

Scenes from a Lumber Camp

B. Traven

The mahogany camps of the southeastern state of Chiapas were among the most notoriously abusive industries in Porfirian Mexico. The abuse of Indian workers, often shanghaied from their villages, reached deadly extremes. The enigmatic German socialist writer B. Traven traveled in the region of the lumber camps as part of an anthropological expedition during the 1920s, a time when, despite the revolution, conditions in the camps had changed but little. His informants were the lumber workers themselves, and he always claimed that he represented them with unsentimental accuracy. In the following excerpt, taken from one of Traven's series of "jungle" novels, Indians newly arrived at a lumber camp are initiated into some harsh realities.

The new gang reached the south camp in the middle of the night. The men were dead on their feet with fatigue from the march through the underbrush and a two-hour struggle to get out of the heavy, sticky mud of the swamps. They let themselves fall to the ground with whatever they were carrying, and it was not until almost half an hour later that they began to have the strength to ask for something to eat. The cook told them he had nothing to give them and that unless they had brought their own provisions they would have to wait until morning. . . .

"Any of you ever been in a camp before?" [someone] asked.

"Not me," replied one of the men in a voice exhausted by fatigue. "And I don't believe that any of us know the camps."

Santiago, one of the ox-drivers, broke in, saying: "Well, you'll get to know them. You'll get to know hell and all its devils."

Nobody took up his words. The old hands smoked; the new ones waited for their beans and coffee to get warm. The fire crackled, throwing out sparks, and at last decided to burn brightly.

THE INDIANS LYING around the fire suddenly raised their heads as if they had heard the roar of a jaguar in the underbrush.



Lumber workers in Chiapas, 1940s. (Alex Harris and Margaret Sartor, eds., *Gertrude Blom: Bearing Witness*. [Photographer Gertrude DUBY Blom. Reprinted by permission of Na Bolom Museum, Mexico])

"What's that noise coming from the jungle?" asked Antonio, an Indian from Sactun, listening intently.

"Do you mean those groans and moans in the underbrush?" asked Santiago, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes, that's what I mean. You'd think that somebody was tormenting gagged animals."

"By God, comrade," said Santiago ironically, "I assure you that you're sharp of hearing. You must be able to hear a flea dancing on a silk handkerchief. With hearing like that, you'll get somewhere! Besides, you're not mistaken."

"No, you're not mistaken, you've heard perfectly," interposed Matías. "They're tormenting animals, and they're holding their mouths to stifle cries

that might disturb Don Acacio while he's slipping between the heavy thighs of his Cristina, the girl with the twisted nose. By the devil, she's ugly! But her ass must have some enchantment, for he takes her everywhere with him and buys her boxes of scented soap whenever the Turk comes."

"And why are they tormenting those poor beasts?" asked Antonio.

The ox-drivers laughed uproariously.

"Those poor beasts!" replied Santiago. "Yes, the poor beasts are being cruelly mistreated because in spite of the gags they can hear their screams."

And there was another outburst of laughter.

"But they're not little lambs with white fleece," explained Pedro.

"Beasts, poor beasts! No, those are not animals that are being tormented, you pack of asses! It's twenty cutters, twenty ax-men who are howling. They've hung them up for three or four hours because they haven't produced, either today or yesterday or the day before, the tons of mahogany they'd been told to. You are innocent and ignorant, but within three days you'll know what four tons are. Two tons are the normal production of an experienced cutter who's as strong as an ox. And now that son of a bitch Don Acacio wants us to cut four tons a day. Whoever can't cut that amount is hung from a tree by his four members, and even by five, for half the night. . . . Then the mosquitoes come humming around, because the thing happens at the edge of the swamps; not to mention the red ants, which arrive in battalions. But I don't have to give you any more details. In less than a week you'll know as much as I do—and by personal experience. After that you'll have been initiated into all the mysteries of a camp belonging to the Montellano brothers. You'll be soldiers of the regiment of the hanged."

Somebody said: "I thought that all they did was flog you the way they do in the prison camps and coffee fincas."

It was Martín Trinidad who seemed to be so well informed. Martín Trinidad was one of the three ragged men who had joined the column on the road and whom Don Gabriel had engaged without a stamped contract. During the three long weeks of the trek through the jungle those three vagabonds had hardly exchanged a word with the Indians. They had always remained together in a group, talking among themselves and not appearing to bother about the others. This was the first time that Martín Trinidad had spoken to them.

Santiago looked at him with half-closed eyes and an air of suspicion, with the caution a real proletarian employs in the presence of an informer.

"Where do you come from?"

"I'm from Yucatán."

"That's a long way! How did you get here? Are you running away?"

"Let's say that's right, brother."

"Right, let's say that. . . . When they've hanged you at least three times, I'll begin to believe you. Because, look, if anyone here isn't flogged or hanged we get suspicious—he may be a squealing son of a——. And even to receive some lashes doesn't prove anything, but to be strung up, to be well and duly hanged as El Rasgón, La Mecha, and El Faldón know how to do it—that's altogether another matter. After that there's no comedy. I hope you understand what I'm going to tell you. Celso and Andrés will have a little chat with your two pals in order to know more about who you are. Here nobody's afraid of anything, and nobody can match our skill in sweetly slicing the next fellow's neck for almost no reason at all. It can happen within twenty paces of the hut without the interested party's feeling it at all. Nor is any attention paid to how the loathsome soul of an informer goes down to hell. As you'll see, we don't give a thought to anything, not even their bullets—you don't shoot a man you expect four tons a day from. A dead man can't fell trees—isn't that so? The worst they can do is hang us, and we're so used to that now that it doesn't help them any more. They used to beat us savagely when we couldn't cut more than two tons. But we got hardened to beating, and it no longer served any purpose. On the contrary, the more they beat us, the less we produced. At that point the Montellanos thought up the scheme of hanging us. It's horrible, it's terrifying, but only while you're strung up. Next day you can work again, and then you cut your four tons! This new invention has really worked for them, because the recollection, the mere recollection of the suffering, the terror of being strung up again, drives you to try to cut four tons, even though after one ton your hands are skinless. Only now we've almost got to the stage where even their new invention will become useless. There's nothing they can do about Celso there, for instance. When they've hanged him for four hours and El Guapo arrives to take him down, Celso shouts: 'Hi! you son of a bitch, here you come just when I feel fine. I'm sleeping peacefully, and this is the moment you choose, you pig, to come and disturb my dreams!' Celso was the first. Now there are about six of us. This is the secret: human beings can become like oxen or donkeys and remain impassive when they're beaten or goaded, but only if they've succeeded in suppressing all their natural instinct to rebel."

Martín Trinidad did not reply. . . .

FIDEL AND TWO of his comrades went to the large hut that served as their dormitory, picked up two lanterns, and made toward the underbrush. Eight men, eight shapeless masses, were twitching on the ground. They were incredibly doubled up, as if they had been cooped up in narrow boxes for six

months. Each wore only a torn pair of white breeches. They groaned quietly, like sleepers half awakened. They squirmed on the ground and slowly stirred their limbs one after another to ease the stiffness, for their arms and legs were stiff and swollen.

The ropes that had held them to the trees had been simply untied by the foremen, letting the men fall brutally to the ground. The foremen never worried about their victims, because they knew that the men would come to help them. Besides, the foremen were not required to watch over the health of hanged men. They could burst or not during the torture. The Montellanos and their bodyguards were not concerned with the possible death of the hanged men beyond the fact that a death meant the loss of a man's labor. If a cutter was lazy or weak and could not produce three tons of mahogany daily, the loss was not great, the man could die quietly. For the worker, work is a duty. If he is lazy, he has no right to live. After all, if he dies, there is one less nuisance.

The eyes of the hanged men were bloodshot and inflamed. Their bodies were covered with the bites of red ants and mosquitoes. Hundreds of ticks of all sizes had penetrated so deeply beneath their skins that infinite patience was necessary to extract them without leaving the heads behind, for if these were left under the skin the bites produced by the insects' stings would become dangerous. Wherever a tick had worked its way in, there remained, even after its removal, a terrible itching that lasted as much as a week and compelled the victim to scratch himself incessantly. The bodies of the tortured men were still covered with ants, which now began to make their escape replete with their booty of blood or flesh. On and between their toes chiggers had left their eggs deposited deep in the flesh. Spiders had invaded their hair, and some of them had begun to weave webs to catch the flies attracted by the blood and sweat of the hanged men. On their legs could be seen the sticky tracks left by snails.

The old hands picked their comrades up in their arms and carried them, still stupefied by pain, to the bank of the arroyo. They immersed them in the running water to alleviate the burning stings of mosquitoes and to rid them of ants and spiders. After this ducking they laid them out on the bank and began to stretch their limbs, massaging them at the same time.

"This isn't so bad," explained Santiago to Antonio, who was helping him revive one of the cutters, Lorenzo. "It's not so serious when they hang one near the huts. What is dangerous is when they do the hanging far from the camp as a special punishment. Because then the wild boars and wild dogs eat them, and they aren't able to defend themselves in any way."

"There's still another marvelous punishment, an invention of Don Severo," said Matías, rubbing another of the hanged men. "Toward eleven o'clock in

the morning they grab a man and take him to a place where there isn't a tree or any shade of any kind. They take off his clothes, tie his hands and feet, and bury him in the hot sand to just below his mouth, leaving only his nose, his eyes, and the top of his head above ground, and all this under the caress of the sun. To you, you innocent lambs who don't yet know anything about these things, I can say that when a man has been buried once in this way, just once, he shakes like a goat's beard when he hears Don Félix say these pretty words: 'Now you'll cut your three tons, or I'll have them bury you for three hours.' Those three hours seem longer than a lifetime." . . .

When the hanged men were at last revived, thanks to the ministrations of their comrades, they could sip a little coffee and eat a few warmed-over frijoles. They got up and, staggering like drunken men, moved toward their huts, where they collapsed at full length. It was nearly eleven o'clock at night.

AT FOUR O'CLOCK the next morning la Mecha went into the huts to kick the sleeping men awake. They were still so full of pain and fright from the hanging of the preceding evening that, without washing their hands, they threw themselves on the pot of tepid beans, which they scooped up with their hands and ate ravenously. Then each of them drank a few gulps of coffee and, ax on shoulder, went off into the forest resolved to cut his four tons that day.

Throughout the entire day they had only one idea in their heads, an idea that never left them in three weeks: "By all the saints in heaven, little God, make me able to cut my four tons so they won't hang me!"

But God, who came to earth two thousand years ago to save men, undoubtedly forgot these Indians. It is certain that at that time their country was still unknown. And when at last it was discovered, the first thing the conquistadores did was to plant a cross on the beach and say a Mass. In spite of that ceremony the Indians still suffer.

"Certainly," said Martín Trinidad unexpectedly some nights later, "the Lord came to the world two thousand years ago to save men. Next time we'll save ourselves."

"Maybe so," replied Pedro, one of the ox-drivers who had some ideas about religion and priests, "maybe so. But we'll still have to wait another two thousand years for our turn to come."

Celso intervened dryly: "Why wait for the Saviour? Save yourself, brother, and then your savior will have arrived."