

INNOCENCIO

By REX BEACH

World-Famed Author of Successful Fiction
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CAPTAIN INNOCENCIO prepared to let himself over the side of the schooner. Outside, the Caribbean was all gleam, save where the coral-reef teeth grazed it into foam; inside, a sand beach, yellow in the moonlight, curved east and west like a causeway until the distance swallowed it. Back of that lay the groves of coconut trees, their plumes waving in the undying undulations that had never ceased since first the trade-winds breathed upon them. Beneath the palms themselves the jungle was ink-black, patched here and there with silver. It was the sort of night that had ever wakened wild impulses in Captain Innocencio's breast. It was on such a night that he had first felt the touch of a woman's lips; it was on such another night that he had first felt a man's warm blood upon his hands. That had been long ago, to be sure, in far Hayti, and since that time both of those sensations had lost much of their novelty, for he had lived fast and hard, and his exile had plunged him into many vicissitudes. It was on such a night, also, that he had begun his wanderings, his feeling southward between moonrise and moonset; southward, whither all the scum of the Indies floated. But, even to this day, when the full of a February moon came round with the fragrant salt breeze blowing and the sound of a throbbing surf beneath it, the staid, stagnant blood of Captain Innocencio went hot, his thin mulatto face grew hard, and a certain strange exultance blazed within him.

His crew had long since come to recognize this frenzy, and had they now beheld him, poised half nude at the rail, his fierce eyes bent upon the forbidden shore, they would have ventured no remark. As it happened, however, they were all asleep, all three of them. It was four years now since he had begun to sail this coast, and even though he was known on every cay and bay from Nombre de Dios to Tiburon, and even though his fair dealing, his Captain Innocencio was still compelled to sleep offshore and under guard, like any common stranger.

It had made the Haytian laugh at first; for who would wish to harm a San Blas woman, with the straggling hair and a hundred miles to the west? Then, as the months crept into years, and for voyage after voyage he never saw a San Blas woman's face, he became furious. Next he grew angry, then sullen, and a sense of injury burned into him. At times he had railed at his crew of spiritless, Jamaican "niggers," and lusted for a following of his own kind—men with the French blood of his hand in their veins, men who would follow where the moonlight flickered. He had even gone so far at one time, as to search the waterfronts from Port Limon to Santa Marta in quest of such fellows; he had winnowed the offerings of the seas gathered there, but without success. They were all chaps, for the main part, crossed with many creeds and colors, and ready for any desperate venture; but he could not find three helpers of sufficient hardness to temper the heat of his virgin's madness. He had retold him the tales he had ready knew by heart; tales of swift and sudden retribution overtaking blacks and whites; retribution that did not halt even at the French or the hated Americans. They told him of all the moody races gathered here since earliest Spanish days, the San Blas blood alone retained its purity. It was his boss, the Senor Williams, who had gone back farthest into history, and it was he likewise who had threatened him with prompt discharge if he presumed to trespass.

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The big thatched roof with its bark-floored loft stood on posts blackened by the smoke of many feasts; there were no walls. The jungle crept close to it from the rear, and hence the watcher could witness every movement of the girl as she passed between the hammocks or stooped to her task. It was very hard to wait. For an hour he stood there. Once a dog came to him and sniffed, then, recognizing a frequent visitor, returned to the house and resumed its slumber beside the fire. From the house beyond came the sound of voices, of a child crying querulously, and of a woman quieting it.

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Tonight he crouched behind the deck-house and ran his eyes over the schooner in one final glance of caution. He thrust his head through a loop of the leathern scabbard, and swung the huge knife back until it lay along the crease between his shoulders; then he seized the port stay and let himself softly down, ward overboard. The water rose to his chin. Without a ripple, he glided into the moonlight stern, and a moment later his round, black head was no more than a piece of bobbing drift borne landward by the current. Down past the village he swam, noting the rows of dugouts on the beach. He saw a blot in the big mahogany cayuca, a great canoe hewn from one priceless trunk, and recognized it for the sentinel. On the beach behind the little point. Once he felt the hard, smooth sand beneath his soles, he waited until a cloud obscured the moon, and when the light broke through again he leaped, and he was on the ground beneath the breadfruit tree at the jungle's edge.

The girl was at her father's house, tending a fire on the dirt floor. It was a large house, for the old man had five daughters, and by the San Blas rule, their husbands had come to live with him. He had waxed fat long ago on their labors, and now only this youngest one remained unmarried. But the ceremony was set. Innocencio had heard of it, and had grudgingly bought a big store of tortoise shell from the groom-to-be, knowing full well that the money was intended for the wedding celebration. Markena was the fellow's name.

The big thatched roof with its bark-floored loft stood on posts blackened by the smoke of many feasts; there were no walls. The jungle crept close to it from the rear, and hence the watcher could witness every movement of the girl as she passed between the hammocks or stooped to her task. It was very hard to wait. For an hour he stood there. Once a dog came to him and sniffed, then, recognizing a frequent visitor, returned to the house and resumed its slumber beside the fire. From the house beyond came the sound of voices, of a child crying querulously, and of a woman quieting it.

And then, before Innocencio realized that she was up to the girl had stolen swiftly out and past him so close that he could hear the scuff of her sandals on the beaten path. The next instant he had glided from cover and fallen in behind. Had he been a less accomplished bushman he might have lost her, for she plunged into the jungle with a tangle of hair and a hundred miles to the west? Then, as the months crept into years, and for voyage after voyage he never saw a San Blas woman's face, he became furious. Next he grew angry, then sullen, and a sense of injury burned into him.

At times he had railed at his crew of spiritless, Jamaican "niggers," and lusted for a following of his own kind—men with the French blood of his hand in their veins, men who would follow where the moonlight flickered. He had even gone so far at one time, as to search the waterfronts from Port Limon to Santa Marta in quest of such fellows; he had winnowed the offerings of the seas gathered there, but without success. They were all chaps, for the main part, crossed with many creeds and colors, and ready for any desperate venture; but he could not find three helpers of sufficient hardness to temper the heat of his virgin's madness. He had retold him the tales he had ready knew by heart; tales of swift and sudden retribution overtaking blacks and whites; retribution that did not halt even at the French or the hated Americans. They told him of all the moody races gathered here since earliest Spanish days, the San Blas blood alone retained its purity. It was his boss, the Senor Williams, who had gone back farthest into history, and it was he likewise who had threatened him with prompt discharge if he presumed to trespass.

Innocencio had listened passively; then, when alone, smiled. He owed no loyalty. He had no law. Even the name he went by was a fiction. He continued to make his trips and, when he came driving in ahead of the humming trade-winds, the schooner laden with the treasures of the islands, the back streets of Colon awoke to his presence and prepared to greet him. But however loud the music in the streets, however fierce the exultation of the Negro in him, however wild the orgies in which he plunged, he could never quite drown the faint song of San Blas women wafted by the breath of the sea.

Four years this thing had grown upon him, during which he haunted the San Blas coast. And then, one night, he slipped overboard and swam ashore. It was not so dangerous as it seemed, for once he had gained the shelter of the jungle, no less than pack of hounds could have followed him, inasmuch as the thickets were laced by a network of trails that gave forth no sound to naked feet, and the rustling branches overhead, played upon by the never-ceasing breeze, drowned all signal of his presence. Once he had gained the tribal lair, he knew no further peace. It was like the first taste of blood to an animal. Thereafter Innocencio, the outlaw, whose name was a symbol of daring, became a jackal prowling through the midnight glades, tasting the scent of the villages, and starting with hungry eyes from just beyond the shadow's edge. Rather he became a panther, for in his caution was no cowardice, only a feline patience. Village after village he hunted until he had marked his prey. Then he waited to spring. To be sure, he had never spoken with the girl, nor even seen her clearly, but the sound of her voice made him tremble.

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"Swim!" he ordered, and, when she would have renewed the alarm, he raised his blade, grimly threatening to call the sharks with her blood.

tricks, else he might have fancied her to be half smiling, as if in some strange exultation akin to his own. Not until he finally dragged her, panting, to the deck of the Espirita, and her white-clad figure stood out clearly from the shore, did he realize the nature of the outrage made itself felt. They drew together at the edge of the sea, staring open-mouthed, amazed before they raised their blood-cry. The man and woman rested a moment, their eyes upon the shore, and where they stood twin pools of water blackened the deck. Then Innocencio turned to look upon his prey. The girl's flimsy cotton shift was molded to her figure, and he saw that she was even fairer than he had pictured. In spite of his need for haste, he paused to gloat upon the favor the moon and the salt sea had rendered him. At last, however, he gave his crew instructions for the night and went below, closing and bolting the hatch behind him. When the smoky lamp that swung between the bunks was lit and its yellow gleam had illumined the interior he saw the girl's eyes fast upon him. He went toward her across the tilting floor and she arose to meet him, smiling.

Senor Bill Williams was in a fine rage. "Didn't you like your job?" he questioned. Innocencio shrugged languidly. "Oh, yes! The job was good." "You knew I'd fire you!" "Bill!" The American tempered his indignation with a hint of curiosity. "You must love that San Blas girl?" "Oh, yes, I suppose so." "And you say she came willing?"

Innocencio could not fathom the meaning of the subdued colloquy among the San Blas men, so he shouted a warning, but, strangely enough, they made no answer. They only crouched, with paddles motionless, staring at the dimming figures facing them, until the Espirita, "wing and wing" ahead of the trades, was no larger than a sea-grull. As yet they had not learned of the other tragedy hidden in the shadow of the palms: had they suspected what lay waiting at the edge of the sea, starting open-mouthed, amazed before they raised their blood-cry. The man and woman rested a moment, their eyes upon the shore, and where they stood twin pools of water blackened the deck. Then Innocencio turned to look upon his prey. The girl's flimsy cotton shift was molded to her figure, and he saw that she was even fairer than he had pictured. In spite of his need for haste, he paused to gloat upon the favor the moon and the salt sea had rendered him. At last, however, he gave his crew instructions for the night and went below, closing and bolting the hatch behind him. When the smoky lamp that swung between the bunks was lit and its yellow gleam had illumined the interior he saw the girl's eyes fast upon him. He went toward her across the tilting floor and she arose to meet him, smiling.

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lashed the hovering miasma, the shore was of powdered coral sand, a litter of huts drowned beneath a grove of coconut palms, while a fleet of cayucas lay moored to stakes inside the breakers or bleaching in the sun.

Captain Innocencio was a person of some importance here, for, besides his occupation as a trader, he carried toll from a score or more of island blacks. They were a lawless crew, gathered from the remotest corners of the Indies, composed of Jamaicans, Bajans, and Saint Lucians, all reared to easy life and ripe for such an occasional crafty pilgrimage as Innocencio might advise. They had gathered around him naturally, paying him scant reverence, to be sure, yet offering a certain loyalty that had its uses. Although the village was but a mile from the town itself, Innocencio's word was law; when the Colombian soldiers were called upon to visit the spot, they came in numbers, never singly.