GENERAL FROM THE JUNGLE

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Chapter One

I

"*Tierra y Libertad!*" With this war-cry an army of Indians marched out of the jungles in the south of the Republic, in order to overthrow the dictator and secure land and freedom for themselves.

Simple and short though this slogan was, it rang like a pæan of triumph to the marching men.

Whatever, in their miserable oppression and their pitiful ignorance, they sensed of poetry, of a desire for beauty, of love for mankind and living creatures, of natural faith in some absolute justice that must be found somewhere, as well as deeply felt sorrow for their comrades who had been horribly murdered or bestially tortured to death—all this, and much more that, unknown to them, slumbering within them, found its expression in that single war-cry. Even when, one united mass, impelled by one and the same urge, they raised their clenched fists in unison as if exhorting God not to forget them, and with one voice yelled out their solemn slogan to the universe until it echoed like a mighty wave thundering against the rocks, nevertheless every man in that throng sensed clearly his own individual cry mingling with the others, for in the depths of his being he felt it as his very own, his deeply personal prayer.

Folksongs, jingles, political and patriotic phrases immediately lose their sense and meaning the moment they are soberly considered and logically thought out. And it could well be that even this war-cry of the Indians, if examined in cold blood, would evaporate into meaningless words.

When their sufferings, their tortures, their deprivations under their masters in the jungles—the mahogany concessionaires and their underlings—grew so intolerable that they and, extraordinarily enough, almost all the others working at that time in the remotest regions of the tropical forests simultaneously came to the realisation that it was better and more worthy of their human dignity to perish in a revolution than to live longer under such humiliations and torments, then they took action. They took action firmly and decisively in order to make an end at last—

either an end to their own lives, or an end to the lives of their tyrants.

In spite of their sufferings and humiliations, they nevertheless had within themselves a glimmering of an understanding as to their bitter situation. Seeing the birds of the jungle, and even the millions of insects which all, in freedom and joy of living, came and went at will, they never lost the sense of a longing for freedom.

Timid, faint-hearted, uncertain at first, then strong and single-minded, they had at last decided on rebellion.

Once begun, things developed far faster than they had ever believed possible.

The owners, managers and overseers in the *monterias*,[1] who as a result of their power and their brutality were more feared than Almighty God Himself, shrank in the first two hours of the insurrection, as soon as they saw that every vestige of their authority had collapsed, into helpless, pitiful puppets who suddenly seemed to have forgotten how to speak, how to move, and how to take with dignity their long-earned, well-merited deserts.

In a short fight, all who did not side with the rebelling Indians were destroyed.

By this means the revolutionaries were able to secure some weapons. Not many. About fifty revolvers, not all in good order. About twelve sporting rifles, some of them undependable and hopelessly rusted from the humid-hot climate of the jungle. In addition there were a few light shot-guns and ten ancient Spanish muzzle-loaders. The plunder in ammunition, not much in itself, was as varied in calibre as were the weapons themselves.

None the less, all the muchachos were excellently armed with machetes, bush-knives, axes and hatchets. With these weapons, with these machetes and axes with which they had daily been compelled to fight the jungles, they were better able to fend for themselves than with automatic rifles.

Of course, in contrast to the modernly equipped federal troops and forces of the *Rurales*, it was absurd to speak of the revolutionary mahogany-workers of the jungle as being armed. In the face of the regular troops, their courage, their hatred, their frenzied rage against their oppressors must make up for what they lacked in weapons. Each one of them knew that. And each one of them considered this hatred and rage to be of greater worth to them in battle than a superfluity of ammunition.

[1] Tropical mahogany forests.

2

Under the dictatorship, no one, apart from the dictator, El Caudillo, was more feared and also more hated than the *Rurales*.

The *Rurales* were a mounted police force, the especial weapon of the dictator, who at times was none too sure of the officers of the Federal Army. The *Rurales*, particularly feared by mutinying and striking workers, were an elite troop of men and youths, excellently equipped, superbly drilled, well looked after and well paid. Hundreds of young men had been specially enrolled in the corps on account of their sadistic instincts. For their activities and actions, arrests and executions, their officers were responsible to no judge, only to El Caudillo himself. They were the instrument of terror, by the help of which El Caudillo mercilessly and ruthlessly repressed the slightest resistance or criticism of his authority. When, as happened in several of the textile workers' strikes, the officers of the Army refused to undertake—after the suppression of the strike—a bestial slaughter of the now humbled and conquered men and women workers, as ordered by El Caudillo, a troop of *Rurales* were marched at top speed to the region. And there what the Army officers had refused to do the *Rurales* carried out with such brutality that in the general massacre no one was spared who had the misfortune to find himself in that quarter of the workers' town which had been cordoned off by the *Rurales*. Workers and non-workers, women, children, old people, the sick—no distinction was made between them. And that happened, not during a strike, but days, often weeks, after the strike had ended, when the workers had returned to the factories and the whole district was entirely quiet. It was the law of retribution and vengeance which the dictator invoked as a warning to all those who disagreed with him as to the benefits of the glorious, golden age which he, El Caudillo, had brought to his people.

An encounter with half a battalion of these *Rurales* while on the march must, according to the honest judgment of any sensible man, mean the certain defeat of the rabble of rebellious jungle workers, and with their annihilation the swift end of the revolution in the jungle regions.

3

Even though the war-cry of the muchachos who had taken upon themselves to overthrow the dictator seemed clear and simple when it was yelled out with full enthusiasm, all of them would have fallen silent had anyone asked them what they really understood by the "Land" and "Liberty" for which they had determined to fight.

Every single one of them bore within himself a different, entirely individual conception of *Tierra y Libertad*; because to each of them "Land" and "Liberty" meant something different, according to his desires, sorrows, circumstances and hopes.

Many, who had been sold as contract-workers in the *monterias* —because of their own debts, or for their fathers' debts, or for non-payment of police fines, or as surety for relatives who had been unable to pay and had died—many of these owned in their native villages a tiny plot of land which they loved and would exchange for no other piece of conquered land, even had it been better and richer. For these people the battle-cry had apparently no meaning because they already possessed land. But the freedom to exploit it and to enjoy the fruits of their labour in peace and quiet was denied them.

And they were denied freedom from the thousands of corrupt officials of all kinds, great and small, who flourished under the dictatorship in order to guard it and maintain it, and who had to be fattened up so as not to be dangerous to El Caudillo. If it happened that the activities of these officials stank too grossly they were promptly excused for having acted thus out of over-zealousness in the interest of the welfare of the State and in devotion to their beloved El Caudillo.

Whoever were relieved of these parasites could say with justice that he now knew what freedom meant.

For others *Tierra y Libertad* meant unrestricted freedom to be able to return to their parents, to their wives, their children, their betrothed, their friends and relations, their native villages.

Others again saw in *Tierra y Libertad* the simple right to be allowed to work where they pleased and for whoever treated them well and for a wage which they considered fair.

To the majority of these Indian mahogany-workers, who were ninety per cent. agriculturalists, the conception of *Libertad* was nothing more than the clear, homely wish simply to be left in

peace from everything connected with government, State welfare, increased production, economic development, capture of markets, obedience, duties without rights, docile submission to the national destiny, and whatever other such senseless and idiotic virtues as were pumped into them by the dictatorship in order to bewilder the brains of the common people and prevent them from looking where the roots of all evil flourished.

When they shouted for *Libertad*, the muchachos hoped that after they had won their battle for freedom they would be allowed to lead their lives in their own ways, untroubled by men in whom they could put no trust because they could not understand their needs and sorrows and took no pains to try to understand them, but simply came again and again with forms that had to be filled in and paid. The liberated wanted to be allowed to enjoy alone the results of their heavy labours; and they had no desire to be robbed from a hundred directions of all or a considerable proportion of these products of their labours, for purposes which they could not understand and did not appreciate and which solely served to provide El Caudillo with further opportunities and means to bolster the supremacy of his golden age.

But however unclear in detail the conceptions of land and freedom might be to the rebels, they nevertheless felt instinctively and rightly what they wanted. And what they wanted was: no longer to be dominated, no longer to be commanded. Any wish to share in the great wealth and culture of modern civilisation—such as the programme of the industrial proletariat in civilised nations always demands—was alien to them. They could not have understood such a desire, even had one attempted to explain it to them for days and weeks. They knew nothing of democracy, socialism, organisation. And had anyone suggested that they should demand a seat in Parliament or in the nation's Congress, they would have regarded him who suggested this as a traitor who only wanted to confuse them, and they would doubtless have replied: "What has Parliament and Congress to do with us? We want to be left in peace, damn you; that's all we want. And now get out, you swindlers!"

4

The vile, disgraceful and cruel treatment which they and all their class had been compelled to suffer throughout the long years of the dictatorship, had fundamentally and thoroughly changed the characters of the rebels.

From peace-loving farmers, wood-cutters, charcoal-burners, potters, hut-weavers, basket-makers, leather-workers, mat-weavers, who wanted nothing else in life than to be allowed to work unhindered, to cultivate their land, to raise their cattle, to bring their wares freely to market, to found families, to have children, to celebrate a feast now and then, and once or twice in the year to make a pilgrimage to the great *Ferias* in the state, and then, grown old, to be able to die in peace and quiet surrounded by their good friends and neighbours—from such as these the dictatorship had succeeded in turning them into savage creatures of vengeance, obstinate, eternally mistrustful, quarrelsome, hypocritical, addicted to strong drink. For this reason, and this reason only, these savages thought of nothing else, once the rebellion had begun, than of destroying everything they approached and of mercilessly annihilating all and everyone who wore uniform or even had a uniform cap on his head, and all those who from position or profession were regarded by them as their tormentors and oppressors.

They had been treated like childish slaves, who might only open their mouths when spoken to. And in the manner of such slaves, whose chains had suddenly broken, they were now behaving.

They had been tortured, beaten, humiliated, struck on the mouth by beasts with human faces. And like beasts they now set forth to ravage the country and to kill everyone who did not belong to their own kind.

When they had one day destroyed and desolated everything that El Caudillo had created from their blood, their sweat, their want, their cares, their tears—the golden age of the Republic—then they would return home, sated with their vengeance, back to their houses, villages, settlements and huts, and from that time on lead a peaceful life according to their own desires.

It was only to be foreseen that the Scribes and Pharisees of all countries would, in their accounts and histories, ascribe such bestialities as were practised to the savage natures of the perpetrators who had no understanding of the great age in which they lived.

And it was equally to be foreseen that the dethroned and the tyrants and their sycophants here and everywhere upon earth would announce to the listening world, when all was over, that now anyone could see and understand why the dictatorship had been right in treating these savages as they had been treated under the dictatorship, and why dictatorship, an iron and merciless dictatorship, was the only form of government which could rule to their own benefit a people consisting of slaves and having only the mentality of slaves. Down with the demoralising democracy! *Viva* the vital and rejuvenating dictatorship!

5

The rebel horde numbered almost six hundred men. No one had counted them exactly. It would indeed have been difficult to arrive at a precise number.

Every day during the march through the jungle they were joined here and there on the paths by small groups or by single escaped individuals who, long before the general insurrection in the *monterias* had begun, had deserted from the remotest corners of the jungles where they had worked. Even peons, who had fled from their *fincas* and then remained hidden in areas close to the jungle, took the opportunity of permanently freeing themselves from their debt-slavery and joined up contentedly with the army, happy to have met the revolution about which only vague and unclear rumours had reached those regions.

On the terrible march through the great jungles many were lost. Some were drowned crossing rivers; some sank in swamps and morasses; others were carried off in twenty-four hours by violent fevers; several were bitten by snakes and stung by poisonous insects; and others again were kicked by terrified horses or mules when following narrow mountain tracks, and these fell into the ravines. There were also many who died of wounds which they still bore on their bodies from work or torture and which could not be healed by their comrades. Thus the numbers of the people fluctuated from day to day.

With the troop marched a considerable number of women and girls and probably a dozen or more children, family dependants of the labourers who had been sold into the *monterias*. These women and children had been unwilling to leave their husbands, fathers, brothers and nephews, and had gone with them voluntarily into the jungle.

6

The army was led by a young fellow, twenty-one years old, called Juan Mendez—or, rather, *he* called himself that, for to all the other muchachos he was simply "General."

He had belonged to the little group of workers who had started the rebellion. Since he had had some military training, it was quite natural that to him should be entrusted the supreme command of the army.

By race he was a Huasteca Indian, with an admixture, to judge by his appearance, of some Spanish blood. At the age of sixteen he had joined the Army as a volunteer. He progressed rapidly until, at nineteen, he was promoted to sergeant.

He persuaded his favourite brother, some years younger than himself, also to become a soldier and to join the same battalion. In the course of his duties the younger boy committed some act of negligence of no great importance. In normal circumstances his offence would have been punished with two days' arrest or a few unpleasant hours of extra guard duty. A friendly disposed lieutenant would have given the boy a sharp dressing-down, and the matter would then have been forgotten. Under the dictatorship, however, superior officers in the Federal Army, and still more in the *Rurales*, had been gradually exalted to the status of infallible saints who represented God on earth. The inferior soldier *vis-à-vis* his betters possessed no other right than that of blind obedience and silent acceptance of whatever was demanded of him. So it happened that an officer, who was probably still drunk, punished the boy for his remissness by ducking his head in a pail of water and keeping him under water with his boot until he was drowned. The murderer was not punished, but instead he was commended in the orders of the day for having acted in the interests of discipline, as was his duty—for discipline was the highest sacrament.

The sergeant had not yet been wholly indoctrinated with the ways of the dictatorship, probably because he was more an Indian than an obedient soldier. Therefore he forgot for an hour the godlike nature of the officer and stabbed him to death, without being able to feel the least regret for his deed. This behaviour made it necessary for him to desert and to leave the Army to get on as best it could without his assistance.

His closest friend in the regiment was a corporal, also of Indian origin. He was the only man in whom he confided what he had

done and where he had hidden the body of the demigod, in order to gain time for flight. True friendship meant more to the corporal than patriotism and far more than the solemnly sworn oath of loyalty which was as much a matter of indifference to him as a divorce in Tlaxcala would have been to a funambulating ape. "You know, Juanito," he said simply to his friend, "I'm going with you, and to hell and damnation with the whole accursed army and all the stinking crap about patriotism and love of one's country. What's it to do with me?" So the two of them went off together.

They thought of escaping to Honduras or San Salvador. Anywhere away from their sacred fatherland.

On the way there they met a recruited gang of Indian workers who were being driven away to the *monterias* as contract labourers. They enlisted in this gang. In the *monterias* nobody looked for them, and anyway no one would have got them out, whoever was being looked for or whatever the crime that had been committed; for a contract worker in the *monterias* was ten times worse off than in a prison or even in *El Valle de Muerte*, the dreaded concentration camp for political prisoners from which seldom anyone returned, and, if he did return, remained a broken man for the rest of his life.

This corporal, Lucio Ortiz by name, had been appointed by General to the rank of colonel in the army.

As chief of staff, General nominated Celso Flores, a Tsotsil Indian. Celso had worked for several years in the *monterias* as a feller. Although he was unable to read or write, like all the mahogany people, he possessed an acute natural intelligence. Also, he was endowed with the rare talent of being able to inspire people to extreme exertions, mostly in the Indian manner. He never demanded anything that he would not himself do first —and do better than anyone else—if it was suggested that it was impossible to carry out his command.

As general in charge of the commissariat, the muchachos chose Andreu, a Tseltal Indian who had worked in the *monterias* as an ox-driver dragging away the felled tree-trunks. He could read and write, and had acquired experience and a certain knowledge of logistics as overseer of oxen on the *carreta* caravans, which brought trade goods and passengers from the railway station on the coast far into the interior of the state—a distance of more than four hundred kilometres.

The spiritual chief, the brains of the army, was Professor, as

the muchachos called him. Professor had been a secondary school teacher. Gradually he had begun to understand the true position of the people who lived under the dictatorship. So it happened that he became more and more unwilling to beat into his pupils by way of their behinds—as had become customary in all schools —an admiration and idolisation of the system. The further he progressed in his political awakening, the less was he spiritually enslaved. Therefore, whenever he had the opportunity, in school, on the street, in cafés, he began shamefully to abuse the dictator and his supremacy; and although he knew what would happen to him, he did not come, as his colleagues put it, to his senses. Once he had properly understood the situation, he could no longer hold his tongue. From a well-paid position in the better schools and in the big towns, he was continually transferred further and further downwards. Each fresh transfer was preceded by several months in prison or a concentration camp.

Finally, he found himself in a little mining town, and here he was employed in a louse-ridden elementary school of the lowest grade, which was attended by the children of the poorest and worst-paid mine workers. He had been at his post scarcely three weeks when every evening, in a different one of the miserable adobe huts of the workers, there took place a meeting of the fathers, mothers and elder brothers of his pupils. Six weeks later there were explosions, now here, now there, in the galleries and even in whole sections of the mines. God was on the side of the *mineros*; for it so happened that after none of the explosions and floodings in the mines was there a single dead proletarian to be found, although there perished a great many military personnel and agents of the secret police who had been introduced into the mines, dressed as labourers, in order to discover why the output was falling off and who stuck the dynamite into the false bore-holes. When it finally came to strikes and open mutiny, the buildings of the mines administration were bombarded with stones and the police troops started to pepper the crowds of recalcitrant *mineros*. Then Professor was arrested again. This time the Government seemed to have withdrawn him from public life for good and all. This time even the fathers and brothers of his former secondary school pupils could no longer obtain clemency for him, as they had hitherto always been able to do successfully, since they held influential positions. This time Professor was included in a transport of incorrigibles and recidivists, a transport which, like a batch of Negro slaves in the eighteenth

century, was bundled into *El Inferno*, a concentration camp that was only called "Hell" because hitherto even the brightest wit had been unable to discover a stronger word to describe the hell that reigned there. Even here, Professor could not keep his impertinent mouth shut. From time to time he was gagged for twenty-four hours on end; was allowed neither water nor shade from the tropical sun. But scarcely was the gag removed and scarcely had the cramp left his tortured lips than the first words he always shouted were: "*Abajo El Caudillo!* (Down with the dictator!) *Que muere la dictadura! Viva la revolucion social! Sufragio efectivo! No Reeleccion! Viva la revolucion del pueblo!*" And straightway his mouth was gagged again, and he was carried out into the burning sun, tied up like a parcel, and laid on the sand. Finally, he succeeded in escaping with several of his companions in suffering, but most of these either perished or else were recaptured and then slowly tortured to death. In the course of his flight he encountered the sergeant and the corporal dressed in rags and indistinguishable from wandering Indian peasants. And in company with these two he also allowed himself to be recruited as a mahogany worker in the *monterias*, in the hope of waiting in the depths of the jungle for the outbreak of the rebellion, which was already flickering throughout the country, and then opening the attack from there and winning the south of the Republic for the cause of the revolution.

7

The army was divided into eight companies, each commanded by a captain and a lieutenant, with corporals as platoon leaders.

On the journey through the jungle, each company marched at a day's interval from the next, partly on account of the more than one hundred and fifty horses, mules, donkeys, oxen, cows and goats which accompanied them, and partly also in order to allow the swamp-like track through the jungle, saturated by heavy tropical downpours, time to dry out somewhat after a company had marched over it, and thus lighten the passage of those following. When a company and its animals had marched over one of these narrow jungle paths, they left behind them a trail compounded of deep, tenacious, porridge-like slime in which men and beasts sank to their knees and even to their stomachs.

8

After weeks of marching, terrible and exhausting as only a march can be through tropical jungle, where the ground is never dry, the army at length reached a settlement on the very edge of the jungle.

The hardships of this march, wading through swamps, crossing streams and rivers, struggling over numerous mountain ranges, gave the rebels rich opportunity to show what they were capable of.

No academically trained and experienced general could have brought a regular army on this march through the jungle and accomplished it with so few losses and so little sickness as the rebel officers managed to do. It was excellent training for them and for all belonging to the army. An army that had succeeded in conquering the jungle so triumphantly had the right to hope that they might overcome still other forces. And these other forces that had to be fought and conquered were drawing nearer every day as the horde advanced further into open country where the great estates, the *fincas*, lay, with their feudal overlords, the *finqueros*, and where were also villages, towns, Army posts, military patrols, and roving squadrons of *Rurales*.

The army marched ahead without having any particular objective. "The objective will appear when once the march has begun," said Professor and General.

The muchachos would have had as little use for a narrowly circumscribed objective as they would have had for a programme or a statute of some sort or other. They were guided solely by their one desire to acquire land and freedom. Once they had found both these things and were certain that they could keep them, then they would settle down, just as the Nahuas after a march lasting more than a hundred years had settled in a region that attracted them and that guaranteed them land and freedom.

Now, of course, *Tierra y Libertad* could only be gained when those who owned and defended these estates had been vanquished. Therefore the first task was to fight them, to conquer them, to overwhelm them utterly and to destroy them. The next task after that was to smash all who hindered or might hinder the achievement of *Tierra y Libertad*. So it might even be necessary to march on the capital, to occupy the Government buildings, to slaughter the Governor and all his bureaucrats, and then to direct from the Government buildings everything further