

COMPLETE
NOVELET



"The pain," Lolás said, "comes later"

Señor Sleight-of-Hand

In the charming Republic of Paraguaso they found it expedient to retire dictators by shotgun, to discuss business matters with the assistance of a rope. There was, however, a certain Scot who had an empty sleeve and an interesting change in method

By RICHARD BLAKER

I

IT WOULD have seemed, fifty years ago, that the Republic of Paraguaso recognized but one obligation on the part of its history towards humanity—that it should repeat itself. During its most lively phase, covering a period of thirty-

six months, it saw the rise of forty-two and the fall (one way and another) of forty-one presidents. The discrepancy between the number of rises and the number of falls is accountable by the fact that the forty-second of those presidents is still president today; he is Esteban d'Aveiro, who assumed office fifty-five years ago.

Even on technically legal grounds his

position is unassailable because, after occupying it for ten or eleven years, he repealed the article in the Republic's Constitution which made it illegal for the same individual to hold the presidency for more than 33 months.

But even that was a long time ago.

Now, at some time during the month of August which His Excellency (this same Esteban d'Aveiro) invariably spends in Europe, he is fairly sure to be seen walking on Hampstead Heath with another elderly gentleman of the prosperously retired class—two amiable old buffers strolling out for the good of a wickedly fat cocker spaniel.

His Excellency's friend, one Mr. Fergusson (who is at the moment his host in one of the large detached houses on Haverstock Hill), seems a little less hale and sprightly than the president himself. His gait is not unlike the old cocker spaniel's; thoughtfulness gives the suspicion of a drag to his feet, or a slight dragging of his left foot as he walks gives him an air of thoughtfulness. In the socket between his right cheekbone and bushy white eyebrow there is no eyeball.

Tradesmen are always anxious to press some military rank or title upon this Mr. Fergusson, for in addition to the eyeless, bristling eyebrow he has a bristling moustache. But he has never been a soldier. He has merely knocked about—here and there.

Thus in the year 1884 Fergusson was in Paraguaso, seeking to acquire gold by the simplest and most direct known method—namely by digging it, in lumps, out of the ground.

It was not till the year following that he became aware of politics in that absurd country when he had been carrying about, for some weeks, two peculiarly heavy and rough knobs which looked very much like dirt. One was about the size of his fist and the other not much smaller than his head. They were both in his saddle-wallets.

He still had both his eyes at that time; from elbow to wrist his left coat-sleeve

was empty. It was lifted out of the way and pinned up to his chest.

There was one man, and one only, in all Paraguaso to whom Fergusson had any wish to display the contents of his saddle-bags. This was young Esteban d'Aveiro, to whose father he had brought the only letter of introduction that had accompanied him to Paraguaso from Glasgow.

Now there were still some twenty miles between him and the d'Aveiro farm when he decided to unsaddle for a couple of hours beside a trickle of water in the dry bed that in a month would be a tumbling river.

In the course of a year's wandering about in search of gold he had got nowhere at all in an understanding of the Republic's politics; but he had got a very good grasp of the simpler and more obvious facts that did really matter. He had discovered, for example, that the average Paraguasan is far more impressed by a fist than by a knife or even a pistol. He knew also that the surest way to excite suspicion in the leisurely breast of this same average caballero was to show signs of any sort of hurry.

It was for this reason alone that he had loitered for useless hours at the tavern where he had slept, explaining that a devilish toothache forced him to cock his saddle and wallets up behind his head to keep the draught off. For this same reason he had accomplished no more than a dozen Paraguasan miles by noon.

The tavern had been infested, as all taverns had been since he had first begun to know them, by soldiers. Whether they were occupied at the moment in upholding the Sacred Government or overthrowing it he did not particularly care and had not noticed.

They jostled each other a good deal in the close quarters of the sleeping room, but they kept scrupulously clear of Fergusson and his saddle-bags by reason of the superstition connected with any sound man's contact with the stump of a mutilated limb.

That was okay to Fergusson.

AND now as he lay under the bush and smoked his cigarette his only immediate anxiety was to make the d'Aveiro farm before dark; for the night had a way of coming on like the sudden clapping of a lid over the bright interior of the country. He looked at his watch and saw that an hour's siesta would still allow him five hours for the remaining twenty miles of his journey.

After his siesta he had a shave and saddled up. When he had ridden for about an hour he noticed a shimmer of dust a couple of miles to the north. It was raised by more than one rider; and travelers in a party suggested the city. They would, at any rate, be able to confirm his geography and to report to friends they might meet later in the day that a one-armed foreigner they met was ambling towards Rocafumilla in no sort of hurry.

The party turned out to consist of six. Two were mounted on ragged horses, three were on mules, and one walked. They had stopped to wait for him.

When he was within twenty or thirty yards of them, one of them suddenly jerked and kicked his horse out of the group and snatched a double-barreled shotgun from a bucket of rawhide against his knee. This he very solemnly levelled in the direction of Fergusson's chest and said, "In the name of the president, His Excellency Ignacio Lolas, I command you to stand."

Fergusson immediately reined in. He swept off his hat to the absurd fellow and answered, "In the name of God, *caballero*, I for my part give you greeting."

"Hold up your hands," the shotgun idiot said very ill-naturedly.

"Your pardon, *caballero*," said Fergusson; "not hands, but hand. I have one only." He replaced his hat and kept the hand up beside it.

"One knows that," said the other; "it is by that that I recognized you five hundred paces off. As soon as it was possible to see you I said to this litter of motherless dogs, 'It is he.'"

"He?" said Fergusson. "You would over-

whelm me, *caballero*, with an undeserved recognition." But he kept his hand scrupulously raised. It was difficult to decide, all in a minute, which he disliked most—the two nostrils in the snout of the stumpy shotgun, or the very nasty eyes of the Paraguasan above and behind them.

He tried another line with the rascal. "There are more men than one in Paraguaso, my friend, whom ill fortune has bereft of an arm. If it is an enemy you seek, it is a pity that you should be detained by one who is altogether peaceable."

"We shall see," said Shotgun. "Dismount and give me your papers."

That was reasonable enough, and Fergusson dismounted, weighing the fellow carefully. Apparently he was not one of the casual, loafing, spare-time soldiers and loungers to be encountered at roadside taverns and farm outbuildings. In his squalor there was a certain battered elegance.

One of the other five could have been a native Indian; the others had the dull swarthiness of the nondescript *mestizo*; but this Johnnie with the blunt fowling-piece had the clear bronze skin that was the proud possession of none but the pure-bred Spanish-Paraguasan.

They had all been traveling for some time; the dismounted one among them had collapsed into a squatting posture in the sand, and was quietly cursing as he made some adjustments to the contraption of string and thongs that held a boot-sole to its upper.

From below the handkerchief under one man's hat there protruded a plug of rag and dried blood. A filthy bandage showed upon another man's chest under the frayed tinsel and green of his waistcoat. The get-up of all six had one detail in common—a narrow brassard of black and scarlet on the left forearm.

"*Caballero*," Fergusson said, "I perceive that you are soldiers. We have nought in common therefore, except mutual respect—and possibly a slight hospitality from a bottle I have in my haversack." Becoming

a little more pompous, he added, "As you have no doubt guessed, I am a foreigner protected by the wider hospitality of nations."

He had been standing close beside his horse, leaning against the wallet that held the larger nugget, getting some vague sort of genial companionship out of the contact.

The Paraguasan noticed that a pistol-butt was sticking out of the holster in front of this wallet, and the discovery brought a jerk to his eyes and moustaches and the nostrils of his shotgun.

"Stand clear!" he snorted, and Fergusson shifted his weight on to both feet in compliance with the letter of the suggestion, if not altogether with the spirit of it. "And do not think of 'protection.' For enemies of the president, His Excellency Ignacio Lolas, there is no protection whatever and very short shift. An edict was made four days ago whereby there are no foreigners in Paraguaso now. All visitors have become citizens, and all citizens are soldiers of the Republic, or prisoners—condemned or awaiting trial. Since you are standing away from your arms, however, you may lower your hand."

II

"I THANK you, *caballero*," said Fergusson, and took a nut from his pocket and cracked it between his teeth. "Even the new law, then, can give me no interest for you; since a man with only one arm would not make a soldier worthy of the Sacred Republic—or a worthy enemy."

"That," said the *caballero*, "is as it may be. But a man with no more than one arm may hold a weapon against His Excellency more dangerous than a knife or pistol. Such a weapon is friendship with Don José d'Aveiro and the young Señor Esteban." He made a beckoning gesture to his hearties. "We will therefore search your saddle wallets."

Fergusson was knocked nearly off his feet by the sudden plunge of his horse. "Beast and brute of hell!" he mumbled,

steadying himself and setting his hat straight, as the horse galloped away.

The *caballero* gave a yell and brandished his gun to send his four mounted men loping after it. The pedestrian finished tying up his foot and ambled away after them.

Fergusson kicked himself for not having thought of calling this fellow "*Capitaz*" until one or two of his bravoes had done so as they scurried away after his nag. The animal had already got over its sudden fit of energy and was strolling back toward the four, who had themselves reined into a walk as soon as they saw that the strain of cantering was uncalled-for. But even so, Fergusson was going to have a devilish little time before they started fumbling with his wallets. The only plan that would occur to his mind was to start calling this fellow "*Capitaz*" without further delay.

He smiled and said, "*Señor Capitaz*"—and this, being constructive, was enough to give him a further idea.

"It would be as well that you alone should know what is in those saddle-wallets. What is amply sufficient for one high-born *caballero* would be nothing if it were shared by half a dozen. Therefore command them to leave the wallets unopened. In the meantime let them wait where they are, so that we may converse, you and I, as one gentleman to another."

The *capitaz* said, "You have performed one trick already—that of sticking a nut-shell into your horse's flank while we talked."

"But that is the only trick I know, *Capitaz*," and Fergusson tried to melt the fellow with a boyish grin. It got him nowhere. The *capitaz* went on nursing his shotgun with an increased sulkiness. "What have you in those wallets?" he asked.

Fergusson said, "Gold."

This was not part of a plan, because he had no plan. He said it because all the fellows had to do was to go and pull a couple of shirts and a few socks out of the wallets and see; and this he was likely to do at any moment. "Gold. And

the only matter of immediate importance is that your trusties should remain unaware of this. But I would have news of Esteban d'Aveiro, who is my friend."

"You admit it?" exclaimed the soldier.

Fergusson's pride carried him further. "His father, the Don José, also."

"They are rebels and the worst enemies of His Excellency, Lolas. They have raised a party, calling it 'The Voice of the Children'—*mestizos* and natives and God knows what other pestilence and scum. The d'Aveiro hacienda is the headquarters of an army. It is the only spot in the country as yet unsubdued. But the president will be glad to hear your secrets, since you were returning to the old Don from the interior."

"But I have no secrets," said Fergusson, "except the one you do me the honour of sharing with me. The gold."

The *capitaz* shrugged his shoulders. "The president has peculiar and great powers of persuasion. Many young men have grown suddenly old in examinations by His Excellency. Others—not to put too fine a point upon it—have died."

"And what is your reward, *capitaz*, for service to such a man?"

"Ultimately," said the other, "the portfolio of War and Internal Communications."

The *capitaz* went on very solemnly, "The Don d'Aveiro thinks and dreams only of his cattle, in the manner of an imbecile. Through all his life he would sooner have bred one perfect colt than sold a thousand indifferent ones at a handsome profit. The son goes the same way, with his lofty words and oily gentle deeds among those accursed 'Children.'"

"They are good, true men," suggested Fergusson.

"Good, true men with empty pockets," said the *capitaz*, "are as useful to a soldier as a good, true rifle with an empty breach." He spat.

"It is true they *had* very little gold," said Fergusson; "but I have been in this country now over a year."

"So you bring gold to this country?"

This was not altogether a sneer, and Fergusson treated it if it were not a sneer at all.

"No," he said; "for in my country there is a saying that we do not carry coals to Newcastle. I brought no gold with me. All I did bring was a letter to Don José. Since delivering that letter I have traveled far and wide in the swamps and marshes. There, as you see, I lost an arm in an encounter with Indians; but I have found thirty-eight streams and have recorded their courses upon a map. They are considerably alike, all these streams and their tributaries. One differs from all the others, however—although this difference does not appear on the map. Its banks are composed, not of dirt, but of gold."

"BRING me that horse, one of you," the *capitaz* shouted to his men. He took the reins from the pedestrian of the troop who brought the horse to him, and handed over the shotgun in exchange. "Let off both barrels," he said, "at his stomach if he should give any occasion. If you aim at his head half the charge would be wasted in the air."

He led Fergusson's horse aside and leaned over in the saddle to examine the wallets. He fished out a towel, shirts, socks, shaving-tackle, and then stopped—staring and gaping into the depths of the wallet, and mumbling. He started to bundle the oddments back again, hurried, and pulled him together.

"Ha!" he shouted in triumph to Fergusson, loud enough for all to hear. "I have *found* it, my good *señor*." With great ostentation he stuffed a pair of socks and Fergusson's razor-strop into his immense pocket, and buckled up the wallets.

He dismounted from his own horse as soon as he got back to Fergusson and tossed the reins to the sentry. "My mount is somewhat jaded, *señor*. I shall therefore take yours. It is fair plunder."

So saying, he scrambled into Fergusson's saddle and snuggled his knees against the wallets. He recovered the shotgun from the sentry, and sent him ambling away.

When he was sufficiently out of earshot he said to Fergusson, "That change of horses—I owe it to my rank and station, before my men, to take the best."

"Perfectly, *capitaz*," said Fergusson, "it is all one to me. Those pieces of gold are as safely mine against your knees as they were against my own. As you very well know, I have only to tell those rascals—"

The *capitaz* leaned forward towards Fergusson. There was a sudden glint in his smoky eyes, like the edge of a knife-blade.

"*Señor!*" he said eagerly, "when men speak of gold—as when they speak of women—they speak as man to man, with hearts widely open. Regard me then, I have here a weapon that easily blows the entrails from an ox at a dozen paces. Any mention to those men. . . . Is my meaning clear, *señor?*"

"Clear as the brightest of mornings," said Fergusson.

"Good. You will mount my horse presently, and will ride some five paces in front of me. In advance of us both will ride the men."

This seemed to indicate that they were ready to move off immediately, but the *capitaz* was obviously reluctant to do this. He looked uneasily towards the men, who seemed to be sinking into sleep as they sat their miserable nags, and jerking themselves out of it again because of some unresting suspicion that haunted them.

He slyly undid the wallet buckles and dipped a hand in, to rummage through the loose kit till his fingers could feel what lay at the bottom. A sort of driveling croon came from him. "Ai—Ai—Ai."

Feeling the gold, the *capitaz* was perplexed. Only two thoughts finally crystalized sharply out of the many that tumbled about under his sweltering hat. One was of an alliance between this one-armed wizard and His Excellency the President. The other was of an alliance between him and young d'Aveiro. Of the two, the first was a shade less repulsive than the second. He therefore said, lugubriously enough, "It is time that we return."

A shout woke the men from their sleep or stupor and brought them over. Fergusson mounted his captor's horse. A nod set the men moving ahead, the pedestrian shuffling along behind them. Fergusson kept a few paces behind him. He wanted to keep an eye on the *capitaz*, for he did not put it past the fellow to drop those confounded nuggets in the sand very quietly, in the hope of coming back for them, by candle-light.

But the *capitaz* only meditated, crooned and sometimes swore—till he was suddenly seized by a wild fit. He cocked both hammers of his gun, stabbed his horse forward in a plunge and reined it back on its haunches abreast of Fergusson. The muzzle of the piece was against our hero's floating ribs. "Dog!" he jibbered, "why do I not blow your vitals to the sky? These two would at least be mine. But why? Tell me that."

"*Capitaz*," said Fergusson, "I do not know. But my stomach is withered with fear that you will. Your hand is shaking on those triggers so that I can scarcely bear to look at it. But there is a parable concerning a goose that laid golden eggs. It is a tale to bring a tear to any eye."

The muzzle still kept jabbing against his ribs; and he found that his little speech about his stomach had expressed its condition with great accuracy. "Sooner or later," the *capitaz* snarled, "the secret will be dragged from you. For no man—no *living* man—has yet left the president's audience-chamber without disclosing whatever is asked of him. Therefore tell me now—and I alone need know it—from which of the thirty-eight streams you have filched these two pieces."

Fergusson slowly shook his head. "*Señor Capitaz*," he said, "how can such a thing be told by word of mouth? It is true that I have made a map; but I am not a skilled maker of maps, nor are you a skilled reader of them. And so it becomes a matter of the greatest importance that you preserve my life with the utmost care and forethought. With your fowling-piece arranged as it now is, one jolt of your

hand against your saddle-pommel . . . For it is I alone who can lead you to that stream . . . Ah." And he drew a very deep breath of relief as he saw the broad, dirty thumb of the *capitaz* slowly letting down the hammers of the gun.

The *capitaz* lodged no objection to his reining in a little, to clear his ribs of the muzzle, as the second one came down. "I thank you. We can now talk again of gold—as you remarked so sagaciously that men talk of a woman—as man to man."

"Since you are to be left alive," said the *capitaz*, and although the thought was obviously not too palatable, he accepted it as a fact without undue ill-humour, "it is best that I take you, for five minutes, to the president."

AS THEY rode, the *capitaz* spoke feelingly of recent historical events in the city. The current Excellency, Ignacio Lolas, had been in the presidential chair for a fortnight and three days. The withdrawal of his predecessor from politics and other early matters was caused by the pulling of both triggers simultaneously, by the *capitaz* himself (who was then but a corporal) of the shotgun which he had now very amiably laid across his saddle . . .

It was not much after seven when they were challenged and saluted and allowed to pass into the city.

The *capitaz* changed his tone from one of general bragging to mild apology: seventeen days had been insufficient time, what with one thing and another, to set the presidency in order for the new government.

Affairs, therefore, were being conducted in one of the commercial buildings in the old part of the city—the warehouse, in fact, where His Excellency Ignacio Lolas had conducted a very successful business as an importer and distributor of hardware before his assumption of office.

At the gateway to a paved courtyard they held their horses to allow a large cart to pass out. The troopers and their commander crossed themselves. The hair

under Fergusson's hat made a disturbing movement and there was a sudden feeling of squalid emptiness inside him.

At the far end of the courtyard, lit by lanterns and a couple of paraffin flares stuck in the wall, was another cart. Two planks rested on its tail from the ground, like a ramp used for rolling beer-barrels from a dray.

Soldiers, tired to the point of apathy and bored beyond words, were shoving long untidy bundles up this slope and into the cart. The bundles had not the absolute rigidity of hardware. They were done up in the waste from a busy and prosperous emporium—in sacks, bits of matting, brown paper remnants of oilcloth; finished, like mummies, with a lavish expenditure of string.

"*Capitaz*," Fergusson whispered, "those gold-lumps are yours if you will let me—let me just go. I'll take my own chance outside."

The suggestion, and the manner of it, surprised the *capitaz*; for he had not expected panic from the *caballero* who had not sweated unduly when a weapon beyond compare had been suddenly pushed against his ribs.

He did not understand, this good soldier of the new Sacred Republic, that fear is not the only sensation that can be produced inside a man by the sight of a heap of long, softish bundles being wearily shoved up an improvised ramp and bumped with a succession of dull thuds to the bottom of a cart.

Sheer panic was the only way the *capitaz* could account for this surprising offer; and panic was connected in his experience with immediate flight. He therefore jerked his fowling-piece into life again; but the tone in which he answered had a new kindness.

"No, *caballero*. We are watched now by a thousand eyes. But something may still be done. We will talk—privately, as man to man—before you see the president."

He dismounted with obvious reluctance from Fergusson's saddle and wallets. Beginning to unbuckle the girth with his own

hands, he cursed back the orderly who lounged out of the doorway to perform this office for his commander. "Attend the prisoner," he said.

"I am maimed, my son," Fergusson said, quietly, to avoid any unnecessary manhandling. The fellow gaped at the empty coatsleeve, crossed himself, cocked his Snider and yawned. He, like all the others whom Fergusson had yet seen, was utterly exhausted.

The *capitaz*, however, seemed to be stimulated into sprightliness by the immense load of the saddle. He managed it with the deftness of a parson with a baby at a christening—keeping hold, at the same time, of his gun.

Fergusson followed him down a cloister-like corridor and through a door which a sentry—yet another somnambulist—opened for them.

III

INSIDE the room was one who was not, like all the others, dead with sleep and dirty. It was a sprucely uniformed young man, seated at a desk.

"Good, Ambato," said the *capitaz*. In his tone were condescension, geniality, confidence, and a command.

"Good, my *Capitaz*. So you have brought something?"

"I have brought that one-armed visitor of whom there has been some talk. There was no bloodshed. I am about to question him."

The staff officer glanced, not unamiably, at Fergusson, and then at his captain, festooned with Fergusson's stirrup-leathers and irons, girth-straps and wallets.

"I will have the saddle taken away; we will examine the prisoner," the young staff officer said.

The *capitaz* became impatient. "You have not understood, Ambato. I examine this one—alone."

"I understand now, *capitaz*," the other said blithely but knowingly. He flicked his papers into order on the desk, put down his pen, lighted a cigarette, and went out.

The *capitaz* laid the gun and the saddle on top of all the beautifully arranged papers on the desk, and picked up a pistol from beside the inkpot. Then he walked over to the door, bolted it, and hung his hat upon the key.

Near a small niche containing the painted image of a saint, he rapped on the wall with the pistol-butt. Fergusson saw a movement behind the image—two rifle-muzzles being withdrawn through little slits. The *capitaz* shifted a large calendar from one nail to another, thus covering up the recess with the saint.

"Now," he said, "we are alone, and may talk freely, though not too loud. First, however—" and he went back to the desk. Shifting the pistol from one hand to the other while he worked, he took out the nuggets and laid them on the desk.

Fergusson, seeing that there was a chair quite near him, sat down. His movement swung the *capitaz* away from the nuggets. As soon as he saw exactly what it was that had happened, he said, "Ah, your pardon, *señor*! I had forgotten that you are, perhaps, fatigued."

He poured some water into a glass from a pitcher on the table and added some rum. Without a thought for himself he handed this to Fergusson, and Fergusson said, "Your good health, *señor*."

The *capitaz* nodded, too busy even to smile. He pushed the lamp across the desk and brought the chair round, to save it on the sate side as the nuggets and Fergusson.

Very much in the manner of a buyer considering samples, he sat down, sideways-on to the desk and the nuggets, and facing the traveler. But his eyes could not remain long anywhere but upon the gleam in those shapeless and yet most lovely torments at his elbow.

Soon his hands and the muscles grew quite still. Affairs of state were forgotten. Fergusson was forgotten. The pistol itself was forgotten, hanging beside him in fingers utterly lifeless. And Fergusson was thinking.

One-handed as he was, he could have

grabbed that pistol and shot the fellow while he still dreamed his dribbling dreams. Alternatively, since even loud speech was likely to be heard through the door, or through the rifle-slits behind the saint, he could have rapped him over the head with the pistol's butt—and been, moreover, one cartridge to the good. But what then?

Those ruffians outside might be done up with fatigue and the monotony of butchery—dead and done to the wide world; but they could spring to nimble life again like cats. The making of any plans, in the circumstances, was a flat impossibility.

He finished his rum and water. The *capitaz* barely stirred at his movement. His dream went on, disturbed only as by the movement of an insect.

"*Capitaz*," Fergusson gently roused him, "you omit to talk."

The visionary and dreamer forced his thoughts into business. "In a word, what is your price?"

"For those two nuggets, my safe conduct to the Hacienda d'Aveiro."

"Fool, fool, fool." The *capitaz* was speaking from the depths of his heart, without any rancour or bitterness. "Of what use are these two alone? It is your price for telling me where they came from that I want to know. If it is reasonable I will pay it. Consider this also; you and I, *señor*, with gold at our disposal, could go far. The man Lolas is well enough—in a measure. He has gold, but not as much gold as would form the banks of a river; not as much as you and I. And d'Aveiro and his sons. Myself, I have no particular animosity towards them; but this Lolas. . . ."

A SUDDEN din of shuffling and scraping and of resounding, heavily booted footfalls in the corridor stopped him short. Immediately upon it came a banging on the door, a trying of the handle and a roar. "What in hell's name—"

"Immediately, Excellency, immediately," the *capitaz* whimpered, having already let the pistol drop to the floor. "You," he

whispered to Fergusson, "you have the immediate kindness to open for him while I—" In a flash he whisked the nuggets from the desk, wrapped them in his cloak, and jumped behind the desk to thrust it into the knee-hole.

Fergusson took the hat off the key and tossed it to the desk. He unlocked the door, opened it and stood aside for the president to enter.

Fergusson had thought, earlier in the day, that the snout of a shotgun was ugly. Soon after this he had thought that the eyes and nose, moustaches and unshaven jowls of a *capitaz* of rifles were ugly. But these were lilies of the field compared with his Excellency, Ignacio Lolas.

The president was as tall as Fergusson. His paunch was a great tub, but it did nothing to impair a natural litheness and agility. A broad belt under it contained the sheath of a knife, and a pistol of the latest American pattern. Emeralds sparkled in the heels of his boots, under enormous silver spurs. A long dark cloak, fastened at the throat by a heavy silver chain, fell away from his elbows as he stood with his hands on his hips to glance, carelessly at Fergusson and contemptuously at the *capitaz*.

He had been picking his teeth as he came in, and left the toothpick stuck between bicuspid and molar so as to give an added fatness to his lower lip, which was—in repose—the shape of a slug. On his head was a Napoleonic sort of hat, crested with cock's feathers.

The *capitaz*, standing by the desk, cleared his throat and said, "I—I was about to bring before you a prisoner, Excellency."

"Damn the prisoner," His Excellency said very shortly. "It is with you that I propose to have a few words."

The *capitaz* jumped at this. "I will dismiss him to the guard," he said with great alacrity, and shot a quick glance at Fergusson of which he did not quite get, or else did not altogether like, the meaning.

"Well, in God's name dismiss him, then," said His Excellency. "Since when does a

capitaz require a week's thought for the dismissing of a prisoner?" At the prisoner himself he would not deign to look.

The idea of those two getting together quietly behind a closed door was rather more than Fergusson could comfortably accept.

In all modesty (coyness almost) he said, "Pardon me, Excellency. First I would hand to you a small present which your good *capitaz* has had the forethought to conceal for you under the desk. I have brought it a long way."

The president now turned to him and looked him carefully up and down. When he had taken in his one arm he turned again to the *capitaz*, with a new dirty look. He withdrew the toothpick by an ingenious movement of his lips and ejected it to the floor. "So," he said. And again, "So. The good *capitaz* had it in his mind to keep this partner to himself, did he? His one-armed visitor who is known to be the dearest friend of Esteban d'Aveiro?"

"Excellency," said the *capitaz*; "those louts outside told me that you were—out. The *señor* here heard them—not one only, but three of them. I swear it. What else could I do with so valuable a prisoner but keep him for you myself?"

"Likewise his present?" sneered the president.

The *capitaz* did not answer. He stooped and hesitated not an instant before straightening up again and placing on the desk the smaller of the two nuggets.

"Yes, Excellency," he said; "I was personally guarding the present also."

FERGUSSON'S choice between these two beauties now took a slight swerve towards the greater of them who was now gaping, like a stunned idiot, at the nugget. "Excellency," he said quietly, "refrain from thanking me until you have seen the other one."

A glance from the *capitaz* gave him a passing feeling of thankfulness that the old shotgun was under the saddle, and the pistol lying on the floor on the near side of the desk.

"What?" said the president. But the *capitaz* had already said proudly; "Yes, Excellency; behold *this* one," and was lifting it slowly from the floor. It was painful to watch him. Drawing out one of his teeth could not have hurt him more.

The president walked over to the desk and took the nuggets. As if they were cocoanuts fairly won at a shy he tucked them under his cloak, between a forearm and his stomach. Then he went back to the door and opened it.

"Where is the corporal?" he asked, and the corporal immediately appeared. "Take this late *capitaz* and keep him for me till morning." With his free hand he drew an immense gold watch from his pocket and frowned at it. "For you," he said to Fergusson, "I have five minutes. Come."

The descent of a dozen steps at the end of the corridor told Fergusson that the president's audience chamber was a cellar. Across the whole width of it was a low girder over which were looped a couple of hide lariats.

"Well, yes. Perhaps it would be as well," the president said in casual answer to a gesture from a fellow who lounged against the wall in the capacity of some sort of orderly.

The orderly took the end of one of the lariats and shifted over to Fergusson turned his left side towards him, and the fellow stopped short. "Ex—Excellency," he mumbled: "would you—how—a—mutilated man . . . the curse . . ."

"Do the other one, you fool," said the president. "There is no need to touch the stump."

The orderly kept what distance he could while binding Fergusson's wrist to the lariat's end. Then he pulled on the end looped over the girder till the prisoner's arm was drawn up taut. Then he tied the end to a ring in the floor.

The president said morosely, "That last one you did that way made an unbearable din with the shuffling of his feet. Fasten this one's about an arm's length apart. There is my staff in the corner."

To the president's handsome walking

stick of ebony the orderly now bound Fergusson's ankles, one near each end of the stick, so that his toes barely touched the ground now.

He saluted and was going out, when the president remembered something and said, "Oh—my horse. Tell them to have it ready at the gate in five minutes. And a rifleman to accompany me on a ride."

When the orderly had gone, His Excellency went out and shut the door at the end of the small entrance passage. Within this he shut another one, so that the door of the cellar itself was the third between them and the outside world. This one he locked.

He flung his cloak on the table, placed the nuggets on the cloak, and sat down on the table-edge. The muzzle of the revolver in his belt was pushed, by his paunch, uncomfortably into his thigh; so he drew it out and laid it beside the nuggets. Sitting upright on a hard chair seemed to disturb the distribution of his bulk altogether. His long, handsome tunic obviously pinched him across the chest and shoulders and under the arms. He took it off and disposed it carefully over the back of his chair before sitting down again.

After staring for some time at the nuggets with an absorption as complete as the *capitaz'*, but with a peculiar glimmer of intelligence in his stare, he turned to Fergusson and began to speak.

IV

"THIS, *señor*, is the fulfillment of a wish of mine. Somewhere over a year ago you came into my shop to buy a waterproof coat. Selling you the coat, I remember that I wished you good luck. Here it is. But you, no doubt, have forgotten the incident and my good wishes, for you did not speak the language as you speak it now."

"I remember the incident very well," said Fergusson; and he did. He recognised the widely spaced teeth and the sparse hair on the upper lip; the high cheekbones, slanting eyes and peculiarly yellow swarthi-

ness that made him wonder how a Mongolian-Tartar should have turned up in that part of the world with the magnificence of such a shop and the name of Lolás. "But I must confess I had forgotten your kind wishes in the discomfort of my present posture."

"Ah," said the well-wisher. "In important discussions of this nature it is necessary that my thoughts are undisturbed by any anxiety for my safety. But you need have no fear. It remains mere discomfort for some considerable time. It is only after several hours that it becomes positive pain. In the chest, mostly. . . .

"But on the occasion of your first visit to me, you showed great curiosity for the d'Aveiro family; and you had not then met the daughter. According to report, you have not been disappointed as to this family's worthiness of your friendship."

"My movements seem to have been very closely observed," said Fergusson. "Is the same attention given to all the many foreigners trying to make a living in your country?"

"By no means," said the president. "I have had you watched carefully, solely because of your friendship with Don José and his son. It has taken me many years of planning to become president: and for just as many years I have known the importance of the d'Aveiro family. For a long time I attempted to make friends with it. My plan now is to—to do otherwise. It is lucky for you that you were intercepted before you were able to reach them and confuse your destiny with theirs. It is lucky also that you were not drawn into any pact with the fellow Brosso, the *capitaz*. He has failed at the first test."

"His conversion was not so entertaining as your Excellency's," said Fergusson; "but since you have ordered your horse I wonder that you do not come more directly to the point—whatever it is."

The confounded lariat was beginning to cut into his wrist and there was already a little twinge of pain between his shoulder-blades.

"To tell you the truth," said the presi-

dent, "I did not think that you would be willing to talk—business—much before morning. A man who goes alone into the swamps and river-beds of the *Infieles* and loses an arm and comes out and buys fresh provisions and a few more cartridges and then goes straight back again did not seem likely to be broken by five minutes of the strap. I had estimated eight or ten hours."

"But there is no reason for not telling me what it is you require. You have my gold already; and, as a soldier, the *Infieles* have made me useless."

"What I require," said His Excellency, "—as you well know—is the knowledge where those nuggets come from."

Fergusson had been afraid of that, but he scarcely showed it.

"But how are we to know that they are not the only two?" asked Fergusson. "I saw no others."

The president grinned. "By morning you will have seen many others; and you will remember exactly where."

This sounded, not to put too fine a point upon it, bad. If two minutes could make a wrist and a chest feel the way Fergusson's were beginning to feel, a night and the morning formed a thought most unattractive. The cellar was filthily stuffy, for all its bright furnishings, and the drawing of a decently deep breath hinted that the point of a knife was somewhere near the pit of Fergusson's stomach.

"You forget," the president went on, "or perhaps you did not know that I myself have spent some time, many years ago, in that same country of the *Infieles*. I found a little stream that was banked—*señor*, it was banked, I tell you—with the same gold of which you have been kind enough to give me these two pieces. What did I do but that which alone I could do? The two colleagues who were with me died"—he stroked his chin—"died of fever, *señor*. I brought back all the gold I could carry. In the course of time, so that no one need suspect me of any object in hurrying, I went back again."

"Then what, in God's name," said Fergusson, "do you want of me?"

"Holy Republic!" exclaimed the president, shocked into incredulity, "the man is a dolt! He does not understand! Fool, I could not find that cursed stream again."

A SMILE that would approach anywhere near to expressing Fergusson's natural feeling brought two minute stabs of pain behind his jawbone, under his ears. So he said very solemnly, "That is easily adjusted, Excellency. There is a map with every stream marked out in my wallet. I will indicate the one from which I brought that gold."

The president shook his head. "You underestimate me in a most surprising manner. Reconsider: I am Ignacio Lolás. I came to Paraguaso as a stowaway and am now president of the Sacred Republic. Such a destiny is the work of sagacity But of what use would be even an honest map to me? Of what use *was* an honest map? I will tell you. None. For I had one, and have it still. It was made by one of my colleagues, before he died. I myself marked the stream with the gold. But even with that map I could not find it. No, *señor*; what I require is that you yourself should guide me, or my emissaries, to the spot."

He smiled at Fergusson as if he was demanding the most reasonable service in the world.

"Oh," said Fergusson: "I see. But since you are so sagacious, how do you know that after I had said I would lead you truly I *would* lead you truly, instead of to death—by fever—among the *Infieles*; or to another stream as innocent of gold as you yourself are of the mysterious craft of map-reading?"

The president smiled. "My friend," he said, "a man who has once been broken by me, remains broken. Alternatively, he can be broken again with considerable ease. For example"—he picked up the revolver from beside the nuggets—"for example, I am a very fine marksman. Seated here, or a dozen paces further away, I could perform a very neat surgical operation upon you. Or I could, if you kept still, remove

the lobe of an ear without disturbing a hair of your whiskers."

He toyed artistically with the weapon before putting it down again and picking up the nuggets.

"And if I will not even say that I will do it?" asked Fergusson.

The president shrugged his broad shoulders. "In practice, *señor*, it has not yet been necessary for me to consider such an alternative. While I am gone my man will come in and stay with you. He is a talkative fellow, and will tell you many things."

"You place me in a delicate position, Excellency Lolas," said Fergusson. "I feel so hearty a dislike for yourself, and all whom I have so far seen of your emissaries, that I am obliged to say, quite flatly, no."

If there were any Calvinist ancestors in Fergusson's lineage, they it must be who dictated the iron coldness of his blunt and unemotional refusal.

"By consenting now," the president said, rather sadly, "you would travel as a robust young man. By procrastinating, even until morning, you run the risk of becoming an ailing cripple. A young doctor from Europe once told me that that position is somewhat of a strain on the heart."

He started to move away from the table with the nuggets; but suddenly startled by a thought, he put them down again and whistled. "*Señor*, a message must be conveyed this very night to the d'Aveiro people, telling them that you are in my hands. If there is any truth in what has been suggested to me concerning yourself and the girl—well, well, well. It will assist them greatly in making up their minds concerning a certain proposition I have put forward to them."

"Don José d'Aveiro make a bargain with you!" Fergusson exclaimed. "You?"

The president chuckled. "All men," he said, "are now as frightened of me as you are." He picked up the gold again. "But I must go now, to an appointment. You have given me, here, your proudest possession. I will show you mine."

In the manner of a small boy about to show off some new toy, he waved his free hand toward the wall farthest from the door. "That is a wall, you say. But regard me!"

HE DID something to one of the bricks and it came out in his hand, showing itself to be not a real brick at all but an ingenious dummy of a brick's face. He next manipulated something in the cavity left by the removal of the dummy, and a section of the wall swung silently out—an enormous thick, steel door, faced with bricks. The safe it disclosed was six feet high and three feet wide.

How deep it was, Fergusson could not yet see, for the president's shadow covered the opening, ran up the wall above it and then twisted backward in an immense blur upon the ceiling.

He looked back over his shoulder at Fergusson, his porcine eyes glittering with childish delight, his teeth catching the reflection of the light.

"It is the masterpiece of a great Spanish ironworker and locksmith. No one man in all the world can open it, except and only Ignacio Lolas; for it is opened not with a key, but by magic. The man who made it for me is dead." He crossed himself. "So that I alone know the five letters of a woman's name that must be set out on the alphabet behind the movable brick. Tell me, *señor*, even in your own country have you seen such a safe as this?"

"It is undoubtedly the finest in the world," said Fergusson. "But does the villain Brosso, your *capitaz*, know of it?"

"He does, the dog," said the president gloomily. "He once saw the brick out of position; but no more. I was able to swing the door to as he entered. And mercifully and magically the door locks itself on shutting."

Fergusson mentally noted these facts with great care. In spite of the pain that was like the touch of white-hot metal against his spine, his lips flickered into a momentary smile of deep but quiet pleasure.

The president did not notice.

He came back as far as the table, picked up the lamp, and ambled toward his precious safe.

Fergusson could see now that it was as deep as it was high, with shelves on all three of its sides. The president walked straight into his cavern and set the lamp in the nearest vacant space on a shelf, so as to have both hands free for packing the nuggets away in a far corner. It was probably reluctance to turn his back on his treasure that impelled him to withdraw from it backwards.

As he came abreast of the lamp and stretched out his hand to take it up, Fergusson called to him in a very mild, unstartling voice, "Lolas, be careful not to drop the lamp—if anything should alarm you when you turn round. I have you amply covered and will shoot the instant you try to do anything, except what I tell you."

The president was obviously puzzled. He turned as dully and as slowly as he spoke. "You will, you say shoot me?"—then his mouth fell suddenly ajar and there was a slow trickle of saliva from its corners. But he remembered what Fergusson had said about dropping the lamp, and gripped it very tight.

Fergusson now had a left hand—at the end of an outstretched, complete, and robust arm. In it was a dazzlingly bright little revolver.

"It is the devil. The devil himself. The most preposterously evil one. A miracle." It was a whimper coming from the president, so weak and so utterly sniveling that Fergusson was none too sure of his being able to hold the lamp much longer.

To pull the fellow together he snapped, "Put up your other hand and come out nearer. Staring at your pistol won't bring it to you."

"But must I, *señor*, indeed come nearer to the devil?"

"Aye, that you must, my beauty." Then Fergusson came back to the language they both had learned to understand. "Surely. Or he will work another magic."

V

THE president of the Sacred Republic shuffled heavily and sadly forward. At the door of the safe he said again, "But *señor*, must I—"

"You must come out and lean forward and place the lamp on the edge of the table and step back and hold up both your ugly hands as high as they will go. Or I will plug you as sweet as a daisy."

He obeyed, his eyes glued to the muzzle of Fergusson's revolver, still loathesomely dribbling. "Magic. Magic. Magic." He kept mumbling. And then, with his hands stuck obediently up, "*Señor*, will you not allow me to lower one hand—to make the sign?"

"That I will not," said Fergusson, "for it is not magic at all, but pure common sense. I once saw a man die in this country of yours, just because he had no more hands than he was thought to have. Well I do not know any way of growing a third hand, for emergencies. But when I was coming out of that God-forsaken fever-hole of your *Infieles*, it struck me that nothing would be easier than to come with only one hand showing for all daily jobs; and to keep the other one, as the saying is in my country, up my sleeve, for jobs like this one. On the inside of my coat-sleeve, at the elbow, I made a slit. On the side of my coat I made another to fit it, and stitched the two together. It is very neat. In my shirts also there is a slit; but these are left to look like a tear, in case some rascal should find them. It is sometimes tiring to carry one's hand all day against one's stomach; but it has the company of this revolver, and a knife which you will presently see, when I draw it to cut this confounded strap.

"Remember all this well, *amigo*.

"And don't forget this: it would take you at least three seconds to get round the table to your revolver. It would take me less than one half of one second to make six holes in your ugly carcass. And that would suit my purpose just as well.

"For it is all one to me whether you go on living or die. So keep still."

He got the knife out of the belt under his shirt. Its half was a fair handful, in addition to the pistol-butt. He managed, however. When he had cut through the strap at his wrist, the sudden placing of all his weight on his stiff and widely-splayed feet nearly threw him off his balance.

When he had freed his ankles and got some life back into his feet by sitting on the president's chair and wagging them about, he said, "Now, in you go."

"In?" asked the President, "what do you mean, *señor*?"

"I mean *in*—into the finest safe in all the world, fathead. That word, by the way, means in my country, 'Most illustrious politician.' Go on; your horse is waiting."

"But my horse is outside." It looked very much as if he were going altogether soft, and Fergusson had had enough of it all.

"Take off those boots and spurs. I'll want them to make a noise like a president. Hurry." The president still had wits enough to see that some little movement in the hand of Fergusson about the revolver-butt was the subtlety of the master. He stooped, uncomfortably, and pulled off the boots and stood again, sheepishly, but remembering to put up his hands.

"By the holy saints!" Fergusson exclaimed, "I had forgotten those nuggets. That shows you how you have upset me. Out with them. Go in and roll them out along the floor. No throwing them, mind, or there'll be devilish trouble."

Lolas went in and set them on the floor, and very reverently trundled them out with his gaily stockinged feet.


The great lout was weeping—a sight as sickening as corpses being bundled into a wagon. "Now, tell me your magic—this lady's name that opens the safe—in case we decide that you can come out again, when you've promised to be good."

"Anita."

"Very well. Just as I shut the door I will toss in that great revolver of yours. It may be that Brosso will be the one to let you out; and I'd not trust that fellow—not even with you. *Adios*, Excellency."

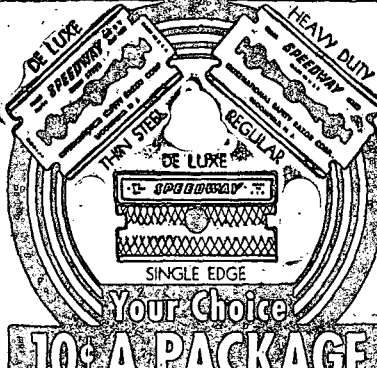
Two or three of the weary loungers in the dark corridor and the courtyard were sufficiently wide awake to say, when the clanking, swaggering, cloaked, hatted and hooded figure had swung into the silver-embossed saddle and ridden away with his attendant rifleman, "He has put him in a good, lively humor—that last, one-armed one has . . ."

Others, here and there, were not too weary to grunt in reply.



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That big hillbilly would drag out his guitar and howl those crazy songs