

The Black Corsair

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Emilio Salgari

Translated by Nico Lorenzutti

Edited by Catherine Peck



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By Emilio Salgari

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West Indies, 1600s

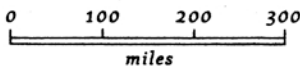


Atlantic Ocean



Caribbean Sea

S P A N I S H
M A I N
COLOMBIA



Chapter 1

The Pirates of Tortuga

A powerful voice shot menacingly out of the darkness:

“You there in the rowboat! Identify yourselves!”

A small boat, manned by two dark figures, had been advancing with difficulty over the ink-black waters, fleeing a shore barely visible on the horizon, but halted at the sound of that command.

Quickly drawing in their oars, the oarsmen nervously fixed their eyes upon the dark mass that had emerged suddenly from the murky depths of the Caribbean.

Both in their forties, their angular features were almost hidden by thick bristling beards that had never known the touch of a comb or blade. Holes riddled their large felt hats, the brims tattered; their flannel shirts were little more than well worn rags, torn away at the shoulder and barely covering their strong chests. Large heavy pistols, of the kind used towards the end of the sixteenth century, peeped from their grimy red sashes. Their breeches were torn; their legs and feet caked in black mud.

The two fugitives quickly eyed that immense silhouette that loomed beneath the stars and shifted uneasily.

“Carmaux,” whispered the younger, “Your eyes are sharper. One of ours or one of theirs?”

“I know not; though she’s only three pistol shots from us, I can’t make out if she’s from Tortuga or the Spanish Main.”

“Could she be one of ours? A pirate ship this close to the Spanish forts? None of our ships would dare venture this far alone!”

“Well, Van Stiller, whoever they may be, they’re not going to let us pass. If we tried to flee, a volley of grapeshot would send us both to brother Beelzebub.”

The voice, even more powerful and resounding, echoed through the darkness once again.

“Who goes there!?!”

“The devil,” mumbled the one named Van Stiller.

His friend, however, clambered atop his thwart and shouted at the top of his voice:

“Who’s the scoundrel that wants to know? If you’re that curious, come down and see for yourself! We’ll fill your hide with bullets!”

No retort of grapeshot came from the sentry on the bridge; pleased, he replied:

“Advance, my brave friends. “You are welcome among the Brethren of the Coast!”

“The Brethren of the Coast!” the two men howled in joyous unison.

Carmaux added, “Sink me if I didn’t recognize the voice that gave us that bit of good news.”

“Who do you think it is?” asked his friend, taking up his oar with renewed vigour.

“There’s only one man on Tortuga brave enough to face the Spanish alone.”

“Who?”

“The Black Corsair.”

“Good Lord! Him!”

“He’s not going to be happy when he hears the news,” Carmaux whispered apprehensively.

“He was probably hoping to arrive in time...”

“Undoubtedly, Van Stiller.”

“That’s twice now...”

“Yes, two brothers, both hanged...”

“He’ll seek vengeance, Carmaux.”

“Aye, and we’ll be with him. The day I see that damned Governor of Maracaibo hang will be the happiest of my life. I’ve got two emeralds

sewn in the lining of my breeches worth at least a thousand pieces of eight to spend in celebration. Ah! Here we are! What did I tell you? The Black Corsair's ship!"

The ship, barely perceptible in the darkness moments earlier, now towered above the small rowboat. She was a brik, one of the racing ships the pirates of Tortuga used to chase the large Spanish galleons returning to Europe laden with the treasures of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. She was a good ship, with tall masts that caught at the lightest breeze, a narrow hull, a tall bow and stern, and heavily armed. Twelve cannons peered from gun ports on her port and starboard sides. Two large chasers stood atop the quarterdeck.

The pirate ship had halted to await the rowboat's approach. A lantern on the bow cast its glow upon a dozen men, all armed with muskets, ready to fire at any suspicious movement.

The rowboat drew up beneath the ship's bow, and the two oarsmen grasped hold of the rope thrown to them, moored their boat, took in their oars then climbed up onto the deck. Two men immediately trained muskets on them, while a third approached, shining his lantern on the new arrivals.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"As Beelzebub is my patron!" exclaimed Carmaux. "Don't you recognize your friends?"

"Stab me! Carmaux the Biscayan!" shouted the man with the lantern. "Still alive, and after all the pirates of Tortuga mourned your death! And... Well! This is a day for resurrections! Aren't you Van Stiller the German?"

"In the flesh."

"You escaped the noose as well, eh?"

"Aye. I thought it might be fun to live a few more years."

"And your captain?"

"Ahhh..." said Carmaux.

"You can tell us. Is he dead?"

"Enough!" shouted the harsh voice that had earlier threatened the two men in the rowboat.

“The Black Corsair!” muttered Van Stiller with a shiver.

“At your service, Cap’n,” replied Carmaux, raising his voice.

A man clad all in black descended from the bridge and approached, his right hand resting on the butt of a pistol tucked in his sash. He was attired with an elegance not often seen amongst the pirates of the Spanish Main, men easily satisfied with a shirt and a simple pair of breeches, and who took greater care of their weapons than their garments.

He wore a fine cloak of black silk trimmed with lace of the same of colour, black silk trousers, a fringed black sash, long black riding boots and a wide-brimmed felt hat adorned with a long black feather that curved down to his shoulders.

His face, stark against his black embroidered collar and his hat’s wide brim, was extremely pale, almost like marble, and was framed by a curled black beard.

Though his expression was sombre, his features were handsome, an elegant nose, a small mouth with lips as red as coral, a high forehead furrowed by a fine line which gave his face a slight melancholy air; eyes as black as coal, vivid and powerful, that at times burned with an intensity that could instil fear in Tortuga’s fiercest pirates. His tall proud bearing made it immediately apparent that he was of noble birth, and above all, a man accustomed to command.

As he drew nearer, Carmaux and Van Stiller exchanged a nervous glance.

“Who are you?” asked the Corsair, halting before them, his right hand still resting on the butt of his pistol.

“Two pirates from Tortuga, sir, two Brethren of the Coast,” replied Carmaux.

“Coming from?”

“Maracaibo.”

“You escaped from the Spanish?”

“Aye, sir.”

“Who was your captain?”

“The Red Corsair.”

The Black Corsair started and fell silent for a moment, his eyes slowly filling with rage.

“My brother,” he said, a slight quiver in his voice.

He grabbed Carmaux by the arm and pulled him towards the stern, almost dragging the pirate off his feet. Once below the bridge, he raised his head towards the man at the wheel.

“Morgan, maintain our present course, gunners at the ready; no man to leave his station, I want all eyes on the water; keep me informed of any suspicious movements.”

“Yes, Captain,” the pirate replied. “You’ll be warned at the first sign of any vessel.”

Still leading Carmaux by the arm, the Black Corsair made his way below deck and entered a small cabin. It was elegantly furnished and lit by a small gilded lamp. He let go of Carmaux’s arm and offered him a chair.

“We’ll talk.”

“At your service, Cap’n.”

The Corsair fixed his eyes upon the pirate and crossed his arms, his pale face now ashen. Twice he opened his mouth to speak only to close it again, as if afraid of asking a question, perhaps dreading to hear the man’s reply. Finally, with great effort, he whispered, “They’ve killed him, haven’t they?”

“Aye, Cap’n,” sighed Carmaux, “Just like they killed his brother, the Green Corsair.”

A savage cry of agony left the captain’s lips. Carmaux watched in silence as he turned horribly pale and clutched his heart, slumped into a chair and hid his face behind the wide brim of his hat. The Corsair remained so for several minutes, during which time the pirate heard him sob repeatedly. Then abruptly, the Corsair sprang to his feet, ashamed of that display of weakness.

All traces of grief had vanished and his face had regained its normal pallor, his eyes blazing with a dark, frightening light. He began to pace around the cabin, then returned to his chair and sat down.

“I feared I’d be too late... nevertheless, vengeance will be mine. Did they shoot him?”

“Hanged him, sir.”

“Are you certain of this?”

“I saw him with my very eyes, hanging from the gallows in the Plaza de Granada.”

“When did they kill him?”

“Early this afternoon.”

“How did he die?”

“Valiantly, sir. The Red Corsair could not have died otherwise.”

“Continue.”

“Even when the noose had tightened ‘round his neck, he still had the strength to spit in the Governor’s face.”

“That wretch Van Guld?”

“Aye, the Flemish duke.”

“Him! Again! Always him! Three of my brothers killed by that wretch, one in betrayal and two on the gallows!”

“They were the two most daring corsairs in these waters, sir; blood enemies of the governor til their graves.”

“They sought vengeance, as I do!” the pirate shouted savagely. “I will not rest until I’ve destroyed Van Guld, his family, and the city he governs. Maracaibo has been fatal to me, but I can be just as deadly! If I have to, I’ll summon every pirate on Tortuga and rally all the buccaneers in Cuba and Santo Domingo to my banner! We’ll raze the city to the ground! Now, my friend, tell me all. How were you captured?”

“We weren’t taken by force of arms, Cap’n. We were ambushed when we were defenceless. As you know, your brother went to Maracaibo to avenge the death of the Green Corsair, having sworn, as do you, to hang the Flemish duke. There were eighty of us in all, determined to do anything, even face a squadron.

But Fate was against us; we were caught in a hurricane just as we reached the Gulf of Venezuela. It swept us into shallow waters where the waves shattered our vessel. After a long struggle, only twenty-six of us managed to reach the shore, unarmed and exhausted, barely strong enough to carry on.

“Your brother never gave up hope. Fearing the Spanish had been in-

formed of our presence and had set out to find us, he rallied our men and slowly led us through the swamps. We were heading to find shelter in the jungle when we fell into an ambush. Three hundred Spaniards, led by Van Guld himself, quickly surrounded us and closed in, killing those that attempted to defend themselves. In the end the survivors were taken captive to Maracaibo.”

“Was my brother among them?”

“Aye, Cap’n. Though armed with only a dagger he defended himself like a lion, preferring to die on the field rather than on the gallows, but the Flemish duke had recognized him and ordered his men to take him alive. They dragged us to Maracaibo, and once we’d been beaten by every soldier and scoundrel in town, they condemned us to the gallows. Yesterday morning, Van Stiller and I strangled our guard and escaped. We hid not far from the plaza and watched them hang your brother and his crew. Later, a friend gave us his rowboat, and once it was dark we set off for Tortuga. That’s all, Cap’n.”

“My brother is dead,” the Corsair said calmly.

“I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Is he still hanging in the plaza?”

“He’ll hang there for three days.”

“Then he’ll probably be thrown into some sewer.”

“Undoubtedly, Cap’n.”

The Corsair stood up and approached the pirate.

“Are you afraid of tempting fate?” he asked sombrely.

“I don’t even fear Beelzebub, Cap’n.”

“You’re not afraid to die?”

“No, sir.”

“Then you’re the type of man I need. We’ll set off immediately.”

“For where, sir?”

“Maracaibo.”

“When?”

“Tonight.”

“Are we going to attack the city?”

“No. We don’t have enough men, but Van Guld will hear from me

soon enough. Tonight, there'll only be three of us: myself, you, and your friend."

"Only the three of us?" asked Carmaux, amazed.

"Yes."

"What do you plan to do?"

"Recover my brother's body."

"There's a good chance we'll get caught, Cap'n."

"Caught? Do you know who I am?"

"By heaven! The most daring pirate ever to set sail from Tortuga."

"Go, have a longboat readied and wait for me on deck."

"No need, Cap'n. Our rowboat's already in the water and at your disposal."

"Excellent! Wait for me on deck."

Chapter 2

A Daring Expedition

Carmaux immediately went above deck to execute the order, knowing it was dangerous to tarry when dealing with the formidable Corsair.

Van Stiller had been waiting for him in front of the hatch in the company of the quartermaster and several pirates. They were plying him with questions on the unfortunate end of the Red Corsair and his crew, each answer intensifying their howls for revenge against the Spanish of Maracaibo and its Governor.

When the German learned that the rowboat had to be prepared for a return trip to the very coast they had just miraculously escaped from, he could not hide his alarm.

“Go back!” he exclaimed. “We’ll leave our hides, Carmaux.”

“Bah! We aren’t going alone this time.”

“Who else is going with us?”

“The Black Corsair.”

“Ah, then that’s a different matter. That devil of a man is worth a hundred men.”

“But he’s coming alone.”

“With him leading us there’s nothing to fear, Carmaux. Are we going back to Maracaibo?”

“Aye, my friend, and, with a bit of cleverness, we’ll be in and out with the Spanish none the wiser. Quartermaster, throw three muskets in the rowboat, some ammunition, a pair of cutlasses for the two of us, and something to eat. You never know what can happen, best be prepared.”

“Already taken care of,” the quartermaster replied knowingly. “I even threw in some tobacco.”

“Thank you, my friend. You’re a good man.”

“There he is,” said Van Stiller.

The Corsair had appeared on the quarterdeck. He was dressed as before, save for his long black cloak, which was now draped over his arm. He had tucked a pair of large pistols and a misericorde in his belt and a long sword now hung from his side. He approached the bridge, exchanged a few words with Morgan, then walked up to the two men.

“Come,” he said.

“At your service, Cap’n,” replied Carmaux.

The three climbed down into the rowboat, which was now tied to the stern and freshly stocked with arms and provisions. The Corsair wrapped himself in his cloak and sat at the bow as the pirates bent over their oars and set off towards the coast.

The pirate ship immediately extinguished her lanterns, raised her sails and manoeuvred to follow the rowboat, tacking, so as not to overtake it; Morgan undoubtedly wanting to escort the tiny vessel as far as the waters would allow to ensure his captain safely reached the shore.

The Corsair was silent, hunched forward in the bows with his head resting on his arm, but his eyes, as sharp as an eagle’s, were carefully searching the dark horizon, trying to spot the American coast that lay hidden in the night.

His ship continued to follow, seven or eight metres behind them. He looked back from time to time, then turned his gaze towards the south.

Van Stiller and Carmaux rowed with great vigour and the small rowboat flew over the dark waters. Neither seemed worried about returning to that enemy coast, so great was their faith in the daring and ability of that formidable corsair, whose name sufficed to instil terror in all the cities of the Spanish Main.

The Gulf of Venezuela was as smooth as glass, allowing the longboat to advance at a brisk pace without tiring the two oarsmen. A great horseshoe of land protected it from large waves. No deep currents ran there, and the waters were seldom rough.

The two pirates had been rowing for an hour, when the Black Corsair, who until then had remained as still as a statue, slowly rose to his feet to

get a better look at the horizon. He had spotted a light flashing to the southwest, just above the waterline.

“Maracaibo,” said the Corsair darkly, his voice heavy with hatred.

“Aye, Cap’n,” replied Carmaux, turning to address him.

“Are we far?”

“Maybe three miles.”

“Then we’ll be there by midnight.”

“Aye.”

“Are there any ships patrolling these waters?”

“A coast guard ship.”

“We must avoid her at all costs.”

“We know a good place to go ashore, sir, there’s never a soul in sight and we can hide the rowboat among the mangroves.”

“Perfect.”

“A word, Cap’n.”

“By all means.”

“It’d be best if the *Thunder* didn’t get any closer.”

“She’s already tacked and headed out to sea,” the Corsair replied. He fell silent for a moment, then added, “Is it true there’s a squadron patrolling the lake?”

“Aye, Cap’n, Admiral Toledo’s. It patrols the waters from Maracaibo to Gibraltar.”

“Ah! So they fear us! As they should! L’Ollonais and I will sink their entire fleet. Patience, a few more days, then Van Guld will get his due.”

He wrapped himself in his cloak, drew his hat low over his brow, and hunched forward once again, fixing his gaze upon the lighthouse’s burning beacon.

Determined to avoid the coast guard, the pirates changed course and began to row away from Maracaibo and the mouth of the lake, heading east of the city towards the place Carmaux had described.

Half an hour later, the coast, no more than three or four cable lengths away, became visible. Covered with mangroves, the shore sloped gently down to the water’s edge. Beyond it the jungle rose in an enormous dark mass against the starlit sky.

Carmaux and Van Stiller had slowed and turned their gaze towards shore. Fearing a sudden attack, they advanced cautiously, in silence, eyes and ears straining to detect anything suspicious.

The Black Corsair had not moved, but he had placed the three muskets before him, intending to greet the first longboat that dared advance towards them with a volley of gunfire. But the waters remained deserted and finally, towards midnight, the rowboat came to a halt amidst the mangroves, vines and roots that covered the shore.

The Corsair stood up, quickly scanning his surroundings before jumping to the ground and tying the boat to a branch.

“Leave the muskets,” he said to Van Stiller and Carmaux. “Do you have your pistols?”

“Aye, Cap’n,” the German replied.

“Do you know where we are?”

“Ten or twelve miles from Maracaibo.”

“Is the city on the other side of this jungle?”

“Aye, this jungle ends a few miles from the outskirts of Maracaibo, sir.”

“Could we make it there tonight?”

“I reckon that’d be impossible, Cap’n. It’s a thick jungle; I doubt we’d make it through before morning.”

“So we’re forced to wait until evening tomorrow?”

“Unless you want to risk entering Maracaibo by day.”

“That would be unwise,” replied the Corsair. “Not with only the three of us.” He remained silent for a few minutes then asked, “You said my brother’s body was to hang in the plaza for three days?”

“Yes, sir. In the Plaza de Granada,” said Carmaux.

“We have time then. Do you know anyone in Maracaibo?”

“Aye, an African, he gave us this rowboat and helped us escape. He lives in a hut on the outskirts of the jungle.”

“Can we trust him?”

“We’ll answer for him, Cap’n.”

“Lead the way then.”

They picked their way through the mangroves lining the shore, Carmaux in front, the Corsair in the middle, Van Stiller following at the rear, and headed into the dark undergrowth. They advanced cautiously, listening carefully; hands on the butts of their pistols, knowing they could be ambushed at any moment.

The jungle stretched out before them like a vast, dark cave. Trees of all sizes and description towered over them, their branches and leaves entwined so thickly above they blotted out the stars. Many obstacles blocked their path. Vines and creepers crisscrossed before them in all directions, and thick roots snaked over the ground. They advanced slowly, often forced to hack at the vegetation with their cutlasses to open a path.

From time to time sparks flashed momentarily in the distance as fire flies swirled and danced among the trees. Found in great swarms throughout the forests of South America, these luminescent insects gave off a light so strong that three or four of them sealed in a crystal jar could illuminate an entire room.

Aware soldiers could be concealed in those dense thickets, the three pirates trod cautiously. The jungle had no shortage of dangers and they kept their eyes open for jaguars and poisonous snakes, especially the *jararaca*, a venomous serpent with skin the color of dried leaves, difficult to detect even by day.

They had gone two miles, when Carmaux, who, being the most familiar with the surroundings was leading the expedition, stopped suddenly and quickly loaded his pistols.

“A jaguar or a man?” the Corsair asked coolly.

“Could be either,” replied Carmaux. “One is never certain of greeting the dawn in this country.”

“Where is he?”

“Twenty paces ahead of me.”

The Corsair crouched low and listened carefully, holding his breath. A light rustling of leaves reached his ear; a sound so soft that few others would have heard it.

“It could be a beast,” he said, getting up. “Humph! It’ll take more than that to frighten us. Raise your cutlasses and follow me.”

He walked around the trunk of an enormous tree that towered over a sea of palms, stopped among a group of giant leaves and peered into the darkness. The rustling sound had stopped, but a metallic clang reached his ear followed by a dry snap: the barrel of a musket being raised.

“Don’t move!” he whispered. “Someone’s spying on us.”

“Could they have seen us come ashore?” Carmaux murmured uneasily. “The Spaniards have spies everywhere.”

The Corsair, who had drawn his sword with his right hand and held a pistol in his left, advanced silently through the tangle of leaves. Suddenly he lunged at a dark form that had cautiously emerged from a bush.

It appeared to be a man armed with a musket, but the Corsair’s attack had been so swift that he was knocked to the ground before he could even attempt to pull the trigger. A blow across the face from the Corsair’s scabbard was enough to quell any attempts at resistance.

Carmaux and Van Stiller immediately rushed forward, the Biscayan quickly picking up the man’s musket as the German aimed his pistol.

“If you move, you die!”

“A soldier,” said the Corsair.

“One of Van Guld’s men,” Van Stiller added. “I’d like to know why he was lying in wait in those bushes.”

The Spaniard, dazed by the Corsair’s scabbard, had begun to regain his senses and attempted to stand.

“*Carra!*” he murmured, a slight tremble in his voice. “Have I fallen into the devil’s hands?”

“More the devil’s minions,” replied Carmaux. “That is what you Spaniards like to call us pirates?”

A shudder of fear raced through the Spaniard’s body, so strong Carmaux noticed it despite the darkness.

“There’s no need to be afraid,” he laughed. “At least not ‘til you’re dancing a fandango from one of those branches with a nice bit of rope round your neck.” He turned towards the Corsair, who had been studying the prisoner in silence. “Shall I shoot him, Cap’n?” he asked.

“No,” replied the Corsair.

“You’d prefer to hang him, sir? There are plenty of good trees about.”

“No,” repeated the Corsair.

“He could be one of those men that hanged the Red Corsair and his crew, Cap’n.”

A fierce light flashed momentarily through the Black Corsair’s eyes.

“We will not kill him,” he said hoarsely. “He could be useful to us alive.”

“Then let’s tie him up at least,” replied Carmaux.

The two pirates unfastened the red wool sashes from about their waists and bound the prisoner, who dared not resist.

“Let’s get a look at him,” said Carmaux.

He lit a cannon fuse that he kept in his pocket and drew closer to the Spaniard. Their captive was hardly thirty years old. He was tall and thin, with an angular face framed by a ginger beard. His grey eyes were wide with fear. He wore a steel helmet adorned with an old feather, a yellow leather jacket and cuirass, red and black striped trousers and long black leather boots. A sword hung from his belt, sheathed in an old rusting scabbard.

“By Beelzebub’s whiskers!” laughed Carmaux. “If the Governor of Maracaibo has an army of such *bravos*, he surely doesn’t feed ‘em with capons; he’s thinner than a smoked herring. It wouldn’t be worth the effort to hang him, Cap’n.”

“I haven’t ordered you to hang him,” the Corsair replied. Then tapping the prisoner with the point of his sword he added, “If you value your life, you’ll tell me what I want to know.”

“My life is over,” the Spaniard replied. “Pirates never spare anyone. Once I’ve answered your questions, you’ll hang me from the nearest tree.”

“This Spaniard has guts,” said Van Stiller.

“Answer my questions and I’ll spare your life,” said the Corsair. “You have my word. Now, will you speak?”

“No,” the prisoner replied.

“I’ve promised to spare you.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Do you know who I am?”

“A pirate.”

“Better known in these waters as the Black Corsair.”

“By the Madonna of Guadeloupe!” the Spaniard exclaimed, turning pale. “The Black Corsair! You’ve come to slaughter us all!”

“Only if you refuse to answer my questions,” the pirate answered darkly.

“*Por todos los santos!* The Black Corsair in Maracaibo!” repeated the prisoner, not having fully recovered from the surprise.

“Will you answer my questions!?!”

“I’m a dead man; it’s hopeless.”

“The Black Corsair is above all a gentleman, and a gentleman does not go back on his word,” the captain replied solemnly.

The prisoner hesitated, then sighed deeply and said, “Very well then, what do you wish to know?”

Chapter 3

The Prisoner

At a sign from the captain, Carmaux and Van Stiller lifted the prisoner and set him down against the foot of a tree. They did not untie him, though it was unlikely he would have been foolish enough to attempt an escape. The Corsair sat down opposite him, upon a large thick root that emerged from the ground like a giant snake, while the two pirates went to stand guard at the far end of the thicket, neither yet convinced the prisoner had been in the jungle alone.

“Tell me,” said the Corsair, after a brief silence. “Is my brother still hanging in the square?”

“Yes,” the prisoner replied. “The governor has ordered him to hang for three days and three nights. Then his body will be dumped in the jungle.”

“Is it possible to steal the body?”

“Perhaps... There is only one guard posted in the Plaza de Granada at night. The fifteen scoundrels they hanged aren't going anywhere.”

“Fifteen!” the Corsair exclaimed darkly. “Then Van Guld didn't spare a single man?”

“Not one.”

“Doesn't he fear the revenge of the pirates of Tortuga?”

“Maracaibo has no shortage of guns and soldiers.”

A contemptuous smile spread across the fierce Corsair's lips.

“What good are his cannons?” he asked. “Our cutlasses are worth more; we've proven as much in our attacks on St. Augustine, San Francisco of Campeche, and in numerous other battles.”

“True, but Van Guld is safe in Maracaibo.”

“Only until L'Ollonais and I decide to mount an attack.”

“L’Ollonais!” the Spaniard exclaimed with another involuntary shudder.

The Corsair appeared not to notice the prisoner’s sudden fear.

“What were you doing in this part of the jungle?” he asked, resuming the interrogation.

“I was patrolling the beach.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, alone.”

“Did Van Guld fear an attack?”

“Yes, a suspicious vessel had been spotted in the gulf.”

“Mine?”

“You are here; it stands to reason the vessel was yours.”

“And the Governor undoubtedly rushed to summon reinforcements.”

“Naturally, he’s sent some men to Gibraltar to warn the Admiral.”

Despite himself, the Corsair shivered.

“Ah!” he exclaimed lividly, “Is my ship in danger?” Then with a shrug he added, “Bah! By the time the Admiral’s ships reach Maracaibo, I’ll be back aboard my *Thunder*.”

He got up suddenly and whistled for the two pirates standing watch.

“We’re leaving,” he said.

“What about our prisoner?” asked Carmaux.

“Bring him along. If he escapes, your life will answer for his.”

“By thunder!” exclaimed Van Stiller. “I won’t let him out of my sight. I’ll hold him by the waist if need be!”

They started walking again in single file, Carmaux in front, Van Stiller in the rear, behind the prisoner. Dawn had begun to break and the first rays of the morning began to filter through the canopy. As the darkness faded, monkeys began to awaken, filling the jungle with their strange cries.

Bands of pygmy marmosets, each one small enough to fit in a jacket pocket, raced about like little elves. Red sahui monkeys, no larger than squirrels sat nestled among the scarlet bromeliads, their handsome manes giving them the appearance of tiny lions. Spider monkeys

perched atop the thin elegant açai palms looked on quietly as howler monkeys swung about the vines.

Birds also abounded. Small groups of blue-headed parrots chattered noisily among the large leaves of jipijapa plants; large red macaws cried incessantly from the groves of fragrant *laransia*, while potoos sighed sadly from among the purple flowers of a quaresma palm.

The pirates and the Spaniard, accustomed as they were to crossing the vast jungles of the American continent and the islands of the Caribbean, did not pause to admire the flora and fauna. They strode quickly, looking for paths made by man or beast, anxious to emerge from the chaotic vegetation and set eyes on Maracaibo.

The Corsair had started to brood, as was his wont, even when aboard his ship or in his house on Tortuga. Wrapped in his black cloak, left hand resting on the hilt of his sword and hat drawn low, his head bowed in contemplation, he walked behind Carmaux without once casting a glance at his companions or the prisoner, as if he were crossing the jungle alone.

The two pirates, knowing better than to disturb his thoughts, held their questions. At most, they talked in whispers amongst themselves whenever they needed to determine which direction to take, then quickened their pace, advancing deeper and deeper into the endless sea of vines and trees. At times flocks of red-beaked hummingbirds would scatter before them, disappearing into the canopy in a flurry of blue feathers.

They had been walking for two hours, when Carmaux came to a sudden stop. He scanned the trees for a moment, stopped, and pointed to a thicket of *cujueiro* bushes.

"This looks like the place," he said. "What do you think, Van Stiller?"

Before the pirate could answer a soft tune reached their ears.

"What's that?" asked the Corsair, quickly raising his head as he removed his cloak.

"Moko's flute," Carmaux replied with a smile.

"Moko?"

“The friend who helped us escape. His hut is just behind those vines. He’s probably training his snakes.”

“He’s a snake charmer?”

“Aye, Cap’n.”

“That sound could draw the attention of our enemies.”

“I’ll take it from him and we’ll send the snakes into the jungle.”

The Corsair unsheathed his sword and gestured for all to advance. Carmaux led the way into the thicket but came to an abrupt halt after a few paces, crying out in both horror and amazement.

In front of a palm-thatched hut partially hidden by the shade of a *cujera*, an enormous pumpkin plant, sat a dark-skinned man of Herculean proportions. He was tall, with strong broad shoulders and strapping limbs. He had a handsome youthful face with a strong mouth, flat nose and sharp cheekbones.

Sitting on a tree trunk, he played softly on a thin bamboo flute, while eight or ten of the most dangerous serpents in South America slithered along the ground before him.

And what an assortment! There were some *jararaca*, small tobacco-coloured snakes so poisonous that they were called ‘the accursed’ by the natives. There were also a few *naja*, black snakes that inject a quick acting poison; a couple of cascabels, or rattlesnakes, and a few *urutùs*, snakes with white cross marks on their head, whose bite causes swift paralysis.

At Carmaux’s cry, the man raised his head. As his eyes fell upon the pirate he removed the flute from his lips, and said in amazement, “You’re still here? I thought you’d be half way across the gulf by now.”

“Aye, we’re back, but I’m the devil’s uncle if you think I’ll take another step with all those snakes ‘round you.”

“They’re harmless to my friends,” laughed the African. “Give me a moment to put them to bed.”

He took up a basket of woven palm leaves then placed the snakes inside one by one as if he were gathering twigs. Once the last snake had been collected, he sealed the basket carefully and set a large stone upon the lid.

“No need to be afraid now,” he said, looking back up at his friend.
“Are you alone?”

“No, I’m with the Cap’n of my ship, the Red Corsair’s brother.”

“The Black Corsair? Here? Maracaibo will tremble!”

“I need another favour, my friend. Lend us your hut, I promise you won’t regret it.”

The Corsair emerged from the trees with Van Stiller and the prisoner. He greeted the African with a nod and followed Carmaux into the hut.

“Is that the man that helped you escape?”

“Aye, Cap’n.”

“Does he hate the Spanish?”

“As much as the Brethren do.”

“How well does he know Maracaibo?”

“As well as we know Tortuga.”

The Corsair turned and gave the African one last look.

“He will be of great help to us,” he murmured to himself.

He looked around the hut, spotted a rough hewn chair in the corner, sat down and immersed himself in his thoughts.

In the meantime, Moko had gathered some cassava bread, some sour sops and several dozen bananas. To complete the meal, he added a pumpkin full of *pulque*, a fermented drink made from agave plants.

The three pirates, who had not eaten all night, did great justice to that breakfast. Once the prisoner had been fed and securely bound, they stretched out on the bundles of fresh leaves that their host had brought into the hut. Having asked Moko to stand guard, they soon fell asleep.

Not one of the three pirates stirred during the course of the day, but night had barely fallen when the Corsair suddenly rose. He was paler than usual and his eyes blazed darkly. He paced back and forth a couple of times, barely hiding his agitation, then came to a halt before the prisoner.

“I promised to spare you, though I had every right to hang you from the nearest tree. Tell me now if I can enter the Governor’s palace undetected.”

“You’re planning to murder him to avenge the Red Corsair’s death?”

“Murder him!” the pirate exclaimed angrily. “I am not some vile assassin. I am a man of honour. I’ll challenge him to a duel; we’ll fight to the death, but murder... never.”

“The governor is an old man; you are young. But that’s beside the point. His palace is well protected and he has a large personal guard. It won’t be easy to get near him.”

“They say he’s brave.”

“Like a lion.”

“Good. Rest assured, our paths will cross.”

He turned toward the two pirates who had now risen and addressed Van Stiller.

“You’ll remain here to guard the prisoner.”

“Moko should suffice, Cap’n.”

“I’m taking him with us. His strength will be of great assistance to carry my brother’s body. Come, Carmaux; let’s go drink a bottle of Spanish wine in Maracaibo.”

“Now, Cap’n!?” exclaimed the Biscayan.

“Are you afraid?”

“Afraid? I’d follow you to hell and take Beelzebub by the nose at your command. My only fear is that someone may recognize you, sir.”

A smile spread across the Corsair’s lips.

“We’ll see,” he said. “Come.”