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To the memory
of my father
George William Friel

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THE PATHLESS TRAIL

I. SONS OF THE NORTH

Three men stood ankle deep in mud on the shore of a jungle river, silently watching a ribbon of smoke drift and dissolve above the somber mass of trees to the northwest.

Three men of widely different types they were, yet all cradled in the same far-off northern land. The tallest, lean bodied but broad shouldered, black of hair and gray of eye, held himself in soldierly fashion and gazed unmoved. His two mates - one stocky, red faced and red headed; the other slender, bronzed and blond - betrayed their thoughts in their blue eyes. The red man squinted quizzically at the smoke feather as if it mattered little to him where he was. The blond watched it with the wistfulness of one who sees the last sign of his own world fade out.

Behind them, at a respectful distance, a number of swarthy individuals of both sexes in nondescript garments smoked and stared at the trio with the interest always accorded strangers by the dwellers of the Out Places. They eyed the uncompromising back of the tall one, the easy lounge of the red one, the thoughtful attitude of the light one. The copper-faced men peered at the rifles hanging in the right hands of the newcomers, their knee boots, khaki clothing, and wide hats. The women let their eyes rove over the boxes and bundles reposing in the mud beside the three.

"Ingles?" hazarded a woman, speaking through the stem of the black pipe clutched in her filed teeth.

"Notre-Americano," asserted a man, nodding toward the broad hats. "Englishmen would wear the round helmets of pith."

"Mercadores? Traders?" suggested the woman, hopefully running an eye again over the bundles.

"Exploradores," the man corrected. "Explorers of the bush. Have you no eyes? Do you not see the guns and high boots?"

The woman subsided. The others continued what seemed to be their only occupation - smoking.

The smoke streamer in the north vanished. As if moved by the same impulse, the three strangers turned their heads and looked south-westward, upriver. The red-haired man spoke.

"So we've lit at last, as the feller said when him and his airyplane landed in a sewer. Faith, I dunno but he was better off than us, at that - he wasn't two thousand miles from nowheres like we are. The steamer's gone, and us three pore li'l boys are left a long ways from home."

Then, assuming the tone of a showman, he went on:

"Before ye, girls, ye see the well known Ja-va-ree River, which I never seen before and comes from gosh-knows-where and ends in the Ammyzon. Over there on t'other side the water

is Peru. Yer feet are in the mud of Brazil. This other river to yer left is the Tickywahoo -"

"Tecuahy," the blond man corrected, grinning.

"Yeah. And behind ye is the last town in the world and the place that God forgot. What d'ye call this here, now, city?"

"Remate de Males. Which means 'Culmination of Evils.'"

"Yeah. It looks it. Wonder if it's anything like Hell's Kitchen, up in li'l old N'Yawk."

They turned and looked dubiously at the town - a row of perhaps seventy iron-walled and palm-roofed houses set on high palm-trunk poles, each with its ladder dropping from the doorway to the one muddy street. Then spoke the tall man.

"Before you see it again, Tim, you'll think it's quite a town. Above here is nothing but a few rubber estates, seven hundred miles of unknown river, and empty jungle."

"Empty, huh? Then they kidded us on the boat. From what they said it's fair crawlin' with snakes and jagers and lizards and bloody vampires and spiders as big as yer fist. And the water is full o' man-eatin' fish and the bush full o' man-eatin' Injuns. If that's what ye call empty, Cap, don't take me no place where it's crowded."

A slight smile twitched the set lips of the tall "cap."

"They're all here, Tim, though maybe not so thick as you expect. Lots of other things too. Who's this?"

Through the knot of pipe-puffing idlers came a portly coppery man in uniform.

"Well, I'll be - Say, he's the same chap who came onto the boat in a police uniform. Now he's in army rig," the light-haired member of the trio exclaimed. "O Lordy! I've got it! He's the police force and the army! The whole blooming works! Ha!"

Tim snickered and stepped forward.

"Hullo, buddy!" he greeted. "What's on yer mind?"

"Boa dia, senhor," responded the official, affably. With the words he deftly slipped an arm around Tim's waist and lifted the other hand toward his shoulder. But that hand stopped short, then flew wildly out into the air.

Tim gave a grunt and a heave. The official went skidding and slithering six feet through the mud, clutching at nothing and contorting himself in a frantic effort to keep from sprawling in the muck. By a margin thin as an eyelash he succeeded in preserving his balance and stood where he stopped, amazement and anger in his face.

"Lay off that stuff!" growled Tim, head forward and jaw out. "If ye want trouble come and git it like a man, not sneak up with a grin and then clinch. Don't reach for no knife, now, or I'll drill ye -"

"Tim!" barked the black-haired one. "Ten-shun!"

Automatically Tim's head snapped erect and his shoulders went back. He relaxed again almost at once. But in the meantime the tall man had stepped forward and faced the raging representative of the government of Brazil.

"Pardon, comrade," he said with an engaging smile. "My friend is a stranger to Brazil and not acquainted with your manner of welcome. In our own country men never put the arm around one another except in combat. He has been a soldier. You are a soldier. So you can understand that a fighting man may be a little abrupt when he does not understand."

The smile, the apology, and most of all the subtle flattery of being treated as an equal by a man whose manner betokened the North American army officer, mollified the aggrieved official at once. The hot gleam died out of his eyes. Punctiliously he saluted. The salute was as punctiliously returned.

"It is forgotten, Capitaio. As the capitaio says, we soldiers are sometimes overquick. I come to give you welcome to Remate de Males. My services are at your disposal."

"We thank you. Why do you call me capitaio?"

"My eyes know a capitaio when they see him."

"But this is not a military expedition, my friend. Nor are any of us soldiers now - though we all have been."

"Once a capitaio, always a capitaio," the Brazilian insisted. Then he hinted: "If the capitaio and his friends wish to call upon the superintendente they will find him in the intendencia, the blue building beyond the hotel. It will soon be closed for the day."

The tall American's keen gray eyes roved down the street to the weather-beaten house whose peeling walls once might have been blue. He nodded shortly.

"Better go down there," he said. "Come on, Merry. Tim, stick here and keep an eye on the stuff. And don't start another war while we're gone."

"Right, Cap." Tim deftly swung his rifle to his right shoulder. "I'll walk me post in a military manner, keepin' always on the alert and observin' everything that takes place within sight or hearin', accordin' to Gin'ral Order Number Two. There won't be no war unless somebody starts somethin'. Hey, there, buddy, would ye smoke a God's-country cigarette if I give ye one?"

"Si," grinned the soldier-policeman, all animosity gone. And as the other two men tramped away through the mud they also grinned, looking back at the North and the South American pacing side by side in sentry-go, blowing smoke and conversing like brothers in arms.

"Tim likes to remember his 'general orders,' but he's forgotten Number Five," laughed the blond man.

"Five? 'To talk to no one except in line of duty.' Don't need it here, Merry."

"Nope. The entente cordiale is the thing. Here's hoping nobody makes Tim remember his 'Gin'ral Order Number Thirteen' while we're gone, Rod."

He of the black hair smiled again as his mate, mimicking Tim's gruff voice, quoted:

"'Gin'ral Order Number Thirteen: In case o' doubt, bust the other guy quick.'"

II. AT SUNDOWN

Past the loungers in the street, past others in the doorways, past children and dogs and goats, the pair marched briskly to the faded blue house whence the federal superintendent ruled the town with tropic indolence. There they found a thin, fever-worn, gravely courteous gentleman awaiting them.

"Sit, senhores," he urged, with a languid wave of the hand toward chairs. "I am honored by your visit, as is all Remate de Males. In what way can I serve you?"

The blond answered:

"We have come, sir, both for the pleasure of making your acquaintance and for a little information. First permit me to introduce my friend Mr. Roderick McKay, lately a captain in the United States army. I am Meredith Knowlton. There is a third member of our party, Mr. Timothy Ryan, who remained on the river bank to talk with - er - a soldier of Brazil."

The federal official nodded, a slight smile in his eyes.

"We are here ostensibly for exploration," Knowlton continued, candidly, "but actually to find a certain man. I think it quite probable that we shall have to do considerable exploring before finding him."

"Ah," the other murmured, shrewdly. "It is a matter of police work, perhaps?"

"No - and yes. The man we seek is not wanted by the law, and yet he is. He has committed no crime, and so cannot be arrested. But the law wants him badly because the settlement of a certain big estate hinges upon the question of whether he is alive or dead. If alive, he is heir to more than a million. If not - the money goes elsewhere."

"Ah," repeated the official, thoughtfully.

"I might add," McKay broke in with a touch of stiffness, "that neither I nor either of my companions would profit in any way by this man's death. Quite the contrary."

"Ah," reiterated the other, his face clearing. "You are commissioned, perhaps, to find and produce this man."

"Exactly," Knowlton nodded. "From our own financial standpoint he is worth much more alive than dead. On the other hand, any absolute proof of his death - proof which would stand in a court of law - is worth something also. Our task is to produce either the man himself or indisputable proof that he no longer lives."