



RIVER KILL

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

When sudden death stalks an Amazon steamer, Ross Landry seeks a clue behind a cloud of hostility!

Before I passed out, I saw my attacker coming down on me with both feet

STORMS in the mouth of the Amazon hit suddenly and with an appalling violence. This one struck us in mid-afternoon, and murder came with it. Why not? With something like pandemonium aboard the ancient, one hundred and ten foot river steamer, *Rio Tapajos*, who was going to notice a small item like murder—especially when the victim was an American among a shipful of natives who had no particular use for Americans.

And the storm gave them an excuse for at least *pretending* that they had seen nothing. The *Rio Tapajos* was rolling and bucking on the choppy waves where wind, tide and current met to make

every square yard of the muddy river a maelstrom. Rain roared on the roof, bombarded the tarps hastily dropped between the roof and the second deck where we all ate and slept—wind-driven rain that crashed like flung buckshot and added its noise to the wild fury of the storm and the sounds of human panic. Kids were screaming and crying, women praying aloud, men muttering and crying out.

In my experience as a kind of detective-of-fortune I had seen some strange murder weapons, but never a hammock. Maybe that sounds funny, but John Jimmy Jains didn't look funny. Not with

his face blue, his eyes popping out, and his tongue protruding from his puffed lips. And the way he swayed with the sickening roll and plunge of the ship, his toes dragging the deck, was pretty gruesome.

The hammock which held his big, one hundred and ninety-pound body suspended by the neck was in the women's section of the ship, an area in which Jimmy Jains had moved about rather too freely. I knew who had occupied that hammock. Maria Terezinha Palos, a lovely nineteen-year-old girl en route to join her husband in Sao Luiz and not averse to a spot of flirtation now and then.

Brazilians are violently hostile to men who so much as *look* at women who belong to them, and Jains might have paid the penalty for some such mistake. However that might be, Jains was an American, and he was field manager for Damon MacLeish—and I was private-eye for MacLeish on the *Rio Tapajos*, commissioned to keep the boat clean of trouble. The situation was in the lap of Ross Landry, forty-two and new on the job—meaning myself. Two days out of Belem on my third monthly trip—and now came this!

I had tied up with MacLeish, in the States, after reading a yarn about his Brazilian “empire” on the Tapajos River. I had written him who I was and he had cabled me fare and put me aboard the old TAP.

“Keep that boat free of trouble,” he had told me in Belem. “Don’t reveal what you’re doing. Be a writer or something equally useless. People are out to get me because I’m new, American, and hanging on by my financial eyebrows. The Alto Tapajos Company is a gold mine if I can keep it. That old tub is my link with the markets. Anyone who hits me there can bust me wide-open. See to it that no one does, Landry.”

MAC LEISH had told me to keep an eye on Jains. He said, “He’s the best field manager I ever had. But he has a weakness for women, and it sometimes gets him into trouble.”

It had! Or something had. Jains would never say what, now. Nor did anyone else show a disposition to enlighten me. The women, kneeling in prayer on deck, had their backs studiously to that dangling horror and they weren’t having any part of the murder. They must often have seen Jains beside that hammock, flirting—harmlessly enough, by American standards probably—with Maria. If they had seen him killed, it was their secret. And Maria was not among the kneeling women.

I was on a spot. This thing could cost Damon MacLeish thousands of dollars at Sao Luiz, where his work in the jungles, getting out rubber, gold, skins and hides, would be held up awaiting the arrival of another field manager to take the place of Jains. Damon wouldn’t be pleased with me. But Jains had not been out of my sight ten minutes. Someone had struck fast and hard.

The ship had three decks. The lowest, below water level, was jammed with cargo going upriver and with the ship’s gargling old power plant, plus darkness and smells to knock your teeth out. The second—middle—deck held the galleys, stalls for cattle which, along with pigs, chickens and ducks had to be killed en route, for eating. All were noisy. This same deck held the mountains of fuel which fed the wood-burning boilers. Both decks were firetraps, more so than usual now, because we were carrying a lot of gasoline and oil in our cargo.

The third deck held the dining room, aft, with a tarpaulin for a roof. The roofed-over area, forward of this, had washrooms, showers and staterooms on either side, a store at the near end, a stairway leading down, piles of hides, and scores of hammocks.

The men slept in hammocks slung over the three mess tables, the women in hammocks forward of the store. My hammock was next to one that Jains had occupied, in a kind of isolated corral formed by the forward stateroom, the rail and the *commandante’s* cabin. I had been walking aft on the starboard side when I found Jains’ body.

I stood beside the dead man, looked over everybody I could see, glimpsed not a soul who so much as glanced in my direction. But there was tension in the air, in the squalling of the kids and in the rigid backs of the praying women that convinced me a lot of those people knew of the murder.

The next move was up to me. Did *Commandante* Ernesto Queiroz know? He had skippered this ship since her maiden voyage—forty years—not missing a trip. Sixty-odd, mostly Bororo Indian, short, stocky, with snow-white hair, he knew the river, the boat, the people. He must have seen many murders. Did he know about this one? If so, what was he doing about it?

I left Jains and hurried along the port side, peering into the staterooms, none of which were locked, each of which was an oven, cheesebox-size. All smelled. Kids slept in some, women in others, but no Maria Terezinha Palos was anywhere to be

found on this deck. I scoured the second deck with the same result.

Then I went down in the hold, thinking what a fine, dark place it was for a knife in the abdomen, and explored the smelly darkness with a pencil flash. No Maria. I returned to the third deck, went up a ladder to the roof, where spooners sometimes lingered in the moonlight.

Nothing! For all I could prove to the contrary, Maria was not on the boat at all. I thought of her beauty—olive skin, rosy cheeks, black hair and eyes—and I didn't much blame Jains for making a play for her. But the *Rio Tapajos* hadn't stopped for two hours, and I had seen them together less than an hour before. So, if she were gone, she was overboard! She might, though, have escaped my search, be in hiding somewhere. If so, then she knew who had killed Jains.

I went to the *commandante's* cabin, where Queiroz was priming up his white uniform to have it nice when we docked at Monte Alegre.

"Maria Terezinha Palos," I said in Portuguese, "I thought she might be here. I want to ask her to see Indian Rocks with me at Monte Alegre."

Queiroz stared at me from under his brown, overhanging forehead. He was all Indian at the moment, his eyes unreadable.

"As a good friend of her husband," he said coldly, "I shall advise her against seeing Indian Rocks with you. Let us talk to her."

HE ROSE, led the way to the murder hammock, and I followed, my heart hammering with excitement. Maria Palos wasn't there, of course, but neither was Jimmy Jains! I swung on Queiroz, but his eyes were inscrutable, his face a mask. A lot of the passengers were looking at me, now, with the same frozen expressions. They knew, and so did Queiroz!

"Jains, where is he?" I asked. "He was here—murdered—fifteen minutes ago. Now he's gone, and the girl is missing, too. As an American, I am interested in what happens to other Americans. What have you done with the body?"

The captain shrugged. "Is this the first time that Jains and Maria have been missing—at the same time—from the rest of the passengers? Don't start trouble, Landry. I'm *commandante* here."

He meant it. He was telling me plainly to keep my nose out.

"What kind of a report will be made?" I insisted.

"Jains was sweet on Maria," said Queiroz. "Maybe they took to the wilds at the last stop. What's wrong with such a report?"

"Plenty," I said. "For one thing, I saw Jains' dead body swinging from the hammock."

"Did anybody but you see that body?" Contempt was in his eyes and in his voice as he turned away, returning to his office. Cursing under my breath, I headed down the port side, prepared to search again.

I am usually pretty careful, for sleuthing in dangerous waters is an old story to me, but I must have gotten a little careless this time, for a hand reached out from one of the staterooms and got me by the neck. I was lifted bodily off the deck, hauled into the stateroom and the door closed before I could wink an eye. And I'm close to two hundred pounds, mostly man, myself. I had never been handled like that before.

A *Rio Tapajos* stateroom is the smallest built for man. Brazilians average about five feet four in height and the bunks are too short even for them. So a fight between two big men in one of them takes up most of the available space. This fellow was all set to choke me or break my neck, and I had to move fast. I got my feet against the bulkhead and tried to smash him against the other side. He crashed, cursing, against the wall.

But then I fell to the space between the bunks, and over me towered a brown-skinned man who must easily have weighed two hundred fifty pounds, with no fat on him. Instantly he jumped, trying to stamp me. I saw his big brogans coming, rolled out of the way just in time, grabbed a foot and twisted.

He went down, I rolled free, and then we were both up and doing a job of slugging like none I'd ever experienced. His huge fists were like mauls, and whenever he landed he hurt me all through my body. He slammed me against the walls, knocked my head against the open port.

I punched him in the face and he didn't seem to feel it. I kneed him—same result. I got a good look at his face—scarred, savage, blue eyes filled with hate. I couldn't name his nationality, for I was taking such a beating that my vision was blurred.

But I did get in some good wallops. Once I got him against the door, banged his head on it, and snarled in his face:

"Where were you when I was hunting for Terezinha, *Palos*? Where have you been hiding, to trap your wife?"

For answer he came off that door with foam flecking his lips and his neck muscles bulging. He hammered me to the deck with a savage series of rights and lefts to the body. I passed out cold, my last sight of the attacker being his huge, broganed feet coming down at me a second time. And this time he didn't miss!

I came to myself in darkness, save for a dim light through the port. The ship was moored, I knew by the sounds. Somewhere I could hear the spat-spatting of bare feet as *caboclos* refilled the woodbins from great piles on the river bank. I must have been out for hours. It was night.

Groaning, I sat up, knew I had been dumped into one of the bunks. I put a foot down, but it didn't touch the deck. It touched something soft instead, and I knew what it was before I turned my flash on it. The body of Maria Terezinha Palos!

There came a knock on the door then, and the voice of *Commandante* Queiroz. "*Senhor* Landry, are you in there? Open up." I opened the door, confronted the stare of the captain and the men with him.

HE LOOKED at me for some moments, but I knew what lay between my widespread feet, even before he let himself look down at the crumpled, contorted body of the girl. Her neck was thoroughly twisted, and I knew at least one pair of hands that could have done it easily.

The *commandante's* eyes in his weather-beaten Indian face came back to meet my stare once more. "I see that you found poor Maria, *Senhor* Landry," he said softly. "Perhaps you will explain."

"I can't explain her presence here, *commandante*," I said. "But when I passed this stateroom, this afternoon, her husband grabbed me, pulled me in here, and gave me a terrific beating. She wasn't here then. When I came to, she was—as you see her."

"Her husband is at Sao Luiz, eight days from here, on the Tapajos River," said the *commandante*. "You could not have fought with him."

"Would you think that Maria could have done this to me?" I asked.

"You could have hammered yourself against the walls."

"That's ridiculous, and you know it."

"Perhaps," said Queiroz. "But you are a prisoner until we reach Arumenduba and the police." He stepped back, motioning me out, and then I noticed the snub-nosed automatic in his hand.

Presently I stood with my back against the inboard wall of the captain's office, in the area where the women swung their hammocks. Behind and above me was a picture of the Holy Virgin to whom the women had been praying while the storm was raging, and John Jimmy Jains still swung crazily in the twisted hammock of Maria Terezinha Palos. The place was packed with men and women. No children. It looked like a trial, for two men came, bearing the body of Maria Terezinha Palos, which they laid almost at my feet.

"*Senhor* Landry," began the *commandante*, "just who are you, besides being a writer? This is your third trip aboard my vessel. Are you working for the company?"

"Are you?" I flung back at him with intended sarcasm.

"I am the captain—and the questioner at the moment. Answer, please."

In my best Portuguese, I told about finding the body of Jains. "I judged he had been strangled by the hammock, but he could have been killed beforehand," I said.

The women were staring down at the body of the girl, and muttering.

"She deserved what she got," said one.

"But what a brute this American is, to have twisted her neck so."

They went into a lot of detail about me and what might have happened to Maria Terezinha in the stateroom, and they were very blunt. I knew I was in the worst kind of jam.

"Too bad murder only calls for seven years," said one man. "This fellow, whatever we may think of Maria, deserves to die as she did!"

There was a growl of agreement. It would take little to turn this into a lynch mob. Easy to heave me into the drink for the *piranhas* to take over, another colorful detail in the "report" to MacLeish.

"Every passenger is here," said Queiroz. "Did any of you see *Senhor* Jains in or around Maria's hammock at the time *Senhor* Landry says?"

There came a chorus of "no's," and I stared at them in unbelief.

"I searched the steamer for Maria," I said desperately.

"You meant to ask her to see Indian Rocks with you, you told me," Queiroz said. "You found her in that stateroom when you were seeking her, did you not? Perhaps she repulsed you, and you killed her. Perhaps she was dead when you came to me, and you merely sought an alibi."

"Then went there and knocked myself out until now," I said, "so as to be found with her body! I tell you I was making a further search when Palos—it must have been he—jumped me, knocked me out. Just why did you come hunting me, Queiroz? How did you know where to look?"

"I went to the stateroom, knowing it was Maria's, and knowing Maria," Queiroz said.

I didn't like that slur on the dead girl. I felt sure that she had been no more than mildly flirtatious with Jains.

"I don't think there was any real harm in her," I said.

That got the wrong reaction, angered them further. I am sure that they would have rushed me if the *commandante* had not had the situation in hand.

"I tell you Maria's husband is aboard," I said.

"You say you confronted him," said the captain. "Then describe him."

I RESORTED to deception, seeking to draw out something. "He's a small brown man," I said. "Handy with his fists. Wore ragged dungarees. I know he must be a white collar man, wore the dungarees in hiding, part of a plan to trap his wife in something that would justify murdering her. His hair is black, curly, his eyes black, his face pitted a little with smallpox scars."

The faces around me told me nothing when I had finished. "I shall now describe Palos for you, *Senhor* Landry," said the captain, and proceeded exactly to describe my assailant of the afternoon. That confirmed his identity, if I could ever get to MacLeish with my story, but I wasn't sure I could. I was in a worse situation now than before.

"I could place you under guard, but I'll take your parole instead," Queiroz said. "You can't escape. The river is teeming with *piranhas*, and it's a long swim to shore where the alligators lie."

This was bad. Under guard in a stateroom I'd have been safe for the time being. On parole, in my hammock, I'd be visited during the night. The glitter in the eyes surrounding me told me that. I had heard there were no *piranhas* below Santarem, but I doubted if the *piranhas* had ever heard of Santarem. Go into the water bleeding and you were a skeleton before you reached bottom. Any one of the dozen knives I saw in Brazilian belts around me could start the blood before I went "accidentally" overside.

And now, as I studied the faces around me, a

new and stunning knowledge came to me. Nobody but myself and the murderer *had* seen Jains' murdered body, there in the hammock. The men had not been there. And the women had rigidly avoided spying on Maria while Jains was about. It was their way of expressing complete disapproval. So these people really did believe I had killed Maria! Queiroz, too.

But I had to face it. "I'll give my parole," I said. "I'll not try to escape. But I'll kill anyone who moves in on me in the night—with my bare fists," I added, lest Queiroz think to have me searched for arms and find my Police Positive in its shoulder holster.

There was a stir of protest among the women over sleeping "so close to a murderer." So Queiroz ordered men and women to change places for the night. That would put twenty men with knives close to me. Very nice. Queiroz, by accident or design, was surely paving the way for a third murder—mine!

Maria Terezinha's body was sewn in a hammock and put in her stateroom, the door locked. It could not be kept until the *Rio Tapajos* reached Sao Luiz, seven days hence, and would have to be put overside. It made me a little sick to think of her, so vibrant and beautiful, lying there in the dark stateroom, rolling, a shapeless bundle, with the gentle, snoring roll of the ship.

Later, I lay in my hammock and waited for trouble, and it came to me that Queiroz was the key to the situation. I had figured him to be in on the murder somehow, an enemy of the company. Now I remembered that in forty years the man had not missed a trip of the *Rio Tapajos*, a fact which, in itself, proved a loyalty far beyond the ordinary. The Amazon cruise was his heart's blood.

There was the further fact that Damon MacLeish trusted Queiroz with all the wealth which the *Rio Tapajos* brought to him out of the jungles each month. It seemed unlikely that he would not likewise have trusted him with knowledge of just what my real job was on the ship. So I came now to the conclusion that the *commandante* knew, but that he had to steer a careful middle course between his loyalty to the company and the uncertain temper of the natives.

In effect he had said to me: "As a Brazilian, loyal to my own kind, I have yet done all I can to cooperate with you. The rest is up to you."

Where, I wondered, was the body of Jimmy Jains. If in hiding, Palos was there, too, with the

body, which surely proved him a cold-blooded gent from way back. I believed, though, that Jains was probably overboard, and in the stomachs of the *piranhas* by this time.

Yes, "Palos" was Palos, all right, and I believed that the captain knew the man was aboard. Probably Palos had come down river from Sao Luiz, by launch to Santarem, by sailboat to wherever he had come aboard the ship. He had come to destroy John Jimmy Jains and to sabotage work on the Tapajos River and its tributaries by doing away with the efficient field manager.

BUT now it was nearly midnight, and nothing had yet happened to me. From the swaying hammocks round about came the snoring of many men. If there were any Landry killers among them, they had gone to sleep on the job.

Then I heard a hammock rope squeak, bare heels hit the deck, and someone yawned prodigiously. The fellow hacked and spat. Now he'd waken someone to talk to. Brazilians always did that. There was never such a thing as one lone Brazilian awake.

But this one was different. Feet padded the deck toward me, and I watched through lowered lids. He didn't attack, though. He turned a flashlight in my face. A hundred times I'd seen night-prowling Brazilians do that. They'd head for the showers, and turn their lights into every face in every hammock, for heaven knows what reason.

I was tense for action, though still pretending sleep. But this fellow was just looking, not on cutting carnival apparently, for he snicked off his light after a while, and returned into the snoring darkness.

I heard a man say, "The American, Ramon. What of him?"

"He sleeps, Pedro. Odd that he can, with murder on his soul, no?"

"Americans do not mind murder," said Pedro. "Some of the very best people in America murder their closest friends just because they do not like their faces. I have seen it happen in American pictures that move!"

More erstwhile sleepers were awake now, discussing me. They surely took me apart, verbally. If they believed half of what they said about me, they showed great forbearance in letting me live beyond the moment.

"We could easily knife him and toss him overboard," said someone.

"Why should we trouble, when he is going willingly to the police?" said another. "Why should one make unnecessary work for oneself?"

The yawns began again, and the creaking of hammock ropes as men turned over to go back to sleep. I waited for the snores to resume. Then I'd start a hunt in the dark for Palos, who was probably waiting, just as I was, for the boat to quiet down. His wife's stateroom was midway of the garden of hammocks now occupied by the men. He had killed both her and Jains because he loved his wife. He would still love her, and, if I had guessed "Brazilian" correctly, the next move would center about her body.

If I were right, I would not need to find the man's hideaway. Just keep an eye on that stateroom door. I'd have wagered a month's pay that after he killed her he had wept like a baby. He would come to her again.

But against those huge fists I needed another weapon than a pistol. I didn't want to kill the big man. I wanted to humble him, leave him alive to talk. There was a lead pipe thrust into rail brackets, for use when the gangplank touched this deck. It was two feet long, an inch thick. Just right. I slid silently out of the hammock, got the pipe and eased along the starboard side, crouching under the mass of hammock ropes. I brushed some of the hammocks, but no sleeper stirred.

Opposite the stateroom door, I lay down, turned on my back, and worked my way along under the hammocks with my heels and my shoulder muscles. Close to the door, in deep shadow, I lay on my stomach and waited developments.

I waited an hour before anything happened. I should have seen the man arrive, but I might have dozed a little, been wakened by his silent presence. I didn't see from which direction he came. But it was the man, by his size, who had attacked me earlier.

I held my breath. He didn't see me. I gasped when he opened the stateroom door, for it had been locked when last I had seen it. Queiroz or someone, expecting Palos, had left it open for him, to give the big man a chance to say good-bye to his dead wife. Maybe they planned to arrest him after that. Queiroz and the crew would know all possible hideouts on the boat.

Palos entered the cabin, leaving the door open, and I started to edge forward. I'd give him time to commune with his wife, then nail him, knock him cold, capture him. Later he could explain what he

was doing aboard the *Rio Tapajos*.

He came out much sooner than I had expected, taking me by surprise in a couple of ways. He turned to his left, so that the port side of the steamer was to his left. He hesitated, and I could hear the big man sob. I almost choked on my own emotions then.

For he held the bundled hammock in his huge arms, cradling it as if it were a baby. He started moving along, bending almost double, bringing his chest close against his wife's body, to ease under the ends of hammocks.

I FOLLOWED him, cold chills crawling along my spine, for I guessed what came next. Oswaldo Palos was going to bury his own dead—in the muddy Amazon! Queiroz had prepared her, knowing Palos would somehow manage it. Nobody else was in on it, or there would have been curious ones awake to watch.

I was on my feet, close behind him, doubting now that he would look back, sure he would be concentrating on his sad job with all of his mind.

He'd weight her body, and drop her over the rail on the port side, opposite Queiroz's cabin. So I had it figured. I squatted under the cover of a couple of hammocks and waited for him to poise her on the rail, wondered if anyone would be awakened by the splash.

But in the open space Palos did not even pause. He moved straight on, past the *commandante's* cabin, into the area occupied by the helmsman. How he expected to do anything there without attracting the attention of the helmsman I could not imagine, but he moved so purposefully I knew he knew what he was doing. Maybe the helmsman had his instructions for all I knew.

Palos turned right at the cabin's corner, and I lost sight of him. When I rounded the corner, I got the creeps, for Palos, with his burden, was moving up the steps which led through a trapdoor onto the roof, under the night sky. He went up backward in order to be able to handle his burden. The helmsman, whose dark face showed above the binnacle lamp, must surely have been aware of him, but his intent expression did not change. Slowly, laboriously, Palos went up through the trapdoor with his burden.

I wasn't far behind him. The murderer was so deep in his sorrow he didn't see me.

On the roof were ventilators and raised skylights which formed perfect seats; Jains had sat up here

with Marie. Lovers came up here and spent hours. Palos must have spent many an hour up here with the wife he had so obviously loved. I felt like a heel, spying on him, but I had a job to do.

Palos sat down on a roofed-over ventilator and held that bundle in his arms. He rocked back and forth with her, crooning to her. He would lift his head and look long at the stars, as he must often have looked at them with Marie, from this same place. I'd been told he'd taken his honeymoon on the *Rio Tapajos*. Now he put his head down, close against his bundle and I managed to get onto the roof myself, behind the end of the skylight. To my right the roof slanted away from the middle for ten feet or so, then dropped off straight, twenty odd feet into the muddy, sullen river. To my left another drop. Palos faced the port side. Far off in that direction there was nothing but river, the jungles too far away even to see. But in the other direction the jungle-smudge was visible—a hellish long swim for anybody but a fish.

I hung on, waiting. I couldn't have interfered with Palos's private burial if my life had depended on it. I felt ashamed of the lead pipe, but when I jumped this man, crazy with his grief, I'd need *two* lead pipes.

I thought he'd never get his heart-tearing good-byes said, but he finally did. He rose, a somehow heroic figure in the night, and moved down the cant of the roof to the edge. He straightened, tense. When he dropped her he would turn. I'd give him time to get clear of the drop, so when I brought the pipe down on him, he wouldn't fall overboard himself.

I sure didn't know Brazilians, especially Brazilians in love.

Palos didn't cast his wife's body into the river. He continued to hold it in his arms and simply stepped overside with it. Before I heard the splash I knew what a fool I had been.

Before I had given myself time to realize that what I next did was suicidal, I flung my lead pipe away, raced along the outer edge of the room yelling like a maniac, loud enough to waken everybody on the *Rio Tapajos*:

"Man overboard! Man overboard!"

I saw the swirl in the muddy water where the two had struck. I dived toward the middle of the swirl. I grasped the enormity of what I was doing, even as I fell, but then it was a little late.

The muddy river sucked me in, its hungry appreciation roaring in my ears.

MANY times I'd seen the jagged limbs of hundreds of floating trees in the Amazon. I might have dived into one of them. That I didn't was a tribute to the navigating of Queiroz's helmsman. As I went under I didn't keep my eyes open. In broad daylight even Amazon fish couldn't see two inches before them. I reached for something, anything, that would attach me to Palos. He wanted to die, which balanced the situation in my favor. He'd know, when he felt my hands on him, just what to expect. He'd try to hang onto his wife, go into the darkness with her, and to make sure of that, he'd breathe in—I *hoped*.

I got my hands into something that immediately stiffened and squirmed. I expected Palos to release his bundle, turn and fight me. Then, the one who could hold breath the longer would survive, if either did. I got my left hand in the collar of Palos' jacket. He could have slipped out of it, but to do that he'd have had to release Maria. I felt his shoulders bunch as he held her even more closely.

He wasn't going to use his hands on me. He was simply going to cling to Maria. I could have socked him, and wasted my strength. I could do just one thing that promised success—hang onto him until he went limp, was unconscious.

Slowly, inexorably, the Amazon played with us, while Palos clung to his burden, and the weights in that hammock carried us all deeper into the blackness and increasing horror of the great river.

It could be a hundred feet, or several hundreds of feet deep here for all I knew. I could only await the river's pleasure. I could release Palos, let him go and come up under a floating island. I could think of a lot of dreadful possibilities in the spot I was in.

Palos' tensed shoulders squirmed and twisted. I sensed that his lungs were fighting the water. Mine were not, for I hadn't taken any water, but there were small balls of light in front of my closed eyes, my chest felt as if I had swallowed a hod of live coals, and bubbles roared past my ears on both sides of my head. I realized that I had been compelled to release ever so little of the precious air I had taken into my lungs while I fell.

Deeper, deeper, pressure making it tougher by the second to take, Palos squirming, hanging on.

The inevitable happened. We moved into a submerged tree. It apparently had anchored itself to the bottom, thrusting up its forest of limbs, empty of leaves. The points were slimy swords. We plowed through the forest of swords. Then I was

scared, for the limbs had cut through my clothing in a dozen or more places, had ripped my skin, deeply, in as many places more. If what people had told me, and what I had read, were true, my blood would now bring *piranhas* by the thousand. I hoped fervently that report was correct about *piranhas* not ranging below Santarem—knew the idea foolish.

I couldn't hang on much longer. I didn't think to congratulate myself that the tree hadn't held us all three, drowning me along with Palos. Being human, I thought of my wounds, and the converging armies of *piranhas*. But time passed, seconds that were eternities, and the *piranhas* did not come. The Amazon pushed us into a slow whirlpool, a submerged roil, and turned all three of us over and over. If it could have been filmed it would have looked horrible. We must have looked like a monster of many arms and legs. Only, it all happened in complete darkness.

My nose was burning and I thought of one last chance. Palos' arms were loosening, but not fast enough. For all I knew we might be too deep to reach the surface. I should have thought of it before. I put both hands in Palos' collar, put my legs around his chest, a desperate scissors hold, got my feet against that hammock whose weight was drowning us both, straightened my legs as far as I could, pulled with my arms, with all my waning strength. If a second time had been required, I'd not have made it.

The dead wife slipped away from us and was gone. Palos rolled easily in my hands. I clung to him with my left hand, fought upward with my right and with all the power of leaden legs. Palos was unconscious. If he had fought even a second, we'd both have been done.

I thought I'd black out sure before my head poked above the surface and I gasped for air. Then I gagged, the smell of the river in my nose, the taste of it in my mouth. But I floated. Wavelets lapped against my lips. I turned Palos on his back, held him up, almost dead weight.

The *piranhas* still had not come. I looked through blurred eyes for the *Rio Tapajos*. She was bearing down on us, almost directly, and every light aboard her was on. The rails were lined with men and women. I wished for just a moment I could hear what they were saying. A small boat was being lowered. I heard the clattering of a winch, knew the line by which live cattle were hoisted aboard for food was being lowered for whoever was overboard. I imagined Queiroz alone

would know who he'd see in the water, if anyone survived.

I'd have wagered everybody knew Maria's body had disappeared.

Palos stirred as the TAP swung in, closer and closer, slowing down to keep her waves from swamping us. I hoped Palos wouldn't rouse enough to make me bop him. If he roused at all, he'd probably attack me in a frenzy.

But he didn't. The *canoa* came alongside, hands fastened in my clothing. Other hands took Palos away from me, hoisted him into the *canoa*. Then I was hauled aboard. The Brazilian crew didn't say a word. It was the first time I ever saw one of them—to say nothing of three—absolutely wordless.

They rowed us back to the *Rio Tapajos*, now with engines cut, riding beam-on to the current; not fast, or we'd have been carried under. Hands helped me up the rope. Then a loop went under Palos' arms and he went aboard as the cattle did, except that cattle were lifted by their horns.

Queiroz was the first man I saw, the first time I ever saw him below the top deck. His white hair was all awry in the light of lanterns and candles. Behind him the gloom of the second deck was packed with people, some of them not clothed enough for inspection.

There was a chorus of remarks when Palos was recognized. They were all I ever got from the Brazilians by way of apology, unless the diffident smiles that came to me at breakfast were apology.

Palos lay supine on the deck, returning to consciousness. Somebody produced a bottle. I pushed it between Palos' teeth, not asking Queiroz' permission. The *commandante* didn't say a thing. There didn't seem anything for anybody to say, except Palos. That came next.

Palos snapped out of it as the liquor bit him. He came up fighting, but Queiroz barked: "Hold it, Palos! Don't make us manhandle you!"

That command saved me from a smashing, double-fisted.

"Now, I'll make you people believe me," I said. "Palos, tell us all what happened, beginning with why and how you came aboard the *Rio Tapajos*."

He stared at me dully, shrugged, not caring.

"Since you insisted on separating me from Maria Terezinha," he said in a dead voice, "I might as well."

I'd guessed right, which I didn't usually do. He'd been hired to mess things up for the company, no instructions as to how or what. He'd dropped

down the Tapajos River to Santarem by company launch, come on down to meet the steamer aboard a fishing schooner, "with red sails," he said, as if the color of the sails were pertinent—come aboard while the steamer was loading wood at night, hidden himself in a new boiler that was being installed because the *Rio Tapajos* was converting to oil soon.

He hadn't expected to see Maria aboard. Above all he had not expected to find her, after less than a year of married life, flirting with another man, especially an American.

He'd forgotten his mission, gone a little mad. He'd attracted Maria's attention, when the storm broke, from the shadows at the top of the stairs. She had gone to him, followed him into the hold, where he had snapped her neck.

But she had told him she was to meet Jains in a few minutes, to go on the roof for some excitement in the storm. Palos came back up, not caring now what happened to him. He jumped Jains when Jains came to the hammock to fetch Maria Terezinha. He'd snapped his neck, too. Fury, jealous despair, somehow connected Jains with Maria's hammock. He'd twisted Jains into it.

Then I had got nosy, found Jains, started hunting, and Palos ambushed me in Maria's cabin. With some idea of framing me for Maria's murder, because I was an American, and probably as bad as Jains about women, he watched his chance to put her in the stateroom with me. He left me alive to take the rap!

But when he realized he had killed the thing he loved most, the heart went out of him.

It confirmed what I had been saying all along. The rest I knew, the rest I told. Palos simply listened, sitting with head in his arms which dangled over his knees.

"You're under arrest, Palos," said Queiroz. "We're all sorry for you, sympathize with you, but there is the law. You're such a powerful man no room we have will hold you. I took Landry's parole, I'll have to take yours, until we reach Arumenduba."

The *Rio Tapajos* was swinging back on her upriver course, picking up speed.

I noted one thing: Queiroz accepted a parole Palos had not given. I thought I knew why, for Queiroz was good on hidden meanings in his speech.

"Better turn in, everybody," said Queiroz, moving away.

I DIDN'T expect to sleep a wink, but dropped right off, dreaming no more than half a dozen times of my recent experience in the Amazon.

I didn't see Palos at breakfast. I didn't see him anywhere on the ship. Nobody else did, for he wasn't aboard. Nobody mentioned it. Nobody had to.

But there was wisdom in those apologetic smiles I mentioned awhile back, and complete understanding of everything in the lined Indian face of loyal Ernesto Queiroz, so we didn't even have to

have a conference about it.

Palos' killing of Jains didn't sabotage matters at Sao Luiz as much as it might have. Damon MacLeish, on receipt of my telegram, sent from Monte Alegre, put me in charge at Sao Luiz until he could appoint a new field manager, get him to Sao Luiz.

Then I went back to being a river dick, promising myself to keep my feet out of the Amazon forever thereafter.