

## The Free Press Short Story

## THE BLUE SEALED ENVELOPE

By ALBERT W. TOLMAN

"Faster! Faster!" Vincent Page, head clerk for Major Wesley Stoneham, paymaster of the Flores River Dam Company, was hurrying along a crooked path through the rank green Central American jungle behind his young native guide, with the small black spider monkey perched on his shoulder. The afternoon sky was dark with threatening clouds.

Vincent was thinking anxiously about Clifford Somerby, who had been digging for weeks at the ruined temple of Moylan, ten miles off in the wilderness. Clifford never would call for help unless something was really the matter. He must be down with fever.

"Twenty miles out and back! A stiff jaunt over jungle trails! 'Got to make time,' thought Vincent.

He must be back in San Pedro that night for two very good reasons: first, Major Wesley Stoneham; second and by far the more important, the major's niece, Opal, due on the "Mazatlan" tomorrow. In Vincent's inside pocket was the letter saying that Opal was coming on the Caribbean cruise; there also was a blue sealed envelope.

On Vincent and his guide hurried through the moist, heavy air. Suddenly they came out on a bluff. Felipe halted, and gestured dramatically. "Senor, behold! The river!"

Below in a deep rocky canyon the Flores, narrow and swift, foamed over a roaring fall. High above it swayed a frail footway of wooden crosspieces, swung from two weather-worn cables.

A rumble of thunder, a blaze of lightning and down came a torrent of rain, mingled with hail. Vincent was glad to take shelter under a big tree. In a minute he was not so glad.

He looked about. Felipe was nowhere to be seen. "Now what?"

Suddenly, as though sprung from the ground, a dozen natives, with guns and machetes, closed in around the young American. Hands gripped his arms, legs and neck. Although taken completely by surprise, he put up a valiant but fruitless fight, knocking down three or four of his assailants. A dozen, however, were too many. They swarmed over him like ants, pulled him down, took away his pistol. Soon he was absolutely in their power.

At twenty-three Vincent Page had come down to San Pedro to take a position in the office of the construction company building the huge hydro-electric dam at the mouth of the Flores River. The first time he saw his superior, Major Wesley Stoneham, he feared they were not going to get along together. That was unfortunate, for the major was Opal's uncle, and it was her father, Albert Stoneham, who had secured Vincent his place.

From the start relations in the paymaster's office were strained. Stoneham, an ex-army officer, militarily neat and precise, was something of a martinet. Vincent, rather happy-go-lucky, was a trifle slack and careless. Friction soon developed between the two.

The first few days Vincent was two or three minutes late, but he soon corrected that. Every morning when he came in, he could see the major glance at the clock, and then could feel him looking him over from head to foot, to see if his hair was combed, his tie straight, his clothes brushed, his boots blacked. This scrutiny greatly annoyed Vincent.

One morning he found his desk put in precise order, and recognized the major's hand. At first it made Vincent angry; but after thinking the matter over, he determined to take Stoneham as a good, although rather bitter, tone.

Life settled down to a kind of content between them, Vincent trying to do everything so well that his chief would not have the slightest excuse for finding fault. He wanted to do a good job; and he needed the money to send home to help his sister, Olive, through college. He felt unpleasantly conscious, however, that the major was still dissatisfied; and a fear grew in his mind that at any time he might be discharged.

The country was in an unsettled state, a big part of the people being opposed to the present government. In the north Arturo Mendez, the revolutionary chief, was constantly growing stronger. He had many adherents in San Pedro.

That morning the New Orleans steamer had brought its fortnightly ten thousand dollars for the Flores pay roll, which had been put in the company safe. Stoneham and Vincent were the only ones who had the combination.

Only a week before the major had discharged a native clerk, Gaspar Majada, for a trifling mistake. Vincent was sorry, for he had liked Gaspar. Also, it made him more uneasy on his own account.

That afternoon was his regular half day off. While he had been lurching on fruit and crackers at his boarding house, Gaspar's brother, Felipe, a slim barefooted boy of sixteen, had come to the house with his monkey. "I am from Moylan. Senor Somerby has discovered something, and wishes you to come at once. Besides, he is very ill!"

Vincent did not hesitate. Clifford Somerby was his best friend. Cramp-

town plunged into darkness. The storm, too, will help."

Vincent shook his head. "I don't know the combination."

Gaspar flushed with anger. "That is a lie! We can force it from you if you will not tell willingly. But I wish to save you from harsh treatment."

Vincent set his jaw stubbornly. Gaspar's face hardened. The native glanced toward the scowling chief with a gesture of defeat, and the latter took charge of matters. He strode forward, scowling.

"You will not tell? Very well, then! Search him!" was the harsh command.

Two of the men seized Vincent roughly. He fought like a wildcat, but was overpowered and flung violently down, his ankle twisted under him. Rough hands rifled his pockets. Opal's letter was tossed contemptuously aside.

One man then pulled out a sealed blue envelope with a few words typewritten on its face. Gaspar pointed at it with a cry of joy. "This is it!"

He looked out the inscription. "Not to be opened unless I am incapacitated. W. Stoneham." He turned triumphantly to Vincent. "So you told the truth! You didn't know the combination, but you did know where it was."

Ripping open the envelope, he read off the figures. Mendez, smiling, bowed mockingly to Vincent. "Much obliged, for bringing us this! When we come back with the money, we will decide what to do with you. Until then—"

He snapped out an order. "Tie his hands and put him in the temple! Guard him carefully! We will start at once for San Pedro!"

His hands were bound tightly behind his back, and Vincent was thrown roughly into a ruined room. Mendez, Gaspar and several others set out for the town.

The time dragged slowly. Vincent lay in the darkness, thinking. If only he could escape and get to San Pedro in time to warn the major! That, however, seemed impossible.

The afternoon waned to dusk. Three men had remained to guard Vincent. Now and then they looked in to be sure his bonds were secure. After dark they lay down in the room between him and the door, and soon were snoring.

Save for an occasional flash of lightning, the night was black as pitch. At times came the patter of rain or the rattle of hail. Vincent wondered what was happening in San Pedro. If the revolutionists got the money and came back, it would go hard with him; and if they did not, it would go still harder.

Get out! he must escape. Desperately, yet noiselessly, he twisted and strained at his bonds.

His wrists were scraped and bleeding when finally he worked his hands free. While he had worked, he had decided just what to do. Pulling off his coat he stuffed it with twigs and pushed it partly under the pile of boughs on which he had lain; on top he placed his hat. He listened. The guards were still breathing heavily.

Rising to his feet, he felt his way stealthily along the clammy stone wall. His only exit lay through the doorway, and one of his captors was sprawled directly across it. Moving with the utmost caution, Vincent slipped lightly over him. The man stirred, but did not wake. Vincent could hardly believe his senses when he found himself outside free and undetected.

Which way should he turn? Hardly daring to breathe, he stood motionless in the gloom, waiting, until a lurid flash of lightning revealed the black entrance of the river trail. He plunged into this and began his journey back. Sooner or later his escape would be discovered, and he would be pursued. He must hurry.

What was happening in San Pedro? It was past midnight now. Mendez and his crew would wait until all was quiet, before they attempted to overpower the watchman and open the safe. If they obtained the money, Vincent knew the major would blame him.

Hal! Voices ahead! The robbers were coming back. Had they secured the

ten thousand dollars? Vincent slipped aside into the underbrush.

They passed so close he could almost have touched them. Had they succeeded or failed? He would not know until he reached San Pedro. When they found out he had escaped, the whole pack would be after him like wolves. As soon as they were safely past, he started on at a dog-trot.

A faint light showed in the east. Dawn was at hand. It helped him to go faster. He reached the river at last, foaming white and furious! There swung the bridge. As Vincent started to set foot on it, a faint cry drew his eyes downward.

At the foot of the shivering bluff, clinging to a bush with both hands, his body dragging in the current, was Felipe! Evidently the boy, following the treasure party, had crossed the bridge last, and slid down the bank into the river. The gloom had prevented the others from seeing him, and the roaring water had drowned his cries. He lifted a pallid despairing face to the man he had betrayed.

Vincent halted, hesitated. What should he do? Every minute was precious, for pursuers might even now be on his trail. If he went on, however, the boy would assuredly drown.

On the ledge below the monkey was chattering and pulling at his master. Vincent stood vacillating. This was a hard place in which to be placed. He thought of the ten thousand dollars, of the major, of Opal, of his own people.

Part of the bush broke away; Felipe hung by one hand. That decided Vincent. He leaped down the bluff, planting his feet firmly, he grasped Felipe's arm, and after a few breathless seconds hauled the lad out on the rocks. With a few muttered words and a look of gratitude, Felipe disappeared in the jungle, his monkey again on his shoulder.

Almost feeling that he had been unwise, Vincent turned toward the bridge. He started to cross in a squall of rain and hail. Foot by foot he worked his way out on the swaying, slipper crosspieces. As he reached the middle of the span, wild yells sounded behind him. He looked back.

Out of the jungle ran an angry crowd. Mendez ahead, Gaspar next. The chief snarled an order. Guns were raised. Vincent, crouching, went on as fast as he dared. Every second he expected the crashing volley that would mark his doom.

Suddenly a shrill yell rose. "Don't shoot!"

Felipe appeared, gesticulating wildly, and began an incoherent appeal. Vincent did not have much hope that the lad would prevail; but he kept on going. The volley did not come, however. Mendez snapped another order and Vincent glanced back. The guns had dropped. A few minutes later he was safely across and making his way through the jungle toward San Pedro.

(Continued on Page Seven)

## SUCCESS IS FOR EVERYBODY

Do not always go to "Whos Who" in order to find the successful people. A railway engineer may be as truly a success as the president of the road, and stenographers may be as successful as business men. Some young people fancy that they can never be successful because they know they will never be Congressmen, bank presidents or popular authors. Everyone can be successful at something. Success is not getting into a square hole if you happen to be a round peg. It is filling satisfactorily the place where you belong.

Some people are failures because they are trying to do more than they are able. Others are failures because they are not doing all they can. Neither is necessary. No one should be a failure, for success is possible to all with ordinary intelligence.

## MARVELLOUS

Old Lady: "Isn't it wonderful how one policeman can dam the flow of traffic?" Boy: "Yes, Grannie; but you should hear the bus driver!"



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## Reach Agreement Which Ends Threat of Railway Strike



Threat of a Dominion-wide railway strike was averted, when representatives of the two Canadian railways and the 18 running trades' unions signed an agreement for restoration of the employees 10 per cent wage cut within the next year. Union officials, empowered by the employees to call a strike, had held out for complete restoration of the pay cuts which went into effect several years ago. A three-man Conciliation Board found in a majority ruling that only part of the wage cut should be given back to the railway workers.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT, are the men who were actively concerned in the peaceful settlement: S. J. Hangerford, President of the Canadian National Railway; Howard B. Chase, Assistant Grand Chief of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, and Chairman of the Union's Joint Conference Board; Sir Edward Beatty, President of the Canadian Pacific Railway; and Federal Minister of Labor Norman L. Rogers, whose work as a conciliator was praised by both sides.

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