooked the reins around the horn and wiped the sweat from his hands. Casually he began to build a cigarette.

He was not hurried about it. He had lots of time and he liked the flavor of his mission.

For two days Marcia Stewart had been at Camp Jaguar getting her late father's affairs in good order. It was time Bill Murphy made his call. He wondered if Marcia still thought that way about him. He hoped her dad wouldn't leave his ghost on the premises. Old man Stewart had been an oilman of the old hard school, a fighter to the last ditch. Now that he was gone, things ought to be fairly calm in Venezuela.

Unable to light a match, Bill removed his sunhat and ran the match through his hair to dry it. That done, he applied the flame to the cigarette.

The white helmet flew high and to the right.

The explosion came an instant later.

Bill Murphy had heard the shrill whine of the bullet.

Hastily he swung his mount into the shelter of a bush,

stepped off and hauled a Springfield from its boot. He went down into the muck on his hands and knees and crawled out for a better view.

A slug kicked splattering mud into his face.

“Damn,” said Bill, unemotionally. He looked at his ruined white shirt and said “Damn,” again.

He went around the other side of the bush, found himself still in shelter, crawled another ten feet and got a clear view of the enemy.

“Injun,” said Bill.

He threw off the safety catch, sighted down the barrel through the number ten peep.

The Indian’s black hair was glistening in a stray beam of sunlight. The cruel profile was set in a waiting expression.

Bill squeezed the trigger.

The Indian flipped backwards, his gun went up into the air and lit across his body.

Bill Murphy walked over to the clearing, leading his horse. He turned the body over with his foot.

“Camp Jaguar man,” said Bill, in a disinterested fashion.

He sighed again and looked at his own muddy shirt which had so lately been stiff with starch for Marcia’s benefit. Well, Marcia wouldn’t love him the less for a dirty shirt if she loved him at all.

Bill swabbed the sweat from his forehead, inspected the hole in the sun helmet, replaced it. He mounted and headed down the twilight trail again with the flies buzzing around his head in pursuit formation.

“*Dum de da de da,*” said Bill, thinking about Marcia again. “Have to do something about these yellow devils,” said Bill to his horse.

“Gettin’ so it ain’t safe to ride five miles from camp without havin’ to waste ammunition on them. . . . Wonder if Marcia looks different.”

He was drowsy with the heat and his great shoulders drooped forward a little. He was riding like a sack of meal when he came in sight of the oil derricks of Camp Jaguar.

The place hadn’t changed much in the last two months. Old man Stewart was dead but the wells were still going down.

“Hello, Romano,” said Bill. “Where’s Marcia?”

Romano had been sitting on a rock with a rifle across his knees. He glanced angrily up at the machine-gun tower and saw that the guard was asleep.

Romano turned deliberately around. He hefted his rifle. His face was as thin as a dagger blade and his hair was very black. His skin had a yellow cast to it like an Indian’s, but Romano claimed to be pure Castilian.

His eyes were squinted up.

“You better get the hell out of here, *amigo,*” said Romano.

“What’s the matter?” said Bill, rolling another cigarette and cocking a heel over the saddle.

“You know what’s the matter,” said Romano.

“Where’s Marcia?”

Bill pulled a match from his sweat-stained pocket, rubbed it through his hair and lighted his smoke. He peered through the smoke haze at Romano.

“She don’t want to see anything of you,” said Romano, definitely.

“Let’s see what Marcia says.”

“You better get the hell out of here while you’re all whole,” said Romano.

Bill put his boot back in the stirrup and glanced up toward the shack he knew Marcia would occupy. He sighed, took another drag on the tattered cigarette and started to move off.

Romano leaped into the trail ahead of him, rifle leveled.

“I’m going to shoot,” cried Romano.

Bill leaned over and grabbed the barrel. He canted the rifle and pulled it to him. Romano had to let go or get a broken wrist. Bill jacked the shells out of the magazine and put them into his pocket.

Romano yelled for help and tried to get at his revolver. Bill leaned over and took that and threw it into the brush. With a sharp crack, the rifle butt connected with the seat of Romano’s pants.

Bill threw the rifle after the revolver and rode easily up toward the shack.

He got down and walked up the steps. He knocked.

Marcia threw back the door and turned white. She looked hard at Bill and then her eyes began to kindle. Her voice sounded as if words were about to stick in her throat and choke her.

“What do you mean by coming here?” said Marcia, angry.

“Oh, I just thought I’d mosey up and see if you were settled yet,” said Bill.

“You two-faced, sneaking thief! You . . . you murderer!”

“Well, now,” said Bill defensively. “I wouldn’t go as far as that. Of course I might have shot Pedro, but . . .”

“Pedro! Another one! First it was Miguel and then Dad and now Pedro. Romano! Romano! Get the men!”

Bill looked at her. He took out a wet handkerchief and mopped at his face. He put it back in his pocket and looked down the trail.

Romano was trying to find the revolver in the brush.

“Get out!” said Marcia, pointing, her mouth set.

Bill looked her over. Yes, he had been right. She was prettier than ever. She was nice and slim and right now she was dressed in a riding skirt and a man’s white shirt with rolled-up sleeves. Her brown hair was curly and crisp and feminine. Her face was a perfect oval and her mouth, when she wanted it to be, was kind.

But she could get mad.

“Now look here,” protested Bill. “There ain’t any use of your getting so up in the air about nothing. I don’t know what you’re talking about. I knew Miguel got it and that somebody chivvied your dad, but you got the wrong drill bit, Marcia, when you point it at me like that. Shucks, I’ve been over there at my place sitting around and wishing . . .”

“That won’t do you any good,” said Marcia in a threatening monotone. “You can’t lie out of it now. You should have thought about me before. But it’s too late. Too late! Now get out.”

“I don’t see how anybody can get so doggoned upset about

nothing,” said Bill. “Course I know that old coyote . . . I mean I know your dad got his in a peculiar way, but what would I be wanting to kill him for?”

“To get this property!” cried Marcia. “You wanted to get all this land, and you aren’t content with some of the best drilling ground in this region. You have to have this too and you . . .”

Bill put his hand on her shoulder. He shoved her back into the shack. She tried to fight him, but he shoved her again.

Bill closed the door and bolted it.

A revolver bullet splintered wood about three inches from where his head had been a moment before.

“Romano found his gun,” said Bill.

“I hope he did. I . . . I hope he kills you with it.”

“Sure now, Marcia, you ain’t going to think anything like that. Shucks, Marcia, you and me are old . . .”

“We might have been and I’m sorry for it. You’re a great big hulking killer. You’re a savage heartless beast! I’m sorry I ever looked at you or saw you. That’s it, go on and hit me. Go on and hit me. Romano and my men will be up here in about two minutes and we’ll see what happens then.”

“Well,” said Bill, thoughtfully, “I can’t guarantee what happens in the next two minutes, but I sure as hell can guess at what would happen tomorrow.”

Frightened, she backed away from him.

Bill sat down in a rocking chair and opened a box of Stewart’s cigars. He bit off the end and lighted up with a dry match from the table.

“My men,” said Bill, puffing slowly, “would probably come over here and crucify Romano and forget to bury him.”

Marcia backed up against the table and looked at him. Her wrath had flared again and the words came in a tumbling flow.

“Your men and you,” said Marcia, disdainfully. “A pack of thieves and cutthroats, every one, led by a backwoods roughneck from Arkansas. . . .”

“Texas,” corrected Bill.

“You think you can throw this camp into a panic. You think because you bested my dad you’ve got me licked. Well, you haven’t. You haven’t! I’m going to see this thing through. I’m going to beat you at your own game if I have to die to do it. I’m going to use your own despicable tools and I’m going to keep on until neither you nor your men are alive.”

“Sounds like a threat,” said Bill, some of the calm gone from his bearing.

“That’s right. You think you can swashbuckle around here because there’s no law this far south. You think you can take matters into your own hands and use the powers of life and death. . . .”

“I wouldn’t emulate your old man for a million,” said Bill, clamping down upon the cigar very hard.

“That’s it, malign a man after he’s dead. You’re rotten. You have no respect for anything. He can’t come back here. . . .”

“No, thank God . . . or the devil.”

Marcia advanced across the room as though she wanted to strike him. Bill sat right where he was until she was within three feet of him. He stood up and took hold of her shoulders.

Deliberately, he shook her.

“You little wildcat. Come to your senses and act decent, hear me? By God, I ought to turn you over my knee and lick you. You know I didn’t do anything to your old man, even though I did hate . . .”

“There!” cried Marcia, stumbling back and panting, throwing her hair out of her eyes with a toss of her head. “There. You see, you admit it. You admit that you hated him and that you killed him . . .”

Bill doubled up his fist and looked at the point of her beautiful chin.

Men were yelling outside. Bill went to the door and opened it. He turned his back on Marcia. She looked eagerly at the wall where a .30-30 hung on pegs.

Bill stepped to the porch. Romano was there, shouting. “Shoot him!” bawled Romano, well in the rear.

Bill walked down the steps and took the reins of his horse. He turned his back upon the men and started to mount. A big driller named O’Brien lifted a club and struck.

Bill staggered a little. But he managed to swing over the saddle. He jabbed his spurs into the mount’s flanks and jerked on the reins.

The pony’s hoofs hammered empty air. Bill yanked the horse up on its hind legs and turned it. Indians and drillers scattered.

Several shots rapped close to Bill’s head.

He jabbed his spurs again and headed for the edge of the jungle.

Marcia was standing in the doorway crying, holding the

.30-30 in shaking hands. Her head was down and her tousled hair was ruffled from Bill's treatment of her.

But she hadn't shot him.

No. Her finger was on the trigger and she hadn't shot him.

She told herself over and over that you can't shoot a man in the back.

She believed that, did Marcia.