

*Title*

# **Tiger River**

**By**

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## ***About this eBook***

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## **TIGER RIVER**

### **I. WHERE WATERS MEET**

At the edge of the jungle a rifle roared. High up among the branches of a tall buttress-rooted tree - more than a hundred feet above the soggy ground - a big, red, bearded monkey lurched out into space. Headlong he fell. A swift rip of breaking underbrush, a dull thump, and he lay lifeless on the earth.

At the base of another tree a man quietly levered a fresh cartridge into his gun barrel. For a few seconds he stood motionless, weapon up, eyes sweeping the surrounding tree butts and bush clumps. Then he let the rifle sink and, velvet-footed, stepped forward.

"So, *Senor Cotomono*," he said softly, "you will make your hideous howling, eh, to tell all the world that I am here? You will yell to the tigers of this Tiger Water to come and tear *José Martinez*, yes? Too late you learn that it does not pay to make too much noise with the mouth."

A sardonic smile played under his fierce black mustache. Even as the words slipped from his tongue his gaze lifted from the motionless animal and once more plumbed the vistas about him. Tall, sinewy, hawk-nosed, bold-eyed, red-kerchiefed, belted with a long machete, alert and wary as the great hunting-cat he had just mentioned - he looked a buccaneer chieftain marooned in a tropic wilderness, poised to fight man, beast, or demon.

A minute passed. No sound came, except the ceaseless rustle of unseen small life creeping about in the shadows during the hot hours of mid-day. With a lightning shift of manner he relaxed.

"Hah!" he growled. "*José*, you are over-careful. You have hardly left the Amazon - you have only just landed on the *Tigre Yacu* - and yet you stand as if you were far upstream and had shot a head-hunter instead of a poor *cotomono*. You disgust me, *José mio*. Come, little howler of the heights, and toast your toes at my fire."

In one motion he swooped up the dead monkey and whirled on his heel. A few strides to the rear, and he halted at water: clear water, about seventy yards broad, flowing southeast, at whose margin floated a small canoe. Some rods downstream the limpid little river ended, merging into a turbid yellow flood rolling eastward the mighty Amazon, here known as the *Maranon*.

Two swift glances he shot to right and left - one upstream, one out at the tawny monarch of rivers. Only empty water, glaring under the sun, met his gaze. Leaning his rifle against a handy tree butt, he drew his machete and sliced some tindery bamboo into kindling. A few deft slashes with the same blade dressed the monkey for roasting. Then, adding more fuel, he squatted and concentrated his attention on the cooking of his meal.

A stiff breeze came rocketing down the clear-water stream, snatching the smoke of his fire and flinging it playfully down to the great river. And almost at once, as if the tang of smoke

and the savory odor of broiling meat had evoked life from the depths of that river, something came crawling into the yellow vacancy at the end of the jungle shores. Foot by foot, yard by yard, it nosed its clumsy way out of the west until its whole length floated there, only a little way from the land. There, for a moment, it hung motionless.

A grotesque, misshapen monster of the jungle, it seemed: a low-bodied thing some thirty feet long, with half a dozen short, rigid legs on each side; a humpy creature with a small square bump in the middle, a big round one near its tail, and more than a dozen smaller protuberances along its back. Presently its little legs moved backward, lifted, came forward - flashing glints of sunlight from its wet feet - and slid backward again. Its blunt nose turned up the clear water. It grew larger, crawling toward the spot whence the smoke rolled. And the rough little breeze, as if it had done its duty in summoning the river-beast, passed and was gone, leaving the smoke to rise straight above the squatting man like a telltale finger.

The man did not see the thing approach. Around him stood waist-high grass, which now, in his doubled-up position, rose just above his head and shut off from his view all but the fire and his meat. The river-creature advanced quietly, as if a bit wary. Fifty feet off shore it paused. From it burst a roaring voice.

"Hey there!"

The man in the grass started, spun about, lengthened himself toward his rifle, and in one second was behind the tree with gun cocked. His narrowed eyes stabbed through the sun-glare at the clumsy thing which had slipped up so smoothly within pistol-shot of him. In one tight squint he saw what it was.

A Peruvian garrotea, or river-canoe, with a pile of supplies corded in the middle, a curve-roofed cabin at the stern, twelve copper-skinned paddlers and a steersman, and four khaki-shirted white men: that was the monster. The second glance of the lurking José told him that all the white men were deeply tanned and well bearded; that two of the beards were black, one yellow, and one unmistakably red. Then the voice spoke again.

"Come on out, feller. We ain't huntin' nobody. I see ye got a bandanna on yer bean, so ye'd oughter be a white man. You savvy United States?"

The eyes of José widened.

"Por Dios!" he muttered. "Is it - it is not - yet the voice is the same! And a red beard -"

He stepped forth, rifle still ready but not aimed.

"Sí, I savvy, señor," he answered. "Who comes?"

"Friends," clipped another voice. "Any objection to our tying up here? Want to sell that meat?"

"It is my dinner, señor, and not for sale," José replied coolly, still squinting at the boat. "Tying up here is as you wish. I do not own this river."

"All right. We'll shoot our own meat. Paddle!"

At the command the paddlers swayed in unison. The garretea floated nearer. Then out broke the first voice.

"Say, cap, lookit the guy! Ain't he a dead ringer for ol' Hozy, the lad that was with us last year on that there, now, Javaree river down below? By gosh, I wonder - Say, feller, mebbe this is a sassy question, but what's yer name?"

The speaker was the red-bearded, red-headed man: a broad-chested, muscular fellow whose blue eyes peered keenly from under a cupped hand and whose wide face glowed with eagerness. Into the hawk face of José flashed the light of certainty. His teeth gleamed and his rifle sank. In three strides he was at the water's edge.

"It is the Senor Tim!" he cried. "I thought - but I was not sure. And El Capitán McKay - Senor Knowlton - sí, yo soy, amigos! It is I, José Martinez, at your service!"

"Well, by thunder!" laughed the blond man. "Welcome to our company, José, old top! I'll pump your arm off as soon as I can get out of this blooming boat. Give you a drink too - the occasion calls for a libation. Tim, break out a bottle of hooch."

"Right ye are, looey. Hozy, ol' sock, ye sure are a sight for sore eyes - bokoo jolly, tray beans, like them frogs use to say in France. Oo-la-la! Look out there, ye gobs! Timmy Ryan is landin', toot sweet."

And land he did - crowding between the Indian paddlers and launching himself over the bow as it touched shore. As his boots plunked into the mud his right hand seized that of José and wrung it in a mighty grip.

"Ye ol' son-of-a-gun!" he chuckled. "Ye ol' slashin', tearin', hip-shootin' death's-head! Jest as homely and full o' cussedness as ever, ain't ye? Mind the time we blowed them Red Bone cannibals all to glory? Gosh, that was a reg'lar scrap, I'll tell the world!"

"I remember it well," laughed José. "But you need not break my hand, amigo. The Senor Knowlton seems to wish to use it."

The blond man too had landed, and now he shouldered the exuberant Tim aside and proceeded to make good his promise to pump the Spaniard's arm, meanwhile giving him a running fire of banter. After him, cool and unhurried, came a tall, black-bearded, wide-shouldered man whose set face and bleak gray eyes now were softened by a welcoming smile. Last of all debarked a stocky man of medium height, with hat pulled well down over his brow.

In contrast to the red Tim and the blond Knowlton, the blackbeard spoke no word as his hand grasped that of José; but his brief, hearty grip and direct gaze spoke what his tongue did not. And to him José gave a look and a tone of deeper respect than that accorded to his predecessors.

"Capitán!" he bowed. Then, as their hands parted, he turned suddenly away. When he swung back his bold eyes were a trifle misty and his smile strained.

"Pardon the weakness, senores," he said. "It is sudden, this meeting. And there are few men

who care to take the hand of José Martinez, outlaw - though there are many who would take his head."

"Grrrump! Let 'em come and git it - they'll have a fat time bumpin' ye off while this gang's here, Hozy!" erupted Tim. "We don't give a tinker's dam if ye're a dozen outlaws. Ye're a square guy and ye've got no yeller streak, and we dang well know it. Besides which, there ain't no law in this neck o' the woods, unless they lugged some in since the last time we was here, which I sure hope they ain't. They's too much law in the world now, most of it made by crooks. But say, ain't ye got a word for Dave Rand here? Ye'd oughter remember him."

He motioned toward the last man ashore, who stood impassively waiting.

"Rand?" echoed José. "Senor Rand I do not - Ho! Por Dios! Is this the man who was the Rapsosa - the Wild Dog of the Javary?"

"The same," answered Rand himself. As he spoke he lifted his broad hat, revealing green-gray eyes and dark hair in which an odd white mark stood out above one ear.

"The man who was a crazy captive of the Red Bone Indians," he went on, "and whom you last saw as a naked, painted wreck being dragged home to the States by McKay and Knowlton and Tim here. No wonder you didn't recognize me. Shake?"

"Indeed yes, senor, with pride." And the final handshake was completed. "But how come you here in South America again - and, of all places, on the banks of this dangerous water? You had best move on quickly, comrades, all of you."

Tim interrupted.

"Aw, who's scairt of a li'l brook like this? And say, feller, yer meat's burnin'. Git out o' me way and I'll save it. We got to eat."

José wheeled, pounced, retrieved the blackened meat, and gazed at it ruefully.

"A third of my dinner gone," he grumbled. "But this cotomono was a big one, and we can each get a few mouthfuls of fresh meat from him. Your Indians can find meat of their own if they will hunt back from the water."

But the Indians seemed to want no meat. They did not even show any intention of landing. Every man of them had remained in the boat, and, though they sniffed wistfully at the odor of the cooking, their eyes were continually watching the thick tropical tangle near at hand. Uneasy mutterings went among them, and repeatedly they grunted two words:

"Tigre Yacu."

The northerners stared at them. José, the jungle rover, alone seemed to understand. He gave the paddlers a brief glance, nodded, and let his own gaze go roving upstream.

"What ails them guys?" wondered Tim. "Is this place ha'nted or somethin'?"

"This, Senor Tim, is the Tiger Water," José explained, "and it is bad country. Above here -" He stopped abruptly. Across his words smote a dread sound.

From the jungle behind them broke a coughing roar: a hoarse, harsh, malignant note of menace which struck both brown and white men like a blow. It was the voice of the South American tiger, savage king of the jungle, eater of men; the voice of the Tigre Yacu, on whose banks lurked unknown things; the voice of Death.

## **II. THE RIVER OF MISSING MEN**

For a moment the jungle and the river were still. No man moved; and the rustle of small things in bush and branches was hushed as if all life held its breath. Then, calmly, tall Captain McKay spoke.

"Sounds hungry. A hungry jaguar is bad medicine. Get aboard, men, and we'll shove out a little. Come along, José. Want to talk to you."

José glowered into the tangle as if half minded to go seeking the tigre. But when Knowlton seconded the invitation he shrugged and nodded.

"Climb in," said the blond man. "Nothing to stay here for. The Indians won't come ashore, your meat is cooked, and we can talk better where that brute won't drop on somebody's back. Besides," with a laugh, "we have to dig up that bottle I spoke of."

"Your last reason is much the best one, señor," José grinned. "Now that I think of it, my throat is most dry."

Back into the garrotea the white men clambered, and at once the paddlers shoved off. But for McKay's sharp commands, they would have driven the boat back to the Amazon. As it was, they reluctantly stopped work after a few strokes, and a moment later a sixty-pound weight plunged over the bow. Fifteen yards out, the boat swung at anchor.

Four of the whites went aft to the shelter of the shady hoop-roofed cabin, which rose importantly from a ten-foot palm-bark deck. Tim, the fifth, halted amidships and sought something among the supplies, straightening up presently with a quart bottle on which the Indians fixed a longing gaze. Not until the red-bearded man entered the cabin did the aborigines take their eyes from his liquid treasure. Then they silently moved forward and made a fire in a big clay pot in the bow - the "galley" of their crude ship.

"Wal, Hozy, ol'-timer, here's how!" proclaimed Tim, flourishing the bottle. "Reg'lar stuff, this is - some o' that there, now, Annie Sadder, double distilled and a hundred proof. Take a husky gargle of it before ye eat. Ye git more of a jolt on an empty stummick. Shoot!"

José shot. The anisadoo gurgled down his throat like water. When he handed back the bottle his eyes glistened and a fourth of the liquor had disappeared from mortal view.

"Gosh!" muttered Tim. "Half a pint to one swaller! Ye got me beat. But I'll do me best."

Measuring off another half pint with a thumb-nail, he opened his capacious mouth, nipped his nose between his free thumb and forefinger, and let the bottle gurgle. Presently he gasped, shot the bottle to McKay, seized a gourd, and seemed to dive overboard; but his legs and body

remained on the deck, and the gourd came up full of river water. Several gulps, and he arose, breathing hard.

"That's what we come up here for, anyways - clean water," he alibied. "So I'm gittin' mine now. That Ammyzon water is awright if ye let it settle, but she sure needs some settlin'. Don't ye want a chaser, too, Hozy? No? Then eat somethin' quick, before ye git vi'lent. We don't want to have to fight ye."

But José only grinned and licked his mustache, bowing to Knowlton as the latter saluted him with the bottle and took a short pull. McKay drank without a quiver. Rand barely touched the glass to his lips, then replaced the cork.

"Hard case, this feller Rand," winked Tim. "Last time he got holt of a bottle he swallered the whole dang thing and then chewed up the cork for a chaser. Right after that he sat down hard and the bottle busted inside him, so he has to go easy a few days. If ye don't believe me, kick him, and ye'll hear the glass jingle."

"You'll be more likely to hear the angels singing," countered the green-eyed man, with a tight smile. "Fact is, José, I'm not drinking any more. Drink got me into hell once. Maybe you remember."

The Peruvian nodded.

"Sí. It was drinking which got you into a fight at Manaos some years ago when you were traveling up the Amazon. You struck down a man - a German - so hard that you believed him killed, and you hid on a steamer and fled up the river. Then you went into the wild cannibal country on the Rio Javary, fought another German - Schwandorf - who tried to make you steal Indian women for his slave trade, and were shot in the head by that man. The bullet crazed you, and for years you wandered among the cannibals, who let you live only because they feared you. The Raposa - the Wild Dog of the jungle! I heard of you long before I ever saw you."

"And if it hadn't been for Mac and Merry Knowlton and Tim, who came hunting me and knocked sense back into my head with a gun butt, I'd be there yet," Rand acquiesced grimly. José nodded again.

"Es verdad. But that time is past, and you are a strong man once more. Yet I am much astonished to see you again in the jungle. If I have it right, these senores came seeking you because you were heir to a great estate and they were commissioned to find you. A North American millionaire is the last kind of man I should expect to see here, even if he had not suffered here as you have."

Rand smiled wryly.

"But I don't happen to be a millionaire. I haven't even a million cents, not to mention dollars."

"Por Dios! There were two million dollars - did you not say so, capitán? And that was hardly a year ago! How have you spent so much money in so short a time?"

"Didn't spend a cent of it. Never had it to spend. It's this way: