

to my surprise Pietro galloped away with the horses and the canoe was turned towards the river.

"The boys don't like the look of things," explained Walter, "an' they say we're gonna get the father an' mother of all rainstorms in about a couple of hours. So I guess we'd better git goin' before we git a wet hide."

I was amazed that by looking at that cloudless sky anyone should prophesy a storm within two hours, for conditions seemed about as perfect as they possibly could be.

It was not long, however, before even I saw that something untoward was brewing. The sun still shone, but it had a lack-lustre brilliance, with a dull reddish tinge. The sky, a short while ago so shining blue, was streaky and grey, while down on the horizon an ominous bank of cloud was slowly rising.

"It's goin' to be kinda damp when it does come," Walter remarked, "though the boys're figurin' on gettin' home 'bout just in time, otherwise we shouldn't be chancin' the river."

Our four paddles sent the canoe fairly skimming through the water, and soon we approached the thick belt of timber and vegetation which marked the river's course.

My doubts looked like coming only too true, for, after following what appeared to be a navigable creek, we came to a dead end where a wall of undergrowth hindered further progress almost to the extent of making it impossible.

Walter spoke his disgust, for in other seasons that channel had always afforded a clear run through the river. But a year's new growth of bushes, scrub and climbing plants had now effectively blocked the route, and it would have taken us hours of heartbreaking toil to slash and hack our way through that clutching mass of vegetation.

With all speed we paddled back up the creek until we reached open campo again. The sun by then was lost behind the grey blanket which had stolen across the sky, and the low bank of cloud had become a vast, threatening mountain. Our hopes of escaping a wetting looked pretty slender I thought, and I half expected to see the canoe headed for home across the campo. But apparently there was another creek only a short distance further on, and it was decided to make a dash towards it and to take a last chance on getting to the river.

WE seemed an unconscionable time in reaching the channel, and when at length we did so it twisted and turned in bewildering fashion, reducing our speed to a crawl. It is remarkable how quickly one senses a feeling of trepidation or panic in others; and, without completely understanding why, I became as anxious as the rest to reach the ranch house without a second's delay. The mounting thundercloud was one reason, of course, but a mere soaking was an everyday occurrence to all of us, and did not explain their obvious concern. Eventually, however, the tortuous procrastinations of the creek finally brought us to the Big River, and my vague fears quickly crystallised into a definite, honest-to-goodness alarm for our safety.

The sheltered channel had prevented us from noticing it, but a nasty wind had sprung up and choppy waves agitated the surface of the river and slapped angrily against the gunwale of the canoe.

And now the race was on with a vengeance. Seated behind the Indian Carlos,

I fixed my eyes on the rippling muscles of his back and dipped my paddle with his, stroke for stroke, in time with the furious pace he set. Behind me Walter did the same, while in the stern Rufino guided the canoe here and there to get the full advantage of the stream. The wind increased, the waves lapped higher and higher, and the water we were shipping swirled in the bottom of the canoe.

"Ten minutes, an' we'll be there," said Walter. "Stick into it, son."

Ten minutes! The huge black thundercloud was already overhead, and once that broke the canoe could not remain afloat for half that time.

"Five minutes!" called Walter. Barely had he spoken when a violent gust of wind lashed the waves to a fury, and from the forest came a menacing rustle, a hissing sough, as if the tired earth was sighing from a grievous wound. A long shudder passed down the bank of the river; trees nodded their heads, the vegetation bowed before a sudden onslaught, and, in an instant, the cloud-burst was upon us.

THE only real things in that mad, tossing tumult were the straining muscles in Carlos' back and the paddle in my hands. Conscious thought was crushed out of me in the maelstrom of rioting waters, and, wielded by a senseless, unreasoning robot, my blade followed Carlos', in-out-in-out-in . . .

At a shout from Walter Carlos stopped paddling to answer back, and the spell was broken. The waterlogged canoe was almost awash, and behind me Walter was bailing for dear life, using his hat for the purpose. The slashing rain blotted out the further bank but I could see we were rounding the last bend in the river, beyond which the ranch house was only two hundred yards distant. Walter clapped his hat back on his head and, seizing his paddle, joined in the final desperate effort to reach safety.

How we ever covered that last fifty yard is a mystery to me. The canoe was so low in the water that I had to kneel to paddle at all, and it had become so heavy that our efforts added practically nothing to the speed of the current.

But somehow we did it, and with water pouring in over the gunwale we grounded the canoe on the sloping bank in front of the ranch house.

"There y'are, pal," said Walter with a grin, "I told you the boys figured on doin' it 'bout just in time."

"You're dead right, Walter," I replied, "and they certainly did. With about ten seconds to spare, I thought."

"Sure," came the cheerful answer, "bout ten seconds. That's what I call a real pretty bit of figurin'."

(To be continued next week)

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