

Whitaker Herman

# The Mystery of The Barranca



Herman Whitaker  
**The Mystery of The Barranca**

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# Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	7
CHAPTER III	12
CHAPTER IV	16
CHAPTER V	20
CHAPTER VI	23
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28

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### CHAPTER I

“Oh Bob, just look at them!”

Leaning down from his perch on the sacked mining tools which formed the apex of their baggage, Billy Thornton punched his companion in the back to call his attention to a scene which had spread a blaze of humor over his own rich crop of freckles.

As a matter of fact, the spectacle of two men fondly embracing can always be depended on to stir the crude Anglo-Saxon sense of humor. In this case it was rendered still more ridiculous by age and portliness, but two years' wandering through interior Mexico had accustomed Thornton's comrade, Robert Seyd, to the sight. After a careless glance he resumed his contemplation of the crowd that thronged the little station. Exhibiting every variety of Mexican costume, from the plain white blanket of the peons to the leather suits of the rancheros and the hacendados, or owners of estates, it was as picturesque and brilliant in color and movement as anything in a musical extravaganza. The European clothing of a young girl who presently stepped out of the ticket office emphasized the theatrical flavor by its vivid contrast. She might easily have been the captive heroine among bandits, and the thought actually occurred to Billy. While she paused to call her dog, a huge Siberian wolf hound, she was hidden from Seyd's view by the stout embracers. Therefore it was to the dog that he applied Billy's remark at first.

“Isn't she a peach?”

She seemed the finest of her race that he had ever seen, and Seyd was just about to say that she carried herself like a “perfect lady” when the dissolution of the aforesaid embrace brought the girl into view. He stopped – with a small gasp that testified to his astonishment at her unusual type.

Although slender for her years – about two and twenty – her throat and bust were rounded in perfect development. The clear olive complexion was undoubtedly Spanish, yet her face lacked the firm line that hardens with the years. Perhaps some strain of Aztec blood – from which the Spanish-Mexican is never free – had helped to soften her features, but this would not account for their pleasing irregularity. A bit *rétroussée*, the small nose with its well-defined nostrils patterned after the Celtic. Had Seyd known it, the face in its entirety – colors and soft contours – is to be found to this day among the descendants of the sailors who escaped from the wreck of the Spanish Armada on the west coast of Ireland. Pretty and unusual as she was, her greatest charm centered in the large black eyes that shone amid her clear pallor, conveying in broad day the tantalizing mystery of a face seen for an instant through a warm gloaming. In the moment that he caught their velvet glance Seyd received an impression of vivacious intelligence altogether foreign in his experience of Mexican women.

As she was standing only a few feet away, he knew that she must have heard Billy's remark; but, counting on her probable ignorance of English, he did not hesitate to answer. “Pretty? Well, I should say – pretty enough to marry. The trouble is that in this country the ugliness of the grown woman seems to be in inverse ratio to her girlish beauty. Bet you the fattest hacendado is her father. And she'll give him pounds at half his age.”

“Maybe,” Billy answered. “Yet I'd be almost willing to take the chance.”

As the girl had turned just then to look at the approaching train neither of them caught the sudden dark flash, supreme disdain, that drew an otherwise quite tender red mouth into a scarlet line. But for the dog they would never have been a whit the wiser. For as the engine came hissing along the platform the brute sprang and crouched on the tracks, furiously snarling, ready for a spring at the headlight, which it evidently took for the Adam's apple of the strange monster. The train still being

under way, the poor beast's faith would have cost it its life but for Seyd's quickness. In the moment that the girl's cry rang out, and in less time than it took Billy to slide from his perch, Seyd leaped down, threw the dog aside, and saved himself by a spring to the cow-catcher.

"Oh, you fool! You crazy idiot!" While thumping him soundly, Billy ran on, "To risk your life for a dog – a Mexican's, at that!"

But he stopped dead, blushed till his freckles were extinguished, as the girl's voice broke in from behind.

"And the Mexican thanks you, sir. It was foolhardy, yes, and dearly as I love the dog I would not have had you take such a risk. But now that it is done – accept my thanks." As the stouter of the embracers now came bustling up, she added in Spanish, "My uncle, señor."

At close range she was even prettier; but, though gratitude had wiped out the flash of disdain, a vivid memory of his late remarks caused Seyd to turn with relief to the hacendado. During the delivery of effusive thanks he had time to cancel a first impression – gained from a rear view of a gaudy jacket – of a fat tenor in a Spanish opera, for the man's head and features were cast in a massive mold. His big fleshy nose jutted out from under heavy brows that overshadowed wide, sagacious eyes, Indian-brown in color. If the wind and weather of sixty years had tanned him dark as a peon, it went excellently with his grizzled mustache. Despite his stoutness and the costume, every fat inch of him expressed the soldier.

"My cousin, señor."

Having been placed, metaphorically, in possession of all the hacendado's earthly possessions, Seyd turned to exchange bows with a young man who had just emerged from the baggage-room – at least he seemed young at the first glance. A second look showed that the impression was largely due to a certain trimness of figure which was accentuated by the perfect fit of a suit of soft-dressed leather. When he raised his felt sombrero the hair showed thin on his temples. Neither were his poise and imperturbable manner attributes of youth.

"It was very clever of you, señor."

A slight peculiarity of intonation made Seyd look up. "Jealous," he thought, yet he was conscious of something else – some feeling too elusively subtle to be analyzed on the spur of the moment. Suggesting, as it did, that he had made a "gallery play," the remark roused in him quick irritation. But had it been possible to frame an answer there was no time, for just then the familiar cry, "*Vaminos!*" rang out, and the American conductor hustled uncle, niece, and her dog into the nearest car.

The entire incident had occupied little more than a moment, and as, a little bewildered by its rush, Seyd stood looking after the train he found himself automatically raising his cap in reply to a fluttering handkerchief.

"You Yankees are certainly very enterprising."

Turning quickly, Seyd met again the glance of subtle hostility. But, though he felt certain that the remark had been called forth by his salute, he had no option but to apply it to the mining kit toward which the other was pointing.

"You are for the mines, señor? In return for your service to my cousin it is, perhaps, that I can be of assistance – in the hiring of men and mules?"

While equally quiet and subtle, the patronage in his manner was easier to meet. Undisturbed, however, when Seyd declined his offer, he sauntered quietly away.

"*Bueno!* As you wish."

## CHAPTER II

“I’ll be with you in a minute, folks.”

To appreciate the accent which the American station agent laid on “folks” it is necessary that one should have been marooned for a couple of years in a ramshackle Mexican station with only a chocolate-skinned henchman, or *mozo*, for companion. It asserted at once welcome and patriotic feeling.

“You know this isn’t the old United States,” he added, hurrying by. “These greasers are the limit. Close one eye for half a minute and when you open it again it’s a cinch you’ll find the other gone. If they’d just swipe each other’s baggage it wouldn’t be so bad. But they steal their own, then sue the company for the loss. Here, you sons of burros, drop that!” with which he dived headlong into the midst of the free fight that a crowd of *cargadores*, or porters, were waging over the up train baggage.

Taking warning, the two returned to their own baggage. As they waited, talking, these two closest of friends offered a fairly startling contrast. In the case of Seyd, a graduate in mining of California University, years of study and strain had tooled his face till his aggressive nose stood boldly out above hollowed cheeks and black-gray eyes. A trifle over medium height, the hundred and sixty pounds he ought to have carried had been reduced a good ten pounds by years of prospecting in Mexico and Arizona. This loss of flesh, however, had been more than made up by a corresponding gain in muscle. Moving a few paces around the baggage, he exhibited the easy, steady movement that comes from the perfect co-ordination of nerve and muscle. His feet seemed first to feel, then to take hold of the ground. In fact, his entire appearance conveyed the impression of force under perfect control, ready to be turned loose in any direction.

Shorter than Seyd by nearly half a foot, Billy Thornton, on the other hand, was red where the other was dark, loquacious instead of thoughtful. From his fiery shock of red hair and undergrowths of red stubble to his slangy college utterance he proved the theory of the attraction of opposites. Bosom friends at college, it had always been understood between them that when either got his “hunch” the other should be called in to share it. And as the luck – in the shape of a rich copper mine – had come first to Seyd, he had immediately wired for Billy. They were talking it over, as they so often before had done, when the agent returned.

“Why – you’re the fellow that was down here last fall, ain’t you?” he asked, offering his hand. “Didn’t recognize you at first. You don’t mean to say that you have denounced – ”

“ – The Santa Gertrudis prospect?” Seyd nodded. “He means the opposition I told you we might expect.” He answered Billy’s look of inquiry.

“Opposition!” The agent spluttered. “That’s one word for it. But since you’re so consarnedly cool about it, mister, let me tell you that this makes the eleventh time that mine has been denounced, and so far nobody has succeeded in holding it.” Looking at Billy, probably as being the more impressionable, he ran on: “The first five were Mex and as there were no pesky foreign consuls to complicate the case with bothersome inquiries, they simply vanished. One by one they came, hit the trail out there in a cloud of dust, and were never seen again.

“After them came the Dutchman, a big fat fellow, obstinate as one of his own mules, and a scrapper. For a while it looked as though he’d make good – might have, perhaps, if he hadn’t taken to using his dynamite box for a pillow. You see, his peons used to steal the sticks to fish, and so many of them blew themselves into kingdom come that he was always running shy on labor. So, as I say, he used the box for a pillow till it went off one night and distributed him all over the Barranca de Guerrero. Just how it came about of course nobody knew, nor cared, and they never did find a piece big enough to warrant an inquest. It just went as accidental, and he’d scarcely, so to say, stopped raining before a Frenchman jumped the claim. But he only lasted for a couple of days, landed back here within a week, and jumped the up train without a word.

“Last came the English Johnnies, two of ’em, the real ‘haw, haw’ boys; no end of style to them and their outfit. As they had hosts of friends up Mexico City, it would never have done to use harsh measures. But if the Johnnies had influence of one sort, Don Luis – he’s the landowner, you know – had it to burn of another. Not only did he gain a general’s commission during the revolutionary wars, but he’s also a member of the Mexican Congress, so close to the government that he needs only to wink to get what he wants. So just about the time the Johnnies had finished development work and begun to deliver ore out here at the railroad – presto! freights went up, prices went down, till they’d wiped out the last cent of profit. Out go the Johnnies – enter you.” With real earnestness he concluded: “Of course, there’s nothing I’d like better than to have you for neighbors. It ain’t so damn lively here. But I’d hate to see you killed. Take my advice, and quit.”

He had addressed himself principally to Billy. But instead of discouragement, impish delight illumined the latter’s freckles.

“A full-sized general with the whole Mexican government behind him? Bully! I never expected anything half so good. But, say! If the mine is so rich why don’t the old cock work it himself instead of leaving it to be denounced by any old tramp?”

“Because he don’t have to. He has more money now than he ever can use. He is worth half a million in cattle alone. And he’s your old-fashioned sort that hate the very thought of change. By the way, he just left on the up train, him and his niece.”

“What, the girl with the dog?” Billy yelled it. “Didn’t you see – no, you were in the baggage-room. Well, he’s our dearest friend – presented Seyd here with all of his horses, cattle, lands, and friends. A bit of a mining claim ought not to cut much ice in an order like that.”

“You met them?” The agent shook his head, however, after he had heard the particulars. “Don’t count much on Spanish courtesies. They go no deeper than the skin. Nice girl, the niece, more like us than Mex, and she ain’t full-blood, for matter of that. Her grandfather was Irish, a free lance that fought with Diaz during the French war. His son by a Mexican wife married Don Luis’s sister, and when he died she and her daughter came to keep the old fellow’s house, for he’s been a widower these twenty years. Like most of the sprigs of the best Mexican families, she was educated in Europe, so she speaks three languages – English, French, and Spanish. Yes, they’re nice people from the old Don down, but lordy! how he hates us gringos. He’ll repay you for the life of the dog – perhaps by saving you alive for a month? But after that – take my advice, and git.”

While he was talking, Seyd had listened with quiet interest. Now he put in, “We will – just as quickly as we can hire men and burros to pack our stuff out to the mine.”

“Well, if you will – you will.” Having thus divested himself of responsibility, the agent continued: “And here’s where your troubles begin. Though donkey-drivers are as thick as fleas in this town, I doubt whether you can hire one to go to Santa Gertrudis.”

“But the Englishmen?” Seyd questioned. “They must have had help.”

“Brought their entire outfit down with them from Mexico City.”

After Seyd’s rejection of his offer the hacendado had entered into conversation with a rancho at the other end of the platform, and, glancing a little regretfully in his direction, Seyd asked, “Do you know him?”

The agent nodded. “Sebastien Rocha? Yes, he’s a nephew to the General.”

“He offered to get me mules.”

“He did! Why, man alive! he hates gringos worse than – worse than I hate Mexicans. *He* offered you help? I doubt he’ll do it when he knows where you’re going.” In a last attempt at dissuasion he added, “But if he doesn’t I can’t see how you can win out with rates and prices at the same mark that wiped out the Johnnies.”

“That’s our business.” Seyd laughed. Then, warmed by the honest fellow’s undoubted anxiety, he said, “Do you remember any consignment of brick that ever came to this station?”

“Sure, three car loads, billed to the Dutchman. But what has that to do – ”

“Just this – that the man had the right idea. Though the mine is the richest copper proposition I have ever seen – besides carrying gold values sufficient to cover smelting expenses – it would never pay, as you say, to ship it out at present prices. But once smelted down into copper matte there’s a fortune in it, as the Dutchman knew. He had already laid out the foundation of an old-style Welsh smelter, and, though it isn’t very big, we propose to make it stake us to a modern plant.”

“So that’s your game!” The agent whistled.

“That’s our game,” Billy confirmed. “If dear cousin over there can only be persuaded to furnish the mules we will do the rest. Go ask him, Bob.”

Seyd hesitated. “I’m afraid that I turned him down rather roughly. Let’s try first ourselves.”

For the last half hour their baggage had formed a center of interest for the porters, mule-drivers, and hackmen who formed the bulk of the crowd, and the snap of the agent’s fingers brought a score of them running. Each tried to make his calling and election sure by seizing a piece of baggage. In ten seconds the pile was dissolved and was flowing off in as many different directions when Seyd’s answer to a question brought all to a sudden halt.

“To the *mina* Santa Gertrudis.”

Crash! the kit of mining tools dropped from the shoulder of the muleteer who had asked the question, and it had no more than touched earth before it was buried under the other pieces.

“I told you so,” the agent commented, and was going on when a voice spoke in from their rear.

“What is the trouble, señors?”

The hacendado had approached unnoticed, and, turning quickly, Seyd met for the third time the equivocal look, now lightened by a touch of amusement. Suppressing a recurrence of irritation he answered, quietly: “We wish to go to the hacienda San Nicolas, señor, upon which we have denounced the mining claim known as the Santa Gertrudis. For some reason no one of these men will hire. Perhaps you can tell why?”

“Now your fat’s in the fire,” the agent muttered.

Whether or no he had overheard Seyd’s answer to the muleteer, the man’s dark face gave no sign. “*Quien sabe?* Ask their blood brother, the burro. One would have little to do and time to waste if he attempted to plumb a mule-driver’s superstitions. *Ola, Carlos.*”

While he was talking the crowd had continued to back away, but it stopped now and stood staring, for all the world like a herd of frightened cattle. The big muleteer who had led the retreat returned on a shuffling run, and as he stood before the hacendado, sombrero in hand, Seyd saw the fear in his face.

“This fellow sometimes works for me. You will need” – he paused, overlooking the baggage – “three burros and two riding-mules. He has only two. *Ola, Mattias!*” When a second muleteer had come with the same breathless haste he gave the quiet order, “You will take these señors to Santa Gertrudis.”

Bowing slightly, he had walked away before Seyd could lay hands on enough Spanish to state his obligation, and as, pausing, he then looked back his face once more changed, expressing knowledge and sarcastic amusement at the mixed feelings behind Seyd’s halting thanks. His bow, returning the customary answer, was more than half shrug.

“It is nothing.”

“One moment, señor!”

The burros having departed with their loads, Seyd and Billy were mounting to follow when the hacendado called to them from the platform. “To-night, of course, you will stay in Chilpancin. But to-morrow? By which trail do you travel?” When Seyd answered he added a word of counsel: “I thought so. Most strangers take that way. But there is a shorter by many miles. Instruct your drivers to take the old trail down the Barranca.”

Thanking him, they rode on.

In accordance with the mysterious and immutable law which places all Mexican cities at least a mile from the railroad, they traveled nearly half an hour before sighting, across a barranca, the town cuddled in a hollow beneath the opposite hills. Under the rich light of the waning sun the variegated color of its walls, houses, churches, merged in warm gold, glowed like a topaz in the setting of the dark hills. Paved with river cobbles and crooked as a dog's hind leg, a street fell steeply down into the barranca from whose black depths uprose the low roar of rushing waters. Entering upon it, while still within sound of a freight engine puffing upgrade to the station, they dropped back four hundred years into the midst of a life that differed but little from that of the Aztecs under the Montezumas.

On both sides of the street one-story adobes flamed in all the colors of the rainbow – roses, purples, umbers, greens – a vivid alternation which was toned only by the weathered gray of heavy doors and massive oaken grills across the windows. At the tinkle of their bells there would come a flash of Spanish eyes in the cool dusk behind the windows, and a pretty face would emerge from deep shadow to fade again before Billy's smile. The peons and hooded women on the narrow causeways were equally reserved. They either passed without according them notice or returned to their glances a stolid stare. Theirs were the dark, impenetrable faces of old Mexico.

While they were climbing at a snail's pace the opposite hill, dusk fell over the town, but presently, riding out of a black alley into the main plaza, they emerged on a scene that caused even the matter-of-fact Billy to exclaim in wonder. On all four sides hundreds of torches blossomed in the dusk, toning with soft rich lights the vivid adobes, tinting the cold white blankets and garments of the hucksters who squatted by their displays – guavas and pineapples, cocoanuts, mangoes, alligator pears, and other fruits of the tropics which shared the same straw mat with cabbage, squash, onions, and other familiar produce of the cold North. In accordance with the shrewd policy that has always kept the Roman Church in close touch with its world, the booths extended to the very doors of a stone church which occupied one side of the square, and the heavy odors of fried garlic mingled with the breath of incense that floated out through the wide doors.

A religious fiesta was in full blast, and they had to turn the mules to avoid the stream of worshipers who shuffled across the square, up the stone steps, and the length of the paved aisles to the great altar which blazed with the light of a thousand candles. Looking, as they rode past, they saw a peon – whose spotless blanket shone whiter by contrast with the scarlet serape which had fallen backward across his calves – erect on his knees, arms extended in a rigid cross, a figure of deathless adoration before the Virgin. It required only the brazen storm of bells that just then broke overhead to complete the atmosphere of savage medievalism. The worshipers might easily have been the first Aztec converts crawling before the superior altars of the Spanish conquerors' God.

Seyd, always thoughtful and sensitive to impression, felt the influence of the scene, and the feeling deepened as their mules struck hollow echoes in the vaulted passage of the hotel whose iron-studded gates, barred windows, yard-thick walls all bespoke a life which had not yet progressed beyond the era of sieges. A runway led down into a wide courtyard and to the stables which lay under a tiled gallery, the hotel proper, for the cell-like sleeping-rooms used by the better class opened upon it.

But the real life of the place surged in the patio, or courtyard, below, and, after they had dined on rice, eggs, and beans, or frijoles, Billy and Seyd perched on the balustrade of the gallery to watch its ebb and flow. Into the great stone inclosure muleteers of Tepic, freighters of Guadalajara, potters of Cuernavaca and Taxco, pilgrims to the far shrines, and their first cousins in dirt and importunity, the beggars, had poured from three main lines of travel, and they were so crowded that it was difficult to find space among the mule panniers, crates, and bundles for their tiny cooking-fires. On occasion a face, plump and darkly pretty, would bloom out of the dusk as a woman fanned the charcoal under her clay cooking-pots. Again, a leaping flame would illumine a hawk face, deeply bronzed and heavily mustached, or lend a deeper dye to the scarlet of some sleeper's serape. In its rich somber color the scene made a picture that would have been loved by Rembrandt. Just as it had done for centuries before the great master was born to his brush, the scene changed and mingled, ebbed and flowed,

while its units passed among the fires, exchanging the gossip of the trails. The hum of it rose to the gallery like the low roar of a distant torrent, but out of it Seyd was able to catch and translate isolated scraps.

“Take not thy *aguardiente* to El Quiss, *amigo*. The administrador – I tell it to my ruth, since I was well skinned by him – is a thief of the nether world. He would flay a flea for the hide and fat.”

“*Ola*, Carlos! The *jefe* [chief of police] of San Pedro is keeping an eye for thy return ever since he bought the last load of charcoal.”

“The swine! Is it my fault that he expects good oak burning for the price of soft ceiba?”

One remark caused Seyd to prick his ears, for it was addressed to one of their own muleteers. “Where go the gringos, *amigo*? To Santa Gertrudis? And thou art driving for them? *Hombre*, hast thou so little regard for thy neck?”

The answer was lost in the sudden braying of a burro in the stables underneath, but the voice of the questioner, a strident tenor, rose over all. “An order from Don Sebastien? *Carambar-r-r-r-a!* And you go by the old trail down the Barranca? But, *hombre!* It is – ” The voice lowered so that Seyd could not hear.

Imagining that the talk bore merely on the condition of the trail, he dismissed it from his mind and returned to his study of the crowd, permitting his gaze to wander here, there, wherever the incessant movement brought to the surface some bit of color or trait of life. In this he obeyed a natural instinct. Endowed with a temperament nicely balanced between the philosophical and the practical, he had taken an auxiliary course in “letters” along with his mining for the sole purpose of broadening his viewpoint and widening his touch with life. Indeed, he had bent his profession to the same end, using it as a means to travel and study, in which he differed altogether from Billy, who was the mining engineer in every dimension. Where Billy saw only the externals, humors, and absurdities, and the picturesqueness of that teeming life, Seyd’s subtle intelligence took hold of the primordial feeling under it all. Contributing only an occasional answer to the other’s chatter, he bathed in the atmosphere and absorbed the wild medievalism of it while reviewing in thought the events of the day. The girl and her dog, her uncle the General, Don Sebastien the hacendado – the latter was in his mind when the sudden leaping of a fire at the far end of the patio revealed his face.

“Look!” But in the moment Seyd grasped Billy’s arm the blaze fell. “I thought I saw him – that fellow, Sebastien – talking to Carlos, our mule-driver.”

“Well, why not?” Billy answered. “I gathered that he lives far out. Like ourselves, probably too far to start out to-night.”

“Of course.” Seyd nodded. “He just happened to be in my mind. Only why should he be in talk with our mule-driver?”

“Search me.” Billy shrugged. “But if he was, it is easy to prove it. There’s Carlos now. Call him up here.”

The muleteer, when questioned a minute later, shook his head. “No, señor, Don Sebastien is not here. He rode out at sunset, is now leagues away on the trail.”

If he were lying, his brown stolid face gave no sign; and, having given him his orders for next day, Seyd returned to his study of the crowd. He had forgotten the incident by the time Billy dragged him away to bed.

## CHAPTER III

“If we are on the road at daybreak we shall reach the Barranca early in the afternoon,” Seyd had said, commenting on his order to the mule-driver. But, fagged out by the day’s hot travel, they did not awaken until a slender beam of light stole between the iron window bars and laid a golden finger across Billy’s eyes.

“We shall have to hustle now.” Seyd concluded a diatribe on the Mexican *mozo* in general while they were dressing. “For you must see the Barranca by daylight. Without its naked savagery it is as big and grand as the Colorado Cañon. Besides, if this trail is as dizzy a proposition as the one I went by on the last trip, I’d rather not tackle it after dark.”

It would have been just as well, however, had they taken their time, for after breakfast came Carlos with a tale of cast-off shoes. It was Paz and Luz, the mules the señors were riding! And having roundly cursed the memory of the fool wife who had been induced by an apparently innocent colthood to bestow names of beauty like Peace and Light upon such misbegotten devils, Carlos further informed them:

“Never were there such ungrateful brutes, señors. Not content with the good barley I had just fed him, Paz it is that takes a piece out of Padre Celso’s arm one fine day and so gets me cursed with candle and Book. And the curse sticks, señors, working itself out by means of this devil of a light who, within one week, chooses the fat belly of the *jefe* of Tehultepec as a cushion for his heels. A year’s earnings that trick cost me, not to mention the prettiest set of blue stripes that ever warmed a cold back. Neither is there a tree between San Blas and the Arroyo Grande that they have not used to scrape off a load. But this shall be the end. They shall feel the knife in their throats at the end of this trip.” In the mean time would the señors be pleased to wait for an hour?

There being no other choice, the señors would, and, returning to their last night’s perch on the balustrade, they watched the patio disgorge its dark life upon the street. Shining in over the low-tiled roofs, the sunlight struck and was thrown back by the massive golden walls on the opposite side in a flood that set fire to brilliant serapes, illumined silver buttons, filled the whole place with light and cheer. Not to mention their interest in the saddling and packing of the loads – to which some refractory mule contributed an occasional humorous touch – a comedy was invariably enacted between the fat landlord and the departing travelers, for only after an altercation which always required the witness of all the saints to the reasonableness of his charges were the gates swung open. With much haggling and confusion of crackling oaths they went out, one by one, *cargadores* and peons, beggars and pilgrims, the tinkling mule trains with their quaint freights, and not until the last hoof struck on the cobbles did Seyd think to look at his watch.

“Nine o’clock. What has become of those – ”

Fortunately they arrived at that moment with Paz and Luz, the damned and foredoomed, and a quarter of an hour thereafter their bells tinkled pleasantly in the scrub oak and copal which first climbed with the trail up a ravine behind the town and then led on through fields where corn grew, by some green miracle thrusting stout green stalks between the stones.

Though it was still quite early in the day, heat waves trembled all over the land. The somnolent hum of insect life, the whisper of a light wind in the corn, were alike conducive to sleep. Before they had been riding an hour both began to yawn. The sibilant hiss of the muleteers urging the mules grew fainter in Seyd’s ears, and, though he was conscious in a dim way that the trail had led out from the fields and was falling, falling, falling downhill through growths of cactus and mimosa into the copal woods, he drowsed on till an exclamation from Billy aroused him to a grisly sight – the dozen and odd mummies whose withered limbs clicked in the breeze as they swung by the neck from the wide boughs of a banyan.

“*Bandidos*, señor, thieves and cutthroats.” The bigger of the two muleteers answered Seyd’s question. “They were hanged by Don Sebastien.”

“Why, that’s our friend back at the station.” Billy commented on Seyd’s translation. “I’m sure that was the name the agent gave him.”

“*Si*, señor,” the mule-driver confirmed the impression. “And these are but the title of those that he hanged. For years the whole of this country was overrun with *bandidos* who took advantage of the absence of the principal men at the wars to rob and murder at will. They were levying regular tolls on the rancheros and hacendados when Don Sebastien returned from his schooling. Though only a lad of two and twenty, he began by hanging the bandits’ messenger in the gates of his hacienda, an act that all thought would end by the wiping of the very memory of the place from the face of the earth. But instead of waiting to be attacked Don Sebastien took the stoutest of his peons and went out after the thieves. And he kept after them all that winter, the following summer, into the next year. No trail was too long, wet, or weary if he could mark its end with a brigand swinging under a tree. Here, there, everywhere within a hundred miles of his hacienda of El Quiss he hanged them by twos and threes and left them to swing in the wind, and it speaks for the fear in which he came to be held that no man, father, mother, sister, or lover dared to cut one down. Scarce a cross trail in this country that lacks its warning, and through his rigor it came to pass that you, señores, might now leave your purses on the open highway where a dozen years ago you would surely have left your lives. No man would dare touch – ”

“ – Except Don Sebastien,” Seyd put in, laughing.

But the man returned only a stare. “What use would he have of purses, señor, that has so many of his own?”

“Perhaps to give to the Church.” But he stopped laughing, surprised by the sudden cloud that spread on the man’s face.

“Never! Though he has a church on his own hacienda, Don Sebastien never crosses its threshold. And Mattias, here, can tell you of the talk he gives to the priest.”

“*Si! si!*” In his eagerness to share the limelight the fellow almost shook off his head. “It is, see you, that I am delivering a mule load of charcoal at El Quiss on the very day that Don Sebastien hires the priest. You are to see him, as I did, sitting on the gallery above the courtyard puffing his cigar in such wise – was there ever such irreverence! – that the smoke rises in the face of the padre who stands before him. And his voice comes ringing down to where Miguel, the steward, is trying to beat me down a peso on the price of the charcoal. ‘I have builded you a church, and for performing the offices I shall pay you one hundred silver pesos the month, for, though I did not feel, myself, any need of your mutterings, they serve to keep my people quiet. Over them you shall exercise the usual authorities, and you may come and go at will through the hacienda – all but one place. If after this hour I find that your foot has touched my threshold I’ll hang you in its gates.’ Thus he spoke, señor, and he would have done it – to a priest quicker than a bandit, for of the two it is hard to tell that which he hates the most.”

“Hum!” Billy coughed when Seyd had translated. Jerking his thumb at the grisly witnesses to the tale’s truth, he commented: “I now begin to understand the general respect for our friend. A man who does things like that is entitled to some consideration. Let us be thankful for pump guns and automatics. If this had been the day of the old muzzle-loader I’m darned if I’d have tackled your hunch.”

In the next hour the red-tiled colored adobe hamlets of the small farmers began to give place to the *jacals* of the country, flimsy huts with sides of cane stalks and grass-thatched. Then the trail passed out from the eternal succession of corn and *maguery* fields into wastes of volcanic scoria, where it began presently to climb mountains, for no apparent reason except to fall dizzily into shallow valleys which were sparsely timbered with copal and other soft woods. In one valley they came upon an Aztec ruin. A huge parallelogram in shape, it was more than half buried and so overgrown with

brush and creepers that they would have passed without notice if the trail had not happened to run along the face of one wall. Looking closely, Seyd first observed a monstrous squat figure in bas-relief, one of dozens which were interwoven into an intricate design; then, riding along, he saw frightfully distorted faces peering out from behind a green veil of creepers. Broad and fat, long and thin, some were stretched in a wide grin, others thrust out tongues in ribald mockery. Here the eyes of one were distorted in a painful squint. There a slant upturn of tight-drawn lids revealed the quintessence of priestly cruelty. Another was grossly lewd. Through anger, violence, lust, fear, the expressions ran the gamut of passion to its death in the cold face of the god whose enormous image formed the corner. The oblong ears, triangular eyes and nose, parallel lips, were such as a child loves to draw on a slate, yet on that enormous scale their mathematical lines somehow conveyed an impression of absolute force. The Sphynx-like calm of the face stirred Seyd's imagination with pictures of captives led to the Aztec altars. Even practical Billy was moved to remark:

“Those old chaps couldn't have been very nice neighbors.”

“No; and they are the lineal ancestors of the neighbors we shall have presently.” Later the thought was to recur under conditions that would lend it enormous force. He forgot it in the moment of utterance, saying, as he glanced at his watch: “We have been doing pretty well. At this rate we'll make the Barranca quite early.”

He had failed to allow, however, for the demon which, usually content with the complete possession of Paz and Luz, suddenly entered into the burros and sent them flying downhill through a grove of trees. Entering on one side fully loaded, they emerged at the other naked, and by the time they were rounded up and reloaded Seyd had to recast his schedule.

“We'll be lucky if we make it now in daylight. We may have to camp at the top.”

Repeated in Spanish, the latter suggestion drew vigorous headshakes from both muleteers. Carlos made answer. “No, señor, at this time of the year one would perish of the cold, and there is an inn in the Barranca with the finest of accommodations. The trail? It is nothing! A peso for every time I have traveled it by night would buy me a rancho – and Paz and Luz, devils as they are, could travel it blindfold.” And whether, as Billy suggested, they were afraid of missing their usual communion with the fleas in the inn stables, both he and Mattias began to hustle the mules with oaths, hissings, whip-crackings. They kept after them so hard that the train trotted out of a forest of upland piñon upon the rim of a great valley a full half hour before sundown.

Though prepared by Seyd's descriptions for something unusually fine, Billy's blue eyes opened to the limit, and he sat silent upon his mule, staring, altogether bereft of his usual loquacity. From their feet the land broke suddenly and fell into purple depths from which dark hills uplifted ruddy peaks into the blaze of the setting sun. The Barranca was so deep, so vast in scale, that he grew dizzy in following with his eye the tiny zigzag of the trail down, down, till it was lost in blue haze through which even the giant ceibas and tall cedars showed like microscopic plants. Across the valley, miles away, naked mountains tossed and tumbled, seamed, scarred, gashed by slide and quake, sterile and desolate, as on the far day that some world convulsion raised them out of the sea.

“Drunk! drunk!” Billy breathed, at last. “Nature gone on a jag. Drunken mountains loose in a crazy world. The whole earth is turned on edge. Hold me, Bob, before I fall in. How deep do you call this bit of a hole?”

“About five thousand feet down to the floor. It falls off a thousand and more in a few miles to the coast. You see, we are still in touch with the old Pacific. Can't be more than thirty miles or so down to the sea.”

“The dear old pond. Isn't that pine on the other side?”

“Sure. An American company is taking out millions of feet, a hundred or so miles farther up. That's a great old tree, and quite particular about the company it keeps. Look how sharply it draws the line along the slope, lifting its skirts from the contamination of the tropics. That spark of green in the far distance is sugar cane – two thousand acres of it on the General's hacienda of San Nicolas.

And you see the gash over there, all yellow and green, about three thousand feet down from the top – that is us, señor, the *mina* Santa Gertrudis. And that reminds me – we'll have to be moving if we are to make the inn before midnight. *Vaminos*, Carlos.”

But the muleteer shook his head. “After you, señor, for if these devils should take to running again, not in six months should we fish your baggage out of the cañons.”

Leading down the trail, which zigzagged along the faces of a V-shaped wall, Seyd perceived, as he thought, the soundness of the argument, for at the first turn a stone from his mule's foot dropped five hundred feet plumb before rebounding into greater depths, and at no place did the width of the path allow an unnecessary inch for the swing of the packs. Deceived by the succession of stairways through which the trail dropped down to the thin thread that marked its course along the bottoms, Billy objected:

“Three hours, you say? Looks to me as though we could make it in one.”

“Less than that – if your mule should happen to slip and take it sideways. Let me see – allowing a thousand feet to a bump, about fourteen seconds ought to distribute you nicely among the bottom trees. But if you elect to follow me around the eight or nine miles of trail you cannot see, it will take the full three hours.”

Even while he was speaking the ruddy fires on the valley hills were suddenly extinguished, only the stark peaks on the other side lifted like yellow torches in the last blaze. One by one these also went out, and another hour found them journeying in gloom that was intensified rather than lightened by the section of moon which achieved a precarious balance on the rim above. In darkness and silence that was broken only by the scrape of hoofs and rattle of displaced stones they followed down and down and down, until Billy presently came under a singular hallucination. Repeatedly he put out his hand to repel the rock wall that seemed to be animated with a desire to crowd him off into the cañon, and because of this pardonable nervousness he endured a real trial that would have drawn a quick protest from Seyd – to wit, the senseless way in which the muleteers were driving their beasts on his heels. Twice he rapped a rough nose that tried to force its way in between him and the wall, and he breathed more easily when an easier grade permitted them to draw ahead on a gentle trot.

Accustomed, on his part, to leave all to his beast, Seyd rode with a loose bridle, lost in thought, his mind busy with mining plans. And thus it was that when Paz suddenly stopped, snorting, at the end of a trot which had carried them well ahead of the train around a rock wall, he almost went over her head. Recovering quickly, he was about to drive in the spurs; and a man of slower intuitions would surely have done it. With him, however, action invariably preceded thought, from instincts almost as acute as those which had brought the mule to a stop. Dismounting, he stepped ahead. Then, to the horror of Billy, who heard the burros slipping and sliding as they came round the wall on a trot, his voice came back.

“Hold on, there! A slide has carried away the trail!”

## CHAPTER IV

Although he had always doubted the phenomenon, Billy's hair stood on end, and when, in the face of Seyd's shouts in Spanish to stop, the burros still came on he felt his cap move.

"Billy!" Seyd's command rang out sharply. "Dismount and lie down. It's our only chance."

In that tense moment, however, Mr. William Thornton, assayer and metallurgist, had done an amount of thinking that would have required many minutes of his leisure. He was already on the ground, and as he lay there, arms wrapped over the back of his head as a protection against the sharp hoofs that would presently grind his face in the dust, uncomfortable expectation gave birth to inspiration. As Seyd also braced himself for the shock there came the scratch of a match, and Billy's red head flashed out in relief against the belly of the leading burro as it upreared in fright at the blaze. In the same moment a second blunt head shoved itself like a wedge between the first burro and the wall, and as the gray body shot off sideways into the chasm Seyd saw first the others sliding in a desperate effort to stop, and behind them the mule whips swinging to drive them on. As under a flashlight it all flamed out and vanished.

In the short time required for Billy to strike a second match Seyd's mind registered an astonishing number of impressions. A hoarse yell, a sudden scurry of departing hoofs, and Billy's hysterical profanity formed merely the background of a sequence that flashed back over the events of the day. The scraps of muleteers' talk the night before, the runaway, and other minor delays, the drivers' refusal to camp on the rim, their insistence that he and Billy should take the lead, all fused in a belief which he expressed as the second match flaring up showed the trail empty of life between themselves and the next turn.

"It's a frame-up! They knew of the slide. They had it fixed to run us off in the dark."

"But where are they now?" Billy gazed down into the dark void. "Surely they didn't all go over."

"No such luck. The burros bolted back on them, and they just legged it out of the way. Listen!" A scurry of hoofs sounded on the level above. "There they go, and it's up to us to keep them going. Back your mule up and turn. If we don't give them the run of their lives we'll deserve all they tried to give us."

And run they did. Overtaking the burros just as they began to slow down, Seyd slipped ahead, struck a match close to the tail of the last, and so precipitated the cavalcade once more upon the sweating drivers. Whereafter, they took turns and kept the frightened beasts on a breathless trot up the heartbreaking grades. Under the flare of a match they sometimes caught a glimpse of the muleteers shuffling ahead on a tired run. Occasionally their sobbing breath rose over the scrape of the hoofs. But first one riding, then the other, they hustled them on without mercy till the train opened at last upon the plateau above.

"Now, then! Run them down!" Seyd shouted; but as he swung his mule out to go by the burros he almost ran into a horseman who had just reined his beast to one side of the trail.

"It is you, señor?"

Here on the top the light of the stars helped out the weak moon, and, though the man's face was in shadow, Seyd recognized the upright, graceful figure. "Come to see if the job is done." He thought it while answering aloud, "As you perceive, señor."

"Not until long after you left did I hear of the break in the trail, and I have ridden hard – used up one horse and half killed this poor beast. But no matter so long as I am in time."

"Hypocrite!" Seyd thought again. A little nonplussed, however, by the tone of assurance, he gave his thought lighter expression. "You would not have been if these fellows had had their way."

"*Caramba*, señor! Why?"

If his surprise were assumed it was certainly remarkably well done. While Seyd was telling of their narrow escape he sat his horse, silent but attentive. With the last word he burst into a fury of

action. Uttering a Spanish oath, he drove in the spurs and rode his rearing horse straight at the mule-drivers, who had turned on Billy with drawn knives, lashing them with his heavy quirt over face, head, shoulders. Five minutes later his whip was still cutting the air with a shrill whistle, and, richly as the fellows deserved it, Seyd and Billy shuddered at the pitiless flogging. Strangest to them of all, the men endured this without attempt at flight or resistance. They stood, their arms shielding their faces, whimpering like beaten hounds.

It was their abject submissiveness that injected a touch of doubt into Billy's comment. "It looks, after all, as though they had done it themselves."

Seyd shrugged. "Perhaps; in any case we have no proof."

"Now, blind swine, that will serve for a while!" Sebastien's cold voice broke in. "Off with you and build a fire, then stake out the mules." Seyd's suspicion gave a little more before his quiet assurance. "You will have to stay here till morning, señors, for it is many miles along the rim to the other trail. Unfortunately, it was your supply mule that went into the cañon, so you must needs go hungry. However, we have a proverb, 'A warm fire helps the empty belly,' and to-morrow you will be able to recover your goods."

Neither did his expression, as presently revealed by the fire, offer evidence for doubt. As he stood looking down at the blaze Seyd was vividly reminded of the Aztec god, for its cold stone face was not more inscrutable than this quiet brown mask. Its inscrutability provoked him to ask a sudden question.

"Did I not see you at the hotel last night?"

But the sudden challenge produced only an indifferent shrug. "Perhaps. I was there."

He did look up at Billy's vigorous comment on his answer as translated by Seyd: "Then why didn't he show himself this morning? Goodness knows we left late enough."

He even asked, "What does he say?" And the sense having been softened in translation to an expression of mild wonder at his non-appearance, he quietly replied, "I do not doubt that the señor's departure was fraught with enormous significance for the country at large, but not being informed of it, there was no reason for me to cut my sleep."

Though the smile which marked his appreciation of the blush that drowned out Billy's freckles when Seyd translated was so slight as to be almost imperceptible, it yet increased his anger. "The dago!" he growled. "I'd punch his head for five cents Mex. The gall of him! Standing there poking fun at us after we have just missed death at the hands of his brigands. And you really think that he planned it all?"

"Looks like it. He chose the men, the trail. Was seen last night at the hotel. Appears now at the psychological moment. Any jury would –"

"– Pronounce me guilty. They would be mistaken, sir."

Utterly confounded at the interruption which was delivered in fluent English – so surprised, indeed, that Billy glanced around to make sure that nobody else had spoken – they stared at him across the fire in red confusion. When Seyd at last found his tongue he could only stammer the obvious question, "You speak English?"

"As you perceive, sir." As he returned Seyd his phrase of a few minutes before not even a twinkle betrayed his knowledge of their ridiculous situation.

Nor was one needed to increase Billy's anger. "Then why don't you speak it?" he roughly blurted.

Ignoring the question, the man went on addressing Seyd. "In accordance with the foolish custom that aims to make poor foreigners out of good Mexicans I received my education at a boarding-school in the city of Manchester, England."

*Manchester, England!* Center of the Lancashire cotton trade, inner shrine of commerce! Commercial essence exuded from the very name; it smelled to heaven of tin and rosin. Imagination faltered, nay, refused even to attempt to establish a relation between its prosiness and this romantic

figure with a face cast in the image of the stone gods! Above all, a Manchester boarding-school! Seyd almost gasped. For to his knowledge of “fags” and “bullies,” “form rows,” “cribs and crams,” and education by external application, gained by the perusal of *Tom Brown’s School Days*, he had added the later, savagely impish realism of Kipling’s *Stalky*.

And he knew what a living hell the life must have been to a high-strung Mexican youth. “Well!” he breathed at last. “I don’t envy you the experience. I’m told that the English schoolboy isn’t particularly sensitive or nice in his – his treatment of – ”

“ – Half-castes. Don’t avoid the word. We Mexicans are proud of our Aztec blood. They did not love me, but I tell you, señor, that their dislike for me was as milk to fire compared with mine for them, and they left me alone after a couple had felt my knife. How I hated them – the conceited lackeys of masters as much as the bullocks of boys and their ox-like fathers. How they lectured me, the lackeys, for my ‘cowardice’ in using a knife – the cowardice of one small boy pitted against a hundred impish devils. But they were never able to blind me with their fustian ideals. Even then I could see through their sham morality, hypocritical humanity, insufferable conceit.

“‘England is the workshop of the world!’ They dinned it into us. In furtherance of the ideal they fouled the air with coal smoke, herded their men and women from the open farms into slums and brothels, and as they have done by their own so would they like to do for the world – make it one huge factory set in a slum.” He had spoken all through with great heat. Glancing for the first time at Billy, he finished, more quietly, “That is why I do not speak English – because I hate both them and their tongue.”

Now Billy’s conception of John Bull and his island had been principally formed on the perfervid “tail-twisting” of the common-school histories, and Seyd, whose views had been corrected by wider reading, had to smile at his emphatic indorsement. “I’m with you. No English, please, in mine.”

Even Sebastien smiled. “No, you are American – from our viewpoint, much worse. Just as sordid as the stupid English, you are quicker-witted, therefore more to be feared, and you stand forever at our gates, ready to force your commerce and ideas upon us. But much as we hate you, loath as we are to have you come among us, I would still have you to believe that this business was accidental. I, at least, did not plan your death.”

“Then you do not speak for them?” Seyd glanced at the muleteers, now crouching over a second small fire they had built for themselves.

“*Quien sabe?*” Sebastien shrugged his shoulders. “They would think little of it. But what can you do? You have no proof. And I will see to it that they play you no more tricks.”

Walking over, he kicked first one, then the other, in the small of the back. “Up, swine!” And while they stood shivering before them he gave them their orders – first to recover the baggage, then to convey the señors in safety to their mine. “Fail me in one thing,” he concluded, with a frightful threat, “and I will pluck out your eyes and turn you out on the road.”

Turning his back on them, he walked over to the horses, and had mounted before Seyd realized his intent. “You are not going?” he asked.

“Yes, it is only five leagues back to the hacienda where I left my own horse.”

“First let me thank you.”

Not seeing the touch of the spur that had caused the beast to rear suddenly, he imagined it shied at his outstretched hand. While curbing its plungings the other answered: “It is nothing. You owe me nothing. I came to repair a mistake and arrived too late. *Adios!*” And swinging the fighting beast out of the firelight into the dusk he galloped off, leaving Seyd standing with hand outstretched.

Returning to the fire, he passed close to the muleteers, whose faces, looking after him, expressed a curious mixture of dislike, suspicion, fear. Observing it, Billy laughed. “Our friend’s football practice over there rather inclines me to favor his theories. I’ve seen a few walking-delegates in my time that I’d like to place under him. I’ll bet you there are no labor troubles in his cosmos. Fancy a system that trains men to put your enemies away without so much as a wink. I call it ideal.”

“Yes.” Seyd laughed. “I have so much respect for it that I propose to keep watch and watch on the off chance of an attempt on our throats. If you’ll just settle down for a snooze I’ll take the first trick.”

His laughter, however, covered feeling that had been deeply stirred by the events of the day. After Billy had curled up close to the fire his glance went over to the muleteers, who lay, heads muffled in their scarlet serapes, beside their own fire. Their very quiet stimulated thoughts which passed back through the medievalism of the “conquest” and the savagery of the Aztecs to the dim time that saw the erection of the temple they had passed that day. Stimulated by the distant roar of waters, the complaint of the wind in the trees, and the voices of night that rose out of the valley’s black void, his fancies grew and possessed him until he saw his own civilization as a flash in the dark space of the ages. So absorbed was he that Billy’s interruption came as a surprise.

“I’ve slept four hours. Time for your snooze.”

## CHAPTER V

“Phe-ew!” Looking up from a treatise on bricklaying as applied to the building of furnaces, Billy pitched a stone at Seyd, who was experimenting with a batch of lime fresh drawn from a kiln of their own burning. “I’d always imagined bricklaying to be a mere matter of plumb and trowel, but this darned craft has more crinkles to it than the differential calculus. This fellow makes me dizzy with his talk of ties and courses, flues, draughts, cornering, slopes, and arches.”

Leaning on his hoe, Seyd wiped his wet brow. “I’m finding out a few things myself. I’d always sort of envied a hod-carrier. But now I know that the humble ‘mort’ puts more foot-pounds of energy into his work than the average horse. As a remedy for dizziness caused by overstudy, mixing mortar has no equal. Come and spell me with this hoe.”

“And the last state of that man was worse than the first,” Billy groaned. “*Can’t* we hire a single solitary peon, Seyd?”

More eloquently than words, Seyd’s shrug testified to the sullen boycott which had been maintained against them for the past three weeks. On the morning of their arrival at the mine, while the fear of Sebastien Rocha still lay heavy upon him, Carlos had been half bullied, half persuaded into the sale of Paz and Luz at a price which raised him almost to the status of a ranchero. But that single transaction summed up their dealings with the natives. No man had answered their call for laborers at wages which must have appeared as wealth to a peon. The charcoal-burners who drove their burros past the mine every day returned to their greetings either muttered curses or black stares. They were as stubborn in their cold obstinacy as the face of the temple god. Indeed, in these days the stony face of the image had become inseparably associated in Seyd’s mind with the determined opposition that had routed his predecessors and now aimed to oust him. He saw it even in the soft, round faces of the children who peeped at him from the doorways of cane huts, a somber look, centuries old in its stubborn dullness.

Not that he and Billy were in the least discouraged. Once convinced that labor was not to be obtained, they had stripped and pitched in. In one month they rebuilt the adobe dwelling which had been somewhat shattered by the Dutchman’s hurried exit, dug a lime kiln, and hauled the wood and stone for the first burning. They had completed the laying out of the smelter foundation, filling in odd moments by picking for the first charge the choicest ore from the hundreds of tons that the Englishmen had unwisely mined before they ran head-on into the hostile combination of freights and prices.

This last had been an inspiring labor, for so rich were the values which the ore carried that after a trial assay Billy had danced all over the place beating an old pan. It is doubtful whether young men ever had better prospects; and so, knowing that Billy’s present pessimism arose from a strong disinclination for physical labor in the hot sun, Seyd merely grinned. Sitting down on a pile of brick, he mopped his face and stared out over the valley.

Situated, as the mine was, on a wide bench which gave pause to the earth’s dizzy plunge from the rim three thousand feet above, Seyd sat at the meeting-place of temperate and tropic zones. A hundred feet below – just where they had climbed the stiff trail out of the jungle that flooded the valley with its fecund life – a group of cocoanut palms stood disputing the downward rush of the pine, and all along the bench piñon and copal, upland growths, shouldered cedars and ceibas, the tropical giants. While these battled above for light and room there came, writhing snake-like up from the tropics, creepers and climbers, vines and twining plants, to engage the ferns and bracken, the pine’s green allies. A plague of orchids here attacked the copal, wreathing trunk and limb in sickly flame. The bracken there overswept the riotous tropical life. All along the borderland the battle raged, here following a charge of the pine down a cool ravine, there mounting with the tropic growths to a sunlit slope. But in the valley below the tropics ruled clear down to the brilliant green of the San Nicolas cane fields.

“By the way” – Seyd spoke as his eye fell on these – “Don Luis is back from Mexico City. The hunchbacked charcoal-burner told me as he went past this morning.”

“The deuce he did!” Of all the black looks that came their way that of the cripple was the most vindictive. “You must have him hypnotized.”

“You wouldn’t think so if you had heard his accent. ‘El General is again at San Nicolas,’ just as though he were sentencing me to hang. Nevertheless, the news comes pat. I think it would be good policy for me to run down and pay the denunciation taxes before we begin work on the smelter. No, I don’t apprehend any trouble. Your Mexican hasn’t much stomach for litigation, and no doubt the old fellow feels quite safe in his pull with the metals companies and railroads. But while he is still in the mind we had better pay the money and complete title. If he once gets wind of the smelter – ”

“Just so.” Billy threw down the hoe. “While you dress I’ll saddle up a mule – if you will please say to which demon you prefer to intrust your precious neck. Light began the day by kicking me through the side of the stable. She needs chastening. But then Peace dined on my arm yesterday. It’s Peace for yours, and I only hope you get it.”

“Hum!” he coughed when, half an hour later, Seyd emerged shaved, bathed, and clad in immaculate white. “Is this magnificence altogether for el General, or did Caliban drop some word of our niece? Really, old chap, you look fine. If I were the señorita I’d go for you myself.”

Though Seyd laughed, yet the instant he passed out of sight he fell into frowning thought which was evidently related to the letter he pulled out and reread while he rode down the steep grades. Written in a characterless round hand, it covered so many pages that he was halfway down before, after tearing it in shreds, he tossed it to the winds. Its destruction, however, did not seem to change his mood. He let Peace take her own way until, having slipped, slid, and tobogganed on tense haunches down the last grade, she felt able to assert her individuality by attempting to rub him off against a tree. Next she attempted the immolation of a fat brown baby that was rolling with a nest of young pigs in the dust outside a hut; and thereafter her performances were so varied that he was simply compelled to take some notice of the sights and sounds of the trail.

Not the least remarkable were the frequent and familiar scowls of the people he met. Various in expression, they ranged between the copious curses of the fat señora whose pacing-mule was driven by Peace off the trail, and the snarling malice of occasional muleteers; but, undisturbed, he pursued his inquiries for laborers at every chance.

“No, señor, we do not desire work.”

The stereotyped answer merely stimulated the quiet persistence which formed the basis of his character, and he continued to ask at the village which raised graceful palm roofs out of a jungle clearing, at the ranchos which now began to cover the valley with a green checker of maize fields, and at scattered huts, half hidden by the rich foliage of palms and bananas. It was while he was questioning a peon who was hulling rice with a wooden pole and churn arrangement that the subdued hostility broke out in open demonstration.

The trail here ran between a fence of split poles, which inclosed the peon’s corn and frijoles, and the steep bank of a dry creek bed, so that only a few feet leeway was left for the train of burros which came trotting out of the jungle behind him. In single file they could have passed, but looking around he saw they were coming three abreast.

Had he chosen, there was time to make the end of the fence. But he had seen behind the train the sparkling, beady eyes of Caliban, the hunchback, and the dark grins of two of his fellows. Flushing with quick anger, he backed Peace against the fence, leaned forward over her neck, and slashed with his whip at the leading beasts. Checked by this, they would have fallen back to single file but for the whips behind that bit out hair and hide and drove them on in a huddled mass.

It seemed for a few seconds that he would be crushed. That he escaped injury was simply due to the hereditary hate between the mule and the ass which suddenly turned Peace into a raging fiend. While her chisel teeth slit ragged hides her other and busier end beat a devil’s tattoo on resounding

ribs and filled the air with flying charcoal. Yet even her demoniac energies had their limitations. If she held the ground for herself and master she could not preserve the inviolability of his white trousers, which emerged sadly smudged from the fray. It is a pity she could not. Little things always cause the greatest trouble, and but for the smudges the incident would probably have closed with Seyd's challenge:

“Can't you be content with half the road?”

His patience even survived their insolent grins. Not until the hunchback in passing emitted a hoarse chuckle as he surveyed the smudges did Seyd's temper burst its bonds. Swinging his whip then with all his might, he laid it across the crooked shoulders once, twice, thrice, before the fellow sprang, snarling, out of reach. The others, who had already passed, came leaping back at his cry, knives flashing as they ran, and though they stopped under the sudden frown of a Colt's automatic, they did not retire, but stood, fingering their knives, muttering curses.

A little sorry on his part for the anger which had turned the sullen hostility into open feud, Seyd faced them, puzzled just what to do. It was too late to give way, for that would expose him to future insult. Yet if, taking the initiative, he should happen to kill a man, he knew enough of the quality of justice as dealt out by the Mexican courts to realize the danger.

While he debated, the puzzle was almost solved by the peon rice-huller, who came stealing up from behind the fence. Not until the man had swung his heavy pestle and was tiptoeing to his blow did Seyd divine the reason for the glances that were passing behind him. Looking quickly, he caught the glint of polished hardwood in the tail of his eye; then, without a pause for thought, he dropped flat on the rump of the mule, and not a second too soon, for, raising the hair on his brow as it passed, the club smashed down through the top rail of the fence. In falling backward his weight on the bridle brought Peace scurrying a few paces to the rear. When he snapped upright again the fourth enemy was also under his gun.

But what to do? The puzzle still remained – to be solved by another, for just then came a sudden beat of hoofs, and from behind a bamboo thicket galloped first the Siberian wolf hound, then the girl he had met at the train.

## CHAPTER VI

So silently did the girl come that the charcoal-burners were forced to jump aside, and, springing in the wrong direction, the hunchback was bowled over by the beast of the *mozo* who rode at her back.

“Why, señor!” she exclaimed, reining in. Then taking in the knives, pistol, broken club, she asked, “They attacked you? Tomas!”

Her Spanish was too rapid for Seyd’s ear, but it was easy to gather its tenor from the results. With a certain complaisance Seyd looked on while his enemies scattered on a run that was diversified by uncouth leaps as the *mozo*’s whip bit on tender places.

“He struck at you?” She broke in on the rice-huller’s voluble plea that never, *never* would he have raised a finger against the señor had he known him for a friend of hers! “Then he, too, shall be flogged.”

“I would not wish – ” Seyd began.

But she interrupted him: “You were going toward San Nicolas? Then I shall turn and ride with you.” Anticipating his protest, she added, “I had already ridden beyond my usual distance.”

Very willingly he fell in at her side, and they rode on till they met the *mozo* returning, hot and flushed, from the pursuit. He was keen as a blooded hound; it required only her backward nod to send him darting along the trail, and just about the time they overtook the charcoal-burners a sudden yelling in their rear told that the account of the rice-huller was in course of settlement.

Passing his late enemies, Seyd could not but wonder at their transformation. With the exception of the hunchback, in whose beady eyes still lurked subdued ferocity, all were sobbing, and even he broke into deprecatory whinings. Having read his Prescott, Seyd knew something of the rigid Aztec caste systems from which Mexican peonage was derived. Now, viewing their abjectness, he was able to apprehend, almost with the vividness of experience, the ages of unspeakable cruelty that had given birth to their fear. But that which astonished him still more was the indifference with which the girl had ordered the flogging.

Such glimpses of her face as he was able to steal while they rode did not aid him much. It was impossible to imagine anything more typically modern than the delicately chiseled features lit with a vivid intelligence which seemed to pulse and glow in the soft shadow beneath her hat. And when from her face his glance fell to her smart riding-suit of tan linen he was completely at sea.

Curiosity dictated his comment: “Your justice is certainly swift. Really I am afraid that I was the aggressor. At least I struck first.”

“But not without cause.” She glanced at his smudged clothes. “Tell me about it.” And when he had finished she commented: “Just as I thought. And these are dangerous men. They would have killed you without a qualm. In the days that Don Sebastien was clearing the country of bandits he counted that hunchback one of his best men.”

“Yet he whined like a puppy under your man’s whip.”

Smiling at his wonder, she went on to state the very terms of his puzzle. “You do not know them – the combination of ferocity and subservience that goes with their blood. In the old days he who raised his hand against the superior caste was put to death by torture, and, though, thank God, those wicked days are past, the effect remains. They are obedient, usually, as trained hounds, but just as dangerous to a stranger. If I had not ordered them flogged they would have taken it as license to kill you at their leisure.”

“Now I realize the depth of my obligation.”

He spoke a little dryly, and she leaped to his meaning with a quickness that greatly advanced her in his secret classification. “I have hurt your pride. You will pardon me. I had forgotten the unconquerable valor of the gringos.”

“Oh, come!” he pleaded.

She stopped laughing. “Really, I did not doubt your courage. But do not imagine for one moment that they would attack you again in the open. A knife in the dark, a shot from a bush, that is their method, and if you should happen to kill one, even in self defense, gringos are not so well beloved in Guerrero but that some one would be found to swear it a murder. Be advised, and go carefully.”

“I surely will.” He was going on to thank her when she cut him off with the usual “It is nothing.” Whereupon, respect for her intuition was added to the classification which was beginning to bewilder him by its scope and variety.

In fact, he could not look her way nor could she speak without some physical trait or mental quality being added to the catalogue. Now it was the quivering sensitiveness of her mouth, an unsuspected archness, the astonishing range of feeling revealed by her large dark eyes. Looking down upon the charcoal-burners, they had gleamed like black diamonds; in talking, their soft glow waxed and waned. Sometimes – but this was omitted from the classification because it only occurred when his head was turned – a merry twinkle illumined a furtive smile. Taken in all its play and sparkle, her face expressed a lively sensibility altogether foreign to his experience of women.

After a short silence she took up the subject again. “But I am giving you a terrible impression of our people. It is only in moments of passion that the old Aztec crops out. At other times they are kind, pleasant, generous. Neither are we the cruel taskmasters that some foreign books and papers portray us. You would not believe how angry they make me – the angrier because I have a strain of your blood in my own veins. My grandfather, you know, was Irish. It was from him I learned your speech.”

The last bit of information was almost superfluous, for from no other source could she have obtained the pure lilting quality that makes the Dublin speech the finest English in the world. To it she had added an individual charm, the measured cadence and soft accent of her native Spanish, delivered in a low contralto that had in it a little break. Her laugh punctuated its flow as she came to her conclusion.

“But you will soon be able to see for yourself what terrible people we are.”

He obtained one glimpse within the next mile. He had already noted the passing of the last wild jungle. From fields of maize which alternated with sunburned fields of *maguey* they now rode into an avenue that led on through green cane. Rising far above their heads, the cane marched with them for a half mile, then suddenly opened out around a primitive wooden sugar mill. Under the thatched roof of an open hut half-nude women were stirring boiling syrup in open pans, and at the sight of Francesca one of them came running out to the trail.

“Her baby is to be christened next Sunday,” the girl told him as they rode on. “She was breaking her heart because she had no robe. But now she is happy, for I have promised to ask the good *mama* to lend her mine, which she has treasured all these years.”

Soon afterward as they turned out of the cane into a new planting they almost ran down her uncle, who had come out to inspect the work. Only his quick use of the spur averted a collision, and as his own spirited roan sprang sideways Seyd noted with admiration that despite his bulk and age horse and man moved as one. If surprised at the sight of his niece in such company, the old man did not reveal it by so much as the lift of a brow. It was difficult even to perceive the twinkle in his eyes that lightened his chiding.

“*Ola*, Francesca! If there be no respect for thy own pretty neck, at least have pity on my old bones. It is you, señor? Welcome to San Nicolas.”

Neither did Seyd’s explanation of his business abate his brown impassivity. If assumed, his ponderous effort at recollection was wonderfully realistic. “Ah, *si!* Santa Gertrudis? If I remember aright, it was denounced before. Yes, yes, by several – but they had no good fortune. Still, you may fare better. Paulo, the administrador, will attend to the business.”

With a wave of the hand, courteous in its very indifference, he put the matter out of his province and displayed no further interest until the girl told of the attack on Seyd. Then he glanced up quickly from under frowning brows.

“You had them whipped? *Bueno!* The rascals must be taught not to molest travelers. And now we shall ride on that the señor may break his fast. And thou, too, wicked one, will be late. As thou knowest, it is the only fault the good mother sees in thee.”

“Would that it totaled my sins,” she laughed. “To escape another black mark I shall have to gallop. *Ola!* for a race!”

As from a light touch of the spur her beast launched out and away, the roan reared and tried to follow, and while he curbed it back to a walk the old man’s heavy face lit up with pleasure. “She rides well. I have not a vaquero with a better seat. But go thou, Tomas, lest she come to a harm. And you, señor, will follow?”

With a vivid picture of the figure Peace would cut in a race occupying the forefront of his mind it did not take Seyd long to choose. After the girl had passed from sight behind a clump of tamarinds he took note, as they rode along, of the peons who were laying the field out in shallow ditches wherein others were planting long shoots of seed cane. To his practical engineer’s eye the hand-digging seemed so slow and laborious that he could not refrain from a comment.

“It seems to me that a good steel plow would do the work much cheaper.”

“Cheaper? Perhaps.” After a heavy pause, during which he took secret note of Seyd out of the corner of his eye, the old man went on: “To do a thing at less cost in labor and time seems to be the only thing that you Yankees consider. But cheapness is sometimes dearly purchased. Come! Suppose that I put myself under the seven devils of haste that continually drive you. What would become of these, my people? Who would employ them? It is true that theirs is not a great wage – perhaps, after all, totals less than the cost of your steel plow and a capable man to run it. We pay only three and a half cents for each ditch, in our currency, and a man must dig twelve a day. If he digs less he gets nothing.

“That does not seem just to you?” He read Seyd’s surprise. “It would if you knew them. Grown children without responsibility or sense of duty are they. If left free to come and go, they would dig one, two, three ditches, enough and no more than would supply them with *cigarros* and *aguardiente*, and our work would never be done. As it is, they dig the full twelve, and have money for other necessities.

“The wage seems small?” Again he read Seyd’s mind. “Yet it is all that we can afford, nor does it have to cover the cost of living. Each man has his patch of maize and frijoles, and a run for his chickens and pigs. Then the river teems with fish, the jungle with small game. His wage goes only for drink and *cigarros*, or, if there be sufficient left over, to buy a dress for his woman. They are perfectly content.” Slightly lifting his heavy brows, he finished, looking straight at Seyd: “I am an old Mexican hacendado, yet I have traveled in your country and Europe. Tell me, señor, can as much be said of your poor?”

Now, in preparing a thesis for one of his social-science courses, Seyd had studied the wage scale of the cotton industry, and so knew that, ridiculously small as this peon wage appeared at the first glance, it actually exceeded that paid to women and children in Southern cotton factories. In their case, moreover, the pittance had to meet every expense.

He did not hesitate to answer. “I should say that your peons were better off, providing the conditions, as you state them, are general.”

“And they are, señor, except in the south tropics, where any kind of labor is murder. But here? It is as you see; and why disturb it by the introduction of Yankee methods?”

Pausing, he looked again at Seyd, and whether through secret pleasure at his concession or because he merely enjoyed the pleasure of speaking out that which would have been dangerous if let fall in the presence of a countryman, he presently went on: “Therefore it is that I do not stand with Porfirio Diaz in his commercial policies. He is a great man. Who should know it better than I that fought with or against him in a dozen campaigns. And he has given us peace – thirty years of slow, warm peace. Yet sometimes I question its value. In the old time, to be sure, we cut each other’s throats on occasion. In the mean time we were warmer friends. And war prevented the land

from being swamped by the millions that overrun your older countries, the teeming millions that will presently swarm like the locusts over your own United States. As I say, señor, I am only an old Mexican hacendado, but I have looked upon it all and seen that where war breeds men, civilization produces only mice. If I be allowed my choice give me the bright sword of war in preference to the starvation and pestilence that thins out your poor.”

Concluding, he looked down, interrogatively, as though expecting a contradiction. But though, after all, his argument was merely a restatement of the time-worn Malthusianism, coming out of the mouth of one who had strenuously applied it during forty years of internecine war, it carried force. Maintaining silence, Seyd stole occasional glances at the massive brown face and the heavy figure moving in stately rhythm with the slow trot of his horse, while his memory flashed over tale after tale that Peters, the station agent, had told him when he was out the other day to the railroad – tales of bravery, hardy adventures, all performed amidst the inconceivable cruelties of the revolutionary wars. Even had he been certain that the eventual peopling of the earth’s vacant places would not force a return to at least a revised Malthusianism, it was not for his youth to match theories with age. When he did speak it was on another subject.

“I have been riding all morning on your land. I suppose it extends as far in the other direction?”

“A trifle.” A deprecatory wave of the strong brown hand lent emphasis to the phrase. “A trifle, señor, by comparison with the original grant to our ancestor from Cortes. ‘From the rim of the Barranca de Guerrero on both sides, and as far up and down from a given point as a man may ride in a day,’ so the deed ran. Being shrewd as he was valiant, my forefather had his Indians blaze a trail in both directions before he essayed the running. A hundred and fifty miles he made of it when he started – not bad riding without a trail. But it is mostly gone by family division, or it has been forfeited by those who threw in their luck on the wrong side of a revolution. Now is there left only a paltry hundred or so thousands of acres – and this!”

For the first time pronounced feeling made itself felt through his massive reserve, and looking over the view that had suddenly opened, Seyd did not wonder at the note of pride. After leaving the cane they had plunged through green skirts of willow to the river that split the wide valley in equal halves, and from the shallow ford they now rode out on a grassy plateau that ran for miles along low lateral hills. Dotted with tamarinds, banyans, and the tall ceibas which held huge leafy umbrellas over panting cattle, it formed a perfect foreground for the hacienda, whose chrome-yellow buildings lay like a band of sunlight along the foot of the hill. The thick adobe walls that bound stables, cottages, and outbuildings into a great square gave the impression of a fortified town, castled by the house, which rose tier on tier up the face of the hill.

When they rode through the great gateway of the lower courtyard the interior view proved equally arresting. Mounting after Don Luis up successive flights of stone steps, they came to the upper courtyard, wherein was concentrated every element of tropical beauty – wide corridors, massive chrome pillars, time-stained arches, luxurious foliage. From the tiled roof above a vine poured in cataracts of living green so dense that only vigorous pruning had kept it from shutting off all light from the rooms behind. Left alone, it would quickly have smothered out the palms, orchids, rare tropical plants that made of the courtyard a vivid garden.

“They call it the *sin verguenza*.” While he was admiring the creeper Francesca had joined them from behind. “Shameless, you know, for it climbs ‘upstairs, downstairs,’ nor respects even the privacy of ‘my lady’s chamber.’ Thanks to the good legs of my beast, I escaped a scolding. Sit here where the vines do not obstruct the view.”

If Seyd had been told a few minutes before that anything could have become her more than the tan riding-suit he would have refused to believe. But now by the evidence of his own eyes he was forced to admit the added charm of a simple batiste, whose fluffy whiteness accentuated her girlishness. The mad gallop had toned her usual clear pallor with a touch of color, and as she looked down, pinning a flower on her breast, he noted the perfect curve of her head.

“Room for a good brain there,” he thought, while answering her observation. “It is beautiful. But don’t you find it a little dull here – after Mexico City?”

“No.” She shook her head with vigor. “Of course, I like the balls and parties, yet I am always glad to return to my horses and dogs and – though it is wicked to put them in the same category – my babies. There are always at least three mothers impatiently awaiting my return to consult me upon names. I am godmother to no less than seven small Francescas.”

“I never should have thought it. You must have begun – ”

“ – Very young? Yes, I was only fifteen, so my first godchild is now seven. That reminds me – she is waiting below to repeat her catechism. There is just time – if you would like it.”

“I would be delighted. So the position is not without its duties?”

“I should think not.” Her eyes lit with a touch of indignation. “I hold the baby at the christening after helping to make the robe. When they are big enough I teach them their catechism. You could not imagine the weight of my responsibilities, and I believe that I am much more concerned for their behavior than their mothers. If any of them were to do anything really wicked” – her little shudder was genuine – “I should feel dreadfully ashamed. But they are really very good – as you shall judge for yourself. Francesca!” As, with a soft patter of chubby feet, a small girl emerged from a far corner, she added with archness that was chastened by real concern, “Now you must not dare to say that she isn’t perfect.”

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