

# **POISONED ARROWS**

Based on a true story, –set in the jungles of  
Colombia, S.A., in 1953

by

R. King Pettigrew

A band of hostile Motilone warriors  
fired curare-tipped arrows down on  
the author and two men who were  
navigating the Rio de Oro River in  
a dugout canoe...

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*A.L. Maria; 11-10, 10-8-2000*

To my wife, Mil:

## **MY GUIDING STAR**

On storm-bound nights in Maui  
We thought and planned, –we two.  
Tales and Stories and Happenings  
That I had told to you.  
With you as my Guiding Star  
Little by little they grew.

You helped me reach the goal, Dear Mil:  
“Arrows” between covers!  
And you inspire me still...  
As it should be, –between Lovers.

King

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## 1 Motilone Country

Along the Venezuelan and Colombian border, the Motilone Indians have lived their primitive jungle lives for millennia.

In the post-war years of the fifties however, the lure of gold and minerals and oil, lying hidden in their mountainous retreat, began to change the Motilones' way of life. The oil industry, mining concerns, and Governments were anxious to exploit the riches of the Motilone territory. A running battle commenced between these aboriginal natives on the one hand, and Big Business on the other. It continued for two decades.

Today the Motilones are subdued. Little is left of their old hunting and killing instincts. In 1953, when I encountered them, they were fierce, small-statured brown men. In groups of twenty or thirty, they ran naked through the tangled jungle undergrowth. Unerring with their curare-tipped poisoned arrows they hunted the wild boar, birds, and any game that moved.

The curare root, famed throughout South America for its lethal juices, was plentiful in their jungle. This root they

boiled and decanted and reboiled until the liquid turned black and pungent. The Motilone warriors soaked foot-long arrowheads in the toxic potion and allowed the spear-like arrow to absorb the venomous fluid. When dried the arrowhead was a deadly weapon. Too,—the small sinewy archers were deadly in their aim.

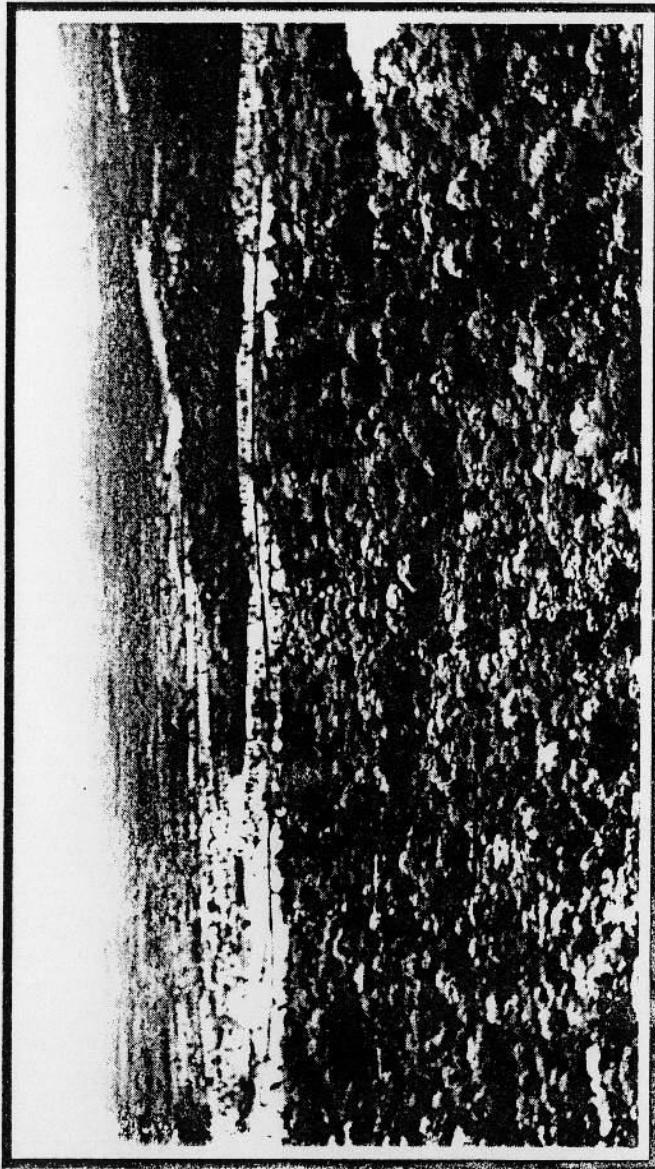
Embedded in an animal,—or a man!—the strychnine-like action is immediate. Within minutes the virulent concoction races through the victim's blood-system constricting vessels and capillaries. Breathing ceases. The quarry dies quickly,—whether hit in a vital organ or merely wounded.

The domain of the jungle-hunters covered a 200-mile extent along the eastern flank of the Motilone Mountains. This mountain range defines the Venezuela-Colombia border. These untamed, ferocious forest-men favoured the lower slopes of the mountains where the flanks swept down to lush flatlands. There, game was plentiful and easy to hunt.

The Motilones lived in very large thatched structures. About 300 of these were scattered throughout their territory. Some huts were spaced as little as five miles apart,—others, as much as twenty miles. Their huts were mammoth affairs. Many reached fifty feet in height and measured up to 150 feet in length! Thirty or forty Motilones lived in one hut. The total population of the tribe was estimated to be about 10000.

From the air, a hut appeared to be all roof. The thatch sloped steeply downward from the ridgepole to the ground. A large circular area, cleared of all growth, surrounded the abode. Two small doorway-openings,—probably no more than four feet in height,—were built on each side. Only a single doorway existed at each end. From each of these six openings a path led straight into the thick rain forest. The paths radiated outward from the hut like the spokes of a wheel.

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The Rio de Oro marks part of the Venezuelan-Colombian border.  
The heavy jungle is typical of this Motilone Country.



In 1953 there were 300 such "huts" along the Venezuelan-Colombian border. They were fifty feet in height and 150 feet in length. Note the doorways in side and end. (Lower photo): Two naked Motilones atop the hut, shot arrows at the plane as we "buzzed" them.

There is little evidence that the groups fought amongst themselves. They appeared to live peacefully in their own home areas and occasionally visited other Motilone communities. However, the Motilone Indians brooked no intrusion or interference from the white man. They killed on sight any intruder,—and left him where he fell.

By 1953, I had spent eight years in Venezuela. That was the year I experienced a first-hand encounter with these savage Stone-Age Hunters. I found myself dodging their poisoned arrows,—fired down on me with murderous intent!

Shell was drilling a well, a rank 'wildcat,' on the Rio de Oro River,—deep within the Motilone Territory. The well was threatening to blow out of control.

I was selected to go to the wellsite to see if I could prevent a disaster.

The Rio de Oro River and it's numerous tributaries drain an area of 1500 square miles of the southern half of Motilone country. The Rio de Oro, the 'River of Gold,' is the pulsating heart of the Motilone homeland. Lush and towering jungle-growth of a veritable rain-forest teems with life. Birds of a thousand species abound in this green and leafy Paradise. Parrots, Toucans, Flamingos, Pelicans and lesser species number in the millions. And along sinuous darkened trails and passageways of the forest floor, the Motilone hunt the larger animals. As well, the jungle provides them with an endless variety of fruits, nuts and edible roots. The streams and rivers supply them fish and fowl.

This then, was the Rio de Oro Country,—the Happy Hunting Ground of the Motilones. For centuries it had provided for all their earthly needs.

But elsewhere, in the post-war years, Industries and Governments were stirring. They were responding to the increased

demand for the earth's resources to fuel the advancing Technological Age. Few places on the Globe would be left unexplored in the next decades. The Motilone domain had not been overlooked.

Geological and airborne seismic surveys of Western Venezuela had revealed the presence of large, domed, rock structures in the sub-surface strata. Such a structure, called a 'seismic high,' might contain reserves of gas and oil. The particular structures along the Venezuelan-Colombian border held promise of petroleum reserves. Shell decided to brave the Motilone threat and drill an exploratory well on the very banks of the Rio de Oro River!

About 100 miles west of the Lake of Maracaibo, The Oro twists and turns through low mountain ranges and down into a foothills-type of terrain. The river works it's way through twenty miles of high sandstone cliffs and eventually joins it's waters with a large river called the Catatumbo.

The Catatumbo waterway is a mile wide in places. It is muddy and silt-laden. It is convoluted,—and alligator-infested. This elephantine river wanders it's ponderous way through a hundred miles of flat and soggy wasteland. Finally, over an extensive delta area that is a webwork of labyrinthian channels and sandbars, it pours it's brown waters into the southern end of Lake Maracaibo.

In the 1950's, some attempts were made by the Government and by Oil Companies to contact the Motilones with a view toward settling the differences between them. Such advances were unsuccessful. The Indians wanted no part of the white man's way of life.

One attempt, however,—one that was not particularly successful,—was made by a Catholic Priest. He had a different



approach. First, he would make himself known to the Motilones by dropping photographs of himself from the air. He would shower their huts with gifts and toys. The Priest felt that, in this way, he would eventually become a familiar figure to the Motilones. Perhaps they would see him as a friend. When the time was right, possibly after a few weeks or even months of such sorties, the good Priest planned to parachute down to several of their huts.

He set about this task with true Missionary Zeal,—no doubt visualizing the Motilones' eventual conversion to the Faith. Every few weeks he flew over their domain seeking certain of their huts. He scattered bags and bags of toys, and articles such as beads, mirrors, small tools, wire, cooking utensils. He felt certain that these would be treasured by children and elders alike. Nor did he overlook photos of himself. Of the thousands that floated down many were enlarged. Some were even waterproofed to ensure a true and lasting likeness of the Holyman's smiling countenance.

Eventually the Priest was ready. Sure of receiving a warm welcome, he selected one of the largest huts that he had long admired. It was one he'd flown over several times. The pilot made two low passes directly over the hut. The last supply of gifts and photos were seen to land within the clearing. The plane climbed to 2000 feet. When once again over the hut at this altitude, the Priest bailed out.

His parachute opened. He drifted earthward. His black robes billowed about him. He floated in on target,—directly over the wide clearing around the hut.

Before the Priest hit the ground, he was dead. The Missionary's body had been riddled with curare-tipped arrows.

This sad story, a true account of what took place along the Colombia-Venezuela border in the 1950's, has its parallel in today's world. Included overleaf is the documented record of

the killing of two missionaries by the Waorani tribe of Ecuadorian Indians. The article was published in the Christian Science Monitor in August 1987. The description of the Stone-Age way of life of the Waorani is similar to that of the Motilone tribes before 1950. The Waorani's primitive arrow-and-spear-like weaponry is similar,—as is their resistance to intrusion by modern society. The Waorani story is almost a carbon-copy of the Motilone chronicle that took place forty years ago!

Shell's decision to drill an exploratory well on the promising seismic structure along the Rio de Oro River, set in motion a whole range of planning and preparations. The major effort was to span more than a full year before results from the first well could be known. The cost would climb to a few million dollars.

The logistics of the operation were impressive. To drill a well and maintain a camp deep in a jungle some 200 river miles from the nearest supply centre, demanded detailed planning. It was necessary to collect, and assemble and package, thousands of 'bits and pieces.'

Listing, sorting, fabricating and stockpiling went on for months. Looking like the skeletal remains of a gigantic dinosaur, a 122-foot steel derrick lay on flatbeds,—ready for its 'voyage' to the wellsite. Massive drilling machinery and large pumps, each weighing many tons, were part of the lengthy inventory. At the shipping terminal on Lake Maracaibo, the stockpile of equipment gradually accumulated until it appeared that a small war was being planned.

'Maybe it was a small war,' I thought, 'but who were we fighting?' Mentally I listed the main forces against us, and over which we had little control. Time,—was the most critical. The Rivers too—as they'd be in flood. The Motilones maybe,—if

## Ecquador Indians battle for life

from Simon Strong, in Quito

Nearly 500 years after the Spanish conquest of Latin America precipitated the destruction of native Indian cultures, oil companies are involved in a grim battle with one of the last Amazonian communities living in the Stone Age.

The Equadorean government has granted exploration rights in territory where the Waorani Indian tribe has lived for centuries to an oil consortium including Braspetro of Brazil, Elf of France, and Britoil of Britain. In their fight to defend that land, a group of Waorani Indians, the Tagairis, last month killed two Roman Catholic missionaries who were trying to contact them.

The ferocious manner of the killing reflects the growing desperation of the Indian community, which has been forced farther south by oil exploration.

The Equadorean government, strapped for cash, is anxious to extract as much as possible from its oil-rich Amazon provinces. It suspended debt payments after a March 5 earthquake ruptured its oil pipeline and anticipates that external debt will rise to \$9 billion (U.S.) this year.

Until the price of oil slumped last year, petroleum accounted for more than 60 per cent of the country's exports earnings. (In 1985, Ecuador earned \$2.9 billion U.S. in foreign exchange.)

Even if the consortium of 21 foreign oil companies strikes lucky, Ecuador's share of the oil production is still expected to have peaked by as early as 1995. The extent to which the oil companies will take on the Indians will depend on how far the government will go in backing the oil companies.

The first clash between the Indians and the petroleum companies occurred 18 years ago, when a cook was murdered in an oil camp. The next was in 1977, when three oil workers were killed by lances as they crossed a river to a Tagairi settlement. And three years ago, two oil workers were severely wounded by spears flung from a canoe. One Indian was then killed.

In the latest incident, a helicopter dropped the missionaries near a Tagairi settlement. Bishop Alejandre and Sister Ines, part of the Capuchin Mission in Coca, had agreed to locate and pacify any Indians who stood in the way of oil extractions.

Their mission, according to the Capuchin Mission, was not to preach but to protect the Indians, to save them from imminent genocide if the government were to call in the military to defend oil workers from the Indians.

The deaths have thrown a wrench into the work of the consortium. Having invested \$30 million U.S. and allowed four years in which to conduct seismic studies and sink three wells, the consortium has had to indefinitely postpone its analysis of the 500,000-acre (200,000 ha.) area.

Christian Science Monitor — Aug. 1987

they caught us on the Rio de Oro. The very thought had a sinister ring to it.

The staging area eventually held miles of drillpipe and similar lengths of various sizes of casing. There were stacks of pipe fittings and a veritable 'warehouse' of spare parts and tools. In addition, three bulldozers were lined up at the water's edge, as these had to be the first to arrive at the drillsite. Piled nearby were a few thousand sacks of cement. Steel drums and bags of chemicals were lined up in long rows. The chemicals would be used to maintain certain characteristics of a mud-fluid. During drilling, the hole is kept full of this fluid to hold back any high pressure encountered.

Also in the assembly yard were the pieces of quonset huts to be fabricated at the wellsite. A large two-storey house-boat was taking shape. It would function as an office, messhall, and also provide some of the living quarters. Three drilling crews would work 'round the clock.'

Nailed to the side of a small building in the supply depot, was a large hand-painted sign that displayed the words: "FOR WANT OF A NAIL." It served as a reminder to the staff that each item, large or small, was critical to the success of the operation. If one looked past the rows of large equipment now assembled, he could see such things as First Aid kits, nails, kitchen-ware, report forms, pens and even paper clips.

The array of equipment continued to grow as the wet-season neared. Torrential rains would swell the river systems and signal the start of the transportation phase. Tons and tons of gear packed on barges must be moved 200-miles. More than half the distance would be along swollen rivers.

Finally, the rains came down.

The staging area became a scene of orderly activity. Barges were loaded. Tugs moved them into position. The convoy started,—slowly, ponderously. The first phase was relatively

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easy: the flat barges moved steadily across the 100-mile length of Lake Maracaibo. The second phase called for navigating the next 100 miles along the wide and swollen Catatumbo River,—against the current. There, progress was exceedingly slow. On some days the distance gained was only a mile or two. Shifting sandbars gave constant problems. At times, extreme flood conditions prevented any attempt to move due to debris, logs, and whole trees that floated down the river. On a 'good' day, when waters had receded somewhat, the convoy might tally a day's travel at four or five miles.

It took a month and a half to move most of the supplies to the mouth of the Rio de Oro. Here, The Oro appeared as a narrow stream in comparison to the mighty Catatumbo. Ahead was another thirty miles of winding river. Parts were sure to be choked with sandbars. And a six-mile section of the river ran through sheer sandstone cliffs where Motilone attacks had taken place in the recent past. To the men who had laboured the length of the Catatumbo, the Rio de Oro promised only more toil and sweat. And it held a constant danger,—the savage hunters may ambush the convoy at any point. Then, only the dread sound of arrows might be heard,—seldom did the warriors show themselves.

In my Maracaibo office the radio receiving set blared loudly. A man's voice shouted, "*—trying to get you. We've got trouble!*" I'd been expecting the daily call from the Rio de Oro well but usually it didn't start with such an ominous message.

I raced for the set, turned the dials, and picked up Jack Morris. He was the head Driller and Boss of the camp at the Rio de Oro wellsite.

"Receiving you Jack,—but not clear. Repeat please."

I fine-tuned, listened, and finally heard Jack's voice. It was a weak signal that blanked-out periodically by bursts of static. In the next half-hour, the only words I heard were these:

"...BLOWOUT MAYBE ...HELLISH PRESSURE ...NEW FORMATION ...NOW 9000 FEET AND..."

The message faded away in mid-sentence. I worked to pick up more. Eventually Jack's voice came back, but faintly.

"Can't get mud weight up...out of Barytes. Repeating, out of..." Jack faded away again. I tried to re-establish contact but only once did I hear a few more words.

"...Urgent send Barge. Urgent ...will try..." Nothing more. I worked with the radio for some time but to no avail.

The garbled message however, was abundantly clear in it's portent: we likely had an imminent blowout on our hands.

Full of portent too, was Jack's statement that he was out of Barytes! This is a mud-weighting material made from the heavy mineral Barite. Without Barytes, Jack may have no hope of controlling the well. The pressure may build,—and build, until—"There she blows!"

As a well is drilled deeper and deeper into the earth's crust, the hole is maintained full of a chemically-mixed mud. The mud column,—constantly being circulated down to the bottom of the hole and back to tanks on surface,—is gradually 'weighted' with Barytes. The principle purpose of this fluid is to hold an over-balance of pressure against the various formations as these are encountered. Pressure increases with depth. Some formations contain abnormally-high pressures. If high enough, such forces may overcome the pressure exerted by the mud column against the formation, permitting gas from the formation to enter the hole.

If gas continues to seep in, it will lighten the mud column. As pressure increases, the mud may be blown out of the hole. When this occurs, gas, oil and water are free to enter the bore hole and flow to the surface uncontrolled. This is a wild well,—or a 'blowout.'

As well as relying on the control provided by mud weight, another safeguard for the prevention of blowouts is an assembly of high-pressure valves and control mechanisms called Blowout Preventors. These are under the derrick floor and connected to the casing of the well. They usually give protection against a blowout. There are situations however, where the well builds pressure, or blows wild, before the equipment can be employed.

These were some of circumstances that Jack Morris was facing at Rio de Oro. To my mind, his situation was extremely critical. It had all the makings of an impending catastrophe. How could this have happened? How could Jack be out of Barytes? After a moment's reflection I recalled that a few weeks earlier two loaded barges of Barytes, on their way to the wellsite, had broken loose from the convoy during a violent storm. Their loads of Barytes had been lost to the Catatumbo. Since that time no further shipment had got through,—due to the low water levels at this season of the year.

I reported the situation to the Production Manager. A few of us reviewed our alternatives and developed a general plan of action. The consensus was that *I go to the well myself and handle the situation as I saw fit!* This new turn of events set me back for a few moments,—and I pondered the pros and cons.

We all realized the serious consequences that would result from a blowout on the Rio de Oro. The political ramifications alone,—of a wild well on the Colombian border,—were fraught with imponderables. A well blowing out thousands of barrels of oil each day,—possibly for weeks on end,—could

cause millions of dollars damage! There were plantations and installations, as well as barge traffic, along the Catatumbo River and around the extensive shoreline of Lake Maracaibo. Damage to these could flood our offices with lawsuits and liability claims.

And of prime concern was the discovery, in the Oro well, of an oil and gas reservoir of significant proportions. The hole was now at about 9000 feet,—with another 3000 feet still to be drilled. It was possible that we might find additional reserves in the deeper section still to be drilled. Further, a prolonged uncontrolled blowout could be ruinous to the reservoir by depleting the virgin pressures. If that happened, millions of barrels of oil may never be recovered.

I pointed out to my colleagues that others were as qualified as I to handle the blowout situation. I mentioned one or two Engineers on our Casigua field who could do the job. Besides, they were 150 miles closer to Rio de Oro than I was,—here in Maracaibo. I was out-voted on this score however, and resigned myself to the daunting task and the lengthy trip ahead of me. I concerned myself with making sure the plans were understood by those who were likely to be involved before this crisis was over.

We worked out a specific plan of action. First, and given Top Priority, a barge load of Barytes would be shipped to the wellsite,—without delay! The all-important chemical was now stockpiled at a place called Encontrados, fifty miles up the Catatumbo River. From Encontrados, there remained thirty or forty miles of the Catatumbo River to be traversed before meeting the Rio de Oro. Still ahead would be another thirty miles along this narrow river before the Barytes would arrive at the wellsite.

If the Rio de Oro water was high enough, the Barge was to continue as far as possible toward the Oro camp. If the Oro river was not navigable by barge, the Barytes would be transferred to a smaller vessel. Load by load, it would be taken the rest of the way. If necessary, the Barytes would be carried, bag by bag, to the wellsite!

I secretly held grave misgivings that the Barytes would arrive in time to prevent a blowout. I visualized myself arriving at the well ahead of the shipment only to stand by for a few days and watch the well gush oil high above the top of the derrick. I visualized the oil floating down the Oro and the Catatumbo and spreading across the Lake of Maracaibo. But I brushed these thoughts from my mind. Plans were made and action already underway. With luck, it all might work. We had to try.

Later, this very day, a power boat would rush me across Lake Maracaibo, then up part of the Catatumbo,—and drop me at Encontrados. Total distance from Maracaibo: 150 miles. Estimated travel time: 10 hours. At Encontrados a small shallow-draft speed boat would meet me and take me to the wellsite. Distance: 50 miles. Estimated travel time: 5 hours. With a little more luck therefore, I should be at the Rio do Oro camp within 15 hours from the time of leaving Maracaibo. The lingering doubt in my mind however, was the question of the Barytes barge. Could it make the difficult trip now that water levels were so low? How long would it take? How long could Jack keep the well from blowing out?

At Encontrados I'd meet an engineer of the Schlumberger Company,—specialists in well surveying. He would accompany me to the well in the small speed boat. He'd be needed to run electrical surveys in the well once it was under control. Such surveys would permit me to calculate the fluid content of the formations, as well as other measurements that are essential in evaluating an oil and gas reservoir.

Last,—and apparently the least of anyone's concern (except mine! ),—were arrangements for my return to Maracaibo.

"This," the Production Manager had stated, "will be considered after the well is under control!"

## 2 By Boat and Barge

A large Diesel-powered boat was standing by to carry me across Lake Maracaibo and up the Catatumbo River. I raced home, packed a few clothes and a camera, and headed for the marine terminal.

It was late afternoon when we pulled away from the dock leaving the city behind in a cloud of diesel fumes and white wake. The engines roared us southward in a straight line for the wide 'Boca Catatumbo,'—the mouth of the river,—almost exactly 100 miles away.

The boat belonged to Shell. It was tug-like in hull shape, about forty feet in length and equipped with two powerful Diesel engines. Wide open, the boat was capable of fifteen knots. There were six bunks, a well-stocked galley, and full navigation gear. The command bridge was poised high above the deck. The Captain welcomed me aboard and introduced me to the three crew members. I was on my way to the Rio de Oro wellsite!

Once again I felt the thrill of being aboard a good boat. I browsed around for the first hour,—checking the craft from

stem to gudgeon. I went above, to the bridge, to talk to the Captain.

"We're making good time," he said. "We've done about a quarter of the distance to the Delta already."

I felt that small bit of information was an auspicious start to the trip. Maybe it was a good omen. For the first time since the radio call from Jack Morris, I felt optimistic. It was exciting to be going somewhere. This diversion was a therapy after too many months in an office. As for the well and the blowout threat, I began to feel more confident that we could get it under control quickly, provided the Barytes arrived at the wellsite on time.

Lake Maracaibo was dead flat. I estimated we'd make the Delta in five more hours. We'd be there about eleven p.m. I struck up a conversation with the Captain.

"Expect any problem getting through the Delta in the dark?" He was an old hand at this sort of thing and I was anxious to get his version of what was ahead of us.

"The Delta is *never* an easy trip," the Captain replied. "With the water so low, the sandbars'll likely slow us down. But it's that next fifty-miles to Encontrados that I don't like."

The Captain was not in a talkative mood, but little by little he opened up and told me about some of his boating experiences in this part of the world.

"I never liked the damned Catatumbo," he added. Treacherous,—a Bad Luck River, I call it. It's either flooding or damn near dry! Sandbars are never in the same place twice."

"What did you mean about that 'next fifty miles to Encontrados?' Why should that be worse than the Delta?" His comment had aroused my curiosity.

"Well, we'll be against the current all the way. The channel, if you're lucky enough to be in the right one, twists and turns constantly. The sandbars move around. Most of 'em,

you can't see,—even in the daylight. In the dark, it's worse." The Captain hesitated again,—then added, "I've seen a few accidents on this piece of river. Once, nearer to Encontrados, I saw a man pulled under by a Gator. Happened when he was in the water trying to get the boat off a sandbar."

The Captain's remarks did little to strengthen the sense of optimism that had been building in my mind the past few hours. Apparently, our conversation was over. He turned the helm over to the First Mate and went below.

I watched the gauges on the control panel for a while. Both Diesels were running at full-throttle. Speed was holding steady. In the pitch dark night streaks of fluorescence showed clearly in our wake. I settled down in the galley and skimmed through a few old magazines for an hour or so, but I felt restless. The First Mate came in and started to make sandwiches and coffee. Unlike his Captain, he talked a steady stream. He



*Shell motor vessel leaving Maracaibo*

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told me about the Catatumbo,—a slightly different version than the Captain's,—but I found it interesting.

He'd been up the Rio de Oro a year earlier with a small prospecting party and had stories about the Motilones. He stated that the Oro was still very dangerous. He knew of two Venezuelans that the warriors had killed with their poisoned arrows not more than two months ago. The two men had been motoring up the river in a small boat and had run into a Motilone ambush. The boat was found a week later,—having drifted down the Rio de Oro and a few miles into the Catatumbo. The two bodies were found on a sandbar in the Oro. They were riddled with arrows. The First Mate was convinced that in their fight against the white man's intrusion into their ancestral region, the Motilones would 'ask no quarter and give none.'

We reached the Catatumbo delta before midnight. From this point on, the Captain handled the helm himself and threaded his way carefully through a maze of sandbars. In places, the broad flatland with its tangle of braided streams looked like a sea of floating islands. The crew played searchlights ahead and to each side to light up the sandbars and low banks of the river. It was tricky navigation.

Twice the Captain selected the wrong channel and had to turn back and search for the right one. Twice the vessel scraped bottom but not hard enough to halt our progress. Once out of the delta and into the main river it became easier to hold a course. The current however, was stronger than expected and sandbars were still a constant hazard.

Occasionally, out of the darkness, a floating log loomed in front of us. Then, with a whirl of the large wheel and a thrust of engine power, the Captain would take whatever evasive action was called for. Often, there was little margin for error. The diesels laboured mightily. They grumbled, in their deep-throated way, at each throttle shift that demanded more output.

Our speed was reduced to about five knots against the steady current and the need to avoid the numerous sandbars.

To me, the scene was full of interest. It held an eerie quality, however. Ghostly shapes sprang up wherever the searchlights penetrated. The light wavered and played on banks of low-lying mist and on dead trees along the shore. These became animated forms,—stark, grotesque, full of shadowy images. Once, hugging a sharp turn, a startled alligator, routed from its ready hideout, clawed its way up a muddy bank not more than ten feet from the boat. Above the noise of the engines, especially at low throttle when the crew were feeling their way along, strange night-cries of Tropical birds filled the air.

Before this long night of river work was done, we'd ground to a stop on two sandbars. At each grounding the Captain attempted to free the vessel by rocking and reversing, but in the end he had to send his crew to shore. They dragged heavy lines and steel cables with them. These were secured around the base of trees, thus enabling the boat to winch itself off the sand. The crew worked long and hard, and at times were waist-deep in water. Recalling the Captain's horror-story, I worried about the unseen enemy lurking in the silty depths.

At four o'clock of that black and muggy night, we saw a distant light identifying the small village of Encontrados. Fourteen hours had passed since leaving Maracaibo! I recalled that our PLAN had been to get me to the Rio de Oro wellsite in fifteen hours! That left just ONE hour in which to do fifty miles of tortuous river systems,—the last portion through Motilone Country! Obviously our plan was already out of phase. And obviously I was going to be late,—maybe real late. Unless,—unless the small speed boat was ready to go. Possibly we might make up a little time the rest of the way. However, I was here at Encontrados, two-thirds of the way to the Rio de Oro camp.

The small village looked dead, deserted, dismal. A few scattered buildings cast low silhouettes at a bend in the river. Beside the wharf, a dead tree and a single storage tank emphasised the starkness of this lonely spot on the Catatumbo.

The Captain eased the vessel alongside the narrow rickety dock. He did not tie up, but merely held the boat in position long enough for me to jump the two foot gap. The Captain and his crew bid me goodbye. They turned their vessel around and headed down river,—on their way back to Maracaibo. Within minutes the boat was out of sight beyond the river bend.

I stood forlornly on the dock for some minutes,—until I could no longer hear the boat's engines. In the ensuing silence, I felt totally alone. Had I been dropped from a plane into the darkest jungle of Tarzan's Africa, I could not have felt more isolated, more bewildered,—more marooned!

From the dock my view of the river was restricted. I wanted to look for some sign of the small craft that was to take me to the Rio de Oro well.

'Surely,' I thought, 'the speed-boat is tied up nearby. The Operator is likely asleep aboard his craft.'

I walked to the end of the dock and searched for any sign of a small boat. There was nothing tied to the dock. Nothing,—as far along the river as I could see. I climbed a low muddy bank of the river and scrabbled to the top of a small knoll. I found the knoll overgrown with dank reeds and tall grasses similar to those along the river's edge. I searched in the darkness for a dry spot on which to sit and wait. Everything I touched was moist or wet from mist or a recent rain. By tramping the grasses flat and spreading out an old rain jacket, I ended up with a two-foot-square area to sit on. At least it afforded me a fair view of the river,—black and shimmering in the dark of the night.

It was a long lonesome wait.

Darkness surrounded me as in a tomb. I felt alone. Beaten. Abandoned.

My night vision slowly developed. Forms materialized that I hadn't noticed earlier. The matted reeds that surrounded me had a musty stagnant smell. A light breeze waved the tall grasses and low shrubs in the rhythm of a man moving his shoulders in an uphill walk. I held my breath and watched until convinced they were only grasses. The sudden, high-pitched squawk of a heron did little to allay my growing apprehension. I moved around in a small circle to search for a drier spot but found the footing slippery and uneven. Wet to the knees, I retreated to my pad and concentrated on the river.

Not a sign of life. Not a sound. The fetid air was sticky and oppressive.

Forsaken, desolate of spirit, I waited through each long minute in this derelict place. My watch beat out the seconds one by one,—as loud as ever a Chipewyan had beat a Tom-Tom! The snakes and 'gators that crawled about me in the eelgrass,—real or imagined,—encircled my small plot and trapped me motionless. I was fixed, rooted. Reaching out my hand I clutched the base of a reed. Wet, cold and slimy,—almost scalelike! I recoiled in a moment's horror.

Every one of those three hours of my life on that dark and dreary bank, had 300 interminable minutes! But it had to end. And end it did. There,—on the horizon: a pinkish streak just above the river's flat surface. Dawn approached the bend of the Catatumbo as if it were afraid to come another step closer. I understood exactly how it felt.

I waited for more light and watched the river,—listening hard for the sound of a motor. I wondered why I was here. Why me? Why here? Had I not tempted the Fates enough since 1939? Then, I'd survived a smashup in a rapids. I had starved a bit. I'd missed a plane crash too,—by the toss of a coin. In

Trinidad, a phone call at a Zero Hour had prevented me from boarding the ill-fated Robert E. Lee. She was sunk by a German torpedo only a day after leaving the island. There were no survivors. Here in Venezuela, I'd endured a few revolutions over the past years.

'Now,' I thought, 'ahead of me the Motilones wait. They wait,—lying hidden in the jungle shrubbery along the tops of those steep-sided sandstone cliffs. Why me?'

Daylight had come to my Swamp.

I shook off the duress and the disquieting visions of the night and gazed at the sunrise as if it was the first one of my life. In the early morning light, a man in a long dugout canoe approached out of nowhere, and paddled slowly toward the dock. There was no sign or sound of the speed boat. However, I kept expecting it to show up at any minute.



*The Old 'Campesino' arrives at Encontrados.*

I looked again at my watch. The time was a few minutes after seven o'clock. The faint sound of a motor throbbed on the quiet air.

'The speed boat! The Speed Boat,—at last! Finally I'll be on my way. In five more hours, God Willing, I'll be at the wellsite.'

From around the river's bend, a flat-bottomed scow came ever-so-slowly into my sight. *A flat-bottomed barge?!* What was going on? Where was the small craft I'd been waiting for? Mesmerized, I watched the Barge move ponderously against the current. It rode low in the water. A deck load was piled high. As the Barge drew nearer, I recognized the load as being bags of Barytes.

'It has to be the shipment scheduled for the Rio de Oro well!', I thought. 'But why is it here? By now, it should be thirty miles or so up the Catatumbo,—or possibly along the Oro River, nearing the wellsite.' The squared-off bow of the barge pushed up a mound of water as the ungainly vessel bumped the dock. A rough-looking man made fast a couple of lines to wooden cleats on the dock. He went aboard and shut down the noisy smoking engines.

Easing myself out of the reeds and the mud, I went to the dock and met the crew of the Barge. The Captain was short, bearded and overweight. Every inch of his stout frame shouted his trade as that of a riverboat man. The two deckhands were nondescript types. They didn't meet my gaze but stood silent;—their hangdog expressions told me little. The three crew were dressed in old dungarees and stained and sweaty T-shirts. Worn leather sandals gave some protection to their feet as they scurried about on the splintery boards of the dock.

I talked to the Captain but had a hard time understanding his Spanish dialect. He had no information about the speed boat. His job, he said, was to "move Barytes up the Catatumbo."

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The Captain went on at length, in a tiresome and dis-jointed manner about engine trouble, the difficult river conditions ahead, and the Motilones. The 'savages,' as he called them, appeared to be his main concern.

"Poco agua pero muchas Motilones!" 'Little water but many Motilones.'

He repeated the phrase over and over. I saw that I'd learn precious little from the Captain. His slovenly appearance turned me off somewhat. Our conversation ended as it had begun: with little understanding between us.

However, the Schlumberger engineer was aboard the Barge. He was a young Frenchman who had been in Venezuela only two months. His appearance surprised me. He was short, —about five-feet-four, well built and stocky. His skin was rather pale and his large dark eyes gave him an intense look. His hair was jet-black and somewhat wavy. He sported a closely-cropped beard.

We tried to converse,—in three different languages,—but got nowhere. He didn't know a single word of English and his Spanish was little better. I had long since forgotten any French they may have taught me in Public school. I never did find out how he'd managed to be on the Barytes Barge. He had with him, various survey instruments for running in the Rio de Oro well,—if we ever made it that far.

But the whereabouts of the speed boat was my immediate concern. From the dock I continued to watch the river. A sense of deepening doubt and frustration increased with each passing minute. My gaze took in the Captain, standing on the shore and in no apparent hurry to get underway. He was in animated conversation with a rather ancient, frail-looking man squatting beside the canoe I'd seen heading toward the dock an hour earlier.

The old man's appearance caught my attention. Sitting squarely on his head was a battered straw hat that somehow, gave him a certain flare. He wore a 'Poncho,'—a cape-affair with a hole in the centre through which the wearer thrusts his head. It reminded me of the ponchos worn by farmers and peasants in the high parts of the Andes Mountains. This poncho was somewhat more colourful than any I'd seen. It covered the wearer generously.

The two men seemed to be arguing. I watched their gestures and saw that they were bargaining. Eventually, the Captain dug deep into his pocket and handed something to the Old Man. The peasant-type, or 'Campesino,' inspected whatever it was that passed between them, and stuffed it inside the folds of his poncho. The Captain and the Campesino then walked aboard the Barge. The deckhands followed,—carrying the Old Man's dugout canoe.

A full hour had been wasted at the dock but now the Captain was ready to continue up the Catatumbo. There was still no sign of the speed boat. A rather obvious choice now lay before me: either wait for my transportation, or travel up river on the Barge. I weighed my alternatives.

I had little desire to spend any more time at Encontrados. On the Barge, I'd be moving in the right direction,—however slowly. And surely the small craft would soon overtake us. It would be a simple matter then, to transfer from the Barge to the speed boat. I decided to throw in my lot with this odd assortment of human cargo and travel on the flat-bottomed scow.

I left word with a couple of labourers, who had turned up to work on the dock, that 'I had gone up-river by Barge.' I asked the men to relay the message that 'the small boat was to make all speed to overtake me.' I was left with strong reservations that my message was understood. If it was, its context was likely to be a different story.

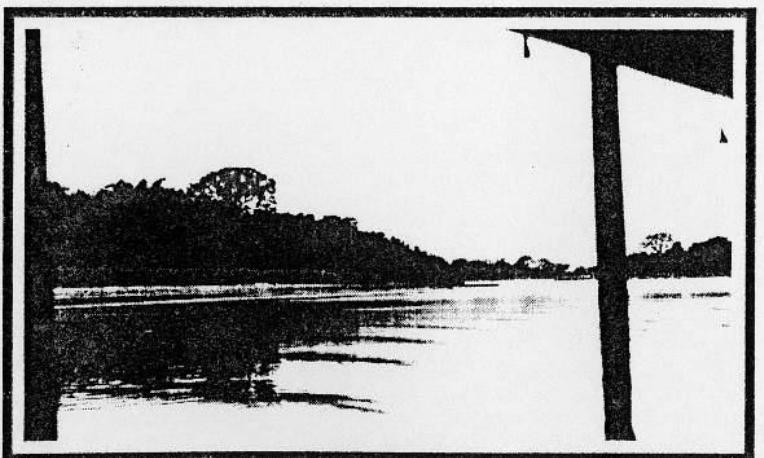
The Captain had no objection to my suggestion that I travel with him on the barge and later transfer to the speed boat when it caught up with us. While talking with the Captain, I asked, "Whose your passenger? The old man, I mean. Don't tell me he wants to go up the Rio de Oro!"

The Captain hesitated before he replied; he looked furtively around as if he didn't want to be overheard.

"Just an old fellow from the Mountains,—says he has a brother living near El Pilar. That's a small airport up the river a ways,—near the mouth of the Rio de Oro. He asked me for a free ride."

The Captain's reply didn't convince me, but I said no more. My intuition told me not to trust him. My guess was that he'd paid the Old Campesino to come aboard with his dugout canoe,—for whatever reason.

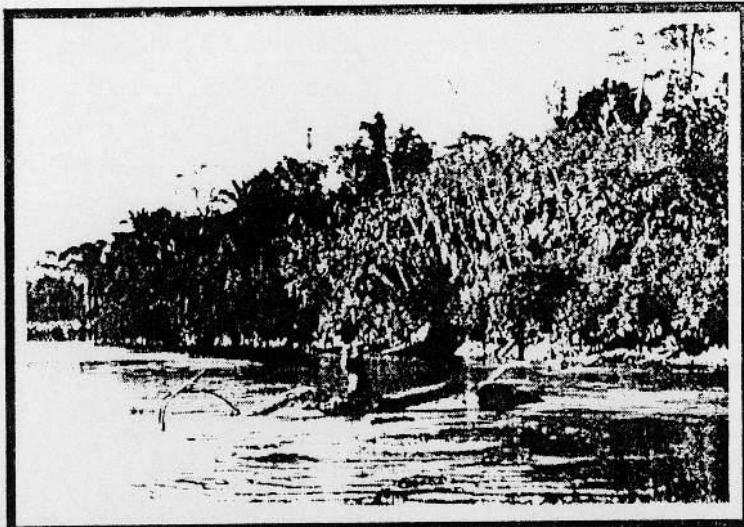
'Maybe,' I thought, 'the Old Man and his canoe are a kind of insurance policy for the Captain.' I was sure I'd witnessed the payment of the first premium.



*Early morning...*



*The Helmsman at the wheel of Old Flatbottom.*



*Sandbars and jungle growth...*

But we were actually moving upstream on the Catatumbo! It was slow. Our speed was possibly one or two knots,—but we moved. I assumed that we were only at half-speed and I hoped that once into a deeper channel, the Captain would try for something better than our tortoise-like pace. Vain hope. A knot or two was the best Old Flatbottom could do against the current, weighted down as she was with Barytes. The Captain however, seemed unconcerned. He would look at the barely-noticeable wake, then ahead at the sandbars, and turn the large spoked wheel from side to side, even when there was no need to do so. The deckhands did little but stare vacantly at the shoreline. Occasionally they talked between themselves. They cast sidelong glances at the Captain as if they were planning some nefarious mutiny.

As for the Frenchman, he sat in the shade of a tarpaulin, slung above the after-deck. He worked constantly with his survey tools. He'd take them apart, study each piece, oil it, and re-assemble the complicated mechanism. He seemed in a world of his own,—far-away Paris, probably. I tried again to talk to him but it was a lost cause. My French consisted of phrases like The Plume of My Aunt, and it soon became clear that he didn't even understand *that!* He merely grinned and shrugged. I thought it was exactly what any Frenchmen would do under these appalling circumstances.

I was hungry and tired. I was becoming impatient. A sense of deep frustration had settled on my mind but I was powerless to do anything about it. I'd started out on the barge feeling that I was the only normal one aboard. With the slow passing of the last few hours, even this assumption was rapidly losing all validity. Hour after hour I paced the steel deck, on the lookout for some sign or sound of the speed boat. I silently cursed the Flat-Bottomed Scow and the Captain. I avoided his miserable crew. I railed within myself at the slow pace and the

frequent delays. Once, to kill time, I went to the stern of the barge to inspect the dugout canoe and to see if I could talk to the Campesino.

The canoe, called a Pakki-Pakki in Venezuela, had been crudely hacked out of a single log. It measured sixteen feet in length. Its width was a narrow eighteen inches. Built into the stern of the dugout was a rusty one-cylinder engine. The little motor was held loosely in place with wire and a bolt or two. I gazed at the contraption and wondered how it was able to propel itself through a watery medium such as the Catatumbo. The owner however, was not communicative. He appeared content to sit on his haunches, crouched beneath his Poncho, and gaze dreamily at the river.

We seemed always to be on the edge of a sandbar. Twice we grounded solidly. I was surprised that the crew were able to pry the barge loose. I asked the Captain to try to double his speed but he only laughed and turned his wheel. He repeated his tedious worries about the Motilones. It was apparent to me that his constant talk and concern regarding the whereabouts of the Indians was making the deckhands nervous. The two young helpers now eyed the shorelines with a suggestion of alarm showing on their features. They stood at the rail less often. And I noted they spent more time behind some protection,—such as the bags of Barytes.

It was noon. The air was stifling. The steel deck burned through the soles of my shoes. The smell of diesel oil hung in the air in a suffocating vapour. The Captain turned the helm over to a deckhand and busied himself with making a huge pot of coffee. In a magnanimous gesture, accompanied with many words, he offered some to his two 'passengers.' He poured the steaming black liquid into rather rusty bean tins. No cream, no

sugar,—just hot, thick 'cafe-noir.' My hunger and thirst were such that I accepted it eagerly.

When the brew had cooled sufficiently, the Old Man and I knocked the drinks back like thirsty cowboys at a bar. We perched on the upturned dugout, waiting for the effects to dissipate, and stared blankly at one another,—without speaking.

### 3 *Adrift on the Rio de Oro.*

Rounding a bend in the river we came in sight of a flock of a hundred or more Flamingos. They were close-bunched and standing tall in a shallow pool on a flat sandbar. The sun was at such an angle that it suffused their pinkish reflection onto the placid surface of water beneath them.

For a few moments the view was charged with a transcendent beauty that mesmerized all of us aboard the barge. Sighting us, the flock rose in one majestic uprising. Like a single pink Flamingo, the feathery cloud spread its wings and exposed the darker red of underlying feathers. As the flock lifted gracefully off the shallow pool and gained height, the sandbar appeared to burst into flame. In reflection, pinnacles of fire soared upward as if reluctant to see the tinted wave depart.

The image lifted my sagging spirits from the dismal surroundings of the noisy and noxious scow. For a moment I forgot my immediate concerns and lost myself in the colourful display of grace and beauty. The Flamingo-imagery lingered in

my mind long after the flock had disappeared. It made my situation seem more tolerable.

'Maybe,' I thought, 'maybe the barge and the Motilones and the threatening blowout are not the most important things in life, after all.'

My thoughts were jarred downward from this ethereal plane as I felt myself falling onto the deck. The barge had hit some obstruction with a jolting force. The impact felt different than the groundings we'd had on sandbars. Instead of the slow grinding along gravel, this one was a solid blow that had stopped Old Flatbottom in her track. On inspection, the Captain found that his vessel had run part way up on a massive deadhead,—a waterlogged tree-trunk that had wedged itself against a shallow bank of sand.

For nearly five hours we laboured before the barge floated again. I say 'we,' because eventually, all of us had worked in the waist-deep muddy water,—shoving, pulling, shovelling, wading and prying. The heavy barge begrudging every inch of progress,—but finally, inch by inch, she finally began to give way.

The time I spent in the water was minimal compared to the hours the deckhands laboured in the river. When partly immersed, my body and mind were electrified with dread. My feet would sink a foot into the silty mud and I'd feel things squish between my toes or brush against my legs. Then, charged with fear and revulsion, and unable to suffer the river longer, I'd scramble for the barge in near panic, and fling myself aboard. Safe on the blistering deck, my first reaction was to count my toes and legs. On each occasion my mind flooded with horror as I looked at the two-inch-long slimy-black leeches that clung to my skin!

Earlier, I'd watched the Captain and the deckhands go through a macabre and repulsive procedure of ridding them-

selves of these Catatumbo Creatures. With a knife blade, they raised the tail-end of the leech. Then, they applied the flame from a cigarette-lighter to the Beast's posterior. The novel method was 100-percent effective in causing the Leech to release it's pincer hold on the skin. With casual abandon the Captain flicked each sizzling animal back into the muddy waters of the Catatumbo.

Today, I still carry a few burn-scars as a reminder of that gruesome ordeal. The burns resulted from my frantic impatience to rid myself of these loathsome Things. I recall how my hands would shake as I applied the knife and the lighter-flame simultaneously. I never seemed to know just where the flame was.

It was near six in the evening before we were underway again. I estimated that we'd made only twelve or fifteen miles up the Catatumbo from Encontrados. I had now been aboard the barge for thirteen long hours. We'd been grounded for half that time!

Reflecting on this deplorable record, I recalled a seafaring term that is used for measuring distance made. A seaman counts 'miles over ground,' or MOG. On a boat passage the MOG is usually different than the miles made on the surface of the water. This difference is due to the effects of tide and wind and current. I concluded that in our case, on the barge, there was no difference at all! Miles over ground, for this Captain, seemed much more appropriate.

Early evening darkness was upon us and it had a definite effect on the Captain and crew. A form of 'contained panic' gradually developed. As the searchlights played the banks, ghostly forms materialized to unnerve the deckhands. They gesticulated wildly. Their voices rose in sudden alarm. All talk between them had to do with Motilones. I too, began to wonder if the warriors were all around us in the pitch dark. And I

wondered too, how this crew would react once we were into the Rio de Oro!

'However,' I thought, 'I'd not be with them then. Surely the power boat would show up early in the morning and I'd leave behind this turtle-paced scow. And I'd leave behind, hopefully forever, the suspect Captain and his frightened crew.'

About that time in the early evening we had a few hours of easy-going,—the first since Encontrados. The river had widened and sandbars were scarce. Banks were higher and the channel was straight. We plowed along at a steady rate for four more hours and gained another six or eight miles. Then it happened.

It was close to midnight. I was groggy but still awake. I'd made myself an uncomfortable seat of bags of Barytes and had sat for hours watching the shoreline pass slowly by. My senses were rather numbed by the turn of events. There was nothing,—absolutely nothing,—I could do to extricate myself from this unholy mess. Mentally, I had even become resigned to the idea of a night aboard. Then there'd be another day of the same monotony before I could expect to see the Rio de Oro camp.

I had noticed that the Captain and the deckhands had been in close quiet discourse for most of the past hour. Now, dead ahead was a sandbar. It lay in mid-channel but there was sufficient room to pass it by on either side where the current indicated deep channels. With a sudden sense of an impending disaster, I noted that the sandbar was only twenty or thirty feet ahead of the barge. It appeared to be moving straight toward us.

*The Captain had a firm grip on the wheel but was taking no evasive action!* Indeed, he held the throttle at Full Forward and the wheel at the midships position!

I shouted a warning that went unheard in the shrill grinding of the steel hull on a sloping gravel surface. The barge

ground to a stop. She listed slightly, to starboard. The deck had an upward slope.

We were high and dry!

The Captain shut down the engine,—almost in a routine end-of-the-day procedure. He checked the dials, casually and methodically, entered the hours in the ship's log, and pocketed the ignition key. That done, the man turned on his heel and slung his hammock on a beam above his head! I could hardly believe what I'd seen. With a shock I realized that the Captain had no intention of proceeding deeper into Motilone Territory!

The crew retired. They slung themselves in white sheets suspended by ropes from one of the upper beams of the barge. With the body inside, each package was more or less tear-drop in shape. They hung in a row,—the three of them,—like so many stocks of bananas.

For the Frenchman and myself however, there were no bunks or hammocks. Obviously, we were the least of the Captain's concern. We settled ourselves alongside the bags of Barytes and listened to the heavy rain come down,—thankful for the small mercy of a leaky tarpaulin above us.

God! What a miserable night it was!

Wet,—dripping wet, splashing wet. The canvas sagged with the downpour. Streams of water cascaded down its valleys and poured onto the deck. The deck was a River. In the wee hours the rain ceased and the humidity climbed to an outrageous level. The corrugated floor of Old Flatbottom was unyielding as armour plate. The noises of an awakening jungle were cacophonous. In turn they were sudden, then squawky-shrill, then guttural. The loud snores of the crew,—each in his own cocoon,—mixed discordantly with the forest clamour. For the Frenchman and myself, the unaccustomed din prevented anything more than mere snatches of sleep.

I awoke from a nightmare of flooding that may have rivalled Noah's. I staggered aft to look and listen for the power boat. I felt weak. It had been two full days since my last meal,—in Maracaibo! Little wonder that I was beginning to feel the kind of hunger pangs that Joe and I had experienced in those survival days north of Stony Rapids. I wondered if I was about to undergo another such event. Logic told me that if I stayed with this Captain aboard this 'drydocked' vessel much longer, another such starvation-event would undoubtedly take place. I would either starve or go out of my mind,—and I wasn't sure which would come first.

A faint light suffused the eastern horizon. I checked my watch and found it was just five o'clock. In a corner of the afterdeck, the Campesino lay asleep beside his dugout canoe. As I gazed at his prostrate form, a flash of inspiration hit me. I considered the new idea for only a minute before I was sure it was the answer to my predicament.

*The Old Man with his dugout canoe was the answer to my transportation problem!* I wondered why I hadn't thought of that alternative yesterday? I would have been at the wellsite ten hours ago,—maybe. At least I'd have avoided a lot of mental and physical duress.

I shook the Old Man. In a few minutes he appeared sufficiently awake to take in the plan I had for him. With some difficulty, I explained that I wanted him to take me, in his dugout canoe, about thirty miles further up the Rio de Oro. I told him there was a camp there, and that a well was being drilled at the site. I added that the Frenchman was to come with me.

Negotiations were tedious and confused. I repeated phrases over and over. He apparently had as much problem understanding my Spanish as I did his. He mentioned some deal he'd made with the Captain, and in the same breath he

talked about the Motilones. I'd understood only half of what he was going on about and I finally lost patience.

Our language problem evaporated rather suddenly however, when I laid out before him a 100-Bolivar note,—worth about thirty dollars. It took the Campesino no more than fifteen seconds to decide. He reached for the note, folded it carefully and stuck it inside his colourful Poncho. I helped him put the dugout into the water. The Old Man took his place in the small seat close to the engine.

Hearing a voice behind me, I turned and stared into the oily bearded face of the Captain. He stood there, in the grey dawn,—stark naked. All two-hundred pounds of his short round hairy body proclaimed a rising temper.

"QUE PASA? QUE PASA, VIEJO?" "What's going on? What's happening, Old Man?"

His fat arms flailed the morning air. He leaned far out over the barge rail and shouted down into the Campesino's face, only feet from his own. The Old Man sat silent in his canoe and merely stared back at the furious Captain.

Turning on me, the naked apparition waved a grubby finger in my face and spewed out a torrent of Spanish. I caught enough of it to gather that he 'had the Old Man under contract.' Further, he accused me of stealing the dugout and the Campesino's services. I made only one attempt to interrupt his tirade but soon saw that any explanation would be pointless. I left him ranting where he stood and went forward to rouse the Frenchman.

With my hands and arms waving frantically, I indicated that he and I were leaving.

"In the bateau," I said.

I repeated the phrase three or four times,—thankful that the French word for boat had come to my mind when I needed it most. The young European looked at me blankly,—

uncomprehending. He stared at the Campesino, then at the naked Captain, then at the dugout canoe. A slight shrug of his shoulders convinced me that he thought the scene before him was some unreal nightmare.

"INTO THE BATEAU!—NOW!" I yelled the command.

Something in my tone got through to the Frenchman. Even though still dazed with sleep he was suddenly all action. In less than a minute he had loaded his instruments and taken a place near the centre of the narrow craft. To this day I believe he thought the barge was on fire.

After numerous pulls on the cord, the old man started the little engine. Eventually the hollow putt-putt sound remained steady and we pushed off from the barge without further ceremony. The squat figure of the Captain raced back and forth along the railing, and all the while his raucous voice shouted insults at the Campesino,—and, no doubt, at me. I did not look back. I'd had enough of Old Flatbottom and its unsavoury Captain. Gradually, as we rounded a few bends of the twisting river, the shouts receded. The Frenchman, I noted, was white as a sheet. His death-grip on the gunnels suggested that he'd never been in a canoe before.

The Old Man sat hunched over his engine. He kept his steely eye fixed on the sandbars and the bends in the channel as he coaxed the One-Lunger to its greatest speed. I estimated it to be somewhere between one and two knots. Suddenly, a sense of excitement gripped me,—we were underway! A few hours and we'd be at the Rio de Oro Camp.

I had taken the position in the bow, accustomed as I was to this 'command post.' In the Pakki-Pakki, I found a short poorly-made paddle,—more like a board with a narrow handle. This I commandeered. For the first half-hour, as we worked our way around the sandbars, I quite enjoyed the feeling of

once again canoeing along a river. However, the sensation was short-lived.

In this part of the river we found it necessary to stop frequently to push off gravel beds. Our speed was painfully slow. Once, the Old Man failed to detect a floating log in time and the encounter came close to spilling us into the Catatumbo. The dugout was extremely tippy and sensitive to the slightest body shift. Also, our combined weight reduced the freeboard to about six inches.

I was prepared for almost any emergency!

The Old Man never spoke. He sat above the noisy engine for the next few hours, coaxing, mumbling, priming, re-starting, and adding a cupful of fuel at intervals. When it conked out from heat prostration, he fussed with its various parts and pulled periodically on the starting cord. Mostly, he squatted beneath his Poncho, squinting ahead at the river,—as if he wasn't sure it was there. When I looked his way, or tried to converse with him in Spanish, he would smile and nod. Seldom did he reply, and then his conversation would be one or two words only. Whenever we stopped for any reason,—a sandbar, or the need to cool the engine,—I tried to talk to the Campesino. Little by little he seemed to accept me,—he appeared more at ease. Gradually his sentences lengthened. Although his dialect was most difficult for me to understand, I began to decipher some of his lingo.

I thought I noted a new glint in the Old Man's eye. He smiled more openly. He appeared to be enjoying the river cruise.

'And why shouldn't he?' I thought. 'He had been heading up-river when he met the barge. Then, for some reason, the wily Captain had actually paid him to come aboard. The barge would carry him almost to his destination. And now I had chartered his craft to take two of us up the Rio de Oro,—as one might charter a boat on the busy rivers of Europe. I'd

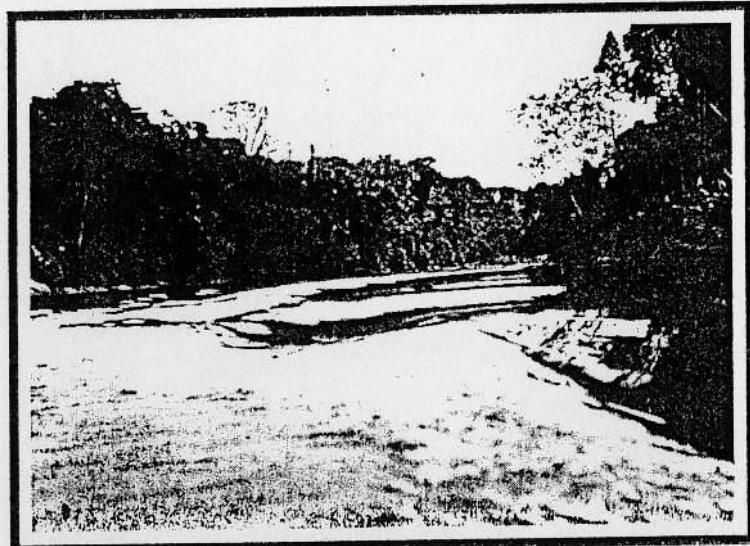
paid him a hefty fee. As if these strokes of luck were not enough, he owned the boat, such as it was, and this made him the Captain! Indeed, he had every reason to enjoy the cruise. No wonder he smiled.'

I felt there was something rather mysterious about the Campesino. Where he was from? Why was he here on the Catatumbo? It is rare that a peasant-type from the mountains wanders far from his native village. And surely he knew of the dangers along the Rio de Oro,—or did he? I wondered about the Captain's comment that the old man had a brother at El Pilar. On the other hand, where was the old fellow bound?

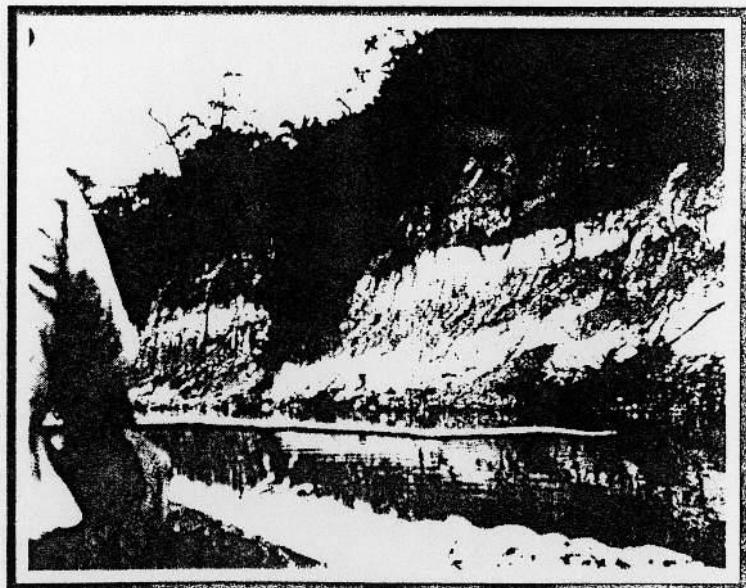
As we made our slow way along a straight stretch of river, I looked around at the Campesino and studied him more

intently. He was watching the shoreline and did not realize I was observing him. In the morning sun his face looked younger. His features were thin and angular. His bronzed skin shone in the sun's rays. The tattered straw hat, now at a slant, gave the Old Man a rakish flair. He had the high cheekbones of the Spanish race. His eyes were clear,—deep brown and somewhat slanted. His tendency to squint gave him a look of deep concentration.

As I studied him, he reached inside the folds of his poncho and recovered the 100-Bolivar note I had paid him on the barge. I thought to myself, 'probably the most money the old man has ever had at one time.' He inspected the note in some detail, then folded it carefully and tucked it back into his



*The narrow Rio de Oro joins the Catatumbo.*



*A sandstone cliff from where Motilones shoot their poison arrows.*

robe. A slight smile played on his strong features. I had to admit, I was beginning to like the Old Guy.

We had many delays. The current held us back. Debris that littered sandbars often prevented easy passage around shallow spots in the river. I came to expect motor trouble every few miles. When the valiant little engine did sputter to a stop, the dugout drifted back down the river. Then we'd quickly lose our hard-won gains. Often, drifting out of control in the current, the craft would hit the shore. There, we'd offload and kin ~~the~~ while our quiet Captain fussed with the motor.

On one occasion we smashed hard into a steep part of the bank where off-loading was impossible. I managed to grab an over-hanging limb of a tree and halt our downstream rush. There we sat for a half-hour. The Frenchman and I took turns clinging to the branch. The old man fiddled with the hot engine and continually pulled on the starting cord. Meanwhile, the current thrust broadside against the dugout, threatening to sweep us further downstream.

During that half hour my single thought was: 'How in hell had I got myself into such a situation?'

The river had narrowed considerably in the past few hours and we were now traversing the head waters of the Catatumbo. We were not yet into the Rio de Oro River. However, I began to feel some concern that the noise of the motor might be heard by Motilones if they were hunting in the area. Thick jungle brush growing along the banks afforded ideal ambush. Our pace was exceedingly slow.

By noon, under a blistering-hot sky, we saw the first of the sandstone cliffs about which I'd heard so many horror-stories. These first outcrops were only ten or fifteen feet in height but they could provide admirable vantage points from which to fire arrows down on anyone traversing the river. The

Motilones would have an unobstructed view of an approaching vessel. They could fire their arrows without exposing themselves for more than a few seconds at a time. A rifle shot, fired from a boat, at a steep upward angle would be quite ineffective against such archers.

The only weapon aboard the dugout was a rusty but sharp Machete that the Campesino kept close beside him. It would be a useless weapon indeed, if we were attacked from above. I wondered now, how I could have embarked on this expedition without so much as a revolver? My mind played at various scenarios as we putt-putted along, and I reviewed what my reactions should be in case of an attack.

There were few, if any, advantages on our side. I glanced again at the Frenchman, and tried to determine what his role would be in a skirmish. He met my gaze and grinned widely. I looked at Captain Poncho, squinting ahead, the tremor of a smile still playing on his Conquistadorian features. Both men were at ease and appeared unconcerned at the cliffs now rising on both sides of the river. I thought it as well that they did not know the threat these embankments posed.

All was quiet along the river. We were making about a mile or two an hour. The Old Man stopped more frequently to allow the struggling engine to cool down. We continued to get into and out of the dugout, to push and wade and carry over sandbars, and to clear debris for a passage. As the time passed without incident, my worries dissipated. I concluded that my imagination had been working overtime,—I'd listened to too many tales of the Motilones. After all, there were not many of them in this wide country. Any hunting party,—even in this part of the Rio de Oro,—could be miles from the river and out of earshot of the engine noise. I began to relax.

We were well into the Rio de Oro system now and were progressing,—however slowly. Since leaving the barge, we'd

been underway about ten hours. Allowing for delays we'd probably travelled a net seven hours. Assuming a two-knot speed, we may have covered fifteen miles. It wasn't much, but it was better than we'd done on the barge. I began to feel that we might even get to the wellsite,—if fuel and motor held out for one more day.

By late afternoon, the sweltering heat and mugginess,—as well as the lack of food,—had sapped our physical resources. The Frenchman and I were both quite useless in helping the old man with the dugout. Almost prostrate, we were drained of energy. Sweat poured from our bodies. We drank gallons of river water. A lassitude settled over me and for a while I didn't really care what happened next. At this low point in the day, the motor died in a fit of coughing. Black smoke poured from the exhaust and I felt sure it had sounded it's death-knell.

From mid-river the dugout drifted helplessly in the current. We moved downstream at a fair clip. I flailed the paddle desperately, and learned that a Pakki-Pakki has a mind of it's own: it follows no laws of canoeing. We drifted aimlessly for a few hundred yards and gradually coaxed the craft toward shore. The dugout pounded against a vertical cliff barren of shrubs along it's top surface. The Old Man tied a short line around a jutting piece of the rock cliff. Once again we sat in the dugout,—trapped,—unable to 'go ashore.'

At least we were in shade. A cool breeze drifted down the canyon, and for this I was thankful. I handed the paddle to the Frenchman who valiantly fended us off the sandstone cliff. The Campesino, as usual, crouched patiently over his smoking engine. This time however, I noticed he shook his head slowly from side to side as he fanned the smouldering motor with his battered straw hat.

I sat in the bow, holding back an impulse to shout. I felt like venting my frustration and anger on anyone or anything.

The Campesino would make a prime target for having such an untrustworthy vessel. But, as I hesitated, I realized that this situation was not his fault. I kept control of my impulses long enough to begin to think rationally.

Something had to be resolved,—and soon. We now had no motor,—that was certain. How many hours of light remained? How far to the wellsite? Were there Motilone hunting parties in the vicinity? What about food? My mind was in a whirl and the questions were coming thick and fast. Questions but no answers.

As I pondered, I began to see what our limited choices were, and what a real fix we were in. Unless we wanted to swim for it we were unable to get to shore. The motor was dead,—dead and gone. The paddle was useless. We were ravenous. The day was waning. We had no communication between the three us in any of our three mother-tongues. I thought of the saying: 'Up Sheep Creek Without a Paddle,' but had never believed I'd come this close to the real thing. At the moment we were truly 'sitting ducks' for the Motilones,—they could pick us off one at a time or all at once. They could get it over with quickly or prolong the sport,—it was their choice.

I cudgelled what brain-power I had left and searched for some reasonable alternative. Mentally I went through the list of options. We could shape a couple more paddles and push on through the night. Risky Business. We could abandon the dugout and walk the remaining thirty miles to the wellsite. Or,—we could drift back to the barge or even as far as Encontrados. One last alternative: we could do nothing.

It crossed my mind that we'd already made a good start on the 'do nothing' option. As I thought through each of the others, my spirits sagged. Not one of the alternatives was attractive. Each was either dangerous or distasteful or impossible. Walk thirty miles through the Motilone Jungle? Drift back to the barge?

*God Forbid!* Rather, let me die of Curare,—it's quicker and less painful.

Old Poncho was still fiddling with his piping-hot engine. The Frenchman still guarded his survey tools.

"God!" I heard my own voice,—hollow, charged with an emotion that was foreign to my nature.

*"How in Hell did I ever get into this mess? What the Devil am I doing here in this God-forsaken stinking steamy jungle? Why, Dear Lord, am I sitting in a hollowed-out log on a head-hunter's river!?"*

I sensed that both my partners were looking at me. Even though they had not understood a word of my outburst, surprise and consternation showed on their faces. Quiet then descended on our little craft. A minute went by and no-one moved. I realized I felt better for having talked to Someone.

For the next half-hour we clung to the cliff. I watched the Old Man take the engine apart for the tenth time. Piece by piece he laid it out on the bottom of the dugout. He'd shake his head as he inspected each part. Again I felt my patience running down. I kept looking up to the top edge of the cliff, and thinking.

Suddenly, my composure gave out in a spasmodic burst of action. I untied the line that held us to the cliff and kicked the dugout off the rock face. Immediately, we started on a downstream drift. We let her run as she chose. I figured that sooner or later we'd hit a sandbar. I suppose my action had been based mainly on the thought that I'd rather sleep on a gravel bank in mid-river than in the forest or in the dugout.

After a rather wild un-controlled ride for some 500 yards, we ground to a stop on a sandbar. We were all stiff and cramped from hours of sitting in the confining space of the canoe. It was a blessed relief to stand and walk again. In the quiet that now surrounded us, I realized I'd almost given up listening for the power boat from Encontrados. If it had appeared at this mo-

ment I'd welcome the man with open arms. There would be no recriminations for his tardiness!

It was late in the afternoon. The Frenchman and I were moving about restlessly on the point of a sandbar. The Old Man still tinkered with the engine, but I believe he knew it was a lost cause. I was in a dark mood. I was wet, weary and famished and had not yet come to any conclusion as to what our next move should be. One decision though, was probably already made for us: with only a few hours of light left in the day, we'd surely have to sleep on the sandbar.

With this sombre thought in mind, I sat down on the gravel and tried not to think about tomorrow.

## 4 The Anti-Arrow Boat

I sat on the edge of the sandbar for a half-hour. I felt weak from hunger. I tried to concentrate on finding a solution to our problem, but it was no use. My thoughts wandered. In a few hours it would be dark. I was tired, dead tired. I looked at the sand and gravel around me and wondered what kind of a bed it would make.

My disjointed thoughts ended abruptly. A rush of adrenaline had coursed through my body and for a split second I wondered why. Then I heard it again,—a strange sound that had alerted all my senses. I felt my whole body tighten.

My eyes took in the top of the long sandstone cliff. I appraised each bluff along its edge. Nothing moved.

I'd heard something. I had caught a sound that was foreign to my ears. As I listened hard, I saw the Old Man jerk upright from his labours. Shading his hand from the sun's glare, he too, scanned the top of the cliff. We were both frozen in our positions,—straining to hear.

Seconds went by. Again the sound came to us. This time it came from the river,—not from above! The Old Man and I

did not move,—only our eyes searched the cliff and the river and the shoreline.

The breeze picked up and we heard the hollow sound become rhythmic! It had to be *a motor!* A motor! Now it was recognizable. I was on my feet. From pure and sudden excitement I jumped,—and may have run in a small circle. I shouted my elation to my travelling companions.

**"THE POWER BOAT,—FROM ENCONTRADOS! FINALLY, THE POWER BOAT!"**

The Old Man and the Frenchman watched my antics and, not understanding a word I said, probably concluded I'd gone 'round the bend.' When I stopped shouting the good news I heard the motor sound nearer. There was no doubt that it was a motor, but...something was wrong.

The sound was coming from UP-river,—not from the Encontrados direction!

*I calm down. In silence I wait,—and watch the upstream curve of water. The repetitive chug of a small motor grows louder with the passing minutes. We three stand stiffly on the gravel tip of the sandbar,—ears tuned and eyes fixed on the point around which the river disappears. Then, as in a movie thriller, the pointed bow of a small boat comes into view. Seconds later I see its whole length,—about eighteen feet. She carries a low superstructure built on the flat surface of a scow.*

Someone on board hailed us loudly from the hundred yards that separated us on first sighting. I recognized the stentorian voice as belonging to Jack Morris!

On hearing a voice I knew, I ran along the edge of the sandbar to meet the boat at a convenient point on a sloping gravel beach. Jack Morris appeared for a moment on the small deck. He jumped nimbly to shore and advanced toward me with his hand outstretched in greeting. I grasped his big hand and secretly I hoped that Jack wouldn't say what I knew was coming. Knowing Jack however, it was inevitable.

"Dr. Livingstone, I presume!"

Jack threw back his head and burst out with a loud laugh that echoed between the cliffs. He'd loved the opportunity to use that line. It was the type of joke that was Jack's piece of cake.

We shook hands. We were truly glad to see each other. Our words and questions flowed into a meaningless jumble. In my excitement at meeting Jack, I had not noticed the armaments that hung about his tall well-proportioned figure. He carried a revolver on each hip and a double-barrelled shotgun slung under his arm. He was loaded for bear! Again we were both talking at once, then Jack held up his hand to silence me.

"We'll talk later," he said, "First, get your gear and move it into the boat. Get the men into the boat too. And do it fast! The Motilones are hunting in this area. They may have heard the motor. If so, they'll be following us. HURRY!"

I needed no prompting. I saw that the Frenchman and the Campesino were still standing beside the Pakki-Pakki. I ran back to them and somehow got the message across that we were all to go aboard the boat. The three of us picked up the dugout and carried it to where Jack was waving us on.

Meanwhile, Jack and his assistant had turned the boat around and were waiting to help us load the Pakki-Pakki. We tied the dugout to the narrow deck that ran along the starboard side of the scow. Then Jack almost pushed us aboard. The Old Man had come willingly, and now he smiled as he bent low and

weaved through the small doorway at the stern. He probably thought that this latest event was merely a continuing part of his river 'cruise.'

Jack's assistant was a young Dutch Engineer by the name of Frans Nesselar,—Ness for short. He was a Trainee, and the Rio de Oro assignment had been a recent, first promotion for him. He was keen, bright and very proud of his new responsibilities. As soon as we were all inside, Ness slammed shut the heavily-screened narrow door and slid a lock-bolt into place. He took over the helm, shifted the gear lever, throttled up and we were on our way up the Rio de Oro to the wellsite! From the time we'd met Jack on the sandbar, no more than five or six minutes had passed.

Jack moved gear to make room for the three of us. He was about six-foot-three and well built. With five of us in the small cabin it was almost impossible for him to move. However, he wrestled free a good-sized box. My gaze swept the cabin and I realized that the covering along both sides of the boat, and over doors and small windows, was *quarter-inch grid galvanized wire screening!*

'So this,' I thought, 'is an Anti-Arrow boat!'

I'd heard about them being essential for the Rio De Oro, and now I was seeing one from the inside!

Jack pried the top off the box he'd been interested in. We were treated to a sight that is still imprinted on my memory after nearly thirty-five years! The box was full of food. There were sandwiches, a few pies, chunks of cheese, and dozens of apples and oranges. What a soul-satisfying feast it was! The three of us tore into the life-restoring nourishment as if it had been our first food for three days! It was.

I took a second look around the cabin and saw that it was strongly built. Benches were fixed along each side. Two small windows faced forward. One was doubly-screened to protect



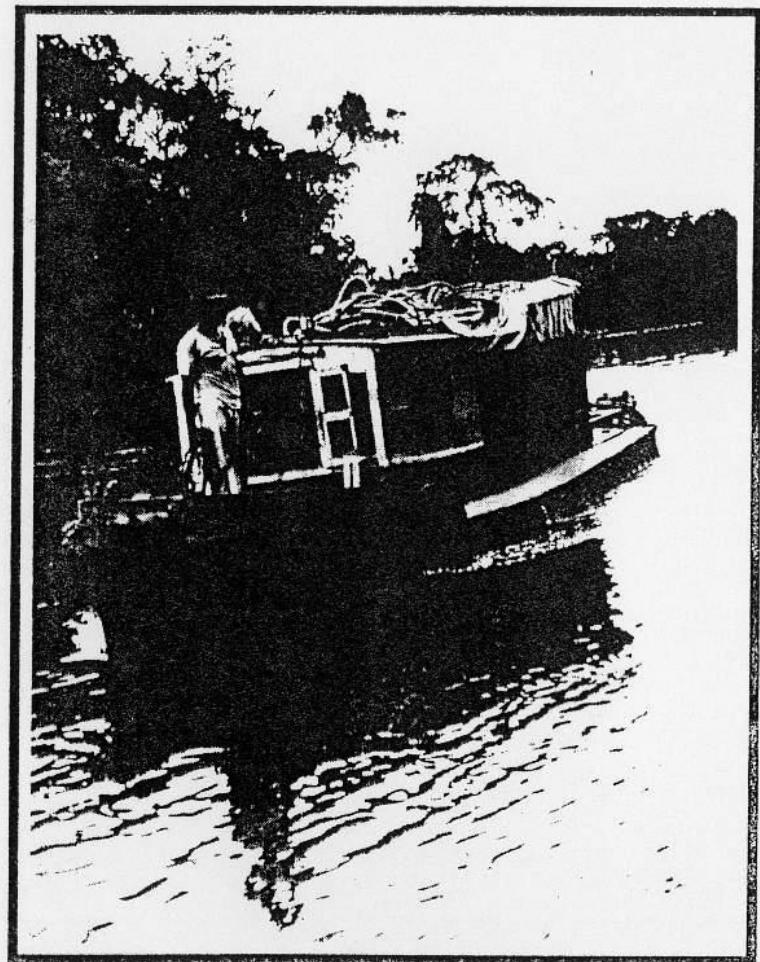
*Jack Morris – wildcat driller.*

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*Jack Morris and Ness,  
—armed to the teeth, they meet me on a sandbar on The Rio de Oro.*



*Anti-Arrow Boat on the Rio de Oro.  
Note the 1/4 inch "rat-wire" screening. (To stop arrows!)*

the helmsman. A third window was high up on the port side. Boat gear was everywhere,—towing cables, lines, grapple hooks, tools, a box of spare parts, a few tins of engine oil. On a small side shelf lay an open carton of ammunition: shotgun shells and a few hundred rounds of revolver bullets.

The food was a godsend. It brought an even wider grin to the Frenchman's face,—now black with about a week's growth of curly beard. The Campesino was obviously enjoying the excitement and diversion. He'd put away several sandwiches and had started to work his way slowly around an apple as though it was the Original,—from Eden!

Jack's voice,—loud and rather nasal.

"We've got about twenty miles of river ahead of us to get to the wellsite. It'll take four hours or more against the current. In the next five miles we'll be going through the highest cliffs on the Rio de Oro. If there's any place that we might be attacked,—it's there. That's one of the Motilone's favourite ambush spots."

Jack paused for effect. He was an inveterate actor. Never did he let an opportunity go by where he could gain a dramatic impact. He loved an audience. He was a superior story-teller. And, when a story needed it, he could be an accomplished liar. I liked Jack. I'd known him for eight years and had enjoyed his tales and theatrics at a number of remote wildcat drilling operations. He loved the isolated life of a wildcat driller. He was good at hacking out a camp in the most God-awful places that an oil company could select in which to drill for oil.

Jack was The Boss at these drilling camps,—as he was at the Rio de Oro wellsite. He made all the important decisions, his word was law, and Jack's ego grew fat on such a diet. He had drilled wells in the States and in Mexico, and for the past ten years, in Venezuela. He still spoke a poor Spanish however, but carried it off with his usual flair by mixing it generously

with English and topping it off with a Jewish accent. Jack had the respect of the Venezuelan drillers and labourers and they worked willingly for him.

Jack continued: "If we're attacked, stay inside and away from the wire screen. The arrows are tipped with Curare and are deadly poison. Some arrows may come part-way through the screen but most will be stopped."

Jack had our full attention and was enjoying his central role. He no doubt assumed that we all were soaking up his every word. He didn't know that the Frenchman could not understand a word he said. Neither did the Old Man understand Jack's words,—but he listened and looked intent when Jack spoke. He nodded and smiled as if he was following every detail of the instruction.

Both the Old Man and the Frenchman had settled back as if they were on some sightseeing cruise aboard a liner. The Campesino seemed to be coming out of his shell a little. That wall around him that had been so apparent during our time on the barge was no longer apparent. He talked once in a while, and, difficult as it was for me to comprehend all of his Spanish dialect, I caught enough to get the drift of his meaning. Hand motions helped to convey a degree of understanding between us.

The Old Man had removed his ragged straw hat shortly after we'd come aboard. A shock of curly silver-grey hair tumbled over his forehead. I looked at him again and thought I saw a resemblance to the blood-line of the Spanish Conquistadores. His ancestry shone through his bronzed skin: the aquiline nose, the high cheek bones, the chiselled features. Maybe, I thought, he had come from the Spanish Explorers of old. Then, some four centuries earlier, Spain had sent her galleons forth to plunder and pirate and explore the Western world. I imagined that aboard those vessels there were Spanish gentry of similar cast to the Old Campesino.

Jack Morris's loud voice penetrated my straying thoughts. "Another point," he said, "if we're attacked, and there's any shooting to be done, I'll do it!"

Ness handled the helm expertly and guided the Anti-Arrow boat through the winding shallows of the Rio de Oro. The boat had a draft of only a foot and seemed to skim over sandy areas that had only inches of water depth. On one occasion the vessel grounded on a gravel bed. Jack gave me a nod when I suggested we push it off. I unlocked the stern door and motioned to the Frenchman to help me. Together, we rocked the craft and then, with a hearty shove, we were off again in less than a minute.

We entered a stretch of the river where the sandstone cliffs rose vertically from the water for about thirty feet. Along the top of the cliff vegetation was sparse. The canyon-type channel continued as far ahead as we could see, a distance of three-hundred yards or so, to a rather sharp bend. The boat moved through the mid-channel of the river at a slow but steady rate.

Jack stood close beside Ness. Both men were silent and alert. They spoke only when one noted something significant about the current or the channel, or a hidden sandbar. Ness was giving all of his attention to boat-handling. When the water was of fair depth he coaxed the engine to its best performance. When manoeuvring around shallows, he handled the throttle and the helm with masterful authority.

I noticed that as we traversed the canyon, the Old Campesino never once took his eyes from the upper edge of the cliffs. He watched intently, scanning every shrub, every crevice. He would search first along one side of the river, then do the same for the other side.

The river widened somewhat, and in the reduced current had deposited a sandbar that spread across nearly a third of the river's width. Ness selected the right-hand channel where current ripples indicated the most favourable water depth. We progressed through part of this narrow passageway and were about to leave the sandbar behind when the dreaded sound of the hull scraping bottom was heard once again.

The Frenchman moved toward me as if he was expected to push off for the second time. I was in the act of unbolting the door, as I had done at the earlier grounding.

Suddenly, the Campesino leaped toward me. He grabbed me by the arm and, with surprising strength, pulled me off to one side of the doorway!

He then threw himself heavily against the partly-opened door, slamming it shut!

## 5 The Attack

I reacted violently to the sudden and unexpected man-handling by the Campesino. I twisted free of his iron grip on my wrist. The Old Man's face was six inches from my own and he was shouting. My first thought was that he'd gone mad but in that split second I heard the alarm in his voice. His words came through to me,—loud and clear.

"CUIDADO! CUIDADO! LOS MOTILONES!"

The Campesino continued his shout of warning: "Look Out! Take Care! The Motilones!" He held his position against the door and pointed to the topmost edge of the cliff on the starboard side of the boat. Then:

ZINGG,—THWACK! WHINGGG. CRACKK!

A shower of arrows hit the wire screening!

Jack's voice,—loud and commanding: "DOWN! DOWN!  
Get to the centre of the boat! STAY LOW!"

A few arrows had penetrated two or three inches through the wire. Their shafts dangled downward on the outside of the wire netting.

WHINNGGG.ZINGGG.TIIWACK!

A salvo of arrows came at us from the top edge of the cliff where the Old Man had first spotted the Motilone warriors. Inside, the three of us, tight-packed in the centre of the cabin, instinctively dodged at the sound of arrows striking the top and side of the boat. We crouched low,—huddled together. Once, as I looked up, I caught a glimpse of a few arrows in flight as they sped toward us.

Ness was steady on the helm. He glanced neither right nor left. The sound of scraping bottom we'd heard a few moments earlier had been a light touch and no more. I sensed, more than observed that the sandbar was behind us. I could feel the thrust of the propeller and the movement of the boat as it began to make headway in deeper water.

Jack opened a small sliding-panel on a window about three feet to the left of the helm. With a pistol in each hand, he thrust them through this opening and aimed at the top edge of the cliff. He emptied the six shots in rapid succession from one pistol and then did the same with the second revolver.

More arrows hit the Anti-Arrow boat. Most of this volley struck on the stern doorway. This was due to the boat being at a different angle to the archers, as Ness had moved the craft part way around the shallow point of the sandbar. Several arrows missed the boat completely,—falling into the river where they floated slowly downstream.

Jack emptied another pistol,—whooping at the top of his voice as he did so,—like a cowboy in a third-rate Western movie. The din inside the cabin was jarring. The echo of the shots pealed through the sandstone corridor,—disappearing down the Rio de Oro.

I'd been concentrating my gaze along the cliff where the Old Man had first seen the Motilones. Finally I caught a brief sight of the savage warriors. Three short, squat, naked brown bodies had charged to the very edge of the cliff, fired one or

two arrows each and were gone. They had been exposed for no more a few seconds! Jack too, had seen the three savages. He shoved the double-barrelled shotgun through the small opening and fired two shells. That blast resounded in the boat and steep canyon walls like all the artillery that had ever been used in World War Two. Like thunder, the echoes of the twin blasts reverberated back and forth for a half-minute.

Thoughts careened through my head: 'Was this really happening? How, in today's world, could we be under attack by a group of hostile Indians? They were intent on seeing every one of us dead,—floating face-down in the Rio de Oro with poisoned arrows protruding from our backs! And what if the boat hits a sandbar now? For certain we'd be sitting ducks if we tried to push off! If we did, they'd nail us to the sandbar, one by one, and leave us there for the vultures.'

*Hold her steady, Ness! Hold her steady. Give her throttle,—but for God's sake stay in the channel!*'

It was as close to a fervent prayer as I could come,—and I'll never know if I said the words aloud or to myself. I heard a few more arrows crash into the rat-wire screen on the rear doorway, but in my cramped position I did not look around. The acrid smell of gunpowder was heavy in the cabin.

The Frenchman was crouched in the same spot on the floor where I'd pulled him down and away from the side screen. The attack must have startled him,—particularly as he had not understood any of Jack's words of caution. Indeed, he may not have known anything of the Motilones or the threat they posed. His face was ashen and his large dark eyes were wide with alarm.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Nous sommes faites tues." He repeated the words over and over. "My God! My God! We will be killed!"

When the Old Campesino had yanked me away from the rear doorway, just before the first salvo of arrows had hit the boat, he had moved with a surprising agility. His movements were cat-like, smooth and quick. His action then had been so timely that I might have thought he'd been expecting the attack. In the brief lull that followed the shotgun blast, my thoughts continued to play on the bizarre scene that had taken place.

*'In another second I would have been out the door and off the boat. The Frenchman would have been beside me. We'd have been standing in a foot of water pushing on the starboard side of the boat,—the side that received the first of the arrows. The curare-dipped arrows would surely have found us easy marks! Then, most likely, when the others braved the open river to help us back aboard, the Motilones would have picked them off too.'*

'Chilling thoughts,—but probably valid,' I told myself. Another thought lingered in my mind: the Campesino had no doubt saved my life. Maybe he'd saved all our lives!

I looked at the Old Man. He still peered up at the leading edge of the cliff and seldom took his eyes from it during the attack. He was poised,—like a spring,—and appeared ready to aid Ness or Jack.

Indeed it was the Campesino who handed Jack twelve bullets with which to reload his revolvers again. Now, he waited for a signal from Jack and then passed him a few shotgun shells. And it was the Old Man who pulled the arrows through the screen. Grasping the curare-tipped foot-long barbed shafts carefully but firmly in his hands, he coaxed each one through the rat-wire and into the cabin. When the boat regained speed

and no more arrows fell around us. The Campesino returned to his bench and began to work on a second apple.

Ness slowed the boat almost to a standstill as he manoeuvred around a gravel spit that protruded from a sandbar.

Jack yelled, "MORE POWER, NESS! MORE POWER! DON'T SLACK UP NOW!"

Ness shouted in reply but at that moment two more rounds rang out from the shotgun and Ness's words were drowned in the thunderous roar. The smell of cordite was strong. A blue smoke drifted about us. A few minutes passed and no more arrows came our way. Jack had reloaded the shotgun and was waiting. He watched and waited, ready for any sign of activity from the Motilones. The boat picked up speed again and we were moving steadily in mid-channel, away from the high barren cliffs. Ahead, as far as I could see to a bend in the river, the sandstone cliffs were of less height.

"Good," I thought. "Maybe we're running out of the canyon-type of channel. If the water stays deep and we can make a few more miles we'll leave those Devils behind."

I wondered, was it the noise of the firearms that put an end to the attack? Or, were the Warriors out of arrows? I thought it was likely that they were now racing up-river to stage another skirmish at some favoured spot. And I wondered too, were other Motilone hunting parties lying in wait ahead?

During the attack Ness had never looked around. Once free of the slight grounding, he'd held the boat's speed steady and had maintained a course dead-centre in the narrow channel. Even when arrows were pinging onto the screen a foot or so from his head, he hadn't so much as flinched!

Jack still stood at the gun-port. The shotgun was re-loaded and at the ready. He'd given no commands during the fight but was alert to all that had taken place. He'd made sure

we stayed low in the centre of the cabin, away from the screen. I'd been impressed with Jack's speed with the pistols. He fired rapidly, he handled the shotgun with a sure and steady hand. I'd observed too that he thrust his smoking pistols back into their holsters with a casual though solid movement. His movements were similar to those I'd seen in many a cowboy movie.

Knowing Jack's strong show-off tendencies, I wondered if he had rehearsed for this drama,—or if he had staged the encounter! But no,—the attack had been real enough! Jack did what he had to do, efficiently. To have added a touch of theatrics,—however unconsciously,—was part of the man's nature. Provided the adventure had a happy ending and we made it to the wellsite, Jack would have a wondrous story to tell. It was like food and drink to Jack, and I felt sure his audiences in the future would hear it in many versions. Maybe his opening line would be the Dr. Livingstone bit.

We carried on for the next three hours. Jack kept watch at the small window by the helm wherever likely ambush spots occurred along the banks of the river. We stayed behind the anti-arrow screen and both doors were kept closed and locked. Jack informed us that the Motilones had killed two men on this very boat in the past year.

"Those Brown Devils," he said, "love to pick a person off by shooting their arrows through an opening!"

We twisted and turned through narrow channels and things had settled down after the attack. The Old Man and I inspected the twenty-three arrows that he had pulled through the rat-wire. The shafts were three to four feet long and made of a hard light-weight wood,—probably dried young palm shoots. Most arrowheads were a foot in length, notched and sharply pointed. They were fashioned from the dense inner bark of the Black Palm. The thread that bound the arrowhead to the shaft was made of copra or coconut fibres. Only three of

the arrows had small metal points affixed to the lance-like arrowhead.

We were nearing the wellsite and it was quiet in the cabin. I thought it a good opportunity to get a few answers as to what had, and had not, taken place over the past two or three days.

"Jack," I said, "what happened to that power boat that was to have met me at Encontrados?"

"Don't know,—yet," Jack replied. "Maracaibo didn't know until late yesterday afternoon that you hadn't arrived. My radio had been out from about the time I talked to you in your office,—when I told you about the possibility of a blowout."

Jack was cleaning the revolvers while we talked.

"I worked with that damned radio for hours and finally had our electrician take it apart. It wasn't till yesterday he had it fixed. I got on to Maracaibo immediately. They told me that you'd left and expected to arrive here in about fifteen hours,—in a small speed boat. They advised me that a barge of Barytes was on its way from Encontrados."

Jack looked up from his polishing.

"Y'know, you're a helluva long time overdue! I've been wondering what you were doing,—besides cruisin' along a couple of rivers. Were you fishin' or campin' or what? My guess is that you shacked up with some gal in Encontrados for a day or so."

Jack leaned back and gave out with one of his loud boisterous laughs that was a Jack Morris trademark. The Frenchman and the Old Man had been dozing and Jack's sudden burst of laughter shocked them into upright positions on the small benches. They probably thought it was a second attack. Ness was still handling the helm. Jack quieted down after his little joke, and his voice went on in a rather steady tone as he reconstructed some of the blanks of the past forty-eight hours.



*Motilone arrowheads. These measure about a foot in length. When fired at us during the attack on the Rio de Oro, each arrowhead was attached to a three-foot shaft. The shafts have since been lost.*

"Maracaibo were concerned that you hadn't shown up and they decided to send a couple of men to look for you. The two fellows were familiar with the Catatumbo. One of the men had been up the Rio de Oro when we set up the camp a few months ago. Anyway, they got away about four o'clock yesterday in a fast small boat that was equipped with a short-wave radio. The radio was good enough to reach the Casigua oilfield some fifty miles south of us. Casigua was to relay any messages back to Maracaibo."

Jack was filling in some of the pieces of the puzzle and I waited for him to add the next one.

"Apparently the two men got to Encontrados about midnight or so and couldn't find out a thing,—not even about the barge of Barytes that must have left from there. In the dark they continued up the Catatumbo,—looking for you. They had a slow and difficult trip and finally came across the grounded barge only thirty miles from Encontrados."

I was eager to hear the rest of the story to see how it all fitted together,—or if it would.

Jack went on: "The men were told that you'd left in a Pakki-Pakki, so they followed in hot pursuit. They left the Barge about mid-morning, I believe. Less than an hour later they hit a deadhead at full speed. Twisted the propeller and bent the shaft. They must have been close behind you at that point."

"Well Jack," I said, "that seems par for the course. Everything else went wrong on this trip,—I'd hardly expect their rescue-mission to go smoothly."

"Yeah," Jack replied, "nothing like a bent prop to stop you dead in the water!" Jack seemed to see something humorous in his reply and once again his roar of laughter brought the Old Man and the Frenchman to their feet. Jack was his own best audience.

"Anyway," Jack continued, "the men radioed Casigua for help and spare parts. That was the last I heard. I received that message this morning,—shortly before Ness and I left camp in the Arrow Boat to try to find you."

'Well,' I thought, 'that's part of the story. At least someone was concerned about my safety.' "Jack," I said, "why didn't you start looking for me yesterday instead of this morning?"

"Couldn't. Had to have an Anti-Arrow boat." Jack checked the shotgun and played the searchlight on the dense jungle-cover along the banks of the river. "I've got two Arrow boats. This one was down with an engine problem and the other was up river where we're doing some work."

A movement on the bank had caught Jack's eye. He swung the shotgun into position and was about to fire when a wild boar grunted in fright and scrabbled up the muddy slope only a few feet from us.

"Imagine!" Jack said, picking up the subject again as if he'd seen wild boars every day of his life. "I've got two Arrow boats, and when I needed one, like yesterday,—I didn't have one. Anyway, the mechanics worked all night on this engine and finally got it re-installed and running about daylight today."

Jack took a breath and then added a new angle to the story: "This morning, Maracaibo were ready to despatch a plane to search for you, but I told them to hold off. After all, what could a plane do except advise your location if they had spotted you on the river? Besides, I felt that a plane would tip off any Motilones that might be hunting nearby and they'd begin to search the river for you. I figured you'd keep moving, seeing as how you had a Pakki-Pakki. Those dugouts just skim along and don't seem to get hung up. Running into an ambush would be your only problem."

It struck me that Jack had taken a calculated risk in calling off the plane search. In retrospect however, knowing a

little more about the Motilones and their ways, it now seemed right. He was still talking,—developing his theory that the Hunters that attacked us had heard the motor of the Anti-Arrow boat. Then, Jack theorized, they located the boat and followed it along the Rio de Oro. He felt they could move faster than the boat could navigate the tortuous river channels.

"I believe," he said, "that those Brown Devils had us in their sights for miles and were heading for their favourite place to launch their attack."

I told Jack my side of the story. I covered our late arrival into Encontrados and the debacle there due to the speed boat not showing up. I described the miserable twenty-four hours aboard the barge and the Captain's intentional grounding. I told him of the trip by Pakki-Pakki, and mentioned the willing help the Old Man had given me. I indicated my liking for the old fellow,—for his quiet steadiness and his smiling easy ways. There wasn't much to say about the Frenchman except that he was here, and no doubt anxious to run a few surveys in the well,—if it hadn't blown out by now!

Jack had given me a few answers. I sat quietly for a while reflecting on the bizarre set of circumstances that had taken place since leaving Maracaibo. Our well-laid plans had started to fall apart even in their first phase. From Encontrados on, nothing had worked as planned.

The boat rounded a sharp bend in the river. Jack pointed ahead and shouted.

"There's the camp! Sure feels good to be home!"

His laughter broke out loud and long. Again it reverberated in the small cabin,—as his shotgun blasts had done a few hours earlier.

## 6 *Jack Morris, Jungle-camp Boss*

It was near ten o'clock when we rounded the last bend of the Rio de Oro and saw the dim yellow lights of the camp a few hundred yards ahead. The trip from the sandbar, where Jack and Ness had found us in the Nick of Time, had taken over four hours. Ness had been on the helm all that time except one or two brief spells when Jack took over. Ness had done a masterful job.

A pale light from a Quarter Moon cast an eerie glow on the slanted roofs of a few buildings along the bank of the river. About 200 yards further along the Rio, a vertical string of lights identified the location of the well that had recently been the cause of so much concern. Indeed, it had disrupted the lives of several people and caused a few of us some degree of duress. I had a feeling there'd be more to come before things were back to normal.

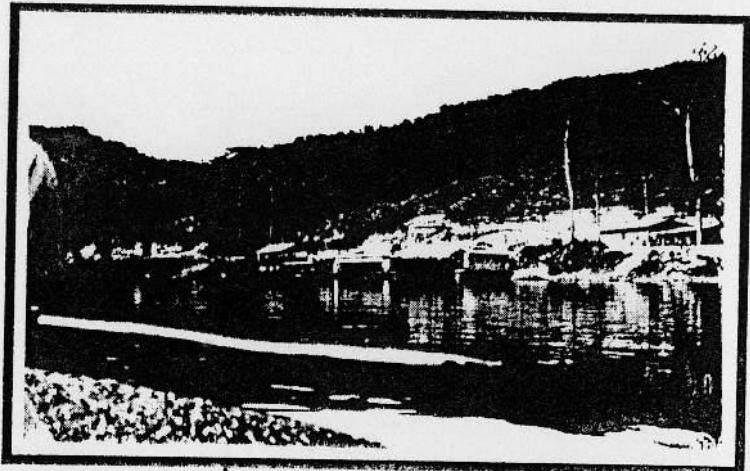
With the searchlight, Jack sent a few flashing signals toward a large two-storey houseboat that dominated the small

cluster of buildings. Someone inside responded. A floodlight was switched on that illuminated a dock. I could see that the dock was part of the floating base for the houseboat. Three or four men waited on the platform. Ness brought the Anti-Arrow boat alongside and in seconds we were securely tied.

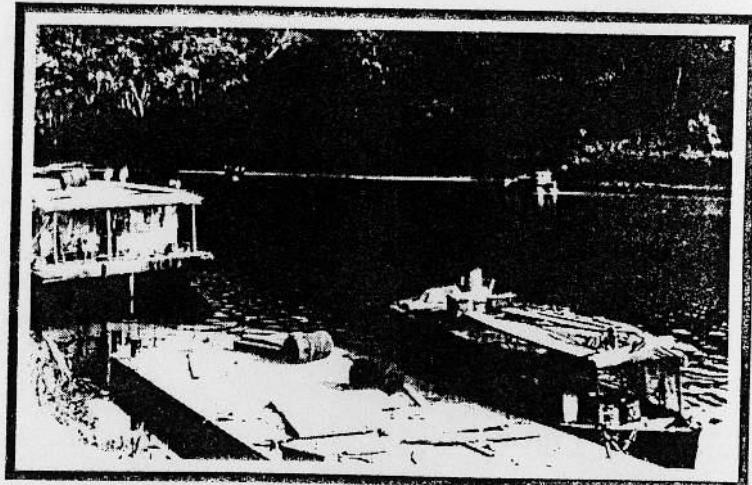
Jack was first out and was surrounded by his men. They were obviously glad to see him. Questions and talk and laughter flowed freely between them until, one by one, the rest of us emerged from the little boat. Jack more or less introduced us, but had trouble naming the Frenchman and the Old Man. He and Ness then led us in to the houseboat and steered us through a couple of rooms filled with supplies of food. We ended up in a large dining hall. Two long tables, gleaming with white oilcloth, were set with places ready for the next meal. Jack gave a brief order that was meant to alert the cook about the number of late meals to prepare.

"This houseboat functions as an office, kitchen and messhall," he was saying. Jack's voice had taken on a tone that he might have used if he was acting as a Tour Guide at the Vatican. "I have my office here and this is where I sleep. There are three other buildings. The one built of poles and thatch is used as sleeping quarters for drilling and labour crews. That's where some of you will bed down for tonight. Tomorrow I'll see what other arrangements we can make."

Before we arrived at the camp, I had informed Jack that the Frenchman and The Campesino could not understand English, and that they surely wouldn't understand his Spanish. He selected a Venezuelan who knew some English, and made him the interpreter. The man took his assignment seriously and relayed every one of Jack's comments and instructions to his new charges. It wasn't long before he and the Campesino were chatting between themselves. The Frenchman listened in to their talk but it was obvious that he got little from it.



*The Camp on the Rio de Oro.  
The cleared area protects against surprise attacks by Motilones.*



*An Anti-Arrow Boat, on right. Note dredging of shallows in river.*

After being shown our quarters, we took time to clean up. I found it a refreshing experience after roughing it the last few days. Jack hustled us all back to the messhall where a full-course meal was laid out. Everyone was famished. For the Campesino, the Frenchman and myself, it was the first meal we'd had for nearly seventy-two hours! I noticed that the Old Man tucked away two thick steaks with no trouble at all.

It had been a long frustrating river trip. The lack of food, the tension-packed day, and the attack we'd experienced on the Rio de Oro, had left me feeling burned out. Fatigued, bone-weary and all but asleep on my feet, I dragged myself to a bed. I fell on it and slept through the night as if drugged.

The next morning I awoke to sounds of an operating drilling rig in the distance. They were familiar sounds,—as I had spent many days and nights of my life around a drilling well. I looked over the Radio shack in which I'd slept. Jack had said it would be my 'home' while at the Rio Camp. It was spacious, light and airy. It had a 'new' smell,—one of wood shavings and uncured cement. There was a bed in one corner. Along one wall, a long table held an array of transmitting and receiving radio equipment. An assortment of tools, wiring diagrams, and various radio parts lay scattered about,—no doubt the result of the lengthy repair Jack had mentioned. Boxes and crates of supplies, still un-opened, were stacked nearly ceiling-high across one end of the shack.

I noted the time was eight o'clock. I'd slept for almost nine hours and felt rested. Before heading for the messhall, I wandered around and made my own inspection of the Rio de Oro camp. There were five structures. Two were recently-constructed buildings and had been set on the narrow terrace of the river bank only yards away from the floating village. One of these was the radio shack, the other a combined machine

shop and storage depot for tools and spare parts. The house-boat, and two other buildings used as living quarters, were on floats and secured to the five-foot bank of the river. It was indeed, as Jack had termed it, a 'little village.'

In the messhall I was surprised to find Jack, Frenchie, and the Campesino, part way through breakfast. Four drillers, just off the midnight or 'graveyard,' shift, were also preparing to dig into the spread that lay before them. The table was loaded with platters of bacon and eggs, pancakes, toast, and a steaming pot of coffee. Jack had been up half the night tending the well and he looked tired. A three-day stubble of beard showed that his time lately had been at a premium.

He filled me in on the condition of the well and then added, "At first light this morning I sent five men down the Oro to get us a load of Barytes. Every hour counts from now on." Jack advised me that the men had taken the Anti-Arrow boat. They carried a food supply, weapons and ammunition, and towed a small floating platform on which to load extra Barytes. Jack felt that the Arrow boat plus the platform could transport sufficient mud-weighting material in one trip to at least hold the pressures from building too rapidly. One load might give us time to transport the balance of the Barytes.

As soon as breakfast was over, Jack strapped on two revolvers and we walked the hundred yards or so to the wellsit. On our left the Rio de Oro meandered by, shallow and slow-moving at this dry season of the year. On our right, for the full distance to the well, the topography rose steeply to form a range of hills. They had an average height of about 300-feet. The thick jungle had been cleared to the halfway point up the incline. From there to the top of the ridge, virgin jungle dominated the scene. Jack read my question before I asked it.

"I keep that hillside cleared so we can see any Motilone hunting party that might want to charge down on our little

village. I keep it lit up at night and two armed guards patrol the area twenty-four hours a day."

At the end of the dirt road stood the derrick. Around the derrick were the usual fuel-oil tanks, steel drums, rolls of cable and racks of drillpipe and casing. After twelve years in the oil industry, I'd seen a lot of rigs. This scene was a familiar one to me. The Oro well looked about the same as the others. I knew I'd be spending many hours at the well over the next few days, and I looked forward to this task with enthusiasm.

It had been nearly a year since I'd spent any time at a drilling site. Recently, in my desk job in Maracaibo, I would often long for the feeling of working around a well again. I loved the heat and the throb of the engines and the sound of the pumps and drilling equipment. I found it fascinating to control the mud properties and to analyse the kinds of drill-cuttings that are circulated up from the drillbit on bottom. These rock cuttings, captured over a screen on surface, show the types of rock formation being drilled through. They may also exhibit oil staining, rock porosity, and fossil evidence. As well, I enjoyed the derrick floor action,—drilling, pulling drillpipe, retrieving core samples, running casing and cementing. And too, I enjoyed the easy camaraderie with the driller and the 'roughnecks' that made up the crews.

Jack and I checked everything we could think of at the well. Pressures were high and building. Valves and fittings were holding. There were no gas leaks evident,—yet. One of our main concerns was that the pressure would build until it forced gas to break out around the casing and channel upward to the surface. If that happened, escaping gas and mud would soon cause cratering of the surface sediments in the vicinity of the well. In some cases of blowouts, geysers of gas, mud, water and oil break through the surface. The area around the wellsite soon becomes a quicksand into which the drilling equipment

slowly sinks out of sight. It has happened at certain blowouts in various parts of the world that the derrick, drawworks, drillpipe, pumps, and even small buildings, have disappeared into the liquid mess that is created.

There was little we could do for the moment however, other than watch the trend of pressure build-up,—and hope the Barytes would arrive in time to prevent a blowout. Having examined the well pressures, I was left with a gut-feeling of real concern. Luck would have to be on our side for us to win. Time was truly 'of the essence!'

We walked to the Radio Shack,—or, as Jack called it, 'The Synagogue.' In a few minutes I had contacted the Maracaibo office. My message was short: 'I had arrived at the wellsite. Well pressures high. Blowout still threatens but under control. Small boatload Barytes expected latest tomorrow morning.'

Jack and Ness and I worked around the well until late in the evening. Jack and his drilling crews did what they could to prepare the scene in case the worst happened and the well blew out. A bulldozer dug pits and built dyked walls to contain or direct the well-fluids that might flow for days from an uncontrolled well. Large-diameter pipelines were laid and extra tankage moved into place.

I asked Jack about the possibility of the five-man-crew being attacked by the Motilones.

"Sure, it's possible," Jack said, "but I have to risk it. That's just the way life is in these parts. Hell! We could be attacked here at camp,—anytime. The men going down the Rio today could meet up with a hunting party at any point along the way. On the other hand, the Motilones are sometimes away from the river for weeks on end. Anyway, we'll know by tomorrow morning."

I learned that Jack had given the crew orders to free the barge, if possible, from its high and dry position on the sandbar. When freed the barge should be able to navigate the remaining thirty miles of the Catatumbo River. If the barge only made it to the confluence of the Rio de Oro and no further, it would save much hard labour and precious time. Those hours saved could make the difference between a controlled well and a wild one.

But Jack was nervous the entire day. He paced, he talked incessantly. He strode back and forth to the well. He worried about the well blowing wild. He worried about the crew in the Arrow boat and how they'd fare if attacked by the Motilones. By evening Jack's nerves were frayed. He cleaned and reloaded his revolvers at least three times that I knew of.

"I sleep with these pistols on me," he said. "Never know when those Brown Devils will show up. They raided the Colpet camp twice this year,—both times in pitch-dark." For my edification, he added; "the Colpet camp is about six miles downstream. Half a dozen American drillers and a few Colombian labourers have lived there for about a year. They hit one producer and are now drilling their second well."

Jack had brought a lunch for me while I was working on the well. We sat and talked about how to handle a night raid if it should happen. Jack was less edgy now that he was talking,—it kept him from dwelling on his many problems. He loved to talk and I let him go on, with little interruption,—knowing that some story worth hearing would eventually come out.

"Speaking of Colpet," he was saying, "...their last raid took place about two months ago. The Motilones have it in for Colpet because the oil camp was built right on one of the Tribe's old ancestral hunting trails. We're better off here on this side of The Oro. There aren't any trails in this area,—so I'm told.

Jack helped himself to more than half my lunch and continued his story of the raids on Colpet. "Anyway, a Motilone hunting party,—about thirty of them in a pack,—broke down part of a high wire fence that surrounds the oil camp. They raced through between the buildings shooting arrows at anything that moved. Killed a few dogs and pigs and wounded an American driller. Shot off over fifty arrows. In less than three minutes they'd disappeared into the jungle again, leaving the Colpet guys firing at shadows,—trigger-happy as Hell!"

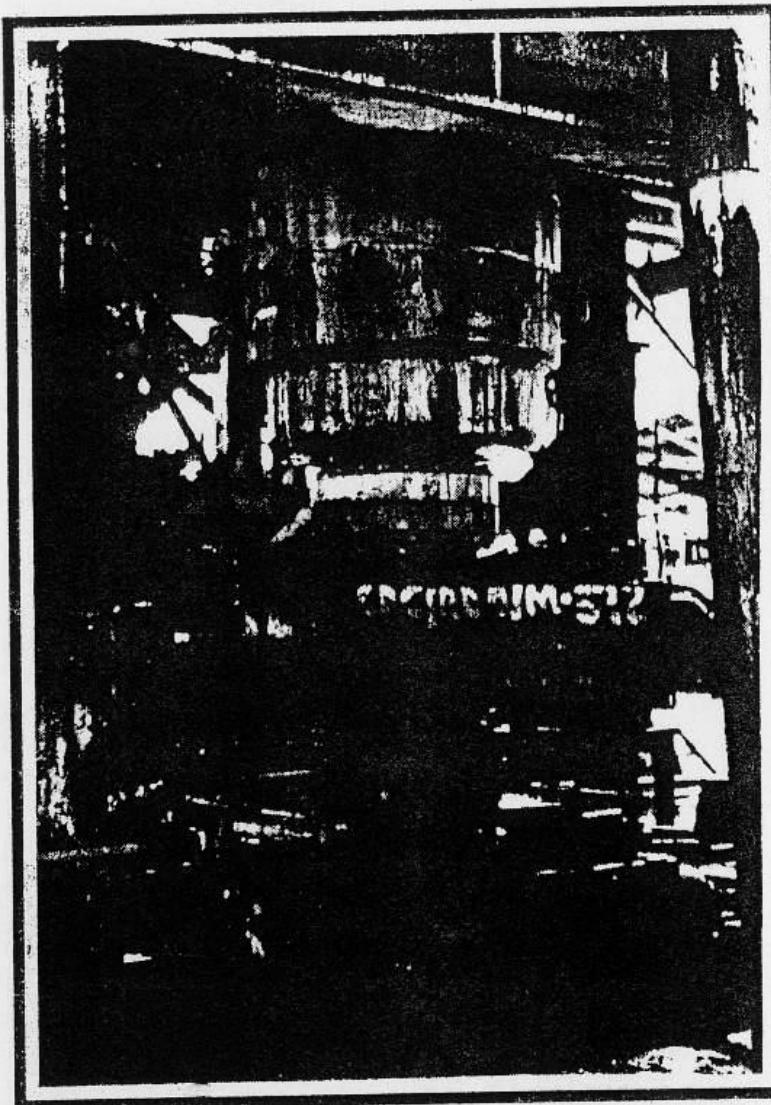
Jack was quiet for a moment then added, "Everybody in the Colpet camp wears two pistols twenty-four hours a day,—even the Cook. They're under orders to sleep with 'em on. That's written into their contract. They're docked a month's pay if caught without their guns on!"

"Jack," I asked, "how can Colpet get people to live and work there under those conditions and the high risk involved?"

"Well," Jack replied, "they pay salaries that are more than double what a man can make in the States. To that is added a handsome amount as Risk Pay. If a guy lasts a year, he gets a generous bonus. If he's killed by Motilones, his widow gets a lump sum and a pension for life. Also, each year the men are given a two-month vacation with pay and allowances. Money talks, eh?"

Jack's Texan drawl didn't really do justice to the Canadian 'eh?' He made it sound more like 'ay-yee.'

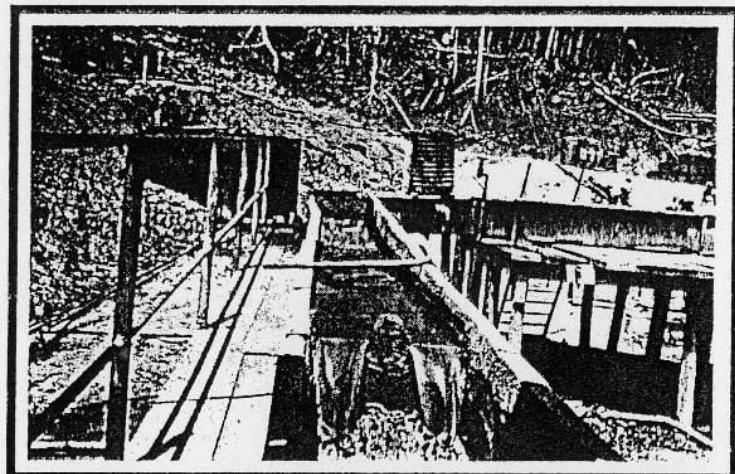
Over my years in Venezuela, I'd worked with Jack a dozen times,—usually at remote wildcat wells. I'd soon learned that he was a renowned kidder and something of a practical joker. He had an odd sense of humour. His talk and actions bothered some people, but I enjoyed Old Jack and his stories. I had grown used to the character of the man. He was, every inch,—a Character.



*Under the derrick floor, "Blowout-Preventors"  
hold back the well's pressure*

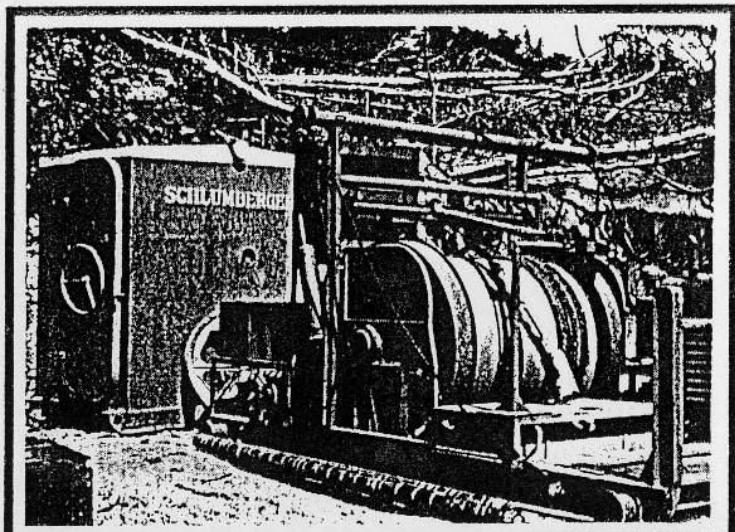


*Ness and myself*



Mud ditch

43



The Frenchman's toy. The hoist he used to run surveys in the well.

Jack would go out of his way to use the 'eh?' expression. And each time he'd laugh. He would howl with boisterous knee-slapping peals of laughter as if he'd come up with a new joke. He over-used the 'ay-yee' when I was around,—a half-dozen times in an hour was not uncommon,—and each time he'd guffaw and be convulsed with laughter. Good Ol' Jack! Geez!

About ten o'clock that night, Jack and Ness and I were having a late supper in the houseboat and we heard a loud hail from the river. Looking out, we saw a strong searchlight playing back and forth along the nearby bank.

Jack shouted, "It's the Arrow Boat. They made it!" We hurried to the dock and greeted the crew. There were only three. I saw Jack brace himself as he waited for the story to unfold.

"No problems," one of the roughnecks reported, "we left two guys there to help free the barge. We've got a small load of Barytes aboard the Arrow Boat and about fifty sacks on the platform."

Jack visibly relaxed and a broad smile played over his features.

"No Motilones?" he asked.

"None," came the reply. "They must've known we were ready for 'em with ten revolvers and two shotguns,—would've been murder!"

We had not expected the crew back until morning, but they told us it had been a fast run down the Oro, travelling with the current. The crew had arrived at the stranded barge before noon. There, all five of the crew, with some help from the barge Captain's motley deckhands, transferred Barytes to the Arrow boat and to the small platform. Two men were left to help the Captain free the barge from its sandbank.

At mid-afternoon the Anti-Arrow Boat left for the return trip to the Oro camp. Due to the heavy load, there were numerous groundings. Hours of back-breaking work were required to

join the tribe that the other begrimed them. The men were most vulnerable when it became necessary to wade and dig and push to free their craft from sandbars. In the dark they ran the steep cliffs where we had been attacked. There was no sign or sound of the enemy,—all was quiet. The three men were sore and weary from the non-stop physical effort they'd undergone for more than twenty hours. It was obvious to me that they were quite proud of their accomplishment.

Over a hot meal in the houseboat, Jack talked to each man and it was plain to see why these rough-and-ready drillers and 'roughnecks' worked so willingly for Jack. A fresh crew was called out to offload the Barytes at the wellsite.

The work of controlling the well now began in earnest. Jack and Ness and I worked around-the-clock for two full days, catching an hour's sleep when and where we could. Using Barytes, the mud weight was increased gradually. By stages we circulated the heavier mud down to bottom at 9000 feet, and there, pumped it into the formation. This had the effect of 'killing' the threatening pressure that had been building for nearly a full week.

Indeed, a full week had gone by since I'd heard Jack Morris's voice on the radio shouting, "We've got trouble!" Slowly but steadily we gained a measure of control. Two days later a second load of Barytes arrived. For the first time, I felt we had an edge. We started to make some gains. I stopped looking for signs of geysers!

The day after the second load of Barytes had arrived at camp, I noticed the Anti-Arrow boat tied to the houseboat dock. I had just finished a mid-afternoon lunch and had some time to kill. Jack was catching up on sleep. The well was in a

holding pattern due to a needed repair to the drawworks. I decided to go aboard.

I walked along the dock and looked at the Brave Little Boat. Along her starboard side were deep gouges where Motilone arrows had penetrated the wood to a depth of a half-inch or more. I inspected the wire netting in some detail and found thirty or so squares that had been rounded into circles. These were the places where arrowheads had driven half-way through the wire grid. The rear door carried wounds of the same type.

Inside, I inspected the cabin. On this occasion however, several things were different. I was alone in the boat. There were no arrows coming at me. The craft was dead in the water. The cabin was not crowded with bodies. Jack was not demanding attention. He was not firing off revolvers. It was, in fact, an ideal time to look at the boat.

During the week I had been at the Oro camp, I'd hardly had time to give the Motilone attack a second thought. Now, I took my time to 'feel' the boat and sat for a while on the bench where The Old Man had so enjoyed an apple. I stood at the helm and tried to capture Ness's gut-feelings as arrows pinged into the screen a foot from his face. I peered out the small 'gunport' opening through which Jack had fired round after round. Standing there, I could almost smell the gunpowder smoke.

I poked around amongst the gear and boxes. Sure enough, under one of the benches lay three empty cartridges and a couple of empty shotgun shells.

'So,' I thought, 'it wasn't a dream,—it was real after all.' I reflected on the attack itself,—that bizarre happening!,—that had taken place between the steep sandstone cliffs of the Rio de Oro.

I asked myself, 'What if.? What if.? My mind played with different scenarios. 'So many things could have happened,' I thought. 'And each would likely have had a different ending.

Some endings would have been sad, no doubt. What if the boat had hung up solidly on that sandbar at the critical moment in the attack? How long could Jack have held the Motilones off? Until the ammunition ran out, probably. Then what?

My thoughts were running a bit wild, but I realized that this was the first time I had reviewed the events of those extraordinary three or four minutes of five men's lives.

My mind picked up the theme again and I heard myself repeat the question, 'What then? ...

*'What might have happened then,—after we'd run out of shells? They'd have out-waited us,—that's what they'd do! The Savages would just sit there and wait,—and shoot the odd arrow our way to draw our fire. And eventually they'd know we were out of fire-power. Then they'd wait some more.'*

My thoughts kept pursuing the likely outcome.

*'Sooner or later we would have to get out of the boat, to try to free it, or leave it to make a dash down-river on foot. Then they'd have us! In the dark or in daylight the results would be the same: one by one their arrows would pick us off. We'd be pinned to the sand. The curare would work its thunder and we'd die,—in minutes or in hours. The shallow waters of the Rio de Oro would wash over five bodies and carry them along until each hung up on a sandbar or was stopped by a soggy tree trunk.'*

My reverie ended abruptly as a drilling crew came out of the houseboat onto the dock. Apparently they were early for their afternoon meal and had to wait for the cook's call. They were a talkative group and the chatter and laughter disturbed my quiet time aboard. I was comfortable however, on the narrow bench and after a few minutes the men went inside to their meal. All was peaceful on the Oro again,—and again the Little Arrow Boat wrapped me around. Again it was a haven. It had undoubtedly saved the lives of the five of us.

*I had a noble thought for it's future: 'the boat should be preserved for posterity. The Anti-Arrow boat should end it's days in a grand Maritime Museum like others had before it. The Mayflower, and the St. Roche of Arctic fame, were both housed in museums, long years after their momentous voyages. I visualized that in the Museum an elegantly-uniformed Commissionnaire would direct the admiring public through the boat's 'historic' cabin. That official would point out the holes in the 'rat-wire' where the poisoned arrows had come through. Then, over an intercom system, a quiet intense voice would tell the story of the Motilones and of their attack on five men on the Rio de Oro River.'*

An hour had passed. It was nearly time for a radio call from Maracaibo. I took a last look around, stepped out of the little boat and made my way to the Synagogue. As I walked, the uppermost thought in my mind was that we had been extremely lucky to have escaped from the Motilone's ambush. And, in

retrospect, for the three of us in the Pakki-Pakki, it had been a close call when the motor had conked out.

If the motor had NOT given up when it did, we would each have stopped a few poisoned arrows within the next mile or two! We were, at that time, only minutes away from certain death. It was by the thinnest thread of Fate that Jack had met us with the Anti-Arrow boat,—*with only minutes to spare!*

I sat at the radio desk waiting for a call from Maracaibo. On a pad of paper in front of me, I found I was sketching a flat-bottomed barge and a Pakki Pakki: Reflecting on that wearisome river trip, I wondered how many hours it had taken from Maracaibo to the wellsite. I broke down the trip into its various stages and was shocked to discover the total time came to 56 hours! My tabulation looked like this:

	Hours
Maracaibo to The Delta.	9
The Delta to Encontrados.	5
On the Bank at Encontrados.	3
By barge, Encontrados to 'grounding.'	17
Slept on barge.	7
By Pakki Pakki.	10
By Anti-Arrow boat to the wellsite.	5
<hr/>	
Total : 56 Hours.	

I examined the tabulation and realized that the trip had taken nearly four times as long as planned. I recalculated the distance and ended up with a total of 185 miles from Maracaibo to the Rio camp,—following the lake and river routes as I had done. A bit of simple arithmetic, dividing the miles by the hours, showed that I had averaged only 3.3 miles per hour!

'Appalling.' I thought. 'Had there been a road or trail, I could have WALKED to the well in the same time!'

The radio blared. I took the call from Maracaibo. Routine discussion about the well. Then, for the first time since I'd left the office, someone wanted to know when I was coming back. I replied that 'Old Pakki and I liked it here on the Oro and we may never leave.' They didn't understand what I meant and probably concluded that I had gone native or slipped my trolley. It wasn't a question of *when* I might return, it was more a question of *how*. So far, I had no answer to the problem.

We learned that the barge was eventually re-floated. The valiant Captain moved Old Flatbottom up the thirty miles of Catatumbo River to the Rio de Oro. Apparently, the Captain and his deckhands were chuck-full of courage now that they had five well-armed bodyguards to protect them. The Rio de Oro however, was so low in water that the barge was unable to navigate even the first mile of the narrower river. The Captain and his two men helped offload the balance of the Barytes onto the Arrow Boat and then lost little time in heading downstream in the muddy Catatumbo waters. I visualized the Captain spinning the helm needlessly and grinning widely with each mile he put between himself and the feared Motilones.

The days had been busy since I arrived at the Rio de Oro camp. Our brush with the Motilones at the sandstone cliffs was seldom mentioned. All discussion had to do with the well and the hour by hour changes we were monitoring. The Frenchman was always nearby, waiting patiently for opportunities to run his surveys. When his turns came, he showed a new side of his character that I'd little suspected. The quiet little Frenchman became rather loud and commanding when he wanted some help from us or from the drilling crew. He shouted out orders in his own language and threw in his seven words of Spanish with

loud and reckless abandon. However, his technical expertise impressed me. He knew his job and did it well.

Jack, in character, had to pin a label on him. When he heard the Frenchman shouting an order to his head driller, Jack immediately referred to the little guy as 'Napoleon.' The label stuck.

'Old Pakki,' as Jack called him, had become a kind of camp favourite. He lounged around the houseboat and talked long hours with any of the crew that was off duty. Everyone liked him. He cut an unusual but striking figure as his tall lean frame strutted about the camp. His old straw hat was usually perched jauntily on his head. Below the tattered brim, a curl of silver-grey dangled over his forehead. His colourful Poncho swayed as he walked.

I learned that Jack had given orders that Pakki was to be a guest of the camp for as long as he felt inclined to stay. He was given sleeping quarters in the thatched building. He ate in the mess-hall and never missed a meal. Indeed, Pakki was always the first to arrive at mealtime. He'd kill time until others arrived by talking to the cook. It was Jack who had the camp mechanic overhaul the Old Man's rusty onc-lunger. On inspection, I found that the old motor had been repaired, de-rusted and painted! It was now solidly bolted into the dugout.

It was obvious that Jack had taken to the Campesino. But Jack kept that to himself.

I talked to Maracaibo by radio each day, giving them a brief report of the well condition. They relayed a few messages to and from my family. My office had pieced together one of the unanswered questions that had to do with my trip up the Catatumbo. This was their message:

"It is learned that the Power Boat operator who had been contracted to meet you at

Encontrados had become involved in some offence and had disappeared. Two days ago his boat was found badly smashed but still afloat on the river Zulia, seven miles northeast of Casigua oilfield. The whereabouts of the operator is unknown."

I had taken a number of photographs of the trip to Rio de Oro, and a few around the camp. Jack was always willing, even anxious, to be photographed. Anytime I pointed the camera toward him he'd strike a pose that he thought brought out the best in him.

One day, when Jack and I were working around the well, he asked, "How about taking a close-up shot of me? I'd like one as close as you can get it." He talked on, spelling out exactly what he wanted,—but I only heard half of what he said. He ended his request with this comment: "Try to get me just as I am most of the time. You know,—looking like the Boss Man of a jungle camp. And maybe sweating a bit, two days growth of beard,—hard hat and all."

"Yeah, guess I could capture all that," I replied. "No make up, no props, no clean shirt,—just you, the way you are, eh?"

I had my camera with me and I opened the case and checked a few settings. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Jack primping a bit. I took my time with the settings, more interested in Jack's self-interest than in the camera. He wiped away a stream of perspiration from his face. He put his hard hat on at an angle, then removed it,—appearing undecided. He tousled his hair. I'd had about enough and walked away from the well toward the river. Jack followed, convinced that I was seeking a locale for the 'portrait' that would be more picturesque than around the rig.

"Take me with the sun on me, that'll show up the whiskers. And get the close-up from my 'best side,—that's the left."

Jack was going on in his usual way. I paid little attention but noticed that he was practising various poses as we walked. He'd gaze upward, look thoughtful, frown a bit, force a smile, pull in his gut. We were at the river. I was curious.

"What are you going to do with a close-up of yourself, Jack?"

"Well," and he said this without any embarrassment, "I've got a lady-friend or two that sure could use a good shot of me. If they're good enough, I might have some of 'em enlarged,—maybe even framed."

While Jack was rambling on, all unsuspecting, I snapped a couple of close-ups in quick succession.

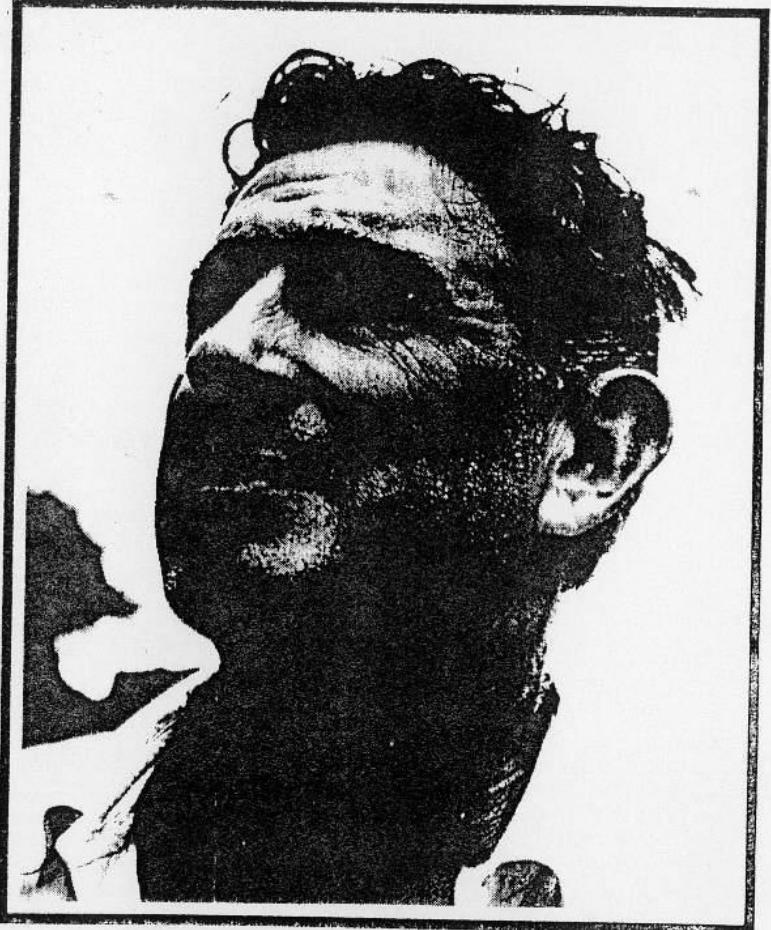
"Hey!" he shouted, "You caught me before I was ready! I was about to give you a front view and a side view. But,—how did I look?"

Jack's self-esteem, even his conceit, was natural enough,—it was part of the man. For some reason, these characteristics didn't bother me, as they did bother most people. I looked upon his antics, his conceit and words with some amusement. Old Jack was always good for a laugh or a story.

"You looked great, Jack. I'll have the film developed in Maracaibo when I get back,—if the Motilones let me through. I'll send you a few prints."

I had Jack pose for two or three other close-ups, more for my own enjoyment than for any insurance-factor. I had a feeling that I'd captured the real Jack Morris on the first try when he was so busy preening.

Until I left the Rio Camp, Jack talked about these photos every day. It was as if he couldn't wait to see the results and to send some off to his lady-friends. One night, in The Synagogue, he wrote out a list of the ladies that he planned to favour.



*Jack Morris — Wildcat Driller and Camp Boss  
(Jack ordered 20 of these for his various lady-friends in the States)*

"I've decided," he announced in a loud voice, "that each lady will receive an eight-by-ten glossy. Yeah,—why not? They've earned it,—and they deserve it!"

Jack studied the list again and advised me of his conclusion.

"Looks like I'll need about twenty enlargements. I could cut out one or two but I'd better be generous, aye-ee?" He hesitated and thought for a minute and said, "Hell! Make it twenty-five,—I might meet somebody new."

Jack handed me the list. I was rather amazed at what it contained. Beside each name he'd written the city or town in which these girl-friends lived. Addresses were listed, and about half had phone numbers. They were literally spread across the U.S.of A. What intrigued me the most was Jack's rating system. Opposite each name was either one, two or three stars. I noted that only two ladies merited the full three stars. Eight others were granted two stars. The rest: a single star only! I wondered why.

Jack's favourite lady, so he told me, lived not far from Chicago. Her large estate, on the shore of Lake Michigan, boasted a luxurious villa, swimming pools, servants, a modest yacht and other attractions. "When my long leave comes up in about a year I'll head for Chicago first." Jack said. "If I can outlive the Motilones here on the Rio de Oro for another year I sure will be ready for a Chicago-style vacation by then!"

It struck me that if Jack's lengthy list was valid, then Ol' Jack was an even-more-incredible man than I'd ever suspected.

He was still talking,—in a dreamy sort of way: "I'll likely stay at the Chicago place about a month and then move on. There's one or two I've got to see in California and after that I'll head for my old stomping grounds in Texas."

Jack's voice trailed off and almost to himself he said, "Yeah,—those Texan Women are really somethin' ...really somethin'!"

It turned out that once I was back in Maracaibo, I had twenty-five enlargements made for Jack. He had specified that each must be eight-by-ten in size and with a glossy finish.

"Love a glossy!" he'd say.

The transaction took a few months to wind down: I sent Jack the package of photographs by Johnny Ransom, a Shell pilot. Johnny delivered them to the Colpet camp where a small airstrip had been completed. Jack made the trip up the Rio de Oro in the Anti-Arrow boat to inspect the photos and to make final judgements as to who got what.

That same day he spent hours at the Colpet camp, pouring over the likenesses of Himself. He signed each one "With Love, Jack," or some similar message. He handed the file back to the pilot, and included a note to me full of detailed instructions regarding the mailing list. The priceless package was on my desk the following morning.

I must admit to having read each one of Jack's love notes as I slipped them, one by one, into their envelope, making sure that "Helen Darling" went to Helen and not to Doris.

Over the years that have since passed by, I often visualized Old Jack relaxing in The Synagogue and dreaming of each of his ladies. I was sure that Jack would see them gazing lovingly at his strong features,—admiring the whiskered macho-look of the jungle-driller they longed to see.

## 7 A Killing at the Camp

I'd been at the Rio de Oro Camp for a week before Jack and I felt that we had full control of the well. In that week I walked back and forth along the road between the well and the campsite several times. Each time I kept my eye on the edge of the jungle part way up the hill. When alone, I'd wear a revolver that Jack had given me. If Jack or Ness were with me, I'd be unarmed. They were never without two revolvers each. As we walked this roadway, Jack would usually comment on the possibilities of an attack.

"Those Brown Devils could come at us out of that forest at any time, you know. They'd run halfway down that hillside and fire their arrows and disappear before we could draw our guns!"

Jack would talk in this vein,—possibly to keep us alert to the potential danger,—but also for the dramatic effect that he loved to develop. These scenarios would often start him off and he'd spin a few far-fetched stories for our benefit. Any touch of humour that crept in to the story brought with it the usual loud laughter that was so much a part of his tall tales. These peals of

mirth would ring out in the dark and echo back from the hillside. I thought that if the Motilones were lying in wait for us along that black and lonely road, the echoing reverberations of Jack's bursts of hilarity would surely send them running. Jack's 'Brown Devils' would scurry for their lives to escape those Demons of the Night Forest.

And once in a while as he pretended to see movement at the edge of the clearing, Jack would wheel and draw, and wheel and draw again. Then he'd assume the classic Western 'High Noon' stance. It was all good practice for Jack. For Ness and myself, it was amusing,—the first two or three times. Eventually it did wear thin.

I usually enjoyed the first run of such play-acting roles that Jack indulged in, but when an act is repeated over and over it becomes a bit stale. Especially so, when accompanied with the same joke and the same loud knee-slapping laughter. Jack was like that in everything he did. He was not inclined to let a little thing like repetition prevent him from telling the same story again and again. Good Ol' Jack. More than once I actually pleaded 'Spare me, Spare me.,' but my words had little effect.

Jack and I were on the rig floor checking pressures and studying results of one of the surveys the Frenchman had run.

"Things look more normal, Jack," I said, "I guess I'll have to think about getting back to Maracaibo. You should be drilling ahead in a few more days."

"Maybe," Jack replied, "but we haven't decided how to get you back there, have we? It's a long trip by Arrow-Boat and sure is risky to go down the Oro."

"What is the best way, Jack? Surely there are better alternatives than running the river again."

"Not really." Jack sounded so final that I thought I might as well charter Old Pakki again and head south in the morning.

"As you've seen, we're dredging sandbars to widen and deepen The Oro so a small float plane can land here, but that'll take another month to complete. Besides, we have to wait for the wet season to have enough water in that river. Colpet have started an airstrip but it takes time to clear the jungle. God knows when that'll be done. I suppose Shell could send a small fast boat for you, but in the two weeks you've been here the river's dropped two more feet. Right now it's almost impassable."

Jack was clearly enjoying himself. He continued to list the problem-areas that we faced at this season of the year, as far as transportation was concerned.

"That's about it,—you either run the river, or stay with us for a month or two until the rains come."

I could feel it coming. Jack's voice had risen in high glee at his final summation. He had found my dismal choices hilarious. Back went his head and he bawled out loud guffaws. He seemed in pain with the side-splitting humour of it all. When he stopped and all was silence again, it felt like a Sunday in the middle of the week.

It was noon and the heat was hellish. The driller shut down a couple of pumps and put the rig in neutral to circulate the mud from bottom for the next few hours. Two of the roughneck crew left the derrick floor, carrying their lunch buckets, and headed for the river where there was a small sandbar. They often spent their lunch hour relaxing or fishing at this spot. Ten minutes went by and Jack and I were still sitting in the shade talking.

*A single pistol shot, and then a shout of alarm, echoed from the river! I sensed an ominous ring of panic in the voice.*

Jack and I bounded to our feet. On the dead run Jack drew one revolver and raced ahead of me down the ramp,

—straight for the sandbar in the river. The Driller and three of his crew were not far behind us. It was about seventy-five yards to the river's edge and we made it in seconds, certainly no more than a half-minute.

As we broke through the tangled bush along the riverbank, one man stumbled toward us through knee-deep water. An arrow protruded from his upper chest just below the shoulder. He supported the shaft with his left hand. In his right dangled a revolver. I glanced past the wounded man and saw his companion sprawled face-down on the sandbar. Half his body lay in water. Three arrows were buried deep in the man's back. He was bleeding profusely.

Jack was the first to reach the stricken man. Kneeling beside the victim, Jack took a few seconds to fire three rounds toward the opposite bank of The Oro. As these sounds hung in the air, I heard a fusillade of shots from nearby. The Driller and his crew had followed Jack's example. They had emptied their revolvers into the dense forest along the bank of the narrow river.

Jack turned the wounded man on his side, looked at his face and his wounds and felt for a heartbeat. He motioned for help from the driller and his men. They picked up their fallen comrade and carried him back to the wellsite. He showed no sign of life.

Other willing hands had supported the man with the arrow in his chest. They half-carried him to the derrick and up the ramp. There, they laid him in the shade on the derrick floor.

The badly-wounded man,—Pepe,—died within ten minutes. Some vital part, no doubt, had been hit by curare-tipped arrows. The deadly poison did the rest.

Jack kneeled beside the man with the one arrow in his shoulder. He cut away the man's shirt. From the First-Aid kit, he selected a two-foot-long piece of stainless steel tubing. The

internal diameter of the tool was about one and one-half inches. Around its lower end was a series of razor-sharp serrated teeth. It was, in fact, a 'circular' saw.

Jack leaned close to the suffering man, now racked with pain, and said, "This is going to hurt, Jose,—but not for long. Get a good grip on something."

In mute eloquence, Jose reached out for the hands of his fellow-workers. They grasped his hands in vice-grips, and held hard to his arms and spoke quietly to him.

Jack cut off about two feet of the shaft of the long arrow, including the feather-tipped end. Eighteen inches of the shaft was still fixed to the foot-long arrowhead. Ten inches of the arrowhead was visible which meant that its tip may have penetrated about two or three inches into Jose's shoulder. Then, very carefully, Jack slipped the 'coring device' over the stub of the arrow's shaft. He lowered the instrument to the point where the serrated teeth touched the patient's skin.

"This is it..." Jack spoke quietly, firmly. "I'm going to cut out a bit of flesh from around the tip of the arrow. It'll hurt for a few seconds. Try to hold as steady as you can. OK ...ready, ...Now!"

Jack pressed on the tool, and as he pressed, he turned it to the right. He repeated this action three times. Blood flowed freely over the man's chest. The men held hard to Jose,—gripping his flesh until it showed white between their strong fingers.

"That's got it, I think."

Jack's voice was hoarse with the emotion that must have been coursing through his mind.

"Hold on, Jose...nearly done. That arrowhead has got to come out clean!"

Jack held the metal tube steady for a moment, its sharp teeth buried two inches or more into the victim's flesh. Then,

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—with one firm pull on the arrow's shaft, the jagged arrowhead was pulled upward through the steel tube. I was transfixed with the horror of the scene.

*As the arrowhead had emerged from the tube, a piece of the unfortunate victim's flesh was attached to the arrow tip!*

Jack poured a handful of a sulpha-powder directly into the wound and then bandaged the shoulder with yards of gauze dressing. The men were silent. I had stood in one spot, in silence. The wounded man had not uttered a sound during the surgical ordeal. Jack stood up. Perspiration ran off his features. Tears rose in Jose's eyes and he reached upward for Jack's hand.

"Gracias, Senor Jack. Gracias! Muchas Gracias! Dios contigo." May God go with you.

Visibly shaken, Jack once again bent his long body over the patient and in a quiet tone, said in Spanish: "I think we got it all,—and maybe in time. Lo siento Jose,—sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you but I had to try. You'll be OK."

Jack's voice broke as he tried to reassure the man.

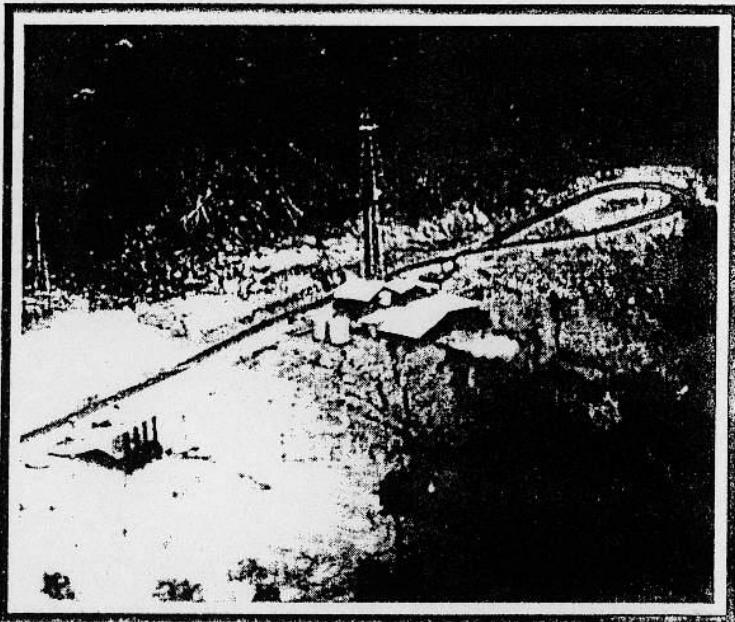
"You'll... be..."

He turned away from us and moved slowly down the steps from the derrick floor. In all the years I'd known Jack, I had never seen him so bowed. His shoulders drooped forward. For a moment his slow gait and his bent-over stance made him look old. He took a long time to walk the road to the houseboat.

I had stood beside the driller and his crew during the gruesome ordeal. The grisly operation on Jose had an unnerving effect on me. I remained rooted to the spot as I watched Jack walk away,—and wondered if I should join him.

Soon, five co-workers lifted their friend from the hard floor and carried him to his small room in the thatched building next to the houseboat. As they moved Jose down the steel stairway and along the road, I followed. For the last minute of the walk, I edged over close to Jose. Finding my voice at last, I spoke to him,—mumbling words of encouragement. He reached out and grasped my hand tightly. I held the grip until we were at the door of the floating dormitory.

That night, Jose's fever rose to a hellish body heat. It raged until dawn and then broke. With pain-killing drugs, he slept for forty-eight hours. On waking he felt well enough to talk and to walk around his room.



*The Rio de Oro Wellsite. The dark and dangerous jungle surrounds*

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Jose told us that a few minutes after he and Pepe had started fishing on the sandbar, he'd heard the whiz of arrows. Looking up, he saw his partner fall forward and sprawl face-down in the water. Jose noticed arrows in Pepe's back. He pulled his revolver and fired a shot into the bushes opposite the sandbar.

At that moment Jose felt an arrow hit him in the chest. He did not recall having yelled a warning. As he turned and tried to run toward the shore in the direction of the rig, he caught sight of four or five Motilones. It was a glimpse only. The dense undergrowth along the far bank of the Rio de Oro swallowed the savage archers and left no trace behind. Later, we concluded that the raiding party must have consisted of twenty or more hunters.

Eighteen arrows were recovered from the end of the small sandbar where the two men had gone to kill an idle hour.

## 8 I Plan My Return

The killing of one of Jack's drilling crew cast a sad shadow over the Camp. The event was the *only* subject of conversation for some time. Everyone analysed the tragedy and sought to find answers to something that had in fact, been expected ever since the start of the Oro camp. For months the workers at the Camp had almost anticipated a Motilone attack,—it was 'part of the job.' To work in Motilone country along the Rio de Oro, was to accept that one might be killed by an arrow. Now that it had happened to one of their own men, the reality was difficult to reconcile.

Jack was particularly disturbed. He blamed himself for becoming over-confident,—for permitting the men to wander down to the river at noon hours. He chastised the two-man guard patrol. However, he was soon to soften his criticism,—knowing that two men could not be everywhere at once. He made a few changes to the already-strict rules that had always applied at the Camp. He doubled the patrol.

Why the Motilones had chosen to attack in broad daylight remained as one of the unknowns. There were many

theories but none were more than guesses. We did not know the mind of the Motilone Hunters. Nor could we out-guess their strategy for harassment of the foreigner in their midst. Neither was there a pattern to the natives' attacks. Those that had taken place at the Colpet Camp had all been at night. Attacks on the Rio de Oro, particularly in the sandstone cliff areas, had been daylight encounters. There was no discernable pattern to where or when they would strike.

"That's exactly the way they want it!" Jack remarked.

Pepe was buried the following day. Jack selected a plot of ground under a spreading Flamboyant tree about two hundred yards from the camp. All work not of an essential nature was suspended for the day. Two men were left on the rig and one man remained with Jose, as he was too ill to be moved. Other than those four men, the entire camp attended the 'funeral.' They stood silently around the grave while one of the drillers read a lengthy eulogy in Spanish. Jack and Ness and I were part of the gathering. Although we missed the meaning of some of the words, the emotional impact of the service left a deep impression on each of us.

After a couple of days, the shock of Pepe's death and the wounding of Jose, began to ease. Gradually, life at the oil camp returned to normal. I saw little of Jack for a few days after the attack, but I had much to occupy my time. The well still demanded a lot of attention,—especially now that we had started to drill ahead into the deeper unknown and untested formations. With Jack occupied on matters related to the recent tragedy, Ness and I ran twelve-hour shifts. One of us was always on the derrick floor,—monitoring, sampling, testing and recording.

As things got back to normal, I began again, to consider when and how I might return to Maracaibo. I'd now been at the Oro Camp for seventeen days. Counting the Fifty-six-Hour-

Trip to get here, I had been away from my office for almost a month! In some ways it seemed like a year had passed since I'd set out from Maracaibo so unconcernedly, on what I thought would be just another wellsitting job. Time had sped by. Probably because I'd been busy every hour of every day, and because so many unusual things had happened. Also, I'd become part of the drilling-camp life. I enjoyed the well-work and had made friends with several of the crew. Ness and I got along. Jack was usually amusing. The meals were wonderful.

I hadn't expected to, but I'd come to like this spot in the jungle on the Rio de Oro!

As a result of the Motilone attack at the camp, I felt I should stay another few days to help Jack in any way I could. Three days went by, then five, then it was a full week since the killing. I decided that the next morning at breakfast, I'd ask Jack for the use of an Anti-Arrow boat to run me down the Oro,—maybe as far as Encontrados. It was the only reasonable choice open to me unless I wanted to wait for the rainy season,—still a month or more away. The water level of the river was at an all-time low and as a result, even the Arrow boat would have difficulty getting through to the Catatumbo.

For safety reasons, I would also ask that three strong men accompany me. The men would be able to free the boat from sandbars when grounded, and, being well armed, could provide plenty of fire-power if needed. I had a feeling that Jack himself would insist on taking me out. If he did, I'd be glad of that,—I'd feel doubly confident.

Early the following morning, I walked out of the Synagogue, thinking it might be for the last time. Thoughts of a river-run were in my mind. I headed for the messhall. Once outside the Radio shack, I heard someone shout. Jack's voice

rang out,—loud. Something was happening near the Houseboat. A group of men were milling about at the river's edge.

I raced toward the action. Three or four men were pulling on a stout rope,—attempting to drag something out of the river. A splash swirled mud and water high in the air. I caught a glimpse of a crocodile's head,—jaws agape, teeth glistening in the sun! A quick word with Jack informed me that he had put one bullet into the beast's head and thought he'd killed it. While it was stunned, the men put a line around the animal's neck to drag it up the low bank. The Croc however, came alive,—and it had other ideas. It clawed its way back into the river. Now, a real tug-of-war was underway.

There was a lot of action in the next four or five minutes. Men yelled. One raced for more line. Extra bodies were added to the rope. Some slipped on the muddy slope and took a dunking in the same pool as the 'Gator. Jack wanted to use his revolver but too many men around. Gradually the Beast lost ground in the muddy river-bottom. Slowly he was inched up the bank. The taut line was snubbed around pilings.

Then Jack's loud voice ordered, "All back! Back away to the end of the rope! GIVE ME ROOM!"

He pumped all six bullets from one of his revolvers into the scaly hide. Three in the head and three behind the shoulder. The Old Crocodile gave up the ghost but not before thrashing the bank and the pilings into a muddy mess. Finally he lay still. One of the men approached the animal cautiously,—machete in hand. With two swipes at the Croc's head, he cut out a perfect 'V' where the brain had been!

Jack had a makeshift tripod installed on the houseboat dock and the men strung up the Old Crocodile. He measured sixteen feet from nose to tip of tail, and must have weighed close to a ton. Jack demanded I get my camera then and there.

"I want my picture taken with that critter just to see whose the prettiest. Besides, I'll need proof that I shot a Croc this size right at my door!"

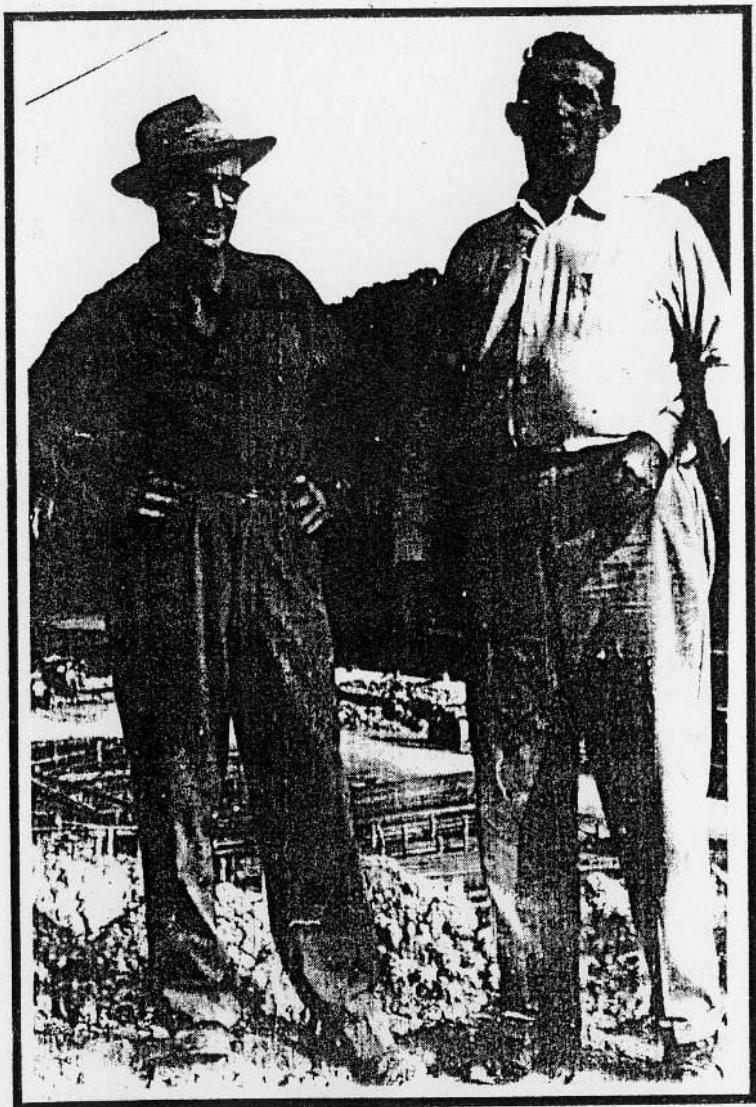
I took three or four exposures of Jack with his prize before he was satisfied that I'd caught 'the right expression and with the sun on me.' Even for this portrait, Jack tucked in his shirt and put his hard hat at a slant. I thought it odd that he did not invite any of the men to get into the picture, but it was in keeping with his character.

"Yeah," he said, "when I show this back in Texas, I'll tell 'em I had the Croc partly tamed. Fed him the garbage from the messhall,—right off the end of the dock. They'll believe it,—if I have a picture to prove it!"

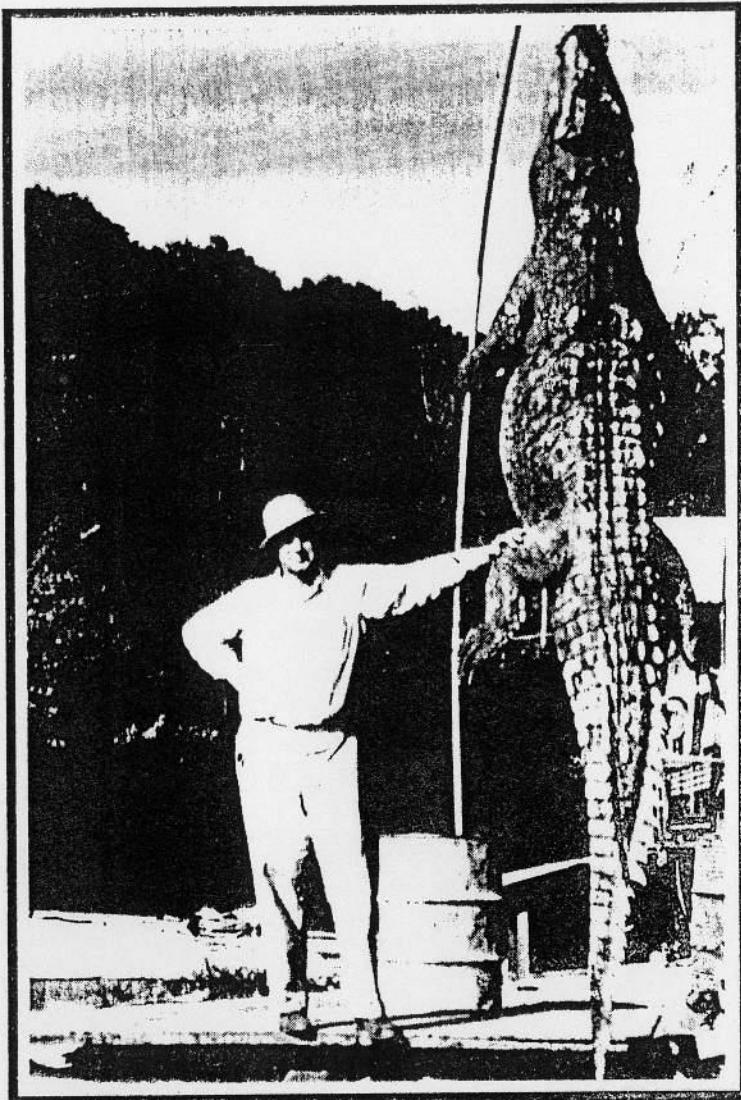
The trophy hung there, not far from the entrance to the messhall, most of the day. Every man in camp came by to have a look. The smell of the Beast however, was appalling,—even when it had first been pulled from the river. By late afternoon, the blistering sun had increased the odour a hundred-fold. When the Cook could stand it no longer he cut the Thing down. A few of the crew who were off duty, wheeled the remains away and bravely skinned the animal. Their reward in the market-place would pay them handsomely.

Later that day Jack sent Ness and two men, by Arrow-Boat, to the Colpet camp. Jose was still suffering from the arrow wound in his shoulder, and there were signs of a slight infection. The supply of pain-killing and other drugs was running low and Jack felt that Colpet might have some that were more effective. Near dusk, Ness arrived back at Camp. Colpet had provided him with a supply of morphine and various drugs that had been used with success at their camp.

Also, and of real importance to me, Ness learned that their airstrip was partly completed. Knowing that I was looking

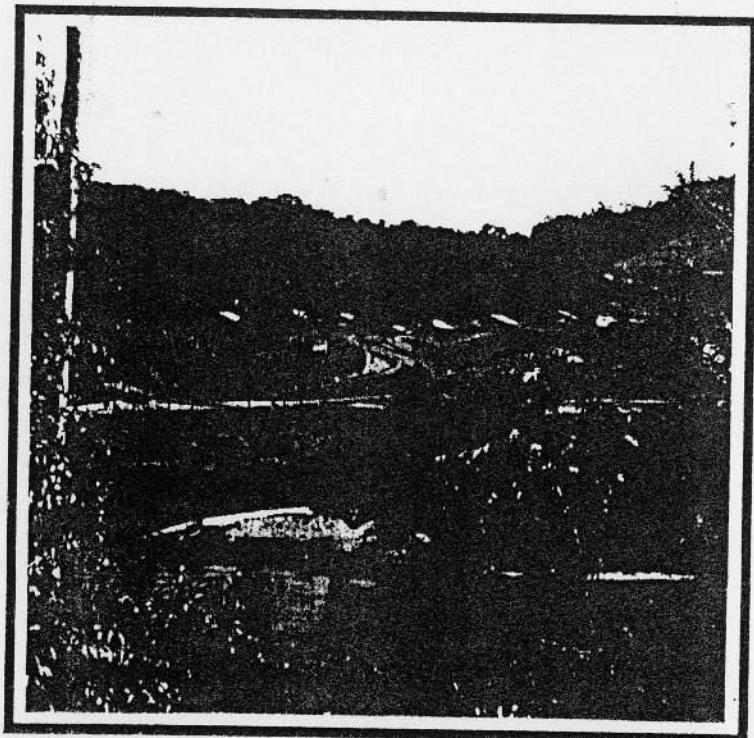


*Myself and Jack*

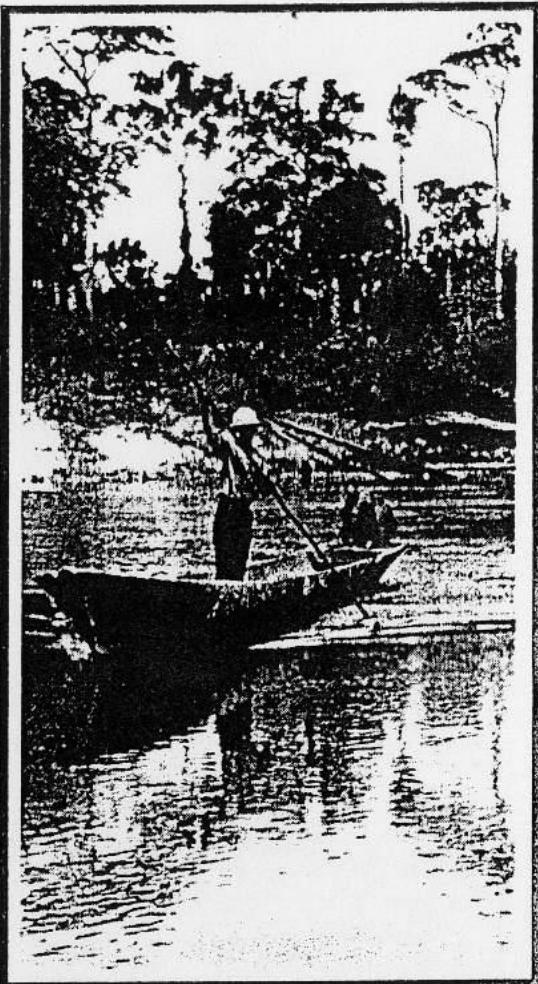


*Jack with his 16-foot Crocodile*

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*The Colpet Camp, -further up the Rio de Oro*



*A labourer tries out the Pakki-Pakki*

for a way back to civilization other than by river route, he inspected the runway. Two bulldozers and a group of labourers were still working on the project. Colpet's objective was to build a runway to accommodate planes the size of a DC-3. Large piles of trees and debris were burning. Stumps were being blasted. It appeared to Ness that it would be a long time before Colpet would have a finished level surface. However, Ness noticed a narrow strip along one side of the clearing that was somewhat level. A third of its length was fairly free of potholes, logs and boulders. Ness learned that the crews would complete levelling that portion in the next day or two.

He chatted with one of the staff who had done some flying in his younger days. The oldish flyer felt that a small plane could land on the narrow strip 'if it was cleaned up.'

The American had a Southern drawl and said to Ness, "It'd take a pilot who knew what he was doin'. "Ah could've done it in mah day,—but these young flyers now-a-days,—they get too much city-flyin'. Hell, I used to..."

But Ness had seen what he wanted. He cut the old flyer off in mid-sentence and headed for the Arrow boat. In my books, Ness's initiative in checking-out the airstrip had earned him a Purple Heart!

I thought about the alternative of flying out of the Colpet camp and it certainly appealed more than the river-run. Could it be done? How? And when? Jack and Ness and I sat in the messhall over a late supper and talked about the choices. As we pondered the pros and cons, I kept thinking of a pilot-friend of mine, Johnny Ransom by name. If ever there was a pilot that could land on the Colpet clearing, it had to be Johnny. He was a young Britisher and had flown for Shell in Venezuela for five years. Johnny was twenty-eight or so, blonde and curly-haired, boyish face. He'd flown in the war a bit and loved to fly. He seemed to make a plane a part of him. I'd made many flights

with Johnny and when I wanted to see something in full view, he'd tip the wings over,—out of the way, I could lie there on my side and really get an overview.

Often I'd be his only passenger, en-route to some far-flung wildcat well high in a mountain range, or hidden in some jungle like the one at Rio de Oro. Once he buzzed a Motilone hut so close I could almost look in a doorway. I developed a high regard for his flying skills and his sense of direction. He'd pick his way through a pile-up of cloud, even in a storm, and search out holes to drop down through.

"We'll have a look-see," he'd say.

Johnny would wander around an electric storm and then find his way back to a well-clearing with apparent ease and an air of supreme confidence.

Mostly, it all looked the same to me,—miles and miles of unending jungle growth,—a mosaic of giant green umbrellas. Peering down, I'd often wonder how Johnny and I would make out if we had to crash-land in stuff like that. Could we survive? Would it be possible to walk out? What about crossing rivers? What about Crocodiles? And what about the Motilones? I shivered at the thoughts that were going through my head, and it brought me back to the discussion I was having with Jack and Ness. Just thinking of Johnny Ransom however, had helped to convince me that I had to find a way to fly out. It followed that it had to be from the Colpet Camp.

The three of us talked about the airstrip and Colpet. We wondered if Shell would give Johnny permission to land at the unfinished and untried runway. We reviewed again, the alternative of trying to run the Oro in the Anti-Arrow boat. Both Jack and Ness offered to make the trip with me if I elected that rather onerous option.

"We out-shot and out-ran the Brown Devils once,—and we can do it again if we have to," Jack said. Then he added,

"Y'know, we could even take Old Pakki along. Remember how he was the one who first saw the Motilones? He was pretty cool during the attack. And just when I needed a few more shells, it was Old Pakki who handed me twelve more!"

In the end we decided to try to work out arrangements with Colpet and with the Maracaibo office. Failing that, we planned to leave in the Anti-Arrow boat 'the day after tomorrow.' Jack would come,—and he insisted on taking Old Pakki. He would also take one of his labourers who was experienced at river-work and boat handling. Ness would remain at Camp to keep his eye on the well. The Frenchman too, would remain at Camp as there were more surveys to be run in the well during the next few weeks.

The following morning I talked to a few people in the Maracaibo office and then discussed the situation with Johnny Ransom. There were concerns but I finally had a green light to try it.

"I have to make a flight to Casigua in two days and I'll take a turn over Colpet's strip," Johnny said. "If it looks OK I'll try a touchdown."

Sounded like Johnny alright. I told him I'd get there by boat and be at the strip when he flew over.

"To clear away the boulders," I added.

Two days later Jack and Ness and I climbed aboard the Anti-Arrow Boat and headed upstream on The Oro toward the Colpet camp. We made the six or eight miles in about three hours. As expected, sandbars were a problem with the river so low. As before, Ness handled the boat in expert fashion and Jack stood guard,—armed and ready for anything.

Colpet staff were surprised at our suggestion that we planned to use their runway,—'sometime in the next few hours,' but were co-operative. They sent a small crew of men to the

worksite to fill in any hollows and to clear away debris. Most accommodating, I thought.

At lunch with some of the staff, Jack asked the Colpet Manager about a Motilone warrior they had wounded and captured a few months earlier during one of the night raids. On that raid, a young Warrior had been gunned down as he raced through the camp with about twenty or thirty other raiders. A rifle slug had fractured his thigh about six inches above the knee. He writhed on the ground and made a desperate attempt to follow the others of his tribe. They had disappeared into thick undergrowth at the edge of the camp.

The Colpet men subdued the young Motilone. They bound his arms behind his back with strong ropes. Then they attended to his wound and placed a plaster cast on his leg from below the knee to the hip. The warrior was confined in a small room that was made secure with steel rods all around.

"He's still like a wild animal," the Manager explained. "He huddles in a corner when we approach the cage to leave food and water, and he's a Holy Terror when we have to check the wound or change the dressing. He fights like any animal would. Eats meat mostly,—raw."

Jack asked what they intended to do with him.

"Well," the Manager continued, "we can't turn him loose when his leg heals because his people will kill him on sight. They consider him taboo now that he's been in contact with whites."

"What about his language?" I asked. "Does he speak at all, and if so, can you understand any of it?"

"Not a word so far. He growls and grunts at us but we can't make any sense out of the sounds. Our plan is to keep him around until he tames a bit, and gradually try to win his confidence. If he accepts us, we'll let him work here. Eventually, we may learn something about the Motilones from him."

We were given a brief look at the captured warrior,—staying a distance of about twelve feet from the barred cage. He sat in a corner of his room, legs straight out in front of him along the floor. One leg was still in the cast. For the few minutes we studied him, he sat without moving, but returned our gaze with what I thought was a defiant expression. The young warrior was dark-brown of skin. His hair was jet black, long and straight. I guessed his height at just over five feet. In spite of a pot belly, he looked muscular and strong.

"Sits like that for hours at a time," the Colpet Chief added. "You wonder what he's thinking about. Maybe some day we'll find out."

In the late afternoon we left the Colpet camp for the airstrip. The Manager and two others accompanied us. We stood around for a half-hour and finally heard the plane. As it came into view, I recognized it as the one I'd flown in so often. It was Johnny Ransom alright. He came in low,—about thirty feet off the ground,—and waved as he flew past our little group. His blonde hair shone in the sunlight. He gained some height, circled once, and tipped the plane on its side for a Ransom-style look-see. Then he made his approach. The ground was rough and we could see that the pilot had a jolting ride until the plane lost speed. Johnny climbed out and we moved toward him.

There were the usual handshakes and many questions. Jack resisted the Dr. Livingstone comment but I was braced for something,—something more airworthy,—possibly a reference to the Wright Brothers. He remained silent, however. He'd been unusually quiet most of the day and I sensed it had to do with my departure. We'd known each other for eight years and had worked together often in that time. He liked to kid me and I responded in kind,—we got along.

With two stops scheduled on the return flight, Johnny was anxious to leave. After a short visit with the group, he and I went aboard. Johnny revved up the engine and we prepared to take off. I was still travelling light. On the trip into Rio de Oro, I had only a camera. On this occasion I had, in addition, fourteen Motilone arrows. Jack had given these to me as a souvenir of a memorable river-run in an Anti-Arrow Boat! The arrows were the same ones that the Old Campesino had pulled through the rat-wire screening from the inside. I was thankful that Jack had not presented me with the stinking Crocodile hide.

Johnny positioned the plane on a grassy slope off the end of the partly-cleared runway. He held the brakes on hard and revved the engines until they cried for release. The aircraft jolted forward. It was a rough take-off. Johnny weaved only once to avoid a few stones. We felt ourselves airborne. Circling once over Jack and Ness and the Colpet staff, Johnny tipped the wings in a farewell salute and then angled upward in a steep climb.

I was homeward bound!

'Beats the Hell out of a flat-bottomed Barge or a dugout Pakki-Pakki.' I thought. 'And it beats doing a hundred or so miles of river work against the current. Particularly when you're wondering if it will be a sandbar or an arrow that will stop you in your tracks.'

Johnny and I joked and talked and we made the two scheduled stops. It was early evening when we landed at Maracaibo. I was surprised to be there.

In a long taxi ride through a busy and noisy city, I suddenly wished I'd not left the Camp on the Rio de Oro. I had taken to the quiet easy pace of the place with its own kind of river-jungle beauty. It had a peacefulness to it. I liked the 'confinement' aspect of the Camp,—the short distances involved. Especially, I had savoured the friendly cameraderie

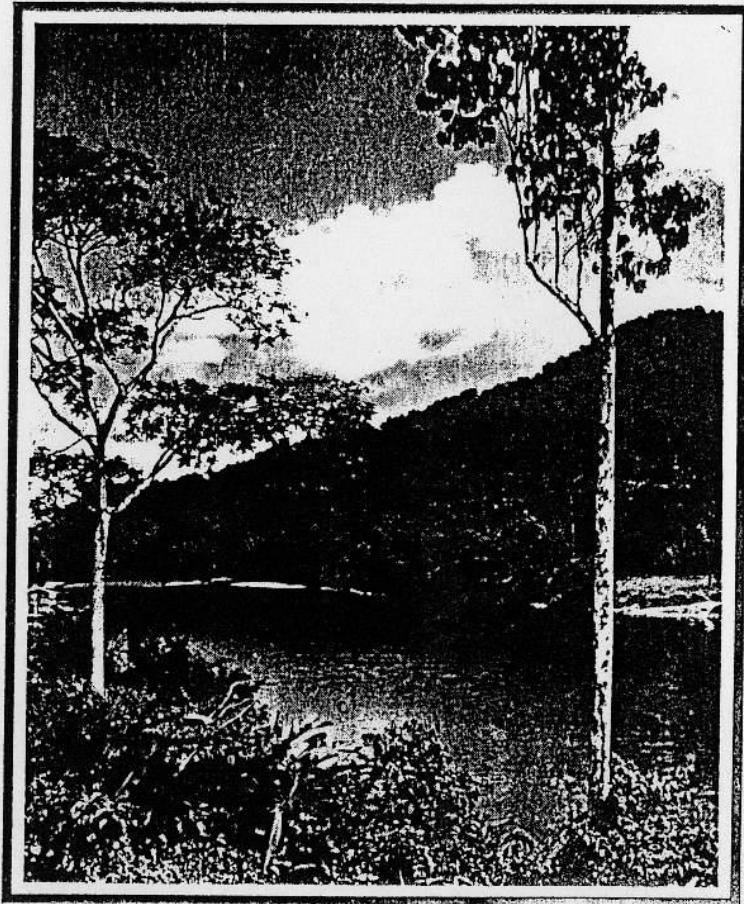
with the drilling crews, with Ness, and with Jack. So much of the unusual had happened in those three weeks, I felt I'd been away for months.

Then the thought struck me: how could I have concluded that the Camp 'had a peacefulness to it'? Indeed, it had exhibited a violence on a scale I'd never experienced! A well-blowout threat that we escaped more by luck than management. One man killed and one wounded from Motilone poisoned arrows. A sixteen-foot Crocodile, killed within twenty feet of the messhall. 'And,' I thought, 'all that had taken place at the Camp,—at that "peaceful little Camp."

And before those happenings, not many miles from the Camp, along the Rio de Oro, five of us had been attacked by a tribe of hostile Motilones! There, we'd been lucky to escape with our lives. How could I possibly have thought of the place as Peaceful? Yet, yet... in my mind it fitted.

This sudden transformation into the smoke and the grime of the city streets, the crowded roadways, the clatter and the bustle, did not sit well. And ahead of me: the workday world of the oil business. Meetings and paper and reports.

Strange but true,—at that moment I looked back with a special fondness on the 'peaceful' little Camp on the Rio de Oro.



*The Rio de Oro has its own kind of beauty*

## 9 *Old Pakki's Story*

After my Rio de Oro experience it took me days to adjust to the job of producing oil,—from a desk. The adventure had been grim in part, even frightening, but it had also been exciting, demanding, and part had been fun. For weeks and weeks after my sojourn there I'd recall scenes and voices and happenings and Jack's loud laughter and shotgun blasts. And so clearly I'd see the look on Jose's face when, after the operation to extract an arrow, he reached for Jack's hand. The message in Jose's eyes had melted strong Ol' Jack like butter.

The original wildcat well, the one that had threatened the blowout, turned out to be a significant oil discovery. The well became a prolific oil producer. Before the year was out, Jack drilled a second well, about two miles from the discovery site. The new well was also a prolific producer. And so, little by little, the Rio de Oro structure was being defined.

Two months after I left, the wet season started and the Oro was again in flood. The dredged part of the river by the original Camp, was suitable for small float planes to land.

Eventually a small airstrip was completed. Things were looking up at the Rio de Oro camp!

During the year that followed my trip to Rio de Oro, Jack turned up in Maracaibo every once in a while. On occasion he'd make the round trip in one day,—now that he could fly in and out of his jungle retreat. Jack would always drop in to my office for a talk and take pains to bring me up to date on everything that had occurred in the interim. He'd tell me, in detail,—whether or not it was important for me to know.

One example was a lengthy story about Colpet's Motilone warrior. Jack had begun periodic visits with the Colpet staff and each time he went to their camp, he asked to see the Motilone. Apparently, the young savage was slowly being tamed.

"He's taken for exercise every day and he walks along beside his guard. They show him around the camp to familiarize him with the white man's ways and he's adjusting and learning. He now speaks a few words of English". I was surprised at Jack's next comment.

"Yeah," he said, "that young Motilone would make a good hand around a rig. He's strong as an ox and he's willing to work. I told the Colpet Chief that I wanted to train the lad at my camp. Y'know,—I think I've got a deal! Wouldn't that be something to write home about, Ay-yee?"

Over the intervening years I'd wonder, once in a while, if Jack ever got his 'deal.' I lost track of Jack eventually and so I never did find out. My gut-feeling however, was that Old Jack would get his way,—sooner or later. He was persistent and patient,—and he would love to do something as unusual as that, if for no other reason than to talk about it.

The last time I ever saw Jack Morris was about a month before I was to leave Venezuela for good and return to Canada. Eighteen months had gone by since I'd spent those few memo-

rable weeks with Jack at his Rio de Oro Camp. I was working at my desk in the Maracaibo office and looked up to see him standing in front of me. He'd walked in quietly. His grin was ear to ear. He was sparkling clean.

"Hi, Podner!"

Jack shouted out the salutation, grabbed my hand from across the desk, and pumped it strenuously for what seemed like a full minute. I returned his back-slapping greeting with equal enthusiasm. We were off to a good start.

Jack was dressed to kill: polished Texan cowboy boots, wide belt and solid silver buckle, expensive blue jeans and colourful Western shirt. He was a sight you'd expect to see in San Antonio or Dallas,—but here, he stood out from the crowd.

His hair was slicked back, he was clean-shaven. It took me a while to replace the rough and sweaty, hard-hatted, be-whiskered jungle driller I'd been used to seeing anytime I heard that voice. We took the afternoon off and retreated to the Club where we could talk.

Jack's news was that he was now through with the Rio de Oro assignment and was heading for the States on a long-overdue vacation. It would span five months. He planned to return to Venezuela after his holiday and take on some other wildcat drilling task.

"I hope they send me someplace where I won't have a Motilone problem. I've had enough of that!" We spent a few easy hours talking, laughing and reminiscing about the various highlights we'd shared,—about people and places and events, and about our future plans.

Old Pakki's name came into our conversation and Jack said, "Did you know that Pakki had tangled with the Motilones once before in his life?"

"No, Jack," I replied, "I didn't know. I could never get much out of the Old Fellow. Or maybe I just found his dialect hard to understand." My curiosity was aroused.

"How did you find out? What's his story?"

Knowing Jack, I had a feeling he had a story he wanted to tell me. We each had a drink in hand and I settled back for whatever time it would take for the story to unfold.

"Well," Jack said, "I got to know Old Pakki pretty well after you left. He stayed at the Camp for two months. Said he was waiting for the Rio de Oro to rise so he could head back down the river. Remember, when you met him aboard the barge, he was planning to visit his brother at El Pilar. He never got to that little airport because I hurried you-all into the Anti-Arrow boat shortly before we were attacked. Then, as you know, he ended up at the Camp and just stayed on."

Jack took time out to sample his drink and then went on with his story.

"With some help from one of the drillers who understood him, we would often draw Old Pakki out. Eventually we got him to talk and we learned a bit about his past life. He told us that about twelve years ago, he'd come up the Rio de Oro with a group of three Venezuelans who were prospecting for gold. They panned along several rivers that drain into the Catatumbo. They had two small boats, both equipped with outboard motors that were used for emergency only or where there was a strong current to fight. Pakki had been hired as a handyman, to help carry and look after the equipment,—and even cook."

"The prospectors travelled up each tributary of the streams that rose in the mountains and flowed into the Catatumbo. Moving westward, stream by stream, they searched and panned the gravel beds for gold. The party had fair success and after a couple of months, had accumulated a good supply of gold dust. They even found a few gold nuggets. Encouraged,

the group continued their western trek and eventually got into the Rio de Oro system. This was where they made their mistake: their maps were poor and did not cover some of the country they were now exploring. *They thought the Rio de Oro was one of the rivers farther east! Instead, it led them right into the Motilone Country.*"

Jack was enjoying telling the story as much as I was enjoying the vision of my old Campesino friend. I began to visualize him in his younger days,—likely strong and active and with jet-black hair and piercing squinty eyes. It stretched my imagination to see him actually exploring for gold, but... Jack's words interrupted my visions. He was in full-flight again.

"The party reached that part of the Rio de Oro where the steep sandstone cliffs run for five miles or so. There, they panned along the edges of sandbars. The boats were separated by a few hundred yards. The one furthest upstream had grounded solidly on a mid-stream sandbar concealed below a foot of water. The two men got out of the boat and started to work it free of the gravel. Then it happened. *Thirty or more arrows riddled the two prospectors!*"

This was a natural place for Jack to hesitate. He knew I was charged with anticipation. He leaned back in his chair and savoured his gin and tonic. Then he took time to order another.

"That's all I drink when I'm on vacation. Keeps you cool. Now take Texas,—that's where you need a drink like this. The heat and the humidity... God-Awful! Worse than the Tropics."

It was a struggle but I didn't ask Jack to get on with the story. I decided to wait him out. Finally he continued where he'd left off ten minutes earlier.

"At the moment the arrows struck the two prospectors, Pakki's boat was approaching the hidden sandbar and was about fifty yards from it. In the boat with Pakki was the third prospector. Both men were aghast at what they saw, but were

unable to take it all in, in the few seconds since they saw their comrades fall. On the edge of a sandstone cliff, high above them, they saw a group of Motilone Indians! Every half-naked warrior was in the act of firing arrows down on their two victims. They fired as fast as they could load an arrow, pull the bow, and let it fly!"

Jack paused in the telling of Old Pakki's story. We were both, no doubt, re-living the attack the Motilones had made on us in the Anti-Arrow boat. We were also visualizing Pakki's shock and horror at what was taking place in front of him. We sensed Pakki's consternation and confusion as to what action to take in the narrow confines of the river gorge.

Jack continued. "According to Pakki, he'd been handling the outboard motor on their boat at the time,—fighting the current through the restricted passage. They were close enough to see their two companions being pierced with arrows in the killing attack. Pakki saw that each man had ten or more arrows in him. He saw the prospectors fall in their tracks onto the gravel,—and lie still. He knew they'd both been killed."

In the next few seconds Pakki whirled his boat around in mid-channel, gave it full throttle, and headed downstream fast! Even so, his boat was hit by a few arrows during the turnaround. His companion took an arrow through his right arm just below the elbow. Pakki, miraculously, was not hit."

Jack hesitated and asked, "How do you like that for an experience? Old Pakki was quite a guy, ay-yee?" Jack tried mightily for the Canadian 'eh?' again, but his Texan tongue could never get it quite right.

"A fascinating story, Jack," I replied. "Imagine that grim scene! Those poor Devils didn't stand a chance. They were probably un-armed at the time and didn't suspect that there were hostile natives nearby. And what an innocent but costly error,— being on the wrong river, I mean!"

I'm not sure Jack heard me. He was talking in a quiet earnest voice as though it had been his own personal adventure.

"A few miles down the Rio de Oro, Pakki beached the boat on a sandbar and inspected the prospector's wound. It was bleeding heavily and looked worse than it was. The arrow had pierced the muscle of the forearm but had not hit the bone. Using the sharp blade of his pocket knife, Pakki cut an X deep into the injury. He sucked out the blood and hopefully any curare that may have been in the vicinity of the arrow's tip as it tore through the man's arm. Pakki bound up the incision and they headed for Encontrados. The prospector was lucky,—or maybe the 'surgery' was effective. He never had any reaction from the arrow wound!"

The temperature had cooled off in the late afternoon. Jack and I walked to a nearby park and found a shady spot beneath a huge Flamboyant tree covered over with scarlet flowers. The Jungle Driller leaned back against the trunk and went on with the story.

"Y'know,—Pakki claimed that the attack on his party, twelve years ago, took place *from the same high cliff* where the Motilones jumped us. Same small sandbar about mid-stream, same forty-foot cliff barren of trees along its top edge. Old Pakki was positive it was the exact spot!"

The memory of our attack flooded into my mind. I broke into Jack's train of thought and said, "So that's why Old Pakki was so alert when we went by those particular cliffs! Remember, Jack? He was like a coiled spring. Recall how he moved around and kept searching the upper edges of the cliffs on both sides of the river?"

Reflecting on the scene in the Anti-Arrow Boat, I saw again, Pakki's rush toward me as I was about to open the doorway. I felt again his quick grab and tight hold on my wrist. I saw again the way he had slammed his body against the door.

## 136 / POISONED ARROWS

Now it was clear to me. Now, a year and a half later, another piece of the puzzle had fallen into place! Jack was silent,—reflective. The story had reawakened in me the feeling of friendship I'd developed for the Old Campesino during my weeks at Rio de Oro. I found myself wondering aloud about his welfare.

"I wonder how the Old Fellow is keeping and what he's doing,—and where he ended up? When did you last see him, Jack?"

"Well," Jack replied, "after his two-month holiday at the Camp,—you know, free meals and a room and nothing to do,—he decided to run The Oro again. Alone. His plan was to visit his brother at El Pilar, then head for Encontrados and eventually work his way back to his mountain village. He was born in Colon, about a hundred miles south of the Catatumbo. He'd lived there all his life,—except for those two trips up the Rio de Oro. Can you believe it?! His first trip was with the three Prospectors, and the second was with you in the dugout. God!...only two trips in a lifetime. On the same river. Fired on both times by Motilones. And from the same spot!"

Jack was silent for a spell and then said, "It beats me why Old Pakki would risk running the same river the third time! Anyway, that's what he did. Wish you could have seen the camp the morning Pakki pushed off from the dock by the houseboat. Every man that wasn't working on the rig was there. They shouted, wished him luck, gave him gifts, and loaded his dugout with food. Every man gave him a long hearty 'abrazo,' the traditional South American embrace between men. There were tears in his squinty eyes as he started the motor and moved downstream. The men waved until he was out of sight around the bend."

I added the thought that Jack and I both likely had in mind: "I just hope he ran the cliffs without trouble that last time. Maybe third time lucky, eh?"

Our visit was nearly over and I realized I was going to miss Old Jack. By the time he returned from his five-month holiday I'd be back in Canada with Shell.

"One more thing, Jack," I said, "how were all those glossies received? Did you ever hear from your lady-friends?"

"Sure did," he responded. "Over the past year I've heard from all but three of 'em. Hell,—they all loved the photo. But why shouldn't they? That photograph is a perfect shot of the way I am. You caught it just right. It was from my best side and in full sun. Great job! Yeah,—they all raved about it and are now anxious to see me in the flesh!"

This, of course, was one of Jack's practiced jokes and he made the most of it. The night air was filled with his laughter. For once, I believed him. And I thought, 'Good Ol' Jack! How could those lucky ladies not love the guy? Egotistical to be sure,—but inside he was all heart. To me, he was a fine friend, a superlative story-teller and entertainer. He overflowed with a special kind of homespun rustic charm.'

The early evening darkness had come down on our Tropical setting under the Flamboyant tree. We stood up and prepared to go our separate ways. We shook hands, long and hard,—and I recalled a similar parting with Old Joe Robertson on the Prince Albert runway,—fourteen years earlier. For once, Jack and I were strangely silent, as if we knew this was the last time we'd meet.

I mumbled, "Good Luck, eh?" then turned and walked away.

Jack's laughter, though more restrained than I had ever heard it, hung in the soft night air. It followed me on my walk,—as it had done so often at his Camp on the Rio de Oro.

