JUNGLE OIL: HAZARDOUS TIMES

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To my wife, Gwendolyn,
who has been with me
through many years of travel, tribulation
and, hopefully, enjoyment

I

Crude—oil—the heavy raw stuff was to me, many years ago, just a sticky smelly mass.

The production of and search for it in the tropical jungles of South America half a century ago was a vastly different proposition from present-day operations. There were no aeroplanes, helicopters, marsh buggies, land-rovers, or amphibious jeeps. Neither was there any kind of seismology, now universally used.

We relied mainly on our own two feet for transport, sweating through the hot, humid, dense, tropical growth; we might on occasions bestride a mule or donkey if we were lucky. A dugout canoe took us precariously along the crocodile-invested rivers and *caños*, and native *piraguas* ("schooners") sailed us across many square miles of rough lake. During the short dry season we were, at times, fortunate enough to "enjoy" the use of a Model T Ford or an old Chevrolet truck, which, with tyre chains permanently clanking away on the rear wheels, jolted us uncomfortably over primitive trails, cut by our gangs of peons, hacking away with axe and machete, and perspiring by the bucketful. We swallowed quinine morning and night; malaria was rampant, and company orders had to be obeyed.

It was life in the raw: ravaging Motilone Indian tribes on the Venezuelan-Colombian border shot arrows at us day and night, and if you were unlucky, they ambushed and dismembered you in an expert manner, carrying off the more prized parts of one's anatomy. Physically we were plagued by tropical sicknesses, malaria, dengüe fever, snakes, bloodsucking ticks, tarantulas, and a variety of stomach ailments due to the bad water and jungle food. When luxuriating in camp, we often toiled away combating fierce oilwell fires. Forest infernos also threatened our

installations, and conflagrations periodically jeopardized the centuries-old palm-thatched villages built out over the Maracaibo lake, and dating from buccaneer Morgan's time. In the jungle we "rested" under crude palm leaf roofs of very primitive shacks, in hammocks made from local flax fibre. They were usually open to the four winds to catch any breeze and accommodated centipedes, spiders, mosquitoes of all sizes, and snakes; the pet monkey, mangy dogs, parrots and chickens shared our lodgings. Amenities did not exist in any form.

Shotguns were always loaded and at the ready and often helped to supplement our larder. We ate wild pig, peccary, *lapa*, jungle turkey and iguana (a large lizard); in fact most anything, including tapir and armadillo. However, I drew the line at monkey (the large *araguato* howler), macaws, and rattlesnakes, which our peons seemed to enjoy.

In later years (the mid-thirties), there was a very disturbing period when dictator General Juan Vicente Gomez died, with the attendant political uprisings and violent personal vendettas, but more of that later.

How did I come to get involved in such affairs? Well, I have to go back quite few years, to set the scene. . . .

My parents, born in the late 1800s, were both orphans at a very early age, and were drawn together, naturally, by that common bond. My own youth was "highlighted," if that is the correct word, by memories of fiercely blazing German zeppelins falling broken and crazily V-shaped from the sky over the county of Essex and by the sound of shrapnel dropping metalically onto roofs and pavements. We lived on boiled turnips, dished up at every dinner, and saccharin sweetened our weak tea. It was a tough life, with bread and "dripping" for supper, and for us kids, a farthingsworth of boiled sweet crumbs was a luxury!

Travel and adventure appeals naturally to most of us. I had always hoped to roam abroad, but little did I dream such a dream would come true, when, at a very early age I slogged at odd jobs, bringing in a bob or two to augment the family kitty. I sweated weekends as a greengrocer's delivery boy, lugging

around a loaded basket as big as myself (I was little for my age). I delivered orders most evenings for a shoeshop, and later, assisted in a typical old-fashioned corn chandler's, rich with never-to-be-forgotten smells, and with the stables at the rear piled high with bales of sweet hay.

I had to leave school at fourteen without any qualifications: it was a case of "get out and earn your bread and butter." I obtained a post in the city of London, as a very junior office boy, clerk, and shipping assistant—in that order—finally ending up as departmental "dog's-body" in a merchant firm dealing with South American countries. In those early days I already glimpsed the attraction of distant tropical climates through the company correspondence, mainly in Spanish. The shipping documents I laboriously typed out in that language and the visits of olive-skinned clients, were a bugle call to travel and adventure. The firm exported an enormous variety of merchandise: Birmingham machetes (cutlasses), axes for the plantations, machinery for the coffee haciendas, and a vast variety of multi-hued cotton fabrics for the native stores. Chemicals and fertilizers by the ton were despatched to the docks every week.

The attractive tempo of life outside the narrow confines of the British Isles was very inviting, and enhanced by the variety of packages constantly arriving in the office bearing intriguing foreign stamps and labels. They contained sample blocks of almost black, unrefined *panela* sugar, hard as iron, cocoa beans, and green and blue coffee berries from many South American *fincas*. I can still conjure up in my mind our grizzled old German manager, cupping a handful of raw beans to his nose, sniffing for quality and aroma, prior to making a trip to Mincing Lane Market, where the coffee sales were held.

The foreign postbag also brought parcels of tortoise-shell, beautifully marked, chunks of crude *balata* with its heavy sour smell, and *corozo* ("ivory") nuts for the button trade, before the advent of plastics. I remember collecting raw cocoa beans which, mixed with hunks of *panela* sugar I compressed in our old-fashioned copying presses, resulting in a very sickly mass, faintly resembling crude chocolate.

I managed to survive city life for six laborious but reasonably happy years, cycling to work in all weathers to save on fares. My favourite occupation was leaning on the parapet of old London Bridge, watching the river steamers. I was constantly on the watch for a post abroad and had several opportunities. An Englishman—a client with a double-barreled name—who ran a coffee plantation in Guatemala was looking for a young fellow to do the donkey work on his *finca*. The chap was a profound snob and expected to get a college graduate for the post at a salary of about £4 a week. Since I was then only getting a little over £2, the money did not seem so ridiculous (it included board and lodging). However, it involved arising at 5:00 A.M. to get the peons started in the fields. Lack of a public school tie ruled out my getting that post, and on reflection, I can thank my lucky stars it turned out that way. Another possibility was in the nitrate fields of Chile, with a multi-interest concern, but family circumstances intervened. This was also just as well, since I later found out the firm did not treat its staff well in South America.

Meanwhile, I kept up studies at local evening classes, obtaining senior grades in shorthand and typewriting early on. They stood me in good stead eventually—I still enjoy bashing out reams of correspondence to friends, when the mood so dictates. During those winter evenings at study, I met the woman who was eventually to become my wife (and was incidentally my typewriting teacher), but several years of foreign service intervened.

Now to chronicle briefly the events which led to my boarding the small Dutch steamer *Crijnssen*, 3,700 tons, one blustery, icy, wintry evening in Dover harbour. It was February, 1928, and I was outward bound for South America; Venezuela, to be precise.

Although I was barely twenty-one years of age, the tiresome commuting to and from the city of London, had only made me more determined to get away from such monotony. I had been closely following the "sitatuations vacant" in the national press, and towards the end of 1927 I applied through a box number for a foreign posting, not knowing or even caring much where it

would land me and, I must add, without much thought of success. A couple of weeks later however, I was surprised to get a letter from a well-known firm, arranging an interview: I was one amongst a large crowd of nervous young hopefuls that day. We were tested as to our ability, briefed by the director of personnel as to the work involved, and told to await a further communication. A week later I was delighted to get a short note asking me to go for a further interview and medical examination. They also asked when I could sail for Venezuela. The eleventh day of February 1928 was agreed on, a momentous occasion indeed.

Days of hectic preparation followed; I was granted £50 by the company for my kit. It seemed a small fortune at the time, but it had to cover a multitude of items: a large cabin trunk, and a leather suitcase (still in our garage covered with a host of labels after some 40 years of travel); suits of tropical white and some khakis for field work were ordered from the tailor, but I objected to the pith helmet so loved by novelists.

Typhoid injections and vaccinations followed. Lists of do's and don't's, route instructions, steamer labels, train and boat tickets, and finally the embarkation notice. I had letters of introduction to the company agent in Curaçao, Dutch West Indies, in itself exciting enough, and the customary official personnel letter to the Maracaibo office. A whirl of final farewells and I was boarding the SS *Crijnssen* lying inside Dover harbour in the teeth of a howling gale. A check with the purser, the stowing of my baggage in the minute cabin, and we were staggering our way down the English Channel, bound for the West Indies, Barbados to be the first port of call.

I found myself allocated a narrow upper bunk in a small four-berth cabin situated aft of the ship—in fact, over the propeller, which whirled with a terrifying clanging roar as it came high out of the water during the rough weather which prevailed for nearly a week. Life was not peaceful, but it was very absorbing. My travelling companions were a quaint group of people—circus folk, Spanish and German, mostly, speaking only a couple words of English. The circus, some forty strong, was beginning a tour of South America, and they had all their gear on board. The

ponies and other animals were housed on the foredeck in special crates and the odour was very noticeable after we had been in the warmer weather for some days.

Despite the crowded quarters and bad weather, we settled down together very well on the old *Crijnssen*, which in later years took myself and family across the Atlantic many times. The smaller steamers, with their informality, seem to be a lot more pleasant in many ways than the impersonal atmosphere of the huge North Atlantic liners, in which we also made many trips. Incidentally, this small ship, together with most of the Royal Dutch Line steamers, was sunk early on in World War II.

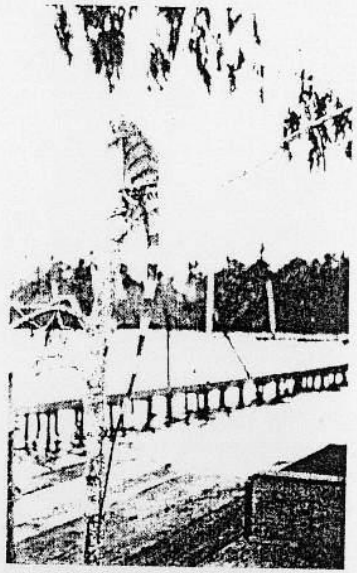
This first sea voyage of mind took a delightfully slow twelve days to the island of Barbados. The weather became unbelievably warm, the sea a wonderful deep green-blue, and schools of flying fish and porpoise were always round the boat. We lounged on the hatches, drank gallons of Dutch beer, and tried to stomach the oily Bols gin and bitters. We attempted to make ourselves understood amongst the circus folk, who spent a lot of time practicing their acrobatics and juggling, and in the calmer weather, they exercised as far as possible, some of the smaller animals. I use "we" in the sense that after embarking, I found three young Dutchmen were on board, travelling out to work for the same company, and that made for a common bond between us.

One memorable dawn—it was around 5:30—I awoke to a gentle throbbing from the ship's engines, and looking through the porthole I could see lines of coconut palms on a sandy shore less than a mile away. The *Crijnssen* was gliding, the only word one could use, at half speed through a calm azure sea towards the port of Bridgetown, Barbadoes, and a few minutes later our anchor clanked down onto the sea bed. It was a very hurried breakfast that morning for everybody, and a dash up onto deck. Several canoes had already gathered around the ship and the dark-skinned occupants, in ragged bathing trunks, were diving for coins thrown from the steamer's deck. Some of the locals had even ventured up the dangling pilot's ladder onto the narrow walkway, and one chap had somehow grabbed a handbag and

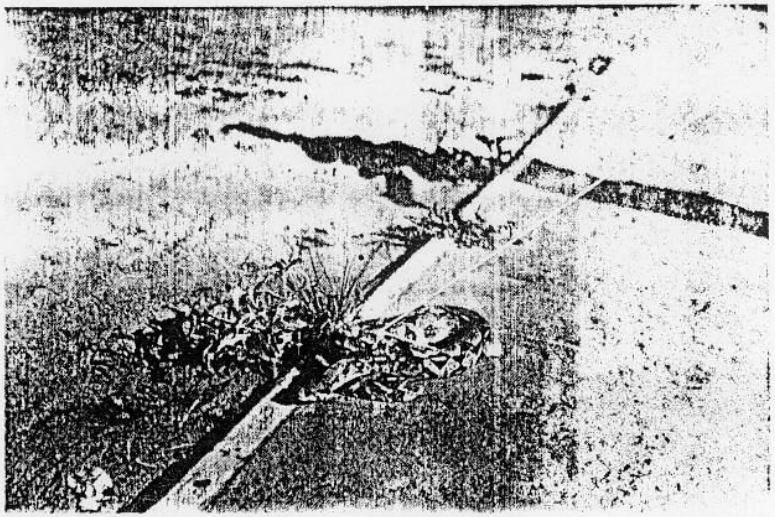
Author, wife, and an orphan jaguar cub—the mother had been shot by hunters in the jungle

The main "trail" from Cabimas to the La Rosa oilfield on the eastern shore of Lake Maracaibo

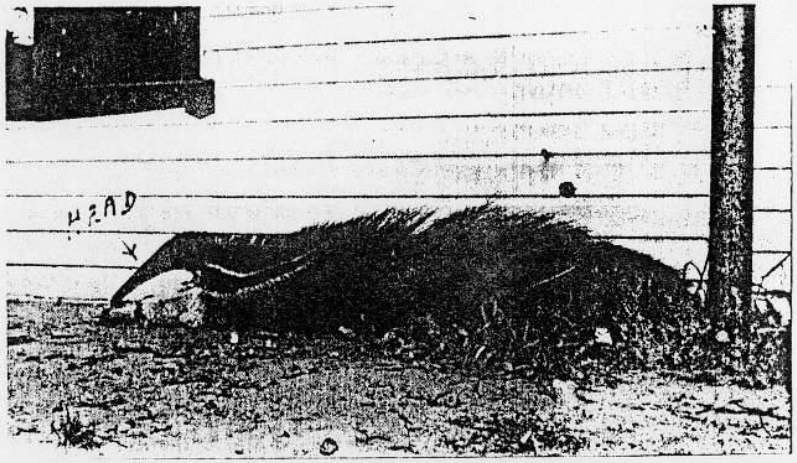
Back from a Sunday morning fishing expedition: lunch assured! A twenty-five-pound grouper



A friendly, pregnant iguana, taking the sun in the Cabimas oilfield, Lake Maracaibo

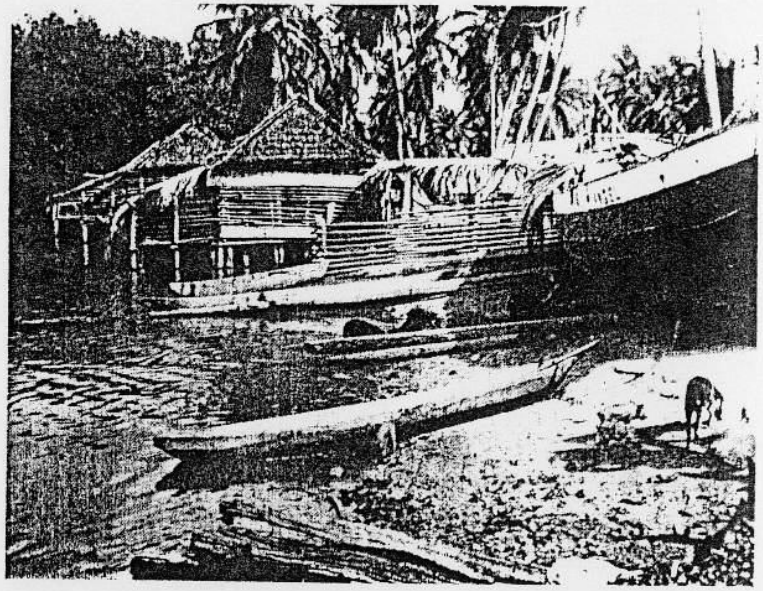


A shy, sleepy, fifteen-foot boa constrictor, tied to our laundry post in the Lagunillas oilfield



A seven-foot anteater, unfortunately shot inside our tankfarm, near the Mene Grande oilfield

Typical form of transport in the Cordillera town of Valera, back in 1929



*A local "boatyard," specializing in dugout canoes (*cayucos*), along the eastern shore of Lake Maracaibo*

taken a flying dive over the rails into the sea. He was picked up by his pal in a canoe which paddled furiously shorewards, with the very decorative harbour police, wearing their beribboned wide-brimmed straw "boaters," rowing after them in their slow heavy dinghy, in a forlorn attempt to head them off. Cabin doors were kept locked after that affair.

Barbados is a lovely little island, and is in fact known as "little England." Hardly did I imagine at that time that I would be returning there a few years later to get married, but that is another story. That morning I went ashore on a small harbour launch, as there was not then sufficient depth of water for the ship to go alongside. I had a swim at the Aquatic Club with its magnificent beach and entrancingly warm sea, then climbed the ladder leading out of the water to the marine clubhouse where I enjoyed a couple of the locally famous drinks—"green devils," I think they were called. Refreshed, I walked around Bridgetown on the way back to the harbour; it was a dream come true. The dusky ladies in multicoloured robes or dresses, the natty point-duty policeman in his smart uniform and beautifully whitened sun helmet, the shops and market stalls with strange tropical fruits, and above all the singsong chatter of the West Indian populace. Yes, that day I savoured fully the opening up of a world miles away and vastly different from the humdrum existence back home in England.

Back on board, after paying off the grizzled old launch patron, we all settled down to lunch, which that day brought us mangoes, papayas, fresh pineapples and the inevitable bananas. "Visitors ashore" sounded shortly after. Anchors aweigh, and the helm was set for Port of Spain, capital of Trinidad, a few hours sailing to the south.

I don't think any of us had much inclination to go to bed that night. We had a full moon overhead, brilliant stars, and a delightfully warm and scented breeze wafted around us on deck. On board were several passengers from Barbados (mostly island residents) who were making the crossing to Trinidad. They mingled amongst us, exchanging interesting gossip until the early hours of the morning. We had received no news from England

for nearly two weeks (there was no transatlantic airmail in those days) but we had managed to buy a local paper in Bridgetown. Approaching Trinidad the next morning, we steamed through the "Bocas," a group of small islands forming a half-speed approach lane to Port of Spain harbour. It was a delightful journey, gliding gently through the deep blue water, with lush tropical vegetation and palm trees quite close on either side of us. Remembering the tiny sandy beaches and luxurious bungalows placed here and there, I have often thought how marvellous it would be to cruise in that part of the world aboard a well-found ten-tonner—the wooded, intriguing, miniature harbours, snug anchorages and a fabulous climate—paradise indeed! Cash and the time to do so were another thing.

Our call at Trinidad was somewhat disappointing after the thrill of the first landfall at Barbados. In those days also, all sizeable steamers had to lie-off due to shallow water, but there are now modern docks at Port of Spain, with ample depth alongside. Anchored as we were over half a mile out from the town, shipboard activity and bustle was similar but even more pronounced than at Barbados. Health officials, immigration, police, all eventually climbed the rope ladder, and after the usual formalities, we were allowed to take a trip ashore for a few hours.

I and two companions went for a taxi ride around Port of Spain and from there went Maqueripe Bay, a pleasant haven for swimming, with white beaches and caves. Returning we paid a visit to the Queen's Park Hotel and before taking the launch back to the ship, we lounged over a cold beer on the balcony of the Ice House, a tavern almost on the quayside.

The next day's steaming was westwards to La Guaira, following the mountainous north Venezulan coast. The La Guaira docks were at that time leased to a British company, under an old charter granted by the Venezuelan government. The company was later bought out, along with the British-owned railway which puffed its way up the steep hillside to Caracas, the capital. I made the journey that day on an ancient wood-burning train, an interesting but very slow trip taking about two hours. It was a

case of the second-class "get-out-and-push" at times. The railway line has long disappeared—it is now only fifteen minutes by car on the modern "autopista." With some of the other passengers off the *Crijnssen* I went for a drive out to the Caracas La Florida Country Club, and later had a meal at the old Palace Hotel in town, before taking a hair-raising ride by taxi down the one-and-only narrow mountain trail to the harbour, compensated at times by marvellous views of the sea and port area.

Dinner aboard ship that night was a sweltering affair in the stuffy dining room, under the lee of the towering range of hills, and we were eventually glad to get out on deck to admire the lights of the town and hillside residences dotted here and there. La Guaira today, with its huge international airport has grown enormously. There was not even an airstrip in those far-off days.

Six hours steaming westwards early next morning brought us to the port of Puerto Cabello, where we docked opposite the government slipway with the aid of a local pilot. We found a marvellous beach west of the town where we enjoyed a swim. It would be a paradise for surfers as the huge rollers from the Caribbean Sea come careering in quite impressively. The main feature of this port at that time was the huge meat packing factory and ice plant, both owned by a British concern, which also had vast cattle lands in the interior. I spent many weeks in the region of Puerto Cabello in later years, negotiating land contracts for a pipeline over the Andean foothills, a tough assignment involving travel by muleback and weary footslogging up the mountain trails. It was interesting, however. With the vegetation changing from sea-level maize to coffee *fincas* on the higher slopes, we had to negotiate a variety of landowners, from the humble smallholder scratching a living from the reluctant hillside, to the millionaire running his mountain retreat in a manner quite like the old feudal days.

Overnight steaming brought us to the entrance to Willemstad harbour, Curaçao, Dutch West Indies. Rolling on a gentle swell, among a line of small shallow-draft tankers, we hove to, awaiting the health and immigration authorities, who eventually came into sight bouncing on the choppy sea, in a launch with

high-flared bows very much like the old-fashioned dories. Curaçao is a quaint coral island, with little vegetation and an acute water shortage. Steaming in very slowly through the narrow rocky passage (one can hardly call it a harbour mouth), past the old forts on either side of the entrance and on beyond the open-pontoon swing-bridge, we finally anchored a few hundred yards further on, virtually in the middle of town. On one side of the harbour channel was the main shopping street. It was like walking through an oriental market, with the shops all displaying a wonderful collection of wares, clothing, jewelry, and curios, to catch the eye of the tourist.

Curaçao is a free port and attracts thousands of American tourists making the round trip from New York or New Orleans. One learnt to keep out of the town when a tourist ship was in—prices rocketed. I should explain here that we often returned to Curaçao for an annual vacation, as our company ran a very comfortable seaside camp just outside Willemstad town. The refinery further inland had sports facilities and a huge cinema which we were allowed to use. It was curious to see how the cinema seats were then graded in accordance with wages or salary. Manual workers all sat at the front, rising back through office staff and artisans to the executive level and general manager right at the back row, a practice which, I should imagine, does not exist in these days. As visitors we were privileged to sit at the rear but to one side.

I had no time on this first trip to explore Curaçao. The rusty coastal steamer which would take us to the port of Maracaibo was lying astern of the *Crijnssen* and we transhipped that evening. We sailed around dusk and found it so pleasant on deck that most of us lounged on the hatches or in deck chairs during the night. Down below, the tiny cabins were hot and stuffy and full of cockroaches and mosquitoes. Being an old tub the boat took over thirty hours to reach the harbour channel which winds its way over the shallow sand bar into Maracaibo lake. The pilot came aboard at the Venezuelan fort-village of San Carlos, rang full steam ahead, and in a couple of hours we saw before us Maracaibo town, which was to be home base for many years to come.

II

It was a Saturday morning when we dropped anchor in the harbour and sat around waiting for the usual crowd of government officials to clamber aboard. I must confess that the first glimpse of the town and the flat back country beyond was somewhat disappointing after the grandeur of the scenery along the mountainous northern coast of Venezuela—Maracaibo did not then possess the fine buildings which now adorn its waterfront.

However, it was all very novel and interesting: coconut palms flourished away to the southwest, white-fronted customs buildings lined the pier, with the spires of the cathedral and many churches in the background. Coastal schooners, fishing boats, and passenger launches were anchored or tied up along the harbour wall. All around us were loaded shallow-draft oil tankers waiting for the tide or clearance; the "mosquito fleet," they were called, due to their small carrying capacity and a draft around twelve feet which enabled them to get over the outer bar to the open sea and the Curaçao refinery. I had to go aboard those tankers on many occasions in later years, accompanying the local court, to attend, on the company's behalf, police affairs mainly connected with wounding or smuggling by the Chinese crews. We were always treated very handsomely by the ship's captain, with whisky and gin flowing freely and cartons of American cigarettes being handed around; it enabled us to speed the legal niceties and get the tanker under way to avoid losing the bar tide.

However, to get back to our very wide-eyed arrival; the company agent, an elderly Dutchman, had turned up on board and helped us through passport and customs formalities. The three

young Dutch employees who had travelled out for the company were put into a taxi and despatched to a rented guest house just outside Maracaibo town. I was, in some ways, less fortunate, for I was booked into the Hotel Victoria in the centre of town, opposite a very smelly food market. My room looked out on to the Plaza Beralt, with its noisy taxis, bars and shops, which all added to the strident chatter of strollers and street vendors on the square below. The company office had closed down at Saturday midday for the weekend, so I was on my own until 7:00 A.M. Monday when (I was informed by the agent) a bus would pick me up.

I felt rather lost—there I was, in a foreign town, with my baggage, two words of Spanish (enough to say *gracias* and order a glass of beer) and a couple of days on my own in which to find my way around. However, find it I did. It is more fun to get out and "do it yourself" than being taken by the hand. Hotel dinner that evening was a strange affair. I came to appreciate the local food better in later years, but on that particular occasion I stuck to the good old *biftek* with salad, although I did try out some of the local fruit.

I had a very disturbed night: many beer parlours encircled the Plaza, and the populace, local and foreign, soaked up the German pilsener well into the early hours of Sunday morning. Gambling was then legal and the casinos kept open night and day over the weekends. It was no unusual sight to see a Chinese, probably a laundry or restaurant owner, wandering around the gambling saloon with his straw hat piled high with winnings—mostly large silver five-bolivar pieces, *fuertes* as they were called, worth then around 4 shillings and similar to our now-extinct crown.

Sleep was impossible, so I got up and dressed at dawn. At 5:00 A.M. some of the local inhabitants had already swallowed their early morning *cafecito* and were off either to mass or to do a spot more gambling. I wandered round town in relative comfort, since the sun had not yet had time to make things stickily unbearable, and the market, open for a few hours or so, had not then released it overpowering smell. Along the waterfront I came

across launches loaded with bananas of all colours and types, mangoes, pawpaws (papayas), melons, yucca, corn on the cob, sweet potatoes, yams, and even dried goat meat. The launches, mostly ancient motorized hulks, were tied up alongside the harbour wall and on this Sunday morning were doing a thriving business. Coconuts, husked or green from the palm trees, were piled on the tiny stern decks, bags of *panela* squares were being slung ashore, some packed in plantain leaves. Salt fish was being loaded onto schooners for despatch to the lake ports, the final destination being villages high up in the Andes. This type of fish cargo had a real "high powered" stink—try travelling behind a truckload of it on an Andean trail and you'll soon pull in and wait for the vehicle and the smell to get well ahead. If you are fortunate and the driver is kindly disposed, you may be allowed to pass on one of the wider stretches of the mountain road.

The native fruits being offered on the pier were of all descriptions: juicy *nisperos* (a kind of medlar), cashew fruit, with its astringent and indescribable taste, oranges of all sizes and colours, green limes, plantains, custard apples, and watermelons, green outside and a juicy pink-white inside. Above, all, there was the incessant chatter of bargaining mixed with the persistent whine of numerous small street urchins, cajoling one into letting them carry your sack or shopping bag to the taxi or the bus for a *locha*, about one old penny. It was a very satisfying couple of hours before I returned to the hotel for breakfast. I never tired of wandering around all kinds of markets and especially the waterfronts in many towns and ports which I subsequently visited in Venezuela, or elsewhere for that matter.

Sunday afternoon, much to the amazement of the Venezuelan hotel manager, who spoke a few words of English, I said I was taking a walk out to the company guest house, about a mile or so north of the town; after all, what was a mile walk? "But Señor, no siesta?" cried the horrified manager. And walking in the heat of the afternoon! Truly, the English are a crazy race, or so he must have thought. However, I started out full of confidence, but very soon began to appreciate the manager's concern. There was no pavement nor even a roadway, only ankle-deep

sand everywhere, through which I gamely struggled. I sweated profusely from every pore and my natty white linen suit was soon bedraggled and soaked with perspiration. That same evening, I found I could have taken a slow but pleasantly cool ride on a very ancient open tram right to the door of the guesthouse, for the princely sum of one half-penny.

The guest house (Ida y Sola), when I did finally arrive, was located well back from the road. It was a typical Spanish-style mansion, rented by the company for accommodating transit employees. It was a very comfortable old place, and after pushing through the swinging half-doors, I found the usual mixed expatriate crowd lounging in the patio, some playing bridge, a game which I found later on to be the inevitable be-all and end-all for many foreign staff and wives and a "must" if one wished to get anywhere in business or the social sphere. I usually deovted my spare time to travelling around and seeing some of the local scenery and meeting the country folk—far more rewarding in many ways.

Early Monday morning, as arranged, I was duly collected by an employee of the company's personnel department and whisked off in a very hard-seated seemingly springless Graham bus. The head office was located south of the harbour and consisted of a very large pretentious Spanish rented mansion with two corner towers. Aptly named El Palacio, it had once belonged to a rich local business man with political ambitions. Adjoining houses had been leased to accommodate the various departments needed for oilfield development and operation: transportation, geological, topographical, marine, labour, stores and of course, management—the latter in large rooms at the front of the building. A number of local residences had also been contracted for staff quarters and building was under way on two "colonies" for housing other employees. Company headquarters are now housed in palatial air-conditioned premises outside town, a far cry from the temporary offices of those old days, although I must confess, the high-ceilinged airy rooms of the old Palacio had a certain charm and comfort. One could gaze right out over the harbour from the front windows; watching craft of all sorts and sizes manoeuvering on the water made it difficult to concentrate on work!

That first morning as a new boy I sat on a bench in the porch entrance of the office and watched the white-suited employees arrive, old "stagers" of a year or more in the tropics. Eventually I was conducted into the personnel department for the usual briefing and arrangements were also made for me to live in a rented house, together with three other young English staff. A chat on my departmental allocation and work followed and at midday I rode the company transportation back to the hotel. On this trip however, I boarded a company barge lashed alongside a small motor launch which plied to and fro across the intervening strip of harbour water from the jetty in front of the office to the government quay. Most of the passengers were local staff who lived in or near the centre of town. It was a far more pleasant journey than by the company bus, which rocked and jolted along the sandy trails spreading out everywhere from the one paved highway through the town. In heavy rain, you were far more certain of getting to your destination if you used the barge, since the nearby local canyon had a habit of turning itself into a raging torrrent, which precluded any vehicular passage through it until hours after the storm had abated.

I soon became accustomed to life in Maracaibo, colourful and interesting from many points of view. The water boys with their donkeys; the quaintly dressed Goajira Indians who came in from the outlying regions with their flowing robes and painted faces. Small general stores dotted the town, trading in everything, including hard liquor and beer, and inevitably had small metal tables out on the sidewalk, at which vociferous groups played dominoes, smashing the ivory slabs down in a vicious manner, amidst violent imprecations and arguments.

In a couple of days I moved to the rented house on the main sandy track out of town. We had a West Indian cook, a cleaner, and a laundry maid, all kept very busy with their various duties—especially the last, since we sometimes were obliged to change our shirts twice a day. One lesson I soon learned—you were obliged to take a siesta at midday and on Sunday afternoons whether you wanted to or not. On no account were you allowed to listen to the radio or play records. I usually picked up an old English newspaper and rocked gently to and fro on one of

the very comfortable wicker chairs. The other chaps stripped down to shorts and slept until tea time. Mosquito nets were draped over the beds, and were very necessary.

The daily routine quickly became familiar; up at 6:00, breakfast (very "English," but improved by the addition of local fruits), and a mad scramble to shave and bathe and a rush to board the company bus to jolt us to the office. Home for a two-hour midday lunch break and then back to work again until 4:00 P.M. At that hour in the evening, some of us used to stroll along to a tumbledown shack near the office where Don Pedro, a wizened little hunchback, kept a tiny beer parlour. Apart from dispensing ice-cold pilsener, brewed in the nearby German brewery, Pedro was quite a character. Come to think of it, so were a number of his clients, practically all foreigners from the "Careebean," as the company was known locally. Many practical jokes were hatched in Pedro's den—one in particular was the introduction of a very, obstreperous donkey into an unpopular senior employee's bedroom, via the wooden stairs at the rear of his lodgings. The stairs were then wrenched away and when our friend got home in the early hours of Sunday morning, very tight, and entered his room via the front he nearly signed the pledge on beholding the, by now somewhat subdued, animal in a corner of the room. He had to enlist the aid of some local people on their way to early mass to get the donkey through the house and out into the street.

Some of the younger set were a wild lot in those days and were always in scrapes of some kind or the other. A party of us went across the lake to one of the camps to attend the inauguration of new club premises. To me it was a memorable trip as it was my introduction to a producing field, with forests of tall oil derricks both on land out in the lake. Miles of pipelines were everywhere, crisscrossing mostly above ground. Vast crude storage tanks and huge gas flares giving off their orange-yellow flames were visible many kilometres away. Above all, I discovered an entirely different way of life: far more freedom—no jackets, open-necked shirts and khaki trousers—and above all a helpful friendliness and few restrictions. I made a mental resolve there and then to get transferred to a camp as soon as possible, a wish which was granted not long afterwards.

That inaugural field club dance was quite an event. Most of the chaps got lit up in more ways than one. In the early hours of the morning a party of them, well liquored, trooped down to the company mess hall and started a huge bonfire in the middle of the main dining room, to the accompaniment of songs untuneful and bawdy. They then decided to visit the transportation yard and staged a race between a mobile crane and an enormous ditching machine. The local telegraph line was damaged in the mad byplay and the lads were lucky not to finish up in goal. At that time the only method of government communication was by primitive dot-dash means, and since the political situation was always very delicate, anything which tended to put the lines out of action was frowned upon severely by the authorities.

However, our crowd eventually found its way down to the company dock where we boarded the waiting launch and set off on the two-hour voyage back to Maracaibo town. It was pitch dark out on the lake and after about an hour's chugging of the old one-lung Kromhout diesel motor we heard noises coming out of the darkness on the port bow. Our *patron* cautiously throttled down and went about, to find that the singing was coming from a small company harbour launch with four of the lads on board. They had run out of petrol, but since they had a cask of beer with them they could not care less—they were tight. We got a line across to the launch and towed it back to town. The chaps were not worried that they showed no lights, but if a tanker had been in the vicinity, they could easily have been run down and sunk.

During the next few months I made several trips out into the back country, which already held a great fascination for me, with enormous twenty-foot-high cacti and vast tracts of sandy desert, stretching for miles to the distant Perijá foothills. The sandy wastes had been caused, so local inhabitants told me, by excessive tree felling about the turn of the century to obtain lumber for building in the town and also for use as firewood. Smallholdings were few and far between, since little grew on the dry sandy soil.

For exercise I played tennis, water polo in the new club pool, and the odd spot of football. Snooker was the favourite recreation in the evenings, either in the new clubhouse up on the hill, or at

the rented building down in the centre of Maracaibo town, next to the cathedral. It was an old Spanish-type house with a flat roof. We sat up there in the cool of the evening and silent picture shows were given down in the patio. The corner hotel in the Plaza Bolivar was convenient for a late beer after the show.

Staff from England and Holland were by then pouring into Maracaibo and movements to and from the oil camps were very frequent: I was no exception and to my great pleasure, my own transfer was fixed for September 1928. I was assigned to the Mene Grande field, named for the large deposits of asphalt (*mene* in Spanish), to be seen all around the region. It was the oldest field in the country, situated some forty miles down the east side of Lake Maracaibo and some ten miles inland. The actual port of entry for the field was San Lorenzo, where the company had a small refinery.

I left Maracaibo one Sunday night on a company passenger launch, a very nice craft with sleeping accommodation amidships and a dining saloon aft. She was named the *Ana Maria Campos*. We sailed around 10:00 P.M. and sat around on the tiny afterdeck, drinking cold beer and watching the lights of Maracaibo town gradually fade into the distance. Within an hour we could see, ahead of us and to port, the glare from the huge gas flares dotted around the oil fields, strung out along the eastern shores of the lake, the orange-red haze staying with us until the early hours of the morning. Breakfast was served just as we were approaching the San Lorenzo refinery jetty around 6:30 A.M. and we tied up alongside soon after. Passengers and baggage were quickly transferred to a waiting motor trolley which was to take us up the fifteen kilometres of narrow gauge rail track to the Mene Grande oil field—there was no road. The journey was mostly through jungle and an occasional smallholding. The first signs of our arrival at our destination were the vast oil storage tanks at the collecting terminal called K. 15. A few minutes later the first derricks came into view and we were then rumbling around the stores yard into the patio of the transportation yard. A bus was waiting to take us to the guest house perched up on a small hillock, alongside the main office.

This particular oil field was an entirely self-contained community, built up by the company over many years. It was tucked away in the foothills of one of the lesser Andean ranges, and comprised villages, both for labour and artisans. Staff houses lined the road up the hill. There were shops down in the village, markets, churches, schools, cinema, electric and ice plants, restaurants, a police station and courthouse and a mess hall for expatriate staff, with a clubhouse constructed high up on top of the hill, overlooking the distant plains and foothills. The land for many miles around had been purchased years previously by the company for the development of the oil resources, and a major area comprised a five-league square of land granted by King Phillip the II of Spain to one of his henchmen, for his services in colonizing Venezuela, way back around the year 1570. I know that it took the company some twenty years to buy up the various fractions of the estate, the owners of which were scattered all over the world. Apart from a tiny riverside village, consisting mainly of crude saloons with attendant female retinues, and a few small farms, the nearest populated region of any kind was many hours and miles away.

I was assigned a bachelor bunkhouse bedroom, and ate in the mess hall at the foot of the hill. My new assignment was a complete change from what I had been doing in the Maracaibo office. I was now classified as an assistant labour supervisor (industrial relations nowadays), which involved an immediate need to improve my Spanish, used all day and every day. The labour force was around 1,500 strong, but with the rest of the community, families, merchants, police, and hangers-on, the total population was nearer the 4,000 mark. Our office employees arrived at 6:30 A.M. (all local staff), and I had the job of interviewing applicants for jobs, keeping track of record cards, and making out weekly and monthly reports. I listened to complaints from everybody about all manner of squabbles (the men for the most part were not married but lived with their concubines). It was not unusual to find a long queue outside the office door on a Monday morning, women with grievances to air about wayward "husbands." Our department also arranged welfare matters,

sports programmes, and fiestas. Field work consisted mainly of inspecting company villages for cleanliness, checking on the shops and markets for quality and prices of goods—the latter regulated by us in accordance with lists sent from town. Last, but by no means least, we entertained the police chief and the local judge, exchanging ideas and news over a noggin of firewater. In an old Model T Ford we drove sedately around the villages, chatting with anybody who had problems or who perhaps wanted to beg a market stall or apply for a shop contract. We were, in effect, a type of district officer of the old colonial days.

I usually got lumbered with innumerable invitations to weddings, baptisms, and even to funerals, all of them ending up in a riotous drunk. The living quarters of the workmen consisted mainly of two-roomed adobe-walled dwellings with a rear kitchen—row upon row of them. Communal toilets were in the centre of the village.

At such fiestas the furniture was removed and dumped outside along the wall of the house, benches were set up, and a large cask of beer was precariously perched on a small table. Inside one of the rooms, a three-piece band would settle itself in a corner, and play local dances. Jostling each other in both rooms would be a dozen or so perspiring couples, bouncing off each other quite good-humouredly. At first it would be all strictly formal—jackets and ties—but when the rum and beer had been circulating for a while, the atmosphere became decidedly relaxed. As an official obligation, I had to dance at least once with everybody of the female species—including the elderly grandmothers and aunts—but after that I usually managed to sneak outside in the cool of the evening to chat with the elders of the village and enjoy whatever breeze might be circulating. At first I was rather inclined to dodge such functions, but as my Spanish improved, I got to know the families and their background, and could take an intelligent interest in the conversation.

Our department had quite a large staff, including village inspectors, refuse and cleaning squads, a police force, watchman service, school teachers—not to mention the cemetery gang and the stables, the latter providing the mules which were used by

production foremen on outlying stations and also by the malaria control gangs, working with oil sprays on the ditches and swamps to combat the Anopheles mosquito which abounded in the camp. We also had a couple of lcally engaged Germans and a Trinidadian who worked as labour "checkers." They were always out checking on the field labour gangs to make sure nobody was trying to fiddle "dead" men onto the payrolls.

One of our more unpleasant tasks was to visit the local slaughterhouse, not all that clean with the killing done in a very primitive manner. The head of the animal was roped, the line passed through a ring in the ground and tightened so that the nose touched the earth. A chap then stabbed away at the neck of the beast to find the main artery and left the animal to fall over minutes later. We had to wait until they did the skinning and were then handed portions of the meat and offal to use on laboratory tests, not that it did much good.

We had our own hospital and clinic with the necessary medical and nursing staff. They not only cared for our own workmen and families, but also hospitalized outsiders who were seriously ill. Admissions were referred to the field superintendent through our office, which formed part of the welfare side of the camp. Distressing cases often came in from distant farms. Many were in advanced stages of sickness with little hope, and a number were victims of accidents in the jungle which had been left far too long.

The country surrounding the field was very different from Maracaibo—here there was an enormous variety. The low ridge of Andean mountains not so far distant: thick jungle, within a few minutes' ride, mostly uninhabited, rivers and *caños,* and vast stretches of grassy plains, where we used to gallop the small native ponies, to the detriment and discomfort of our posteriors.

A dam built across one of the small rivers made a delightfully cool swimming hole, where we passed many a pleasant Sunday morning, taking our midday meal and buckets of pilsener.

The local animal life was also fascinating. One morning my foreman brought along an enormous anteater, over six feet long

from the tip of his tapering snout to the end of his bushy tail. I still have a photograph of it, taken outside our office. Jaguars were found close by and killed the wild deer and sometimes the farmers' cattle. The odd mountain lion was occasionally seen, usually frequenting the water holes in the river bed. Tribes of large red monkeys swung amongst the jungle trees to the south of the field and at night one could hear their weird siren-like howling. In fact, they are commonly known as "red howlers"—the Spanish name for them was *araguato.* The smallholders used to shoot them to supplement their larders and they were reckoned to be quite good eating. The smallholders also hunted the larger iguanas, which were prized as a delicacy. I often ate such peculiar dishes in later years when I changed my occupation and travelled around the jungle regions; they were usually served up in quite tasty stews or *caldos,* which made them acceptable.

Small alligators abounded in the rivers winding along the foothills and I went on many a crocodile-egg hunt with some of the local lads. The eggs were considered quite a delicacy and formed part of the customary Easter food together with the small land turtles. The armadillos were found on the edge of the savanna and jungle and likewise made a very tasty meal. Afterwards the locals used the shell as a basket. I had one such little chap as a pet. He ran around my room and was fed on scraps from the mess hall, I called him Little Willie. He had a very pronounced beaky nose, and usually curled up at night in one of my slippers. Unfortunately he got out one day and was savaged by a local hound. He now adorns our lounge in England—stuffed, of course.

Down around the gas plant, in the evening, one could see huge beetles flying around. They had beautiful velvety brown substances on their backs and enormous antennae. I think they were attracted by the gas flares, or maybe by the smell! Turn them on their backs and they were helpless. Butterflies were in abundance, and some of our staff had very fine collections.

Mess hall food in those days was largely imported. Butter was not made in the country but was imported from the States in large tins. Milk was of the dried variety imported also from

America, since the local supply was unreliable to say the least — lab reports had been very unfavourable. The market supplied a variety of fruits and vegetables, but the meat was tough, although haunches of venison, shot locally, were very acceptable and cheap.

The most peculiar things could crop up in or out of working hours; in fact we were virtually on twenty-four-hour call.

The local judge was in the lounge of the staff club at the top of the hill, engaged in chatting up the young daughter of the resident engineer, a Dutchman. This was around 4:00 P.M. and the club was the coolest place at that time of day. The post of "judge" was rather a sinecure, an appointment made by one of his political relations. The work involved was very simple but carried a variety of "perks," mostly in the nature of commercial contracts and the settling of minor squabbles for which he usually managed to extract something from both litigants. He rarely functioned at marriages since some 95 percent of the labour force lived with concubines.

I had gone up to the club that evening for a game of tennis, but a sudden downpour had left the concrete court under water. I was enjoying a cold beer and knocking the snooker balls around when a phone call came through from Don Pedro, the village inspector. "Doctor," said an agitated voice, "could you come down to the Inspectoria? Something has cropped up."

I envisaged a knifing in one of the cantinas, unusual so early in the evening. (Incidentally, any senior staff connected with hospital, or technical, legal, or industrial affairs in the fields, was always referred to as "doctor," placing them, for some unknown reason, above office staff and workmen.)

I interrupted the amorous monologue of the good-looking young judge, much to his disgust, and asked him to accompany me down to the village, where I had little doubt his services would be needed, one way or the other. He somewhat reluctantly agreed and we took the company car down to where Don Pedro was awaiting us. Pedro was somewhat annoyed also, as he was in the middle of supervising his private off-duty business of fresh milk delivery to the village stores, milk which had just been

brought in in old kerosene cans on a train of donkeys from outlying ranches.

It was not, as I had suspected, a cantina brawl. Pedro had just received a message from the company gravediggers at the cemetery outside camp, that a body had been brought in by four runners from the hills, and something needed to be done *muy pronto,* as the cadaver was falling to pieces. We took off in the inspector's pick-up truck to the scene, and from a distance of some fifty metres, the need for prompt action was very evident—a ripe stench hung heavily on the close evening air. The four *campesinos* were standing in a bunch, exhausted from their exertions, as they had been jog-trotting for many hours, carrying the body on a crude stretcher made from bamboo poles, strung across with old bits of rope and liana strips. The grotesquely swollen cadaver itself was covered with an old mule blanket, suspiciously like one from our stables.

We had handkerchiefs to our noses and furiously puffed the pungent local green cheroots as we approached the body. It needed no feat of imagination to guess the cause of death. There were two deep cutlass wounds in the neck and another vicious slash had almost severed the left arm, no doubt during an attempt to defend himself. Gangrene had set in and the wounds were alive with maggots.

We interrogated the four men: "Who was the deceased?"

"*Pués,* it was Antonio Gonzalez, who worked a corn patch up in the foothills, living on his own with a mangy cur, a monkey, a few hens and a donkey."

"Did they hear anything suspicious?"

"No, Señor, we know nothing about the matter, but we did hear rumours that Josefina, a girl living with Agustin Peralta, a workman in the neighbourhood, had been seen swinging in Gonzalez' hammock some weeks back, and *caramba,* such women, they always cause trouble."

"And where is Peralta now?" asked the judge, obviously thinking he might be able to pass the case on to the police, and get back to his enamorada at the club.

"Well, we saw him pass on his donkey some days ago, head-

ing for the hills, but we thought he was on his usual trip to the village for his stock of tabacos, coffee, and rice."

They had not seen him return, and he had usually dropped in for a noggin of aguadiente and a chat. "Why did they suspect something had happened to Gonzalez?" asked the judge. Again an evasive reply: his dog had turned up at one of the ranches, obviously very hungry.

"We had also been planning a joint hunt for land turtles" (*icoteas*—a favourite delicacy during Holy Week), and they were hoping Gonzalez would accompany them.

"We dropped in at his shack to find him dead on the mud floor. We are entirely innocent, Señor, otherwise we'd have just buried him up there and nobody would have been any the wiser."

The judge looked somewhat dejected: his pleasant evening with the señorita seemed to be rapidly fading. He should report this matter to the police, who would then send a message to the distant village where Peralta might be found, and ask for him to be detained on suspicion. This again meant he would have to chase round and find his secretary to instruct him to take depositions from the four men who were obviously only too keen to disappear back into the jungle. Furthermore, such a step would undoubtedly involve him, the judge, in an uncomfortable mosquito-ridden ride on mule back for a day or so, to visit the scene of the crime and complete his dossier. It certainly was a prospect to be avoided if at all possible.

The judge was turning the matter over in his mind; I could guess what he was thinking. He again questioned the men: Did they really have any actual proof as to what had happened? After all Gonzalez might have been attacked by some unknown bandit, or even perhaps fallen on his machete after a heavy drinking bout. The judge was desperately trying to find an easy way out.

In any event, the body had to be buried right away, and I commented that the doctor, for official purposes, could sign a death certificate later on, to complete the records. "*Verdad*" ("truly"), said the judge: "Of course, it is clearly the solution to the problem—death by natural causes. The sanidad people will confirm that Gonzalez had to be interred right away, otherwise

he could well have been a health hazard."

We turned away whilst our gravediggers unceremoniously dumped the body in an open grave and proceeded to fill it in. I dropped the judge back at the club, got in my game of tennis and Don Pedro hurried back to his milk business. The four country lads disappeared rapidly back into the jungle. It may have sounded callous, but I doubt very much if any further official action would have resulted, if we had gone ahead as laid down by the book.

A word here about Don Pedro Rodriguez, our village inspector. He was quite a character, very loyal, and for a Venezuelan, a very distinct physical type—tall, fair, and blue eyed. We got on very well together and had many a chat and *cafecito* in his well-kept cottage on the outskirts of the village. Many years later in Caracas, I was visiting somebody in the hospital. Walking along a corridor I saw a crowd seated around an oxygen tent in a private ward. I recognizd Pedro's wife and she tearfully explained that he had just been operated on for a liver complaint; he was a very sick man, barely conscious, and although I had not seen him for some twenty years, he immediately recognized me and whispered, "Senor Avery." He tried to lift his hand in welcome, but could not make the effort. He passed away the following morning.

I stayed in the Mene Grande field for some uneventful months, apart from a minor earthquake which shook the club and mess hall. The only damage was to the mosquito-screen windows, which took a beating when some of the staff made hurried headlong dives through the wire mesh!

That particular assignment finished early in 1929, and I had now qualified for a local leave of three weeks. Most of the staff spent it on the neighbouring island of Curaçao, but I had made friends with an Australian chap, and we decided to make a trip over the Andes to the old university town of Mérida, staying a while at a *pensión* on the upper mountain slopes.

One Saturday night therefore, we embarked on an ancient paddle steamer in Maracaibo harbour and rolled and creaked our slow way down the eastern shore of the lake to the port of Mota-

tan del Lago. Here we entrained next morning on a hot and sweaty trip, which brought us in the evening to the small township called Motatán de Tierra. It was not a long journey from the lakeside port, but the old wood-burning locomotive took its time and we spent hours stopping for water and wood fuel; life was very leisurely up in that region. From the rail terminus we took a dilapidated bus to the town of Valera, nestling amongst the foothills of the lesser Andes, where we spent the night at the one and only Hotel Haack, run by a German. The following day we boarded another ramshackle old bus for a village called Timotes, situated high in a fold of the mountains at an altitude around 7,000 feet. We reached the village just before nightfall and were welcomed by the local innkeeper, who insisted on our spending the next three days with him entirely free of charge. He was a young chap and enjoyed a change from his normally placid life. Those few pleasant days spent in the cool fresh mountain air proved a welcome change from the heat, and hustle and bustle of tropical Maracaibo. However, our original plan was to go over the Andean pass to the town of Mérida, and so we arranged seats on a bus leaving at the end of the week. It was a memorable trip; the vehicle, in surprisingly good condition (and it needed to be) was loaded up with all conceivable types of people, with their baggage. Priests from outlying villages, farmers with their families and a number of men from the oilfields, returning back home for a visit. The roof of the bus was piled high with bundles and parcels of every description, including crates of live chickens, sacks of plantains and roped packages of salted fish, giving out a ripe smell. There was even a live pig tied up in a sack, venting its indignation in vociferous squeals.

After lots of noise and confusion, we started off an hour later than scheduled. But there is no sense of urgency in the hills: the later the start, the less likelihood of running into the mountain mists and rains on the upper slopes, a situation which is very unpleasant when you have a narrow muddy trail to traverse, and numerous hairpin bends and sheer drops of a thousand feet or so, at times on both sides.

The vintage Chevrolet bus crawled slowly up the mountain

trail, mostly in bottom or second gear, while we stopped frequently to refill the boiling radiator with water from the streams. There were some eighty-seven hairpin bends, with ever-changing breathtaking views at each and every turn. We must have travelled some thirty kilometres along the trail, yet almost straight down below one could see the diminutive village we had left, only some six kilometres away, as the crow flies. The track at that time, 1929, was barely wide enough for one vehicle and the rough surface had partly been hewn out of the mountain face, mostly by political prisoners. Crude "lay bys" had been cut at infrequent intervals for the passing of vehicles, usually on the softer sections. We unfortunately met a descending lorry on a very narrow portion of the trail. Neither driver was prepared to give way, but after a lot of argument, our chap inched his way over and finally reached a wider strip of the road and the other vehicle scraped past. As we started off again our outer wheels bogged down in the crumbly edge of the track and the bus began to take on a decided list to starboard, with a sheer drop hundreds of feet below. There was a wild scramble by all and sundry, to get out, and then came the problem of getting the bus back on to firm ground. Eventually, by unloading most of the top baggage and everybody pushing and heaving, we managed to get started again. At an altitude of nearly 10,000 feet we were all gasping for breath, but thankful nothing worse had transpired.

Midday saw us pulling into a small village called San Rafael de Mucuchies, where we had a meal of salt pork, beans, rice and plantains. The locals here walk around all day wearing their woolen ponchos, it is so chilly; at nightime they shut themselves into their practically windowless cottages and snuggle under a number of blankets. Still climbing, we crawled over the top of the Páramo pass, shrouded in mist, and it was a relief to stop at a tiny kiosk for hot coffee and a good shot of cognac. We were over the 13,000-foot mark and all around us we could see the snow-capped peaks of the Andes, some over 18,000 feet tall.

Now began the slow low-gear crawl down the other side of the Andean range. An hour or so later, we were passing fields being ploughed by oxen, working on incredible slopes on the

mountainsides. Those beasts are priceless in such regions, as they plod along ploughing or interminably winding 'round and 'round a pole, rotating the huge corn-grinding stones. They haul timber and pull crude wagons loaded with sugar cane on the lower slopes. They do everything where heavy traction is needed, but in these days, I've no doubt tractors are much in evidence.

Mérida is a very clean and interesting old university town with a delightfully clear river running through the centre. We booked in at an old-fashioned but comfortable hotel and unpacked our grips. Most of our stay was spent lounging on the river bank with a book, the local ladies busy nearby doing their laundry, bashing the apparel on the stones at the river edge. At 5,000 feet we could enjoy walks in the neighbouring countryside, completely relaxed; there were no cinemas, no radios or TV. Apart from the chimes of the cathedral, sleep was perfect. Ten days later, we reluctantly retraced our steps over the mountain pass and down once again to the tropical heat and work. The trip had been well worth the effort.

III

Reporting back from leave, I found I had been posted to one of the other camps on the eastern shore of the lake, but only some fifteen nautical miles from Maracaibo town. The voyage across the lake was made on a small company Kromhout-engined diesel tug, the journey taking about two and a half hours. A private mail launch was later put into service and was more comfortable, however it had an abnormally top-heavy superstructure and she rolled quite alarmingly in bad weather. Sudden violent storms, *chubascos*, were quite frequent at certain times of the year, bringing fierce winds and high seas. I was once returning to Maracaibo on this mailboat, when we hit such a storm. It carried away everything forward, including the steps to the upper deck and the tiny steering cabin. The waves were terrifying and we shipped water every time the launch rolled. Passengers were being sick everywhere and some were "telling their beads." Our native captain was very proficient and turned the boat to come under the lee of the distant shore, where we eventually struggled, waterloggeed, back into port, three hours late. We were thankful we did not have to make use of the few sorry-looking lifebelts piled in a dark corner and floating in dirty bilge water. I am sure there weren't enough to go around anyway.

My stay in this particular field was quite short—the boss of the section spent most of his time around the local saloons instead of an the job. The field itself was centred around a sizable native township with public market, shops, bars, police station, and court house. The company only had its own staff camp and labour villages and the inevitable club. Two other American oil companies, operating over the lake itself, had headquarters ashore,

which added variety to the social life. This region however, was completely different to the ordered conditions prevailing in my first assignment up in Mene Grande. The town of Cabimas was sprawling and tough and since most of the saloons were open day and night, violent brawls often broke out, at times involving foreigners of one or other of the oil companies. It was part of our job to handle these matters, and it was therefore essential for us to maintain good relations with the police force and the court officials. Stabbings were not uncommon, and one of our staff had his throat cut almost from ear to ear in a drunken fight down in the village. Only marvellous surgery by one of our doctors saved his life. Drillers, usually tough Texans, were always in trouble. They used to stagger into the company mess hall, gloriously tight, and bellyache about the food. The much-abused Chinese cooks and native waiters never batted an eyelid (just as well), so the drillers, frustrated and furious, hurled their meals, plates and all, into the huge ceiling fans. It was a case of a hurried duck under the tables!

I returned from this assignment to find I was now on the permanent industrial relations staff, and had been allocated to relief work, travelling around to different fields, as and when employees went on leave.

My next transfer was one of the most interesting. It involved a complicated and tiring journey way down south of the lake to an oilfield close to Motilone Indian and bandit country, on the Colombia-Venezuela border.

The trip started off with a long, boring and rough lake voyage of over ninety miles to the mouth of the Catabumbo river, where I transferred somewhat precariously to a flat-bottomed launch, rigged up all 'round with mosquito netting, a very necessary precaution, as we had to spend part of the night in deck chairs. The "loo" was a plank fixed over the stern, with a flap of canvas around it for privacy. Needless to say, it needed an acrobatic feat to maintain equilibrium! Just beyond the little port of Encontrados, reached after hours of chugging past sugar and coconut plantations, interspersed with heavy jungle, we disembarked and clambered aboard a somewhat crude "trolley" mounted on a narrow-gauge railroad. A slow trip of thirty kilometres, lurching through wild jungle, brought us to the El Cubo field. In previous years the final leg had to be made up the Tarra River, a tributary of the Catatumbo, where a similar narrow-guage rail line bumped the six kilometres from the village of La Paloma, to the camp. A small Milwaukee shunting engine pulled a flatcar in those days, the motor running on crude oil straight from one of the wells in the Los Manuele area nearby—almost pure parrafin. This short rail line was later abandoned, but a local squatter had the bright idea of using an old flatcar with benches. He hitched it to a mule and on Saturday nights conveyed the workmen (and others) down to the whore shops and saloons at the riverside village, which, needless to say, were run by the chief of police.

The administration centre of this operational area was located at Casigua camp; it was in a very isolated region, but as opposed to the sparse scenery of the other camps, it enjoyed beautiful hilly and wooded surroundings. The camp was entirely self-contained, as at Mene Grande field, but due to transportation difficulties it was nowhere so advanced in civilized amenities and creature comforts. Beyond the mountains were large swamps overlapping the Colombian border and here were the hunting grounds of the predatory Motilone Indian tribes. They lurked around the camp and the outlying wildcat wells, and we were all obliged to carry revolvers in our belts and shotguns in the car.

A gruesome story of one surveyor Kuhn and his companion was still very much in the minds of company staff and local inhabitants, some three years later, when I arrived on the scene.

The incident had occurred around the end of the 1920s and some of the native "rescue" peons were still around and were very willing to recount the gory details of the affair over tots of rum in the local saloon.

Kuhn was a Swiss engineer, and he and a surveyor companion, Oeuvray, were carrying out topographical work quite a distance from the campsite on the rio Lora. Kuhn had gone on ahead with a few of his peons, opening up trails with machetes

and axes. They were ambushed, but the peons managed to escape into the jungle and over the river together with Oeuvray. Kuhn was not so lucky: he was killed by four arrows which hit him in various parts of the body, three of them being later wrenched out by the Indians and taken away. The Motilones then practically severed his head from his body, probably with a machete and ripped open his stomach and chest, tearing his heart out; they took it and his right hand away with them. His left leg had been almost chopped away at the thigh and the right leg mutilated and practically severed above the knee and he had been savagely stabbed many times after death. The rescue party buried his remains on the spot under a cairn of stones. His companion Oeuvray and two of the peons were found later, hiding in the jungle, their clothing in tatters and covered with wounds and bruises incurred in their escape attempt. They had waded the river Lora and had been without food for some days. Only one arrow was found in Kuhn's body, deeply embedded in his kidneys; the other three had been torn out, from the condition of the wounds.

Another attack had occurred one stormy night up in the Rio de Oro camp of the Colon Development Company. Some of the Motilone Indians had managed to get inside the barbed wire fence of the wildcat well, and had let loose with their arrows at one of the Camp's temporary sleeping quarters. A driller named Smith, seated in a deck chair reading, with his back to the wire screening, was hit in the shoulder, the arrow also passing through his lung. He died a few days later.

In later years when I flew over the Motilone country in the company Stintson plane, one could clearly observe the huge thatched-to-the-ground communal ranch houses inhabited by Indian tribes. The enormous huts measured roughly 150 feet long and at least 40 feet wide, I could see everything very clearly, but never caught sight of any of the Indian occupants. In such a small (single-engined four-seater) plane, with miles of jungle all round, we always kept our fingers crossed that the motor would not cut out or misbehave. The Stinson was equipped with floats for river landings on the wider stretches, but the water in the

Indian-country rivers was normally so low that even if we had landed safely, we would still have had a dangerous and tough journey struggling through hostile Indian country to relative safety and civilization. Most of the Indian attacks were on wildcat rigs or on the outlying pump stations in the field. The collections of storage tanks and pumps, boosting the crude oil to main storage seemed to attract the attention of the prowling tribal Indians, looking for plunder.

One morning around 3:00 A.M. I had a call that a watchman at a wildcat well site had been shot through the stomach by an Indian, the arrow precluding any attempt at moving him. I found the doctor was spending the night with girlfriend down at the riverside village and it was hopeless to try and get a message to him in time. The only means of communication was on the old mule-drawn flatcar, which took about an hour to cover the few kilometres to the riverside shanty town. In any case, by late Saturday evening there was no hope of finding the flatcar at the camp end, as it always stayed down in the village to ferry back the drunks in the early hours of the morning. Many of them fell off into the ditch on the way back, but nobody bothered much. The driver made sure the fallen chap was not in any danger of drowning and was reasonably comfortable; he would walk home on the Sunday, usually still muzzy and unharmed, apart from a grandaddy of a hangover, mosquito bites, and clusters of ticks all over his body.

However, to get back to our story: I phoned around, but the only chap I could contact was a foreign *practicante*, a sort of hospital orderly, named Hans. He was somewhat peculiar in his habits, and was the subject of much ribbing by the Yanks and limeys; in fact, I well remember one night at the club—they spiked his beer with "firewater" and he passed out cold. His tormentors then ferried him back to the bunkhouse, put him in bed, packed ice around his private parts and then squirted toothpaste into his penis. Hans had a violent reaction the next morning when he awoke, with the grandaddy of a heachache, and soapsuds everywhere!

I went 'round to the bunkhouse where Hans was living. I

told him what had occurred and asked him to go along with me and bring the necessary items from the dispensary, including morphia and a surgical saw. I checked over the pickup truck, and made sure it was full of petrol and had sound chains on the rear wheels. I added blankets, a stretcher, a thermos of hot coffee and a bottle of rum, strapped my revolver 'round my waist, and dumped a shotgun in the back of the truck. It was a chaotic drive over the muddy jungle trail, skidding all over the place and with our eyes skinned for signs of an ambush. It was with great relief that we saw the boiler flare and the floodlights in the distance.

The wounded watchman was in great agony, barely conscious; the arrow had gone clean through his body and out the other side—hence the surgical saw. We gave him a heavy shot of morphia and waited a few minutes. We turned him on to his side and got some of the drilling crew to hold his arms and legs. I left it to the *practicante* to cut off the arrow shaft close the man's spine, and he then packed the wound with sterile bandages. We lifted him on to the stretcher, allowed ourselves a much needed shot of rum and started our nightmare journey back to the camp. It was a slow crawl to avoid excessive jolting, at the same time keeping a close lookout for any intruders along the trail.

Arriving at our field hospital, the night nurse came out and quite unconcernedly viewed the arrowhead sticking out of the man's stomach; she also drew attention to the wounded man's member which was making a tent pole under the blanket. The *practicante* sadly shook his head. "Senor," he said to me, "he is in *extremis*—no hope—you must call the local padre."

The man died ten minutes later, and I had the unpleasant task of breaking the sad news to his concubine and relations.

There was another occurrence whilst I was in this camp, but this was connected with Colombian bandits who were said to be going to attack our installations in order to obtain firearms for political purposes. It was quite a hectic affair whilst the two-day scare was on, and I spent most of my time translating government messages sent via our Maracaibo radio station in English and then retranslating them for the local authorities. They, in turn, were relaying somewhat lurid reports in regard to bandit

movements, which I had to pass on via the head office in English for the Maracaibo police and national guard.

The local chief of police was quite a pleasant chap, friendly and helpful under normal peaceful conditions. I spent many evenings in his company down at the riverside village where he had a ranch house, saloons and a general store; he could also book the mule trolley at any time, which was useful. Our evening would commence with a few beers up at our club, then a move would be made down to his ranchhouse by the river, where a repast had always been prepared on a long rough trestle table. Broad green banana leaves formed a sort of table cloth; large calabash halves held steaming chicken stew, flanked by piles of yucca, baked and boiled plantain, hot-pepper sauce, corn on the cob, and the main dish, a huge wooden *batea* piled high with succulent, chunky portions of cockerel—a typical *sancocho*, and a proper feast. No knives or forks were used, and no chairs. We all stood around the trestle table, eating with our fingers. If anybody wanted some of the stew, he picked up a sliver of dried calabash, which formed a serviceable ladle, and helped himself. The meal inevitably finished up with cognac and strong sugary black coffee, the later drunk out of, yes, tiny calabash halves.

In camp one of the staff had a white bull terrier named General; he was famous for having once killed a mule by hanging on to its throat, until they finally had to shoot the mule. The dog himself was a docile old pet with humans. He was borrowed one day by a couple of jokers who spread the word that in the local cockpit there would be a fight to the death between the bull terrier and a young jaguar. Ticket prices were nominal but betting was very fierce, especially amongst the Chinese.

That evening there was great excitement: a large crowd gathered inside the cockpit shed and the moment eagerly awaited when the traps were to be sprung. Out of the first trap came General on a long leash; out of the other shot a very scared jungle cat with a chipped and rusty pisspot tied to its tail. Roars of laughter followed, but the frustrated spectators insisted on their money back. The Chinese tong chief, who managed the

local laundry was holding the stake for many massive side bets, had a tough time explaining matters to his followers. The jungle cat managed to scramble over the cockpit wall and fled into the undergrowth; General was duly returned to his owner and the crowd gradually dispersed to the local bar.

The following year I was offered the bull terrier, as he was becoming somewhat of a hazard in camp. He used to travel with me out in the backwoods, but was a real devil with the farm animals. With General on the seat at my side, I would be jogging along the when he would take a flying leap through the open car window—he had sighted some animal, and if it was not very fast, it would up as dead as a doornail. I often had to compensate irate smallholders for the loss of their pets. General's Waterloo came one day when I was visiting one of the tanker captains; he had a wire-haired terrier, and General broke his collar and made short work of the poor beast. He was banished to a ranch way out in the backwoods, where he sired many offspring for the local hunting gentry.

My stay in this pleasant but somewhat vulnerable camp ended just after Christmas: the usual holiday festivities were held in the clubhouse on the hilltop, but a communal dinner was served down in the mess hall, with bachelors and married staff attending. A dance followed but was marred by a couple of the lads who got very tight; they went outside the building and let fly around midnight with their revolvers. A mad scramble ensued inside the club, everybody diving under the tables, the lights put out. Speculation followed as to whether it was an Indian raid or bandits, and it was some hours later before the truth came out. Those two lads were rapidly shipped down the line—back to the head office. They had livened up the Christmas festivities a little too briskly!

I arrived back in the big city with profound regret at leaving field life, but the powers-that-be decided I should help out in the head office, with all its attendant "civilization." Back to white suits, ties, and polished shoes; to the bus rides and that chained-up feeling I get even now when I see a bowler hat. However, I lasted out my full three years under contract, and embarked on a small Dutch steamer for New York, (got at all impressed by the place). The North Atlantic crossing I made on the old four-stacker *Berengaria* in a stuffy narrow inside four-berth cabin, with one wash basin was not exactly an ideal way of voyaging, and I was glad to see Southampton.

I bought a 1929 Morris-Oxford two-seater, had a delightful three months leave, including getting engaged, and left happily again for Venezuela, on the SS *Colombia*, of the Dutch Line.

Upon my return from leave I was again assigned to the Mene Grande field in a relief capacity as industrial relations supervisor. I renewed acquaintance with many old friends, amongst our own departmental employees, the local tradesmen and government officials. In the office, although nobody had mentioned anything, I could sense unrest in the air. One reason, I deducted, was due to a prohibition placed on the villagers regarding the construction of fences around their dwellings to keep out stray donkeys, goats, and dogs: the fences were to protect their few vegetables and the odd pawpaw tree. The village inspectors were having a difficult time trying to enforce the order. There were two sides to the problem: the fences were for the most part not uniform in any way and being made of old posts and pieces of tin, were unsightly. However, one could also sympathize with the villagers who wanted to enclose a few square metres in which to grow something edible or colourful.

The other bone of contention was more serious: it had cropped up over an order given to the shift men in the gas plant to the effect that, apart from certain increased duties, they had to keep the gangways tidy and clean.

Not surprisingly therefore, we were one morning suddenly confronted very early with what was a public demonstration. I would hardly call it a strike, but it had all the signs of turning into one. In retrospect, it does not sound all that serious, but at that time we were in a very isolated camp, miles from any effective assistance, and dependent for everything—light, power, water, sewage, food, shops—on the labour force; also, of course, for rail transport, our only means of getting out of the camp.

The police force consisted of half a dozen men, on our payroll, but understandably sympathetic towards the demonstrators. Things did, indeed, look somewhat grim early that morning, with hundreds of workmen, wives, and children forming a milling crowd outside the general office. The field superintendent was fortunately able to radio Maracaibo for advice and assistance, since our wireless station was still functioning. The news imparted that morning to the head office, as one can imagine, caused quite a stir, but prompt action was forthcoming from the authorities, who feared possible political complications.

A speed launch was despatched from Maracaibo harbour with a small posse of military on board. They made the journey to the refinery in some three hours and upon arrival by rail trolley at the camp they lined up along the front of the office building. The officer in charge realized the tension among the crowd and moved them back a hundred yards or so from the front of the main building. He was a wily old campaigner and without any further ado he went over and strolled along the front ranks of the throng chatting to some of the workmen. He asked for a representative half dozen men to step forward to discuss their grievances, but nobody seemed to be willing—the Captain thereupon indicated to some that they would accompany him to the office to talk things over. Those unfortunates reluctantly shuffled up the office steps and through into the patio; once inside they were interrogated and then marched out to the waiting rail trolley and within minutes were on their way to the coast and the waiting launch. Needless to add, the crowd had meanwhile melted away like snow on a hot tin roof; the "demonstration" was over. I am glad to be able to say, however, that the incident had the effect of bringing recognition of a need for a standard form of back yard enclosure around the village houses, and it also brought an amicable settlement of the labour trouble in the gas plant. It was rather a tough solution to the problems, but they were tough times.

The only other incident during my three month stay was in regard to an accident case brought in from the outlying jungle; it concerned a young farmer who had been kicked in the face by his

mule. The usual native remedies, cacti poultices, had proved to be of little use and he was in a bad way. Not being a company employee, we cleared up the matter first with the superintendent and then he was hospitalized. He looked such a terrible sight he was put in the isolation hut alongside the main hospital building. His face, if you could call it that, had been eaten half away by maggots and we could only feed him by a tube through what we hoped was his mouth. The only people who went near him were the West Indian nurse, the doctor and myself, with our faces well masked.

His mouth had disappeared, so he could not talk and we never saw any of his relatives again. The doctor kept him loaded with morphia and did wht he could, but complications set in and I think the medical staff were relieved when three days later, he passed away in the night.

Head Office meanwhile had directed me to go down the rail line to take on a temporary assignment at the little San Lorenzo refinery, situated on the Maracaibo lake shore. It was a hot isolated camp: just a clubhouse, mess hall, a few houses and a loading wharf for the tankers. The labourers, for the most part, were housed under tall thatched-roof open sheds, fitted with poles for hammock ties; Ladders led up to the higher regions. On Mondays there was the usual line of peons in front of our office, mostly complaining of stabbings, brawls over women, or about top-hammock occupants who, with their bellies full of Saturday-night booze, did not bother to climb down during the night to use the latrines.

A kilometre along the coast, reached by a narrow muddy trail, there was a tiny village called San Timoteo. It comprised saloons, brothels, and the odd Turk trading in cotton goods and mixed groceries. The entire place was located out on stilts over the swampy lake shore, stinking and unhealthy. Reached from "land" by a rotton plank boardwalk, one false step would plunge you waist deep into the oily muck below.

I went over one Saturday night with a companion, mainly to call on the local police chief, who also controlled our small camp security force. Whilst having a beer in a dingy saloon, I saw

what looked like a jar of preserved cherries, and in my innocence, fished out a couple and starting to chew! They nearly lifted the top off my head: they were hot chili peppers.

Since I was only carrying out relief assignments, I shortly found myself back at the head office for a few days. I enjoyed some water polo and tennis, but was soon on the march, transferred to a field called Lagunillas, about halfway down the east coast of the lake, some thirty miles from Maracaibo town.

This oilfield, rightly, had the reputation of being a very tough place, and as the camp itself was built entirely over a huge swamp, it was, in those early days before mosquito control, a somewhat unhealthy environment. However, we all kept surprisingly fit, probably due to imbibing quantities of local beer and taking quinine regularly.

The nearby native village itself consisted of a motley collection of rough thatch-roofed shacks, most of them built many years previously out over the lake on palm trunk stilts. Indeed, rumour had it that the place was once the haunt of the famous buccaneer Captain Morgan. Clusters of these crude lake villages were to be found further down the east side of the lake, inhabited mainly by smallholders with a corn patch on land. They did occasional hunting at night or took their canoes out fishing to supplement the larder. They were picturesque places, but lacking entirely in any kind of amenity, hygienic or otherwise.

Since the trails inland were often impassable during the rainy months, I often spent nights at these villages, travelling by launch or canoe to visit distant properties or to carry out some bargaining for the passage of geological parties. I found such trips far more peaceful and one was less prone to be infested with bugs or mosquitoes. A paraffin storm lantern and a hammock were all one needed; the villagers provided quite adequate meals washed down by their local rum.

The shacks in Lagunillas lake village housed a few small native dry goods and grocery stores, and a large number of rough saloons with their usual female retinues. The village streets were made from old rotten planks, and were a menace, especially at

night. After a few drinks one could very easily take a plunge into the murky oily water below.

Tied up alongside the outer boardwalks were numerous schooners trading in fruit, vegetables, chickens, and dried fish. On the tiny afterdeck there was the ship's "kitchen"—flattened sheets of old steel oil drum, supporting a charcoal brazier, complete with the inevitable smoke-blackened coffee pot and blocks of *panela* sugar. Bunches of plantains, yucca, and a cockerel or so were always on hand, ready for the cookpot. It was surprising how appetizing a meal the *cocinero* could concoct with the schooner rolling and dipping on the lake swell. I know from experience, as many a time I had to travel on them on urgent trips.

The court house and police station were located in a large brick building, constructed on land just inside the dyke wall, a very convenient vantage point especially on pay nights, when the village over the lake filled up with the boys from the oilfields, enjoying themselves, and usually creating drunken brawls. The company office and staff camp were fenced in and constructed on reclaimed swamp land lying well below lake-water level; it was all protected by an earthen dyke wall, which in later years was converted into a concrete and steel levee capable of resisting the elements. The earth dyke in rough weather was a constant menace, since it often breached in wide gaping holes, mainly during the night time for some unknown reason. The staff, including myself, spent many an uncomfortable night struggling in oily, muddy, lake water, trying to block the gaps with sand bags—in one instance the only remedy was to sink a barge across an enormous opening. Small crocodiles and snakes, fleeing from the swamp and attracted by the lights of the floodlamps made life a little more exciting.

Although still a bachelor I by now had sufficient seniority to be able to share a small two-bedroom house with another staff member. This meant we could employ our own cook and laundrymaid and live entirely independent of the company mess hall, where the food was adequate but very predictable (with ice cream on Thursday evenings and chicken on Sundays). The day resolved itself into the usual pattern: up at 6:00 A.M.; down to

the office for a couple of hours work, despatching the labour checkers; back to the house for breakfast. Afterwards came a trip 'round the company villages for a chat with the inspectors, sorting out any difficulties and allocating housing, and a walk round the company markets and stores to ensure they were reasonably clean and that prices were more or less in line with the standard company lists ruling at the time. It was in fact, much the same pattern as the Mene Grande field routine. Time permitting I would take a stroll down to the village police station and the courthouse, to pass the time of day with the authorities, and to sort out, over a *copita* of rum, any problems that might have arisen with staff—fights, traffic infractions, woman trouble and domestic grievances, both local and expatriate, all came up for discussion.

After lunch and a siesta in the hammock on the bungalow porch, it was back to work, mostly on office routine until 4:00 A.M., when practically everybody departed for their respective relaxation. Tea was the usual routine for the married folk and some of the more senior bachelors, but a number would wend their way to the club bar for a cold beer and a game of snooker or dominoes. Dinner, either at home or in the messhall was around 7:00 P.M., and afterwards, depending on the day of the week, there would be a cinema show or a game of bridge or billiards. At times, it hardly seemed we were living and working in one of the largest oilfields of the Western Hemisphere, but this fact was brought home to us with the occasional well blowouts. Fortunately not too frequent, they were always dangerous, and very spectacular at any rate to the distant onlooker. If, as sometimes occurred, the well caught fire after "blowing," things were indeed grim; as the frightening gas and oil flames shot roaring skywards, nobody could get anywhere near the well head. Normally, on such occasions, a slanted hole was rapidly drilled at some distance, with the object of diverting the blowout into a controlled well head, thus bringing the gas and oil under control. If the well just "blew" without catching fire, the drilling crew pumped down quantities of barytes, hoping to be able to choke off the flow of oil and eventually shut down the safety valves. On one occasion they flew in, as a last resort, tons of beans, haricots

or limas, and pumped them down into the hole, with satisfactory results.

One famous blowout occurred back in the 1920s in the La Rosa field of Cabimas, when thousands of tons of crude gushed high over the neighbouring countryside. The local inhabitants thought is was the end of the world, and reports have it that expectant women, fled terrified from their homes and gave birth in the streets, the one-and-only church was understandably overflowing. The scars from this debacle were still evident many years later, as could be seen from the thick layers of asphalt found over a wide area round the site of the old gusher. Some years later, another well further to the north of this field blew gas so violently that the earth for hundreds of yards around cracked wide open with the terrific underground pressure. The gas caught fire and the whole scene looked like a fantastic prairie fire, with the heat so intense one could not get nearer than a quarter of a mile. Needless to say, we had a very busy time "policing" the area and keeping curious sightseers from getting too close. Eventually, the company had to fly in an oilwell fire expert frm the States, Red Adair, I think his name was. He had the well quickly under control by exploding charges of dynamite, literally blowing the inferno out. On the rare occasions of these blowouts, the roar from the gushing gas and oil flames made it quite impossible to hear anything that was said, even at a long distance from the well. At night, the spectacle was awesome, the numerous gas flares burning around the field were as candle flames by comparison.

Tennis and swimming were the favourite outdoor recreations; football matches were arranged between field staff and tanker crews, followed by dinner in the company messhall, and snooker and a singsong afterwards in the club. I was often called out during the night to bail out tanker officers from the local gaol, so that they could make the lake tide. Most of the officers were Scots and after a tankful of beer at our club they gravitated down to the village and got into heated arguments, mostly about home politics. The local cops usually put them in jug to sober up, and after a chat with the official on duty, I would get them released, upon payment of a fine. In return for my efforts at such

unearthly hours, they often made me presents of cigars, or what was more highly prized, they brought me half a dozen pairs of kippers from the ship's store.

Our somewhat placid life was rudely interrupted in a different manner on another occasion. The night had been very sultry and I was tossing and turning under the mosquito net, perspiring profusely and clad only in shorts. Arriving at the office in the morning, slightly more suitably clad, I heard that a general warning had been put out by our radio operator to the effect that we might soon expect the arrival of the tail end of a hurricane.

Such storms were not unusual in the Caribbean area at that time of the year; there was not much that could be done however, except to have the fire squad stand by, and hope matters would not become too hectic.

Around midday it hit, and we got quite a bit more than the tail end of the snorter; our timber bungalow (built on wooden piles about eight feet off the ground) swayed and shook under the initial impact. The wind rose to a howling crescendo and the air was filled with dust and debris. A sudden vicious blast hit under the eaves of our corrugated iron roof; one whole side came adrift with a terrific rending sound and it was whirled away over and over like a leaf, to land some hundred yards away in the middle of our muddy football pitch.

Then came solid drenching sheets of rain; my companion and I had just finished our lunch and were desperately trying to move our more vulnerable goods and chattels to a reasonably dry place, vainly attempting meanwhile to reassure our West Indian cook, who was cowering inside the tiny larder with the cockroaches scampering around her. The gas flares dotting the field and camp were the only things barely visible through the yellow murky air and rain, but a lot of those were soon snuffed out like candles. Hours elapsed before the hurricane abated and we could appraise the damage. My house-mate and I took refuge in the guest house for a few days whilst the maintenance gang repaired our roof. The tropical sun the next day soon dried out our very damp belongings, and life returned to normal for a short while, in fact for only a very short while.

IV

It happened so suddenly and had such tragic consequences that even to this day I can vividly recall the events leading up to and lasting for days after the catastrophe, since I was closely involved in the whole matter.

I was in the club that particular evening around 8:00 P.M. when the camp fire-siren commenced its banshee wailing—a sound which struck fear into the hearts of even the most toughened oil man, and which demanded instant action from everyone. It might turn out to be only a small bush blaze caused by the torrid sun on dried undergrowth, or it could be a dreaded well or tankfarm blaze, developing into a fierce holocaust.

This time it was neither: the enormous dull red glow was obviously somewhere near the lake village area, and in fact it was the entire wooden shanty town, well alight. Being over the lake, the company fire engines were helpless, and in any case, the whole waterfront was packed with a frantic crowd milling around in their attempts to help survivors. It was a horrifying sight, some of them badly burnt and covered in oily muck. The hospital had been immediately alerted and was soon attending to the casualties, but worse was to come. The entire village was suddenly cut off from land when the boardwalk connecting it to the top of the dyke caught alight and fell into the lake. There was little hope for any further human beings coming out alive. Due to the intense heat, rescue launches could only cruise outside the perimeter of the conflagration trying to pick up the few survivors who had been able to jump into the water, and had managed to struggle away from the blazing inferno.

By daybreak there remained only charred bits of wreckage

floating on the scummy water and the still-smoldering stumps of a few palm trunk supports, where there had once been a lively community. Native canoes and launches ceaselessly plied to and fro picking up a few floating items of personal belongings, and keeping a lookout for bodies. The cause of the disaster was attributed to an oil lamp being overturned in a drunken brawl in one of the saloons, and it was a miracle it had not happened before.

As industrial relations representative, I had the very unpleasant task during the next few days of standing by in the local courthouse at the lakeside, endeavouring to identify the mutilated bodies as they were recovered. To this day I can clearly envisage the stunned and shocked faces of the crowds cramming the narrow mud street in front of the court building; people enquiring about relatives or friends, or as happens at most violent disasters, just plain rubbernecking.

Along the rear wall of the courtroom there were stacks of dozens of rough wooden coffins put together hastily in the carpenters' shops of the oil companies. Wearily we heard the oft repeated phrase: "Here comes another *pobrecito* ("poor thing"). "What a horrible sight." He wore just cotton trousers and singlet; his face had been partly eaten away by the voracious catfish which abounded in those waters.

Have to search in his pockets: a few sodden cigarettes, some odd silver, a company ficha (identification disc). Who did he work for? "He's your man, Bill, No. 657." A check on the payroll list—his name, Pablo Gonzalez. Phone through to the office records clerk and find out who his relations are; nobody has come forward from the crowd. Carlos, the clerk, rings back: "34 years of age, from Trujillo, in the Andes—drilling department floorman, three years of service; mother living." The clerks singsong voice drones on, he is getting somewhat blasé about the whole matter. We'll have to send a telegram to Trujillo, but that may take a day or so to reach his mother. Is anybody travelling up that way soon, it would be quicker?

And so it went on, until, utterly fatigued, dispirited, and sick, after three days and nights hard at it, the search was officially called off: the final death toll was never known. As a

foreigner amongst that heaving shock-ridden multitude it was not a comfortable feeling for me, yet I passed unmolested among the crowd since I was known and accepted by them, and above all could chat to them in their own colloquial dialects, which differed according to the part of the country they came from.

In those early years, that particular oilfield was still relatively undeveloped. The vast swamp area was being drained and the jungle beyond slashed in all directions by bulldozers, day and night, clearing road strips and well locations. South of the field, the workmen had to contend with large numbers of rattlesnakes and every day a number of rattler tails were brought into my office—they were supposed to bring good luck. Some superstitious individual one day swiped the lot. Every foreman had to carry his antidote pack at all times.

To the north of the field, where the swamp practically met the lake shore, the drainage operations drove out hundreds of small alligators. Travelling along the coast road in the evening or early morning, it was a common sight to see dead reptiles laying at the roadside, having been run over by lorries or dying from sheer exhaustion in their efforts to reach the lake.

I had ample opportunity in those days to drive around the countryside, and I had also made friends with the foreman in charge of the forest guards, who patrolled company property in the backwoods. Together we made many trips to outlying haciendas, and one Easter I was invited to spend several days with a local ranch owner, up country. We ate the traditional Easter meal of curried land tortoise liver and feet, mixed with hardboiled eggs, yucca, yam and hot pickle, all washed down with noggins of *cucuy* firewater and thick syrupy coffee. I slept in a hammock under the ranch house thatch, open on all four sides to the night breeze, my first but not by any means my last acquaintance with that form of accomodation.

I returned to camp with an even stronger hankering for a life outside the oilfields. On that Easter trip we took our shotguns, in case we met deer or wild fowl, and wandered off along the creeks leading from the swamp, mainly in search of alligator eggs, usually buried in the sand at the water's edge. We collected quite a number, but I found the flavour very strong. The ranch hands

had an alligator egg feast that evening—they were supposed to have a "stimulating" effect on the partaker. I settled for a couple of quail which I had shot on the trail. Barbecued on a spit over red-hot charcoal, they made a delicious supper.

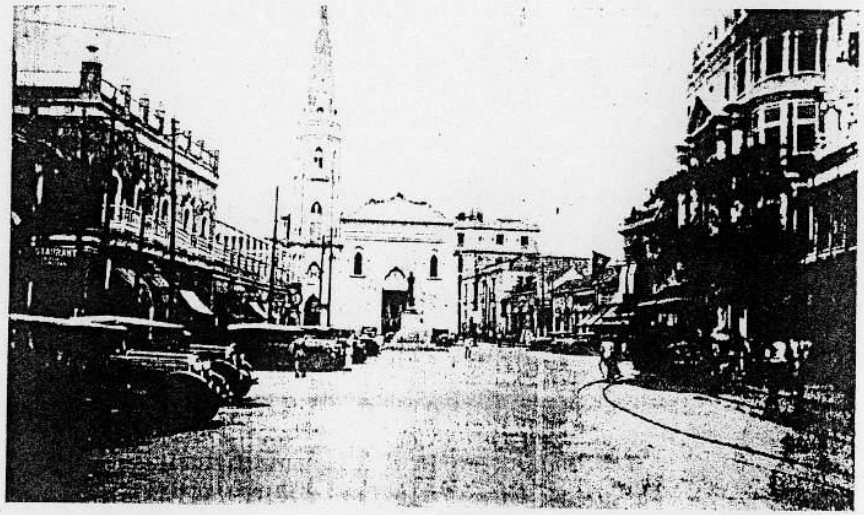
By now I had become more or less reconciled to being a permanent fixture on the industrial relations staff, and it was therefore a pleasant surprise one day to be visited by the personnel boss from the head office. In brief, he asked me to think over the idea of a transfer to a post in the land and legal department, as district representative: my journeyings and interest in the backwoods had obviously not gone unnoticed in upper circles. I was only too happy to say yes, but requested that I should be allowed to get married within the next few months, and that I be allocated married quarters in the camp. In those days, the company did not encourage expatriate staff to marry until well into a second three-year contract. This was understandable, since a bachelor could be moved around the fields far more easily than a married staff man with all his equipment, and later perhaps children as well. However, permission was forthcoming, and I sat right down to acquaint my fiancée of the forthcoming change in plans and of my new post, sounding her out at the same time as to the possibility of her sailing out to Barbados within a few weeks. A number of the staff had recently been married on the island since only three days residential qualifications were needed. It was difficult to arrange a quick ceremony in Venezuela, where at least three weeks residence was obligatory, and the civil ceremony was in Spanish.

It was now the month of May, and I had already been assigned to an extensive three-month training and takeover course, which involved visiting distant expanses of territory to get to know company real estate, meet some of the land owners and call on the many squatters who were under company occupation contracts. I suggested September for the wedding, my idea then being to take a short leave in Barbados, get the licence and everything else arranged, and meet my fiancée off the Dutch boat, which sailed regularly from Dover to the West Indies and Venezuela. I had already received an enthusiastic reply from my "to-be," who thenceforth had a hectic scramble buying household china and kitchen equipment to set up home.

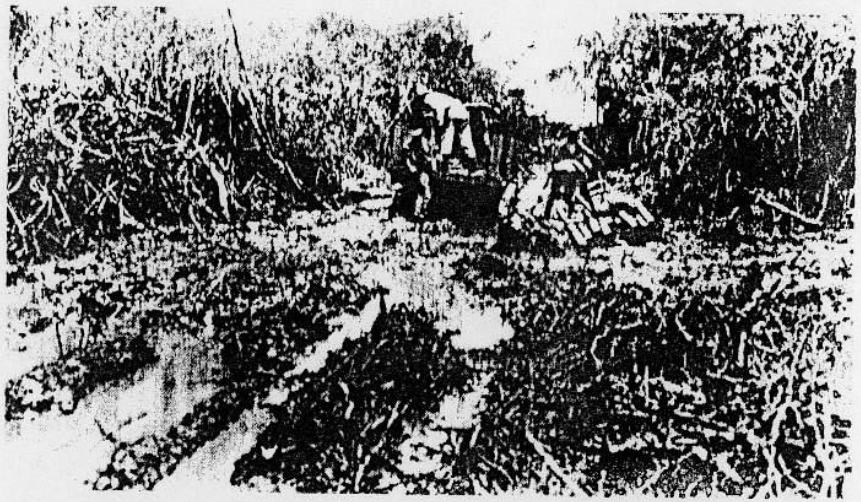
Meanwhile I was travelling around the jungle, learning everything possible connected with the new post, in order to be able to take over from the chap who was shortly going to be repatriated. My many and varied trips into the backwoods were to me like entering a different world. Once away from the hustle and bustle of the camps and clubs of the oilfields, the leisurely pace of outback life and the natural hospitality of the inhabitants more than made up for the lack of hygiene, the odd discomforts, and the plagues of mosquitoes and other insects.

One particular trip, still vividly in my mind, was my introduction to long-distance packmule journeys. We collected together our kit (I had even managed to borrow some corduroy riding breeches), filled our water bottles, mounted our somewhat restive animals—myself with some trepidation—and started off along the cool murky jungle trail one near-dawn, around 4:30 A.M. Within a couple of hours my posterior was registering a very positive protest at the mode of travel; however, we thankfully had a short respite at a local hacienda, enjoying a breakfast of barbecued wild pig, beans and plantains, and then pressed on to the river, which we had to cross with the mules. I might mention here that this trip would normally have been made in a pick-up truck, but since we were right in the middle of the rainy season, the trails were completely impassable, and the rivers swollen with flood water.

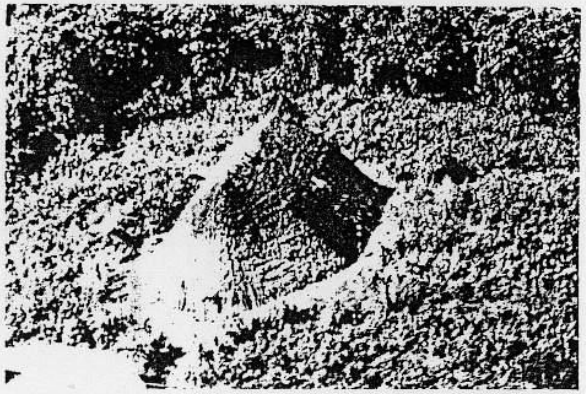
The staff chap I was replacing, a very experienced horseman, and Jose Antonio, his native foreman, went ahead down the treacherous muddy slopes of the river bank, and gradually eased their mounts into the dirty grey-green swollen torrent, tucking their legs up as the water swirled round the mules' bellies. I held back at the water's edge, watching operations whilst holding grimly on to the reins. The other two urged their mules into the swift midstream current some forty yards distant; the animals gave what appeared to be a desperate plunge and swam obliquely downstream, finally getting a foothold and staggering out on the the opposite bank about a hundred yards from the point they had entered the river.



The Plaza Baralt, Maracaibo, shopping and saloon center around 1930; note old tramway system on the right.

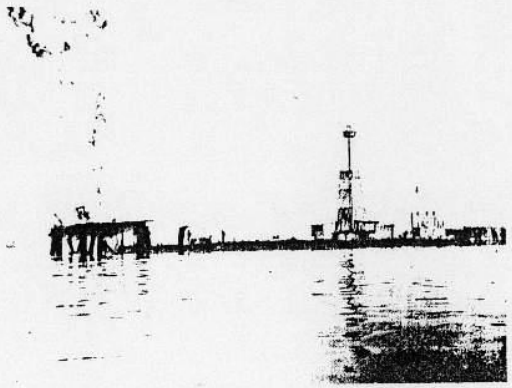


Tough going on the Colombian/Venezuelan boundary; unloading drill pipe destined for a wildcat well, with the tractor well bogged down in the mud!

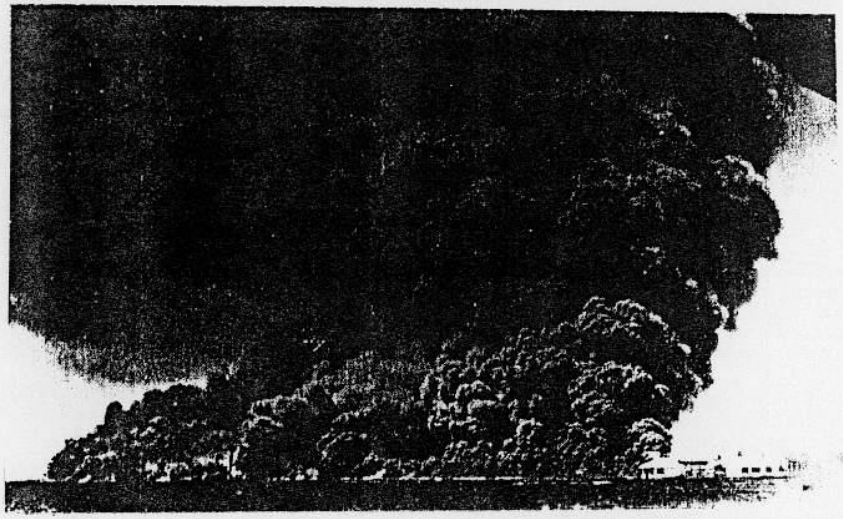


Taken from our single-engine Stinson four-seater. A jungle encampment of the "Motilone" Indian tribe on the Colombian/Venezuelan boundary. At times, the Indians caused havoc and casualties (bows and arrows), amongst our employees.

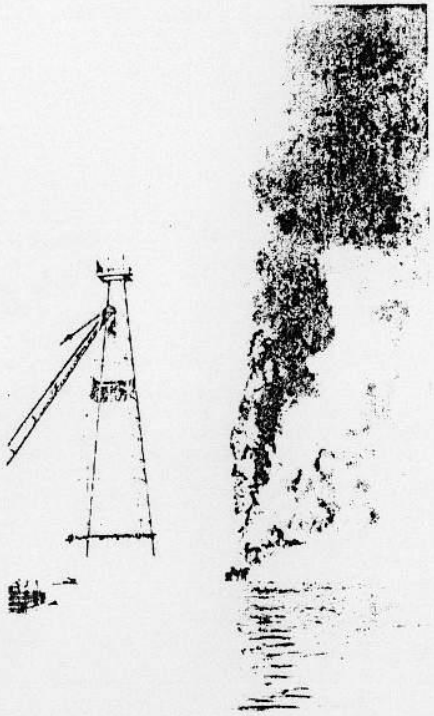
Progress: a temporary pedestrian bridge over the Motatan River, southeast of Lake Maracaibo. A road bridge was eventually constructed



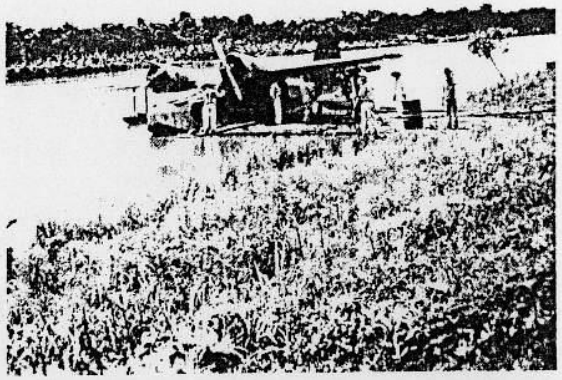
A Maracaibo easterly lake-well blowout—not an unusual sight on land or water in those days



Lagunillas native lake village ablaze, eastern shore of Lake Maracaibo, said to be the haunt of Captain Morgan, the famous pirate



Assistance on the way to cap the blowout off the Lagunillas field



Our Grumman amphibian being refueled on the Catatumbo River, south of Lake Maracaibo. Primitive methods and dangerous landings

I plucked up courage as I saw their mules climb out of the shallows on the other bank, and spurred my reluctant mount forward. It was quite a circus performance: my feet were by now up around the mules ears; one hand was grasping the pommel of the rather heavy ornate native saddle and the other was desperately gripping the crupper behind, anyway, it is the piece of harness which leads from the saddle back around and under the horse's tail.

I seemed to be floating much further downstream than the others, and my mule was becoming very agitated, or so it appeared to me. It was therefore with very relieved feelings that I felt the animal get his hoofs into the mud and force himself and his human cargo up the opposite bank and on to the savanna; it appeared to be an eternity in time. Later that evening over supper and a noggin of rum, Jose Antonio told me that I had indeed been swept much further downstream than was wise, due to my not retaining a firm grip on the reins. The disquiet of the mule was explained by the fact that it had been swept by the current very close to a deep water hole or bank erosion, inhabited by a couple of rather unfriendly alligators.

For once, I had some slight misgivings as to whether I would match up to the job, but a canter on the very picturesque savanna at dusk, after a good meal of chicken stew, soon revived my enthusiasm. I must admit however, that I had some difficulty in sitting down that evening after seven solid hours in the saddle, and the next morning my sore behind had stuck to the seat of my pyjamas—yes, we even wore such things in the jungle. I spent the next two days on my camp bed, lying on my stomach.

We spent a further three days visiting company properties, friendly ranchers, and concession boundaries, then broke camp for the return journey. It took us all of eight hours in worsening weather. It sheeted rain, the trail was a swampy mess of mud, at times nearly up to the mules' bellies. With thunder and lightning playing around the thick jungle trees on both sides of the trail, you just don't care whether you stay on the beast or fall off. It was therefore a wonderful feeling to reach an outlying ranch and collapse into a hammock, sideways, and soak up a huge mug of

strong sweet coffee laced with a liberal dose of native cognac. It was even more pleasant to find that one of our trackers had managed to get a message through to camp, so that, equipped with heavy tyre chains, the departmental pickup truck had literally charged many kilometres through the almost impassable muddy and potholed trail, up to the ranch gate. Sleeping in a bed that night was a very comfortable change; I stayed on my tummy!

Out in the jungle, small, even trivial things can give one a real lift. One week I was taking a mule train over a spur of the Cordilleras, accompanying a Venezuelan engineer on a check of concession boundaries. After a long hard sweaty ride along a narrow mountain ridge, we saw in a cleft of the valley below, a wildcat well location of a British oil company. Glad for a rest, we rode down the hillside trail and made our way to a tiny corrugated iron shack, serving as a commissary for the drilling crew. Imagine my pleasure and astonishment when I found on a shelf amongst a clutter of canned foods, a tin of English chocolate biscuits, sticky and somewhat stale, but what a treat. It made my day!

Time seemed to fly; news from the passage department confirmed my fiancée's sailing date on one of the Dutch liners leaving Dover in mid-September. We had been exchanging reams of correspondence about household equipment, tropical clothing and even a mini piano, and now *the day* was fast approaching.

I had by now, to all intents and purposes, taken over my new post, and had been granted a short local leave. I packed my grip and travelled over to Curaçao on one of the company tankers, transferring the same evening to a steamer which would arrive in Barbados three days before the arrival of the ship bringing my fiancée. Upon arrival in Bridgetown, I found everything had been delightfully arranged by the vicar of the parish of Christchurch, including guests and a "best man," the American vice-consul for the island.

I was staying at the Hotel Windsor, and on the day, I was up around 4:00 A.M., took a taxi into town and met up with the

Dutch Line agent, who was going out in his launch to board the steamer, anchored just inside the harbour. It was quite a thrill to see my bethrothed leaning over the rail at that early hour, accompanied by a few of the other passengers, no doubt curious to see what the "bloke" looked like.

The wedding ceremony was held at St. Cyprian's Church. There was a brief reception, photographs, cake and champagne at the Vicar's house, and on board ship went the whole crowd, including the reverend and his retinue, which included his daughters. It was a very merry party, including some of the ship's officers and other passengers, until the chief made it abundantly clear that he just had to get under way. It was quite a tricky task getting the island party down the wobbly gangway and into the rocking harbour launch.

Up anchors and away to Trinidad; then hot and steaming La Guaira, and so to Puerto Cabello, where we managed to get in a cooling swim on a beach outside the town. All the honeymoon we had was a few days in Curaçao at the company holiday camp there. Somewhat disgusted, I received a cable from my department at the end of the week requesting a prompt return. The next day we shipped aboard the coastal steamer for the voyage over to Maracaibo; wife, crates, and baggage.

What a transformation the preceding two major events made in my way of life: first, I had taken unto myself a wife and this meant that living conditions as a married staff man, both in town and in the fields, would now be vastly different to the seminomadic existence one led as a bachelor; and second, my new post, compared to the restricted camp and office work in industrial relations, was undoubtedly going to prove an enjoyable venture. I would be free to roam the outback, having contact with the country folk, relatively untarnished by commerce or industry. I could also fit in my work and journeying to suit any particular programme, unmindful of the hated sound of the camp 6:30 A.M. siren down at the boiler shed, wailing out its "get-up-and-go" message to the bleary-eyed masses in camp.

There was no time for sightseeing in Maracaibo town after I

had checked in at the head office. We had just two days in the company hotel arranging for our packing cases to be shipped out on the weekly barge. We ourselves embarked one morning on a company launch to the Lagunillas field, which was to be the hub of operations, and where I was going to set up a central office and a home. It was the same field where I had previously carried out an assignment on the industrial relations staff, and where the disastrous lake village fire had occurred.

The camp was still surrounded by evil-smelling swamp extending miles back into the interior; all the houses were built on eight-foot stilts, embedded in concrete oil pots to impede the entry of hordes of ants and cockroaches, or the occasional snake. Gum boots had to be used to fetch pails of drinking water from a tap at the end of the swampy garden—water which had been condensed in the company boilers down at the plant. It came out a rich rusty brown colour, and stayed like that despite running it several times through a filter. The filter consisted of an eighteen-inch-square hollowed-out porous sandstone block, supported on a wooden frame, which was located in the kitchen. Pails of murky brown liquid were poured into it and slowly and frustratingly dripped through into a large earthenware crock below. Cooking was on an ancient oil stove; refrigerators were only in their infancy and unavailable and we had to be content with an old-fashioned icebox. The company truck came along each morning and delivered a large block of somewhat murky ice to each family; at least it kept the beer cool—the drinking water was not at all inviting! The water for the kitchen sink and shower came out of regular house taps, but by midday the water was too hot to use as the pipelines were laid on top of the ground. Occasionally globules of crude oil mixed in with the water made it awkward for bathing.

I had already served an apprenticeship of over four years in the tropics, but the transition must have been quite unnerving for my good lady, although she took it all in her stride.

Swarms of mosquitoes appeared in the house, despite wire netting in all the windows; cockroaches inhabited our larder, and tiny red ants decorated all the food especially the sweet things

like sugar and cakes. One just ignored them. The cakes, before being offered for tea, were quickly placed in a hot oven, given a brief treatment, and after blowing off the dead corpses, were reasonably edible! The odd centipede and scorpion added a touch of variety to life, and one looked carefully round the bathroom and under the house, in case a snake had taken up residence.

We settled down however, quite happily, to the new way of life; it was virtually impossible to grow flowers or plants, so we acquired pets. A tiny motherless deer, which lived in the so-called garden and pattered up the wooden back steps in the early morning to imbibe its breakfast of warm milk from a baby's bottle; a mischievous monkey swung itself around the veranda and was the idol of the neighbouring children; and of course we had the usual voluble green parrot, swearing in Spanish.

In my work I had some fifty miles of coastline to supervise, by canoe or launch, and company property interests varied between a few kilometres to as far inland as seventy to eighty kilometres, with many rivers and *caños* criss-crossing the terrain, apart from dense jungle. It was not unusual for me to travel by pickup truck, mule, canoe and on foot in one day, to reach my destination. In the dry season, when we could expect to get back to camp by nightfall, my wife accompanied me, until family ties kept her at home.

My work trips took me way up-country and were mainly comprised of assisting geological and survey parties in obtaining permits to cross private haciendas and cultivated estates; assessing and paying for crop damage; buying up properties or squatter holdings in areas of interest, or signing up owners for drilling contracts or options to purchase. Work near camp kept me busy at times arranging rights of way, for pipelines, high tension power lines, pump stations and well locations. Squatters on company property had to be put under a proper form of legal contract in Spanish, and we were constantly on the watch for attempts at illegal land-grabbing in areas where we might have shown some interest.

Our department also helped out on police and local legal affairs, which occasionally cropped up, and meant close contact

with the authorities. The marketing department, which controlled retail oil sales outlets in the towns and villages, also called on us for assistance as and when they had land problems, or when they wished to acquire acreage for storage facilities or service stations. When I was later stationed in Caracas, marketing problems necessitated my travelling to all corners of the country, and proved most interesting.

Out in the jungle one was offered all sorts of concoctions, (for want of a better word): armadillo stew (rather like chicken); iguana, a kind of lizard and quite palatable; wild pig, tapir, peccar, wild turkey and partridge, all good eating. The peons used to make a stew from *araguato* (red monkey) and even macaws.

The local fruits, some of which I have already mentioned, were of infinite variety: mangoes, oranges, limes, papayas, watermelons, pineapples, bananas of many different types, custard apples, plantains (used boiled, fried or baked), and *nisperos*,—a kind of medlar or pomengranate. Of course, there was the habitual main meal, chicken stew, with a diversity of vegetables including corn on the cob, hot peppers and piles of yams and boiled yucca. On the side, there was always a heap- of *arepas*, a handbeaten crumpet-shaped maize patty, toasted on a hot plate over charcoal and eaten with *nata* (sour curd), or dipped in the stew. Returning from a working session up in the bush, I often found that nearby farmers had loaded the back of my pickup with gifts of bananas, plantains, papayas, corn on the cob, yams and even sometimes a chicken, a live sucking pig, or young goat.

The trails in those days were very primitive, mere narrow gashes hacked out of the jungle; the various oilfields were then so isolated that one had to use a launch along the lake coast to get from one to the other, or else, in the dry season, take a chance through the jungle bouncing high along the rutted trails. Each field was a separate entity, presided over by a field superintendent; contact with the head office in Maracaibo was at certain hours via old-fashioned one-way radio telephone. Conversation time was strictly rationed and messages limited to urgent cases,

mainly for stores, drilling reports or technical emergencies. No long-distance telephone service existed; simply inter-office service.

I often carried thousands of bolivars (some in gold) around with me for payroll and other expenses, and when in the bush always had a .38 Colt in the car; at times my foreman and I put in some practice along the trail. I well remember one incident which nearly had an unfortunate ending. I had stopped the pick-up on a murky rutted trail just beyond a ninety-degree bend, well beyond bullet range, or so I thought. I walked back and fixed on the trunk of a hardwood tree a home-made target. Sixto, the foreman, was alongside the pickup out of harm's way. I paced off about fifteen metres, and took aim: the first two were well wide. The third hit and I heard a faint tinkle round the corner, where the pickup was parked. Impossible, I thought. I walked back and saw Sixto peering at the side of the vehicle and swearing volubly in true jungle Spanish. "Que pasa?" I asked. "Doctor," he yelled, "you just missed my ear by two centimetres, and the rear mirror is smashed—look!" I found it difficult to believe, but returning to the hardwood tree, I found the reason—the bullet had hit dead centre, ricocheted at right angles up the trail, where somewhat spent (fortunately), it had broken the mirror and put the wind up Don Sixto Lugo. I apologized and resolved to change the system.

top of the mud with the wheels spinning. We then had to lever the vehicle up with branches and lay a bedding of brush under the wheels to get it going again; this could happen every hundred yards or so, and was very hard work. A hardwood tree across the trail was another bugbear: you could not spend days cutting through it; one just had to cut a new piece of trail as a bypass, which likewise took up many precious hours of our time.

Bachacos, black ants over half an inch long, were also a nuisance. They often built solid six- to seven-foot high columns right in the middle of the trail, and they could measure a couple of feet at the base. You had to divert round them, they were like solid concrete. If you hit them at night the car suffered considerable damage. The ants themselves were fascinating to watch; they formed long lines coming out of the jungle, most of them carried hunks of leaf twice their own size, waving them like banners. If they came across a dead or wounded animal or reptile, they would strip it in a very short time; legend has it that the Indians used to peg down their enemies close to a bachaco nest and leave the victim there to be eaten alive.

Sixto, my foreman, was quite a character: his one obsession was hunting at night, and after seeing me comfortably fed and settled in my hammock (he also acted as a sort of cook and batman), he would prepare his acetylene lamp, strap it on to his forehead, load his shotgun (or borrow my five-shot Browning) and disappear for hours. He would inevitably arrive back at camp around dawn with either a deer, a brace of partridge, or a wild turkey, and these would provide a welcome change from the salted or smoked fish or meat usually served up by the isolated jungle squatters. Years later Sixto met with a very tragic end. He developed epilectic fits and the company doctor forbade him to drive the company vehicle; he was demoted to forest rounds on a mule, and was heartbroken. He carried out his duties in a mechanical manner and some six months later he was found lying on a trail after a rainstorm; he had presumedly fallen off his mule whilst having a fit and had drowned in a puddle of water.

His brother, Francisco, who was an assitant foreman, took

over Sixto's post. However, he developed blackwater fever and the company doctor phoned me one evening to say there was no hope that Francisco would not last the night. I passed the news on to his family and they requested a specially shaped coffin, similar to a violin—a family tradition or part of their cult. I had to chase all over the camp to locate the company carpenter and an apprentice, and they worked all night to finish the job, which was just about ready by daybreak. However, Francisco was still alive, and in fact he recovered, grew fat and was still with the department when I left for Caracas. There must be a moral somewhere in that!

Another forestry foreman in charge of the guards in and around the Cabimas oilfield was old Olimpiades Inciarte. He was a grizzled old veteran of the oil pioneering days way back around 1914 he had worked as a water boy with geologists and surveyors up in the Indian country on the Rio de Oro, (near the Colombian border), and had many a strange tale to tell of those hectic and dangerous times. He was a very rare type, utterly loyal to the company and its interests, and in the violent troublesome days after the death of dictator Gomez, with land grabbing rife. His life was often endangered endeavouring to protect company properties and installations against marauding gangs. He sat his mule like a carved oaken statue, and was generally well liked and respected by the local inhabitants. I spent many a restful evening in a hammock down by the lake shore, chatting to the old man about his eventful life and admiring his simple philosophy.

It would not come amiss here to recount a few of the more weird and at times somewhat gruesome experiences which were my lot over the years.

In the very early days of my tropical sojourn I had a rather peculiar encounter whilst travelling on a company bus. A sand track which served as a road, ran alongside the wall of the local cemetery. One day our driver stalled his motor and our wheels sank deep into the shifting sand. He went off on foot to get assistance to tow the bus out, and meanwhile we were left contemplating the surrounding scenery. Looking over the wall of the cemetary, I was quite dumbfounded to find myself almost face to

face with a heap of grinning skulls and a pile of old bones; further over in the centre of the plot were two honeycomblike blocks of cells, thirty long and six high. When our driver returned with a relief vehicle, I asked him about the macabre view over the cemetary wall. He was quite casual about it: "You see, senor," he explained, "the cells containing the caskets are rented out to the deceased relations, the fronts being sealed and the name inscribed. If the rent is not paid regularly, the council declare the cell vacant and the remains are dumped in the corner of the grounds." Apparently at that time, it was quite a common custom.

Another strange sight, especially in the fields, was the vast gathering of *zamuros* ("vultures"), which hovered, wheeled and strutted in the vicinity of the slaughterhouse. Hundreds more perched in a solid black mass on the steel framework of the nearby oil derricks, awaiting their turn to swoop onto any tasty morsel which might become available. They were also actively pecking at the hides which were to be found stretched out on wooden frames behind the village. Legend has it that the common vulture always held back until the "king" vulture, with a white topnob arrived and had first gobble at the prey or carcass. One could always spot where a dead or dying body, usually an animal, was lying in the jungle, as the sky above and the surrounding trees would be alive with flocks of expectant scavenging birds.

In the depth of the jungle one could at times stumble on some of the most intriguing mysteries: one day, whilst my foreman and I were searching for a concession corner post, which meant probing an area of jungle well off the beaten track, we came across a crumbling hammock flimsily suspended between two mapora palms. Amongst the rotting fibres of the hammock was a sacklike object, which on closer inspection turned out to be a tattered vest and the remains of a pair of ragged trousers, inside of which was a heap of bones; a skull was lying on the ground below. There was not a shred of flesh or skin left; the huge bachaco ants, vultures and probably a wild animal or two

had made very certain of that. It had obviously had been been a human being, dead now for many months; an old muzzle-loading shotgun was half hidden under the decayed vegetation a yard or so away, and a powder horn had fallen under the hammock, together with a small tin of heavy-gauge shot. It was very evident what the cause of death had been, too much energy tamping home a charge of buckshot, or perhaps carelessness. From the look of the skull, the load had caught the chap full in the head. We notified the authorities on return to camp, but it is very doubtful whether anything further transpired; it was too long a trip to send out a posse, and for what purpose?

One narrative of the many which come to mind is perhaps the most revolting, but perfectly true. It occurred not far from one of the field camps.

Two young chaps worked a small maize and yucca patch on the edge of the jungle; they had living with them a young woman—a very sexy one. Living with them also was a youngish lad, a simple—almost Mongoloid—type, whose main tasks were to chop firewood and fetch water. One afternoon, whilst the two fellows were away hunting, the girl attempted to get the halfwit lad to have intercourse with her, and was very annoyed and affronted when he showed complete disinterest in her overtures.

When her two companions returned she made a violent scene, accusing the youngster of attempting to rape her. The lad was too witless to attempt any denial or defense and was immediately set upon by the girl and the two men. They beat him up, took a knife and stabbed him around the groin several times, and in a final frenzy, no doubt egged on by the girl, they tore out his genitals by the roots.

I arrived on the scene with the police some time later, when the news filtered through to camp, and managed to get the unfortunate lad into the hospital. He lived, but was mained for life. The culprits were sent into town under guard, and were given heavy prison sentences.

Reminiscences of an infinite variety of jungle journeyings could also be chronicled here, but strangely enough, one simple

trek in particular still stands out in my memory.

I had initially planned this trip as a regular routine visit to some of our outlying forest stations, but inevitably something or other cropped up on such occasions as it did this time, and our program had to be somewhat curtailed.

Antonio Sanchez, one of the forest guards, was waiting for us on the trail where the dense jungle thinned out and gradually blended into the sun-baked savanna. His mule was tethered to a mapora palm and Antonio was desultorily slashing his machete at some of the undergrowth bordering the end of the rutted and muddy track. Sanchez was a little runt of a man, malarial yellow, thin, with a reedy voice, and hardly the type fitted for the rugged job of forest guard. His specialty was that he could locate our overgrown property boundaries and concession posts better than any other tracker, and he was unequalled on night hunting expeditions.

We had been delayed by fallen hardwood trees and an unusually heavy torrential downpour, unexpected, since we were nearly at the end of the rainy season. I travelled light during the hot dry months, as the only dangers were forest fires, wild animals and snakes. This trip, I had, in fact, left my monsoon kit, previously described, back in the storeroom. I had planned on pushing on across the miles of savanna to a rickety old wooden bridge over the Pueblo Viejo River, as I wanted to give the whole structure a good checkup. The bridge was at least sixty years old, had all wooden pegs instead of nails, and a span of around seventy-five feet. It had been built by old-time ranchers in the late 1800s to get their bullock carts and cattle over to the other side of the river to the better grazing lands; the timber was mainly hardwood trees roughly hewn into planks, with tree trunks forming the main supports. Some of the soft timber underpinning had rotted on one side and the plank runway of the bridge had tilted to quite a dangerous angle. I had crossed over many times before with the pickup, after unloading all our equipment and sending the men across on foot to watch for any dangerous shifting of the bridge fabric. Once they were in position I revved up the engine and cautiously eased the front wheels of the truck onto the flimsy

platform. It was then a case of speed: bottom gear and belt like blazes to the other side, hoping the truck and myself would not end up some forty feet below in the river, which was infested with alligators. It was all part of the day's work, but I was always glad when that particular adventure was safely completed.

However, it was obvious that we were not going to get much further that day—night falls rapidly in the tropics and it was already 4:00 P.M. It had taken us some six hours to struggle the twenty-four kilometres of trail from the camp perimeter to Antonio's ranch, and I was now looking forward to a rest in my hammock and a drink, plus, of course, the usual dose of mandatory quinine. Malaria was rife on the savannas, and the bite of the female *anopheles* mosquito could not be felt. The quinine lulled one into a false sense of security; I found that out much to my cost years later.

Antonio lived on the edge of the plains in a small shack with a palm-thatched roof; it was open to the elements on all sides, except for a tiny kitchen shelter and one small mud room in the corner; where he slept with his "wife" and family. Visitors slung their hammocks where they fancied from the roof poles. Sanchez had the usual miscellaneous collection of animals: chickens, a few turkeys, a monkey, a couple of pigs, parrots and a macaw, plus the odd goat; since he was living out on the plains, he was also able to keep a couple of cows. Forest guards living deep in the jungle were not able to keep cows due to the lack of fodder and water, and to predatory jaguars.

Since we were staying overnight, Sixto soon had my hammock slung from the rafters, the latter festooned with the usual collection of bananas, plantains, dry maize cobs, strips of salt fish and a hunk of smelly venison, plus a couple of small land turtles hanging up ready for Semana Santa ("Holy Week"). Sanchez always had meat of some kind drying under the roof away from the vultures, as he inevitably carried his shotgun with him on his rounds and could be relied on to bring back wild turkey, partridges, or a wild pig on occasions.

Sanchez' woman, Lucinda, brought us the customary gourd of black coffee, hot, thick and treacly with panela sugar; it was

pleasant and satisfying after our struggles along the trail, and I commented on its flavour to Antonio: he seemed somewhat embarrassed at the time. We chatted about his work program, the yearly opening up of overgrown property boundaries, repainting of concession posts, and discussed the number of new squatters on company lands needing to be surveyed and put under contracts.

Lucinda meanwhile had caught a chicken and was preparing the usual *sancocho*, with fritters of maize bread toated on the iron griddle over the charcoal fire. Antonio had broached a bottle of *cucuy*, a clear-coloured firewater which would take the scale off boiler pipes—it was distilled somehow from the cactus plant. I enquired whether he wanted a change of mule—we kept spare animals back in camp—and I casually asked how his cows were getting on with the scarcity of grass. Antonio looked somewhat unhappy at this point, and hesitatingly asked if he could have some rolls of barbed wire, as the fencing around the *jaguey* ("water hole") was in bad shape. Apologetically, Sanchez continued: "When you praised the coffee a while back, I felt ashamed, since I fully expected a *regaño* [a "yelling at"]. You see, señor, unfortunately, last night the cows got inside the fence and had a good splash around in the little muddy water; by the time I found out, the damage was done, and since the animals had spent some hours there, they no doubt had themselves added to the liquid content. Lucinda was furious; the ranch filter had no rainwater and the jaguey supply was all she had for cooking and coffee." Hence the reason for the rather queer taste and "pungent" odour of the cafecito we had drunk; cows will be cows, it was a pity they were not housebroken. I swallowed my noggin of *cucuy* and discreetly tipped the remains of the aromatic coffee onto the ground. Needless to say, Sixto made a trip the following week with barbed wire and fence posts. Despite the hot sultry savanna night, the mosquitoes, cockroaches, and the various animal noises, I slept soundly and comfortably in my hammock, after a nightcap of Antonio's rum, and a bellyful of Lucinda's appetizing chicken stew.

Away from the towns and camps, a type of feudal system

was very much in evidence. The large hacienda owners practically kept the peons in bondage. The general store on the ranch was built and owned by the *hacendado*, who passed over machetes, *alpargatas* ("sandals"), clothing, foodstuff, tobacco and rum, against payroll earnings; no cash ever changed hands, and the peon obviously, was always in the red on the books. The ranch hands were allowed to construct a mud hut on the property and permitted to clear five hectares of forest for grass and vegetables, yucca and maize mostly. Once the patch had been cleared, burnt off, and cultivated, usually after a few years, the peon was moved to another uncleared jungle area, and his clean patch was added to the main area of grassland as pasture for the owner's cattle. With fifty or sixty men on the payroll, this proved a very economic manner of providing grazing for quite a large herd of cattle.

During my early jungle wanderings, I was often inveigled, somewhat unwillingly I must admit, into a night shoot of alligators. I was the proud possesor of a Belgian-made Browning five-shot automatic shotgun, but most of my companions in the shoot had antiquated muzzle loaders, some of which must have been over a century old. They way they casually fired and rapidly reloaded those old muskets was fascinating; they carried little canvas haversacks containing a horn full of gunpower, felt pads, lead shots of various sizes usually in old tobacco tins, and always a couple of home-made ballshot. They carefully measured out gunpowder into a tiny thimble, added a felt pad and the shot and then carried out what to me seemed a somewhat precarious final "bashing" with a metal rod. They were then ready for anything moving in the forest!

I never did fire one of those contraptions. They looked pretty lethal. I had seen so many scarred faces and torn ears, and the occasional empty eye socket, due to a burst gun barrel or a fierce backfire; the locals however, took it all in their stride. In any event, they could not financially aspire to anything at all modern. My Browning was their pride and joy, and became almost a communal and favoured weapon. It did have one disadvantage: one always had to use new cartridges or only those in tip-top

condition, carefully recharged. I discarded all my used shell cases, and they were snapped up by the few ranchers lucky enough to own an ancient single- or double-barreled 16-gauge shotgun. The Browning took four cartridges and one in the breech, but the slightest malformation in the shell case caused the automatic action to jam; when you are out after wild boar or jaguar, it could be somewhat disconcerting to have this happen.

The jamming of the barrel of this particular gun was the reason I obtained it cheap in the first place, due to an unfortunate accident to the previous owner. He was a Londoner, a field administration officer, keen on hunting, and he was preparing his kit one Saturday evening, prior to a safari trip on the Sunday. He had got two of the cartridges into the gun, but one had jammed halfway. He tried everything to loosen the barrel so as to get the shell either to eject or to slide up into place, but to no avail. Either in desperation or impatient frustration, he placed his right hand on the end of the barrel and pushed downwards. There was a terrific bang, and the load of buckshot literally tore his hand into shreds; he finished up with an artificial limb.

Our alligator shoots were always at night. We spent hours slipping and stumbling along the banks of the *caños* and rivers, with our acetylene lamps fastened onto our foreneads. Most of us used heavy buckshot, but the more experienced favoured a single ball; you had to be dead on target with such a charge. We skidded along the muddy banks, disturbing various kinds of nightlife and keeping our eyes skinned for snakes; we progressed slowly and painfully along keeping as quiet as possible and searching for the telltale twin points down at the water's edge—twin points of red-orange fire, about six inches apart, which indicated the quarry. It was always left to one of the party to draw a bead on the target, everybody else staying quite still; the face of the chosen hunter behind the hissing flare of the lamp would be puckered in concentration. He would only have one chance, right between those twin points, and into the solid bony head.

I was not an expert, and did not often take an active part; during my daylight travels I always looked for alligator or iguana eggs on the hot sandy soil on the river banks. The local ranchers

and my own men were delighted if they found a cache, but I did not appreciate the strong flavour. Holy Week saw a massive invasion of the jungle and rivers for iguana, armadillo, and land turtle, the meat of which was allowed during the religious fiestas. Add jugs of *aguadiente*, plenty of *sancocho*, maize on the cob, yam, and you had the making of a real native feast.

At times, we had some very difficult negotiating to carry out; I remember one incident very well. The engineers were running a 33,000-volt power line northwest from Maracaibo, to a distant new oilfield; they needed a sixty-foot-wide strip of jungle and we were doing the advance negotiating. We found ourselves needing to cross a plot occupied by an elderly Guajira Indian woman, who lived in a palm shack accompanied by two fierce-looking young lads, always to be found with their sharp machetes in their hands. I made several trips to try and persuade the old lady to sell, and offered to build her a new ranch house nearby, but to no avail; I plied her old monkey with chicle which he adored, and made a fuss of her fleabitten hound. The tractors could be heard half a kilometre away and the engineers were breathing down our necks. Even the management, usually understanding about such deals, was beginning to ask awkward questions. One day, I decided on a last desperate effort, which, if it failed, would mean bending the whole line to pass round the edge of the smallholding, and involving thousands of additional dollars. I took a pick-up and one of the lawyers who spoke a little Guajira dialect. We also had with us the municipal judge and his secretary, complete with his seal of office and a brief but sufficiently detailed sale document, in the event we pulled off the seemingly impossible. The "court" stayed in the vehicle, well provided with Scotch and food.

The lawyer and myself took the narrow trail to the shack and greeted the old lady; her two helpers came and stood around with their machetes. We argued back and forth for hours, but the señora would not agree to any sort of deal; she kept quoting an old Guajira superstition, but I thought I could detect a faint weakening in her attitude. Finally, and by now, frustrated, I turned to the lawyer and said, "Vamonos, Don Emiro, we are just wasting our time." As I said this I casually pulled out of my pocket a half-inch wad of crisp new banknotes and waved them at the good lady, bidding her adios. "Too bad," I said. "One could do a lot with this pile of bolivars . . . however." With that we strolled off down the trail. A hundred or so metres away, we heard a shrill voice, "maybe we could arrange a deal." We wandered back. Five minutes later we all trooped Indian file down the pica to where the court was "sitting"; they were pretty well sozzled on the Scotch, but sufficiently capable to read out the document we had brought with us. The deed was signed on behalf of the old lady with the two lads as witnesses, the judge added his official seal, goodbyes were said all round, and we later had the pleasure of advising the engineers to get cracking.

VII

General Juan Vicente Gomez, President of Venezuela, died towards the end of 1935. His death was kept secret for some days, but eventually had to leak out. Dictator Gomez had ruled for some thirty years with an iron fist, backed up by corruption, torture and violence. It was no wonder the "lid blew off the pot."

I was taking a local leave in Jamaica at the time and upon return was astounded to observe the ferocity of the reaction which had set in throughout the whole country, almost overnight. Scores of top military officials, politicians, and a number of leading professional men had disappeared, some forever! Young officers had taken over key army posts and were demanding a new order of things. Practically the entire police force (for the most part appointed by Gomez or his henchmen), had vanished and were being temporarily replaced by army personnel. Old feuds and grudges were now being settled, and the fugitives of the old regime if or when caught, were given short shrift. When one recalls the horrors of the Puerto Cabello and San Carlos undersea dungeons; the torture and floggings of prisoners with whips made from a bull's penis reinforced with jagged steel inserts; the inconceivable agony of a man being hung upside down by his genitals, from a thin rope fixed to the ceiling of his cell, with just his fingers and toes barely touching the ground, it was no wonder ferocious vengeance manifested itself during the upheaval.

We were not surprised to see and hear of terrible mutilations carried out on the hated Gomez minions, and even in the field camps we were regaled with tales of protégés being caught, flayed with machetes and knives and then dumped still alive, to roast to death on the village incinerators, in full view of the populace.

Near chaos existed for many weeks but fortunately firm action by the military gradually brought some sort of order; new and far-reaching changes were however sweeping the country. All of the vast Gomez properties and haciendas were confiscated, as were those of his cronies. The workers unions, hitherto prohibited but nevertheless existing underground, came out into the open and were speedily organized. Industrial relations on both sides were being scrutinized and given a complete and comprehensive review. Housing was top priority, and the building and inauguration of clubs was rapidly proceeded with. Constant review and classification of labour and artisans occupied the enlarged industrial relations force of the company.

As for our department, dealing mainly with land affairs, we had our own particular worries. Company properties on the fringes of the oilfields and even much farther afield, which were held for possible future development, were the targets for indiscriminate squatting and fencing, some of it speculative, some for justifiable reasons such as the need for settling and growing crops. In the latter cases we usually put the party under a standard form of contract which ensured payment of any improvements should the company wish to occupy at any future date.

For some months we were, (perhaps understandably), not able to get the full official assistance we required to bring matters under control.

However, our good relations with the normal nonpolitical up-country land owners stood us in good stead, and we managed to sort out our problems as best we could under the existing circumstances. The industrial relations side of the industry was the toughest issue in those days; strikes, up to that time unheard of, were now everyday events.

It was during this particularly crucial phase that I became a very sick man. I had been out in the backwoods on a concession job, and one night stayed up chatting with one of the local farmers at his ranch. My hammock had been slung under the thatch and it was quite late when I let down my mosquito net; too late, in fact.

I felt all right upon returning to Maracaibo, and then began

to get bouts of fever and a high temperature. The doctor put it down to an attack of dengüe fever and prescribed accordingly, telling me to stay at home for a few days. I got progressively worse and was sweating so profusely that my wife had to haul my mattress out on to the balcony to dry in the sun every few hours. She eventually became worried and called in another of the medical staff, who ordered my immediate removal to the hospital. Installed in the ward, it was still assumed that I was suffering from dengüe fever and was therefore given normal meals, which made me violently sick. After several such days, I became quite delirious and the chief medical officer was called; he immediately diagnosed an advanced stage of malaria and I was moved into a small single ward opposite the night sister's room. For well over a week my temperature was way over 100, sometimes near 105 or 106 degrees fahrenheit. I was only allowed occasional teaspoonfuls of iced water, fed to me by a nurse or my wife, if she was present. I had not the strength to lift a finger, let alone an arm.

At this stage, some of the local nursing staff went on strike, and a few days later I had to be sent back home. Luckily by that time the fever had broken, but I had to stay down in the lounge day and night, sleeping in a deck chair, as I was too weak to get up the stairs. Fortunately, one of the expatriate nursing staff was able to come in every morning, to give me an injection. It was weeks before I slowly managed to drag myself the few hundred yards to the head office, looking like a magnificent advertisement for Colman's mustard, the bright yellow color of my skin due partly to the amounts of plasmoquin tablets I had swallowed.

Strikes were still the order of the day, particularly in the fields; the possibility of a return to work in my condition was out of the question for some time, and the hospital authorities strongly recommended I should be given convalescent leave over in Curaçao. Management, understandably, was loathe to grant any special leave to staff under the existing troubled circumstances, but I was permitted to take an early local leave.

My wife packed our suitcases and we flew over to the island on an old KLM tri-motor Fokker plane, to start, as I thought, a

lazy fortnight down by the sea. Unfortunately, within a week I was once again down with malarial attacks and the Dutch doctor at the refinery, where I reported sick, had me hospitalized right away, specifying this time a course of atebrin and plasmoquin. It resulted in my staying over a month there in hospital, but I eventually returned to Maracaibo, fairly fit but considerably weakened. At least I proved something—never trust the smooth night air of the savanna; the female *Anopheles* mosquito is always around, and you can't feel her bite.

After spending a month or so at the head office, I was called in one day by management and informed that I was being transferred to Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, on an assignment connected with initial property title investigation in the Magdalena valley, inside potential concession areas. I was not exactly enthusiastic about the new post, which, apart from other considerations, would mean living on my own for a year or more. Nor was I at all happy about the idea of being stationed around 8,000 feet altitude in the Andes and from that altitude having to make numerous prolonged trips down to the humid tropical climate of the valley. To me it did not appear to be a healthy prospect for a still-suspect malarial body.

However, I agreed to give it a trial, and in due course we packed up all our worldly possessions, except the heavy and bulky articles which we sold, and embarked on the small Dutch steamer for Curaçao. My wife and daughter shipped out on a liner for England, and I sailed for Barranquilla, a Colombian seaport. Here I booked passage on a seaplane taking off from the Magdalena estuary and two hours later we alighted on lake San Marco, in the hinterland. I transferred within half an hour to a tri-motor Fokker bound for the city of Medellín, where there was a short stopover for coffee and a snack.

Shortly after our break, we all trooped aboard for the last airborn leg to Bogotá, packed tightly into the old Fokker, some passengers even squatting down between the seats, a thing which would not be tolerated these days. We managed only barely to clear the nearby rooftops on takeoff, and our anxiety was not in any way soothed upon seeing the wrecked remains of the plane

in which a month before, Carlos Gardel, the Argentine singer and actor, had been killed on takeoff; the twisted fuselage was still lying alongside the runway! A couple of hours later, we hedge-hopped over the outskirts of Bogotá at around 500 feet, in bright evening sunshine, and landed at dusk The trip had taken in all some seven hours for the 500-odd miles, and had been over some of the wildest jungle and mountain scenery in the world; it was a tiring journey but interesting and educational.

I checked in at a midtown hotel, and the next day reported to the office to be briefed as to my duties. I was not at all in the best of health and had also begun to feel the effects of the altitude and the chilly dampness; within a week I had another bout of fever. It was obvious that I was not, nor would be for some time, fit enough to undertake the type of work anticipated, and it was agreed I should be transferred back to Maracaibo. I did not happily contemplate another long and tiring flight back to the coast, so it was with relief I heard that I could take the river boat down the Magdalena, and then catch the steamer back to Venezuela. It was a six-day journey, starting off from Bogotá with an all-day trip down the mountains to a riverside village, where an old Mississippi-type woodburning paddle steamer was tied up. I was allocated a tiny cabin, shared with dozens of cockroaches. The passengers all ate at a long table in the saloon, which was literally a patio in the centre of the main deck. The meals were plantains, stew, beans, rice, and corn, with salt fish or meat, but I was well accustomed to that sort of diet.

It was a very engrossing and interesting trip chugging down the Magdalena River, gliding past endless banana and coconut plantations, and calling in at small waterside villages to drop off or collect passengers and parcels, stocking up meanwhile with loads of firewood for the boiler. We had one unpleasant night stuck on a sandbank, with a violent thunderstorm raging around us. However, there was music by a small band on board and a bar of sorts, so time passed quickly enough. We had a long stopover at the Tropical Oil Company's depot at Barranca Bermeja but I did not bother to go ashore. We were lucky to take only five days over the voyage—in the height of the dry season,

the trip could take as long as three weeks!

Arriving back once more at the Maracaibo office, I was checked over by the medical department and they in turn informed the management that it had not been a wise decision to send me to Bogotá, since I was still strongly susceptible to bouts of malaria. In fact, I was so weakened by the recent attacks that I began to break out in sores everywhere, and after two months, the medical officer recommended that I should be sent home on early foreign leave, to be able to recuperate in a more temperate clime. I therefore left Curaçao for England one November day on the S.S. *Magdalena* of the German line, arriving after a week or so at sea, at Plymouth, for a happy family reunion.

I had been granted two months' leave, since I had only completed two years of my contract, and as it was winter time, we never travelled far from our flat; it was unfortunate that within two days of our being due to sail back, I went down again with an attack of benign tertian malaria and had to have further treatment in London. It was touch and go whether I would be allowed to return to the tropics, but the company decided I could be useful at the head office in Maracaibo. In February 1937 therefore, we eventually sailed on the French Line steamer *Colombie* from Southampton waters, calling in at Guadeloupe and Martinique, which made an interesting break in the voyage. Arriving at Curaçao we caught the KLM flight to Maracaibo, and settled down once again in our old haunts.

After a few days, in which we had not bothered to unpack, I was assigned to my previous post in the fields, and took up more or less where I had left off, some months earlier.

Conditions by now had quieted down considerably, although we were still having to contend with many difficult problems involving squatter invasions and land grabbing.

On the industrial relations front, matters were improving rapidly. The company was building extensive new villages to house labour and artisans, promoting clubs, opening new schools, and organizing sports activities. The *Sindicatos* now had official blessing and a review of wage scales was on the agenda.

I might mention here that in June our son Peter was born in the company hospital. On this occasion we were fortunately on a short assignment at the head office and were able to avoid an uncomfortable overnight trip on the afterdeck of a company launch, as had happened at the birth of our daughter some three years before.

Progress in transportation had also by now gone on to such an extent that the company had acquired an eight-seat twin-engine Lockheed plane, mainly for top-brass flights. The manager had his own little two-seat Piper Cub, and another four-seater single-engine Stinson seaplane was on its way from the States. Most of the routine journeys, however, were still made across the lake on company launches, or in emergencies, on converted native schooners.

Flights to the distant southern part of the lake were always hazardous. The small seaplane had to land and take off on the Escalante or Catatumbo rivers, and the pilot always made a low-level pass before finally putting her down, to ensure there were no floating logs, alligators, or other obstacles. Takeoff also presented difficulties: several runs often had to be made up and down a straight stretch of the river to break up water suction, and here again a sharp lookout was necessary for drifting objects; they could easily smash the floats and capsize the plane. Passengers on outgoing flights usually sat with their feet on crates of fresh vegetables and frozen foods destined for the distant isolated staff and the mess hall, luxuries unobtainable in such camps.

Foreign leaves of the expatriate members of our department usually meant somebody had to be transferred as a replacement for periods anything up to six months, and I did my share of moving around. In fact, our household goods were so depleted by breakages, that we finally bought up a load of the cheapest kitchenware, china and glass, mostly at Woolworths, when on leave or at the local stores.

Office work at headquarters was completely different from field life. Every morning we had to scrutinize very thoroughly the

national and local newspapers for items of interest, which were then marked and passed on to management. All official gazettes and those published by the state and municipalities had to be thoroughly reviewed for changes in laws, regulations, or ordinances, and one of the most tiresome jobs was to compare an old law with the new one, taking notes and inserting cuttings. We then had to advise management and the operational departments of anything which concerned their particular sphere of work. This was specially true in regard to the Hydrocarbons Law and Regulations, the Labour Law and those concerning wild (government) lands. Any municipal ordinance changes had to be promptly passed on to the drilling and engineering departments, insofar as it concerned them, for action in the fields.

We had in fact a whole array of laws to keep an eye on, some of which were just coming into effect. The new Aviation Law; law governing collisions at sea (this affected our tanker fleet); the Law of Woods and Waters, which concerned the extraction of water from rivers and streams, and which at wildcat wells, usually meant special licences. The laws which were normally left to the legal boys were the Civil Code, the Penal Code, and the Code of Civil Procedure, the latter mainly concerning active judicial matters.

Close liaison had to be maintained with the topographical, production and industrial relations departments, which relied on us to keep them posted as to any developments which might affect them. Drilling programmes were top secret and all maps were kept under lock and key, especially those which indicated undrilled locations: these could well affect our study of land titles and possible future property acquisitions. A number of local lawyers were attached to the department. They had their own offices in town and worked about 75 percent for the company, partly on salary and expense sheets. Their function, apart from handling lawsuits, was to study and give opinions on any land titles in which we might at the time be interested in. This side of our work was, to me, very fascinating. Searches were always proceeding in the land registry office and in the courts, for any unusual activity by speculators; they were an everpresent menace to our operations. I always got great satisfaction out of studying

original title deeds, tracing the chain of ownership which could go back many years, and I could eventually give a fair assessment of what the legal validity of the *escrituras* might be; however, it would always be up to the lawyers in town to give a final analysis and summing up of all property titles.

Occasionally radio messages were received from tanker captains, giving advance details of trouble aboard ship, whilst inside Venezuelan lake waters, or down at the loading stations. With all-Chinese crews (except for the officers), smuggling was rife—mostly opium, cigarettes, and silks. Fights and knifings were prevalent. Forewarned, we would be ready with the court (judge and secretary) at standby when the tanker dropped anchor in Maracaibo harbour. Fast action was essential to enable the ship to catch the tide over the bar, no matter what time of day or night. Our party would tumble aboard a company launch and bounce over the waves to a rope ladder hanging down the side of the tanker. It was quite an acrobatic feat to get on board, due to the rise and fall of the launch if a heavy sea was running. However, once up in the captain's cabin, the Bols gin and Scotch would be brought out and details of the incident would be recounted, I giving a translation to the court. The judge would usually request the crew be lined up and in cases of a fatal stabbing the body would be viewed by a resident medical officer. Trying to obtain any useful information as to what had happened was pretty hopeless; the tong chief would preserve a stony silence, as would all the crew. The judge would eventually pick out a couple of the most evil looking and send them ashore, where they would spend a couple of months in the gaol; after that they would be put on a tanker for deportation to Curaçao. Once the judicial formalities had been dealt with, the court would draw up a brief and with tokens of appreciation from the captain, we would all leave for the dockside. The captain would joyfully raise anchor and steam away for the bar, a delay in the delivery of some 3,000 tons of crude oil avoided. Justice? Well, "que se hace," as they say in Spanish. The tong would not be too unhappy and the next time it could be somebody else's turn to occupy the hot seat!

In effect, on being transferred for months on end into the

Maracaibo office, with all the intricacies of the work and a vastly different atmosphere, I became increasingly attracted to the idea, despite having to wear a white suit, collar and tie!

The social side of things was far better and the shops naturally attracted my wife. There was a further bonus in the move into town. We could indulge in our favourite pastime of fishing both from the nearby jetties and also out in the lake. This huge expanse of water measures approximately 100 miles north to south and some 50 miles east to west, at its widest point, and in it one could catch anything from a six-inch catfish—of which there were many thousands—to a sixty-pound grouper. I can vividly recall hooking into a seventy-five-pound stingray out in the middle of the lake. We were fishing from a small hired native launch during a violent rainstorm which had broken over us just as I was playing the huge fish, balanced on the tiny heaving stern deck. It had become very choppy and difficult to keep one's feet. I had only twelve-pound nylon line on a short American casting rod, but I eventually managed to "horse" the ray to the surface. The launch patron hit it with a boathook and then cut off the six-foot long tail, which had two vicious poisonous spikes at the base. If you got stuck with one of those you could be in hospital for weeks, and have some nasty scars to show for the rest of your life. When we finally gaffed the fish aboard and and opened it up, the liver was found to weigh around two kilos. This delighted the old native boatman, who took the liver home to boil down for remedial oil. I took some of the "wings" and we had skate fry that night.

It was during one of my head office transfers that fishing trips became a regular outing for us on Sunday mornings We were friendly with the boss of the marine transportation department and he, being also an ardent fisherman, always managed to have a fast launch available on weekends. Th drill did not vary: we arose at 5:00 A.M. when it was barely light, prepared coffee and sandwiches, and loaded our haversacks with frozen prawn bait and bottled beer from the icebox.

With our wives, we then wound our way down to the company dock and made ourselves comfortable aboard the launch.

The *patrón* started the twin diesels and we were soon on our way, cruising gently out of the harbour, with the sun just showing dawn red through the palm trees on the distant shore. We would burble past a Dutch steamer moored alongside the town dock, with a Grace Line passenger and cargo boat tied up behind her, then sweep around the ever-present group of shallow-draft tankers waiting patiently for customs clearance and pilots before steaming off for the "bar"—the narrow stretch of shoal water dividing the lake and the open sea. I think the channel has now been dredged to take ships of considerable larger tonnage.

Once out on to the gentle swell or chop of the lake, we had to decide where to fish on that particular morning—north towards the brackish water of the sea; south to the deeper lake water, or perhaps east or west, closer to the shoreline. There was a slight tidal drop of some two feet, but it made little difference to the fishing. We usually cut motors and drifted, with our rods out and a hunk of prawn on the hook, keeping a lookout for the native fishermen in their dugout canoes: they could usually tell where the fish were feeding. In actual fact, when approaching a small fleet of five or six canoes, we would often see a slim dark almost naked figure slide quietly overboard and disappear below the surface of the water, to reappear some thirty seconds or so later. If he had heard the shoal feeding, he would point in a certain direction and the canoes would paddle swiftly away to a different spot; inevitably they would soon be filling their dugouts with a nice catch of *curbina*.

The fishermen did not exactly welcome us with open arms, as the noise of our motors could scare off the feeding shoals, so we circled at a distance with the motors barely ticking over. If we were lucky and the fish came our way, we would have plenty of excitement for some minutes, hauling in flapping, struggling fish as fast as we could bait up. The canoe fishermen used only a very highly polished strip of lead fastened on the line an inch or so above the hook; gently twitching the handlines a few feet from the bottom of the lake was very effective and they always went back into harbour with a sizeable catch. We ourselves regularly came ashore with a good variety of fish: *palometa*, a type of

mackerel or kingfish; *robato* (snook); *curbina* haddock; grouper, or Jewfish as they call them in the States. The latter lurked amongst the rock formation offshore; they could scale fifty pounds or more. Sheepshead were usually plentiful amongst the debris of wrecks where they lived and fed; they were tasty eating. The fish was oval, not unlike a pómpano, with half-inch black and white stripes like a football jersey. We even caught small tarpon on occasions, but they were considered inedible, although the locals used them for fish chowder. The scourge of all fishermen were the small catfish, vicious scavengers, with sharp poisonous hornlike spikes on the side of the head, and long whiskers. They gobbled everything, and could be found in huge shoals swarming around sewage discharge lines, or below the native toilet huts built over the lake; we had an unprintable name for them! Another strange type was the little blowfish; it had a tiny mouth with sharp teeth and if one tickled its belly, it blew itself up like an enlarged tennis ball; they were a real nuisance, as they nibbled away at the bait and were rarely taken on the hook.

The lake surface could change alarmingly in a very short space of time; *chubascos*, violent local storms, could blow up at any time out of nowhere, and you could get very seasick in a surprisingly short time. We often made the lake crossing on native launches; they were mainly old sailing schooners, built up, top-heavy, and with unreliable, smelly, converted marine engines amidships. We only used them in real emergencies. (In later years, excellent passenger and vehicle ferries were put into service across the narrow neck of the lake, and eventually a seven-kilometre bridge was built, with a swinging section in the centre for the passage of tankers and steamers.)

One of the old schooners left town harbour one Sunday evening, loaded to the gunwales with workers returning to the oilfields after spending the weekend with their families in the city. The launch must have had around a hundred persons on board, some of the more venturesome climbing up to doze on the deck covering—planks covered with canvas. Undoubtedly quite a

number were full of rum and just wanted to lie down and pass out until they reached the other side of the lake. The launch had just cleared the harbour mouth, headed southeast, when it caught fire; it was a terrific holocaust. Only a few lifebelts were readily available and panic ensued; most of the passengers leapt into the water only to drown, as no other craft was nearby. At the time I happened to be on board one of the company launches tied up near our warehouses, preparing to settle in for a night trip to the refinery—we sailed around midnight. The conflagration could be seen barely a mile or so away and our captain immediately started his engines and went at full speed to the scene. Little could be done, but we managed to pick up a few struggling survivors. The heat was so intense that we finally had to stand off, and it was just as well, for a few minutes later the schooner's oil tank exploded and she went down in a cloud of steam.

Lake travel in those days was always an adventure. Given the choice I always preferred to ship on our own small tugs, powered by reliable single-cylinder Kromhout diesel engines. They chugged merrily away, were slow, but could be counted on to get you safely to port. Provided the lake was reasonably smooth, one could drowse on a deck chair on the afterdeck under the awning, or read and quaff a cold beer from an old icebox.

The more distant voyages, to the San Lorenzo refinery and to the Catatumbo river, could take six to twelve hours, especially if calls were made at other camps en route. The company had two such comfortable passenger launches, the *Ana Maria Campos* and the *Luisa Caceres*; they boasted two small cabins with bunks and toilet facilities: a mini dining saloon was housed amidships; there was plenty of deck space for lounging during the day. The crew was comprised of a competent local patrón, an engineer, a cook, and two seamen; it was comparable to travel on a luxury yacht. Two speedboats were available in Maracaibo, mainly for management. They could churn out eighteen knots, weather permitting, but if caught out in a storm, they could bounce quite alarmingly.

VIII

My six-month temporary transfer to the Maracaibo office was now over, and with the family I moved back to the Lagunillas field, to catch up on a heavy backlog of work. Once we had unpacked in our bungalow, I quickly organized an urgent trip to the southern foothills.

Sixto, my foreman, woke me around 4:30 A.M. at the company guest house in the Mene Grande field, where we were spending the night, prior to a trek southwards through the jungle. I had previously received instructions from the head office to do a preliminary investigation of potential areas for the siting of a large agricultural colony, which, if developed, would eventually be divided into several hundreds of individual five-hectare (twelve-acre) smallholdings for future unemployed workmen; all part of a scheme being worked out between the company and the government to alleviate any hardship which might result, due to the redundancies which would follow a heavy cutback in oil production in the fields.

The previous day we had ploughed for miles through the muddy trail from the Lagunillas field. It was late that evening when we arrived in Mene Grande, and I had a much-needed shower upon arrival, a couple of cold beers at the club, a dinner in the mess hall and had then retired to my room in the guest house for an early night. Sixto had taken the pickup and had found a pal of his down in the village, staying there the night.

It was still dark when he tootled the horn outside the guesthouse, and we were soon on our way to the mess hall, where the Chinese cook served us a hasty breakfast and coffee; the cooks came on duty at the crack of dawn to cater for the shift men on

the drilling rigs or on other night duties. We filled our *pimpinas* ("water bottles") with ice water, not that it stayed cold very long; we made sure we had a compass, machetes, and shotgun and also my waterproof wallet with maps of the region. They would not be of any great use in the particular countryside we were heading for, as they had been drawn up by the company purely for geological and survey parties and were mostly simple outline maps. There were no official surveys of that region in existence.

We headed south across the savanna for several kilometres, the air smelling beautifully fresh and clean at that hour of the morning, and arrived at the end of the trail on the north bank of the San Pedro river, half in flood at that time. This was where we had to park the pickup truck and proceed on foot. There was no bridge, and the first obstacle was the river itself, which we had to cross balanced precariously on a fallen *ceiba* tree, which spanned the murky current below. Sixto, as sure-footed as a cat, carried most of the equipment, and was across in a few seconds. I took my time sidling slowly over the wet, mossy tree trunk, but eventually made it without falling in or ignominiously going down on all fours, as I had done on previous occasions.

We found the trail on the other side of the river disappearing into a dense wall of jungle, and automatically sorted out into single file. I never took the lead—first, because my lads could always follow the signs of the old trail much better than I could; second, because the lead man always became smothered in ticks, which clung to the leaves and were a real menace; third, because the man at the head of the column, knowing his jungle lore, could always sense the presence of anything likely to be dangerous, a snake, a wild boar, which could become savage if disturbed, and sometimes the odd jaguar or mountain lion. *Garrapatas* ("ticks") were the bane of our jungle trips. They got into every part of the body, dug deeply into the flesh and sucked the blood, blowing themselves out to the size of a pea. I carried with me a bottle of alcohol and camphor, which helped to release the insects and relieve the soreness; the men had their own remedy, consisting of raw tobacco leaf soaked in rum, which was also very effective. If a garrapata really got a grip, the thing then was

to burn his rear end with lighted cigarette. It made him let go, but left the head embedded in the flesh which could well turn septic. The man up front also carried the shotgun and should he suddenly come to a halt and hold up his hand, we knew he had scented a game bird—partridge, wild turkey, quail—or perhaps even a deer or *lapa*, the meat of which ate like young pork.

We pushed slowly ahead into the gloom of the tall jungle palms, mahogany and cedar trees, all tangled around with lianas and undergrowth; nobody had been through that way for some time. Multicoloured butterflies, some with six-inch wingspan, fluttered around the rare sunlit spaces—beautiful specimens of blues, reds, yellows, gold and purple. Parrots, parakeets and macaws screeched indignantly and flew higher up into the branches, and away in the distance we heard the weird sirenlike noises of a family of red monkeys. Troops of a smaller variety at times crossed the lower branches of the jungle trees, chattering away and peering down at the invaders of their privacy.

I was in my element, even though it was hot, humid, and tiring; we were grateful the mosquitoes had not yet made their presence felt. We crossed a number of small *caños*, balancing somewhat precariously on narrow slippery tree trunks placed expressly for use as bridges; they were mostly rotten and uneven, but the fall to the canyon bed was not all that serious if one overbalanced; it was sticky mud down below. Occasionally, the small highly poisonous yellowtail snake, which liked to nest below rotting timber, showed itself. The trick then was to stand perfectly still, and let one of the gang hit it with a broken branch or his machete, or give it a blast from the shotgun.

After some three hours hard going, we came to a clearing in the jungle, planted with maize, sugar cane, yucca and papaya trees. We were offered coffee and sat around for a rest on a rough wooden bench under a very tatty thatched-roof open shack, occupied by a lone squatter and his concubine, a scruffy female of about sixteen years of age by the look of her. I made some enquiries and learned that the region we were aiming for was some distance to the west, still about an hour's trek; with the sun now high in the sky and relentlessly beating down on the thinning

jungle, we pressed on. Signs of property boundaries and trails now appeared, and we eventually found ourselves filing out into open grassland and fenced pastures.

This was obviously a well managed hacienda and soon a spacious ranch house came into view, with the attendant mules, dogs, chickens, pigs, monkeys and other assorted birds and animals. We were made welcome by the resident owner, always a genuine ritual when miles away from so-called civilization. I gathered a lot of very useful information regarding surrounding properties, and could observe that the type of terrain would lend itself to what the company had in mind. I also found that the water supply was adequate and could be obtained by drilling bore holes down to around thirty metres; very encouraging as we were many kilometres from the seasonal and doubtful supply provided by the river.

After a welcome noggin, we dined on *arepas*, maize muffins which we dipped in *nata*, a sour cream made from goats' milk; there were plantains roasted over the charcoal kitchen fire with *caldo*, a vegetable soup served in a calabash shell. I did not enquire as to the meat, but it was delicious—probably well-cured venison. Afterwards, I drew in as well as possible, on one of the maps, a rough outline of the region, made notes of anything else which might be of future use, and bade our host farewell. We had a long trek before us if we wanted to be back in camp by nightfall; it would be most unpleasant traversing that jungle trail in the dark. Since the trail was now clearly defined, we made good progress and were back at the camp office around 4:00 P.M. just as the staff was going home. I intended staying the night, as we were all quite weary. Pushing on that same evening for hours over a muddy potholed and pitch-dark track did not appeal to any of us.

I was greeted by the camp maintenance boss at the mess hall where, over coffee, we exchanged field gossip. He casually asked me if I would like a lift on the company Lockheed plane which would be taking off in half an hour or so for Maracaibo; en route it would land at Lagunillas to drop off the field superintendent. It was very tempting to think of being back with the

family that same evening, but I still had to fix up Sixto and the peons with accomodation for the night down in the local village. I had also planned a sidetrip for the next day to take some measurements for the making up of squatter contracts, now well behind, so I regretfully declined the offer.

I called in at the guest house to book a room, and had a quick shower. Sixto meanwhile had gone off with the pickup and the men to see about lodgings. I thumbed a lift to the club on the hill and relaxed on the veranda overlooking the plains, with a jug of ice-cold beer in front of me. In the distance I could hear the dull rumble of the twin engines of the Lockheed starting up; the pilot was checking his instruments and warming up for takeoff along the oiled-sand runway, heading away from the lines of derricks.

The rumble developed into a snarl as the Lockheed was held on the brakes for the final boost, and then the slim yellow twin-tailed plane came into view low down over to the southeast, looking like a huge buzzing hornet.

I was watching it quite casually and perhaps somewhat regretfully, when all of a sudden something happened: I heard the sound of what seemed like a cough from one of the motors and the plane heeled over in a tight turn. It was evident the pilot was fighting desperately to haul the aircraft 'round to regain the safety of the landing strip, but he never made it. The plane sideslipped around about 500 feet over the derricks, and without hitting any of them, fell like a stone onto one of the field roads, breaking into dozens of pieces. It did not catch fire. The occupants had no chance. When we got there some minutes later with the ambulance and the fire engine, we found them sitting in the roadway, still strapped into their seats, all dead. In fact, one of the doctors told me later that they had hardly a bone in their bodies which was not broken. I was indeed glad I had stuck to my original program, and we left overland the next morning in a very subdued frame of mind.

We were in fact very fortunate in having pilots with very good records and vast experience. Accidents did sometimes occur, and I was involved in a near miss on one occasion, when coming

back from eastern Venezuela on a regular airline, a story which I have recorded later. On another trip, we had a bit of a scare in the Lagunillas field, when four of us took off in the company Stinson, a single-engine monoplane. The landing strip in this camp was constructed out of oiled sand spread over swampy ground, which made it very tacky and soft for takeoff. Our destination was the Mene Grande field. On the way we'd have a look from the air at some oil spillage.

The Stinson could lift a payload of 800 pounds. I weighed 200 pounds, the pilot about the same; a Dutchman must have gone 240 pounds at least, and the other passenger was no lightweight. We had a full load of gasoline, so were very near, if not over the total desired payload.

The landing strip was partly fenced, but cattle sometimes got in and a guard was detailed to clear the narrow runway for us as we waited, revving up right at the far end. We had our seat belts fastened and after the final run-up, the pilot released the brakes and gave the Stinson the gun; we "ploughed" along the soft runway—and that is about the right word for it. Gathering speed, the pilot pulled the stick back a short distance before we got to the fence at the end of the strip, and we cleared it by a few feet; the pilot then put the aircraft into a tight bank, and the company 33,000-volt high-tension line loomed up ahead, far too close for comfort. I heard the chap sitting next to me utter some strong language or a prayer, but it was OK. We had cleared the menacing wires and pylons by some eight feet. I think we all looked rather green, and no further word was uttered for quite some time. The remainder of the trip was uneventful. We dropped off the passengers at the Mene Grande landing strip, and I flew on with the pilot to check on the oil spillage and came back over the mountain tops. It was interesting to see all the jungle spread out below and to identify local features—and much more comfortable.

The end of 1938 saw us due for a local leave, and we decided to take a round trip voyage on a German ship to Guatemala, via Colombia, Panama, and Costa Rica. We embarked in Curaçao, after flying over from the Venezuelan mainland, but although we enjoyed the ports of call, life on board was somewhat unpleasant. Hitler's portrait, life sized, glowered at us from the walls of the bars, lounges, and dining room; the stewards were insolent and at times drunk, even during the day; in the evenings, they held black-beer parties in the tourist section, to the constant shouts of "Heil Hitler." Discipline was nonexistent and no service of any kind was available after dinner time.

We went ashore at Panama and enjoyed a tour round the town in a horse-drawn open carriage. In Puerto Limón, my wife and children stayed on board and I took the train through the banana plantations and up the mountains to San José; it was my second visit. Costa Rica was then a lovely little country. I don't know what happened after the violent volcanic eruption a few years ago, which covered the western part of the country with thick lava ash and ruined the coffee crops.

The German captain on the *Magdalena* was somewhat upset when, after leaving Cartagena, Colombia, we were shadowed by two French submarines right up to Puerto Barrios in Guatemala. The ship's officers jokingly called them the "twins," but all the same the men were annoyed at the attention of the two silent subs, which, ghostlike, appeared a few hundred yards away in all the harbours, soon after our arrival. On our return trip we put in at Puerto Colombia, the port for Barranquilla. Somehow or other one of the senior German officers offended a high-ranking Colombian port official during a dance on board and the ship was put under arrest until a formal apology had been received. Two armed Colombian soldiers were posted at the bottom of the gangway, and the local officials departed in high dudgeon. It was obviously going to mean quite a long delay in the sailing schedule of the liner, which was due to leave in the early hours. It must have been around 4:00 A.M. when I awoke to noises on the upper deck and shouts from dockside. I peered out of our porthole and to my surprise, found we were moving quickly away from the pier, and within a matter of minutes were out of the harbour and on the open sea. At breakfeast that morning, I learned that the captain had sent some of the crew forward and aft, with axes,

and had ordered them to sever the mooring lines. We duly arrived in Curaçao on schedule, but that German Line never went back into a Colombian port for many years after. In retrospect, one could foresee, with the attitude of the crew and their cavorting, the French subs and the high-handed action of the German captain, the whispering shadow of the Second World War.

News of the outbreak of war came as quite a shock to most of us out in Venezuela in that autumn of 1939. We were not really in touch with world affairs, especially European, since shortwave broadcasts were very difficult to tune in on the radio sets then available.

When the news broke that autumn morning, all the staff at the head office and out in the fields could be found sitting at home crouched over their sets and fiddling with the knobs, in a somewhat vain attempt to hear the London broadcast.

The weeks that followed saw many changes and developments: security measures were discussed at staff meetings and put into practice. The general manager made it plain that neither London office or the British government wanted anybody, as an individual, to present himself as a volunteer for military duty, since the industry itself was to all intents and purposes now under government control as a vital war effort. Later on, if any of the younger staff were needed, they would so be advised.

The oil fields themselves were put under strict national and local protection. Everyone had to carry a pass and we were subjected to constant thorough searches and screening on all highways by the National Guard—even down to the handbags carried by the women. All German staff were dismissed, some leaving the country for Costa Rica or Colombia, where they formed themselves into colonies. Others took to the Andean mountains and ran small guesthouses or went into horticulture; a few of the more radical elements, known to the authorities, went into hiding.

Late that year, news of the torpedoeing of the Dutch liner *Simon Bolivar* in the north Atlantic was announced; I can vividly remember the impact it had on everybody. The news was given out whilst we were at a cinema show in one of the field clubs, and the Dutch families present were particularly and understandably upset and horrified. Holland was not even remotely connected with the war at that time. Some of the company staff were on board the ship but were rescued.

IX

I was due for my three months home leave early in 1940; normally taken in England visiting parents and relations. However, we had all been informed that European leave was now out of the question, although staff would be pemitted to take a vacation in the States or in any other part of South America. Since we were all working flat out with maximum oil output top priority, management had decreed that staff *must* take their accrued holiday period after the normal contractual period of three years.

Most of the European expatriates, British, Dutch, and Swiss, had elected to take a trip to New York. They had discovered that if they bought a new car there and made the overland journey to California, motelling on the way, they could sell the vehicle out on the West Coast at a higher price; obtaining, in fact, a margin of profit which covered their travelling expenses.

My leave was due in February, but it was April before I was able to hand over my duties and arrange passages. Our plan was to take the local boat over to Curaçao and then catch the Dutch liner to New York, thereafter planning any further movements to suit circumstances. We hoped also to contact some distant relations whilst in New York and do some shopping.

The end of April therefore, saw us in Willemstad, boarding the SS *Colombia*, a comfortable steamship, flagship of the Royal Netherlands Steamship Company, and we sailed that same evening. A couple of days out of port, with the war situation becoming more and more disturbing, there was a fire and lifeboat drill. The weather was unsettled but our family had by then all got their sea legs; I myself had been enjoying some noggins of Scotch at the ship's bar, and although I was not feeling a hundred per-

cent, I put it down to a temporary tummy upset and subsequent events proved it definitely was—very much so.

There was no elevator in the ship and when the signal for the lifeboat dril sounded, we grabbed up our belts and climbed several flights of stairs to our respective stations. I was thoroughly exhausted by the time the "all-clear" sounded on the ship's siren, and was glad to lie down on a bunk once we were back in our cabin. My wife noticed I was very white and listless. I was also disinclined to eat which, for me, was unusual. The next day I felt really ill and the ship's doctor came along. He told my wife to keep me lying down and on a very light diet, milk preferably, and he would return in the evening. I became very restless and later that day it was thought prudent to move me into a single empty cabin alongside, just in case it was something contagious.

The following day I was worse and the doctor was very puzzled. That evening in fact really brought things to a head. The dinner gong sounded about 7:30 P.M. and my wife had by then fed the two children and put them to bed; she looked in on me and then went off to the dining room.

I was lying very quietly on the bunk under the sheet, with just my pajama top on, when I suddenly had an attack of extreme nausea. I managed to stumble off the bed and just reached the wash basin, when I was violently sick, vomiting quantities of foul-smelling dark sticky liquid. I learned later that a large proportion was blood. To my embarassment, I also found I was unable to control my bowels and an enormous mess of dark tarry feces was deposited down my legs and onto the cabin floor. I was so weak I could do nothing but lean on the wash basin, unable even to crawl back to the bunk. It seemed ages before I heard a noise and a steward glanced into the open cabin door; he gave a horrified gasp and went off in a great hurry. In a very short while my wife and the doctor appeared together with another passenger, who turned out to be a Danish specialist in internal ailments. The latter took one quick look and had me lifted gently back on to the bunk; I was cleaned up and the steward meanwhile mopped up the cabin. The specialist took the ship's doctor

and my wife aside and I learned later that he had diagnosed a perforated stomach ulcer. The situation apparently was very serious.

I was kept absolutely motionless on my back, with ice packs on my head and stomach; nothing at all to eat or drink, but a little ice could be passed over my, by now, parched lips. Shots of morphia were given every so often, and my wife sat in a deck chair all through the night to see I kept perfectly still. The captain was informed by the doctors that I had to be taken off the ship as soon as ever possible for immediate blood transfusions. We were then off Cape Hatteras with nearly two days sailing to reach New York.

The Netherlands was being overrun at that time, and German subs were operating in our vicinity; it was indeed a difficult problem to resolve, as we were a long way from the American coast. The Captain finally decided to make arrangements for an ambulance to meet the ship at Staten Island, over a day's sailing away, but the ship's doctor and the specialist advised tht I would probably not last that long.

Aboard ship were some company friends of ours, traveling to the States, and when they heard the decision, they cabled our New York office, asking whether something could not be done at that end to expedite more effective action. It somehow had the desired effect. On the Sunday morning, the *Colombia* altered course toward Norfolk, Virginia, and radioed for an immediate rendezvous with a suitable vessel, to take me ashore to a hospital. Around midday a U.S. Customs cutter was sighted; a motor launch was lowered from her davits and manoeuvered alongside the liner. I was slowly lowered down, strapped tightly in a wire stretcher, to the bobbing boat below. My wife was not allowed to accompany me, and in any case, with the two children aboard, it would have been very difficult. When she finally arrived in New York the next day, with some of our trunks containing gent's clothing, and no husband, she had to wait for hours whilst they sorted out the problem.

Meanwhile I had been transferred to the customs cutter. The tender was winched aboard, and I was carefully taken down below deck, where they placed the stretcher on the safest place,

the galley table. Some of the crew kindheartedly but mistakenly gathered round offering hot coffee, but luckily the Lt. Commander in charge had been briefed as to my condition on the radio.

Full speed for three hours brought us into Norfolk harbour and alongside the naval docks, where the crew had a tricky job carrying the stretcher over a ten-inch plank to the waiting ambulance. There was a further hitch, as they though I was merchant navy personnel and were going to take me to the naval base hospital. However, we finally drove to the Norfolk General, where the staff immediately set to work.

As it was Sunday afternoon, and I was in a general ward, there were plenty of visitors around. I was the object of much interest to the children visiting other patients. A blood transfusion was dripping into one arm and I had a shock serum needle in my leg. The kids were very intrigued by the "funny man with needles stuck in him." A laboratory technician came around with his tray for the usual tests. He was back later in the evening and asked whether I was a "limey." He apparently came from Oxted, Surrey, and had been in the States some years. He dropped around several times afterwards for a chat, since I knew his home village quite well. He mentioned that it had been really touch and go with me—I had been admitted with a haemoglobin of twenty-five (forty is normal) and despite several transfusions, I was still not up to a normal count. During those days I was not allowed to have any regular sleep; nurses woke me at predetermined times to take my blood pressure, and I had nothing at all to eat or drink for days.

The company was very good. They cabled their Eastern Seaboard representative, asking him to visit the hospital and advise on my condition. The chap turned out to be a sales manager I had known in Venezuela, and he sent in a huge bunch of flowers. The following week my wife caught a plane down from New York, but had to return after two days because of the children whom she had left with some of her relations in New Jersey. By that time I was still very weak but off the danger list, and was itching to move out and be reunited with my family. The resident specialist reluctantly agreed to my departure, and some twelve

days after being admitted, I left the hospital. I realized afterwards that it was a very precipitate move on my part.

I caught a Lockheed plane out of Norfolk on the following day and spent a somewhat terrifying fifteen minutes whilst we were flying through a violent thunderstorm over the Potomac River, before landing in Washington. Here I had to make a dash through pouring rain to catch my connection to La Guardia airport, New York, where my wife was awaiting me.

It certainly seemed as though our proposed plans would have to be rearranged, and so it proved. The company doctor in New York, when he had checked me over and read the medical file from Norfolk, raised merry hell for over an hour. He grabbed the phone and arranged for my immediate admittance into New York Central Hospital, and there I stayed flat on my back for six weeks. They took numerous X-rays but never found the expected ulcer scar, which puzzled the specialists who were called in.

When I came out of the hospital, I stayed for a few days with my family and relations over in New Jersey. Any hope of motelling across the States was out, and we finally settled for a holiday up at Cape Cod, where we rented a beach bungalow, with excellent sea fishing on the doorstep.

My wife was already several months pregnant with our third offspring, which had not made things any easier for her during my illness, and the doctor who checked on both of us in Boston prior to our return to South America, found the baby was upside down; nothing serious, and as events proved, the little beggar turned himself right side up before he was born down in the Maracaibo hospital.

We took the train back to New York at the end of our leave. The *Santa Rosa* of the Grace Line took us down to Curaçao, and we boarded the plane the next day for Maracaibo, and home.

X

The years 1940 and 1941 saw us moving between the Maracaibo office and the fields. Local produce was being used in much greater quantities, since commissary supplies were now dwindling and rationing was introduced. We particularly missed imported bacon and cheese, and tyres for private cars were practically unobtainable. The synthetic tyres supplied to the company were stored in a well-guarded building and issued only under special permits to the field garages. Bicycles were even introduced for journeys around the camp area, but were not very popular. Frightfully beneath one's dignity, what! Security was tightened up all over the country; I still had to travel around the district, but exploration (wildcat wells) and therefore some of our work, had been curtailed—the emphasis was on an all-out production effort.

We supplemented our larder by fishing out in the lake on all possible occasions. At times, out on the savannas, I could buy fresh meat from a cattle farmer, if I waited around whilst the beast was slaughtered and butchered. I usually managed to acquire some fillet and liver, the latter not highly rated out in the backwoods. We had also found out that by paying in dollars, we could have food parcels sent from Canada to our respective families in England, and arranged for a package of mixed groceries and some odd delicacies to be forwarded each month. The contents were greatly appreciated by the old folk, and we continued sending them a long while after the cessation of hostilities.

We managed to take a local leave in Curaçao in 1942, staying at the company holiday hotel outside Willemstad, Piscadera

Bay. There were blackouts at nightfall, which were somewhat of a farce, as the island anyhow was always lit up by the enormous gas flares at the refinery. On various occasions there were also lights flashing from the nearby hillsides, giving rise to tales of possible local collaboration.

One evening in fact, as we were preparing to go over to the hotel dining room, there was a violent explosion quite nearby. From our chalet we saw clouds of smoke rising a mile or so away, near the harbour mouth and shortly afterwards an elderly military aircraft staggered into the air and dropped depth charges offshore. A couple of antisubmarine launches also put out from the port, but nothing further transpired. The following day we learnt that two torpedoes had been fired by a German submarine at a tanker which was turning, preparatory to entering the narrow harbour mouth. It was loaded way down with tons of high octane gasoline, and goodness knows what would have happened to the town if the sub had scored a hit.

In 1943, we were allowed another three months leave. However, since the States were now in the war, we planned this time to stay down in Florida to avoid unnecessary travel; furthermore a long journey with three young children was something of a problem. We caught a Pan Am flight to Barranquilla in Colombia and the following morning we flew out on a four-engine Clipper "flying boat" for Miami. This trip reminded me of way back in 1930, when the service was first inaugurated; I have an envelope sent on 7 May 1930 to my fiancée in England, commemorating the innaugural flight of Pan American Airways to and from Venezuela. The Maracaibo postmark is 7 May 1930; the franking on the back of the envelope is also 7 May, 4:00 P.M. Panama, Canal Zone. What is interesting is, that the London arrival postmark has a date of May 20!

In route to Miami we touched down in Jamaica, but saw little from the air, as all the portholes were blacked out before alighting in the harbout, a wartime precaution. Ashore for half an hour, we were served the customary rum punches dispensed by the airline at the Kingston seaplane jetty. We were very late in

takeoff however, due to some minor engine trouble, and it was nearly dark when we flew into Miami harbour and taxied to the seaplane base. It was around midnight before we cleared immigration and customs and got to our hotel.

The next day we shopped down Biscayne Boulevard, and later caught a train to St. Petersburg, where we had arranged to rent a seaside chalet. The climate in August was hotter than in Venezuela, and the mosquitoes twice the size. The kids all contracted a nasty form of impetigo and went around town with purple-stained arms and legs. However, we made the most of the change and rest. The two eldest children attended a local country-style school and in between we lounged 'round St. Petersburg town and fished from the nearby jetty, cussing an old pelican who repeatedly stole our catch if we as much as turned our heads.

I managed to obtain a special permit from the local harbourmaster, and went for a trip in a fast launch to catch grouper off the Florida Keys. We had many delicious meals of fried fresh grouper fillet, but what I enjoyed most was smoked mullet, a truly mouth-watering local delicacy.

I had been told to report to our New York office for a medical check-up and departed alone one day on the Seaboard train, a journey of some twenty-six hours. It was full of American soldiers, mainly from the West Coast, and they had very little praise for the scenery along the Eastern shoreline. In St. Petersburg itself there was a lot of grumbling about a recent imposition of partial rationing, but it was nothing compared to what the people at home were having to endure.

Our return flight was also by Pan Am Clipper. We took off from the Miami base late one day, so late in fact, that we had to overnight at Cienfuegos, on the southern coast of Cuba. We had a hair-raising "landing"; our pilot made a preliminary run over the harbour as there was a strong northwesterly wind blowing; one could see the whitecaps inside the harbour wall. The steward came round and fitted the blackout boards over the portholes and down on to the rough water we went. We hit the first of the waves with a frightening crash, and then literally bounced along

until we were in the relatively calmer water near the seaplane base. A look 'round Cienfuegos town that evening, and the purchase of some necessary clothing for the two lads, made a nice break.

Flying on south from Cienfuegos the next day was uneventful, and we landed in the river Magdalena at Barranquilla around midday, to find ourselves spending the night in a hotel before taking the land plane for Maracaibo. That evening we had dinner and drinks with some company friends stationed in town; I had a final "smoke-up" of cigarettes, before cutting them out altogether, and never started again. The company doctor in New York read me the riot act about smoking and the probable effect on my previous stomach trouble. I have never regretted taking his advice.

Nineteen forty-four saw me spending more and more time at the head office, and towards the autumn I was permanently assigned to Maracaibo. Our two eldest children, Pat, the girl, and Peter, the eldest boy had meanwhile been attending the company school, but we decided it was not time they started a proper basic English education. The nearest place (apart from sending them home, which at the time was impossible due to the war), was Jamaica, and so they were duly enrolled in colleges there. They were later joined by Michael, our youngest lad, and they all spent the next few years travelling to and from Maracaibo, and later Caracas, to their respective schools in Jamaica. In fact, they became seasoned travellers on the airlines—KLM, British West Indies Airlines, Chicago and Southern or whichever seats were available at the time. They made the journey every three months unaccompanied.

It was good training for them and developed self-reliance. On one occasion they were offloaded in Aruba, Dutch West Indies, staying at the guest house and catching the Maiquetia plane the next day. Once they turned up without their passports, but since I was friendly with the Venezuelan airport manager, the matter was quickly fixed up. They travelled on two passports, their British ones to get into Jamaica, and their Venezuelan passports to come back home. I can also remember one occasion when the

two boys climbed into our station wagon after passing through customs, and gleefully unloaded from under their shirts large quantities of fireworks which they had bought in Kingston the night before. I can imagine the pilot would have had something to say, if he had but known.

Nineteen forty-five saw the end of the war and expatriate staff was by now depleted to such an extent that we had to spend long hours trying to keep up with the work. I was at my desk by 6:30 A.M. and rarely left before 6:00 P.M. I had only one foreign assistant, a Canadian, who luckily spoke quite a fair Spanish; we just managed to cope. By the end of that year, I really needed some leave, but it was mid-1946 before I could get away. With my family I caught the Grace Line boat *Santa Paula* for New York and then hung around for six weeks waiting on passages to England. We spent most of our time taking the children to Coney Island, the La Guardia airport, the Metropolitan Museum and in between times feeding the squirrels in Central Park; we were staying at the nearby Windsor Hotel.

Eventually we managed to get passages on the American liner, the SS *Washington* bound for Southampton; she was a partially converted troopship and passengers were segregated, females on one side and men on the other, meeting up during the day, and for simple meals served at long trestle tables without any ceremony. We were fortunate however, in being allocated cabin bunks; many of the passengers had to be content with being literally packed into dormitories holding forty or more persons, sleeping either in bunks or hammocks, and with very limited sanitary facilities. It was also a completely "dry" ship, with no bars or diversions of any nature. I could have kicked myself for not bringing along a couple of bottles of Scotch, freely obtainable in New York.

After nearly ten years' absence, everything looked very different back in England. What we really enjoyed on our trip up to London from Southampton by train, was the vivid greenness of the fields and the pleasant country scenery, after the arid desert around Maracaibo. Our three months leave went by very quickly

and we were all too soon on our way back to Venezuela. We went via New York, travelling on the old four-stack *Acquitania*; it was her last voyage I think. She was very narrow gutted and rolled heavily in the stormy weather of the north Atlantic. We met fog, snow and hail and to cap everything she was diverted to Halifax, Nova Scotia, due to a dock strike in New York. We arrived in Halifax at the end of December, 1946, thirty-six hours late and in well below freezing temperature. We entrained the following day for New York, via Montreal, but it took us three days to reach the States. The train was so overloaded they had to provide an extra locomotive half way, but we finally crossed the Canadia-U.S. border on New Year's Eve, just after midnight.

Disgruntled U.S. Customs and Immigration officials boarded the train and went along the corridors, noisily waking everybody up. The heating system broke down and we huddled in blankets in the carriages; food was running short and the stewards practically went on strike, and refused to make up the Pullman bunks. In Whitman, Massachusetts, however, the railway authorities put on a hot meal for all of us in the early hours of the morning, and later that day we happily steamed into New York's Grand Central Station.

Two days shopping and fixing passages and we again entrained for Miami, but this time with different weather and a comfortable private drawing room to rest and sleep in, and best of all, our own toilet. Miami was very cold. The KLM flight was delayed, but we were finally airborne over the town about 1:00 A.M. enjoying a very nice steak and chip supper. The lights of Florida dimmed away to the north; we did not have a full complement of passengers, so we could stretch out and sleep. By dawn, we were circling over Aruba, Dutch West Indies, and transferred to a local flight for Curaçao and Maracaibo, glad to settle down again and pick up our normal pattern of work and family life.

Back into the Maracaibo work pattern, with odd trips out to the backwoods, time soon flew past; I got in a little sailing in a snipe, with the Dutch consul, and we once again started our reg-

ular Sunday morning fishing trips. By autumn the following year, we were looking forward with pleasurable anticipation to our local leave. It had been an unusually unpleasant hot, steamy summer in Maracaibo, and we only had one bedroom in our bungalow fitted with the then newfangled air conditioning. We had also just taken delivery of a new Dodge saloon car with fluid drive, (head office company cars were for management only), and were itching to try out the vehicle on a trip to the Andes, and to enjoy some cool air, a change of scenery and the flowers which bloom in profusion in the mountain villages. The children were going to stay over in Jamaica between terms on this occasion, and were booked in at the Chatham Hotel in Montego Bay, where Mr. and Mrs. Foster and their daughters were always glad to look after them.

The Dodge was accordingly loaded up one weekend, and we caught the recently introduced early ferry boat across the lake and headed southwards towards the foothills of the Andes, which we reached some hours later. We spent the night in the town of Valera, about a thousand feet up in a fold of the valleys, and enjoyed a relatively cool night and a *criollo* dinner. The next morning we made an early start and were soon hauling the Dodge round the numerous hairpin bends, climbing towards Timotes, actually only about eight kilometres as the crow flies, but eighty bends and some thirty kilometres on the speedometer. The journey reminded me vividly of my trip as a bachelor some twenty years before, in an ancient bus, loaded to the hilt with local travellers, pigs, chickens and the inevitable bundles of salt fish, with their very pungent smell—the road and scenery had hardly changed at all. Actually, the main highway at the time was being improved, and at one point we came upon a gang working on a diversion on the hillside. I produced a cold beer and had a chat with the foreman, who had no objection to my driving a short way up the new route to take some photographs. He requested me to be back within half an hour, as he wanted to continue "operations" which, at the time, he did not specify.

It was very interesting to see from a different angle the old trail winding around the mountains, and one could imagine the

enormous amount of labour (mostly prisoners) it had taken to carry out the work. The going was very rough and I noticed small holes drilled in the unfinished surface from which tapes protruded. Back again on the main highway, I enquired of the foreman as to what they were intended for: his reply rather shook me. "Charges of dynamite, señor: if you want to stay here you can watch us detonate them. We were only waiting for you to return to continue our blasting." I drove further up the mountain and waited: a dull roar shook the surrounding countryside and clouds of dust flew up from the spot where I had been parked a short while previously. I needed more than an adequate shot of local cognac to settle my tummy, when I thought of what could have happened if the charges had been set off by our bumping over them!

We turned off later, on to a narrow mountain trail, a few kilometres before Timotes, and found the going increasingly hazardous. Most of it was composed of single track and the hairpin bends were so acute we often had to reverse back twice to get round, with our rear perched perilously near the mountain edge. However, we arrived at the small village of La Mesa de Esnujaque (lovely name that) about 4:00 P.M. all in one piece, and were soon snugged down in a comfortable *pensión*. We walked miles around the country lanes in those few days, enjoying the fresh cool air, the wild flowers and the masses of geraniums in the hedgerows; we delighted in the unusual sight of vegetables growing in the villagers gardens, and nattered to the locals lounging in front of the little *tienda*; (a bar-grocery store), around which most small village life usually centred. We were living in a stimulating somewhat rarified atmosphere at an altitude over 6,000 feet, and could breathe without scorching our lungs. It was very invigorating, and we slept soundly at night under blankets.

Early one morning we drove higher up the Andes and stopped at a little township called San Rafael de Mucuchies, at an altitude of 10,000 feet. Our lunch at a tiny inn, was local goat cheese with *arepas*, coffee and tots of rum to keep out the cold. Continuing our climb up and over the Páramo pass, which crosses the Andes around 13,000 feet, we found ourselves blanketed

in a freezing damp mist, but could just make out the nearby towering snow-covered heights of the Pico del Gavilan. We did not tarry long in that chilly climate, but pointed the bonnet of the Dodge down the other side of the pass, to where the mountainsides were being cultivated by oxen, laboriously dragging iron ploughshares. They surefootedly crisscrossed the incredibly steep slopes, churning up the sparse cap of top humus.

The countryside now gradually changed and we passed through small hamlets and farms, growing mainly corn and sugar cane. Oxen, attached to a pole, toiled slowly, endlessly and resignedly 'round and 'round turning an enormous stone grinding wheel. Late that evening, we drove into the university town of Mérida, situated in a very pleasant valley, around 5,000 feet. We spent the night in a hotel in the city and the following day leisurely retraced our steps back over the pass to our village *pensión* on the other side. Little had changed since my trip in 1929.

Another day we visited a horticultural development run by a German, who delivered fresh vegetables to the various oil companies down in the lake region; he had a well organized holding and a comfortable ranchhouse, beautifully designed and furnished. He even had several carp ponds in the gardens, stocked with large specimens, ready for the traditional German feast at Christmas time. Our holiday had to end however, and we were shortly on our way back to dusty sweaty Maracaibo.

The news awaiting me on return was that I had been "loaned" to the Caracas office for some weeks, and I flew up the following day, taking a room in the old Majestic Hotel in town. The Caracas office at that time was housed in a very spacious old-style Spanish Colonial mansion right in the city centre. Around the very well laid out patio in the middle of the house were rooms accomodating the various departments: management, legal/political, and topographical for the most part, and a small section for handling areas in the eastern part of Venezuela, where preliminary exploration was going on. Our land department also had a fair-sized office and map cabinets. The whole organization changed a few years later, when the industry was centralized in Caracas, leaving the western producing areas to local management.

I spent two months in the Caracas office and at weekends enjoyed exploring the old parts of the town, walking out in the nearby countryside or having a swim at the Florida Club. I stayed at the Majestic Hotel all the time, as it was within walking distance from the office; apart from the old Palace Hotel, it was the only reasonable accommodation then available. We had one noted visitor during my stay: Manolete, the world-famous bullfighter, took a suite of rooms in the Majestic whilst he functioned at various *corridas* in the city. He was in his early thirties and already a multi-millionaire. I met him once or twice sitting out in front of the hotel, always accompanied by a large retinue of assistants and followers. Tragically, he was killed by a bull the following year in Spain, just as he was about to retire from the "sport." He never knew when to call it a day!

XI

In 1948, I was assigned permanently to the Caracas office, and formally handed over the department in Maracaibo. I still have a copy of a twenty-page report on "pending matters," and it reads as though we had an enormous lot of work in our area at that time—which, in fact, we did.

The packers milled around the Maracaibo bungalow filling our crates. We recalled the boys from Jamaica—it was end of term anyway—but we decided to leave the daughter at school near Montego Bay, since we could not cope with all the family and small baggage in the car. We had to make the journey overland in any case in those days and it was a hot gruelling dusty three day event, necessitating night stops at Valera, Barquisimeto, and Maracay. The trip itself was relatively uneventful but quite interesting, especially to the two lads. In the hillside town of Valera, after an early morning start, we stocked up with oranges and pineapples from a roadside stall, and then commenced a very weary, sweaty and dirty trip through the valley and the Quebrada de Carora, which was just a weathered track, inches deep in dust. If you met another car or truck from the opposite direction, you had to pull over and stop, the air was so thick, just like a fog. If anybody tried to overtake you, it was a race and if you lost, you just pulled in and sat it out until the air had cleared.

By afternoon we were passing flax fields which stretched for miles outside Barquisimeto town, and we were glad to hole up there and shower the mess of dust from our bodies. We pushed on the next day, climbing a low range of mountains, to Maracay, once the gracious headquarters of General Gomez, whose old

palace had been turned into a government hotel. It was somewhat dilapidated, with the swimming pools full of dirty water and unuseable. A military band was performing that evening in the nearby plaza, and our two lads went across and stood enjoying the music, open mouthed. They had never seen anything like it before. It was the same at home when say saw an electric train for the first time. From a recent message, we learned that daughter Pat was holidaying with a school friend in Spanish Town, near Kingston, so that settled another problem for us.

Caracas, at 3,000 feet, proved a welcome change after the sweltering heat of Maracaibo, and we spent some busy days negotiating the rental of a house on the outskirts of the town. All such arrangements had to be made privately, but the Company granted a cost-of-living allowance for the increase in living expenses. We were fortunate in finding an old Spanish-type house in a residential suburb called Campo Alegre, acquiring also some secondhand furniture and kitchen equipment. Likewise included in the deal was an elderly shaggy black cocker spaniel.

We found life in the capital completely different in all ways. Back in the fields and the Maracaibo Colonies, everything was laid on; when needed, you just had to ring for a plumber, carpenter, or electrician and he would appear soon afterwards. The houses were all company owned and maintained at that time, but I believe they have now been sold off to staff. Field staff also enjoyed the benefit of cheap foodstuffs in the commissaries.

In Caracas you were entirely on your own and had to fend for yourself, which perhaps was a good thing in many ways. On Fridays, we got up early, and wound our way to the town market, where you could buy fresh food and meats of all kinds. We usually landed back home with a couple of live lobsters transported up from the coast. We would put them under a zinc bath in the patio until we were ready to cook them, and it was weird to see the bath moving around pushed by the lobsters underneath—it used to drive our old cocker to distraction.

Caracas had golf and bridge clubs, which most of the expatriates belonged to—it was a sort of status symbol. We, however, preferred to spend our weekends either in the country, high up in

the mountains, or else we would start out early with the station wagon and follow the hairpin bends down to the coast near La Guaira, loaded with swimming gear and picnic material. I had exchanged our Dodge car for a De Soto station wagon, with extra large wheels, which enabled us to drive over the rutted and muddy trails outside town without fear of getting bogged down. We occasionally made safari trips for long weekends to little-known places on the north coast of Venezuela. We would pass through lovely mountain scenery, coloured by flaming *apamate* trees and the deep green of cocoa and coffee plantations on the hillsides. Down at sea level we leisurely meandered through flax, banana, and sugar cane country, ending up at a small local beach hostelry to enjoy a cool swim in the sea. The tiny coastal village was delightfully primitive; the lights were always dim, as the small electric plant could barely cope with the demand, and there were no radios. Adding to the spice of the journey was the fact that the roads were either hidden in clouds of dust or thick with mud, depending on the season, and on the flatlands there were long stretches with little or no sign of life. Spare petrol, a shovel, a tow rope, and tools were vital necessities.

Towards the end of that year, when the children came home from school in Jamaica, we reluctantly decided to send daughter Pat back to England in care of some friends of ours who were returning on leave. We had already arranged for her to live with relatives in London, so that she could attend a commercial college, something not remotely available in Venezuela at that time. The two boys continued with their education in Jamaica, since they were three years younger, and their college principal was quite pleased with their progress.

Early the following year we moved to a new rented house in a modern suburb of Caracas, called Las Mercedes. There was the usual run of revolutionary scares at that time, and once we found our two lads intently engaged in watching the operations of a military patrol, shooting it out with a gang holed up in a *caño* alongside the bottom of our garden. The mausers were crackling and whining merrily away, and our kids thought it great fun!

They were somewhat unwilling to come back into the house, but consoled themselves by watching developments from one of the upstairs bedroom windows.

I usually had advance warning of any impending trouble, since some of my staff colleagues were connected with the régime in power at that time. In fact, a lawyer friend of mine was an honorary Captain of Courts Martial, and should the occasion arise, he would indicate that an early departure from office would be advisable. One occasion however, was noted for worldwide repercussions: it was the dramatic affair when General Rafael Simon Urbina and his henchmen shot dead the junta's president, Colonel Carlos Delgado Chalbaud in a house only a few yards away from where we lived in Las Mercedes. I still have a cutting from the U.S. magazine *Time* of 27 November 1950, which published some of the gory details. That copy of the magazine was not allowed to circulate in Venezuela; somebody smuggled me a copy. General Urbina was later shot dead "whilst trying to escape!" That unfortunate gentleman was the instigator of a revolutionary attempt in 1930, when he chartered a ship in Curaçao, and made an abortive attack on Coro, a town near the Paraguaná peninsula.

Misfortune was not far away from our own circle either. One of my closest friends was a departmental colleague in the Maracaibo office, a lawyer, Dr. David Castillo; he and I worked together for many years on land matters and property negotiations. His older brother, Dr. Nemesio, was the company's chief lawyer, and they both were loyal and competent in every way.

One afternoon, I was very surprised to be called to the telephone and told that David had been hurriedly brought up to Caracas, very ill with a heart complaint. I immediately went round to the clinic and found both he and his wife very distressed. I could see he was really ill, but did not realize at the time how serious his condition was. I stayed for some hours at the clinic trying to reassure them, and got home very late. Around 3:00 A.M. I was aroused out of bed by the personnel boss, who told me that David had just passed away. I was utterly

astounded and went immediately to the clinic. There was nothing much I could do except try and comfort his distraught widow, Doña Josefina. The company acted with great kindness and promptness: a plane was chartered, and that same afternoon I accompanied the widow and the coffin back to Maracaibo, where we landed at dusk. Literally hundreds of friends and relatives were on the tarmac and I discreetly disappeared. It was an eerie journey on the plane, and one that will for ever stay in my memory. Up in the cockpit was the pilot and his second; back in the passenger compartment, space had been made for the coffin, which had a glass panel in the top, with David's now composed features seemingly quietly observing us. We sat one on each side; the weeping widow, under sedation, sobbing beneath her black veil. Nobody else and not a sound except the growl of the twin motors; it was two-and-a-half unhappy interminable hours before we touched down.

Frankly, I was in many ways glad to let the waiting multitude take over while I got myself a much needed drink at the local bar. I attended the religious ceremony the next morning together with a management representative, and caught an afternoon flight back to Caracas. It had been a sad and harrowing experience: Josefina, the widow, and her six children departed for Canada six months later, for some unknown reason. I never heard of or saw her again.

Late 1949 saw our three-month home leave coming round once again, and we were looking forward to spending our first Christmas in England for thirteen years. We travelled to New York on the Grace Line *Santa Paula* and boarded the SS *America* of the United States Line for Southampton one very chilly day in Novenber. A fellow traveller was Vishinsky, the then Russian Ambassador to the United States, who was on his way back to Moscow. He was always acompanied by private guards whilst taking his constitutionals on deck. One evening, a drunken passenger crouched behind some deck chairs and stupidly lurched out when the Ambassador was passing, pointing his finger at him as though it was a gun. It was very fortunate the two guards in close attendance had time to size up the situation, otherwise the drunk would have undoubtedly been buried at sea—without any honours!

It was very cold in England, and although we enjoyed the Christmas festivities with our parents, we were very glad to embark on the SS *Britannic* in the February 1950, bound for New York. It was snowing hard in Manhattan on our arrival, but we were able to get around and make our connection with the *Santa Paula* the next afternoon, and sailed that evening. We had very bad weather off Cape Hatteras with a strong following swell and a force-nine gale. One evening, the ship gave such a terrific roll that all the dining room glass and china, laid out on the tables for dinner moments before, crashed to the floor and smashed to smithereens. Furniture, including the piano in the lounge, broke loose and shot across the recreation room and bars, and the crew had a busy time anchoring everything down. The Chief Steward was in serious difficulties, since he had lost the major part of his dining room equipment. The ship rolled and staggered along corkscrew fashion for the next two days; meals were a farce, fiddles on the tables were fully extended, the tablecloths were kept wet and of course, no liquids could be served. We subsisted mainly on dry foods, eaten for the most part with one hand, whilst hanging on grimly with the other. Ropes were strung everywhere to assist the passengers in moving around the ship, and we were definitely warned off the decks. It was quite a relief when we eventually tied up alongside the dock at La Guaira, and could speed on our way up the mountains to our home in Caracas.

The following year 1951, I took over all land department matters, and to acquaint myself first hand with conditions on the ground, I arranged trips to the more remote areas where we were operating or had marketing connections. The first of these involved a round trip, starting from Caracas overland, heading southwest, a stopover being made at the quaint old town of San Juan de los Morros, capital of the State of Aragua. My companion was Alejandro, our senior land negotiator. He had many valuable countrywide connections including San Juan, where we

were warmly greeted by the state president and were wined and dined in great style that night; it was quite a fiesta he laid on for us. Our company vehicle which had brought us to the town, returned to Caracas the next day, as it would be of little use beyond this first stop, due to the rough terrain.

We hired a local taxi the following morning to take us to the town of Zaraza, where Alex's buddy was chief of police. He likewise made us very welcome and we had a somewhat hectic couple of days, mainly, I suspect, on government expense accounts. Our host, in fact, insisted on providing us with a government jeep and chauffeur for the next rough leg of the journey, which brought us to the primitive small township of Onoto, where Alex, again, met up with some of his old pals in the cattle industry. He came from around that part of the country.

The only accommodation in town was a very bare room in the solitary *pensión*, and it really was bare; all it had were a few strong metal hooks projecting from the walls, not a thing else; not even a chamber pot! We always carried hammocks in our grips and we slung them diagonally across the corners of the room. Our baggage was dumped on the floor. After a very crude wash, we sat down in the patio to a typical *criollo* meal of fried plantain, beans, salt pork and maize cakes, washed down by lukewarm beer from a kerosene refrigerator, barely ticking over. The "loo" consisted of six galvanized sheets standing on end forming a small hut with no roof. A pole ran horizontally across at knee height, located approximately over an eight inch hole in a wooden floor; the pong was ripe. I guess one became used to it and quite a marksman after months of practice.

Water was collected in buckets from the local stream and dripped slowly through a stone filter; we suffered no ill effects, but generally drank the bottled beer. That night I climbed quite early and somewhat wearily into my hammock and despite the noisy efforts of the friendly locals to get us out on a pub crawl, we stayed put until the dawn hours.

The weather had now deteriorated considerably and there were rumours of very bad trail conditions and floods, so much so that we decided it would be safer to hire a local Dodge truck, complete with chains, to continue our journey to the small town of Clarines. This was in fact Alejandro's birthplace and old hunting ground; he still owned quite a large hacienda in the vicinity and had many friends there. Our company was at that time carrying out an oil exploration programme in that area, and had a camp not far away, so we opted to stay that night at the guest house. A small amount of production had been found after some years of seismic and wildcat drilling, but the "field," if one could call it that, was not as yet a commercial proposition.

The following day we were invited to move out of the company camp and spend a couple of days on a large estate belonging to a cousin of Alejandro's. The owner was a charming and hospitable fellow, and his ranchhouse was fitted up in a marvellous manner. I recognized various pieces of company furniture and equipment, not very surprising, since the chap was one of the major contractors for the company! We had an excellent turkey dinner, watched down by loads of Scotch, which soon made us sleepy and we were ready for be quite early on. I was awakened the next morning around 4:00 A.M. (after sleeping in an ex-company bed and showering in a company-built bathroom), by the hustle and bustle of milking. Calabashes of hot sweet black coffee laced with shots of the local rum were being downed by the hacienda peons in the nearby sheds, and we were served similar refreshment in the ranch kitchen. There seemed to be some excitement in the air and this was heightened by the arrival of the village policeman; he explained to the ranch boss that he had Pepe "locked away in the gaol," whatever that indicated, and that the other chap was "on his way to hospital." By this time I had gathered that there had been an early morning fracas between the two gentlemen, using cutlasses, and in a very drunken condition. The usual tale—a quarrel over a local wench—fortunately, with no fatal results.

We spent a couple of days in the company office, sorting out pending land matters and contracts and having a chat with the resident manager about matters concerning our department. There was no spare transport, so we hired a car and headed northwards bound for the large town of Barcelona, on the north

Venezuelan coast. We passed through the small town of Puerto Piritu, which had some very pretty beaches, but the sea was not very inviting. It looked murky and there was some pollution. We found a hotel in the middle of Barcelona and booked a couple of rooms; we had property interests locally and spent a couple of days travelling around over some shockingly rough and potholed roads, even in the centre of town. Three days later we quite happily boarded a plane for Maiquetia airport, twisted our way up the mountainside in a taxi to Caracas, and for a while we were back home.

I managed to put in some office work during the next week or two and then took off by plane for a couple of days in the Maracaibo region, where we had a number of pending land problems to sort out. I think I must have been one of the most travelled employees of the firm, in Venezuela anyway. Apart from work, it was pleasant meeting up with old friends, having a pint at the club in the evening, and a few games of snooker. One noticed the heat, coming down to sea level from an altitude of 3,000 feet in Caracas. Returning to the head office at the end of the week, I was hoping to be able to stay at home for Christmas, since our two lads had just flown in from Jamaica on holiday from college. However, it was not to be, and I was once again reaching for my grip, whilst waiting for the car to take me down to the airport, destination southeast—the Orinoco river region—but this time by company plane. It turned out to be quite an eventful trip.

The company twin-engined "Percival Prince" highwing monoplane, was waiting for us at the end of the runway down at Maiquetia. Johnny, the pilot, had already cleared his flight plan for Ciudad Bolivar, on the Orinoco river and for other short hauls to the gold field camp areas. The passengers included myself and Don Alejandro; the head of the marketing division; and a bishop from the West Indies, who was making his annual trip to the goldfields of eastern Venezuela, where several hundred West Indians were now employed; they formed part of the Bishop's distant expatriate flock. He made the journey in late December every year, to carry out Christmas marriages, baptisms, and hold services for the Protestant workers; a seat on the company plane saved him a lot of time, as opposed to overland travel.

Johnny cleared with the control tower, started rolling, and we were on our way. Our initial leg eastwards along the north Venezuelan coast was an interesting low-altitude flight, over a sea of magnificent greens and blues, with shoals of fish clearly visible around the underwater rock formations. Opposite the island of Margarita, (famed for pearls and fishing), the pilot changed course southwards toward a gap in the Cordilleras through which we passed, and then flew for some time over flat uninteresting savanna country, until we belatedly caught sight of the wide, sluggish, muddy Orinoco River way down below us. I say belatedly, since a strong northeast trade wind had blown us off course to the west; however, it was simply a question now of following the Orinoco eastwards, and some twenty minutes later we drifted down to a soft landing on the hot sticky tarmac of Ciudad Bolivar airport. After clearing officialdom, Alejandro and I grabbed a taxi and were soon gratefully quaffing ice cool Pilsener in the town hotel.

We were on a definite project trip this time, making a preliminary land study for a bulk gasoline storage scheme for the marketing boys, which would eventually involve purchase of a sizeable plot of land for tanks and ancillary facilities, and negotiating pipeline rights of way (easements), through the town. There was no vital urgency however, and we had arranged with Johnny the pilot for a flight southwards the following day, to show the bishop the highest waterfall in the world, Angel Falls, located not far from the boundary of British Guiana. On the return trip we were going to drop the bishop off at one of the airstrip serving the goldfield camps, either Callao or Guasipati.

We took off in brilliant sunshine the next morning, and flew southwards for a long while over dense green jungle; the outline map we had of the area was not at all helpful and we had to search around for a long while before we located the falls. At first sight, they were not all that impressive, nothing like the vol-

ume of water at Niagara or Victoria. Furthermore, we had to fly at a height of some 7000 feet to stay above the rugged mass of mountains which soared majestically below us. They were a fascinating sight, looking as though cleanly chopped off flat, and resembling an enormous array of giant's teeth. The actual fall of water is reckoned to be around 2,750 feet, and although we got a good view of the cascading misty torrent by circling 'round and 'round, Johnny the pilot, was not at all happy. As he remarked, one minute there would be solid mountain a bare 200 feet under his wings, and the next minute there would be a clear drop between the craggy rocks of thousands of feet, with air pockets and downdrafts to contend with. Quite understandably, he was glad to turn and head northwards again, back over the jungle. We did not sight the wreckage of Jimmy Angel's plane, said to have crashed on one of the peaks a few years before.

On the return flight we circled very low over the rapids of the Caroni river. The boiling cauldrons of the headwaters below were a magnificent sight, churning round and over the rocks in immense power. I believe the energy is now harnessed to a hydroelectric dam, and being made good use of for miles around. Flying on, we sighted down below the famous Cerro Bolivar, a 3,500-foot mountain of 66 percent iron ore, which in those days was just being exploited. Tractors and earth-moving equipment were crawling about below us, carving out roads around the mountainside—they looked just like toys. This region nowadays forms part of a sizeable township, and the nearby Orinoco River has been dredged to provide sufficient depth for the deep draft ore boats from the States. We made a low-level pass over the nearby savanna to see whether we could make a landing. It was covered with high pampas grass, but our pilots were used to landing almost anywhere, and on the next trip round Johnny put the plane down; with our seat belts tightly fastened, we bumped to a rough and noisy stop. The fuselage was pitted and dented by the grit and shale thrown up by the props, but otherwise we suffered no serious damage. A pickup truck took us for a trip round the steel company workings (United or Bethlehem, I forget which), and after a bite in the mess, we took off again, for

Guasipati, the goldfield airstrip, to deliver his worship the bishop, to his flock.

We came in to land at Ciudad Bolivar airport that evening, and had dinner with Johnny at the hotel; he took off for Maiquetia the next morning, after refuelling. Alejandro and I began our work which involved several days sweating it out 'round the centre of the town, and some tough secret bargaining. We wanted to sign up sufficient options to ensure future freedom of action, without the news of the proposed project leaking out, and the company being held to ransom later on.

In the evening I managed to visit some of the town workshops where they turned out beautiful handmade jewelry of local gold, and I acquired two elegant orchid-shaped brooches with a Margarita pearl in the centre. The craftsmen doing this work each own a small individual strong box for storing the different coloured nuggets of raw gold. A simple Bunsen burner and a box of quite ordinary tools were all they use. The men work alongside each other at long wooden benches, housed under a rough shed with a corrugated-iron roof; nothing was ever stolen.

During our stay a barge ferrying drums of gasoline across the river blew up and several workmen were badly burned, the usual story—a forbidden cigarette. It was precisely for that reason we were doing our reconnaissance, in order to provide centralised bulk storage for oil products, and thus eliminate the need for such dangerous methods of transport from the opposite bank of the Orinoco River. With industrial expansion in and around Ciudad Bolivar, we needed vastly increasing quantities of all kinds of oil derivatives.

We were hoping to be back in Caracas by the weekend, and had booked our return passages on the local airline. Friday morning, therefore, saw us waiting in the lounge of the Ciudad Bolivar airport for the departure of our Dakota to be announced. There was a delay for some reason or other; the pilot possibly had been out to a fiesta the night before. Anyhow, we finally took off nearly an hour late, and after a short hop over the savannas, touched down on the sun-soft oiled-sand landing strip at El Tomé,

a then-primitive intermediate staging post, manned mainly for the benefit of Gulf oil staff, and few local inhabitants, and some of the outlying ranchers—it was mostly cattle country. The ragged windsock hung limply from a piece of 2-inch pipe in the steaming hot atmosphere; the "operations" buildings were a radio shack and a tin hut, dispensing coffee and warm beer. Lining the edges of the runway were several oil wells, with their derricks dismantled for obvious reasons. Only the production pipelines and wellhead valves showed above ground.

It took over half an hour for clearance, a little longer than usual, as one of the distant hacienda owners was making his first flight ever to the capital. Around him was a retinue of about fifty relations and henchmen seeing him off, most of them with a fair amount of rum beneath their belts. The rancher himself, was already well loaded when he took his seat behind Alex and myself, and he painstakingly lodged a bottle of cognac down between his feet. A solicitous young stewardess fastened his seat belt for him. He was a man well past middle age, and sweating profusely in his "liki-liki" jacket, buttoned right up underneath his chin—the ranchers' standard uniform in the outback.

We taxied to the far end of the spongy strip; the old Dakota swung round, revved up, roared, raced and bumped on the uneven ground, and we were soon airborn, swinging away in a direction just west of north and heading for a gap in the Andes, with the coast just beyond. At any rate we thought so at the time, since it was the customary route to follow, enabling the pilot eventually to make a convenient westward turn and follow the coast along to the Maiquetia airport. Our pilot, however, probably due to our late takeoff from Ciudad Bolivar, must have decided on a short cut up along the valley paralleling the coast. The weather looked fair at the time, but he had not reckoned on a blanketing mist which came sneaking quietly down from the mountains after we were well up the valley (I should say, the creek). Things did not look nearly so rosy. Naturally, those old Dakotas had no such thing as radar.

We bucketed, swayed, and dropped in the turbulence and swirling mist, seat belts tight around our laps. Alejandro and

myself, with a few bottles of beer under our belts, were quietly dozing, when strange noises and smells began to filter through our light slumbers. I had a drowsy glance around and beheld a strange sight: a number of the female passengers, much to the distress of the stewardess, were kneeling in the aisle, "telling their beads": I didn't really wonder, the way we were bumping and rocking. Children and grownups were being sick all over the place, which did not help matters, and the old rancher just behind us was making all sorts of funny noises, accompanied by loud gurglings from his bottle of cognac. Furthermore, a horrid stench was coming from his direction.

It was some fifteen minutes later and after more aerial acrobatics, that we finally flew into a relatively clear patch, showing the mountain sides close in all round us. The pilot, who we had seen wrestling the controls through the open cockpit door, which had been flung open during a particularly bad bump, left things to his sidekick and came aft to reassure the passengers. He himself was a rather sickly colour and soaked to the skin in perspiration. He announced to the obviously very apprehensive passengers that he was taking the plane over the end of the range of mountains and would continue the flight along the coast, where conditions would be much safer. I thought it a bit late in the day to come out with that. Too, I reckoned we had been lucky not to have hit any of those nasty looking hillsides; perhaps it was neat blind flying!

Coming in to land eventually at Maiquetia was routine stuff after that. Smiles all round, and undoubtedly prayers were being said by the relieved passengers as they hurried through the plane door and down the steps. I was still somewhat mystified by the queer smell which had spread inside the plane, and since I found myself alongside the flight hostess, I casually asked her if she could explain the cause. "Si, senor," she replied. "It was something quite unavoidalbe,—the *pobre hacendado* [rancher] had never been on a plane before, and as you could see, he was very full of liquor. Furthermore, he did not know we had a little room at the rear for toilet facilities, and well. . . . " No wonder—he had filled his pants: sweet violets!

I met the pilot and his copilot at the airport bar a little later. His shoulders still ached from wrestling the old Dakota, and he admitted he was pretty concerned at the time, to put it mildly. On our next trip, Alejandro and I resolved to make it a three day journey overland, mosquitoes and snakes notwithstanding!

Navigation in those early years was mainly visual since practically all flights were during daylight. Our pilots always carried with them a map of the country divided into squares, the vertical blocks bearing the letters of the alphabet and the horizontal ones, numbers. This meant that in the event of a mishap, the pilot could always radio to the head office his approximate position, if he had to make a forced landing. I remember this happened whilst flying over the southern savanna country, and a belly-flop landing had to be made due to failure of the undercarriage. The result was a rather buckled fuselage and two bent propellors. Since we had given the "square" position on the map, spares were flown in and the somewhat battered Lockheed was airborne a couple of days later.

During one special assignment I travelled practically the entire country from north to south and east to west. The work involved checking all land titles to every gasoline station, depot, and also bulk installations, and doing a physical check on the property itself on the ground. My journeyings took me along the north coast of Venezuela from Maracaibo via Coro, Puerto Cabello, La Guaira, Barcelona, Cumaná and finally to Carúpano. Landing at the last coastal town was quite a feat; the airstrip was positioned north to south, starting right at the edge of the beach. The planes came in directly over the sea and the temperature difference over land at times made landing a little hazardous. Furthermore the strip itself was quite short, and the usual procedure was to keep the tail well down and bounce in on the three-point landing, which slowed the plane up well before the end of the runway.

I made trips along the Orinoco to a small town named Caicara, thence onto San Fernando de Apure; up again and over the

mountains to Táchira and Merida, and back via Valera and Motatan. I spent a week in Maracay and Valencia, where we had quite extensive storage facilities. It was very pleasant in those interesting old towns and the only complaint I had was being housed in a hotel on the corner of the plaza, right opposite the cathedral. Midnight mass and again in the early hours, with the attendant discordant bell ringing, did not give one much chance of getting any sleep.

The work was finally completed: It had been tedious and at times tiring in the humid heat down at sea level. All details had to be meticulously scrutinized and double checked, since they were to form the basis for the legal transfer of the properties from the holding company to the parent company. There were a number of discrepancies, especially in boundary descriptions—where the deeds dated from some years back, they had to be ironed out before the dossiers could be finally handed over to the lawyers for all the formalities to be completed.

My local leave was due around Easter 1951 and since the boys were not returning home for the holidays, my wife and I decided to fly to Jamaica, hire a car in Kingston, and pick up the lads at their respective colleges, continuing afterwards to Montego Bay. Our daughter Pat accompanied us and we flew out on a Chicago and Southern Constellation from Maiquetia. Approaching Kingston airport, which is built out into the harbour, we could clearly see the devastation caused to the old town of Port Royal by the recent hurricane.

We spent two pleasant days at the Melrose Hotel in Duke Street and collected a Vauxhall rented saloon in town, where I had to present my English driving license and take out a Jamaican visitor's driving permit.

We stopped the next night at Mandeville in order to collect our youngest from the de Carteret prep school. The town and hotel buzzed with huge moths at nightfall, and despite wire mosquito netting on the veranda, it became quite unpleasant to sit around after dinner.

The following day we continued our wanderings through the very interesting "cockpit" country and in the afternoon picked up

Peter, our eldest, from Munro College, situated on a red earth escarpment near the Black River. Our car was being plagued with punctures until I finally realized what was happening; the garage chaps repairing the inner tubes were putting on "cold" patches, as no vulcanizing equipment was available; these were lifting as soon as we drove at any speed on the hot gravel roads. However, we were in no hurry and by evening arrived with our carload at the Chatham Hotel in Montego Bay, where we were warmly greeted by Mr. and Mrs. Foster the then owners, and their daughters.

We did quite a lot of exploring along the north coast of Jamaica, picnicking in the countryside and enjoying many delightful hours in the warm sea at the famous Doctor's Cave. Two weeks later we left the two lads behind at the hotel to finish their holiday, and started off one morning for Kingston, going via Ocho Rios. The following day we caught a new type Constellation and were back home in Caracas the same evening. Meanwhile, a telegram was on its way to say Michael had had a minor accident whilst fishing out in the bay. A hook had gone clean through his lip whilst casting, but there was no serious damage, only a scar remained where the hook had to be cut out.

It was towards the end of this year that we decided to bring the two boys home and put them into a so-called British school in Caracas. Pat, our daughter, had returned with us from England the year before, commercially trained, and was at the time working for the Esso Company, so before long we were a united family once again. Many happy outings were enjoyed at the weekends during the following months: we used to load up the De Soto station wagon and take off up the mountains to Junquito at an altitude of 8,000 feet, where we reveled in the fresh cool air. It was very pleasant, reclining in deck chairs with a book and a thermos of cocktails to hand, whilst the lads chased around the surrounding green countryside, very glad to be off the leash for a few hours. We spent other weekends driving down the winding mountain road to the coast, where we either scrambled down to the rocky beach at Macuto, or drove over to Recife on the other side of La Guaira, where by climbing down a steep hillside, we could reach a marvellous sandy strip with nobody in sight. The huge green-blue rollers sweeping in from the Caribbean made the sea very enjoyable although somewhat hazardous. Unfortunately there was no shade from the blistering sun, but an old brolly and a blanket kept us from being cooked.

The two lads were enjoying life at the local school, but I am afraid the headmaster was not of the same mind; he had a motley collection of students of all nationalities, including some very precocious local youngsters, and we often had to drive over to the school to smooth over pranks in which our offspring were usually involved.

XII

Early in 1952, my wife and I reckoned it was high time we made a serious survey of our family outlook, especially in regard to the future education of the two boys, who by now really needed to be able to settle down in a well-disciplined teaching establishment, preferably back in England. I had completed over twenty-four years out in the tropics and my wife twenty years, living mostly around oil field camps and in the jungle. My old tummy trouble, a suspected ulcer, which had previously resulted in a near-fatal haemorrhage, was giving trouble again and I had recurring bouts of malaria from my old backwoods days. Our chief medical officer in fact, had told me a few weeks before that he seriously considered I was virtually unfit for the tropics and that he would recommend my repatriation.

We were not at all opposed to the idea and the management contacted the head office in London, which resulted in my being offered a post back there; naturally I gladly accepted. The usual machinery was put in motion, our passages were booked on the French liner *De Grasse*, sailing around the middle of June, and the mammoth task of packing up for our final return voyage commenced.

We were given a truly magnificent sendoff by the general office staff and in particular by my departmental colleagues, who accompanied us down to the docks at La Guaira on the day of embarcation, hoping to be able to have a farewell dinner with us on board. Unfortunately it was not to be. Government officials on the dock had prohibited all visitors aboard the liner, as they had just had a political upheaval in the capital, and had expelled the entire Czech legation, some sixty persons. They were all passengers on the *De Grasse* and officialdom had clamped down on security arrangements. Leave taking was therefore a somewhat mournful affair down on the pier itself, until we finally went on board that evening, sailing in the early hours for the French West Indies.

We called in at Martinique and were stuck on a sandbank outside the harbour, floating off at high tide. Twenty-four hours were spent in Trinidad and we managed a visit ashore and a swim at the country club. My wife and I were hoping very much to be able to go ashore at Barbados to visit St. Cyprians Church, where we had been married some twenty years previously, but here again we were unlucky. Barbados officials had got wind of the trouble over the Czech legation staff on board, and resolutely declined to allow any passengers ashore. We therefore gazed very disconsolately from the promenade deck at the white sandy beach of the Aquatic Club, and had to be satisfied with what we imagined to be the spire of St. Cyprians church climbing skywards in the background. We sailed that evening for Le Havre and Southampton, a seven-day nonstop journey. Customs arguments over our presentation Rolex watches made us lose the boat train, so we perforce had to hire a lorry for our baggage and engage a taxi to take us up to London.

I had three months leave due now, which we spent partly with friends down in Cornwall, fishing and lazing around, and the remaining weeks we spent doing the rounds of the estate agents, looking for a house to purchase. We finally acquired a nice property out at Kenley, on the north downs, and took up residence later that year. I started work in the London office about the same time, not without certain misgivings. I was not accustomed to city life and I never really did settle down. Bowler hats, brief cases, and rolled umbrellas were to me like comic opera; I still shudder at the sight of them! I also took an intense dislike to the mad scurry and crush on the train journey up to the city every day, and eventually I took to going up early on a workman's train, and staying at the office in the evening until the rush was over.

The work was varied and interesting, connected as it was with many different countries; it was not arduous by any means but after twenty-five years of relative freedom, I could not easily adjust to the smoky grimy grind of London office life. I imagine that the new operations centre, on South Bank these days, could be vastly different. Lunch times I would wander down to the old London Bridge and gaze longingly over the parapet at the Spanish steamers unloading bananas and tomatoes at Fresh Wharf. Little did I think at the time that a few years later I would be making trips on one of these selfsame boats out to the Canary Islands.

Three long rather sterile years passed, and my old ulcer ailment was playing up again; this was possibly due to the change of environment and lack of an active life. It was then that I approached the company with a view to getting out of the city and taking an early pension. They were very helpful about the whole affair, and so one day around mid-1955, I made my last trip on the crowded commuter train up to London.

The big question then, was what to do now: I was still relatively young and we did not wish to stay in London. During the period in the city, I had bought a holiday caravan on the south coast near the witterings and we had got to like the region very much. It was not odd, therefore, that we decided to buy a cottage south of Chichester, which would enable us to do some sailing in the harbour. We moved later to a bungalow at Selsey Bill, and then, with the lads settled and married, the wife and I decided to move down to Cornwall, where ex-Venezuelan friends of ours were living.

Our eldest son meanwhile had gone out to the Canary Islands on contract for a horticultural firm, and our daughter followed. She, like us, was missing the tropical sun. Our other lad finally settled on a career as a lecturer in mechanical engineering, and is well established in a college at Chichester.

Snugged down in Cornwall, we shared an old Brit-engined crabber moored up at Malpas, near Truro, and usually chugged off from our anchorage on Sunday mornings down at Fal creek, towards the open sea. Quaffing a mug of hot coffee laced with a

dash of rum (October mornings were chilly), we would pass King Harry's ferry and glide on out into the harbour, cutting motors somewhere off St. Just in Roseland, all prepared for a pleasant day with rod and line. There is nothing more delectable than freshly caught grilled school bass with a jug of ale on the side, after a day out on the water.

Before moving down to Cornwall, I had not been idle. Early retirement is all very well, but time hangs heavily—I therefore decided to do something about it. I spent three years helping out at a caravan firm and obtained a sound basic grounding of the trade, on the touring side mostly. In fact, I myself always maintained a touring van and a towing vehicle, usually a Land Rover, and my wife and I spent many enjoyable months wandering all over the continent. It is a great life—I guess I must have a strong streak of gypsy in me!

After leaving the caravan job, which proved rather burdensome since it involved travelling forty miles each day, I teamed up with a friend who had a small country pub and settled down to learn that trade. I found it very satisfying work, meeting people in all walks of life and getting to know the locals and their habits. It was very exhausting work however, and means 365 days a year on the job. I, for one, would not want to be in the business by choice, although it is very rewarding in many ways, provided you set yourself a target and time limit.

During our four years residence in Cornwall, we took time out to spend a winter in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, where our eldest son was living at the time; it was very gratifying to speak Spanish again after so many years, and it came back very naturally to us. Our daughter had also by then obtained a good post in Las Palmas town and we had numerous family reunions during those winter months. The following year, our son finished his contract out in the islands and we arranged to meet him and his family in Cádiz and camp up through Spain, Portugal, and France. We then had a Dormobile "Caravette," as we had found towing a caravan somewhat of a chore with the increasing traffic on the roads.

September saw my wife and I embarking on the Cherbourg

ferry and wending our way leisurely south towards Biarritz, thereafter cutting eastwards north of the Pyrenees to Aix les Thermes. From there we poodled down the east coast of Spain to Gibraltar. We spent an interesting stay in Granada, visiting the Alhambra, and a week later were waiting on the Cádiz dockside for the Spanish steamer bringing the lad, his family and his Cortina estate car from Las Palmas. We had a very pleasant camping trip via Lisbon and north Spain, but the weather was by then getting chilly and damp, so we were quite happy to get to Le Havre and embark on the ferry for Southampton.

I think the bug of independence must have well and truly bitten our eldest lad, because after a year with his old firm back in England, he announced his firm intention to start on his own in the horticultural line, for which he had been trained. He scouted around for months along the south coast and as far away as Cornwall, but eventually found a nursery which approximately met his needs just outside Stratford-upon-Avon; he would be concentrating on commercial growing.

Our daughter also had definitely decided to stay out in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and become resident. She wisely invested in a flat in town, now paid up, and with her lucrative job in the hotel business and her circle of friends both local and expatriate, it is very doubtful whether she will ever return to England. I can well appreciate her decision, and naturally we benefit from having family contacts out in the island.

My wife and I returned to our staid way of life in Cornwall, tucked away in a bungalow in a valley between Truro and Falmouth. There was only one bus a week to town, one tiny shop and a pub. A newspaper arrived if the chap did not get tight too early and sleep it off in the hedge! Routine was interrupted occasionally when we made trips to see the lads and grandchildren, and for the now somewhat irregular fishing trips. The latter were becoming more and more infrequent, as our ex-Venezuelan friend had developed serious heart trouble. Very early one morning, a policeman on a motorcycle from Falmouth, brought news that he had passed away.

Life then became tedious for us, tucked away in the south-west; four months of summer chaos when the tourists arrived and eight months dullness during the quiet winter months. We were also finding the long car journeys visiting our offspring at Chichester and Stratford (some 250 miles), rather a burden especially in the bad weather. We therefore upped stakes, sold our bungalow and eventually found ourselves a ground floor flat on the outskirts of Stratford-upon-Avon. The nursery run by our son is just a mile away and the shops are around the corner; we have sold our transport, it is of little use sitting in the garage. In the winter, we turn down our central heating, give our lad the key to the flat and depart for the pleasant sun of the Canary Islands, looking forward to a reunion with the daughter, and to a decent-sized noggin, without breaking the bank.

We have been travelling out to Gran Canaria for many winters, embarking on the Spanish cargo-passenger steamer in Liverpool for Las Palmas. In itself, it is a pleasure to be able to have a good chat in the Spanish language and also to wander around the towns of Vigo, La Coruña and Tenerife, ports of call along the way. We rent a small flat in Las Palmas, and I do the shopping in the island markets. My chief pleasure is to wander down to the trawler docks and prowl around the fishing boats from all over the world: Japan, China, Korea, Russia, Cuba, Panama, and even from the island of Margarita in Venezuela. Most of the boats are occupied in unloading catches of huge frozen tunny fish, which are winched out of the refrigerated holds, roped a dozen or so at a time around the wide flared tails, and dumped onto waiting trucks, on their way to the huge cold-storage plants.

Speaking the language fluently, we are often called upon to interpret for the locals or tourists. We have been innocently involved in a number of incidents—even a case of attempted suicide and a stabbing next door at 2:00 A.M. Never a dull moment! The apartment porter, Don José, also managed to get away with his family up to the hills for the first time in years, since I was quite happy to sit around on Sundays to read the newspapers, even though they were a few days old. I usually held the fort

for him from Saturday night until Sunday evening, when José would return, always bringing us something—a demijohn of local wine, a skip of new potatoes, fruit, or even a rabbit from his hillside smallholding. Joe always stayed on in our flat to sup my whisky and chat, until his buxom wife dragged him out by the ears some hours later to say goodnight to his mob of children. He would reluctantly and unsteadily wend his way downstairs to his own place. I am afraid José is going to be upset we are not returning to one of those apartments, but we found life amongst the tourist hotels alongside the beach was, to say the least, noisy and expensive. This next trip we have booked in at a little village up in the mountains some eight miles out of Las Palmas, where we hope to find some peace and quiet and less social activity. We can also enjoy the hedgerows filled with hibiscus, oleander, jacaranda, geraniums, and poinsettas, even in mid-winter. It will also be peaceful to watch the men working quietly in the hillside vineyards, just below the lounge window.

We have visited Tangiers, Madeira, Tenerife, and the queer volcanic moon island of Lanzarote, but have always preferred the equable climate and way of life on the island of Gran Canaria, despite a minor influx of the hippie brigade.

Whilst out there next time, I am hoping to make a trip over to the nearby West Africa coast to Spanish Sahara (Villa Cisneros and Aiaun), even though it is mostly uninteresting and arid desert. I may even get as far south as Senegal and Gambia on one of the local steamers, travelling third-class, without the wife. I, myself, can rough it in that manner, and it costs a fifth of the fare charged by the luxury tourist liners which make the run during the season. In any case, as my wife has spinal trouble and can only manage a painful half mile walk, it would definitely be too much of a strain on her to attempt such a journey. There is one fly in the ointment—the hygienic facilities on some of those old tubs are what we fondly call from our caravan touring days, continental "footprints in the sand"; at my age they could prove awkward to say the least!

Perhaps we are old-fashioned, but we both find pleasure in adapting to the atmosphere of our surroundings, wherever it might be—on board ship, in the local backstreet bar, in the plaza among the tourists or up among the villagers. I found it a great asset in my work in South America to be able to hobnob with peasant, peon, and potman, and to be able to negotiate with the wealthy land owner or the politician, should the need arise. I am perfectly happy standing around among a cosmopolitan gang of Japanese, Panamian, or Korean fisherman, drinking beer out of a bottle, at a kiosk on the Las Palmas trawler dock, and incidentally paying a third of what I would be charged in the Plaza café. Groups of tourists from the dockside liners, scurrying back from town to their luxury cabins with their souvenirs, eye me rather wonderingly. Perhaps they are envious! The Spanish stevedores working on the cranes, unloading bulk maize, frozen fish, and general merchandise are normally a cheerful crowd and accept you amiably if you can cuss in their own lingo. They thought me somewhat crazy at times, when I brought down a bag of scraps for the starving pack of skinny mangy curs slinking around the warehouses. Seating myself on a bollard alongside a rusty trawler, dispensing the bits of food and bones, I could detect the look of anticipation and also distrust which transformed the dogs, as they gathered round to see what was offering. If they plucked up the courage to come near, they might even get a friendly pat, not a vicious kick in the guts, which they had learned so expertly to avoid. *Asi es la vida*. Such is life.

XIII

This, actually, is a postscript! My wife and I have just returned from our four-month sojourn in the mountains of Gran Canaria and are back in chilly England. Up in the hills we spoke English only between ourselves. We got to know the villagers including the local guardia civil, who always had a friendly salute, and we were welcomed by the innkeepers, of course. We found it was like living in a different world from that of the town and beaches, and far more pleasant. At times we saw a few coachloads of Swedes or Germans, who spent a few hours making rather hideous noises at the restaurant and bar below us, but such occasions were relatively rare.

Guess what—yes—we are planning on a return trip this autumn, even though I myself am a senior citizen and the good woman will be over seventy. Whilst we are still reasonably healthy and mobile—press on!