

# The Cigarette

By William Dent Pitman

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"THERE is only one thing I do not understand, and do not like, about the billet," declared Banning emphatically, "and that is the record."

"You mean the tale of my predecessors?" asked Grendon, the elder man, "yes—it is rather a coincidence."

"A coincidence?" Jack Banning sat up, with a movement full of nervous energy peculiar to him, "Surely it is more than that! Why, look here, man—" he searched among the typewritten sheets on the table near at hand, and selected one, "read this! 'You are to succeed Prof. Christy Jarvis, who three months ago, in a sudden attack of madness, killed a Mexican attendant, and has since died himself in the hospital.' Jarvis had followed on the recall of Palen, 'whose health,' Banning read again, 'was so unfavorable as to cause him accessions of delirium, in which he endangered the life of his companions—!' Palen, you observe, however, has recovered since his return home."

"I knew all that," was Grendon's comment, "but—"

"But! Isn't it rather a big 'but'?" Banning interrupted, "and when we go still further back—now let's look. Jarvis is dead, Palen on duty at Copan for five months, left there in 1905. His predecessor, Langton Eustace, had started the expedition in 1903, and after two years, cut his own throat in a fit of mania! Three men in four years; I never heard anything like it!"

"Oh, it's nothing but coincidence," Grendon asserted easily. "I know that part of Honduras and so do you, Banning. It's not healthy exactly—but it doesn't kill, if one is careful. I don't believe these fellows were, that's all. Why, there's the chap in charge of the expedition now, Norquoy, he went down with Eustace originally, and has stayed right through since 1903, with only two short holidays. Nothing has happened to him, you see."

"Norquoy? I don't seem to know the name," said Banning.

"Tony Norquoy, Antonio, I believe," Grendon explained. "His mother was a Mexican, though his father is English. He writes me his health has been excellent. Come now, what do you say? There isn't a chap I'd rather have than you, Banning, for aide and secretary. You know the country, and you're a good photographer. The pay is fair—and the glory will be considerable, if we have any kind of luck with those ruins."

"I know, and yet—" Banning hesitated, "Eustace goes crazy and kills himself; Palen, delirious—endangers the lives of his companions; Jarvis kills a fellow, and dies insane. Doesn't that make you creep—a bit?"

"Not a creep—and Norquoy?"

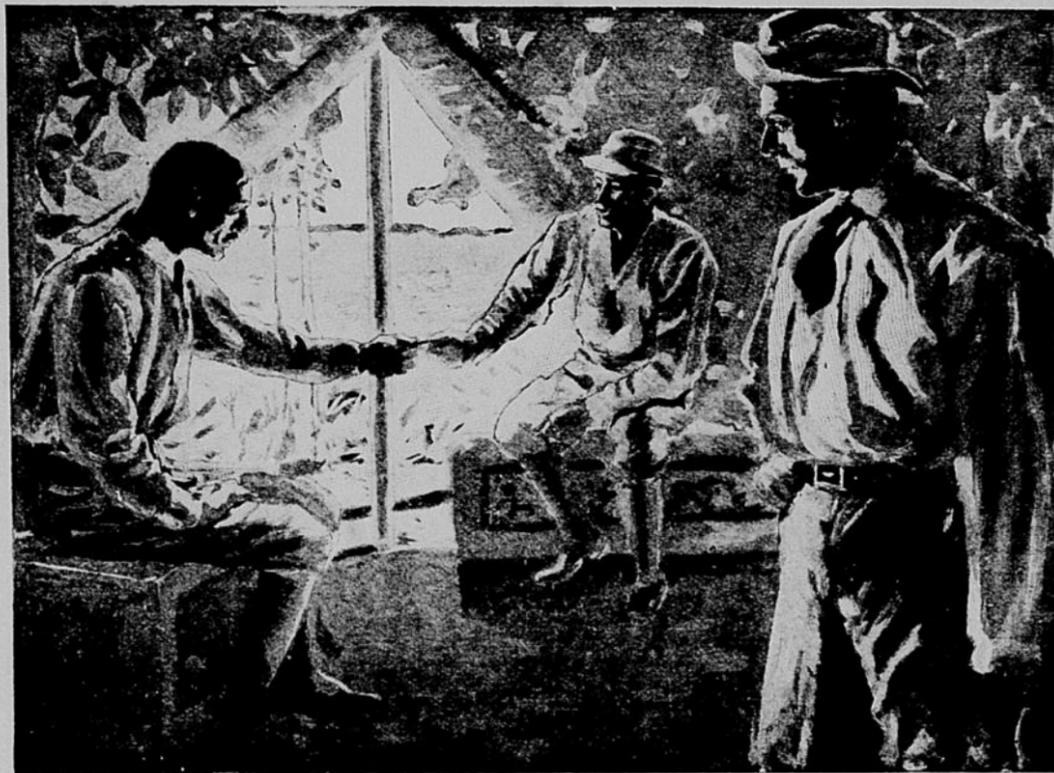
"I've not made up my mind about Norquoy."

"Oh come now, Jack! Don't be absurd!" and Grendon sat up to laugh his jovial peal. "Do I look like mania? Come along—unless you've something better to do."

"You know I haven't, and of course I'll come," said Banning, at last, resignedly, "but mark my words—we'll have to keep a sharp lookout."

"Sit up all night and look out if you want to, old man," said Grendon, good humoredly; and plunged at once into a discussion of stores and equipment. For him, the sinister fate of his predecessors in the Copan Excavation Expedition dropped out of mind as if it had not been.

WITH Jack Banning this was not the case. A younger man, perhaps more highly strung, the facts remained in his mind, though they came but seldom from his lips. He chose his pistols, his rifle, for instance, with that black thought always in the back of his consciousness. Otherwise he was efficiency, energy itself, full of interest in the plan, and of loyalty to his chief. It was due in no small measure to his efforts that they landed promptly at Port Yzabal, and after several days' toilsome journey by rude mountain tracks, came out late in the afternoon upon a cliff overlooking their goal.



"Try one of my cigarettes," said Norquoy.

Copan, the famous ruined city of the Mayas, that mysterious people of Central America, lay in a lovely valley beneath Banning, as he drew rein. The mountains they had just passed through raised craggy heads behind the little group. The Copan River wound along below, dividing into halves the immense, low heaps and mounds of stone and earth which once had been houses and buildings. On the right bank a huge, vague mass of terrace and plateau showed the famous temples, with stairways reaching up to them. Cedars and ceibas grew among the blocks of stonework, forcing them apart. The characteristic of this ruin, which at once struck the eye of Grendon and his assistant, was its incoherence. Not as in Egypt a central group of ruins, here was a great, scattered pile, spreading out by the river bank what must have been innumerable temples and other edifices. Just under them, now half a mile away, a little bunch of huts, and white, gleaming tents showed the camp of the expedition to the newcomers. And as they looked, a figure somewhat taller than the others grouped about the tents, came out and stood gazing up at the opaque, tropical sky.

"That's Norquoy," said Grendon to his assistant, and Banning stared with interest at the man who had outstayed his ill-starred chiefs.

HALF an hour later when they were all laughing and talking in the camp together, he was inclined to believe that Norquoy might outstay anybody anywhere. Tall, lean and wiry, he had not an ounce of spare flesh on his bones, and was as gnarled and brown as a twisted cedar tree. His eyes were black, but even under the sun of Honduras there were tokens that his coloring had verged originally on the blond. For the rest he was affability itself; courteously respectful to Grendon as his new chief, cordial and friendly to Banning. All the while he chatted he rolled and smoked innumerable tiny cigarettes, and Banning was conscious that his penetrating eye studied them both.

"Yes, you're just in time, Dr. Grendon," he was saying, "we had to stop work on the Jaguar stairway when Jarvis went off the hook, and the stelae there are fine, very fine. There's plenty of work for a good photographer."

"Banning's camera is excellent," said Grendon, interested, feeling in his pockets all the while. "Bother, it looks as if I was out of tobacco."

"Try one of my cigarettes," said Norquoy, promptly, proffering one which his chief as promptly accepted. "It's Mexican tobacco, but not at all bad."

"Very good, on the contrary," said Grendon, after the first puff or two, and the talk flowed about the work; while the assistant, who was no smoker, sat by on a case of tinned beef and listened with interest.

Norquoy had not wasted time during the interregnum, it was evident; and indeed during the next week Banning had many times to acknowledge his ability. The gang of Mexicans and half-breeds

obeyed him implicitly. His work on the Jaguar stairway, one of the richest sections of the ruins, had been steadily carried ahead; so that the assistant was kept busy for the first fortnight in obtaining negatives of the magnificent bits of carving and monoliths Norquoy had unearthed. And yet, he puzzled Banning. There were moments when his eyes shone with scornful gleams, almost of laughter; and when his observation of his companions carried in it a something of mockery. But there was little time after all to speculate about Norquoy. The work on the stairway was organized and vigorously pushed; and Grendon, with his energy and his learning, saw rich material in view to occupy both.

One day nearly a month after their arrival, Jack Banning came out of the tent he used as a photographic dark-room, and met Norquoy running toward it with an anxious face. Behind him, a group of Mexicans moved more slowly, with Grendon, looking in a very bad way, in their midst.

"What's up?" Banning asked.

"Oh, nothing—" panted the other, making light, "only the chief, he has a touch of sun, I guess. Sort of, delirious and wanted to axe one of the boys. He better lie down awhile."

"You don't mean it!" cried the other, hastening forward and feeling as if an icy hand had touched him.

"He's off his head, anyhow," declared Norquoy significantly, and Banning soon saw he was not mistaken. The elder man, dizzy, muttering, and at times raving, was put to bed in his tent, and all night Banning watched beside him.

Of course, it was overwork and sun, so he repeated to himself, as he listened to the wildly delirious cries and visions of the sick man. After awhile the opiates Banning gave, took effect, and Grendon seemed to quiet into sleep. His friend, however, still sat awake thinking. Was it sun? And if not, what was it? He knew Grendon to be an absolutely sober man, familiar with the climate, and acquainted with the dangers added to it by alcohol. Also, he was a man in good physical condition. Under his direction and Norquoy's care, the camp was as nearly hygienic as it was possible to keep it, and this was not the season of the year for the swamp fever. What was this mysterious attack, and was it true, as one of the Indian carriers had told Banning, that the gods of the Mayas were indignant at the desecration of their temples, and would smite the desecrator with madness? Why should the heads of the expedition in succession be the ones afflicted? Sorely puzzled, troubled and suspicious, Banning went to the door of the tent to breathe the fresh air. It was long after midnight and very still. Suddenly, and noiselessly, he saw the flap of Norquoy's tent open, and the tall figure of its owner seemed to glide out of the crack and disappear into the night. Banning listened and watched, but no sound rewarded him. There was no reason why Norquoy should not go out if he chose, and yet, Banning said nothing at all about it to him the next morning.

WHATEVER had been the cause of Grendon's attack it had practically passed off with the dawn. He was shaky, and complained of headache, but pooh-poohed Banning's anxiety. He had a touch of fever, he said, and would be more careful in the future, and he kept his word. A fortnight and some days went peacefully by, and in the excitement and the hard work Jack Banning had little time to worry over the occurrence. He returned to his tent one evening to find his chief there before him. Grendon spoke of slight headache and dizziness, and beside him on the ground Banning saw his medicine case of simple remedies. "I'd lie down, sir," he suggested, but the chief shook his head.

"Oh, I'm not sick," he declared irritably. "I'll sit here and smoke awhile before going to bed."

Banning turned to his diary and was soon absorbed. The acrid smoke of Grendon's cigarettes