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Author: Robert Welles Ritchie

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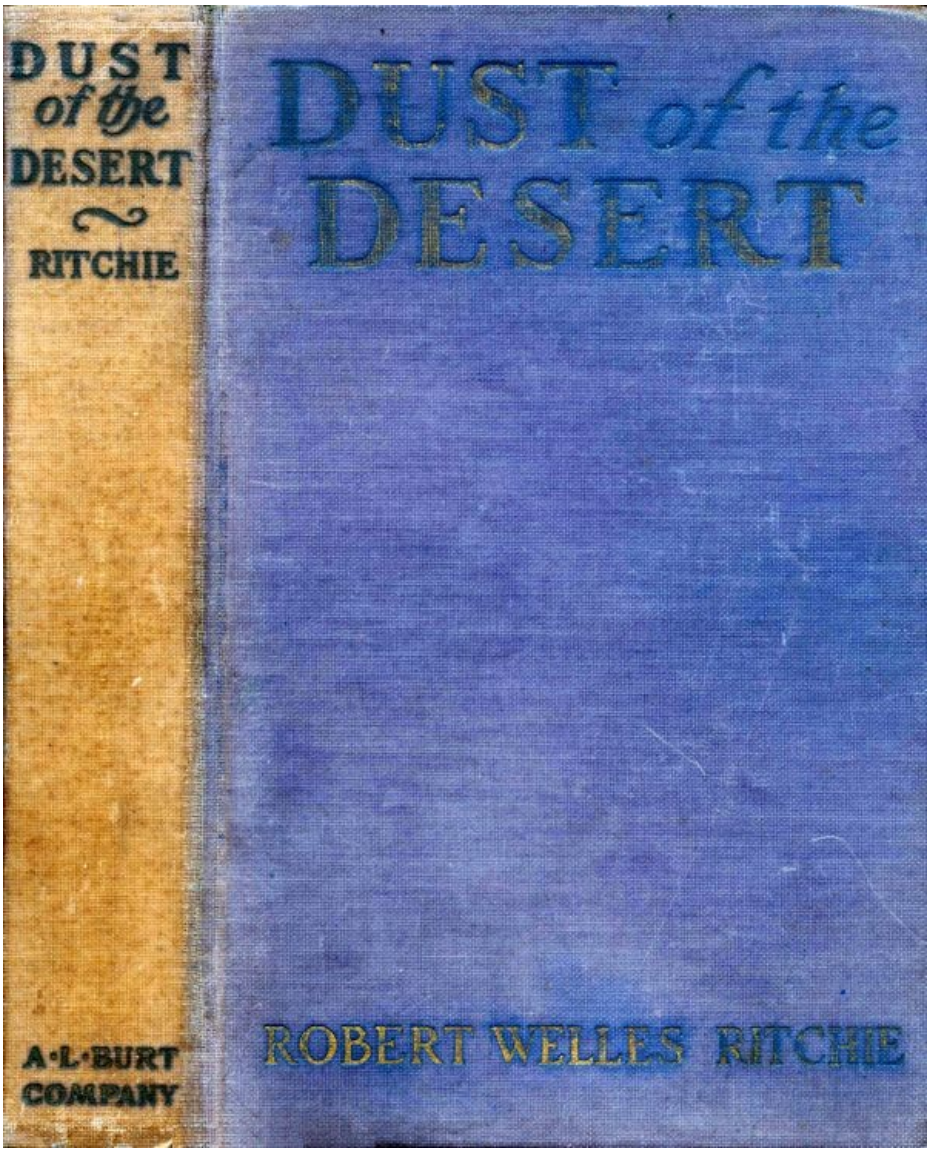

DUST OF THE DESERT

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By ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE

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CONTENTS

DUST OF THE DESERT

[1]

PROLOGUE

Roads of men thread the world. They thunder with a life flood. They are vibrant with a pulse of affairs. By land and water and air they link to-day to to-morrow. But El Camino de los Muertos (the Road of the Dead Men) is a dim highway leading nowhere but back and back to forgotten yesterdays. Its faint sign-posts once were vivid in lettering of tears and blood. Its stages were measured by the sum of all human hardihood. Faith, valour, reckless adventuring, thirst for gold, love o' women—these the links in the measuring chain that marked its course through a dead land. And black crosses formed of lava stones laid down in the sand; these abide over all the length of the Road of the Dead Men from Caborca to Yuma to cry to the white-hot sky of slain hopes and faith betrayed in those buried years gone.

[2] The priest-adventurers of New Spain first blazed this trail through an unknown wilderness. Restless pioneers of the Society of Jesus and the Order of St. Francis, men with the zeal to dare, pushed out from the northernmost limits of the Spanish settlements in a new world with their soldier guards and their Indian guides. They fought death in a land of thirst northward, ever northward. The cross fell from the hands of spent zealots at some waterhole where water was not, and other hands followed to snatch up the sacred emblem and push it deeper into Papagueria. North and west through El Infiernillo to the red waters of the Colorado where the Yumas had their reed huts. Thence on to the west through a land that stank of death until at last the end of the trail was smothered in the soft green of Californian valleys—good ground for the seed of Faith.

The overland trail of the padres became the single trail from Mexico to gold when the madness of '49 called to all peoples. Then the Road of the Dead Men took its toll by the score and doublescore. Then men fought for precious water at Tinajas Altas; many crosses of malapais mark the sands there. Bandits lurked at Tule Wells, ninety miles over blistering desert from the nearest water, to shoot men for the gold they were bringing back from California. The Pock-[3] Marked Woman, mad with thirst—so runs the legend—walked at nights with the Virgin in the flats beyond Pitiquito and found water with celestial candles burning all about the pool.

So passed the wraiths of the gold madness. A railroad was laid down from the Pacific eastward across the desert. What once was called Papagueria had come to be known as Sonora, in Mexico, and Arizona in the Republic of the North. The Road of the Dead Men at its California end became a way through green and watered valleys where bungalows mushroom overnight; along its course in southwestern Arizona and northern Sonora it lapsed to a faint trail from waterhole to waterhole of a heat scourged desert. To-day this forgotten remnant of a high road of adventure and hot romance exists a streak in an incandescent inferno of sand and lava slag, wherein death is the omnipresent fact. Occasionally a prospector putters along its dreary stretches, chipping at ledge and rimrock. A Papago or a Cocopa creeps over caliche-stained flats with baskets of salt from the Pinacate marshes near the Gulf.

That is all. The Dead Men hold their road inviolable. It is dust of the desert.

[4] That is all, did I say? No, the spirit of romance and the shape of illusion have not completely passed from El Camino de los Muertos. Remains that tale which carries itself over a span of a century and a half, linking lives of the present to lives of men and women whose very graves long since have passed from sight of folk. A tale strangely like the desert trail along whose course its episodes of hot passion and swift action befell; for its beginnings are laid in a mirage of an elder day which we of the present can see but dimly, and its ending is beyond the horizon of to-day. Would you know the full story of the Lost Mission de los Cuatros Evangelistas: how the baleful spell of its green pearls of the Virgin worked upon the fortunes of the House of O'Donoju and how the last of that house wrought expiation for the sin of a forbear through heroism and the fire of a great love—would you know the full story, I say, you must see with me the substance of a beginning.

No more can one plump into the middle of this the last of the romance tales of the Road of the Dead Men than could one drop onto the Road itself midway of its length.

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[5] A King in Spain once followed a practice of careless munificence. Whenever one of his generals in the great wars appeared worthy of reward His Majesty used to ink the ball of his thumb and with a grand and free gesture he would make a print somewhere on the map of Mexico, then called New Spain. Then the lucky general, taking this patent of royal favor across the seas with him, would hire surveyors to translate the print of Philip's thumb into terms of square miles of

domain. These square miles were his and his heirs' to govern like little kings, with justice in their hands, the Church to give them countenance and Indians by the hundreds to serve them under a modified code of slavery. No man has lived since as did those magnificent possessors of Philip's thumbprints.

The Rancho del Refugio in the little known reaches of Papagueria was one of these fiefs of the king. Michael O'Donohue, a wild man of the red Irish who had fought English kings and queens under the banner of Spain, had come by the grant originally and had taken a lady of Granada to the new world to bear him heirs worthy of their inheritance. Michael O'Donohue became Don Miguel O'Donoju, lord of a desert principality and a power at the Viceroy's court in the City of Mexico. He established two rigid precedents to be followed by the house of O'Donoju: pride of [6] race and jealous conservation of the family principality. It became a rule of the O'Donoju that none of the clan marry outside the pure Castilian blood—Irish excepted if Irish could be found; and a rule that, come what might, no O'Donoju pass title to so much as a foot of the Rancho del Refugio.

It was a day in April, the year 1780, that the clan O'Donoju came to the Mission of the Four Evangelists to lend the dignity of their presence to the solemn service of re-dedication. More than that, Don Padraic O'Donoju, venerable head of the house and master of the Casa O'Donoju in the oasis named the Garden of Solitude, was come to witness a personal triumph. For it had been his money that had gone to the Franciscan College to be used in the rebuilding of the frontier post of God after the Apaches had raided and burned it fifty years before. And one of his own sons, Padre Felice, had been the architect and builder of the restored mission and was to continue the priest in charge. Padre Felice was fourth in a line of O'Donojus to take orders, one from each generation since the establishment of the grant.

The O'Donojus—grandchildren, cousins and kin by marriage—had ridden five days and upwards [7] from various sections of the Rancho del Refugio, up and out through the Altar desert to this remote sanctuary of God in the country of the Sand People. They came by the way called the Road of the Dead Men. Its asperities were softened by the quick desert spring which tipped each thorny cactus cone with candelabra tufts of golden and carmine flowers. The desert's usual heat was tempered by the snows that lay in unnamed mountains to the north.

They came in a lengthy caravan of horses and burros, with half naked Indians to herd the goats and the yearling steers that were to be barbecued for the secular feast to follow the religious rites; with a half-company of foot soldiers from the Presidio del Refugio to guard the company against roving Apaches; Indian maids on mule back to serve the needs of their mistresses, regally mounted on ponies of the Cortez strain; baggage porters, cooks, roustabouts. Fully a hundred of the clan O'Donoju and satellites on pilgrimage over the Road of the Dead Men.

All of the O'Donoju were there but one, El Rojo—the Red One. The "Red One" was he because [8] of the throw-back to the red Irish strain of his fighting ancestor Don Miguel. Red with the pugnacious red of Donegal was his hair; his cheeks had none of the sallow tan of the Spanish but were dyed with the stain of Irish bog winds; his eyes were blue lamps of the devil. A fatherless grandson of old Don Padraic, El Rojo had played the wild youth in the City of Mexico with only occasional visits of penance to the Casa O'Donoju in the desert country of the north until, when the tang of youth still was his, he had tainted his name with scandal. Followed his formal expulsion from the clan at the hands of the old aristocrat, his grandfather, and the closing of all doors of his kindred in Papagueria against him. El Rojo had ridden out to the wide world of sand and mountains an outcast but with a laugh on his lips; this a full year before the gathering of the family at the Mission of the Four Evangelists.

When El Rojo had turned lone wolf, a sadness that was not the sadness of shame settled upon the heart of one of the O'Donoju. Frecia Mayortorena, a cousin, one of the flowers of girlhood that caused old Hermosillo to be named the Little Garden, sat behind her barred windows on many a night with heart wild to hear once more the love song only El Rojo knew how to sing. [9] Frecia Mayortorena, all fire under the cold ice of her schooled and decorous features, knew that the reckless devil with the flame-blue eyes had but to come and strum a love call on his guitar; she would go with him into banishment and worse. So on this pilgrimage to the shrine of the four holy men the girl, who rode with her father and brothers, allowed her imagination to frame the figure of a phantom horseman on every ragged mountain top. At each camp fire along the Road of the Dead Men, when the vast sea of desert round about was stilled under the stars, Frecia Mayortorena sat with tiny pointed chin cupped in a propping palm and seemed to hear in the clink of a mule's hobble chain the opening chord of that song of songs,

> Red as the pomegranate flower, my love,
> The heart of him who sings.

The cavalcade came to the mission with the firing of guns and with shouts. The reed-and-mud huts of the Sand People beyond the cloisters disgorged their shouting savages to welcome the travellers. Padre Felice, a gaunt man with the face of an ascetic above the folds of his rough brown cowl, hurried out from the doors of the new sanctuary to meet and give embrace to his [10] father, Don Padraic, and then in turn to all his next of kin; behind him followed his two novitiate priests who were, with Padre Felice, the only white men in all the stretch of Papagueria from the Rancho del Refugio westward to the Sea of Cortez. Five days' travel were they from the nearest of their kind, and to west and north stretched unguessed leagues of the desert. Only the Road of the Dead Men linked them with the first of the Californian missions thirty days over the western horizon.

Missionary to the Sand People was Padre Felice—to that branch of the Papago tribe of tractable Indians who lived about the east shore of the Sea of Cortez and on eastward throughout the desert of Altar. The rebuilt mission stood in the middle of a small oasis which was fed by a stream down out of the burnt mountains not a mile behind; one of those rare and furtive desert trickles of water which hides in the sand most months of the year. The diminutive mission building, with its rounded dome of sun-burned brick, lifted in sharp outlines above the vivid and water-fed greenery of the oasis mesquite and *palo verde*; but the whole—oasis and house of God —was dwarfed by the bleak immensity of the flanking mountains leaping sheer from the plain to [11] push their fire-scarred summits against the sky.

Before the choir of Indian voices intoned the opening prayer of the dedication service the packs of the O'Donoju caravan yielded precious things. There was a monstrance of heavy gold studded at its tips with precious gems; this was the personal offering of old Don Padraic to the shrine of the Four Evangelists. A chalice of gold, a great altar crucifix of gold inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a pair of candelabra wrought of chased silver and a communion service of the same metal represented the pious contributions of the rest of the clan O'Donoju.

But most precious of all the altar treasures was that double string of the pearls of the Virgin which by a miracle had been saved from plunder of the Apaches when the savages from the north had come burning and murdering fifty years before. For a half-century the lucent rope of moonbeam green had lain in the treasure vaults of the Franciscan College in the City of Mexico awaiting this hour of restoration. Green pearls fetched from the shell beads of the Sea of Cortez by Indian converts. Pearls hinting of caves of ocean by their shimmering, changeful lustre. Pearls [12] to fire the lust of covetousness even from their hallowed place about the throat of the Virgin.

Padre Felice held the glinting rope of lights high in dedication, and as reverently he draped them upon the bosom of the sacred effigy the clan O'Donoju and all the dark-skinned children of the mission sang a gloria.

An untoward incident jarred the merriment of the feasting that followed the re-dedication of the mission. When whole beeves were being lifted from the roasting pits and the skins of wine and tequila were passing from table to table beneath the flowering mesquite trees a column of dust strode across the desert from the east and spawned two horsemen upon the oasis. One, a naked Indian of the stature of a giant, reined in his horse at the far fringe of the mesquite as befitting a servant. The second rode boldly into the circle of the tables. Silver clinked from bridle and stirrup leathers of his magnificent white thoroughbred. The rider's silver-trimmed hat came off with a sweeping bow to include all there, and the red of his hair was like molten copper in the sun.

"El Rojo!" was the startled cry on every lip. Men scrambled to their feet as if to combat some overt move of an enemy.

"God be with you all," came the Red One's speech of polite greeting, made all the more ironical [13] by the reckless upturn of his lips in a grin and the steely lights that flashed from his blue eyes.

"—And God, or his gentle vicar, Padre Felice, give me place at table with my noble kin," El Rojo added lightly. "I have travelled far to have my cup here on this day of celebration."

The laughing horseman let his eyes dance over the circle of faces until they came to rest for just an instant upon one. He saw cheeks flaming, eyes filled with wonder and full lips parted to give a heart its song. Frecia Mayortorena was seeing a vision in the life. Quickly El Rojo's glance leaped on as if to shield the girl from contamination. The venerable Don Padraic, head of the clan O'Donoju, was on his feet now and trembling.

"We know you not, sir! We must ask you to begone!"

El Rojo caused his horse to rear perilously. Before hoofs touched the ground hardly two paces from the old man the rider again had made his full-armed bow. He spoke with mock respect.

"Sanctuary, my grandsire! I and my servant claim sanctuary of Holy Church. We have ridden [14] far, and good Uncle Felice can not deny us the charity of his order."

Don Padraic was being swiftly mastered by his rage when the friar to whom the unwelcome horseman had appealed pushed his way to the side of the older man.

"He speaks the truth, sire," urged the man in the brown habit. "Here on God's ground we can not be guilty of uncharity." Then, looking up into the laughing blue eyes of his nephew, "I ask you to descend, sir, and refresh yourself and your servant until such time as you take the road."

So all merriment in the oasis of the Four Evangelists was stilled. There in the single green spot on all the leagues of the Road of the Dead Men was wrought a comedy; a prelude it was to swift tragedy. The clan O'Donoju, its satellites and retainers ate and drank in silence, and apart from this company sat El Rojo and his naked copper giant alone. From time to time El Rojo lifted his cup as if in ceremonious health to his kin. Only Frecia Mayortorena read the glint in the blue eyes which told that the toast was to her—and to what would eventuate.

Near sundown El Rojo and his Indian rode off to the west, but not until the outlaw had spent a [15] few minutes alone in the mission. Padre Felice saw him at prayer before the altar of the Virgin and was deeply touched that the spirit of religion had not altogether departed from the family's scapegrace.

In the dark of midnight Frecia Mayortorena, who had cried herself to sleep, was awakened by the touch of a hand stretched under the side of the tent where she slept with the women of the party. A silver embroidered hat was slipped under the tent to rest on her arm. The girl dressed

herself in a folly of love and terror and stole outside. The waiting figure of El Rojo's giant Indian detached itself from the shadow of the mesquite, motioning her to a tethered horse. Blind infatuation for a hero lover brooked no questioning on the girl's part. She mounted and followed her guide through the alleys of heavy shade.

A single dreadful cry sounded from out the opened door of the mission. A minute later a vague horseman spurred to her side and stopped the beating of her heart with flaming kisses. The silent desert swallowed three phantom shapes on horseback.

[16] Dawn brought revelation and the beginning of that cycle of tragedy and dreadful pursuit of Nemesis which was to overwhelm the clan O'Donoju. Padre Felice murdered at the altar of the Virgin, where he had tried to stay the hand of impiety. The green pearls of the Virgin gone. A daughter of the house of O'Donoju flown with a thief and a murderer.

One word more and this mirage of years long dead fades. The curse that all Papagueria saw descend on the clan O'Donoju spared not even the sanctuary of the Four Evangelists. A year to the night of the Virgin's despoliation the Apaches came again to this frontier post of the Church, and after a spiteful siege they slew the white priests, burned the mission and carried the Indian converts over the mountains into slavery. The Franciscans dared not rebuild on such accursed ground. Winds of the desert, which move sand mountains in their eternal sweep, played upon the ruined mission year on year to blot even a vestige of it from the eyes of man. God's hand—so the Indians had it—shook the mountains behind the little oasis so that the source of the tiny life-giving stream was blocked. The green vanished like a mist, and scabrous desert cacti crept in on prickly feet.

The Mission de los Cuatros Evangelistas became legend.

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[17]

CHAPTER I

WHAT HAPPENED ON THE LIMITED

The Golden Sunset Limited, Pacific Coast bound, snaked its way through a cleft in mountains and came sighing to a stop at the man's town, El Paso. A patchwork crowd spilled out from the station platform to push around the ladders of the car icers to the train steps. Swarthy Mexicans under sombreros, with their black-shawled women and their little tin trunks, scrambled and clogged at the approaches to the oven-like day coaches forward. Pullman passengers sauntered over frogs and switches to plush and rosewood at the train's end.

Among these was Grant Hickman, civil engineer, New York, lately captain in the First Division overseas. Arizona bound and west of the Ohio River for the first time in his thirty years, Hickman had broken his journey by a day's stopover in El Paso. He had given Juarez a whirl, decided the kind of life he saw across the International Bridge was spurious and of little worth, and now was [18] entraining again for his destination some four hundred miles to the westward. He gave the porter his bags to stow for him according to the directions scribbled on his Pullman ticket and began a lazy pacing of the platform, his eye alert for the colour and the bustle of it all. The blending of two races, of widely differing civilizations, here in this sturdy city gave Hickman's restless imagination a smart fillip. He saw men with gaily coloured blankets worn as cloaks over their shoulders like prayer shawls in a synagogue; Indians with ornaments of beaten silver and raw turquoise hasps on their belts had their shoulders planted against solid brick walls with a grace born only of perfect indolence. All great stuff—regular musical show background.

On his first lap down the platform the New York man's eyes rested momentarily on two figures standing in the drip of one of the car icers' laden pushcarts. A girl and a man; she hatless as she had left the car for a stroll, the man all gesticulating hands and eloquently moving shoulders. Hickman caught a scrap of the man's fervid speech as he strolled past; it was in a foreign tongue, liquid—almost lisping—with its softly rolled r's and a peculiar singing intonation at the upward [19] lift of each period. Spanish undoubtedly. Just an over-shoulder glimpse of a thin, dark face in sharp profile confirmed Grant in his guess at the speaker's nationality. The girl's bared head attracted his appreciative eye; it bore a glory of wondrously burning red hair, coiled in great masses, vividly alive.

Grant turned his corner at the platform's end and began to retrace his steps, consciously bearing in the direction of the beacon hair. When he was still twenty paces off he saw that the swarthy man had gripped one of the girl's wrists and that his hawk face was pushed close to hers in what might have been an access of fury or of pleading. Grant quickened his pace instinctively; he did not like the looks of that man's talon grip on a girl's wrist. He paused a decent distance from the twain and made a pretence of lighting a cigarette while his eyes glanced steadily over his cupped palms.

Then a surprising thing. The girl launched some verbal javelin at the man who gripped her wrist, at the same instant looking down at the clamping fingers as if to emphasize what must have been a command to release her. No answer but a flash of white teeth beneath a toy moustache. The girl's free hand shot to a great coil of hair over the nape of her neck, came away [20] with twin prongs of thin steel—anchorage of some hair ornament—showing below her clenched fingers. A lightning jab downward, and the Spanish-speaking man dropped the imprisoned hand to whip his own to his mouth. He snarled something in sharp falsetto. The girl with the red hair

tilted her chin at him, and the laugh that slipped between her grudging little teeth was thin and sharp as the double dagger points she had used.

She turned, took three steps to a stool below the Pullman's steps, mounted with a quick swirl of skirts and was gone. Grant thought he saw a half-formed determination to follow flash into the Spaniard's eyes. Without knowing why he did it, the New Yorker hastily put one foot upon the lower Pullman step and bent his body so as to block access to it. Very painstakingly he unloosed the knot on his low shoe, straightened the tongue in place and began taking in slack on every loop of the strings.

A grunt of exasperation from behind Grant. When at last he straightened himself and looked around the Spanish gentleman was gone. He chuckled.

"Now that, señor, should teach you not to play rough with a red-head."

He walked down to the Pullman his ticket called for and climbed aboard. Just as the [21]
conductor's bellow, "Bo-oa-rd," sounded, Grant, looking through the glass of the vestibule, saw the Spanish gentleman with a grip flying for the train out of the baggage room of the station.

Passing into the body of the car he found his bags piled upon a seat midway of its length. As he seated himself he was the least bit startled to see flaming coils of hair above the top of the seat across the aisle and one beyond his. Grant was not displeased. Girls with spirit always walked straight into his somewhat susceptible affections; and a girl who carried a home-made fish spear in her coiffure—

"'Scuse me, Cap'n; ef I could jes' have a look at youah berth ticket. This gentmum says he reckons you-all's settin' in his seat." Grant looked up to see the porter shifting uneasily before him and with a deprecatory grin on his face. By him stood the waspish Spanish gentleman; the latter inclined himself in a stiff bow as Grant's gaze met his. Out of the tail of his eye Grant thought he saw a slow turning of the sunset cloud against the high seat-back ahead.

"This is my section," Grant drawled with no show of inclination to arbitrate the matter. "I [22]
always buy a section when I travel."

"But, pardon, sir—" The Spanish gentleman extended a pink slip. "The agent at the station has but now sold me this lower berth."

"Indeed?" A slow ache of perversity began to travel along Grant's spine. He had no love for a man who will manhandle women. "Indeed. The agent at El Paso sold me mine yesterday."

"Ef I could see youah ticket," the porter began feebly.

"You couldn't," Grant snapped. "Perhaps the Pullman conductor may."

A cloud began gathering over the finely chiselled features of the Spaniard. His toy moustache went up. He spoke to the porter:

"The señor is not what we call *sympatico*. Have the kindness to fetch the conductor."

The darkey disappeared. Grant turned to look out of the window, ignoring completely the standing figure in the aisle. But he did not ignore the reflection a trick of the sun cast on the double glass of the window. He saw there just the faint aura of a fiery head which refused to turn, though the compelling gaze of the standing man strove mightily to command it. Faintly in the magic of the dusty glass was carried to this bystander, whose neutrality already was [23]
considerably strained, the silent battle of wills.

The Pullman conductor bustled up to Grant's seat. To him the Spaniard appealed, offering the evidence of the berth check. Grant vouchsafed no comment when he passed his own up for inspection. The man in blue compared them.

"Some ball-up somewhere," he grunted. Then to Grant: "When was this ticket sold to you?"

"Yesterday morning at ten-fifteen o'clock," came the prompt answer. The waspish Spanish person admitted he had purchased his only a minute before the train started. The conductor waved at Grant.

"Then I guess the seat belongs to this gentleman. I'll have to find you one in another car."

"But, señor, I have special reason for remaining in this car." The Spaniard's carefully restrained wrath began to bubble over. Grant looked up at him and smiled frankly.

"So have I," he declared levelly. The other's eyes snapped and his lips lifted over small white teeth in what was meant to be a smile.

"Señor," he began with a shaking voice, "your courtesy deserves remembrance. I hope some [24]
day it may be my pleasure to show you equal consideration."

"Until then—*au revoir*," Grant caught him up. With the porter preceding him, the loser walked down the aisle to the far door of the car. As he passed the seat where the girl was he half turned with a sulky smile. But it was lost. She was looking out at the procession of the telegraph poles. Grant, catching this final passage in the little comedy, grinned.

"There's going to be lots of paprika in this Western hike," joyfully he assured himself—"or do we call it chili?"

CHAPTER II

A GIRL NAMED BENICIA

Grant Hickman was not one of that tribe dignified by the name of he-flirts. He abominated the whole slimy clan with the loathing of a clean man. When he had seized upon the part of studied rudeness toward the Spaniard it was not with the ulterior purpose of winning a smile or paving the way for acquaintance with a pretty woman; Grant's vivid recollection of the sidewalk cafés of Paris in war time and their hunting women left him cold toward the type that is careless of men's approaches. In flouting the foreigner and preventing his scheme to gain a place in the car with the girl he had bullied on the station platform the New York man had acted merely on instinct; he had protected a girl from annoyance. Yet now that he had won through by dint of crass boorishness—and the young man's conscience gave him a twinge over the substance of his discourtesy—he suffered a not unreasonable curiosity regarding the possessor of that glorious beacon in the seat across the aisle.

Who was she? What circumstances had led to that scene on the platform which had ended with [26] the unexpected dagger thrust of the steel hair ornament? Was this little black-and-tan whipper-snapper a lover—a brother—blackmailer? Grant's galloping imagination built up flimsy hypotheses only to rip them apart. And his eyes dwelt upon the soft involutions of flame coloured hair, which were the only physical indices of personality granted him thus far.

Once the object of his conjectures shifted her seat so that a profile peeped out from behind the wide seat arm. Grant's eyes hungrily conned delectable details: one broad wing of hair sweeping down in a line of studied carelessness over a forehead somewhat low and rounded; fine line of nose with the hint of a passionate spirit in the modelling; mouth that was all girlish, mobile, ready to reflect whims or laughter. The sort of mouth, Grant reflected, that could load a laugh with poison—even as he had seen it done that tense instant on the platform at El Paso—or freight it with sweetness for a favoured one. A world of fire and seduction untried lay in the full round lips, yet a chin with the thrust of will in it warned that the promise of those lips was jealously guarded.

A broad sheaf of sunlight lay across her cheek. Grant saw that hers was not the usual apple tint [27] of the red-haired, the characteristic skin so delicate as to suggest translucence. Rather a touch of the sun had spread an impalpable film of tan, warm as the colour of old ivory, over cheek and throat. Duskiness of a southland dyed cheek and throat despite the anomaly of the burning hair, quite Celtic.

The afternoon waned with no favouring fortune throwing Grant's way opportunity to study the girl closer. When the sunset was in the sky he walked through the train to the observation platform. As he drew near the glassed-in end of the observation car he noted with a little leap of elation that the girl was sitting under the awning beyond the screen door. He saw, too, the objectionable Spanish gentleman. His midget body was packed into a chair, one neatly booted foot under him; like some hunting cat he sat in watchful patience inside the body of the car, his eyes never leaving the figure of the girl beyond the screen door.

Grant passed through to the platform, not giving the Spaniard so much as a glance. As the door slammed behind him the girl looked up quickly. Grant saw her eyes were blue, saw, too, a fighting gleam quickly pass from them. Evidently he was not the one they expected to fall upon. A [28] pretty confusion which tried to deny recognition swiftly replaced the strained look. Grant allowed himself to be bold to the extent of tip-tilting his cap. The girl evidently decided that to overlook a service done would be pushing decorum too far; she gave Grant a quick, shy smile which might have carried a hint of gratitude mingled with naïve humour.

"You were very kind," she said as Grant took the camp-stool next to her, "and very amusing. The high hand—you possess the art of using it, sir."

"I should be ashamed of my rudeness," he answered with a quick smile. "But somehow I am not. Your way of repelling attack has its advantages, too—" His eyes strayed to the silver comb, whose concealed steel had been so efficacious on the El Paso platform. The girl reddened prettily.

"Always one must be—prepared against—persuasion," was the answer that put a period to all reference which might be distasteful. Grant would have liked to know more of circumstances that had pushed this radiant young person into the grip of a bullying little civet cat of a Spaniard, but he dared not risk rudeness by further questioning. Reward enough was his already; he had it in [29] the swift play of laughter across delicate features, in the sweetly resonant quality of her voice, all of a part with the engaging exotic character of the girl. For American she assuredly was not, though her trim tailoring was impeccably the mode of the moment. Her speech had a rippling musical lilt to it suggestive of a mother tongue less harsh than Anglo-Saxon; her enunciation was too perfect to be American. There was a trick of the eyes, something almost vocal, which was an inheritance from mothers whose speech is sternly hedged about by conventions but who find subtler ways of expression.

What could her nationality be? Assuredly not Irish, though eyes and hair were exactly what Grant had seen in the green island during a furlough spent in jaunting cars and peaty inns. Mexican? The flame hair denied that. Here was another mystery to be set aside with that of the encounter at the station. With two avenues of conversation closed Grant plunged blindly along one strictly innocuous.

"We seem to be getting rather deep into the desert." He waved out at a hundred mile vista of sunset painted waste, all purple and hot gold in the glory from the west—a new picture for the eastern man. The girl made an unconscious movement of half-stretched arms as if to free her soul [30] for wandering in limitless spaces.

"Yes, the desert," she breathed. "How wonderful! And for me, returning to it after two years in cities—in cities where one chokes from walls all about—you see how the desert welcomes with all its glory." Grant looked at her curiously; he saw a vision in her eyes.

"Then you like this—this dry and barren land? Why, I thought nobody lived out here unless he had to. No trees, no water—" The girl's wondering eyes upon him checked his summary of the desert's shortcomings.

"You do not know the desert then," she reproved. "You have never seen the *palo verde* tree when every branch is heavy with gold. You do not know how the *sahuaro* wreathes itself a crown of blossoms—the tough old *sahuaro*, a giant with flowers on his head ready to play with spring fairies. Water!"—a crescendo gust of laughter—"You think water only comes from a faucet. If you dug for it with your bare hands—dug and dug in hot sands while death moved closer to you each hour, then you would come to see a real beauty in water."

"You know something of the desert," Grant conceded.

"Something! Señor"—the alien word slipped from her in her flurry of devotion—"señor, my [31] home is there and my father's home has been there more than a hundred and fifty years. I have been away from it in the slavery of the cities—two years at music in New Orleans and Baltimore. Now I return. To-morrow morning at Arizora big Quelele, my father's Indian servant, meets me to take me a hundred miles—a hundred miles off the railroad and away from the nearest city to my home."

"But Arizora is where I am bound," Grant eagerly caught her up. "That's on the Line, isn't it? A hundred miles—why, then you must live in Mexico." She nodded. His curiosity would not down:

"Then you are Mexican?"

An instant her blue eyes sparkled resentment. Grant sensed he had made some blunder, though he could not for the life of him guess how his innocent question could have offended. The girl, on her part, quickly regretted her show of displeasure; one new to the Southwest naturally could not know much about its social distinctions.

"Not Mexican," she amended gently. "We are Spanish folk living in Mexico. We have always been Spanish since the time one of my ancestors got his grant from the king of Spain. Never [32] Mexican. That sounds like silly boasting to you. When you have lived in this country for a little while you will understand why we have pride in our blood. Just as you have pride, señor, in your American blood when all the cities of your country are choked with mongrels."

Hoping to hear her name, Grant gave her his own. She repeated it as if to fix it in memory; then she told him hers. Benicia O'Donoju it is written, but in her mouth the two words had a quality like a muted violin note, too fugitive to be imprisoned in letters. She spoke the surname without accent on any syllable—"Odonohoo." The man grasped at something evanescent in the sound:

"Why, I'd pronounce that 'O'Donohue.'"

"My great-great-grandfather did." Once more Grant's ears drank in that velvety contralto laughter which bubbled to her lips so easily. "You would pronounce his first name 'Mike,' and so did he."

"Then your first name should be Peg or Molly-o," Grant rallied. She shook her head in gay denial.

"Señorita Peg—impossible! Benicia is much better. It means 'Blessed' in our tongue. 'Blessed are the pure in heart,' Señor Hickman; or 'Blessed are the meek.' I might be either if I could [33] forget I am an O'Donoju."

"Benicia." Grant tried to copy the slurring softness she gave to the word.—"B'nishia: that sounds like little bells. I like it."

"You are gracious, señor. I thought Americans were too busy with skyscrapers and wheat markets to learn the art of paying compliments gracefully."

"Compliments are born, not paid," he joked. Conversation limped no longer. Youth has a way of opening little windows in the souls of two brought together under its wizardry and giving each elusive peeps into secret chambers. It was Benicia who first became conscious of the lateness of the hour and the strain on strict canons of propriety her presence alone with a stranger on the observation platform had entailed. She arose with a little laugh.

"My guardian"—a roguish glance toward the tiny figure of the Spaniard still on the watch beyond the platform's glass—"I fear he does not approve. And so—*adios*." She gave Grant the tips of her fingers and was gone.

He watched her pass where the sentinel was sitting. The little man uncurled himself from his hump-shouldered crouch and scrambled to his feet as if he would speak to her. But Benicia, [34] bowing sweetly, passed on up the aisle and into the alley of rosewood and glass beyond. After a moment's hesitation the Spaniard came to the screen door giving onto the platform, where Grant now stood alone, and opened it. He scratched a match and put it to his cigarette. Grant saw the flare illumine a cruel hawk's nose and thin, saturnine lips. The Spaniard inhaled deeply, then let

thin streams of smoke seep from his nostrils.

"Señor"—his voice was cold as a lizard's foot—"perhaps you do not know that Señorita O'Donoju is travelling under my protection."

Grant took time to tap a cigarette on the heel of his palm and light it before he answered. His eyes were brimming with laughter.

"Perhaps not," he said. "I congratulate the lady on her protector." Again blue smoke played over the toy moustache; little eyes were snapping like a badger's.

"I have the honour to inform you, señor, that your attentions to the lady do her no credit and that they must cease."

"Really!" Grant's settled good humour received a jar. He felt a tingling of fighting nerves down his back. "Really? And who constituted you judge of the value of my attentions?"

"Very naturally I have appointed that position to myself, señor, since Señorita O'Donoju is to become my wife." [35]

"Ah!" Grant's interjection did not carry all the irony he would have wished. His assurance was a trifle shaken.

"And so," the little man continued, "it is understood. You will not address the lady further." Grant laughed.

"My understanding is very weak and not at all reliable. I promise you that unless the lady objects I shall continue to address her whenever opportunity presents."

The little figure in the doorway straightened itself in an access of dignity. He snapped his cigarette over the car rail.

"Señor, let us have no misunderstanding. We approach the Border, where every man works justice according to the dictates of his own conscience. To-morrow we touch Mexico, where it is known that Colonel Hamilcar Urgo is a law unto himself. I am that Colonel Hamilcar Urgo. Need I go farther?"

"And I am Captain Grant Hickman, formerly of the First Division, Expeditionary Forces. Go as far as you like!"

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[36]

CHAPTER III

DOC STOODER

With evenly divided cause and equal cheerfulness Grant could have kicked the porter and himself when he awoke tardily next morning and found his car at a standstill. He raised the berth curtain and looked out. On the eaves of a station he saw a white board with the name "Arizora" painted upon it and certain irrelevant advice as to the distance to New Orleans and to Culiacan. Out through the curtains popped his head and he whistled the porter.

"Why didn't you give me a call?" was his angry demand.

"Yassuh, yassuh, ev'body in this kyar gets out here. Mos' have gone an' done it a'ready. You see, Cap'n, this kyar's been switched off here at the Line two hours ago; train's kep' right on goin' into Sonora."

Grant, cursing his luck, boiled into his clothes and made a race for the washroom. He was hoping against luck that Benicia O'Donoju had not been an earlier riser than himself. With his face puffy with lather, he stopped from minute to minute to peep through the window giving onto the station platform. A decrepit autobus was backed up against the curb with a few passengers sitting patiently on its frayed seats; loungers were dangling their legs from baggage trucks; under wooden awnings of a business block across from the station a Mexican was languidly sweeping out a store. Arizora had not yet come to life. [37]

Just as Grant was towelling the last remnants of shaving lather from his cheeks he made another quick survey of the platform and his heart dropped into his shoes. Benicia walked into the field of the washroom window; with her the unspeakable Spaniard, who carried her neat travelling satchel as well as his own bag. The girl was fresh as the dawn in a suit of khaki, short-skirted over high laced boots of russet leather. Rebellious hair strayed from beneath the brim of a soft-crowned Stetson, saucily noosed to her head by a fillet of leather under her chin. Soft green of a scarf lightly drew together at her throat the wings of her khaki collar. Nothing of the theatrical or self-consciousness of tailoring in the picture the desert girl made; she was the spirit of the Southwest, unsophisticated and without pretence. By her side the little Spaniard with his knife-edged trousers and thin-waisted coat appeared comic. [38]

As Grant, towel in hand, lingered by the window feeding his soul with vain regrets, a crazy thing on wheels swung around the station and came to a stop by the girl's side. It might have been called an automobile by courtesy, though there was little to identify it as a member of the gas family save that it went of its own traction. Engine naked, dash gone, two high-backed seats of unpainted tin like the wing of an old-fashioned sitz-bath and unprotected by a top; behind these a home-built box body wherein a trunk and a suitcase were lashed. Grant was seeing his

first desert speeder, rebuilt for service of a highly specialized kind. The man at the wheel was no less in character—an Indian in overalls and high peaked sombrero; a giant of a man with shoulders of a wrestler and dull bronze features of a Roman bust.

What ensued upon the arrival of the auto nearly drove the watcher, shirtless as he was, out to two-fisted intervention. Urgo, the salamander, evidently was of a mind to make a third in the car. Grant saw his humped shoulders and expostulating hands, saw Benicia tilt her chin as she gave him some cold refusal. But the colonel calmly stowed his suitcase by the side of the trunk in the [39] box body, evidently planning to use it as a seat. Again Benicia, now in her place by the side of the Indian giant, turned to give him peremptory refusal. The Indian at the wheel had his engine going and was sitting statue-like, utterly detached from the quarrel.

Urgo stepped on the rear wheel's hub and had one hand on the floor of the box body when one of the Indian's hands flashed up the spark even as his foot went down on the gear pedal. The crazy little car leaped like a singed cat. Colonel Urgo cut a neat arc, hit the road on his back and rolled over just in time to escape receiving amidships his suitcase, which the Indian driver had dropped from the car without turning his head.

In the Pullman washroom Grant collapsed to the seat and smeared soap into his eyes while he tried to check tears of laughter. The fall of the peppery little Spaniard had been colossal, and he guessed it had been wrought at the quick prompting of the spirited girl in khaki. What a wonder she was! All laughter and bubbling spirits one minute; quick as a leopard to strike the next.

"Man"—Grant addressed a beaming face in the glass—"man, always lay your bets on a red- [40] headed girl!"

That minute of communion with a smiling confidant was an important one in the life of Grant Hickman, cautious bachelor. For it came to him with the force of a hammer blow that he wanted and must have this vivid creature of the desert named Benicia O'Donoju. Girl of fire and sparkle—of a spirit free and piquant as the winds that blow across the wastes—unspoiled of cities and the stale conventions of drawing rooms. Oh, he would have her! Gone she might be, out into a land beyond his ken. Unguessed barriers of circumstance, of others' intervention, might have to be scaled; but somehow, somewhere, Grant Hickman was going to find and win Benicia O'Donoju.

Love at first sight—old-fashioned, mid-Victorian stuff, says the cynical débutante over her cigarette and outlaw cocktail. In New York tearooms and Washington ballrooms, quite so. Where girls of twenty must know the sum that stands in bank to Clarence's credit, before Clarence is marked down as eligible, love at first sight is, in truth, dead as the dodo bird. Even so, spirit still calls to spirit and like leaps to like most all the world over. It is only where fungus spots stain the [41] garden that love will not bloom.

When Grant quit the Pullman Colonel Urgo was nowhere to be seen. Grant idly wondered as he walked to the hotel, directly across a plaza from the station, how long it would be before he encountered this half-portion rival of his and what would be the Spaniard's first move in his frank threat of reprisals of the night before. But when he was shown to his room—and the New York man whimsically reflected he had seen better ones at the Admiral on Madison Avenue—events of recent hours were pushed back from his attention by the more immediate demands of his presence in Arizora. He took from his suitcase the letter that had brought him sky-hooting across the continent to this back-water of life on the Mexican Line and skimmed it through:

> "... I know just how hard it is for you to settle down to office routine after the Big Show. All of us are in the same fix, Old-timer, but I have the edge on you because out here in this man's country there's something breaking every minute. That's the reason I'm writing you this mysterious letter.... Old Doc Stooder is counted the prime nut of Southern Arizona, but I believe he's got a [42] whale of a proposition and that's why I'm counting myself—and you—in on the deal.
>
> "I've sewed myself up with him—promised not to peep a word of the real dope to you in this letter. The old Doc says, 'We'll need a good engineer and if your buddy in France has a head on him and knows how to keep his mouth shut tell him to come out here.' ... So if you still have that old take-a-chance spirit that hopped you through the Big Mill from Cantigny to Sedan I'll see you in Arizora. If I'm not in town when you arrive dig up Doc Stooder—everybody knows him.
>
> "Yours for the big chance,
>
> "BIM."

Grant folded the letter with a smile. Good old Bim with his "whale of a proposition." Running true to form was Bim in this characteristic letter. Just as Grant had come to know and love him in training area and dugout: Bim Bagley, six-feet-one of tough Arizona bone and muscle and brimful of wild optimism. Always ready to take a chance, whether at the enemy on all fours through midnight mud or at fortune in the wild lands of the Border: that was Bim Bagley of Arizona, "the [43] finest country in the Southwest."

And Bim had shot truer than he could know when he sent this hint of big things in the offing back to a man two years out of uniform and moping for excitement on the sixteenth floor of a skyscraper in Manhattan. Two years of civilian's life had been just that span of slow moral suffocation for Grant. For all his thirty years, for all his better than moderate success in a profession of sharp competition, Grant Hickman still could hear the call to the swimmin' hole of

adventure. How he had yearned to hear it these past two years when the springs of his soul still tingled with the high tension of battle lines! Then this letter from a pal, promising all the substance of his dreams. It had not been a week in the engineer's pocket before he was on the train for Arizora.

Grant went out to find Bagley. He located his office—"Insurance, Bonds, Investments" was the sign on the glass of the door; but the lock was turned and no one opened at his knock. His eye caught a corner of white paper projecting through the letter slot.

"Grant:—Called out of town—back Friday. B. B." was the scrawl across the face of it. A stab of disappointment was his; he had builded heavily on that moment of meeting when Bim's big hand [44] would have his own in a vise. Nothing to do now but see the town and amuse himself as he might, or call on that mysterious Doc Stooder and discover why Grant Hickman had come racing out to this Arizora. He decided to do both.

The Arizora Grant saw in an hour's swinging round the circle was something different from the "hick town" his New York smugness had pictured in anticipation. It was a condensed El Paso, jammed in the narrow compass of a mountain gorge, with railroad yards monopolizing the whole of the flat space between crowding hills. A man could go from his home to business by the simple trick of leaping off the front porch of his bungalow with an opened umbrella. Arizora's streets were jammed with cars—fantastic desert coursers stripped to the nines and with canteens strapped to the running board. Sidewalks swarmed with men—big men with steady eyes looking out from beneath sombreros the size of a woman's garden hat; men with high-heeled boots and the pins of many lodges stuck on their unbuttoned vests; lantern-jawed, hollow-templed men of the sun, whose bodies were indurated by the desert law of struggle and whose souls were simple as a fairy book.

Across Main Street stretched a fence of rabbit-proof wire with three strands of barbed wire [45] topping that; a fence with something like a pasture gate swung back for traffic. This was the Line. On the hither side of that rabbit-proof wire web the authority of a President and his Congress stopped; on the far side the authority of quite a different president and his peculiar congress began. Over yonder, where stood a man under a straw sombrero and with a rifle hung on one shoulder, lay Sonora and the beginning of a thousand mile stretch of fantastic land called Mexico. A cart with solid wooden wheels and drawn by oxen under a ponderous yoke blocked the way of a twelve-cylinder auto seeking clearance at the international gate.

When he had tired of sight seeing Grant inquired at a cigar counter where Dr. Stooder could be found. The breezy man in shirtsleeves grinned and glanced at the clock on the wall behind him.

"Well, sir, usually mornings he's over across the Line getting organized for the day on tequila. Mostly he comes back to his office round noon time, steppin' wide and handsome. Office's over yonder, top-side of the Bon Ton barber shop. You might give it a look."

Grant acted on the cigar clerk's advice. He located a dingy door at the end of a dark upper [46] hallway with the lettering, "A. Stooder, M.D.," on a tin sign over the transom. Entering, he found himself in a sad company. Three Mexican women and a man of the same race sat like mourners on chairs about the wall; a big-eyed child squatted in the middle of the floor and listlessly pulled a magazine to bits. The stamp of woe and of infinite patience was set on all the dark faces. Mephitic smell of iodoform was in the air. Grant hastily withdrew. After an hour's walking and when the whistles were blowing noon he returned. A different collection of patient waiters occupied the chairs; evidently the doctor was in and at work.

He took a chair by the window where he could look down into the street and so keep the set masks of misery out of his eyes. After fifteen minutes the door to the inner office was violently opened and a Mexican woman shot out of it as if propelled by a kick. Thundering Spanish pursued her. Grant saw a scarecrow figure framed in the doorway.

Tall beyond the average and gaunt almost to the point of emaciation; frock coated like a senator of the Eighties; thin shoulders seeming bowed by the weight of the garments hung thereon; enormous, heavily veined hands carried as if hooked onto invisible hinges behind the [47] stained white cuffs:—this the superficial aspect of Dr. Stooder. Vital character of the man was all summed up in his face: skin like wrinkled vellum stretched on a rack; eyes glinting from deep caves on either side of a veritable crag of a nose which had been broken and skewed off the true. A great mane of grey hair reared up and back from his high forehead; tufts of the same colour on lip and chin in the ancient mode of the "Imperial" added the last daguerreotype touch to his features.

Black eyes roved the room and fell on Grant, who had risen. The doctor crooked a bony finger at him and he passed through into the private office, taking the seat indicated. Without paying his visitor the least heed, Dr. Stooder went to a closet, poured two fingers of some white liquid into a graduating glass and drank it. His lips smacked like a pistol shot. Then he returned and took a swivel chair before a very shabby and littered desk.

"I never seen you before, sah"—the man's accent reeked of Texas, the old Texas before the oil invasions. "So I'll answer the question every stranger's just mortal dying to ask and don't dare. How'd I come to get this scar?" The surprising doctor tilted his great head back and traced with [48] his fore-finger an angry weal which encircled his throat like a collar gall. "Well, sah, I was informally hanged once—and cut down. Now we can get down to business. What's your symptoms?"

Grant, caught off balance by so unconventional a reception, stammered that he had no

symptoms.

“My friend, Bim Bagley, who is out of town for a few days, told me to look you up. My name is Grant Hickman. I’m from New York.” The black eyes, never deviating from their disconcerting stare, showed no flicker of recognition at the name.

“What you want of me if you have no symptoms?” abruptly in the doctor’s nasal bray. “I’m not in the market for the World’s Library of Wit and Humour. I’ll cut you for a tumour or dose you for dyspepsia; but I won’t buy a book.”

“I have no books to sell.” Grant found his temperature rising. “I have come out from New York because you told my friend Bagley to send for me.”

Doc Stooder suddenly snapped out of his chair like a yard rule unfolding and strode to the closet. With bottle and graduating glass poised he bent a severe eye upon his visitor.

“You say you don’t drink. Highly commendable. I do.” Again the pistol shot from satisfied lips. [49] He replaced the bottle and tucked his hands under the tails of his coat where they flapped the sleazy garment restlessly.

“You call yourself an engineer. How do I know you are?”

Grant had said nothing about being an engineer. Doc Stooder had identified him right enough. What reason for his bluff, then?

“My dear sir, graduates of Boston Tech. do not carry their diplomas round with them on their key rings. You’ll have to take Bagley’s word for it that I’m an engineer if my own is not convincing.”

The gangling doctor took two turns of the office with enormous strides; one hand tugged at his straggling goatee. Abruptly he stopped by Grant’s chair.

“Young man, what need do you figure a doctor in Arizora would have of an engineer—more especial an engineer from New York? Why should I tell this Bagley, who’s as crazy as a June-bug, to fetch a graduate engineer out to Arizora? Engineers are a drug on the market here—and every one of ’em a crook.”

Grant’s patience snapped. He rose and strode to the door.

“Dr. Stooder, I didn’t come away out here to your town to have somebody play horse with me. [50] When you are sober you can find me at the International Hotel.”

A grin started under Doc Stooder’s moustache and travelled swiftly to his ears.

“God bless my soul, boy! When I’m sober, you say. I’m never sober and I hope I never will be—”

Grant slammed the door behind him.

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[51]

CHAPTER IV

COLONEL URGO REPAYS

Before he had descended to the street Grant began to regret his flash of anger which had launched him out of Doc Stooder’s office. To be sure, the unconventional doctor had been insulting; his was hardly the orthodox reception to be expected by one who had crossed the continent to become his partner in some hidden enterprise. Equally certain it was that, to apply the cigar clerk’s pat phrase, Stooder was “organized for the day”; the finishing touches to that organization had been made in two trips to the closet in Grant’s presence. Need one have been so touchy under these alcoholic circumstances?

Strive as he would to put the best face on the matter, the man from New York could not escape a lowering of the spiritual barometer. Here he was, a stranger in an outlandish desert town with none to give him so much as a friendly glance. Glances enough came his way, but they were inspired by his clothes, the cut of which seemed to put them beyond the pale. Grant pleasured [52] himself by reviewing his case in the most pessimistic light. He had been but a fortnight ago a sober and industrious citizen. Came to him a wild letter hinting darkly of some shadowy enterprise in a bleak land. Instantly he had quit his work and galloped across two thousand miles to encounter a scarecrow cynic who greeted him as a book agent.

He wandered aimlessly beyond the town and out onto a road which wound up to the edge of one of the mesas which were the eaves of Arizora. Well might drivers of passing cars stare at the figure of a broad-shouldered young man in a black derby and double-breasted coat, who was afoot in a country where no man walks unless he carries a blanket on his shoulders—unless he is a “stiff,” in the phrase of the Southwest. Even though February was but on the wane, already the sun was guarantor of a promise to pay with heat interest in sixty days.

He came to the top of the rise and halted under the psychic compulsion of boundless space. For space, crystalline and ethereal as the gulf between stars, flowed from him as an ocean. The air that filled this space was so thin, so impalpable as to seem no air at all, and it was tinted faint [53] gold by reflection from the desert below. Mountains near and far were so many detached reefs taking the silent surf of the ocean of space; they were tawny where shadows did not smear

purple-black down their sides. Near at hand showed the grim desert growths: prickly clumps of *cholla*, whose new daggers sparkled like frosted glass; fluted columns of *sahuaro*, or giant cactus, lifting their fat arms twenty and thirty feet above the ground; vivid green of cottonwoods laid in a streak to mark a secret watercourse.

To the man just come from the softness and languor of Eastern landscapes, where lakes lie in the laps of green hillocks, this first intimate view of the desert carried some subtle terror prick. The iron savagery of it! What right had man or beast to venture here?

Then flashed to his mind the picture of Benicia O'Donoju, the girl who loved the desert, who felt she was prisoner only when hedged about by the walls of cities in the East. Somewhere to the south where a higher raft of peaks marked Sonora's mystery land—somewhere in country like this she was speeding to her home. What kind of a home might that be? How could a girl with the bounding vitality that was hers find life worth living in a land enslaved by thirst? A hundred miles [54]
from town or railroad, she had said:—a hundred miles deep in such a wilderness her home! Heavens, how he pitied her!

Grant turned back to the town, revolving over and over in his mind the first steps he would have to take to learn where Benicia O'Donoju lived; and, haply discovering the place of her abode, how to get there.

By the time night fell the restless visitor to Arizora had exhausted the town's opportunities for amusement. He crossed the Line into the companion Mexican community, Sonizona. Here was beguilement enough. The rabbit-proof fence which converted Main Street into a Calle Benito Juarez also marked a frontier no less obvious. North of the fence was aridity to rejoice the conscience of the most enthusiastic prohibitionist; south of it the frail goddess Virtue tottered in her step. In Arizona a man sought traps and deadfalls consciously and with a secret thrill of bravado; in Sonora he avoided them only by the most circumspect watching of his step. Dark streets winding along the contours of the crowding mountains were raucous with the bray of phonographs and the tin-panning of pianos. Lattices over darkened windows trembled as one [55]
passed and the ghosts of whispers fluttered through them. Where an occasional arc lamp threw a spot of radiance across the 'dobe road lurked shadowy creatures who whined in an American dialect for money to buy drugs.

Grant did not realize that when he passed through the rabbit-proof fence he left behind him everything for which he paid income tax and other doles—protection, due processes of law, all the checks and balances on society and the individual painstakingly built up under the Anglo-Saxon scheme of things. He did not conceive himself in the light of an alien—of a not-too-popular nation—gratuitously placing himself under the protection of laws quite the opposite in terms of interpretation. Nor did he appreciate that, save for his suitcase and a signature on a hotel register, he had left behind him nothing to bear testimony to the fact that a man named Grant Hickman had come to Arizora and had left the United States to enter Mexico. All these inattentions he recalled later when opportunity for correction had passed.

Grant was circling the plaza, where the municipal band was giving a concert, when amid the strollers he thought he saw a familiar face. He looked again and was sure. Little Colonel Urgo, in [56]
a snappy uniform of dark blue with back-turned cape, was walking with a woman whose beauty was that of the blown peony. Chance brought Urgo's eyes Grant's way. They lighted with sudden surprise, then the colonel brought up his hand in a salute. A flash of teeth was cut by the travelling hand; it was like a too quick shutter on the villain's smile in Way Down East.

Grant doffed his hat and passed on. Half an hour later a particularly glittering sheaf of lights he had noted in earlier saunterings pricked his curiosity and he turned into a low building just off the plaza. A bare front room easily visible from the street was a too obvious blind for complacent police inspection; through an open arch in its rear wall a crowded gambling room was given false length by wall mirrors in dingy frames. Fifty or more men and women were clustered about roulette, faro and crap tables. A fat Chinaman with a face expressionless as a bowl of jelly sat on a dais behind a little desk stacked high with silver and with deft movement of his fingers achieved nice problems in international exchange. Pursuit of the goddess Luck was being engaged in with a frankness and business-like absorption quite different from furtive evasions of [57]
hidden attic and camouflaged club across the Line.

Grant exchanged a ten-dollar note for a heavy stack of Mexican silver and moved over to a table where two ivory cubes were dancing to the droning incantations of a big negro game keeper. He was curious to see whether Big Dick and Lady Natural were as temperamental a couple in Mexico as he had discovered them to be in many a front-line dugout in France.

"Come to papa!" A raw-boned Arizonan across the table was singing to the dice held in his cupped palms, huge as waffle irons; a humorous imp of strong liquor danced in his eyes. "Cap'n come down the gangplank and says, 'Good mawnin', Seven!'"

The ring of dark faces about the green cloth stirred and white teeth flashed unlovely smiles when a six and a one winked up from the dice. A chinking of silver dollars as a red paw gathered them in.

"Baby! Now meet you' grandpaw, Ole Man E-oleven. Wham! Lookit! Five an' a six makes e'oleven! How's that for nussin' 'em along, white man?" The crap wizard looked across to Grant and grinned in amity. Mexican scowls accompanied the covering of the winner's pile left [58]
temptingly untouched. Grant felt an undefined tugging of race bonds here in this ring of alien faces, and he backed the Arizonan against the field. On his third throw the big fellow made his point.

“That’s harvestin’! That’s bringin’ in the sheaves! Now here’s my stack of ’dobe dollars for any Mex to cop if he thinks the copping’s good.”

When it came Grant’s turn to throw his new-found friend played him vociferously against the Mexican field, calling upon all present to witness that a white man sure could skin anything under a sombrero, from craps to parchesi. For the first time since he had left the train that morning the New Yorker felt the warming tingle of fellowship; the gaunt, sunburned face of the desert man with the dancing imps of humour in the eyes was a jovial hailing sign of fraternity.

“Shoot ’em, Mister Man! You’re rigged for Broadway, Noo Yawk, but I can see from here that you has the lovin’ touch.”

Grant rolled and won, rolled and won again. Carelessly he dropped the heavy fistfuls of dollars into the side pocket of his coat. Even when he lost his point, he had a bulging weight of silver there. Grant was enjoying the game itself not nearly so keenly as he did the Arizonan across the [59]
table, his Homeric humour and the bewildering wonder of his vocabulary. So intent was he that he did not see Colonel Urgo enter, nor did he catch the almost imperceptible nod toward him that the little officer passed to a furtive-eyed tatterdemalion who accompanied him. The latter by a devious course of idling finally came to a stand behind Grant and appeared to be a keen spectator of the game.

“Ole Man Jed Hawkins’ son is a-goin’ splatter out a natch’ral. Ole Man Hawkins’ son is a-goin’ turn loose the hay cutter an’ mow him a mess of greens. Comes Little Joe! Dip in, Mexes, an’ takes yo’ fodder! Now the man from Dos Cabezas starts a-runnin’—”

A hand was busy at Grant’s pocket—a slick, suave hand which replaced weight for weight what it subtracted. Just three quick passes and the tatterdemalion who had been so intent on the prancing dice lost interest and moved away.

It came Grant’s turn to roll the dice. He dipped into his pocket and carelessly dropped a stack of eight silver dollars on the table. One of them rolled a little way and flopped in front of a Mexican player. The latter started to pass the dollar back to Grant when he hesitated, gave the [60]
coin a sharp scrutiny, then balanced it on a finger tip and struck its edge with one from his own pile.

“Señor!” An ugly droop to his smiling lips. “Ah, no, señor!”

He passed the dollar over to Grant with exaggerated courtesy. Eyes all about the table, which had followed the pantomime with avid interest, now centred on the American’s face. As if on a signal the fat Chinaman at the exchange desk waddled over to shoulder his way officiously to Grant’s side. He growled something in Spanish and held out his hand. Dazedly Grant laid the suspected dollar in a creasy palm. The Chinaman flung it on the green felt with a contemptuous “Faugh!” and he pointed imperiously at Grant’s bulging pocket.

“It’s a frame, pardner,” called the Arizonan. “If your money’s bogus it’s what the Chink himself handed you.”

“I came in here with American money and changed it at your desk,” Grant quietly addressed the Chinaman. “See here; this is the money I either got from you or won at this table.” He brought from his pocket a brimming handful of Mexican dollars and dumped them on the cloth. Two or three of the heavy discs shone true silver; the others were clumsy counterfeits, dull and [61]
leaden.

A cry, half snarling laughter, from the crowd about the table, now grown to a score: “Aha—gr-ringo!”

A movement of the crowd forward to rush Grant against the wall. Then with a cougar’s spring the big Arizonan was on the solid table, feet spread wide apart, head towering above the tin light shade. He balanced a chair in one hand as the conductor of an orchestra might lift his baton. His gaunt features were split in a wide grin. Before Grant could gather his senses a big paw had him by the shoulder and was dragging him up onto the green island of refuge.

“They don’t saw no whizzer off on a white man wiles ole Jed Hawkins’ boy got his health,” Grant’s companion bellowed a welcome. “I got these greasers’ number, brother!”

Grant’s gaze as he rose to his feet over the heads all about encountered two interesting objects. One was Colonel Urgo, who stood alone in a far corner of the room; the colonel was smiling with rare good humour. A second was a man wrapped about with a blanket, over whose shoulder appeared the tip of a rifle; he was just coming through from the front room on a run and there [62]
were three like him following. Rurales, the somewhat informal bandit-policemen of Mexico.

Just what ensued Grant never could quite piece together. He remembered seeing Hawkins wrench off a leg from his chair and send it whizzing at a central cluster of light globes in mid-ceiling. They snuffed out with a thin tinkling of glass. Then the rush.

Out of the dark swirl of figures about the table’s edge a vivid spit of flame—roar of a pistol shot. Hands grappling for braced legs on the table top. “Huh” of breath expelled as Hawkins swung his chair in a wide sweep downward. A cry, “Hesus!” Oaths chirped in the voice of songbirds. A knife missing its objective and trembling rigid in the midst of the baize.

The table collapsed with dull creakings, and then the affair of mauling and writhing became a bear pit. Grant fought with steady, measured short-arm jabs delivered at whatever object lay nearest. When one arm was pinioned he swung the other against the restraining body until it was freed. Some one sank teeth in his shoulder.

"Ride 'em, Noo Yawker!" came the shrill cry of battle from somewhere in the mill. Then a blow [63]
at the base of the brain which meant lights out for Grant.

When consciousness came halting back he found himself standing half-supported by two of the rurales in a dark street and before a high gate in unbroken masonry. The gate swung inward. He was propelled violently through the dark arch and into a small room, where sat a man in uniform under a dusty electric globe. He did not look up from the scratching of his pen on the desk before him.

A door behind the writing man opened and Colonel Urgo entered. His start at seeing the bloodied and half-clothed figure which the rurales supported was well acted. A hand came to the vizor of his cap in mocking salute. Then he turned to the man at the desk and exchanged low words with him.

"Ah, Señor 'Ickman"—Colonel Urgo's voice was tender as the dove's—"I regret to learn you are here in the *carcel* on serious charges. The one, counterfeiting the coin of Mexico; the other, resisting officers of the law. Very regrettable, Señor 'Ickman. But, remembering your courtesies toward me on the train yesterday, let me assure you of my willingness to serve you in any way. You will command me, señor."

A sudden lightning flash of comprehension shot through the clouds that pressed down on the [64]
prisoner's mind. He saw the whole trick of the counterfeit dollars in his pocket and remembered the little Spaniard's threat on the observation platform of the train the night before: "To-morrow we touch Mexico, where it is known that Colonel Hamilcar Urgo is a law unto himself." Grant strained forward and his mouth opened to incoherent speech.

"And now, señor," Colonel Urgo continued blandly, "unfortunately you will be locked up incommunicado."

Five minutes later Grant Hickman, behind a steel-studded door in a Mexican jail, was as wholly out of the world as a man in a sunken submarine.

CHAPTER V

[65]

THE GARDEN OF SOLITUDE

Benicia O'Donoju by the side of the big Papago Quelele and with the twin towns on the Line behind her—ahead the unlimned immensity of the wilderness—gave herself to the exhilaration of flight. For the skimming and dipping of the little car over the wave crests of the desert was like the flight of the desert quail, who rarely lifts himself above the height of the mesquite in his unerring dartings from bush to bush. On its partially deflated tires, provision against sand traps and the expansion of imprisoned air under heat, the skeleton thing reeled off its twenty miles an hour with snortings.

The final incident at the Arizora station—little Colonel Urgo and his unceremonious jettisoning —left no abiding impression with the spirited desert girl. His struttings and posings, his humorously impetuous wooing, resumed at the El Paso station after the two years' interruption of her stay in the States, were for her no more than the high stepping of some barnyard Lothario. [66]
Benicia, little given to the morbid business of self-analysis, was not sensible of how exactly the dual strain of blood in her had reacted to Urgo's advances; how it had been the swift thrust of Spanish temper which had prompted her to resort to the pronged weapon from her hair at El Paso even as the persistent Irish humour tang inherent in the O'Donoju name had flashed out in the dumping of the suitor at Arizora.

No, Hamilcar Urgo's dapper figure was as evanescent as the mirage, but there was another which appeared to replace it. A man with the figure of an athlete and a forthright way of looking at one—perhaps the least bit too self-assured, perhaps inviting rebuke did one but feel in the humour of rebuking. One of those quick-witted Americans, ever ready on a hair trigger of resourcefulness yet seeming to carry a situation as if no situation existed. Nice eyes, yes. A pleasant laugh, rich in humour. But so New Yorkish! He thought the desert a place where no one lived willingly. Amusing conceit! And his name was—? Ah, yes, Hickman—Grant Hickman. One would try to remember that name.

Retrospect could not long hold Benicia's mind against the joy of the homing journey. For the [67]
desert she loved spoke to her a welcome long dreamed in the stifling precincts of cities. There was the sky she had yearned for, something of infinite depths which did not shut down over the earth like an inverted cup; rather an impalpable sea wherein the earth swam free. Morning gold still tinted it. And the mountains that rose sheer from the desert floor with no lesser foothill heights: under the sun they were blue in the east and where slant rays fell upon western barriers a tawny strength of naked rock clothed them. Between the feet of the mountain stretched the level desert plain far and far beyond the power of eye to compass; grey with the grey of saltbush and greasewood, overtones of green where the first leaves of the mesquite and ironwood answered the call of the spring sun.

Quelele had turned the machine onto a westward wending road once the Line was crossed at Sonizona. A few straggling ranches near the border town, then the unsullied desert. Westward and southward sped the machine, deep into the greatest stretch of unpeopled wilderness

between the Barren Grounds of the Dominion and Panama.

The Desert of Altar lies there. From the Line south to the Yaqui River and from the Gulf of [68]
California, once called the Sea of Cortez, eastward to the Sierra Madre:—here is the terra incognita of Sonora; here is the dominion of thirst. A territory large as New England and with a population smaller than the average New England mill town. A vast graveyard of vanished peoples, who left behind them mountains terraced with fortifications laid in unbroken breastworks of porphyry and rocks pictured with their annals of life and death. Rain comes only with occasional summer thunder storms up from the Gulf, storms which wake dead rivers into furious flood. So precious is this water from the sky that the primitive peoples weave mystic rain symbols into their basketry for a fetish, and their songs are all of thunderheads and croaking frogs.

Here in the Desert of Altar the impossible becomes commonplace. A man caught in a river bed by the spearhead of a freshet drowns in sand made mud and irresistibly rushing. Cattle drink no water for months on end but are sustained by munching cactus whose spines can penetrate sole leather. In the furnace heat of summer furious rain storms occur in the higher air but the moisture is sucked up by the sun before it touches earth. Gold lies scattered on the surface of the [69]
desert and water must be mined. The desert kind slay after the manner of the ages but declare a truce at the waterhole. Death of all life is ever-present, yet grant so much as a permanent trickle of the life-giving fluid and the dust is covered with a glory of green.

For its devotees the desert holds mysteries potent beyond comprehension of folk in a softer land. The venturing padres of an elder day called it the Hand of God; they walked in the hand of God and were not afraid. Divinity, force, original cause—whatever may be your term for that power which jewels the grass with dew and swings the suns in their courses—this is very close in the desert. In great cities man has driven the Presence far from him by his silly rackets of steam and electricity, by his farcical reproductions of cliffs and pinnacles. In the Desert of Altar he walks in silence and with God. The very air is kinetic with the energy that brought forth life on a cooled planet.

The desert had been Benicia's teacher; had moulded her spirit to its own pattern of elemental strength. Born the last of the O'Donojus in the desert oasis that was the ultimate remnant of the once kingly Rancho del Refugio—grant of a Spanish Philip to her ancestor—she had been reared [70]
in the asperities of the land, had absorbed into her bone and tissue the rigours and simple verities of a wilderness. Because there was no son in the Casa O'Donoju and because, too, this only daughter came into the world with the inheritance of a spirit impetuous and errant as a desert bird, Don Padraic, her father, gave over all attempts at imposing on her the straight decorum that shackles the Spanish maiden of gentle blood. With the death of her mother when Benicia was still in short skirts came this loosening of the bonds. Instead of growing to maturity a shy creature who must never quit the sight of a duenna and whose eyes shall tell no secrets, the girl warmed to a wonderful companionship with her father, lived the life of a boy.

Her flaming red hair bobbed about the fringe of milling cores of wild cattle at the round-up. At *Sahuaro* feasts of the Papagoes, Mo Vopoki (Lightning Hair) added her shrill soprano to the chorus of the Frog Doctor Song. She learned where gold lay in shallow pockets and winnowed it from the sands in the Indian fashion. She brought home a mewing, spitting kitten she had taken from a bobcat's litter. Her doll was discarded for a rifle before her strength could shoulder it. [71]

Schooling came in her father's library, filled with books in three languages. English and music, the music of the great harp, became her passions. The harp had been her great-grandmother's; Don Padraic could make the mesh of strings sing with the sound of rain on flowers. He was her first teacher. Then, when twenty years were hers and Don Padraic realized something besides the wild desert life was needed to round out the full beauty of his daughter's soul, he had urged further studies on the harp as the excuse for Benicia's two years in the cities of the States. Those two years had served well to overlay upon the rugged handiwork of the wild the softness and subtleties of culture.

Benicia believed she possessed all her father's confidences. So she did—all but one. She did not know that when she came into the world with tiny head furry in burning red Donna Francisca, her mother, had cried herself into hysteria and Don Padraic's heart had gone cold. Nor was she ever told that her flaming hair marked her with the finger of Nemesis.

This day of the return from exile no premonition of the inheritance of fate arose to disturb the [72]
singing heart of the girl. She rattled on to the stoical Papago at the wheel unending questions concerning her father and the most humble of the Indian retainers living on the rancherias about the oasis, Don Padraic's fief in the waste lands. She told the credulous Quelele stories of the cities she had seen; of white men's wickiups climbing as high as the hill of La Nariz; of water so plentiful that it was launched at a burning house out of a long serpent's mouth; how men lifted themselves above the earth in machines like the king condor and flew hundreds of miles between sun and sun. To all of which big Quelele, never lifting his eyes from the thin rut lines in the sand, answered with a single monosyllable "Hi," wherein was compounded all his capacity for wonder.

South and west about the skirts of the Pajarito they went, and then into the old road up from Caborca, the ancient highway called the Road of the Dead Men which swings north parallel with the Line, cutting the tails of numerous ranges that are great in Arizona. And so, when the day was hardly more than half spent, the little car crawled to the height called the Nose of the Devil, and Benicia saw below her land of desire.

Fists of the mountains grudgingly opened out to permit a broad basin running from east to [73]

west, and there against the savage baldness of sentinel ranges showed a ribbon of green. Green of precious gems it was. So vivid in the setting of the drought land. So cyclonic its assault of colour against the eye inured to the duns and greys of a hundred miles of parched terrain. And in the midst of the oasis the shining white dot, which was the house of the O'Donoju; of Benicia's father and his fathers before him back to the day of a royal favourite baptized Michael O'Donohue. The Casa O'Donoju in El Jardin de Soledad—the Garden of Solitude.

Indian women, in skirts of orange and cerise and with gay mantles over their sleek hair, lined the way to the avenue of royal date palms which led from the bridge over the Rio Dulce straight to the white single-story house of 'dobe, heavy walled and loopholed like a fort. They waved and sent shouts of welcome to the mistress of the casa as she passed.

Benicia knew her father would not be outside the house to greet her; their love was not for the servants to see. Rather he would be waiting in their own trysting place, the place where he had given her farewell two years before. The girl leaped from the car before the heavy studded oak [74] door breaking the solid white front of the house at its centre. It was opened to her by old 'Cepcion, feminine major domo of the household servants. Benicia paused to give the parchment cheeks a kiss, then she danced down a flagged hall to the flare of green marking the patio garden in the centre of the house.

Here was a place of beauty and a fragrant cave of coolness—the very secret heart of the Garden of Solitude. Open to the sky and with cloistered dimness of the four sides of the house all about, the patio was a tiny jungle of climbing things, all green and riotous blossoms. A stately date palm reigned in the centre behind the little basin of the fountain; curtains of purple bougainvillea draped themselves down its shaggy ribs; lavender water-hyacinths sailed their little barques in the pool; geraniums flamed in living fire against the pillars of the arcades.

There in the garden waited a man all in white. Snow white his heavy hair and beard, though the life in his deep-set eyes and the vigorous set of his shoulders belied age; white were his thin garments of silk and flannel.

He caught the flash of a red head through the greenery, saw an eager, breathless face turned [75] questioningly.

"'Nicia, heart of my heart—!"

Then she ran to him, paused just an instant to lift swift fingers under his chin and tilt his head. Their eyes measured each the love that welled brimming in the soul's windows. Then the father drew his daughter close to his heart and his lips brushed her forehead.

"'Nicia, my strong one, your father has great need of you."

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[76]

CHAPTER VI

JUSTICE

The Mexican theory of the treatment of prisoners, their status before the law and the responsibilities of government toward them has few complexities and knows no interference on the part of prisoners' welfare leagues or humanitarian congresses. When a man is arrested south of the Line he straightway ceases to be enumerated among the living; if, haply, he reappears in the course of weeks or years his family looks upon the prodigy in the light of a resurrection. Such resurrections do not occur often enough to dull the edge of the popular interest attending them. There are several dim roads, peculiarly Mexican, down which a prisoner may march to oblivion, with no record of his expunction left behind. Officials with easy consciences find these extralegal methods of clearing the docket handy and expeditious.

Grant Hickman, new to the Border and utterly ignorant of customs and manners in the republic of *poco tiempo*, necessarily could not possess a background of sinister knowledge against which [77] to build doubts of his immediate future when he found himself locked in a cell. He was in darkness deep as Jonah's. He ached from his scalp to his toes. A gingerly groping hand applied to various parts of his body took stock of the exterior costs of that healthy fight in the gambling palace. The heat of battle was still on him. He recalled how nobly the big Arizonan swung his chair from the vantage of the crap table; what a virile call to battle was the stranger's "Ride 'em, Noo Yawker!"

As for Colonel Urgo's clumsy frame-up—the handful of lead dollars in his pocket to prompt arrest for counterfeiting—Grant dismissed the trick as childish spite. When he appeared before a judge in the morning he could easily prove that the only Mexican money he possessed was that given him in change by the fat Chinaman and what he had taken in across the baize. Some tool of the vengeful little wooer of Benicia had "salted" him during the progress of the game.

But when morning light through a four-inch slit in the wall roused him from a restless sleep long hours of doubt were ushered in. Came a jailer with dry tortillas and water but no summons to appear before a magistrate. Three tortillas—clammy rolled cakes of meal tasting strongly of a [78] cook's carelessness in matters of excluding the unessential—were the sum of his receipts from the outside world that day. The jailer, who had the features of a bandit, merely grunted a "no sabe" at the volley of questions the prisoner launched at him during the minute he was in the

cell.

Those hours of solitude in the six-by-ten box of stone gave opportunity for much thinking. Little by little it was borne in on Grant how completely he was a victim of whatever spite Colonel Urgo might care to devise; and recollection of his smiling face seen in the prison office the night before —thin lips parted over teeth in a ferret's grin—confirmed the assumption that at devising mischief Colonel Urgo would be hampered by no lack of ingenuity.

Grant weighed the hope of aid from the other end of the town across the Border fence. Bim Bagley, the only friend he had in all the Southwest, was still out of town and would not be back until the morrow. Doc Stooder—small chance! The worthy doctor was velvet drunk when he received Grant in his office; for reasons which only his satiric humour could explain he had elected to consider his visitor an impostor. Little chance that Doc Stooder would pay him a [79]
thought until Bagley returned and inquired of his whereabouts. Remained just the cobweb contingency that the Arizonan who had fought beside him had escaped the clutches of the rurales; Grant was certain the big fellow's simple loyalty to a fellow countryman would prompt him to set going some kind of inquiry from across the Line.

Night came, with it three more tortillas and a bowl of *carne* seasoned with chili sufficient to burn the gullet of a bronze image. Then, several hours after the scant meal had been shoved in to him, the bandit jailer opened his cell door and motioned him to step into the corridor. Two men with rifles were waiting there; they stepped to his side and marched him off between them.

Down a flight of steps, through a courtyard heavy with shadows, then up tortuous stairs to a door beneath a dim electric globe. The door opened from within, and Grant found himself in a chamber which might have passed as a courtroom. At its far end on a raised dais was a long desk lighted from above, three men sitting behind it. A sort of wooden cage stood apart on a platform by itself. Six men with serapes over their shoulders and rifles hanging by straps across the blanket stripes were slouching before the judges' dais. A black headed peon crouched timorously [80]
on a seat to the left and behind the guards.

Grant's escort halted him before the judges. He kept silence, studying the faces of the three. Not pleasant faces. A hardness of eye and cat-like bristle of moustachios over thin line of lips was common to the trio.

"Grant 'Ickman?" challenged the man in the middle.

Grant nodded. His interrogator gave a sign to one of the rurales. The latter turned to the peon on the bench, dragged him to his feet and hustled him to the cage-like affair to the left of the dais, evidently a witness box. The little fellow's head hardly showed above the top rail that fenced him in; his eyes were all whites.

The examining judge jerked a thumb toward Grant as he shaped a question in Spanish for the witness. The peon bobbed his head emphatically. Another question and, "*Si,*" chirped the witness. Then a lengthy flow of interrogation prompted by reference to some dossier in hand.

"*Si! Si!*" The witness hurried to oblige. Cat whiskers lifted in a smile as the judge turned back to Grant.

"You unnerstan'?"

"I don't," bluntly. More twitching of the spiked moustachios. [81]

"Zeese man, 'oo's make confession of counterfeiting and 'oo ees to be shot to-day, says 'e sells you thirty pesos made with bad metal—counterfeit. An'—"

"He lies!" Grant interrupted.

"*Quieto!*" The judge banged his fist on the desk and fixed the prisoner with a savage glare. "'E says, zeese man, 'e meets with you las' night on Calle San Lazar outside Crystal Palacio gambling 'ouse an' for ten veritable pesos 'e gives to you thirty pesos of bad metal. Then zeese man 'e says 'e sees you enter Crystal Palacio. What remark you make for zeese?"

The monstrous farce of this accusation numbed Grant. Judicial subornation fabricated to give colour to what was already determined in the minds of these three puppets. As clearly as if they were bearing on him he could see the cold, mocking eyes of Colonel Urgo behind the shoulders of his pawns on the bench. Perception of his peril steadied him.

"I demand a lawyer if I am to be tried on this outrageous charge. And I demand that the American consul in this town be told of the accusation against me."

The interrogating judge turned to his confreres with a bland outspreading of the palms. Then to [82]
Grant:

"American consul 'as no business with crime against state of Mehico. You will 'ave lawyer when you are tried before court at Hermosillo. Zeese court ees not court of condemnation. Court of condemnation ees at Hermosillo. W'en you arrive there, w'ere you make for a start to-night, Señor 'Ickman, you ask for American consul if you desire."

"But you cannot send me to this Hermosillo place without trial." Grant took a step toward the bench in his vehemence. He was roughly jerked back by his guards. The interrogating judge beamed on him.

"In Mehico, Señor 'Ickman, it ees folly to say 'you cannot.' Much ees possible in Mehico. To-night prisoners make start for Hermosillo. You go weeth them."

He nodded to Grant's guards and they closed in on him. He heard a farewell, "Adios, Señor

'Ickman," from the bench as he was rudely hustled out of the courtroom.

An hour later he stood with seven other shadows in the *carcel* courtyard. About them were the rurales with their rifles; four were mounted on horseback and a pack mule, lightly laden, slept on [83] three legs behind the horsemen. Men came with lanterns and heavy loops of something which chinked metallically when it was dropped. They fixed a broad steel shackle on the left wrist of each prisoner and linked them all to a bull chain. Then the door of a courtyard swung inward, the mounted rurales closed in and the eight chained men went clinking out to the dark street.

A few midnight dawdlers paused to watch the shadowy procession stumbling over the cobbles. No word was spoken. The clink of the horses' hoofs, the patter-patter of the short-legged pack mule and the metallic whisperings of the chain fitted into a measured cadence. Despite the presence of the pack mule, Grant first had thought the journey would be a short one, ending at the railroad station. But after fifteen minutes' marching no railroad line was in sight and the houses began to be scattered. Suddenly houses ceased; nothing but the hump-shouldered shapes of mountains about; clear burning stars and ahead a dim ribbon of road leading out into the desert.

To Hermosillo, a town unheard of and at a distance unknown—across the desert to Hermosillo afoot and chained in line with seven men. In the slim rifle barrels so carelessly slung under [84] shadows of sombreros was the sullen emblem of that unwritten law of Mexico which stills so many accusing mouths: *ley de fuga*—law of flight.

Out into the desert of Altar marched the American, whose name appeared only upon a secret cachet in the hands of the puppet judges—a man gone, as a German once put it, "without trace."

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[85]

CHAPTER VII

THE CHAIN GANG

"But, Doc, I tell you you're crazy! How could a tenderfoot like Hickman just in town from the East breeze across the Line and get into a jam the first night he's in town—drop out of sight completely?"

Bim Bagley, back in Arizora and distracted by the unexplained mystery of his pal's name on the hotel register, his pal's suitcase in a hotel room but no more material trace of Grant Hickman, was knee to knee with Dr. Stooder in the latter's office. The Doc made judicious answer:

"Well, son, Jed Hawkins' specifications of the gringo he fought with atop the crap table in the Palacio tallies pretty closely with the young man as I saw him in my office earlier in the day. But here's the funny thing: the rurales let Hawkins go even though he laid out two of 'em with a chair. Let that fightin' wildcat go and trotted this fellah Hickman off to the *carcel*. That's what gets me." Doc Stooder gave his decision with a wave of the hand. He jack-knifed his bony knees [86] up to his chin and waited the younger man's comment.

"But what did Hawkins say started the big row?" Bim's long face, all criss-crossed with the wind wrinkles that make desert men look older than their years, gave a vivid picture of his distress, of his eagerness to seize upon any detail that might point a solution of the mystery. Doc Stooder recited with picturesque detail Jed Hawkins' story of the battle in the gambling palace as the redoubtable Jed himself had narrated it in the Border Delight pool hall before returning to his ranch at Dos Cabezas.

"That give me a clue," he concluded, "so I laid my pipe lines an' I'm looking for to tap a well any time now."

Doc Stooder's pipe lines—of information, if not of wealth—were the most productive of any along the Border. He was one of those rare white men in the Southwestern country who enjoyed the unreserved respect if not the love of the Mexican population, among whom nine-tenths of his practice extended. Though he bawled at his patients, stricken dumb with terror of their ailments, though he cursed the women and manhandled the men, no poor Mexican's hovel of 'dobe was too [87] far out in the desert to discourage Doc Stooder's night prowling gas-wagon. Through dust storm and withering heat this blasted jack-pine of a man flitted on wings of gasoline, with his nostrums for dysentery and asthma, his splints for broken bones and needles for knife thrusts.

Drunk he might be half the time, an indifferent physician all the time—for the Doc had not been away from the Border for twenty-five years and never read a medical magazine. But under his hard rind of brutalities and cynicisms the Mexicans and Indians had come to discover a deep sympathy with their homely tragedies, their patient sufferings. Sometimes they paid him in coin; more often they paid him in slavish fealty the coin of which was information. Of gold strikes in the far hills; of shrewd business deals to be wrought through connivance of knavish officials across the Line; even of stolen jewels to be picked up from a pawnbroker:—these the flow of Doc Stooder's pipe lines. No man on the Border for a hundred miles each way knew so much of the scrapple of life as A. Stooder, M.D.

"I'm lookin' to hear of a woman," the Doc drawlingly resumed, a wry smile greeting Bim's gesture of negation. "Yep, son, when any likely lookin' young fellah along the Border drops outa [88] sight—and this Hickman fellah's got an eye with him for all his Noo Yawk bridle trimmin's—

they's a swish of skirts comes to my ears. Or"—he sat up suddenly and threw a bony finger at Bim —"or he knows somethin' about why he's come out here an' went an' babbled."

"Rot!" Bim's grey eyes were clouded with anger. "I told you he doesn't know why we got him out here—and he's not the babbling kind if he did."

"Well, it sizes up thisaway," the Doc continued, ignoring the other's flash of temper. "They's one man down in Sonora who knows all we know about the Lost Mission and like's not a dam' sight more. That's this proud old don who lives down in the Garden of Solitude with his red-headed daughter—name's Padraic O'Donoju, if I haven't told you that before. If he ever got a line on the fact we've asked a Noo Yawk engineer to come out here to Arizora he'd put two an' two together an' figure we're after that Four Evangelists church his ancestors built. You know he's sorta king of all the Papagoes in Altar and—"

"How about your Papago who's going to lead us to the Mission?" Bim interrupted. "If there's any leak likely as not it's through him." [89]

Stooder's great head wagged slowly; a grin tilted the rabbit's tail tuft under his lip until it stood out a quizzical interrogation point.

"No, son; no. I got that Papago brother where he thinks all I got to do is crook my little finger an' his wife passes away with asthma overnight. We can rely—"

A timid knock on the office door giving onto the hall. The Doc bellowed a command to enter. A wizened Mexican peon whose left arm was a stump sidled quickly through the doorway and stood bowing, shaggy head uncovered. He cast a quick glance at Bagley, then to the doctor for reassurance.

"Go ahead, Angel—shoot!" commanded Stooder.

"Señor, I hear from Jesus Ruiz, 'e's cousin to me an' rurale at the *carcel*; Jesus Ruiz 'e says the gringo arrest' at Palacio goes last night in chain gang for Hermosillo—"

Bim leaped to his feet with an oath. The peon's eyes were on Doc Stooder in an hypnotic stare.

"The gringo goes in chain gang for Hermosillo, but my cousin Jesus Ruiz 'e says that gringo mos' like never arrive."

[90]

That hour when Doc Stooder's pipe line began spouting information Grant Hickman was discovering deep down within him an unguessed hardiness of spirit. A trial was on him, a test of his moral fibre no less than of his physical powers. At the end of twelve hours' steady plodding across the desert he was coming into his second wind. Every effort a devilish ingenuity could contrive had been tried out by the four rurales, his guards, in their common endeavour to break down this gringo's fighting morale. The single result was a fixed grin on features smeared with dried blood and sweat—a challenge provoking the Mexicans to fresh barbarities.

During the first dark hours of the march Grant had nursed the hope that at some point outside of town he and his fellow prisoners would be brought to a railroad station to await the coming of a train. He could not conceive a reason for transferring prisoners afoot when a railroad would serve. But with the coming of the dawn and the lifting of the dark from an empty land not even a telegraph pole raised above the scrub to point fulfilment of his hope. Just the dry ribbon of road stretching ahead and empty speculation as to the number of days or hours which must intervene between present misery and journey's end. Grant never had heard the name Hermosillo until it [91] was spoken by the examining judge the night before; he did not know whether the town was just over the horizon or half way to Panama.

Morning brought him the chance to study the men chained with him who, during the night hours, had been just so many disembodied shadows marching in a nightmare. The one ahead of him was a shrivelled little Chinaman, whose legs were so short he was forced to a skipping step to keep slack on his segment of the chain; his breath came in asthmatic pipings and wheezes like the noise of a leaky valve in some midget engine. Behind him was a giant of an Indian, almost the colour of teak. With a timed regularity this Indian spat noisily all through the dark hours and until the sun rose to dry up his throat. The rest were in character with Grant's nearer companions—just flotsam.

The guards were typical of their class; Mexican peons brutalized even beyond the inheritance of their mixed bloods by their small taste of power. The quarter-blood Indian south of the Line, whose ancestry is devious as his own starved dog's, knows but a single law of life and that the law of fear. Lift him by ever so little from the station of the one who fears to that of the one to be [92] feared and he has no counterpart for studied cruelty anywhere on earth.

The one who rode to the right of the line in which Grant's position was fourth from the front, had commenced with the dawn a calculated campaign of nasty tortures. He would suddenly swerve his horse against Grant, threatening his feet with trampling hoofs. He held his lighted cigarette low at his side with elaborate air of carelessness, then pressed in close for the burning tip to eat through the white man's shirt. Once he aimed a vicious backward kick at his victim; his heavy spur left a line of red through the torn sleeve from elbow to shoulder.

At each of these refinements of humour the rurale's snickering laughter was met by the American's wordless grin. Just a tense spreading of lips and baring of teeth, which carried to the guard's savage perception a taunt and a threat. Always in Grant's twisted grin lay the unspoken

promise of retribution once the odds against him were lightened.

The desert under sun at the meridian flexed its harsh hand to pinch the crawling caterpillar of chained men. Heat waves made all the ragged summits of the Sierras pulsate. A dust tasting of [93] desert salts spread a low cloud about the marching column. Thirst that was a poignant agony was made all the more unendurable by the tactics of the guards. From time to time one of them would unhitch a canteen from the pack mule's burden and in the sight of the eight helpless sufferers tilt his head and guzzle noisily. Even he would allow some of the water to slop from his mouth and be wasted in the sand.

When the little Chinaman marching before Grant sighed and dropped, the line was halted for half an hour. First the yellow man was revived, then the canteen at which he had sucked so noisily was passed down the line to the rest of the prisoners. It was their first taste of water since the prison gate was passed. After the canteen circulated, black strips of jerked beef, sharp with salt, were distributed. Grant never had seen the "jerky" of the Southwest; the leathery stuff would have revolted him did his body not cry out for food. He tore at the tough substance after the manner of his fellows while the guards brewed themselves some more complicated mess over a fire of greasewood sticks.

Then the march again. Dragging hour after dragging hour. Clink-clank of the swinging chain. [94] Pad-pad of feet in time. Snuffle and wheeze—snuffle and wheeze of the asthmatic Chinaman's breathing. All in an unvarying synchronism which tore at the nerves. All the world—Grant's world of a great city—was reduced to this dreadful monotony of movement and sound.

He tried to think. Came to his mind a picture of his office in the Manhattan skyscraper—his desk with the mounted bit of shrapnel for a paperweight, its clear greeny-white glass top, the two wire baskets which held his correspondence. He saw the squash court at the club—men in sleeveless shirts straining after a white ball. Henry's bar in the little side street off the Rue D'Anou in Paris; Henry selling stolen American cigarettes for five times their value at the commissary. St. Mihiel and the old woman who knitted lace. Then the girl—Benicia O'Donoju. Grant called to his mind the vivid glory of her hair, the trick of her short upper lip in curling outward like the petal of a tea rose, a something roguish always lurking deep down in the warm pools of her eyes.

"Not Mexican. We are Spanish folk." That was her sharp reproof when he, blundering, had [95] asked her if she was of Mexican blood. That night on the train—it seemed a year back. "Not Mexican." Now he understood why the girl had corrected him so pointedly. Thank God she was not of that breed!

Near dusk the line was halted and one of the guards dismounted. Grant saw him fumble in his shirt and bring out a bright bit of metal, saw him approach the head of the line and tinker with the first fellow's wrist shackle. He heard a sharp intake of breath behind him and, turning, caught the stamp of terror on the giant Indian's face. Something was going forward which he could not comprehend, something to shake the stoicism of this Indian. Within five minutes the steel band about his wrist was unlocked and he stood free of the chain with the rest of the prisoners. He saw on the faces of all of them that same terror mask the Indian wore.

The freed men cast covert glances at the guards, followed their every move with cat-like slyness. The little Chinaman began a falsetto sing-song under his breath, which might have been a prayer to his protecting joss. One of the guards turned in his saddle and called some jocular order to the prisoners. They moved on in the wine-light of the sunset, falling precisely into the [96] line they had held when chained, their eyes vigilant for every move of a hand on the part of the mounted men.

The rurales now carried their rifles swung free across the saddles.

Though he could understand no word of the muttered scraps of speech passed between man and man behind him, the magnetic fear waves possessing all the rest began to prompt Grant to some comprehension. The coming night—dropping of the chain—those rifles unslung from shoulders and carried free across the saddles:—did these things presage the near end of this farce of a pilgrimage across the desert to a court?

Light now was nearly gone from the western sky and the guards were riding farther away from the trudging line, deliberately inviting some one to offer himself for fair target practice while gunsights still could be seen. Grant faced the hazard squarely. Certain he was that none of the eight would see another sunrise, that butcher's work would commence the minute sporting chances were definitively ignored by the victims. He was of no mind to be the passive party to a hog killing. Better a quick dash—a bullet from behind—

The line of men had just emerged from an arroyo with almost perpendicular sides; the bed of [97] the dry stream was thick with shadow. Grant leaped from line and ran straight for the guard who rode between himself and the course of the stream. Almost at his stirrup he swerved and cut under the horse's rump.

Shouts. A shot gone wild. Grant, zigzagging, was at the brink of the arroyo. Two shots almost as one. A lance of fire through his shoulder. Up went his arms and he plunged headlong into the gulf of blackness.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HEART OF BENICIA

The Desert of Altar is transcendence of silence. From the savage Growler range in Arizona south to the obsidian bastions of Pinacate, by the dead Gulf, is space to crowd five million people with their tumult of cities, their crash of machines, hoot of locomotives and shriek of steel under stress. Yet in all this blank waste not a sound.

The chirp of the wren from her hole in the *sahuaro* carries not even so far as the watching hawk on nearby skeleton *ocatilla* stalk. The meat cry of the prowling cat in the mountains where the wild sheep range is swallowed in the muffling depths of the canyon under her feet. Thin air seems too tenuous to conduct sound waves. Creatures of the wild lands move mute under the oppression of unbounded space.

Yet nowhere does rumour fly swifter than here in this vacant land. Comes a strange prowler to the waterholes of Tinajas Altas, and the antelope fifty miles away know the news and seek the [99] hidden springs at Bates' Wells. A Papago three days' journey from the nearest rancheria stumbles onto hoofprints of six horses away over where tidewater climbs into the delta of the Colorado, and he turns back to carry report of revolution in Baja California. Strange signs tell their tales from the sands; the arrangement of little sticks conveys whole chapters of information to the wayfarer. When man meets man, be he white, brown or copper coloured, news is a torch to be passed on to a new hand. Nothing can be long a secret. The latent must out.

Even as the worthy Doc Stooder in his shabby office at Arizora had a never-ending messenger service from all the Border and the lands beyond, carrying scraps of oblique news, another far distant in the Garden of Solitude enjoyed the same intelligence. This was Don Padraic O'Donoju, last of the line of masters over the once-great principality of El Rancho del Refugio. Though a hundred years of revolution, of uproar and the teetering of political balances in the more populous Mexico to south and east of him had left to the last don of the O'Donojus little more territory than that comprised in the oasis of the Garden, still he had cattle enough to be counted a rich man and six generations of custom gave him unbroken sway over the Papagoes. From the [100] Sand People of the Gulf away up to the San Xavier rancheria at Tucson extended the secret kingdom of Don Padraic's influence. His only tithes were those of loyalty and the bringing of report. What the Papagoes thought Don Padraic should know, that he knew as speedily as word could be passed.

So, a week after Benicia had returned to the Casa O'Donoju, came a runner from the eastward —one sent by El Doctor Coyote Belly, whose winter house was at Babinioqui near the railroad. The runner had big news. El Doctor, known all over the Desert of Altar because of his reputed skill at curing hydrophobia and the bite of the sidewinder, had a sick white man—a seriously wounded white man who might be an American—in his house at Babinioqui and he asked Don Padraic what he should do with this man.

El Doctor was returning from the Medicine Cave of Pinacate—this was the runner's tale—when on the road that runs from Sonizona to Hermosillo he found seven dead men; dead men with the marks of fetters on their left wrists. A little beyond he found still another; this one, lying in an arroyo, had been shot through the shoulder from behind and he still lived. El Doctor had tied the [101] living man to his burro and taken him to his winter house at Babinioqui, where he had treated him with the most powerful herbs and had massaged the wound with the lizard image. The wounded white man would live. Coyote Belly did not wish to turn him over to the Mexicans, for he was a victim of *ley de fuga* and the Mexicans undoubtedly would shoot him again.

Don Padraic, whose charity was wider than his acres, made his decision instantly. He ordered Quelele to go, with the runner to guide him to El Doctor's house, in the little desert car and to fetch the white man to the Garden of Solitude as soon as he was able to be moved. It was best, the master instructed, that Quelele travel in the night, returning with the wounded man, and tell no one of the object of his mission.

The big Indian stocked the car with gasoline from the tank behind the master's house—a reservoir filled monthly from drums brought by ox cart from the distant railroad point—strapped canteens and oil containers on his running boards and was off. Don Padraic said nothing of the incident to his daughter.

That night Don Padraic and Benicia sat in the candlelight of the big salon or living room which [102] filled the space of one quadrangle off the patio. In all Sonora there was no counterpart of this chamber of mellowed antiquities, the collection of generations of the O'Donoju. Low ceiled and with crossing beams of oak, whereon the marks of the hewer's adze showed like waves; walls hung with tapestries between the heavy frames of portraits of grandees and their ladies of forgotten days; a great fireplace wherein a man could stand upright, with its hand-wrought andirons and heavy crane shank; floor almost black from a hundred years of polishing and with the skins of animals floating there like so many islands:—here was a magic bit of old Spain lifted overseas to find root in the heart of the desert.

Benicia, in a gown of rippling lines which left her strong young arms bare to the shoulder, was seated behind the great golden span of her harp. Candlelight falling across her shoulders made ivory the flesh of her bare arms as they moved rhythmically back and forth over the wilderness of strings. She was playing the Volga Boatsong, a peasant melody whose minors rose and fell to the sweep of oars. As the girl gave her heart to the music, the thrumming strings wove a picture of

some barbaric steppe coming down to a sluggish river; boatmen chanting at the sweeps. The ancient room was a-thrill with resonance. [103]

She finished with just a breath of melody, the song of the boatmen dying in the distance. Her eyes fell on the face of her father; it was deeply etched by the play of flames from the mesquite logs in the fireplace. Always he sat this way, moveless before the fire, when she played on the great harp o' nights, freeing his soul to drink in the melodies; but to Benicia's understanding eyes appeared now the semblance of a deeper shadow not of the firelight. She softly left the instrument and stole over to nestle herself on the broad chair wing, with her coppery head laid against the snow white one.

"*Pobrecito*"—this was her pet word carried through the years from childhood—"*Pobrecito*, thy face is as grave as the owl's. Some secret? Remember, there are no secrets between us two—no worry which the other does not share."

Her coaxing hand played through the heavy mane of hair; her cheek was against his. Don Padraic slowly turned his head with denial in his eyes; but that denial could not sustain the accusation in the steady blue eyes of the daughter. During the week Benicia had been home a secret doubt had steadily pressed upon the father; he had been waiting some word from her which did not come. Now one of his hands stole up to tweak her ear—signal of surrender. [104]

"'Nicia, great-heart, you have told me all about your two years in the cities—your two years of life in the great world outside? There is something you have withheld?"

"Nothing, little father." She gave him a peck on the forehead. Don Padraic appeared to be groping for his words.

"You met—many American men—young men who—ah—might have been attracted by the beauty of my desert flower?"

A ripple of soft laughter and the girl pressed closer to him.

"Ah, *Pobrecito*, you forget that your desert flower carries thorns. Ask that ridiculous Hamilcar Urgo; he has felt the thorns."

"But"—Don Padraic was not to be put off by evasions—"was there not one whose heart was conquered by a girl of such fire, such beauty? Come—come! These Americans are not men of ice."

For a minute Benicia was silent. She was weighing in all sincerity the only shred of a secret she had in her heart; testing it for genuineness as fairly as she might.

"Yes, daddy, there were many with bold eyes and ready tongues; but hardly had they begun to speak as friends or companions when their talk was all of money—how much they were planning to make that year; the 'big deal' they were going to put through. All were like this—but one." [105]

"Ah," breathed Don Padraic.

"That one I have told you of," she continued. "The man on the train who was so masterful with little Hamilcar. He was not like the others. A man of wit—of sympathies; one who seemed to have understanding of life—"

"And he—?" the father prompted.

"We said '*adios*' the night before we came to Arizora. I did not see him in the morning, though he said that was his destination."

They were silent once more. Finally from Benicia a wraith of laughter on fluttering wings of a sigh:

"But, my grave old owl, why these questions? Never before have I seen my daddy play the prying duenna."

"Heart of mine, thou canst not be blind"—the father's voice trembled over the intimate pronoun. "I have been thy father, mother, elder brother, all in one. And selfish—selfish beyond measure! Keeping thee chained here to an old man in the wilderness when all the world of love and life lies beyond—" [106]

"No—no, daddy mine!" Tears dewed blue eyes as yearning arm strained him to her.

"—My 'Nicia has her years ahead of her. Her love life must be awakened and given freedom to unfold like a flower in a garden. Yet I have permitted her to come back to me here in the Garden of Solitude because I was lonely. Better far that I sell what we have here and take you back to the world. In these evil days there is no fit mate to be found for you in all Sonora. Hamilcar Urgo has threatened me if I do not give you to him; he is of our blood, but he is abominable. I—"

A soft hand clapped over his lips. He heard passionate words:

"Father mine, stop! Never—never whisper again that you will sell our Garden. For I love it, next to you, above all the world. We are desert people, little father. We live in God's hand and are happy. The cities crush me with their noise, their confusion."

"But, 'Nicia—"

"And, dearest of daddies"—her lips against his ear were giving kisses light as thistledown—"I want no lover but you—no happiness but what I have returned to here in the Garden. Now, not a word more!" [107]

She was on her feet and with the skirts of her gown caught in her fingers was making him an

old-fashioned curtsy. Then she slipped into the shadows where the great golden harp stood, and in an instant the ancient room began to hum with spirited arpeggios—rush of many waters over a fall.

CHAPTER IX

[108]

GOLD AND PEARLS

Bim Bagley, on the trail of the information brought by Doc Stooder's pipe line, found himself against a blank wall the instant he passed through the barrier of the Line into Sonizona. He was too conversant with the ways of Mexican officialdom to make any inquiry in high places, knowing that to do so would be but to jeopardize Grant Hickman, however he might be placed, and win for himself naught but suave denials. Nor did he even go to the American consul, who, in the usual course of things, would be the last man in Sonizona to hear of the disappearance of an American citizen there.

Rather, with Doc Stooder's counsel, Bim circulated warily among the gambling halls and in the *cantinas* where the rurales were wont to go for their salt and mescal. Here ten pesos slipped into a complacent palm; there twenty. Then weary waiting for results.

[109]

Bit by bit the story came to him, and behind the fragments was always the dim figure of Colonel Hamilcar Urgo. Bagley knew Urgo for the tyrant politician that he was: how he used his position in the garrison as a cloak to cover his manipulations of government all along the Sonora border. No man was stronger, not even the governor of Sonora himself; and the central regime in Mexico City was forced to wink at Colonel Urgo's obliquities else run the risk of his firing the train to revolution.

But why this little sand viper in uniform should have conceived a desire to be rid of Grant Hickman, a total stranger to the country, not even the most astute of Bagley's informers could guess. "'E's not like theese gringo" appeared to cover the whole case.

The saturnine doctor, repenting him of his brusque reception of the New York man—prompted, after all, by his superlative caution in the presence of a possible impostor—sent the tip to the farthermost ganglions of his news system: "Fifty gold dollars to the man bringing information of the missing American's whereabouts."

[110]

Doc Stooder's proffer of that amount of money was not all humanitarian. Below his surface show of concern, designed for the benefit of Bim Bagley, good Dr. Stooder did not care a plugged nickel what might be the fate of the Eastern man. He was not one to lose sleep over the misfortunes of others if those misfortunes were not attributable to strictly physical causes and under materia medica. Then only they interested him.

No, Doc Stooder's real concern was the delay caused by the disappearance of this third party to his scheme for a "great killing." The killing in question was one he could not make single-handed. Circumstances which have no place in this tale had forced him to share the secret of it with Bagley, and the latter had refused to move a step in the enterprise until he had his pal from overseas in on the game. The Doc fretted aloud one day, which was the tenth after Grant had dropped from sight.

"Son, I'm tellin' you 'less we make tracks for that Four Evangelists mission purty pronto this here O'Donoju Spaniard down in the Garden's goin' to get what's in the wind and shove in on us. He's got every Papago from here to the Gulf runnin' to him with every whisper a little bird lets spill. He gets wind you an' me are raising sand to lay hands on an engineer out from Noo Yawk an' he smells a mice."

[111]

"You go dig alone for your dam'd mission." Bim Bagley's temper had been ground fine by days of restless anxiety. "Me, I roost right here till I get the lay where my buddy is."

Next day all the silver of subsidy Bim had distributed bore fruit an hundred-fold. There came to the office of Doc Stooder unquestioned report that the missing American was alive, though shot through the body, and under the care of El Doctor Coyote Belly at a speck in the desert called Babinioqui away down beyond the Line.

Bagley was off in his car that night. Doc Stooder, alone in his office and with a graduating glass and bottle of fiery tequila at his elbow, dreamed of gold plate brought to light from caverns of sand, of altar jewels and hoards of nuggets—riches of crafty priests—salvaged from the crypt of a holy place lost to sight of man a century and a quarter.

"Gold all hammered into crosses an' such!" The Doc tipped his brimming graduating glass against the electric bulb and studied with fond eye the liquor made golden by the light.

"—Pearls, my Papago says. Pearls big as *bisnaga* fruit an' greeny-white like a high moon. Gold an' pearls! Pearls an' gold! Stooder, you're goin' be a prancin', r'arin' aristocrat!"

CHAPTER X

[112]

AT THE CASA O'DONOJU

Six days after Quelele the Papago set out on his mission of mercy from the Casa O'Donoju he returned to the oasis. It was in the first flush of dawn that the *shuf-shuf* of the little car roused master and servants; Quelele had travelled all night and at a pace to conserve the strength of the wounded man, who lay on thick straw in the box body. All night without lights save the thickly strewn lamps in the firmament, wending hither and thither through the scrub where half-guessed lines in the sand marked the Road of the Dead Men—a journey weird enough.

For Grant Hickman it was but part of the moving drama of a dream. That instant of flight from the chain gang, when a bullet tore through his shoulder and sent him toppling into the arroyo, was the visitation of death; in his flickering perceptions all else following was but adventuring in the country beyond death—incidents to paint impressions on a consciousness otherwise wiped clean of otherworld recollections. First of these exposures on the cloudy plate of his mind came [113] many days after the rurales had left him for dead in the desert: a face deep-dyed as mahogany and with white bristles of a beard about chin and lips, a face kindly withal, which bent near his as a hand lifted his head to bring his lips to a vessel of pungent brew. Then another age of drifting and swimming through soft clouds.

Grant had just come to accept the grey-thatched face of El Doctor Coyote Belly as part of a permanent picture when another Indian appeared between himself and the bundles of sticks making a roof over his head. This second personage in the world of the unreal, a giant with the features of a boy, had spelled El Doctor in ministering herb brews and keeping the wet cloths under the burning wound in his back for what seemed many years. Then Grant had felt himself lifted, carried from the hut with the bundles of sticks for a roof and laid on sweet smelling straw. In the starshine he felt the hand of El Doctor close over his own with a heartening squeeze.

Then—wonder of wonders!—the racking cough of a gas engine, and Grant was soaring back to that familiar earth which had been lost to him so long.

Upon the arrival of the car bringing Grant to the Casa O'Donoju Don Padraic, hastily dressed, [114] superintended the moving of his guest to a small, clean room, candle lit. The wounded man felt the gracious softness of feathers under him, the suave clinging of sheets. An aged Indian woman, working under the white man's direction, divested him of his tattered clothes and patted everything comfortable. Drowsy luxury stole across his consciousness to cloud it and bring sleep.

Sunlight flooded the room when Grant awoke. He was alone. His mind was clearer than it had been since he was shot. Only the steady burning in his vitals linked this moment of comfort with the tortured past. His eyes roved about the room to take in its appointments. White walls devoid of ornamentation; by the heavy door with its curiously wrought iron latch a single chest of drawers of some antique pattern; the bed he lay upon massive as a galleon of old days and with a canopy of carved wood and tapestry for a sail: here was a room from the period department of the Metropolitan Museum.

Grant was patiently trying to fit together the jig-saw scraps of his memory when the door [115] opened and the white man he had seen the night before entered. Seeing the light of reason in the patient's eyes, Don Padraic smiled and bowed. Something mighty heartening lay in that welcome and the warm cordiality of Don Padraic's features.

"I am rejoiced to find you better to-day," he said as he drew a chair to the side of the bed. "Yours was a hard journey last night."

"I am still a little uncertain up here"—Grant tapped his forehead with an attempt at a laugh. "For instance, I was just thinking I had been lifted straight into a room of the Metropolitan in New York."

The host's brows were knitted an instant, then he caught the allusion and smiled.

"Ah, yes; we have rather ancient furnishings here. But you are quite a distance from New York, señor. This is the Casa O'Donoju in the Garden of Solitude, and I am Don Padraic O'Donoju."

The name crashed into Grant's consciousness like the clang of iron. His heart gave a great leap. Could it be possible—? No, this must be but part of the aurora dreams of the vague eternity still just behind his back. Grant wished to make no blunder which might belie the present soundness [116] of his mind, so he held his tongue over the question burning to be asked. Instead:

"My name is Grant Hickman, sir. I am deeply obliged to you for your charity in bringing me here. Of course, I do not know quite how it all happened—my coming here from some place else, where an Indian, or two of them—seemed to be caring for me. And I fear I am hardly a presentable guest." The sick man's hand passed ruefully over his stubby chin.

Don Padraic made a gesture dismissing Grant's fastidiousness. "Señor, a gentleman should not consider the state of his beard and the state of his health with equal seriousness. The one may be repaired at once even if our wishes cannot immediately effect a cure of the other. Permit me to retire, señor, and not tax you with questions until you are stronger."

Shortly after the gentle host had bowed himself out an Indian servant entered with basin and razor and effected an agreeable change in the patient's appearance. Then Grant was left alone with the tab to a wonderful possibility to turn over and over in his mind.

He was in the house of the O'Donoju. Could there be more than one family of that unusual [117] name in the desert country; or had fate thrown him a recompense for all he'd suffered by lifting

him from a line of chained convicts to carry him through a nightmare straight to the one spot in all the world he most desired to be in? Perhaps under the same roof, near enough to him to permit the carrying of her laughter, was Benicia, the vivid creature who had won his heart into captivity.

He was not kept long in suspense. The door opened and Don Padraic's white clad figure appeared, behind it Benicia. She was in khaki, as Grant had last seen her at the Arizora station, wide-brimmed hat noosed under her chin just as she had come in from a ride through the oasis. All the wild, free spaces of the wilderness seemed compacted in the girl's trim figure, in the flush of her browned cheeks touched by the sun.

"Señor Hickman—" Don Padraic began introduction, but Benicia was at the bedside; her cool hand was given to Grant's clasp with a gesture of boyish comradeship.

"We need not be introduced, father," Benicia laughed, and there was a queer catch in her throat. "Señor Hickman did me a service on the train which served as the best introduction in the world." Turning back to Grant—"I did not know, señor, you were the wounded man Quelele brought into our home so early this morning—did not even know we had a guest until my father told me when I returned from my ride a few minutes ago." [118]

Grant strove to put all his heart prompted in words that were mete: "And I did not dare hope that this house to which a miracle has brought me was the desert home you described on the train."

Benicia's eyes read surely what his lips would not frame. She saw in the white face of the wounded man a touch of that old hardihood and forthright spirit of address which had commended this American to her at first meeting—commended him even against her own impulse to resent his self-assurance. But she saw, too, how suffering battled to dim the valiant spirit, and something deeper than abstract sympathy stirred in her heart.

"But, señor, to meet you again this way! Father has told me the message brought from El Doctor: how you were found among dead men on the Hermosillo road and brought back to life by that old Papago. You, a stranger and unknown here in the desert country—how could this happen to you, señor?" [119]

Don Padraic interposed:

"Perhaps, 'Nicia, when Señor Hickman is stronger he will answer questions. Would it not be better—?"

The girl was quick to appreciate her father's considerate thought. Again she laid her hand in Grant's.

"If you will permit me to play the doctor—at least to see to it that lazy old 'Cepcion, your nurse, does not neglect you?" The smile that went with this promise was tonic for the sick man. It remained like an afterglow when the door was closed behind the girl. And when the wrinkled Indian woman came an hour later with broth on a silver tray that smile reappeared, translated into the fragrant beauty of rose petals laid by the side of the bowl.

Five luxurious days passed—days each with a wonderful spot of sunshine in them—that when Benicia accompanied the aged 'Cepcion to his chamber. On these daily visits she would draw her chair to the side of the great bed—she looked very small below the high buttress of the mattress—and while he quaffed his chicken broth and nibbled his flaky tortillas Benicia would talk. 'Cepcion, like some mahogany coloured manikin in her flaring skirts and winged bodice, always stood, arms akimbo and features passive as a graven image, behind her mistress' chair. [120]

The girl's talk was directed away from the personal; with an art concealing art she evaded Grant's frequent endeavours to swing conversation into more intimate channels. She brought the world of the desert into the sick room, unconsciously revealing herself as a flashing, restless creature of the wastes: now on horseback and threading dim trails over the Line to carry quinine to a family of Papagoes down with the fever; now beside Quelele in the little gas-beetle and skimming to Caborca, the southern town, to buy a wedding dress for an Indian belle.

Not once did she touch again upon the subject of Grant's misadventures and how he came to be found on the road to Hermosillo. A delicate sense of the fitness of things prompted her to await the moment when he himself should volunteer explanations. Grant, on his part, felt an impelling reluctance to give details, for to do so would necessitate his revealing his conviction that little Colonel Urgo's was the hand that had pushed him so near death. A delicate—perhaps quixotic—sense of personal honour prompted that he keep his enemy's name out of any explanations. He could not know how close might be the little Spaniard's relations with Benicia and her father—even discounting Urgo's boast that he expected to make the girl his wife—and, besides, he felt the score between himself and Urgo must be evened before he linked the Colonel's name with his experiences. [121]

With Benicia's father Grant modified his resolution to a certain degree. It was no more than proper, he argued with himself, that the master of the Casa O'Donoju have some explanation for the presence in his house of a man from a Mexican chain gang.

"Señor O'Donoju," Grant addressed his host when the latter was come on one of his daily visits, "you have been more than kind to me, but I fear I may be an embarrassment to you—a fugitive, you know, if that is my status before the law."

"My dear sir"—the courtly Spaniard waved away Grant's scruples with a smile—"you forget that the evidence El Doctor Coyote Belly found on the Hermosillo Road—you the only survivor

among eight men who had been murdered, eight men with marks of fetters on their wrists; that this evidence, I say, clearly indicates you now have no status whatever before what the Mexicans call their law." [122]

Grant looked his surprise. Don Padraic continued easily:

"You are officially dead, Señor Hickman. It is the *ley de fuga*—the law of flight. You were shot trying to escape while being transferred from one prison to another. Monstrous barbarism! So the president, Francisco Madero, met his end; so, perhaps, Carranza. When you were chained to other convicts and sent afoot out into the desert you were doomed; the men responsible for that act counted you as dead the minute they ordered you overland to Hermosillo."

Grant recalled the mask of fear he'd seen settle over the features of the big Indian, his chain mate, when the rurales began to loose the fetters in the sunset hour of that fateful night on the desert; how the asthmatic little Chinaman had commenced his chant to the joss—men who had known every weary hour of that march brought them nearer to the stroke of doom.

"I have no direct evidence to explain why I was in that chain gang," Grant began, honestly enough; then he told the story of the fight in the gambling palace after the discovery of the counterfeit dollars in his pocket, reserving only all reference to Colonel Urgo. His host heard him through with a grave face. [123]

"Perhaps," he ventured, "you were on some mission to the Border which ran counter to the interests of a scheming official on the Mexican side."

"To be honest, I do not know yet on what mission I came to Arizora," Grant conceded with a laugh. "A friend of mine wrote me in New York he wanted me to join him in 'a whale of a proposition' out here along the Border. I was fool enough to come just on that, and when I had an interview with a Dr. Stooder—"

"Ah!" The interjection escaped Don Padraic against instant reflex of judgment, as his hand part way raised to his lips betrayed. Grant caught the other's quickly covered confusion and suddenly was sensible of his careless garrulity. Here he was bandying names in a matter his friend Bagley had surrounded with unexplained secrecy. He finished lamely:

"And so on my first night in Arizora I fell into a trap."

When Don Padraic left the chamber Grant still was dwelling upon his host's involuntary exclamation at the name of Doc Stooder. What was there about the saturnine physician, what notorious reputation which could lead a hermit such as Don Padraic away off in this desert oasis to evince surprise that one under his roof had had dealings with him? More and more an undefined regret for his mention of the name of Stooder plagued him. [124]

In truth, the whole reason for his coming to Arizora and whatever fantastic project might be at the bottom of it appeared now strangely linked with this latest turn of fate, his coming to the Casa O'Donoju. Grant became aware of a duty long overlooked and wrote a brief and non-committal note to Bim Bagley, in Arizora, saying only he had suffered an accident and would return to the Border town as soon as he was able. This Benicia took from him to give to Quelele when he should go to the nearest railroad town.

Two days thereafter befell a boon the wounded man had dreamed of during many yearning hours. Two male servants of the household came to dress him in one of Don Padraic's white suits —his own clothes were rags—and assisted him down a long hall which turned into the green paradise of the patio. There under the royal date palm they sat him, with the fountain pool and its magic purple sails of the hyacinth at his feet, behind and on either hand the green and crimson glory of the geraniums. [125]

Benicia was awaiting him there alone. The girl, in a simple green frock which revealed bare arms and the warm round of her shoulders, was the embodiment of the garden's fairy essence. She was a sprite of this green and glowing place. Hot sunlight falling upon her head made it a great exotic flower.

"Now both of us can revel in being lawbreakers," she exclaimed when the Indians had bowed themselves out. She was hovering about Grant, patting into place the gay serape which covered his knees.

"Lawbreakers!" Grant's glowing eyes bespoke the intoxication of pleasure. "I feel, rather, like a prisoner whose sentence is commuted."

The girl's rippling laughter ended with, "Oh, but my father said you should not be moved for three days yet. Now he has gone into town with Quelele and you and I are breaking the law—with you equally guilty."

"What man would not rush into crime with you to lead?" he rallied, and the little game of give and take in joke and repartee which had been of their devising these last few days of Grant's convalescence, when Benicia made her daily visits at his bedside, was resumed. It was in this course their friendship had grown: on a basis of comradeship and with healthy minds in apposition, giving and finding something of humour, of rollicking fun. No angling for sickly sentimentalism on the part of this unspoiled girl of the waste places—so Grant during hours of staring at the ceiling had appraised the heart of Benicia O'Donoju; no place in their communion for any of the trite nothings a man burbles into concealed ear of a flapper over tea or whatever else comes from the sophisticated city teapot. [126]

During these delicious hours in the shadow-dappled patio, as heretofore, Benicia continued a

tantalizing enigma to the man of cities. While seeming to give so freely of herself in laughing quip and quick answer to his sallies, never was there that least suspicion of some overtone to her buoyancy the man yearned to catch; not the quick revealing of secret depths in the eyes which would betray a heart responsive to the waves of the man's love enveloping her. Yet the lips of the girl, full, soft, trembling with unconcealed promise of richness to the one conquering them: these [127] were not the lips of one devoid of love's alluring tyrannies. Nor was the rounded body of her, fully ripened to share in the law of life giving, one to wither outside love's garden.

Grant could not speculate, with tremors of eagerness, on the flood of passion that was dammed behind the girl's sure mastery of herself. Dare he believe that he might be the one to loose that flood? As he sat there in the odorous garden the nimble, superficial part of his brain was playing with bubbles while the deeper fibre of him resolved that nothing in the world mattered beyond possessing Benicia's love.

When luncheon was cleared away—it had been a veritable feast of laughter—Benicia clapped her hands and gave some direction to the servant answering. The Indian woman disappeared in the body of the house, soon to come waddling out under the weight of the great harp. Grant gasped his surprise; he never had associated harps with any surroundings other than the orchestra pit.

"My Irish ancestors, who were kings in Donegal, always called for their harp after a feast," Benicia declared with laughter in her eyes. "That is the reason we Irish are such dreamers. The [128] harp is the stairs to dreams. Listen, señor, and hear if I tell the truth."

Grant watched her, fascinated. Her slender body was in the shade of a great palm frond, but when she leaned her head forward against the carved sounding board a narrow lance of sunshine shot down to kindle her hair to flame there against the gold. As her bare arms passed in swift flight of swallows across the field of strings shadows and sunlight played upon them in gules and chevrons of black and ivory.

First she gave the solo, *Depuis le Jour*, from some opera Grant vaguely recalled; it was a mad thing, wherein the great instrument thundered to the far recesses of the patio garden. Then the girl's mood changed and was interpreted in the sighing motif of *In the Garden*. It was all bird song and lisping fountains. Grant allowed his eyes to close so his soul could take flight with the music.

Slowly, reluctantly, Benicia's fingers swept the final chords. The great harp was still.

Out from the shadow of a flanking archway stepped a dapper little figure in a cloak. Heels clicked sharply and the marionette bowed low. It was Colonel Hamilcar Urgo.

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[129]

CHAPTER XI

THE MARK OF EL ROJO

Colonel Urgo straightened himself, and the smile that had twisted his little waxed moustache awry suddenly was smudged out. For his eyes encountered what they were hardly prepared to see—a living dead man. His face went sickly white; one hand arrested itself in the motion of making the sign of the cross. He stared at Grant, fascinated.

Grant himself was little less shaken at the appearance of his enemy. It was as if a cobra suddenly had lifted its head from the patio's flowering jungle. In a moment of dreamy ecstasy, when he had felt his heart yearning toward the girl's over a bridge of music, came this sinister apparition of evil. It was not fear of the man that caused Grant's heart to pound—the waspish little Spaniard possessed no essence of malignity sufficient to terrify one of the American's fibre; rather a loathing and instinctive reflex of anger gorged his combative nerves with blood. Grant read surely enough the shock of surprise in his enemy's eyes and cannily laid this revelation away [130] as a weapon to hand should necessity demand its use.

As for Benicia, she made no pretence of concealing her annoyance. Quick perception seized upon the coincidence of her father's absence and Colonel Urgo's coming; she knew the wily little suitor had somehow managed to time his visit to that circumstance. In the first flush of her surprise Benicia caught herself feeling a great thankfulness that Grant Hickman was in the house.

"If you have come to see my father"—Benicia did not rise to greet Urgo when he took a tentative step toward her—"he is absent at the moment. I am sorry you have not found him at home."

Urgo's lynx eyes darted from the girl's face to Grant's and back again. Plainly he was in a quandary, not knowing how much—if anything—this American had told his hosts of the circumstances of a night in Sonizona and its consequences. Benicia, misreading his perturbation, was quick to interpose with a smile all irony:

"This is Señor Hickman, whom you may remember having seen on the train. Señor Hickman, [131] this is a distant cousin of mine, Colonel Hamilcar Urgo, of the garrison at Sonizona. He is the gentleman who believed you occupied his berth out of El Paso, if you recall. There was some slight misunderstanding—"

Grant flashed a glance at the girl, read the mockery in her eyes and took his cue from her:

"I believe I have seen the Colonel subsequently," this in heavy seriousness. "Was it not somewhere in Sonizona?"

"I do not recall having had that honour." Teeth flashed in a nervous smile and the man's eyes veiled themselves furtively. He caught the challenge to battle of wits with the American and entrenched himself accordingly. Colonel Urgo found himself at a momentary disadvantage, however; he did not know what ammunition his rival would choose. Essaying a diversion, he addressed the girl in rapid Spanish.

"Our guest, Señor Hickman, does not understand Spanish," Benicia insinuated reproof. "Yes, it is quite true, as you have judged, that he is recovering from a wound—a slight misadventure on the road to Hermosillo. But pray be seated, my cousin, and let me order wine and a light luncheon. You are visibly fatigued." With a slight bow to Urgo Benicia arose and crossed the [132] patio to disappear in the shadows of the arcade.

Urgo, surprised into an unpleasant situation by being left alone with the man he had sent to death, fidgeted with the hasp of his cigarette case. He made great difficulty of scratching a match. Grant, watching his every move, decided to play some of the cards fate had dealt him.

"I guessed you were inquiring of Señorita O'Donoju about my condition, Colonel. You are charmingly solicitous. I was shot in the back—bullet through my shoulder. Left for dead with the other convicts."

The little Spaniard let smoke seep through his nostrils and spread out his hands to say, "So much for that!" Grant was not to be denied his advantage:

"Of course, Colonel Urgo, I remember you were good enough to be present when I was arraigned at the jail on a false charge of counterfeiting; I shall not soon forget the promise you made then to do what you could for me. You did—all you possibly could!" Grant's smile had become set and one hand resting on his blanketed knees flexed into a fist, white across the knuckles.

Urgo expelled a cloud of smoke from his lungs and showed his teeth in a wolf's smile. [133]

"You remember much, señor. Do not fail to remember, too, you are a criminal under the laws of Mexico, to be tried on charge of counterfeiting at the court of Hermosillo."

"Yes?" Grant was cool under the other's counter. "And will you move to take me to Hermosillo after what happened—out yonder on that road through the desert?"

"I?" Urgo's shoulders lifted. "I am a soldier, señor. I have nothing to do with justice and the courts. But assuredly you will be taken to Hermosillo and put on trial."

The little Spaniard had fully recovered his poise by now. The uneasy light in his eyes had yielded to a dangerous flicker of craft. Suavity of a tiger's purr lurked in his voice. Grant mastered the rage which ridged all his fighting muscles despite the weakness of his body; this was no moment to be betrayed into throwing away a trick.

"But before I go to Hermosillo, Colonel, of course I shall take precautions to insure that I get there—that there will be no more *ley de fuga* in my case. Don Padraic O'Donoju, who is an honest man; I shall take him more fully into my confidence and—"

"Then you have told—?" Urgo bit his lip in mortification over having fallen into a trap. Grant's [134] answering smile was innocent as a babe's.

"I might prefer, Colonel Urgo, to confine our affair—call it a misunderstanding between two gentlemen—strictly to yourself and myself, trusting to take care of myself when I have recovered my strength. But should I be driven to seek the assistance of an honest man—"

Benicia appeared that instant; behind her was 'Cepcion with a silver tray. Before Colonel Urgo bobbed to his feet Grant caught a shaft of cold fury from his eyes which said that if the girl's presence forced an armistice no promise of peace lay at its termination.

Followed an interlude of quiet comedy. Grant, content to leave the first move in the hands of his enemy, eased his shoulder lazily against the chair back and let his eyes play over the Spaniard's face and diminutive figure. There was an indolent suggestion of probing, of detached appraisal in the steady scrutiny which bit into Urgo's pride. That and dull rage over the unexplained presence of his rival here in Benicia's home kept the little whippet fidgeting.

He essayed addressing the girl in her own tongue, but again and more pointedly Benicia [135] reminded him of this breach of courtesy. She made no effort to conceal the imp of humour that tugged at the corners of her mouth; this flickering of a smile and the dancing of her eyes made farcical the sober decorum of her speech. Urgo, no fool, was not long realizing he was being made the butt of his cousin's sport. Thin lines of strain began to appear about the mouth that smiled so smugly; just below his temples irritated nerves commenced setting the muscles a-twitching. Grant, who did not fail to note these reflexes, saw in the figure opposite a preying animal setting himself for a spring.

Urgo and Benicia had been exchanging commonplaces. Suddenly the man leaned forward tensely and returned to the forbidden Spanish in a hurried burst: "For your own good, my cousin, I must have a few minutes with you alone. Arrange it, I command you."

"You are hardly the one, sweetest cousin, to be the judge of my good. Nor the one to command me." Benicia retorted in the same tongue. Then, turning with a smile of mock apology to Grant:

“You will excuse Colonel Urgo his occasional lapse from a tongue that is difficult for him.”

[136] The Spaniard took a final draught of wine and pushed back from the table where his luncheon had been spread. As he idly tapped the corn husk of one of his cigarettes Grant thought he saw resolution shape itself in the narrowed eyes. There was a moment’s silence, then Urgo addressed himself graciously to Grant:

“Señor Hickman, perhaps my adorable cousin here has not found opportunity to tell you anything of the history of this remarkable house in the desert where you have found such agreeable convalescence.”

“I believe not.” Grant spoke warily, his senses alert for some pitfall. He shot a warning glance at Benicia; but the girl, ignorant of the grim feud between the two, could not read it understandingly. Colonel Urgo surrounded his head with a blue cloud and continued:

“An engaging history, señor. Not a house in all Sonora with such romance behind it, such—how do you say it?—such legend, eh? Though I am distantly of the same family, our branch cannot claim the distinction that falls to my cousin, who is the last of the veritable O’Donoju.

[137] “Behold her glorious head, Señor Hickman!” Urgo waved his cigarette to point the burning of sunlight above Benicia’s brow; his own head inclined as if in reverence. “There in my fairest cousin’s so-marvellous hair lies all the legend and the history of the great family O’Donoju.”

The girl, frankly amused at what appeared a turgid compliment, tossed back her head in a gust of laughter. But Grant could not join with her. As from some iceberg veiled in fog came to him the cold feel of malignity moving to some unguessed purpose. Was Urgo planning to strike at him through the girl he adored? Yet what possible obloquy could he call up against Benicia, whose soul was unsullied as the winds of the wastes? Urgo spoke on:

“Undoubtedly, my cousin, Señor Hickman has felt his heart snared by those burning meshes of yours or he is not a judge of beauty”—gesture of impatience from Benicia. “So it is for the benefit of the señor as well as for your own, fairest cousin, that I recite this legend of the red hair of the O’Donoju. Strange, is it not, that all Sonora knows it and has told the story to its children for a hundred years, yet you, *chiquita*”—a wave of the cigarette toward the girl—“who should be most interested are the only ignorant one.

[138] “There was in the long ago, señor, a Michael O’Donohue—what you call of the wild Irish, who had flaming hair and an untamed spirit. A king in Spain gave him the whole district of Altar for his estate, and he came here to the Garden of Solitude with his Spanish lady and built him this house where we sit. He was a man who considered the safety of his soul, so he built a mission to the glory of the four evangelists out yonder by the Gulf where the Sand People needed the comfort of the Mother Church and—”

“He lived a life any one of his descendants might pattern after,” Benicia put in with a smile carrying a sting. Urgo touched his breast with delicate fingers and bowed. Then turning again to Grant:

“When the Apaches burned that mission, señor, a pious O’Donoju restored it and the family, then numerous, endowed that mission altar with much gold and silver. There was, too, a great string of pearls—pearls with a green light, legend says, which the Sand People brought from the shell beds of the Gulf to show their piety. You are following me, Señor Hickman, eh?”

[139] Grant made no sign. His eyes were upon Benicia’s face, reading there a slow change. Now she, too, had begun to feel a nameless portent stealing over her like the chill from hidden ice. The wells of her eyes were deeper; faint colour came and went in her cheeks and throat. Grant, certain that Urgo was preparing torture for her under the innocent mask of narrative, was helpless to intervene; no diversion short of the work of fists was possible, and that his weakness denied him.

“There was of that generation which restored the mission, señor, a wild youth, true descendant of the original O’Donoju. He was known from Mexico City to Tucson as El Rojo—the Red One—for his hair was the veritable colour of that which our cousin possesses. And the devil rode his heart with spurs of fire. You have never been told of El Rojo, Benicia?”

The girl made no answer. Her level gaze was a mute challenge. The little colonel rerolled one of his eternal cigarettes, lighted it and drank smoke with a sensuous inhalation.

“At the feast of the re-dedication El Rojo, banished from the family, appeared out of nowhere. Conceive the consternation, señor! The red head of the devil’s own come to sanctified ground. This fiery head, so like our Benicia’s, swooping as a comet into the feasting place of the family; [140] well might the pious O’Donojus be fearful.

“And their fears were not without grounds. Before El Rojo quit the Mission of the Four Evangelists he had murdered the priest, his own uncle, and stolen the rope of pearls from the sacred image of the Virgin. He rode away with one of his cousins, a foolish girl of the Mayortorenas, who was wife to him in the desert without priest or book.”

Urgo let his voice trail away as with a tale finished. His teasing glance lingered on the faces of his two auditors. Benicia drew a tremulous breath and forced a smile, as though she were relaxing from strain. On this cue the story teller unexpectedly continued:

“But I hear Señor Hickman ask, ‘What part has all this ancient legend with Señorita Benicia’s red hair?’ Patience, señor. We approach that.

“Legend says that though El Rojo’s wife worked upon his heart and brought repentance, it was

too late. He returned to the mission a year after his double crime to restore the Virgin's pearls to the sanctuary. The Apaches had been there just before him. The priests were slain and the mission burned. El Rojo buried the pearls within the stark walls, hoping the good God would [141] accept this his acknowledgment of sin. There the pearls lie to-day beyond sight of man, for the desert has blotted out the last remnants of ruins.

"But the sin of El Rojo was not so easily to be forgotten in sight of the good God, sweetest cousin." Urgo suddenly turned away from Grant, to whom he had been addressing his story, and fixed his eyes on Benicia; almost there was the click of snapping fetters in his glance. "You bear the mark of it above your brow like the mark of Cain—his fire-red hair!"

"Stop!" The girl leaped from her chair, blazing wrath in every line of her face. "I shall not listen —"

"The grandson of El Rojo and his grandson," Urgo purred on with his smile of a hunting cat, "every second generation of the O'Donoju has one born with the curse of the red hair to tell all Sonora God does not forget. And now you, the last of an accursed family, its great estates gone—its power gone—your own grandfather with his red hair shot with Maximilian!—You with the red head—daughter of a murderer—"

A hand closed over the collar of the colonel's military jacket, gave it a twist, throttling his [142] speech. Grant had leaped from his seat—a pain like a bayonet point shot through his shoulder at the sudden movement—and come upon the spiteful little slanderer from behind.

"Gringo assassin!" whistled the little Spaniard, and his right hand groped backward to a concealed holster. It fell into a grip too strong to be broken. Grant was bearing all his weight on the other's back, for the instant he was on his feet he discovered a weakness of his knees which would not support him. The impulse to shut off Urgo's venomous tongue had been acted upon without calculation; now that he had committed himself to action the American realized how heavy was the hazard against him. One arm useless, all the other muscles once ready to respond instantly to call for action now seeming to be palsied. A paralytic boldly attempting to bell a wildcat; this was the situation.

Benicia saw the American's face over the squirming Urgo's shoulder; it wore a strained grin which hardly served to mask the toll taken of weakened muscles. She whirled and ran out of the patio to call aid in the servants' quarters.

Now the hot fire from his wound was spreading across Grant's back and down his fighting arm [143] as he swayed across the patio half supported on the Spaniard's back. The frantic jerkings of Urgo's pistol arm in Grant's grip threatened momentarily to loosen the restraining fingers; that done, the American's end would be speedy.

Grant found himself near a wall, braced one foot against it and lunged outward. Down went both men. Urgo twisted out from under the heavier body, pinning him, and raised himself to one knee. Grant saw a tigerish gleam of triumph in the other's eyes as his right hand whipped back to the holster on his hip.

Some power more rapid than thought moved the American's sound arm outward in a wild sweep which encompassed a giant fuchsia bush growing in a Chinese tea tub. Over went the bush just as Urgo fired from the hip, its branches swishing down over the latter's head.

The bullet went wild. Grant, near swooning from the consuming pain of his wound, scrambled for his enemy—went up with him when he found his feet. The revolver had been knocked from Urgo's hand by the avalanche of greenery; a sideways kick of Grant's foot sent it spinning into the fountain.

Now the wounded man sent a final summons to his last reservoir of strength. Slowly—slowly he [144] forced the little Spaniard out of the patio and down the long corridor toward the front door of the house. When Benicia came running with two husky Indians they found Grant with his man waiting before the heavy oaken portal. One of the Indians swung back the door. Grant gave a supreme heave and the colonel went sprawling like a straddle bug out onto the gravel.

The great door slammed behind him.

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[145]

CHAPTER XII

DESERT SECRETS

Consider now the interesting activities of Doc Stooder, fallen angel of Æsculapius:

On a March evening of sunset splendour the worthy doctor descended from the single combination coach and baggage car which a suffering locomotive drags once daily from a junction point on the transcontinental line south through naked battalions of mountains to the ghost town of Cuprico. Once Cuprico was famous; once when primitive steam shovels nibbled at solid mountains of copper up back of Main Street Cuprico roared with a life that was dizzy and vaunted itself the rip-roarin'est copper camp in all the Southwest. But the glory that was Cuprico passed, even as that of Rome; to-day they tell of the town that when its mayor fell dead on the post office steps his body remained undiscovered for three days.

No romantic craving for revisiting scenes of his youth had prompted the Doc to his journey Cupricoward—he had been its premier stud player in a day of glory fifteen years before. No, a far more material urge had ended a period of fretting in Arizora by shunting him on a westward-wending train. For a week Bim Bagley, his partner in a secret enterprise, had been absent on his quest of El Doctor Coyote Belly and the New York engineer, Bim's friend, who was reported to be wounded and under the care of the Papago medicine man. Ten days prior to Bagley's excursion into Sonora had been frittered away in groping for information concerning this vanished engineer. All precious time wasted! [146]

It has, perhaps, become apparent that Doc Stooder was not enthusiastic over the inclusion of Grant Hickman, the Easterner, in his golden scheme of treasure trove in desert sands. The stubborn refusal of Bim Bagley to move without this fellow Hickman's being party to the enterprise had prevented a start on the expedition for the Mission of the Four Evangelists six weeks before. The canny physician—whose share in the joint endeavour was to be his exclusive information concerning the whereabouts of the Lost Mission—possessed in large degree that sense of divination bestowed upon folk of the desert which gives their imagination wings over the horizon of time. Each day of delay he read a day to the advantage of Don Padraic O'Donoju, certain sure as he was that the master of the desert oasis had come by knowledge of his own treasure hunt intent through mysterious desert channels. [147]

The vision of gold and pearls Doc Stooder had seen in the depths of raw alcohol on a night of dreaming in his office had become a goad. So he came to Cuprico, the ghost town not seventy miles away from the supposed site of the buried mission; his intent was to pick up his Papago informant, who lived midway between Cuprico and the Border, and, as Stooder happily phrased his purpose, "give things a look-see." If his luck was with him and he should stumble onto the mission during this solo game so much the better. Conscience nor maxims of fair play were any part of the doctor's moral anatomy.

The Doc upon his arrival did not pervade Cuprico's centres of evening society—the Golden Star pool hall and soft drinks emporium and the back room of Garcia's drug store—for reasons sufficiently potent to merit a paragraph of explanation.

Years before, when he was a resident of the mining camp and had money, Doc Stooder took unto himself a Mexican wife who had a passion for diamonds. Mrs. Apolinaria Stooder had a way with her which seemed to win deep into the atrophied heart of her spouse, and he showered her with the stones of her choice. No woman from Yuma to Tucson—so legend still recites—"packed so much ice" as Doc Stooder's. Then in an epidemic of typhoid, which the Doc combated with the heroism of a saint, Apolinaria died. [148]

Alone and with his own hands her sorrowing widower gave her sepulchre somewhere amid the gaunt hills surrounding the town. He let it become known after the interment that since Apolinaria loved her diamonds so he had buried them with her, adding for good measure of gossip that he figured their total value at round $5000. Immediately and for several years thereafter all the prospectors for fifty miles about gave up their search for dip and strike and prospected for Mrs. Apolinaria Stooder. Failing to find so much as a "colour" of her diamonds, the profession drew the conclusion that Doc Stooder was a monumental liar. His popularity waned accordingly.

Shadows were lengthening when Stooder tooled a rented desert skimmer out of Cuprico's single garage and brought it to a stop before the general store. Into the wagon box behind the seat went his bed roll, brought from Arizora and containing certain glassware whose contents were more precious to their owner than life itself; boxes of grocery staples; extra cans of oil and gasoline. Two big canteens on the running board were filled. Plugs of chewing tobacco heavy and broad as slate shingles were stowed in the tool box. In all this preparation the doctor's long legs calipered themselves from counter to car with remarkable efficiency. [149]

"Goin' on a little prospecting trip?" the storekeeper had volunteered when the Doc first commenced his stowing. No answer.

"Figgerin' on a little *pasear* down 'crost the Line?" hopefully from that worthy as he helped noose the tarpaulin over the dunnage. The Doc's head was buried above the ears among the engine's naked cylinders and he professed not to hear. When Stooder was seated at the wheel and the storekeeper had the edge of the final pail of water over the radiator vent he feebly flung out his last grappling hook:

"Reckon you might be selling Bibles to the Papagoes."

"Come here, friend," sternly from the doctor. "Now I give you the way inside if you'll promise to keep it mum." The storekeeper hopped around to lean his ear over the wheel in gleeful anticipation. [150]

"I'm a-goin' south from here to give a Chinese lady a lesson on the ocarina. So long!"

When the Doc skittered down the brief Main Street and out onto the thread of grey caliche that was the road to the mysterious south all of the west was a-roil with the final palette scrapings of the sunset—umber, pale lemon and, high above the mountains standing black as obsidian, cirrus clouds dyed a fugitive cherry. Ahead showed the ragged gate into the valley of El Infiernillo—the Little Hell—place of bleak distances between mountain ranges bare as sheet iron; place of unimaginable thirst when summer sun hurls reflected heat back from burning walls. Beyond El Infiernillo just a hint of peaks like fretwork spires marked destination for the doctor; there at the foot of the Growler range and where the Desert of Altar washes across the imaginary line

between two nations, lay the land of his desire. Somewhere on the Road of the Dead Men passing through that savage waste perchance a nubbin of weathered 'dobe wall lifted a few inches above the sand to mark treasure of gold and pearls below; maybe naught but a charred timber end concealed by a patch of greasewood and crying a secret to the ears of the searcher. [151]

Gold and pearls—pearls and gold! The Doc's rapt eye caught the colours of sacred treasure in the dyes of the sunset and read them for a portent of success.

"Me, I'm a-goin' just slosh around in wealth! Doc Stooder, the man with the *dinero*—that's me!" The gaunt head behind the wheel of the desert skimmer was tilted back and A. Stooder, M.D., carolled his expectations at the new stars. Then he reined in his gas snorter long enough to fumble with his bed roll in the wagon box. Out came a square bottle of fluid fire, such as passes currency with the international bootleggers in the Southwest. The Doc drank heartily to the promise spread across the western heavens. The bottle was tucked in a handy coat pocket for future reference.

Nights in the desert along the Line are psychic. They are not of the world of arc lights, elevated trains and the winking jewels of white ways. In that world man has so completely surrounded himself with the tinsels of his own making, the noise of his own multiplied squeakings and chatterings, that he comes to accept the vault above him as under the care of the city parks [152] department. His little tent of night is no higher than the towers of his skyscrapers. But in the desert it is different.

Emptiness of day is increased an hundred fold at dark because it leaps up to lose its frontiers behind the stars. Silence of the day is intensified to such a degree that the inner ear catches a humming of supernal machinery in the heavens. The eye measures perspectives between the near and far planets. And the soul of man hearkens to strange voices; sighings from the pale mouths of the desert scrubs, born to a servitude of thirst; whisperings passed from mountain top to mountain top; faint stirrings of the earth relaxed from the torsion of the sun.

Doc Stooder, desert familiar as he was, never could blunt his senses to this emptiness of night in the wastes. It awed him, left him itching under half-perceived conceptions of the infinite. Hence the bottle carried handily in his pocket. From time to time as he careered over the road faintly marked by the feeble sparks of his headlights he braked down to have a swig. The more he felt lifted above sombre unrealities about him the greater his impulse to break into song. The iron gate of El Infiernillo heard his roundelay.

Miles unreeled behind him. Dim shapes of mountains dissolved to new contours and were left [153] behind. The Doc came to a sharp eastward turning of the road but kept straight ahead out over the untracked flats to southward. He knew his way; the packed sand gave him as good traction as the road. Down and down into the unpeopled wilderness of sandhills and buttes bored the twin sparks of the little car.

Another shift of direction and the Doc was teetering up a narrow cañon between high mountain walls. His course was a dry wash, boulder strewn. Only instinct of a desert driver saved him from piling up on some rough block of detritus. Sand traps forced him to shove the engine into low, and the snarling of the exhaust was multiplied from the cañon walls.

A light flickered far ahead. A dog barked. The car wallowed and snuffled out of the wash to come to a halt before several silhouettes of huts. People, roused from sleep by the car's clamour, stood ringed about in curiosity; one held a torch of reeds.

"Ho, Guadalupe!" Doc Stooder bellowed. A solid looking Indian with a mat of tousled iron-grey hair stood out under the torch light, grinning a welcome to "El Doctor."

"Show me a place to sleep," commanded the visitor, and the one called Guadalupe carried the [154] doctor's bed-roll to his own hut, of which squaw and children were speedily dispossessed. So the good doctor from Arizora slept the rest of the night in the rancheria of the Sand People, last remnant of that Papago family for which the Mission of the Four Evangelists was reared to save souls. In five hours the Doc had covered by gasoline what it would have cost Guadalupe of the Sand People as many days in painful plodding.

Morning saw the rancheria in a ferment of excitement and Doc Stooder viciously tyrannical in reaction from his accustomed alcoholic night. Guadalupe found himself in a difficult position. Once in a moment of gratitude when the white doctor had snatched his squaw from the tortures of asthma—the miracle had occurred in Guadalupe's summer camp near Arizora—the Indian had babbled his knowledge of the buried mission, its treasure. But he had not counted upon this unexpected appearance of the white doctor, demanding to be led to the place of wealth. It is common with all the Southwestern Indians to believe naught but ill luck can follow any revelation to a white man of the desert's hidden gold; some say the early padres, themselves consistent [155] hoarders, inculcated this lesson. With the eyes of his fellow villagers disapprovingly upon him, Guadalupe first attempted evasion.

Stooder in an ominous quiet heard him through. Then without a word he opened a small medicine chest he carried in his bed-roll and took therefrom two tightly folded pieces of paper—blue and white. While Guadalupe and the rest watched, round-eyed, the doctor made quick passes with each bit of paper over the mouth of a small water *olla*. The surface of the water sizzed and boiled.

Guadalupe, two shades whiter, babbled his willingness to go at once to the place where the mission lay hidden.

"Prime cathartic for the mind," grunted the Doc, and he tuned his engine for the trip.

They were off down the cañon and into the yellow basin of El Infiernillo. Guadalupe, riding for the first time in the white man's smell-wagon, gripped his seat with the delicious fear of a child on a merry-go-round. He watched the movements of the doctor's foot on the gear-shift, marvelling that the beast concealed in pipes and rods answered each downward thrust with a roar. Earth spun under him as if Elder Brother himself, master of all created things, had a hold [156] on it and were pulling it all one way.

Down and down into the untracked miles of Altar. A single iron post on a hill marking the Line. The sierra of Pinacate cinder-red in the south for a beacon. Right and left sheet iron ranges with stipples of rust where the *camisa* grew. Mirage quivering into nothingness just as its false waters were ready to be parted by the car's wheels.

They came upon an east-and-west track in the sand—the Road of the Dead Men—and turned westward upon it. Away off to the north and east a spiral dust cloud walked across the wastes along the skirts of the mountains. Guadalupe pointed to it with an ejaculation in his own tongue. A sign—a sign! There was the place of the mission!

The Doc felt his internals quiver in expectation. Prickles of excitement played in fingers that gripped the wheel. Automatically he began to hum an ancient bar-room ditty.

The Papago indicated where he should turn off the road in the direction of a great gap in the mountains, into which the desert flowed as a sea. Here the mesquite lifted from its crouch and flourished in a five-foot growth—true index of hidden waters. The car made hard going, what with [157] brittle twigs that caught at its tires and the *cholla* creeping like a spined snake to threaten punctures. At his guide's word Doc Stooder stopped. Both scrambled out.

Before moving a step the Doc must have a ceremonial drink, a preliminary he did not deem necessary to share with Guadalupe. The man's big hands trembled as he raised the bottle to his lips; his eyes were shining with gold lust.

Guadalupe stood for several minutes slowly swinging his head from landmark to landmark, his eyes following calculated lines through the scrub. Then he commenced a slow pacing through the close-set aisles of the greasewood and cactus, bearing in a wide circle. He peered into the core of each shrub, kicked at every naked stub of root and branch appearing above the surface. The Doc, cursing and humming alternately, was right at his shoulder.

An hour passed—two. The sun, now high, burned mercilessly. Still Guadalupe pursued a narrowing circle through the scrub. Of a sudden the Indian gurgled and dropped to his knees beside a salt-bush. He whipped out his knife and began hacking at the tough stubs of branches near the soil. The Doc, slavering in his excitement, dropped beside him and looked into the heart [158] of the salt-bush. He saw nothing but a rounded slab of rock.

Guadalupe finished his knife work and started to dig with his hands. Terrier-like he pawed a hole away from what Stooder had taken for a rock. The smooth black surface began to curve outward in a form too symmetrical for nature's work; it was rounded and gradually flaring.

Guadalupe dug on. Blood pounded in the Doc's ears. Snatches of song trickled from his lips.

Suddenly patience exploded. Stooder pushed the Papago to his haunches and threw his own body full length into the hole dug. His arms embraced a flaring shape of metal. His eyes fell upon faint ridges and lines, like lettering. He spat upon the spot and rubbed it clean of clinging soil.

GLORIA DEI ET MUND——
PHILLIPUS REX
ANNO DOM.——XXIV

"The bell! The mission bell!" screamed the Doc.

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[159]

CHAPTER XIII

CROSSCURRENTS

An hour after the sun had set on the day of Colonel Urgo's humiliation at the Casa O'Donoju, Quelele tooled his car into the avenue of palms at the end of the long return journey from Magdalena, on the railroad. With him were his master, Don Padraic, and an American stranger, Bim Bagley of Arizora.

Fate had played capriciously with Bim. When he set out from Arizora on the quest of his pal Grant Hickman it was only on the bare report that the man was seriously wounded and under the care of El Doctor Coyote Belly at Babinioqui, south of the Line. Near the end of his journey his car had wrecked itself beyond repair hard by Magdalena; a mule had been requisitioned to carry him over the mountains to the home of the medicine man; once there he was as far from the end of his quest as ever.

For grey old Coyote Belly lied unblinkingly. He knew nothing of a wounded man. Persuasion of words nor the chink of silver dollars availed to budge him from a trust he conceived to be joined [160] between himself and the master of the Casa O'Donoju.

The hours following the scene in the patio and the sudden gust of action concluding the visit of Hamilcar Urgo had been trying ones for Grant. Spent as he was by the struggle with the

Spaniard, he had suffered himself to be half-carried to his room by the Indian servants. Benicia, accompanying him to the door, had permitted her hand to rest in his at farewell; a clasp tried to tell what the storm in her soul denied speech. The girl's face was etched by suffering; sacrificed pride and a shadow of some deep fear lay heavy in her eyes and the drawn lines about her mouth. The wound made by her spiteful suitor was deeper than Grant could conceive.

Alone on his bed he conned over the tale Urgo had told. Unfamiliar as he was with the Latin temperament, the belief of the romance peoples in the very reality of inherited curse and whips of Nemesis pursuing innocent generations, yet the raw tragedy of the story fired his imagination. He tried to put himself in the place of the girl he loved with all her pride of race and family; to feel with her the stripes of scorn the despicable Urgo had laid on. El Rojo's desecration of the [161]
mission sanctuary by an act of blood; his flight into the desert with the pearls of the Virgin and a girl, "who was wife to him without priest or book"; the blotting of the mission from sight of man; all this cycle of tragedy of the dim past linked to a gloriously vital creature of the present by the chance colour of her hair. The thing was monstrously absurd! And yet—

A knock at the door and Don Padraic entered. He turned to beckon some one behind him. In the candlelight Grant saw the head of a giant stoop to avoid the lintel.

"Bim Bagley!"

The desert man crossed to the bed by a single wide step and threw both arms about Grant in a bear hug.

"You dam'd old snoozer. You dam'd old snoozer!" was all Bim could give in greeting. Don Padraic stepped outside and closed the door on the reunion. Bim let his friend's body lightly down on the pillows and sat back to grin into Grant's eyes.

"I sure been burnin' the ground all over North Sonora on your trail," he rumbled. "You're the original little Mexican jumping bean."

"Jumped right into a flock of trouble, old side partner, with more right beyond the front line [162]
waiting for me. The reserves seem to have come up just the right time." Grant gave his pal's great paw a squeeze. Bim roared assurance:

"Reserves got all bogged down through failure in liaison—just like the days of the Big Show. But they're with you now from hell to breakfast, young fellah; an' I think I know the name of the outfit we got to trim. Name's Hamilcar Urgo, huh?" His buoyant spirit was wine to Grant; the very animal force of him seemed to fill the old room.

"Ran acrost that li'l sidewinder this afternoon when the old Don was bringing me up here from Magdalena. Just our two cars on the road. He pulls up when we're makin' to pass him—face on him just as pleasant as a polecat's. Your friend the Don passes the time of day courteous as you please.

"'I had the honour to visit your daughter this day,' whinnies this Urgo gazabo; of course he speaks in Spanish, which is nuts for me. 'And I discover she is entertaining a convict who escaped from a chain gang.'" Bim grinned. "I take it that convict is my li'l friend from Noo Yawk."

Grant nodded. The other wagged his head in a grotesque mockery of grief. [163]

"'My daughter and I are entertaining an American gentleman who was wounded on the Hermosillo road,' your Don answers, civil enough. 'While he is a guest in our house we naturally ask no questions.'

"'Then,' snaps this Urgo boy, 'I must inform you that for harbouring an escaped criminal you are responsible before the law. The rurales will visit your house and it is for me to say whether they take you as well as the gringo convict.'"

Grant started. Here was a phase of the situation he had not guessed: that his courteous host might be made to suffer for Urgo's rage and jealousy.

Eagerly, "What did Don Padraic say to that?"

"He says something to the effect that the laws of hospitality were above any this-here Urgo might care to dig up, the same I call being mighty white of your Don Whosis with the Irish twist to his name." Bim broke off to shoot a quizzical look into his friend's eyes. "Say, brother, what you been doin' to this little black-an'-tan stingin' lizard to make him ride your trail so hard? You a [164]
tenderfoot an' riding your herd across the fence line of the biggest little man in the whole Sonora government!"

Grant grinned childishly. "Well, I threw him out of the front door here this afternoon for one thing and—"

Admiration beamed from every wind wrinkle about the Arizonan's eyes. "Sho! You did that? Now I call that steppin' some for a man with a bullet through him. I thought from the gen'ral slant to Señor Urgo's manner when he met up with us some one'd been working on his frame somewhere. He just sweat T.N.T. But why did you crawl him?"

"He insulted Señorita O'Donoju," was Grant's answer. Bim lowered the lid of one eye owlishly and his gaunt face was pulled down to a comic aspect of concern.

"Uh-huh; now I begin to get the drift. Old Doc Stooder was right when he says there's the shoo-shoo of a skirt somewheres in your big disappearing act. Boy—boy! I had you figgered for the orig'nal old hermit coyote who travels the meat trail alone. No wonder li'l Urgo's all coiled up for the strike, you aimin' to run him out on his girl."

Before Grant could head off his friend on a topic that brought sudden embarrassment to him [165]
’Cepcion and a second servant entered with a spread table. Bim tucked pillows under his friend’s shoulders with clumsy tenderness, then in mellow candlelight they ate and talked. Both were bursting with questions to be asked, but Bim claimed the right of priority by virtue of his ten days’ blind search through the country south of the Line. At his demand Grant gave him the whole story of his feud with Colonel Urgo, from the meeting at El Paso down to the afternoon’s events in the patio. Lively play of sympathies about the Arizonan’s features followed the narrative of the dreadful march in the chain gang and Grant’s burst for freedom under the rifles of the rurales. The little his friend left unsaid Bim was shrewd enough to supply; he guessed the story of Grant’s thraldom under the witchery of the desert girl and found it good.

When the man on the pillows began recital of what had occurred just a few hours before—Urgo’s savage assault on a girl’s pride through the story of El Rojo’s impiety—the big man by the bed stiffened in intensified interest. He heard Grant through with scarce concealed impatience.

“But, man, that was the Mission of the Four Evangelists Urgo was telling of!” explosively from [166]
Bim. Grant nodded confirmation.

“Why, that’s the Doc’s big proposition—our proposition!”

Grant looked his puzzlement. The other’s excitement swirled him on:

“That proves what the Doc’s Papago told him. Pearls buried there. An’ gold—lots of gold, the Papago says. I had a sneaking hunch all the time it might be one of Stooder’s wild dreams, but this story proves we’re on the right track.”

“Do you mean—?”

“Sure! That’s what I brought you out from the East for—to help us uncover this Lost Mission, as folks in Arizona call it. Doc Stooder’s such a cagey old monkey he wouldn’t let me put on paper just what I wanted you to whack in on. Now you got it all—the pure quill. Isn’t it a whale of a proposition!”

Though Grant’s surface perception had grasped the full import of his friend’s words some substrata of mind, or of heart, stubbornly refused to be convinced that he had heard aright. He groped for words:

“You say you brought me out here to help you uncover pearls and gold that belong to the Church?”

“Why not?” A subtle note of pugnacity in the other’s speech. “The stuff’s been lyin’ buried for a [167]
hundred an’ fifty years more or less. The priests’ve never lifted a finger to find it, though slews of prospectors have rooted round trying to uncover this cache.”

“But the old O’Donojus built this church and endowed it with that very treasure you want to dig for,” Grant persisted. “What about their rights?”

He did not hear Bim’s arguments. Instead he was conning over the story of the bane of the house of O’Donoju. Before his eyes was the face of the girl he loved, as he had last seen it, deeply graven with tragedy.

Grant’s hand went out in a comrade’s clasp. “Bim, old man, count me out on this thing. I couldn’t consider it for a minute.”

CHAPTER XIV [168]

REVELATION

“Don Padraic’s compliments, and he awaits the pleasure of his guests’ company in the music room if the sick señor feels able.” It was ’Cepcion’s soft patois that interrupted Bim Bagley’s explosion of pained surprise in mid-flight. Grant gave him a smile which interpreted the diversion as something to his friend’s advantage and, leaning on Bim’s shoulder, followed the servant to the great room in the centre of the house.

A fire burned in the cavernous fireplace, for spring nights in Altar have a chill; candles in dull silver wall sconces tempered the red light. The vast room was so peopled with dancing shadows from the antique furnishings that the tall man in white and the girl who advanced to greet the guests appeared to be moving in a company of hooded monks.

“’Nicia, Señor Bagley, the friend of our friend.” Don Padraic bowed to Bim, who crooked his lank body with surprising grace.

“And I am a friend of you two,” came Bim’s forthright answer, “since you have treated Grant [169]
Hickman so kindly. He is the salt of the earth.”

Don Padraic indicated seats before the andirons. Benicia chose a low settle by the side of the great winged chair where her father seated himself. Grant saw shadows beneath her eyes where the firelight played upon her features, almost waxen in uncertain light. The glint of copper in the piled-up mass of her hair was like summer lightning in clouds. Their eyes met, and Grant was disappointed in the hope he might still find the soul of the girl revealed there as it had been that afternoon in the unguarded moment when Benicia gave him wordless thanks. He guessed she

had told Don Padraic of the incident in the patio and that what had passed between father and daughter thereafter had been a drain on the emotions of both.

Don Padraic turned to Grant with more than perfunctory concern in speech and glance. “Your health, señor? I fear that certain events of the day, of which my daughter has told me—”

“Please!” Grant was quick to interrupt. “I am feeling fit as I could be, thanks to the careful nursing I have had in your house.”

[170] The thing that had been left unspoken by both weighed like an unlaid spirit on the silence that followed. Each of the four before the fire had little thought save for the chapter of circumstance left unconcluded by one who had departed the Garden a few hours before, swollen with the venom of outraged pride. It was Don Padraic who brushed aside reserve:

“Señor Hickman, I may speak before your friend, who must share your confidence. He will pardon my bringing personal affairs before him. I can not postpone my thanks—my very sincere thanks—for what you did this afternoon. My daughter was defenceless.”

“And I—” Benicia began, but Grant quickly put in:

“Will you not consider that I was really serving my own private ends—a score to be evened between Colonel Urgo and myself?”

Bim covered a reminiscent grin with a broad palm as Grant hurried on, eager to withhold from the girl opportunity to speak her thanks.

“When I was brought here I thought it best to keep silent on the matter of my own private grudge against this man. But now that it appears we all have common cause against him I think I may speak. Urgo himself was responsible for my being shot.”

[171] He saw Benicia’s eyes grow wide, read the surprise that parted her lips in a breathed exclamation. He thought he saw, too, just the flash of something no eyes but his own could understand, and he was glad. Briefly he sketched the incident of the gambling palace in Sonizona, his encounter with Urgo in the office of the jail, the march with the chain gang.

“And so,” Grant concluded, “Colonel Urgo found a dead man come to life when he saw me in the patio to-day. When Señorita O’Donoju was out of hearing for a moment I could not resist a shot which left our friend guessing whether or not I had told you, señor, how I came by my wound.”

“Ah, yes,” from Benicia in a hushed voice. “I knew the minute I returned there had been something between you. Urgo was like a cornered animal.”

“And so he turned on you,” Grant could not help saying. “If only I could have guessed beforehand his attack—”

Again silence fell. Grant was alive to the play of unspoken thought between father and daughter; these two alone in the immensity of the desert and facing unsupported the craft of an implacable enemy. He sensed the battle between their pride and their desperate need for an ally: [172] the one impulse dictating that what was the secret affair of the House of O’Donoju must remain strictly its own secret, the other moving them to confide in him, who unwittingly had been drawn into the struggle. Gladly would he have offered himself as a champion; but he must await their initiative. Suddenly Grant recalled what Bim had told him of Urgo’s threat at the meeting with Don Padraic on the desert road: how the head of the Casa O’Donoju would be held responsible for harbouring an escaped convict. There was no blinking his duty in this direction.

“My friend tells me, Don Padraic, that Colonel Urgo threatens your arrest as well as my own; that you will be held responsible for concealing a fugitive from justice. That cannot be, of course. To-morrow, if Quelele can take Bagley and myself in the car—”

“No!” Benicia’s denial came peremptorily and with a hint of passion which gave Grant a sting of surprise. “No, señor, we do not turn wounded men into the desert—particularly a friend who has served us as you have done.”

Again Grant saw in the firelit pools of her eyes just an instant’s revelation of depths he yearned to plumb—the aspect of a beginning love hardly knowing itself as such. He scarcely heard the [173] voice of Don Padraic seconding his daughter’s protest.

“The hospitality of the Casa O’Donoju,” he was saying, “can hardly recognize such silly threats. Colonel Urgo’s hope was that we would send you back over the Road of the Dead Men to Caborca or Magdalena where, naturally, you would be made a prisoner. Please dismiss from your mind any idea of our permitting ourselves to play into this man’s hands.”

Bim Bagley ventured to break his silence: “Grant here and I have important business together up over the Line. We ought to be moving soon’s we can.” The white-haired don turned to Bim with a gracious spreading of the hands.

“When Señor Hickman feels able to make the journey Quelele will take him and yourself, Señor Bagley, to westward. There is a way through El Infiernillo up to the Arizona town of Cuprico. By so going you will avoid any trap Urgo might lay. But you will not hurry Señor Hickman’s going”—Don Padraic interjected reservation—“and you, Señor Bagley, surely can remain with us until then.”

[174] The direct Bagley, finding himself thwarted by the don’s suavity, sent a sheepish grin Grant’s way in token of his defeat and maintained silence. Don Padraic, to dismiss the subject his reticence had reluctantly introduced, struck a gong to summon a servant. Soon a decanter of

sherry was glowing golden in the firelight and cigarettes were burning. The master of the Casa O'Donoju artfully led Bim into talk of cattle, always currency of conversation in the Southwest. Grant drew his chair closer to Benicia's.

"You startled me with that 'No' of yours to my proposal to leave the Garden of Solitude at once," he said with a boldness he did not wholly feel. "Being a little deaf, I am not sure I heard all the reasons you gave why I should not go."

"What you failed to hear me say my father supplied," the girl quickly parried, giving him her steady gaze. He was not to be so easily side-tracked. What had begun in boldness swept him on in passionate sincerity:

"There are many excellent reasons why I should be somewhere else than here this time to-morrow night; but there is one very compelling reason why I welcome every added hour here in the Garden. May I tell you that reason?"

"If you think I should know." The words came simply. He, looking down into the hint of features [175] the firelight grudgingly gave him, saw there the frank camaraderie of a candid spirit: the soul that was Benicia O'Donoju, unsullied of artifice or the vain trickeries of the woman desired. "If you think I should know"—call of comrade to comrade. The desert girl scorning subtleties and inventions; knowing what her words would prompt yet wishing them to be said.

"It is that I love you, Benicia, and that I cannot leave you, loving you so, when I know you are in danger." Grant gave her his heart's pledge in simple directness. Though the girl was not unprepared for his avowal, the call in his words, elemental as the sweep of precious rain over the thirsting desert, set quivering chords of her being never before stirred. He saw the trembling of her lips; her curving lashes trembled and were jewelled with little drops. She turned her gaze into the fire for a long minute. Grant heard vaguely the voice of Bim Bagley expounding some theme of cattle ticks. His heart was on the rack.

"Grant—good friend—" Her voice broke, then valiantly found itself. "You heard from Urgo the story of our house—of the Red One and his crime against God—"

"The hound!" he muttered. Benicia groped on: [176]

"My father—no one ever told me that story because—because—" Grant saw one hand steal up to touch with a gesture almost abhorrent the low wave of red over her brow—"I bear the sign, you see."

He put out his hand to stay her, for the dregs of suffering were working a slow torture upon her; the face of the girl he loved had become like some sculptor's study of the spirit of fatalism. He could not check her.

"My father when he returned to-day and I told him—my father said the story was true as Urgo told it. Once in every second generation—this sign of El Rojo, murderer and violator of the sanctuary—"

"But, Benicia, surely you don't believe this fairy story!" Grant packed into his low words all the willing of a spirit fighting for precious possession. He felt that every word the girl spoke was pushing her farther from him.

"Ah, Grant, we desert people believe easily because the truth is not hidden. It *is* true; my good grey father knew that I knew it to be true and did not seek to deceive me when I asked him. The O'Donoju with this"—again the shrinking touch of fingers to the dull-burning stripe on her [177] forehead—"cannot give love, for with love goes unhappiness—and death."

She broke off suddenly, rose and hurried into the shadows beyond the range of firelight. Grant heard a door latch at the far end of the room click to.

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[178]

CHAPTER XV

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE NIGHT

Somewhere in the darkness of the ancient house a deep-toned bell tolled the hour of two. The sound came to Grant, broad awake in his room, as if from a great distance—tocsin strokes against the bowl of the desert sky. Four times in his sleepless vigil he had heard that bell measuring night watches, and each successive hour struck seemed the period to a century.

He had gone to bed with a heavy ache following his words with Benicia and her abrupt termination of his pleading. On his first review of the girl's abnegation of the love she could not conceal the whole thing had seemed fantastic, almost childish in its essence of witch-bane and belief in blighting curse. How could this virile creature of a fine and cultured mind conceive herself the heritor of a weight of guilt carried down from some ancestor in the dim past? There was the superstition of the evil eye among ignorant peasants of the Latin countries, to be sure; but for a girl of Benicia's intelligence to be enslaved by such mumbo-jumbo as Urgo had voiced— [179] ridiculous!

Such was Grant's first review. Weighed from every angle and conceding the girl he loved every mitigation of jangled nerves, nevertheless the man of the cities could find naught but lamentable folly in it all. The first striking of the distant bell found him rebellious.

From where he lay he could look through a grated window up to the heavens: a square of dappled infinity. Insensibly his eyes began singling out the stars, measuring the gulf between this and that steady-burning point of light. Somewhere outside a desert owl timed the pulse of the night with an insistent call, unvarying, unwearying. The man on the bed found himself tallying the blood beats to his brain by this ghostly metronome. Beat—beat!—passing seconds of mortality for the man Grant Hickman. Beat—beat!—How puny a thing, how inconsequential the life of a man when calipered by the time measure of those burning suns up yonder!

He rallied himself, for such drifting into the subjective was a new and puzzling experience for a practical man. But minute by minute the spirit of the desert, which is the spirit of chaos become ponderable, stole over him, chaining his imagination to things felt but not seen of men. A chill of [180] the untoward and the unreal swept over him. He seemed to be braced nervously for some blow out of the void. His imagination played with a dim figure, the shape of El Rojo of the red hair riding—riding through the dark on his eternal mission of damnation.

The clock struck three and at the instant of the third stroke a shadow like a bat's wing flitted across the bars of the window through which the eyes of the wakeful man had been roaming. A sharp tinkle of steel on stone split the silence of the chamber. Grant was galvanized into a leap from the bed. He stood shaking. Silence. Silence absolute as the grave after that single sharp ring of steel on stone.

He looked up at the window where the flitting passage of the bat's wing had showed. Just the clear-burning stars there. The dim recesses of the room revealed no bulk of an intruder. Was this but the trick of overwrought nerves?

Grant fumbled for his matches and brought a light to the candle wick. By the waxing yellow glow he peered round the chamber. A flicker of white reflection caught his eye and he almost leaped to a spot on the floor directly beneath the window.

A dagger lay there. It was that curiously wrought affair of dulled silver haft and double-edged [181] blade which he had noted before as part of the rosette of ancient knives and short swords clamped against the high wainscoting above the window for a wall decoration—the weapons Don Padraic had pointed to with the pride of a collector that first day the wounded guest was brought in from the desert.

But how could this dagger have slipped from its sheath with no hand to disturb it? Grant stooped to pick it up.

He had the haft in his grip for a quarter-second, then dropped the thing and leaped back as if from an asp. Something gummed the palm of his hand. Something showed dull black against the dim flicker of the blade. With a gasp he knelt and brought the candle closer.

Blood there on the blade! Blood on his hand!

He stood frozen while the pumping of his heart volleyed thunder against his ear drums. Murder cried aloud from that stained thing of silver and steel on the floor. Somewhere in this rambling old pile—somewhere in the silence a swift stroke that had snuffed out a life, and then the murderer, fleeing, had flung this weapon through the window. He had flung it almost at the feet [182] of the only one in the whole house who was not sleeping.

Alarm! He must give the alarm while yet the murderer was near the scene! Spur to action followed swiftly upon Grant's momentary numbness. He threw a dressing robe over him and ran through the door of his chamber giving onto the arcade about the patio. Just over the low balustrade lay the little jungle of flowering things, and on the opposite side, he remembered, hung the great Javanese gong Benicia used to summon the servants to the patio. Grant leaped the low balustrade and stumbled crashing through the geraniums and giant fuchsias toward the dim moon of metal he saw in the shadows of an arch.

He came to the gong, groped for the padded mace hanging over it. The patio roared with its released thunders.

Muffled shouts. Banging of doors. Lights. A white figure came blundering through the arcade; it was Bim Bagley.

"Some one's been murdered!" Grant greeted him. "A dagger—through my window!"

Came others—servants with blankets clutched around them. Bim directed them to run to the great door in the outer wall and catch any skulker they might find in the gardens beyond the [183] house. Only dimly aware himself of something untoward, the big man could give no more specific directions.

Then Benicia, bare-footed, her hair fallen down over a blue robe she drew together across her breast. Grant started towards her.

"Where is father?" she cried in a woman's divination, and Grant noted Don Padraic's absence. He saw the girl make a quick step for a closed door behind her. Unreasoned instinct prompted him to put himself before the door, denying her.

"No; let me," he commanded. She made a swaying step towards Grant but was met by the door swiftly closing in her face. Inside the chamber, he turned the key in the lock and struck a match to grope for a candle wick.

In the pallid flicker he saw the figure of Don Padraic on his high bed. A dagger wound was in his breast.

And the girl outside the locked door stood very still. Her eyes, wide with horror, were fixed upon the spot where she had seen Grant put his hand in pushing open the door.

Three small smears of blood there.

CHAPTER XVI

ACCUSATION

[184]

Grant was stunned. The vision of the figure with the fine patrician face there on the bed—in the breast the savage mark of violence—seemed but a part with the disordered fancies of recent hours. Beating of Benicia's hands on the locked door and the faint sound of her calls aroused him. He stepped to the bedside and felt for a pulse, listened for a breath. There was none.

Murder had been done swiftly and surely—and done with the ancient dagger from the weapon cluster on the wall of his own room. In the stunning discovery he had just made Grant did not find any grim correlation between these two circumstances. He pulled up a coverlet to conceal ugly stains, then stepped to the door and unlocked it.

Benicia was waiting there. The eyes meeting his were blazing horror. Almost Grant read in them unthinkable accusation. He put out his hands to support her, for she was swaying in her effort over the doorstep.

[185]

"No—no!" Benicia shuddered and drew away from him as though he were a man unclean. Mystified, Grant stepped aside to let her pass. He saw her run to the side of the high bed and kneel there. Her hands went out blindly to grope for the still features on the pillow. They played uncertainly over them, then rested on the heavy mane of hair. Her fingers repeated little smoothing gestures. A breathless faltering of love phrases in the Spanish came from her lips. Grant, seeing that the girl retained mastery over herself, tiptoed from the chamber; it was not meet that he should be witness to a soul's acceptance of the bitter fact of death.

He blundered into Bim coming back to the patio from his excursion at the head of servants beyond the great front door and told him what had happened; of the dagger dropped through the window and the murder. The big Arizonan reared back as if roweled.

"My God, man, that leaves the girl alone here in this jumping-off place!—With that snake Urgo in the offing. Boy, it's up to us to help her out!"

Grant gripped his pal's hand with a low, "I knew I could count on you, old scout."

[186]

The dry patter of sandals came down the arcade from a knot of lights where some of the servants had gathered in indecision waiting to be given orders. Grant recognized 'Cepcion in the mountainous figure approaching and was recalled to the necessities of the moment.

"Tell her, Bim, what has happened and send her to her mistress. Then we must get out men to circle the Garden and prevent any person's getting away."

Bagley strode to meet the major domo and rattled swift Spanish at her. The waddling Indian woman quivered and lifted her fat arms above her head. A dreadful wavering cry came from her lips. Instantly the cry was taken up by the servants at the far end of the patio—a bone-chilling, animal noise which climbed slowly to the highest register and ended in a yelp. At the sound Grant's blood went cold. This Indian death howl was the cry of the desert kind, calling the despair of creatures chained to a land of drought and ever-present death.

To escape it he went with Bim out of the great door to the unwalled spaces where the avenue of palms stood sentinels against the night. Beyond the bridge over the oasis stream lay the clutter of huts that was the Papago village, a fief under the overlordship of the manor house. Not a light showed among the thirty or forty beehive shapes when the two men started to walk under the palms; but suddenly a cry arose from the midst of the village answering that coming down the night wind from the mourners in the great house. Rumour of death had outstripped the two who walked.

[187]

The single cry from the village instantly grew in volume. Treble voices of squaws lifted the abomination of noise to the saw edge of a screech; men's harsher notes rumbled and boomed intolerably. All the night was made bedlam.

Lights were winking through the chinks of the jacals when Grant and Bim came to the outskirts of the village. There was confusion of forms skittering about from hut to hut. Bim seized upon one man and demanded to know the whereabouts of Quelele, head man of the village. The big Indian soon stood before them with a gesture of hand to breast indicating they were to command him.

"Somebody has killed your master," Bim told him. "Get out men on horses to circle the Garden and go out along the road both ways. Cover every foot and bring in anybody you may find."

[188]

Quelele sped with hoarse shouts down the village's single street; a dozen men joined him in a race for the corrals.

"There's no way for the murderer to get out and live except along the road," was Bim's comment as they turned to retrace their steps to the house. "If he took to the mountains even

with a horse he couldn't last a day; they're straight up and down."

They had not gone fifty yards from the Papago village when a new sound punctuated the death cry, now settled to a monotonous chant promising hours' duration. It was the *bum-bum-bum* of the water-drum—gigantic gourds floated, cut side down, in a tub of water and drubbed with sticks. That noise was accompanied by the locust-like slither and rattle of the rasping sticks, another primitive tempo-setting instrument of the Southwestern natives.

The death howl began to catch its measure by the boom and screak of these two instruments. A noise to beat against the inside of men's skulls and set the bone of them in rhythm. Savage as the peaks of Altar, unremitting as the drive of wind-blown sand against granite.

Bum-chut-chut-chut! Sob of a land in chains.

"Oh, tell them to cut it!" Grant's frayed nerves cried out protest. The other merely gave a wave [189] of his hand comprehending resignation.

"Might as well tell the wind to stop. This'll keep up for three days—this ding-dong business. It's custom, old son."

As they drew near to the house of death again Grant caught his mind harking back to that moment when he had come from Don Padraic's chamber to confront the girl's wild eyes—eyes with almost the unthinkable look of accusation in them. That aspect of her eyes dumbfounded him, left him groping for an explanation.

Once at the house, Grant took his friend to his chamber and showed him the knife where it lay on the floor as he had dropped it. The big Arizonan stooped over with the candle near the grisly thing—his hawk's nose and salient cheekbones were outlined against the candle flame like the raised head of some emperor on a Roman coin—and very gingerly he turned the dagger over.

"Finger prints here on the haft," he grunted.

"Yes, mine," Grant put in. "I picked it up at first without knowing—without reckoning there might be—" He broke off to pour water into the quaint old willow-ware bowl which stood with its [190] ewer on a stand in a corner, then he scrubbed his hands vigorously. A great relief came to him with this act of purification.

"Yours—yes, and probably somebody else's," Bim was mumbling his thoughts aloud. He stood erect once more and measured the height of the barred window over the lintel of which was fixed the rosette of arms. "Hum. I simply don't figger why the man who wanted to kill the old don came to the outside of this room, clum up the wall an' reached in through those bars there to take one of these old knives. Can't see why all that fuss—more particular, why he snuck back here an' tossed the knife through the bars after his bloody work."

"Perhaps he wanted it to appear I am the murderer," Grant hazarded doubtfully.

"You!" Bim looked up with a wry smile. "Why should you want to kill off that fine old man?—What motive?"

"What motive for anybody here in the house or in the Papago village outside for that matter?" Grant voiced his perplexity. "Don Padraic was the *padrone* of every Indian from the Gulf to Arizora. From what his daughter tells me there's not a Papago on the place here who wouldn't [191] gladly have died in his place. The whole thing's too deep for me."

They left the dim chamber with its relic of violence still lying on the floor and walked out into the perfumed patio. It was the hour when first heralds of dawn were coursing across the sky. Grant looked up to the dimming stars and read there the same message that had come to him the hours before swift stroke of tragedy: the fragility of that spider web man spins into the gulf of infinite time. And the oneness of this unlimned stretch of vacancy called the Desert of Altar with that ethereal desert of stars. How infinitesimal in the face of either the soul of man, its hopes!

A great sense of impotence weighed down on Grant. His thoughts dwelt with the girl he loved, sore stricken by this cowardly blow in the dark, bereft of one who had been soul of her soul. Now, the last of her name, alone in this bleak wilderness with none to fend for her against the wiles of Urgo except the child-like Indians: what a situation for Benicia to face! The man yearned to go to where she knelt alone with her dead, to take her in his arms and give her pledge of his love and protection. Yet that was not meet. The gulf of Benicia's grief denied him.

Bim brought Grant out of his reverie with, "It's my hunch we won't have to look far to find the [192] man behind this bad business."

"You mean—?"

"That same—Hamilcar Urgo," was Bim's positive assertion. Grant objected:

"But you passed him well on the way to Magdalena this afternoon. It's not likely he'd risk coming back in his car to attempt porch-climbing and murder. That's not in his line."

"Sure not! But one of these Indians around here who knows the lay of the house—somebody who savvyed, for instance, about those old knives on your wall—a hundred silver pesos from Urgo's pocket—"

Grant's mind was in no state to analyze subtleties of villainy. "I can't see what Urgo could possibly gain by killing Don Padraic unless there's a great deal behind his relations with Benicia's father you and I don't know."

The fat shape of 'Cepcion waddled down the nearby arcade in the direction of the room

wherein Benicia had locked herself. Bim's eyes idly followed her as he pressed his argument:

"Maybe so—maybe not. But figger the thing thisaway: Urgo's dead set on marryin' this high-spirited señorita—if you'll excuse me trompin' on a tender subject, old hoss—an' he reckons they's two folks who don't encourage those ideas to the limit—her father and yourself. Yourself he tries to get on suspicion and because you riled him on the train like you say. Now he does for the father an' counts he has the girl for the taking, she having no kith or kin to come up in support, as you might say." [193]

The dawn reddened and still the two men in the patio fruitlessly pursued speculation. A sudden step crunched the gravel behind them. Both leaped at the sound, so taut were their nerves. They turned to see Benicia standing in the half light with the misty banks of geraniums for a background. With her were the giant Papago Quelele and two other Indians. They carried loops of hair ropes.

"Señor Hickman"—the girl's voice was deadly cold—"Señor Hickman, my servant 'Cepcion has just brought to me the dagger she found in your room. The dagger is stained with my father's blood, señor. There are prints of fingers on the haft of that dagger, Señor Hickman."

Grant caught the poisonous edge of hatred in the voice, read the bitter accusation in her eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but Benicia checked him.

"I saw you leave those prints of my father's blood on the door of his chamber, señor. Before my very eyes, señor! Just now when 'Cepcion brings me the dagger she finds in your room I compare the print of fingers on its haft with the print on the door. They are the same. What have you to say, Señor Hickman?" [194]

"Say!" Bim Bagley's voice snapped like a whip lash. "Are you accusing Grant Hickman here of murder?" Benicia never even cast a glance at him. She repeated:

"What have you to say to this, Señor Hickman?" Grant answered levelly, "Enough already has been said, Señorita O'Donoju." Benicia signalled to Quelele and he advanced with the ropes.

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[195]

CHAPTER XVII

THE ORDEAL

With the lithe spring of a cat Bim put himself between Grant and the advancing Indian. His face had gone dead white and his eyes were coals blown upon by the wind of anger.

"None of that! Get back there—you!" Bim's voice was scarcely audible but his pose of furious battling on the hair-trigger of release was sufficiently vocal to awe the Papago giant into a backward stumble. Then to Benicia:

"Young woman, you're making the mistake of your life. I'm a'mighty sorry for you, an' you are going to be right regretful yourself when you have time to think." Grant made a step forward to lay a checking hand on his friend's arm. He would have spoken but the girl interrupted.

"My father's blood on this man's hands!—the dagger from the wall of his chamber—" Of a sudden the last shred of restraint she had battled to impose upon herself gave way and a flood came under propulsion of hysteria. Out fluttered her hands to point the object of her execration. [196]

"You—I do not know you! Just a chance meeting between us and we part. Then fate brings you to this house wounded—snatched from death. An escaped convict from a chain gang—you yourself admitted as much just last night. With good reason my cousin, Colonel Urgo, must have caused your arrest. Why should I not believe you capable of killing my father? Why not when the signs of his very blood cry out against you!"

"Señorita O'Donoju—" Grant's effort to check her was fruitless, for she had whirled upon Bagley: "And you! Unknown to my father—unknown to me. He brought you here on your own representation. You said you were hunting for your friend to whom we had offered our hospitality. Can you deny that both of you discovered opportunity here to kill—and then to rob?"

The storm that had swept the girl through this welter of imaginings, illogical, frenetic, took heavy toll of her physical reserves. Now she stood trembling, white-faced in the spreading dawn, pitiful. Her small hands were clenched into fists across her breast. Flutterings of uncontrolled nerves made the flesh of her temples pulsate. Grant, for all the crushing horror of these moments, felt pity pushing through the numbness Benicia's accusation had wrought. Never had he seen a woman so tortured by the devils of hysteria; he was appalled. He spoke to her gently: [197]

"If you will permit me to go to my room while you make further investigations I will answer any questions they may suggest. It must be plain to you, Señorita O'Donoju, that I cannot escape from this place."

The girl gave him a dazed look as if she hardly comprehended what he said, then she slowly nodded and, beckoning the Indians to follow, she turned and disappeared beyond the patio's green. Bim threw an arm over his pal's shoulder and accompanied him to his room. At the door he whirled Grant about with a strong grip of both his hands and gave him a grin more eloquent than any sermon on fortitude.

“When the she-ones get to stampedin’, old pal, they sure have us helpless men winging. Now go in there and get a sleep while I take a look round below your window and elsewheres.”

[198] Bim’s easy injunction to sleep was not so easily followed by the man who was a self-appointed prisoner. On his bed Grant tossed in a fever of mingled blind speculation and outraged pride. Strive though he might to palliate Benicia’s charge against him on the score of the girl’s complete prostration through the night’s tragedy, the quick and fiery blood in her that was inheritance from Spanish forebears, yet always he came against the same ugly fact: one whom he loved with all the passion in him and whose return of love he had dared hope to win had accused him of murder out of hand.

Yet how could he prove his innocence? Of a sudden that thought plumped down on him with the burst of a high explosive shell.

Benicia’s accusation had appeared monstrous, yes. But, look upon the facts through her eyes—so a curiously impersonal phase of mind prompted; what were those facts as they appeared to the girl? A man who was first a chance acquaintance in a train and then, by a trick of fate, a guest in the house, rouses the household at three o’clock in the morning by sounding an alarm in the patio. He calls “Murder!” though he does not say who has been murdered, he has not apparently discovered the body of Don Padraic in his chamber.

[199] This man—this waif brought in from the desert—prevents the daughter’s going in to the room of death until first he has entered that room and locked the door behind him. He leaves the marks of his fingers in blood upon the outside of that door. Then he and his friend—“call him confederate” was Grant’s cynical amendment—organize a hue and cry outside of the house. While this is in progress a servant finds in the guest’s room a dagger; instead of being in its usual place amid the rack of weapons on the wall this dagger lies on the floor as if hastily thrown there by one who had no proper time for its concealment. The dagger is blood stained and on its haft are the same finger prints as those on the door of the dead don’s chamber.

There was the record. How refute it?

Say that while lying awake he saw a hand appear at the bars of his window and heard the tinkle of a knife dropped within? Why, if he was so vigilant at three o’clock in the morning, had he not seen that hand of a murderer steal in to abstract the weapon before the deed? And whose hand was it? Did not the burden of proof that it was not his own which took the dagger from the wall rest solely upon Grant Hickman?

[200] Another’s finger prints on that bloodied haft besides his own? Perhaps. But it needed the instruments of precision of a detective central office to juggle with such minutiæ as the whorls and spirals in a finger print, and they most certainly were lacking at the Casa O’Donoju. Graver difficulty still, there were a hundred and more Indians in the oasis; how gather them all together and take the prints of their fingers?

The more his mind roved amid hypotheses the closer about him seemed drawn the meshes of circumstance. As the sun of a new day painted a glory beyond the bars of his window Grant Hickman felt himself as helpless as that Tomlinson of the Kipling story who plunged headlong through the space between all the suns of infinity.

He must have slipped into the sleep of exhaustion, for it was near noon when a knock on his door roused him. At his bidding ’Cepcion opened to illustrate a command in Spanish with a backward jerk of her head. Grant arose and followed her through a corridor to the patio. Benicia was standing there in an attitude of awaiting him, a little beyond her was Bim, his face wreathed with a heartening smile.

The girl received him with bleak eyes. “You will please follow me, señor,” was all she said. Then she led the way, the two men a step behind her, out of the still house and down the avenue of [201] palms towards the Papago village. From time to time a turn in the path gave Grant a glimpse of Benicia’s face. It was a changed woman he saw.

Gone was the vital spirit of joy of living which always gave the girl her character of Eurydice in khaki; gone, too, that softness of grain born of happiness undisturbed, of life amid the elemental things of nature. This Benicia was a cold fury moving to judgment. The call of her Spanish blood from centuries past—call for vengeance and blood-sacrifice—had possessed her. It was as if some mocking cartoonist had run a brush over the features of Innocence in portraiture, giving an upward twist of cruelty to lips, the glint of blood lust in eyes.

They came to the Indian village, all hushed in anticipation of some prodigy. Only the frog-croaking of the water drums and the dry clicking of the rasping sticks betokened a continuance of the mourning ritual. All the retainers of the Casa O’Donoju, farmers, cattle handlers, house servants, men, squaws and half-naked children, were assembled in the rudely-defined street that led between rows of reed and mud-capped huts. Two only were seated apart: the man who bobbled the drumming sticks over the turtle-back halves of the gourds and an ancient who [202] manipulated the rasping sticks. On every bronze-black face showed the strain of awaiting an untoward event.

When Benicia appeared some elderly squaws started afresh the lugubrious death howl, but a gesture from the girl silenced them. She beckoned Quelele to her and spoke some rapid words in the Papago tongue. He in turn passed the orders to two men, who ran into one of the nearby huts to reappear staggering under the weight of a great metal kettle, such as might be used for soap boiling, carried between them. Quelele laid two heavy flat stones in the middle of the street; the kettle carriers deposited their burden, rim down on the rocks. A space of two inches or more

showed between the kettle rim and the hard adobe.

Still the hollow *bum-bum-bum* of the water-drum, whisper and cluck of the notched sticks. A very old man, the skin of whose naked legs was grey and tough as elephant hide, had attached ceremonial circlets of dried yucca pods about his ankles in a cuff extending almost to the knees. He took his stand by the instrumentalists and his feet moved in a shuffle in time to the drum beats. The pods emitted dry whispers. The rapt look of a seer was on his leathern features. [203]

The kettle in place, Quelele himself went to a small pen of *ocatilla* sticks on the outskirts of the village and brought therefrom a young rooster. The fowl's head bobbed nervously and his small eyes glinted as he was carried on the big Indian's arm through the throng. Two helpers lifted the edge of the soap kettle while Quelele thrust the cock underneath. A faint clucking came muffled from the iron prison. The bird thrust his head out here and there from beneath the rim, seeking egress.

Now Benicia took from 'Cepcion something she had carried wrapped about in a handkerchief and carried it to the kettle top. She let fall the handkerchief and with a slight gesture focused the eyes of all upon the stained dagger. A sigh like the swish of a scythe in long grass swept through the crowd as the girl balanced the knife on the exact top of the dome of fire-smudged metal. The ancient with the yucca rattles did a sacrificial step which caused a sharp alarm like that of the desert sidewinder's warning.

Grant and Bim, still unaware of the significance of all this preparation, sensed the growing tensity of emotions all about them. The Papagoes, like all their kind, more than ready to invest with ritual any untoward incident of life, saw in the white girl's preparations—particularly in the offering of the knife upon this rude altar—formulæ of an appeal to decision of powers beyond human comprehension. Perhaps the elders, remembering tales of ancient custom, recognized the preliminaries and welcomed a revival among the unregenerate younger men of a direct appeal to Elder Brother. If big Quelele knew better he had kept his tongue still. [204]

Benicia's features had never relaxed their cold intentness during the preparations. There was even, to Grant's troubled scrutiny, some element of the barbaric there. A look like that on the stone visage of an Aztec goddess, implacable, without mortal instincts. She took her stand by the kettle and spoke rapidly to the Papagoes, pointing to the knife, then lifting her finger to mark the place of the sun in the white sky.

Abruptly she finished, stooped and touched one finger to the bottom of the kettle. It came away blackened by soot. Then she turned to Grant. "It is the test of God," she said in a dulled voice. "My people have used it in times past when they were perplexed as I am. All here including you, Señor Hickman, and you, Señor Bagley, will endure this test even as I just have done. Put your fingers to the kettle and show them to all, blackened. God will speak through the mouth of the imprisoned cock when the guilty man touches the iron." [205]

Grant gave the girl a steady look, then without a word he stepped to the blackened dome, swept the fingers of his right hand across it and held them aloft. Benicia was looking away when Grant stepped back beside her; he saw a convulsive movement of her throat—no other sign. Then big Bim dared the oracle with an easy grace. A shuddering intake of breath from the Indians as each man underwent trial.

Quelele now gave an order which brought all the men of the village and great-house into line of which he was the head. Even the musicians were replaced by squaws who did not permit the drubbing and squeaking to diminish. The faces of all wore the set look of hypnosis—eyes white and staring, muscles twittering in cheeks, tongues licking out over dried lips.

Thrut-t-t-t-t! An extra flourish of the rasping sticks and a thunder of the water drums as Quelele started the line forward toward the kettle. The big Indian moved with a mincing sidewise step reminiscent of some deer-dance of his people at the festival of *sahuaro*. His arms were held rigidly crooked at elbows and fingers splayed. The great moon face was contorted into a lolling mask. He sweat with fear. [206]

Twice the lightning-like bobbing out and back of the imprisoned cock's head as Quelele approached. "Ai-ie!" a squaw screamed in a frenzy.

The leader touched the kettle, held up his blackened finger for those in line behind him to see, then broke from line and stood at a little distance from Benicia and the two white men.

Second in line was the ancient with the yucca rattles on his legs. Coming to the kettle, he stood rigid, tilted his old eyes to the blinding sun. A shiver ran down his body which caused every dry pod of his anklets to emit a whisper. He whirled once, dipped and swept a finger through the soot. "*Njo oovik* (Bird speaking)," he cried, and there was foam on his lips.

But the bird did not speak, and the line came slowly on. The spell of the weird had Grant bound. The rational in him tried to prompt that all this was but a shrewd application of the new psychological method of crime detection as utilized by primitive peoples before ever the science of the mind was thought of; but his imagination strained to hear the crowing of the cock when the finger of guilt was laid upon the iron shell. Mutter of the drums, shuffle of dancing feet, guttural calls and imprecations: these things had swept away all prim gauds and dressings of a mind counting itself superior and he was swept back to kinship with the wild, its children. Again the desert moved to bring him under its subjection. [207]

"Lookit that fellah!" It was Bim who gripped Grant's arm and pointed to the advancing line. One of the younger bucks had dodged out of his place and fallen back three numbers.

On came the men facing trial by ordeal. Now and again the imprisoned cock thrust his head out with snake-like darting, and the individual who was poised over the kettle hiccoughed fear. The young man who had dodged back tried the trick again when he was near the kettle; but the one behind him held him by the shoulders and forced him on.

The dodger came to the place of test, hesitated, made a downward sweep of his hand and stumbled past. Big Quelele suddenly leaped at him and gripped his right hand. No smudge of soot on the fingers.

"Hai—ee!" Quelele called, and the line stood still. He wrenched the young man's hand high above his head and showed the fingers clean. "Hai—ee!" chorused fifty voices. Quelele started to drag the wretch back to the kettle. [208]

Then his victim went to his knees—to his face in the dust. He rolled and kicked, screaming. Still Quelele dragged him nearer the kettle, his right hand firmly gripped in the vise of his own two, forefinger extended to take the print of soot and draw the cock's crow.

"I did it! I did it!" the wretched creature blubbered. Quelele dropped him as if he were a poisonous lizard. The crowd pushed forward menacingly. The murderer fumbled in his trousers pocket and brought out a shining silver peso, which he threw from him with a gesture of horror. Quelele picked it up and turned it over in his palm, his brow heavily knotted. He passed it to Benicia.

The girl turned the coin over to the reverse, whereon the spread eagle grips a snake and a cactus branch in his talons. A deep knife cut was scored through the neck of the eagle.

The wretch in the dust saw she had noted the mutilation and cried out to her in pleading, "The sign, mistress! The sign! The soldier-señor Urgo tells me many months ago when I receive the sign I shall kill or my brother, who is in his prison, will be shot!" [209]

"And he gave you this—" the girl began.

"Yesterday, mistress. He passes me in his thunder-wagon and tosses me this peso. 'Find the knife in the room of the wounded gringo señor,' he commands. 'Use no other.'"

Benicia nodded to Quelele, who made a sign to others. They brought a hair rope and trussed the murderer hands to feet. His lips were mute. Stamp of fate was on his grey features. He knew his punishment: to be taken to the burning lava fields of Pinacate, where the dead volcanoes are, there to be left without gun or canteen; no man would see him again. Such was the Papago custom decreed for murderers from beforetime.

She who had ordained this trial by ordeal had turned away, once the wretch's confession had been heard. The soul of the girl now stood its own trial in turn; faced by the guilt of false suspicion, by the wounds wrought of bitter accusation, it must needs purge itself. Yes, even though the spirit of Benicia O'Donoju was not one easily to humble itself. A long minute she fought with herself and finally turned gropingly to make her hard penance before Grant.

Then she saw the figure of the man whose debtor in honour she was striding with his companion towards the avenue of palms leading to the house. The distance between them seemed suddenly the breadth of the world. [210]

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[211]

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DESERT INTERVENES

That day omniscient will of the desert moved to point a murderer's guilt the same inscrutable power flexed a finger to mould events some seventy miles away from the Garden of Solitude where the worthy doctor from Arizora and his Papago had been nibbling at a mystery. Though Doc Stooder moved in a haze of strong waters, though he looked upon the face of the desert through a golden veil of his own weaving, yet was he not the least immune from the law of the waste places. The Doc walked with God, even as did the pioneer fathers of the Church; the fact that he did not admit the companionship had no influence on the operations of destiny.

We left Stooder on his knees before the uncovered bell with its inscription carrying identification. His excitements, his hysterical grubbings, soundings and prospectings of the ensuing twenty-four hours were heroic. After the uncovering of the bell he had paced off a square through the scrub thirty or forty feet each way and with the corroded cone of metal for a centre; then the Indian and he had gone on their hands and knees over every inch of this square. Result, a single stick of hewn timber whose fire-blackened end had projected but an inch above the sand; digging revealed a twenty-foot beam, dry as a puff-ball and almost ready to disintegrate. [212]

That was all: the bell and the uncovered beam. But that was enough. Doc Stooder knew that beneath him lay the mission site; how deeply the blown sands of more than a century had buried it he could not guess. But it was here! Here lay the rich core of a legend that had sent many a man out into the desert to chase rainbow ends. His—Stooder's! A'mighty God! how he'd riffle those pearls through his fingers—lay 'em all out on a piece of velvet under some secret lamp and match 'em, pearl with pearl.

But twenty-four hours in the desert exact their price; and that price is in measure of water. The

Doc did not drink water so long as his store of contraband liquor held out; but the Papago did. Great was the Doc's rage and disgust when his companion called him away from sinking a prospect shaft to point the single remaining water container, now much lighter than it should be. [213] He tested the little car's radiator to find that evaporation had left almost none of the necessary fluid therein. No use buckin' fate; if he wanted to get back to the village of the Sand People on four wheels he'd have to give the radiator a drink and that would leave none for himself and the Papago.

It was near noon of their second day at the treasure site when the Doc whipped his reluctance into acceptance of the inevitable. He made certain preparations. First he copied into a prescription book the inscription on the bell; that would do to convince somebody whose financing of the excavation operations might have to be invoked. Then he sketched a map of the vicinity with meticulous care, marking in the jagged spurs of the nearby mountains for bearing points and indicating the position of the bell in reference to a dry wash which was traced down from a gash in the mountain wall.

"Guadalupe, old son, your old friend Stooder's goin' rustle back here with an outfit right soon an' dig himself right down to them pearls. So he's just a mite p'ticular about this map."

Access of caution prompted the Doc to dismount from the car after he'd set the engine to [214] humming. He ran back with a shovel and covered the bell with sand; the haggled bush above it would be a sufficient guide for him and no significant landmark for the possible prying stranger. The beam he hid in the wash. Then they trundled down their own track and back to the Road of the Dead Men. Doc Stooder cursed the necessity of automobiles leaving tracks. Some snoozer amblin' along the main road would just's like as not turn out to follow these two lines out into nowhere to see what he could see. Then perhaps—

Summer had come miraculously to the desert overnight, as the seasons in Altar have a way of doing. Yesterday the pink convolvulus of spring lay in scattered coral patches amid the scrub and the greasewood was showing its midget spots of yellow. Now every glistening clump of *cholla* was aglow with the blood-red flowers of its kind; the occasional pillars of the giant cactus were wreathed each at its top by fillets of creamy blossoms—grotesque masquerading of these withered old men of the wastes. First hint of summer's heat was abroad. It came from the west on puffy little winds like the back-draught from an oil-burning boiler.

The Doc found himself in a frolicsome mood, for his night's potations, predicated on a [215] dwindling supply, had recklessly drained that supply but availed to carry him over to another day with the stars of his dream world still burning. Hunched low in his seat so that the tip of his goatee waggled against the rim of the wheel, with his flopping black hat all grease streaked pulled low against the sun glare, the tramp physician chewed tobacco with all the unction of a care-free conscience and indulged himself in wandering monologue. Guadalupe's meagre stock of Spanish made him anything but a lively conversationalist, so the Doc was constrained to carry on a vivid conversation with himself.

Into what penetralia of reminiscence this auto-dialogue carried him! Back through the years—through countless dim valleys of a Never-Never Land of alcoholic fantasies where his spirit had been wont to pitch its tent. Scraps of jest and shreds of song stirred the ghosts along the Road of the Dead Men.

No such exuberance from Guadalupe, slave of the desert. They had not been an hour on the road when the Papago began to feel a crawling of the nerves along the spine and the pressure of invisible fingers across the brow—evil signs! No less than the mountain sheep or the road-runner [216] in the scrub could the Papago interpret the desert's forerunners of portent. A feel in the air—hue of the mountain rims—colour of sunlight against a rock: these things had their meaning.

Away off to the northward where a patch of gypsum showed white as film ice the Indian's eye caught the first tangible evidence of trouble ahead. A dust whirlwind like a gigantic leg in baggy trousers was wavering across the flats; the thing possessed volition of its own so surely did it map its course across a five-mile span in less than five minutes. Guadalupe nudged his companion timidly and pointed to it.

"Uh-huh, old Peg-legged Grandpap," chuckled the Doc. "Seen him lots times. Gotta hole in his peg-leg you can drive a car through slick's a whistle—allowin' you can find the hole."

A half hour later the sun changed colour. Like the passing of a shutter across a calcium light: now blinding white, now blood-orange. Instantaneous.

Three gusts of sand-laden wind came sweeping toward them from the west. A long lull, then the storm.

It pounced upon them with a sibilant whistle growing momentarily to a roar which was [217] engulfing. The little desert skimmer bucked like a wild colt against the onslaught of the wind; but when the Doc dropped the engine into low the car wallowed on in the face of the gale. The air was thick as flour. Wind-driven sand had the bite of an emery wheel at high revolution; it rasped the skin and drove eyelids tight shut. The two in the car buttoned jackets above their noses to breathe.

All the space of the desert was a poisonous yellow glare. Minute by minute density thickened until the car's radiator was hardly visible.

Then the sturdy engine quit. First a tortured grinding of clogged cylinders, puny explosions from the exhaust, a bucking and quivering. After that sudden stoppage of movement as if the car had plumped into a stone wall.

The Doc and Guadalupe tumbled out of the seat and crawled beneath the car for protection. A stab of fear shot down through Stooder's disordered thoughts—the water! None in the canteens, for they had drained the last into the radiator before starting from the treasure ground. Was there—could the sand have—?

He inched himself through a new sand drift below the front axle to where the drain cock projected below the radiator base. Like a suckling kid he lifted his lips to the steel teat and [218] turned the cock. A trickle of heavy mud filled his mouth with grit, then stopped.

Radiator a mess of mud—cylinders clogged—feed pipes all choked and water—gone!

Doc Stooder pulled his floppy hat over his face and whimpered the name of God.

And on the back trail where the bell of the Lost Mission had been found; over that site which the Doc had so carefully mapped and measured the wind scoured and builded—scoured and builded. Obliterating, changing, re-creating.

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[219]

CHAPTER XIX

THIRST

The sun went down before the sand storm abated. Two men, the one called civilized, the other a savage, crouched like rabbits in a covert beneath the body of the little car with a high sand drift piled up to windward even over the radiator top. Two mites in the wind-scourged wilderness of Altar with love o' life the leveller that made them kin.

When the last vagrant wind fury had passed fell silence almost terrific by contrast with the uproar of the storm. In place of the slithering and whistling of driven sand an oppressive stillness, which seemed dropped from the void of the stars, now showing. Occasionally the dry rustle of sand dropping in rivulets from some desert bush lifting its head after the scourging; that was all.

When the two crawled out from beneath their shelter Guadalupe was for an immediate start afoot in the direction of the faint pencilings of red marking the west. But Doc Stooder possessed [220] an abiding glimmer of faith in the soundness of the car and insisted on taking stock of its motive possibilities. A cursory examination convinced him of the hopelessness of his trust, for the sand was heaped entirely over the unprotected engine—desert cars dispense with a hood because it blankets the engine's heat—and he knew that even with water in the radiator he couldn't get a kick out of the thing before a thorough overhauling. This was out of the question. They must achieve their escape from the desert's trap afoot.

The Papago started on a swinging walk a little north of west, the Doc following. They had not gone far when the white man discovered they were not following the road; each step was through loose sand which received the foot with a viscous hold and reluctantly released it. The Doc snarled a query at his companion: why in the name of deletion had he quit the Road of the Dead Men?

"Not quit—finding him," came Guadalupe's grudging answer. Then Stooder admitted to himself the possibility that during the time the little car had pushed on into the storm he had tooled it off the road. How far he had driven away from the single track which spans Altar he could not hazard a guess. Anyway, he knew one thing: he was dog tired, and if this mangy black coyote [221] thought A. Stooder, M.D., was going to wallow through sand all night without a sleep he had another think coming.

Reaction from the excitements of the past two days added extra weight to the Doc's already none-too-light handicap of alcoholic repercussions. The storm had torn his nerves to tatters; his mouth was as dry as an old church pew cushion; each of his legs felt as if they were dragging an Oregon boot. Stooder's mind was too dulled to probe down below these afflictions and read the real seriousness of his situation; it dealt only with cogent aches and reluctances.

"Hey, Guadalupe! We take a sleep right here." The Doc halted. Great was his surprise when he saw the Papago striding on. Hot rage bubbled to his lips in an explosive Mexican oath.

"Hey, you lizard-eatin' mozo, hear me? We stop here for the big shut-eye!" The Doc spurred his long legs into a gangling run to overtake the Indian, who had plodded on unheeding. All the arrogance of the white man in his fancied superiority fell with the doctor's hand on the Indian's shoulder. Guadalupe wrenched free and turned to face him sulkily.

"Sleep here—to-morrow much sun—no water. Maybe to-morrow we die here. Walk!" [222] Guadalupe's sparse vocabulary of Spanish words was drained; but the manner of his resuming the forward hike was sufficiently eloquent. Guadalupe, born to the desert code and grown to manhood under the inexorable desert law, had in mind but a single impulse—to survive. His mind plumped through the bog of discomforts wherein Stooder's was mired to read clearly the tablets of the desert's decalogue: ten commandments in one—live! In extremity throw over loyalty, discard obligations of oath or of blood, strip the soul to its elemental selfishness; but live!

Guadalupe strode on, still bearing to the north and the west, and still no road. Stooder, growing more weary each step, spent his strength in blind rage at the stubbornness of the Papago. He conned over various capital operations he would like to perform with Guadalupe for a subject.

His brain tired of that and began to nurture the germ of a new thought. Why strain himself keeping up with that ring-tailed kangaroo rat who skipped on and on without rest? Guadalupe left the print of his foot every step he took; those footprints would point to wherever Guadalupe might go—and the Papago, of course, knew the shortest way out of this hellhole—so why break his own neck? The old Doc would take a little snooze and then just follow the footprints when he [223] felt good and ready to do so.

The gangling form crumpled up as if cut off at the knees. Guadalupe heard a thud, turned for a half-glance over his shoulder and pushed steadily on under the stars. It was not in the Papago's code to add one ounce to the weight of circumstance obtruding between himself and water. In a dozen steps his figure was swallowed up in the dark.

Stooder may have allotted to himself only that minimum of sleep designated as a snooze. But a high sun pried open his reluctant eyelids. He sat up and sent a dazed glance around an unfamiliar world. Mountains tawny and black with knife-edge water scores down their flanks; a sea of scrub stretching interminably from their bases; patches of gypsum and *salitre* showing dull white as scars of leprosy here and there amid the grey-green of the *camisa*. The sky already was taking on the yellow-white glaze indicative of imminent heat.

The Doc arose and shook the sand out of the creases of his clothing. First definite impression coming to him was the need of a drink: his favourite tequila if might be, water in a pinch. All the nerves in his body twittered "Hear—hear!" to the first of the alternatives. Then, his mind [224] beginning to function along the line of the night's impressions, Doc Stooder read the story of the footprints leading off to the north and west. There they were: good li'l signposts; they'd take him to a drink just as easy!

Stooder's renewed strength carried him easily along the trail the Papago had left. For an hour, that is; then trouble. For the sand disappeared under a broad apron of *caliche*—a hardpan of baked mineral salts and earth almost impervious even to the shod hoof of a horse. It was like a door swung shut on the trailer—the locked door to some labyrinth beyond. Here the last firm print of a boot in the sand, there nothingness. The Doc paused, looked back over the cup-like shadows marking the footprint trail he had been following to take its line of direction, then he pushed ahead along that line.

Another hour, and he still was on the *caliche* outcrop. He stopped to consider. Where in the name of all the angels was that road—the Road of the Dead Men? If he'd driven the car a little south of it during the sand storm, surely Guadalupe must have cut tangent to it by this time. And if the road passed over the *caliche* flat there'd be wheel marks; that was sure. Miss that road and [225] miss the Papago's trail both—why then old Doc Stooder'd be a goner!

He tried to follow his own back trail by such small signs as the scratch of a hobnail against an embedded rock and a thin print of a sole in a pocket of dust. A while and he had lost even that. He stopped and swabbed his streaming face with a shirtsleeve—he now was carrying his coat.

"By the eternal, Stooder, you gotta do something—and do it dam'd pronto!"

Once more he turned on his own tracks. Better go back and find that putrid Papago's trail and let the road go to the devil. Whole half hour wasted a'ready—good half hour, by criminy! with a drink just that much farther off.

It was not so easy finding the scored rocks and the stamp of a heel in pools of dust; not so easy as the first essay. For the sun was at meridian now and foreshortened little shadows to nothingness. Plump! he came to the edge of the hardpan and into the sandy soil. No tracks there. Should he bear to right or left in circling the edge of the *caliche* on his hunt for the footprints? If he guessed wrong where'd he be? "Oh, dear God!"

He turned to the left and resumed his tramp. Furnace light refracted from the sand seared into [226] his eyes, which must be always kept downward peering—spying. His mouth now was dry as rotted wood. Something alien there kept bothering him by pressing against the roof of it. He explored with his fingers and discovered the alien object to be his tongue, which was swelling.

"But my mind's clear—clear as a bell. Got a steady mind anyway. Gotta hold onto that or I'm a gone coon."

A slight breeze struck his right arm more penetratingly than it should. Stooder shifted his glance to his arm, held crooked.

"Good God! Coat's gone!" Dropped somewhere—that coat in whose pocket was a prescription book; among its pages the map of the treasure site. The precious map showing where lay the bell and the beam! The man whirled and started on a staggering run along the rim of the *caliche* he had been travelling.

"Must find that coat! Don't find the coat an' I lose the pearls an' the gold—the pearls an' the gold!"

He halted as if shot. Down the wind came to him the faint tolling of a bell. *Dong—dong.* Silvery throb of a swinging bell. Measured, unhurried; like the sounding of a bell for mass of a Sunday [227] morning. The Doc had heard the bell of San Xavier sending its call across the alfalfa fields of a Sunday morning, just like that.

Even as he strained his ears to drink in the full miracle of it the sound faded, ceased.

"I heard it! A bell! No illusion. Mind's still clear—still clear!" On he went, his gaunt legs weaving in wide circles. He came to a dark patch on the hardpan and strided over it, unheeding.

It was his missing coat, in the pocket the precious map of the treasure site. The Doc did not see the coat because again his ears were drinking in the maddening tolling of the bell; this time a little clearer down the wind in his face. An animal cry, half articulate, burst from his swollen lips:

"The mission bell! Bell of the Four Evangelists which I found t'other day! Callin' me back!"

Right over yonder where the mountains cracked apart to let that arroyo down onto the plain: that's where the bell sounded. Yes, sir, no mistake about it. 'Bout four-five mile, judgin' from the sound. Hear what that bell's a-callin'? "Gol-l-ld! Gol-l-ld!"

[228] Doc Stooder, coatless, hatless, the high roach of his streaked hair fanning in the hot winds, was stumbling and falling—stumbling and falling ever forward toward the crack in the mountains. Light of madness flamed in his eyes; his great arms clawed forward as if to catch invisible supports to pull him the faster. Gol-l-ld—Gol-l-ld!

"Old mind's still clear, else couldn't hear that mission bell so plain— Gotta keep old mind clear —"

The way of the desert god, always beyond man's comprehending, nevertheless sometimes approaches so close to the human scheme of thought and motive as to permit of analogy with it. When the director of destinies in the dry wastes seems to make a travesty of such a sacrosanct quality as human justice we may be moved to call the impulse satiric for want of a better name. Satiric, then, that reversal of the decree of death passed upon the Papago youth who confessed to murder before the overturned kettle at the Casa O'Donoju; more than satiric the moving finger now directing his path through the dead lands up to a union with the crazed doctor's.

[229] According to ancient custom the Indian retainers of the O'Donoju had taken the youth—his baptismal name was Ygnacio—down to the crater land of the Pinacate and there turned him loose without water to wander for a while and finally to die miserably. Other murderers had been so treated and never had been seen of men again. But the desert god who slays so peremptorily knew that Ygnacio had done the bidding to murder to save his brother from death—had killed without malice and only as the price of redemption for one of his blood. Wherefore the arbiter of life and death flung life at Ygnacio.

When he was athirst almost to the point of exhaustion he found a knob-like growth a scant two inches above the surface of the ground, recognized it for a promise of succour and with the last ounce of his strength dug the deep sand all about it. The end of his effort gave to him a strange and rare vegetable reservoir like an elongated radish, which miraculously holds scant moisture of summer rains the year round. "Root-of-the-sands" the Sonorans have named it. In the desolation between the Pinacate and the Gulf even the coyotes have the wisdom to dig for this precious sustainer of life.

[230] Ygnacio devoured the whole of the root and was revived. He found others, which he tied into a bundle to carry over his shoulders. Food and drink had come to him from the hand of Elder Brother himself when it was decreed by man he should have neither. Wherefore love o' life once more burned strong in the man. He set his course northward, travelling only by night when the heat had given place to the biting desert chill, keeping his precious roots buried in the sand while he slept by day so that evaporation would not rob him of the promise of escape from inferno. Straight as an arrow northward where, beyond the Line, lay tribes of Papagoes who never had heard of Don Padraic O'Donoju nor of a murderer named Ygnacio.

So it happened that on the third night of his march, when Ygnacio had paused to munch a segment of the sustaining root, came to his ears the sound of a voice, faintly and from a great distance. It might be a human voice, though there was a burred and thickened quality to it almost like a burro's bray.

The Indian boldly followed where his ears gave direction. "Gol'—gol'—gol'" was the monotonous iteration, sounding almost like the muffled tapping of a clapper against metal. He walked a mile—so clearly do sounds carry in the desert night—and suddenly came upon the [231] figure of a white man. Naked above the waist, wisp of a goatee tilted at the stars, arms rigid at sides and with fingers widespread, the spectre of a white man chanted the single word, "Gold."

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[232]

CHAPTER XX

THE COMING OF EL DOCTOR

The sandstorm that overwhelmed Stooder and his guide on the Road of the Dead Men brought the mighty voice of the desert to the Garden of Solitude in requiem for the soul of Don Padraic O'Donoju. Savage elegy of a life lived in communion with the spirit of the wild.

There was no priest to order the funeral rites of the Church. Though a day's journey in Quelele's car to Caborca and back would have fetched a minister of religion, Benicia was determined word of her father's death should not reach the man who provoked it sooner than the courses of rumour allowed. The Caborca priest posting out to the Casa O'Donoju would set

tongues wagging instantly and the seal of silence imposed by miles of unpeopled space between the casa and the nearest community would be broken. “The service of the heart will be just as acceptable to my father’s spirit,” was Benicia’s simple justification to herself of breach of custom. [233]

So in the heat haze preceding the storm six Indians bore the body of their master through fields of alfalfa behind the white house down to a grove of shimmering alamo trees which fringed a reservoir of the oasis’ precious water. Here beneath the white and silver-green tent of the trees was sanctified ground. Here lay the dust of lords and ladies of a desert principality who, for their spans of years, had been inheritors of the desert’s cruelties and benefices.

Grant fell in with the file of dark-skinned mourners that followed behind the body of Don Padraic, with him Bagley. They did this unbidden of Benicia. Neither had seen her since the dramatic climax of the ordeal of the kettle the day before; no word had come from her. Yet each had felt the need to succour the bereaved girl in her great loneliness, forgetting unhappy events of the dawn in the patio.

For Grant there had been a brief struggle with pride and outraged sensibilities—blessedly brief because a broader tolerance and finer manhood had rallied to overthrow the narrower view of selfishness. In the light of the terrific blow that had been dealt the girl he loved—all the more crushing because of its suddenness—the savage reaction of a high spirit seemed to him not so to [234] be wondered at. Nor Benicia’s silence since. In these dark hours there was no place in her heart for aught but unassuaged grief.

Arrived at the alamo grove, all the Indians of the village and household massed themselves a little way apart from freshly turned sod, their glistening black heads dappled by the silhouettes of the leaves, their eyes restless and awestruck. Benicia, garbed in dull black which made the whiteness of her face and uncovered glory of her hair the more striking, stood at the head of the rude housing fashioned by the Papagoes for her beloved clay; her calm was absolute as that of the iron peaks beyond the oasis green. In her hand was a wreath the Indian women had woven—scarlet flowers of the cactus with feathery acacia intertwined.

In a steady voice the girl read a Latin prayer while the Indians knelt. Then with a lingering touch she laid the scarlet and olive-green wreath upon the pall and watched the glowing spot of colour slowly sink from sight.

Suddenly the recessional: the sand storm with its clamour of incoherent desert tongues crying hidden tragedies, its blinding sheets of sand. When the first blast struck the group turning away [235] from the grave Grant stepped quickly to Benicia’s side, drew her arm protectingly through his and bent his body to shield her from the myriad chisels of the driven sand. He fought for footing for them both.

At his touch Benicia turned dry eyes to his. Swiftly she read the love there—love triumphing over the hurt she had so lately given him. On the instant tears filmed the hard brightness of the orbs Grant looked down upon. Her lips moved in some halting speech of contrition, but the savage blast snatched away the sound of her words. In the softening of those eyes and the weight of her body clinging nervelessly to him the man was told the whole story of a girl’s amends for hasty and unconsidered action. All her iron will which had carried her head high through hours of grief suddenly had sped from her, leaving her groping and dependent.

An exalted sense of guardianship came to Grant—swept over him like a cool breeze to a fever patient. Almost it was a feeling of holy trust bestowed. At last—at last the woman he loved had battled against bitter fate beyond the limit of her endurance and was turning to him to fend for her. Unheeding the twinges his wound gave him, he bent to the blast with his precious burden. [236] Oh, if only he could be given liberty to sweep her into his arms, to call her name in the piety of supreme love, snatch her away from the incubus of dread which had settled upon her so relentlessly.

He would not wait for such opportunity—so the thought came lancing at him in a lightning flash of resolution; he would create it! No longer stand idly by with footless compassion while the girl of his heart remained in chains of a fixed idea too strong for her to break. He himself would free her of those shackles even if he had to fight her fiery will to do it!

While the storm furiously grappled with the palms outside, Bim and Grant sat in the dark music room of the great-house. With hushed voices the two friends conned over the situation facing them and the girl now left alone in the immensity of Altar. Not a simple exigency. On the one hand promptings of delicacy and the dictates of custom ruled against their remaining longer in the Casa O’Donoju. Opposed to this was the alternative of leaving Benicia to become a prey to the schemes of Colonel Urgo—a girl fighting single-handed the craft of an implacable enemy. Without a protector other than the Indians of the oasis—and they had the minds of children—the girl [237] could not combat this unscrupulous wooer for long. What then?

Bim finally summed the situation: “It comes down to this, old side-pardner; either you’ve got to persuade her to come back to Arizona with us mighty pronto or to marry you, putting it bald-headed like.”

Grant’s mind leaped to grapple with the flash of an idea—the one that had come to him when he and the girl breasted the sandstorm. Resolution crystallized on the instant. He silently quizzed his friend with an appraising eye.

“And if I can’t persuade her?” he queried softly.

“Then you simply trundle yourself away from here and up across the Line, knowing that, sure as shootin’, this wolf Urgo’ll be down on her just as soon as he makes up his mind to move.” The

big fellow in the firelight stressed inevitability in his dictum. Grant gave him a cryptic smile.

"Suppose I take her anyway if she will not be persuaded?" Bim jerked back his head and surveyed his friend with startlement which speedily softened to a wide grin. Out went his hand to clap Grant's knee.

"Now you're tootin'!"

[238] Once he had put his resolution into words, the idea back-fired to scorch Grant with sudden comprehension of what would be involved in such a cavalierly course of action. Actually to steal Benicia O'Donoju! Take her by force from the home which now was hers to rule. Play the very part which he feared Colonel Urgo would pursue if left alone. He scarcely heard Bim rumbling his enthusiasms.

"That's the pure quill!" the desert man was saying. "That's the Grant Hickman who brought me in on his back from a section of Heinie's first line trench with H.E.'s droppin' round like gumdrops from a baby's torn candy bag." He checked himself to launch the question, "Have you got a line on the girl yet? I mean, do you think she fancies you enough to be glad—after you've run away with her?"

"I think so," was Grant's simple answer.

"Fine business! The sooner the quicker, young fellah. You an' her an' me in the li'l old desert skimmer. 'Cause I gotta get back to Arizora. The old Doc'll think I've thrown him down an', besides, my own business—"

"You mean you'll go ahead with Stooder on his scheme for finding the Lost Mission?" Grant cut in impetuously. The big love he bore Bagley jealously demanded an answer. The other reached over to lay a hand on Grant's shoulder.

[239] "No. That's all off, old son. I couldn't go prying around after lost treasure that belongs to the girl's family—more particular not after what you've told me I couldn't. I promise you I'll head off the Doc if I have to get him thrown in the *carcel* for boot-legging."

The storm wore itself to a final sibilant whisper among the tortured palms and the two continued to sit in the room of shadows with the complexities of the daring plan of kidnapping still bulking large. 'Cepcion tip-toed in to announce to Bim in an awed whisper, "El Doctor Coyote Belly from Babinioqui has come through the storm. Shall I disturb the mistress?"

Bim translated to Grant with a questioning tilt of the eyebrows. Grant started at the name of the medicine man who had been his rescuer and to whom he owed his life. What could have brought this old Indian away across the expanse of Altar to drop out of the storm upon the house of mourning?

"Tell her we will see him first," Grant directed, moved as he was by some half-sensed instinct of protection for Benicia; evil tidings—if such the Indian bore—must be kept from her. The two rose and followed the waddling Indian woman through the halls to the servants' quarters in the rear. Under a pepper tree in the fading dusk they found the squat figure of Coyote Belly. The Indian [240] doffed his hat at the approach of the white men and stood smiling; there was in his pose something of quiet dignity which bent little before the centuries-old convention of the white man's superiority. His beady eyes, well larded in creasy folds, possessed intelligence beyond the ordinary.

Grant impulsively took El Doctor's hand in a strong grip carrying the thanks he could not speak. El Doctor's eyes mirrored recognition and he bobbed his head with a broadening smile.

"Tell him, Bim, I could not thank him for all he did for me. He is the chap that found me on the Hermosillo road, you know, and pulled me through." Bim put the words in Spanish and El Doctor bobbed his head again. Then the Indian began haltingly in the same tongue. Bim's eyes narrowed to a quizzical pucker as he progressed. Grant could read a spreading wonder in his friend's features.

"The old bird says he came here because he knew Don Padraic had been killed," Bim repeated. "Says he knew it the night of the murder because a star fell in the west and he saw the picture of the old Don with a knife in his heart—saw it in the water of his medicine *olla*. So he's been on the trail ever since because he's got to tell Señorita Benicia something." [241]

"But," Grant began incredulously. Bim caught him up with, "Sure, I know it sounds phoney. But I know, too, the old boy's telling the truth. These desert people have a way of seeing across space—reading signs and such—which leaves us white folks gasping— How's that?" He turned an ear to El Doctor, who had begun to speak again.

"Standing-White-in-the-Sun was my father and my brother," the medicine man gravely intoned. "He gave me *pinole* when I was starving. He came to my house at the festival of the *sahuaro* wine and drank with me as a brother. His child, Lightning Hair, is as my own child."

Depth of feeling was sweeping El Doctor like a storm. His grey head trembled and drops of moisture stood in his eyes. Bim gently checked him with, "The señorita is oppressed with grief. If we could take your message to her—" But El Doctor shook his head.

"She will see me. She will hear what El Doctor Coyote Belly has come through the storm to tell."

"Yes, she will hear," came an unexpected voice from the direction of the doorway, and Benicia walked up to the Indian. El Doctor made a step forward to meet her; with a gesture of reverence [242]

he took the hand stretched out to him and placed it first on his brow then over his heart. His old eyes shone. The two white men turned and walked beyond earshot. From a distance Grant saw the girl lead the medicine man to a rustic seat beneath the pepper tree; snatches of barbarous Papago speech came to his ears.

The glory of sunset, more glorious because of the dust held in suspension in the air, came and passed and still Benicia and the medicine man talked beneath the pepper tree. The evening meal was a mournful affair, with only Grant and Bim at the candle-lit table. Grant, unable to contain his restlessness, quit the house alone when supper was finished; he walked down the avenue of palms in the direction of the red fires marking the Indian village. The night was luminous with that sheen which covers the desert heavens like a bloom. Thin rind of a moon hung low in the west, a cold glow of nacre.

He had crossed the bridge and was about to turn off into an adjacent field when he heard a footstep in the shadowed aisle below palm tops ahead of him. A figure scarce discernible in its black garb came upon him.

"Benicia!"

She stopped, startled. "Ah, it is you," was her murmured greeting as Grant stepped to her side. [243]

"Alone and in the dark," he chided, but the girl tossed off his fears with a gesture of the hands. "I have been with El Doctor down to the village to find a place for him to lodge." Grant imprisoned her arm and gently persuaded her steps back down the aisle of darkness toward the village. For a minute they walked in silence. Each knew there were things to be spoken, yet each was reluctant to break the silent communion their nearness wrought.

"And El Doctor gave you the message he came to bring?" finally from Grant. Her head nodded assent.

"Not bad news, I hope," he hazarded. A tightening of fingers on his arm as she answered, "The best—and the worst." Grant drew a long breath.

"And may I share with you—the worst?" he managed to murmur. Now once more that dragging weight on his arm as when he guided Benicia through the storm—mute signal of surrender from one spent in the fight.

"El Doctor says—oh, my friend, you must not stay here in the Garden longer. The rurales are gathering at Babinioqui, El Doctor tells me—with Urgo. That means but one thing: Urgo is [244] bringing them here, and you—"

"But you!" Grant interrupted almost fiercely. "What of you? Must I run away and leave you unprotected from that man?" The girl drew away from him as if in very defiance of some mastering impulse which would push her into his arms.

"I—my people will fight for me if need be. Urgo comes for you this time, and I cannot be sure these children"—a vague sweep of her hand toward the winking village fires—"that these children would fight for you, whom they scarcely know." There was that brave yet pitiful resolution in her tone when she spoke of the hazard of Urgo's probable sally upon her own person which crashed through all a lover's carefully built barriers of restraint. Unmindful of the events of recent hours, of the girl's fresh bereavement, Grant crushed her to him hotly.

"Oh, 'Nicia—'Nicia, can't you understand! I must go—yes, to-morrow! Not because Urgo is coming to get me but because your being here alone forces me away from you. Yet I cannot think of leaving you to fight that man single-handed. 'Nicia—precious!—you will come—you must come with me up over the Line where—"

"Oh, please—please stop!" Hands were feebly pressing him away. Glint of starlight revealed [245] tears a-tremble on her lashes. "Grant—great heart—I understand. I cry for you. See! My eyes tell you what is in my heart. But I cannot give myself to you when that—that terrible thing of misfortune and death goes with me. I—the mark I bear brought death to my dear father!"

He looked down into her eyes, appalled at this last speech. Before he could hush her she faltered on:

"But El Doctor brought me also good news—wonderful news! It is that I can lift this evil from me if—if"—she seemed to falter before a possibility scarce credible—"if the finding of the gold and jewels El Rojo stained with his sacrilege and their restoration to a sanctuary of the Church will be acceptable in God's sight."

The hint of purpose in Benicia's voice revealed the edge of the truth. "Do you mean El Doctor knows where the Lost Mission lies and that you intend to find it?" Grant pressed her. The girl gave answer:

"He knows where the gold and pearls of the Lost Mission are. He knows, too, the story of El Rojo and how I bear the weight of his guilt. Because he loved my father he says he loves me too [246] much to have me go on and on under an evil spell. Father's death opens his lips and—"

"You are going with El Doctor to find those things?" breathlessly from Grant. She nodded. "Then I will go with you. At once! To-morrow!"

Decision came on the wings of inspiration. Better this flight into the desert on treasure quest, with its promise of exorcism of all the devils that plagued the girl—better this venture than that other he had determined: to play the strong hand willy-nilly.

CHAPTER XXI

TREASURE QUEST

[247]

Colonel Hamilcar Urgo was not addicted to introspection. He took himself as he found himself and as a rule was well pleased with the find. Had any non-partisan voice of conscience told him cruelty played a large part in his make-up undoubtedly the little Colonel would have denied the charge with hot indignation. Cruelty, to his way of thinking, was exclusively a feminine defect; a woman was guilty of cruelty, for example, when she spurned the honourable advances of so honourable a suitor as Hamilcar Urgo. Benicia O'Donoju was the cruelest creature he knew; wherefore like a fractious horse she must be broken.

No, Señor Urgo found nothing reprehensible in his orders to Ygnacio, the Papago, that Don Padraic must be put out of the way. The same impulse had prompted him to strip the bandage of ignorance from Benicia's eyes during that interview in the patio without the least compunction. [248] These headstrong women! There was a way to handle them just as there was a way to break the heart of a high-spirited mount: curb bits that tear and spurs that gouge. Let him have possession of a spirit-broken woman for a little while, to play with and then discard; possession was not nearly so diverting as the game of spirit breaking. At that Urgo considered himself rather a master hand.

He had not hated the master of the Casa O'Donoju. Aside from the necessity of clearing the field of a possible objector to his suit and bringing pain to the haughty desert girl, Urgo's murder impulse was prompted by no personal bias. But with all the deadly spleen compacted into his wispy body the little man hated the gringo Grant Hickman. Hated him because the American was in the lists against him; hated him, especially, because twice Hickman had humiliated him before the eyes of Benicia: once in the Pullman out of El Paso and a second time—searing scar in memory—when the man, though weakened by a bullet wound, had hustled him out the door of the desert manor.

If whole-heartedness gives any palliation to hatred then was Hamilcar Urgo's passion almost to [249] be forgiven him. For very dynamic force no impulse in his twisted career matched it. The vision of this gringo's impudently smiling face went to bed with him at night and abided with him all day—a veritable ache. Come what might, he would destroy Grant Hickman and in a manner such as to entail the most refined tortures.

So this was his single purpose—possession of the girl would be a mere by-product—when he used his power with the police arm of the Sonora state government to assemble ten ruffians of the rurales force at a point on the railroad within striking distance of the Road of the Dead Men. Desert cars were at his disposal but he preferred to head a mounted force because his plans looked to an excursion into country where autos could not go, once Hickman was his prisoner. A complaisant spirit of justice at Hermosillo would accept in lieu of the escaped convict's person some token symbolical of a justice already wrought through the instrument of the state's worthy servant, Urgo.

The day after the sand storm Urgo and his rurales set out from the railroad for the west and the Garden of Solitude at the end of a long road. They were superbly mounted; two pack animals [250] trotted behind the file of horsemen. Revolutions had been squelched by a less imposing force.

After the cleansing storm the desert was bland and tolerant. Air clear as quartz, sun tempered by fresh winds from the west, on every club and spike of cactus fresh flowers born overnight to replace those destroyed by the driving sands. One of the rurales unslung a guitar from a mule's pack and strummed minor chords to the accompaniment of a song in which the rest joined. The ballad was gentle as a butterfly's wing, telling of roses over a lady-love's window.

Urgo, lulled by the immensity of the desert peace, perhaps even by the tenderness of the song his murderers sang, pleasured himself by building pictures in prospect. He saw himself riding alone up to the door of the Casa O'Donoju—the rurales would be disposed beyond sight of the door but within call; saw the courteous bow he would make to Señorita Benicia; heard himself inquiring in polite phrase concerning her health and that of her respected father. Ah, Don Padraic dead—murdered! Grace of God, but that was sad news. But the American gentleman who was a guest at the Casa O'Donoju; did his unfortunate wound still keep him under the [251] beneficence of the casa's hospitality—?

Five hours of the second day out on the Road of the Dead Men the rurale who was riding at the head of the file reined in with a shout. His arm stretched to point a tiny black beetle away off to the westward: a beetle skittering down the long slope of a divide and in their direction. In ten minutes the beetle showed again, but it had grown to the dimensions of an auto. It was upon them almost before the horsemen had spread themselves in a fan across the road. Quelele, whom Urgo instantly recognized, accepted the implied hint to halt; in the seat beside him was a strange white man—a gringo by his looks. This man let a bland, incurious eye range over the band of horsemen until it settled upon Urgo; there it rested with a dispassionate stare somehow affronting to the Spaniard's dignity.

Urgo stiffly bowed and waited for the gringo to speak. Instead of returning his salutation the white man searched the pockets of his vest for tobacco bag and papers and bent all his attention upon rolling a cigarette.

"You have come from the Casa O'Donoju, señor?" Urgo asked in English. Bim Bagley gave the [252]

clipped Spanish “Si” of assent and drew his rolled cigarette across his lips with a languid air. Urgo in a growing rage wondered if this boorishness were the stranger’s typically American manner or assumed to provoke hostility. His voice was silken as he put his next question in Spanish:

“The Señorita O’Donoju and Don Padraic, her father, they enjoy the best health, I hope.”

“I hope so, too,” was Bim’s short reply as he put a match to his smoke. Urgo’s brows knitted. Here was no boor but a wise gringo with a chuckle behind every word.

“I am doing myself the honour to call upon Don Padraic and his charming daughter,” his temper pushed him to volunteer. Bim swept the company of horsemen with a lack-lustre eye and then let his glance return to the dapper figure of the Colonel.

“Do tell,” he drawled in broadest Border dialect. “See you brought all the boys with you. Well, so long!” He nudged the Indian a signal to go ahead. Urgo would have liked to detain this impudent gringo for a lesson in manners did not more pressing pleasure lie ahead. He gave an imperceptible nod and the horsemen who blocked the road moved aside. The little car shot back a pungent cloud of smoke for a parting insult as it took the road in high. Urgo watched it rise to [253] the low crest of a divide and disappear. Insufferable gringo! What had he been doing at Casa O’Donoju? What did he know of recent events there?

A shrug dismissed Bagley, and the file of horsemen resumed leisurely progress along the desert road. A night’s dry camp, and early morning would see them in the oasis green at journey’s end.

Colonel Urgo miscalculated when he dismissed Bim Bagley with a shrug. Did the little Spaniard but know it, this meeting in the wastes was the objective point in the gringo’s strategy. Even under certain heavy handicaps ten gallons of gasoline in the desert can achieve more than ten horses with rurales on their backs. It all depends upon the hand that nurses precious jets of this gasoline across the path of the spark. And Quelele’s was a master hand. Wherefore the second phase in Bim’s strategy was entered upon.

Bim and the Indian had made perhaps five miles along the eastward-bearing road beyond the point of the meeting with Urgo’s ruffians when the Papago turned off the single wheel track and into the sparse scrub. A low range separated them from the rurales; the crumbling of that range [254] into desert flatness lay a good ten miles to southward. Once around that, the little car could be tooled behind a screen of hillocks back onto the Road of the Dead Men and ahead of the rurales, but only by exercise of the most delicate driving judgment. “Smack through the country—without roads?” whiffles the incredulous driver of limousines along sedate highways in Pennsylvania and New York. Exactly that. It is done in Arizona and Sonora—thirty or fifty miles of unfenced desert; compass to pick up direction and shovel to dig out of arroyos. Johnny Cameron, of Ajo, even herds wild horses on a motorcycle.

Quelele stopped to let air out of his tires that they might better grip the sand and pad through soft places. Then began a jackrabbit skittering and twisting ’cross country, with every hundred yards offering the hazard of a broken axle and the little desert skimmer standing on its nose at the brink of a dry wash while its passengers flattened the descent by hasty shovel work. Like a rowboat in mid-Atlantic the puny contraption of tin and steel took the long waves, snarling and grumbling over sand-traps, boggling through thickets of *cholla* which rigged its tires with festoons of prickly stubs. Quelele’s hands possessed magic. They knew just when to give a twist [255] to the wheel, when to shoot the spark ahead. Every hummock and pitfall was read by them surely and swiftly.

The little car rounded the end of the mountain range and shot back on a tangent for the road where Urgo and his rurales were travelling. With a grunt Quelele suddenly let the car trundle to a halt; he clambered out and knelt by the radiator. Drip-drip of precious water from some stab of brush through the honeycomb of cells there. Bim sacrificed his tobacco in the emergency. The flaky mass was poured into the radiator with fresh water from a canteen; the stuff found the leak and, swelling, stopped it.

Then on and on, around the flanks of the little hills and across wide flats where the brush was scattered. Always Quelele was sure to keep a height of land between the car and the Road of the Dead Men until finally he brought his gas mustang to a stop on the crest of a lava ridge and pointed back. Against the eastern horizon showed a crawling inch-worm in the desert’s immensity—Urgo and the rurales. Below the lava crest and near at hand was the objective of their detour, the road that led to the Casa O’Donoju and those who must be warned. [256]

It was after sunset when the little car hiccoughed up under the avenue of palms. An hour later in the first dark of night a file of horsemen quit the perfumed precincts of alfalfa fields behind the Casa O’Donoju. At the head, driving a pack-mule, was El Doctor Coyote Belly, big Quelele riding beside him. Behind were Benicia and Grant. Bim Bagley was file closer. In scabbards at the saddle of each hung carbines.

El Doctor, the guide, set the course away from the Road of the Dead Men which, passing through the Garden of Solitude, buries itself in the Yuma Desert. His direction was south and west toward the Gulf and the labyrinth of volcano craters on its hither shore called Pinacate.

CHAPTER XXII [257]

ALTAR TAKES ITS TOLL

Dawn marched over the mountains like a phalanx of Alexander: spear points of light on long hafts, which drove at the zenith in solid bundles. Then the mercenaries of the sun trooped across the vacant desert floor wave on wave and strength following strength. All the dead world of Altar stirred and set itself for the ordeal of a new day.

The figure of a man that had been Doc Stooder, cynical tinker of life's rusts and corrodings, stirred under the trampling of the light—stirred and stretched its members in dull protest of unconsciousness. Finally when the arrows of the new day drove at his eyelids the man opened them and lay staring up into the sky's opalescence. For a long minute they probed the marbled colour depths uncomprehendingly, then turned to find the rim of the iron mountains to the east. Comprehension came at last; with it a distorted memory image of hours of madness and wandering, agony of thirst, despair pressing upon footsteps that carried nowhere. Sleep which [258] had put a period to all this nightmare had also mercifully rallied the man's nervous forces to a new effort of self-saving. Men die hard because the instinct locked up in their sub-conscious minds always prevails over surrender of the conscious will.

The Doc lifted an arm to shield his eyes and felt something sinuous slide off his body. An instant his heart was chilled, for the feeling was of a desert serpent trailing over his form. He dared lift his head ever so little and let his eyes rove down his body. A queer something, not snake, lay in a curve by his side; a pallid, root-like thing the size of a man's wrist at one end and tapering to a stringy point. He raised himself on his elbow and drew the vegetable serpent to him. Just as he did so his eyes discovered the prints of a man's feet in the sand by where he lay.

"Glory be!" came the croak from stiffened lips, and the Doc concentrated all his scattered wits on an examination of the prodigy. Yes, footprints. They came from behind him; they were printed in a semi-circle about him to mark where one had stood hesitantly looking down at him while he slept; they marched off in line with their approach straight toward the tawny mountains ringing [259] the northern horizon.

Guadalupe's footprints—the trail he had followed and lost the day before! So Stooder thought.

A great sense of security pushed through the daze in his brain. Here, at last, lay the way to salvation. That thought having been duly relished, he turned his attention once more to the mysterious vegetable whip by his side. He never had seen its like. How it came to be there he had no notion. The thing was unlike any desert growth in his experienced observation, wherefore it seemed to represent some prodigy of the desert god dropped by him for a purpose.

He gripped the heavier end of the root between his hands and gave it a twist. The thing broke like an over-ripe radish and a thin spurt of water shot from the severed ends. Greedily he thrust one stump into his mouth and clamped his jaws upon it. Gracious fluid, mildly acrid, drenched the parchment-like membranes of his throat. The Doc sighed once, then wolfed the whole stub of the root he had broken off. As the pulp was swallowed he felt immediate access of strength and sanity.

From somewhere deep in the corroded heart of him welled an emotion whose like he had not [260] known during all the years of his warped and weathered manhood. As if a child prompted him the gaunt, half-naked creature on the sands lifted his eyes to the glowing blue.

"Thanks, dear God!"

So the sardonic genius of the waste places permitted the cloak of divinity to fall upon Ygnacio, fugitive and murderer, for that a surprising charity had prompted him to pause in the night by a raving man, divide with him his slender store of insurance against death, then pass on.

The root-of-the-sands which Stooder half devoured quickly restored him to something like the normal. Gone were the deliriums that had dogged him those hours of horror. He heard no longer the ghost bells of the Lost Mission summoning him to treasure buried in the bleak mountains yonder. Rational thought was his after all the wanderings in Bedlam. He mapped his strategy against the ever-present menace of the desert.

Here were Guadalupe's tracks—the Papago hound; wait till he could get hands on the devil! Of course they would lead to the village of the Sand People on the edge of El Infiernillo. Well and [261] good; but that might still be a long way ahead. Could he make it just on what was left of this mysterious root? About one chance in ten; and the old Doc wasn't taking any more chances. What then?

Why, follow the tracks back to the stalled auto. Water might be there. Surely were cans of tomatoes—about a dozen of 'em. A dozen tomato cans would carry him a hundred miles on foot; he knew because he'd drunk uncooked canned tomatoes many a time—food and drink in small compass. All right; follow the tracks back to the auto, rest up a bit and then get a fresh start back over those same tracks and straight into the Sand People's rancheria.

Stooder wrapped the precious remains of his giant radish in a strip of his shirt and started back over the line of blue shadow cups in the sand. As he laboured through the heavy going he reviewed all he could remember of yesterday's terrors, and a great fear began to build in the back of his mind. Fear of the leagues upon leagues of blank space about him—land unchanged by time since the waters of a great sea were withdrawn into a shallow cup now called the Gulf. Fear of latent forces which lurked in the naked mountains all about, in the ghostly mirage which [262] stretched vain beauties before his eyes. Over-mastering all was a corroding fear of his own body.

The Doc's trained intelligence was functioning with deadly precision. It separated his mind from the rest of his being, counting the mind as a rider and the body the beast it rode. The rider willed that the beast carry it to a certain destination; did that beast stumble and fall the rider could cry out never so furiously but it would be lost. And that burden-bearer of the mind was capable of just so much. Its tissues and sinews were kept functioning by water and food. So much water and so much food gave so many foot-pounds of energy; no more. Inexorable mathematics!

When sweat began to trickle down into his eyes Stooder could not repress a shudder. Lost! Water lost from his body. The desert greasewood is wise enough to coat all its leaves and little stems with creosote to trick evaporation; the big *sahuaro* shows only the edges of its accordion flutings to the sun and greases them with paraffin; man yields water like a stranded jellyfish.

Better take another chew on that water-root dingus to make up for sweat lost. Better give the old pulse a feel to see how it's runnin'.

The sun swam dizzily at meridian so that the footprints the Doc followed were hard to see— [263]
mere shallow spoon marks. On and on towards the south!

What was that thing moving over yonder in that bunch of saltbush? Yes, sir, moving!—A coyote, by th' eternal!—Naw, coyotes weren't white like this animal; coyotes were a mangy yellow.—But, by criminy! this thing had the looks of a coyote—sharp nose and baggy tail half way 'tween its hind legs, skulkin' like.—An albino coyote! Lookit! Eyes pinky like a white rabbit.—Whoever heard of an albino coyote?

No phantom of the imagination that slinking, dirty-white creature which matched its pace to the Doc's on parallel course through the low lying scrub. The desert Ishmael trotted along with a foolish air of being strictly about its own business, as if no other creature were in sight. When Stooder stopped to bawl curses at it the albino thing halted and made a great pretence of snouting at a flea bite, utterly oblivious to his presence. A fragment of dead bush-stock was hurled at it; the coyote lifted a corner of his lip in a deprecatory smile but did not abate his casual trot.

"Huh, you mangy bag o' bones! Think you're goin' have a feed off'n me, do you? Well, I'm tellin' [264]
you, you got a mighty long tromp ahead!"

On through the desert slogged the man and on trotted the freaky animal whose colour made him outcast even from his own kind. These twain alone under the hot sky: two mites of life in a land of death, each blindly following the call of every life cell in him to live—live!

What had been a piled-up cloud of blue and faint rose to the south when the Doc started his hike had unfolded hour by hour into definite form. Little by little pinnacles sharp as ice splinters lifted from a mountain mass and detached mountains with their tops blown off stood against the horizon like truncated columns of an acropolis. Here were the mazes of the Pinacate, raw shards of volcanoes and wilderness of lava flows down by the Gulf sandhills; country so fire-scarred and forbidding that even the Indian nomads give it wide berth. Only the big-horn sheep possess it, living no man knows how.

The undeviating trend of the trail southward towards this ragged mass had perplexed Stooder when first he became conscious of it. The auto should be lying somewhere off to eastward if he didn't miss his guess; those mountains ahead were strange to him. But he could not know how far [265]
nor where he had wandered the day before; even though he thought long since he should have come upon a second line of footprints—his own—running along with those of the Papago, yet there was no denying he was following the right trail back to the auto and the cached tomatoes. There sure could not be two lines of footprints here in this least-travelled part of Altar.

So ran the mind of him whom the mocking Gog and Magog of the desert's diarchy had put on a false trail to desolation. Deeper and deeper into a waterless scrap-heap of forgotten ages his steps took him. And the albino coyote was his aloof companion.

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[266]

CHAPTER XXIII

INTO THE FURNACE

Meanwhile from another direction adventurers were moving through the night upon the slag mountains of Pinacate. Empty space of Altar's ultimate sweep was become almost populous. A strange company this, which passed ghostily under the great lights of the near stars with only the clink of bridle metal and pack mule's canteens to give tempo to the march; Benicia O'Donoju, the desert girl, moved to this risky hazard by compulsion of an incubus of fate visited upon her through inheritance down the generations of her people; Grant Hickman, man of cities and crowds, whom destiny had whirled out into a country of the world's dawn; Bagley the Arizonan, taker of chances, seeker after rainbow ends; and the two Papagoes, Quelele and El Doctor Coyote Belly, on whom was spread thin the veneer of so-called civilization.

It had been Benicia's mastering purpose that had moved the cavalcade away from the Casa [267]
O'Donoju and out onto the desert immediately upon the return of Bim and Quelele reporting the leisurely approach of Colonel Urgo and his rurales. This was not flight, she told Bim; they would go in search of the treasure of the Lost Mission whose hiding place the old medicine man was

willing to reveal, and if Urgo followed—well, eventualities could be met as they arose. In this resolve Grant had strongly seconded her. The girl's slavery under the obsession of the bane of El Rojo, especially following the slaying of her father, had laid an impenetrable barrier between her and him; he had seized upon this possibility promising her emancipation from this horror. This chance failing, he had but the last desperate recourse.

The first hour of their pilgrimage away from the desert oasis Grant rode by Benicia's side. He essayed to distract her thoughts from the tragedy that lay behind by questioning her on the revelations El Doctor had made: how had the old Indian come by knowledge of the buried gold and pearls; what impulse had led him to promise their restoration? But the girl was not to be drawn. She answered his queries by evasions or meaningless monosyllables. It was as if Grant were a stranger, impudently prying. [268]

At first the man was stung by this treatment. His self-pride rebelled against so arbitrary a closing of the door of confidence against him. Why should he be treated thus cavalierly when the girl had surely read the great love he bore her and his single desire to place himself between her and the menace of one who had prompted murder? But these hurts did not continue long. Riding by Benicia's side in the starshine, the man began to feel the emanations of a mastering will which poured from her as the pungent prickles of ozone surround a high-power dynamo. Her consciousness was frozen into a mould of purpose, locked against any distractions. Benicia was alive only to the single resolve to free herself from the curse of the Red One. Man nor spirit could invade that preoccupation.

There under the steady-burning desert lamps the man of the cities began to feel again that spell of the infinite which had chained him the night of Don Padraic's passing. Here was he, lately denizen of a hive of stone and steel, tiny integer in that man-made machine called a metropolis, moving through the darkness over a land unsullied by hand of man since the floods of melting glaciers drove a shadowy race of stone-axe people back to the highlands. The loves and hates, the battles and deaths of these stone-axe folk occurred but yesterday in the time-sheet of the waste places. The to-morrow of ten thousand years would find the desert still untouched, supine under the stars. What then of hidden baubles of gold; what then of the love of a Grant Hickman for a Benicia O'Donoju? A fossil snail shell by the shore of the gulf left a more enduring record. [269]

"The thing that's sorta got me fussed is how I'm goin' explain all this to the old Doc." Bim's voice broke through Grant's contemplation of shadowy frontiers; he noted with a start that his horse had dropped behind Benicia's and was ambling head-and-head with his friend's. Bim drawled on:

"It sure will look like a double-cross to Stooder—my sailin' off down into Sonora on the search for you an' then hooking up with an outfit to go get all the plunder the old Doc thinks he's as good as got his hands on. Me, I guess I'm queered all right," was the man's whimsical finish to his lament. Grant, who had been too preoccupied with the sweep of affairs to give any thought to his pal's perplexities, could not now offer much consolation. A point of honour involving the grotesque creature who had elected to receive him as a book agent did not greatly move Grant. [270]

"A' course," Bim continued his monologue, "the way things lie with the girl, her bein' hipped on gettin' back this swag somebody in her family lifted from the mission, I'm more'n willing to see her get it. But the old Doc hasn't got a large store of what you might call sentiment, an' I sure got my work cut out for me when I try to show him the light."

"Too bad I got you into a tangle, old man," Grant heartily commiserated; then with a hopeless little laugh, "My own affairs aren't set on any straight and beautiful road to happiness either."

Bim chuckled deep in his throat. "Me, I was all for your first idea to rope the señorita right outa the home corral an' put your brand on her, fighting. But like's not we'll get *mucho* plenty excitement along this trail before we're through." He gave a short laugh. "Say, Cap'n Hickman, I brought you out from the East on a whale of a proposition. You're sure getting it. A girl who assays higher'n any pearls an' old gold junk you could find in a church cellar—the feel and savvy of a man's country—a larrupin' fight with old Urgo and his rurales bunch. That last you can back right down to your last white chip." [271]

"But how can Urgo follow us from the O'Donoju house?" incredulously from Grant. "Not one of the servants or other Indians there knows what our destination is—we don't ourselves except in a general way."

The man of the big country chuckled at metropolitan innocence. "Horses don't leave tracks on your Fifth Avenoo because they's no horses left there for one thing, I reckon. But in this country they do. Five horses make a trail a blind man could follow. I or anybody else could track this outfit of ours in the dark. I look to see our li'l friend Urgo drop in on us some time to-morrow. He'll travel fast with fresh horses his men round up at the O'Donoju corrals."

They rode some time in silence, Grant turning over in his mind this unthought-of possibility. Tenderfoot that he was—so he accused himself—he had noted the carbines slung in scabbards at each saddlehorn; noted with an unreading eye. So Benicia and all the others had provided against a contingency he had not even suspected.

"Only thing I'm figgerin' in this proposition," he heard Bim saying, "is, will the Papagoes stick under fire? Papagoes are not strong for the knock-down-an'-drag-out stuff. An', besides, you're not a whole man yet." [272]

"Whole enough to keep my end up," Grant said shortly, knowing not why he resented any imputation of disability against him.

“Oh, sure—sure!” the other hurriedly amended, and the subject died.

Dawn spread a ghostly panorama before them. In the greeny-white light that heralds the sun’s first ruddiness the whole western horizon bulked with black masses of slag heaped in fantastic shapes. High above the lesser masses towered the two peaks of Pinacate, their summits yawning in wide craters. The horses’ hoofs struck sparks from lava aprons; the beasts had to pick their way carefully over traps and crevices. Ever and again grey arms of cactus struck out to rake the riders’ legs with claws of thorns.

Waxing light filled in details of a phantom land, terrific in stark brutalities of scarp and battlement—a world just set aside from the baking-oven of the Potter and unadorned by a single brush stroke. The little company of horsemen threaded single file up a narrow gorge between the main peaks of the range. Walls of porphyry and slag the colour of furnace clinkers leaped to [273] heights on either side which dwarfed the riders to the stature of weevils. The trail they followed was the path cut by the rushing waters of summer cloudbursts, which pack into the downpour of minutes’ duration all the water denied during months of drought; great blocks of fused glass and conglomerate wrenched from the canyon’s eaves by the fingers of these storms choked the way. Where capfuls of soil had been caught and held in some pocket the gaunt sticks of the *ocatilla* splayed out against raw rock like cat’s whiskers. Low-lying *cholla*, that spined and vicious vegetable tarantula of the desert, seemed to grow from the very rock; all its nodules were frosty with close-set thorns. Over all dropped the veil of mystical morning radiance.

The horses groaned as they had to choose, minute by minute, between barking their hocks on the knife-like corners of obsidian or taking the barbs of the *cholla*. The higher the ascent the savager grew the way. Grant, awed by this penetration into the very laboratory of earth, almost leaped from his saddle when a sharp clatter of small pebbles to his right broke the silence. His eyes jumped up the canyon wall to follow three dots of bounding dun-white against its sheer side [274] —bighorn sheep skipping surely along no visible foothold.

When the sun was well in the sky—though naught but its reflected radiance penetrated the gorge—El Doctor, in the lead, signalled a halt. The place was a constricted apron or shelf in the cleft between rock walls whereon sparse galetta grass was growing. Reason for this tiny oasis of vegetation lay just beyond in the fact of a water-worn cistern in the lava—such a natural reservoir as the desert folk called a “tank,” a godsend when it still contains the wash from a last cloudburst. This one was bone-dry.

The party breakfasted meagrely, wood for their coffee fire being grubbed by the Indians painfully and after long search. There was little speech between them for they were tired; the night’s ride had been wearing. Moreover, even the Indians appeared to feel a malign presence bearing down upon them and forbidding desecration of the silence. For them, in especial for Coyote Belly, there was a very real and fear-compelling presence abroad. These mountains of Tjuktoak housed Iitoi, Elder Brother himself; the god of all things who, with a coyote and a black beetle, drifted four times round the earth in the time of the Flood and came to anchorage in this [275] place. El Doctor Coyote Belly, driven by a great love to commit sacrilege, might well have heard the voice of Iitoi in the wind and felt his heart turn to water.

In truth, the aged Papago was having a battle with himself. Before he had gulped his coffee and tortillas the medicine man’s eyes were roaming fearsomely and he whimpered snatches of sacerdotal songs as he rummaged in the pack for a wicker basket. From it he took a wand stained red and with an eagle’s feather bound to one end, an arrow very handsomely feathered from the same bird, a string of glass beads and a bundle of cigarettes—presents for Elder Brother, who must be beguiled before being robbed.

The old man’s hands wavered to return the presents to the basket when Benicia hurried to him, sat down by his side and earnestly pleaded with him in his own tongue. Finally his resolution seemed to be brought to the sticking point. He started up the gorge alone and with his basket of trifles.

“Coyote Belly says he must go and sing to the god Iitoi before we are permitted to visit his house,” Benicia gravely explained to her white companions. “The poor man is desperately scared [276] because we have come to rob Elder Brother.”

Seeing the look of puzzlement on the men’s faces she continued with that same grave respect as if speaking of a real presence. “This old man through the love he bore my father has consented to betray a secret the medicine men of his people have handed down for more than a hundred years. The treasure of the Lost Mission, he tells me, was dug up by Papago medicine men not long after the Mission was destroyed by the Apaches and brought to these mountains—to the cave of Elder Brother—”

“And it’s all here now?” Bim put in excitedly. The girl nodded.

“It has been as well hidden from those who sought it as if it were under the buried ruins of the mission,” she said; then simply: “While El Doctor is gone it is best that we get some sleep.”

Benicia stretched herself under the shade of a rock with a saddle blanket for pillow and slept. But neither of the white men could follow her precept; both were too sensible of the prickling of some unnameable essence of the strange and the unworldly—perhaps that very savagery of atmosphere which had prompted primitive Indians to designate Pinacate as the residence of their [277] god. They were alone; big Quelele had quietly slipped away shortly after El Doctor without saying where he was going.

The men sat smoking while their eyes roved the prospect of burnt cliff and ragged parapet. The

heat had whips; it drove them to burrow for lessening shade wherever angles of the rocks offered. A curious cast to the slice of sky visible above the cañon walls first caught Bagley's attention. He squinted up at it for a long moment of speculation.

"If it wasn't so early in the summer I'd say a thunderhead was fixin' up to give us a big razoo," he ventured. Grant looked up and noted that the blue had turned to a heavy saffron tint as if the sun were shining through a stratum of light sand; such a tint he'd seen before the great windstorm on the day of Don Padraic's burial.

"If I could only look over the top of the wall yonder to west'ard," Bim grumbled uneasily. "These cloudbursts always come from direction of the Gulf. We're not very well put right here in the channel of all the wash down from up top-side. Those horses now—"

He walked uneasily about the narrow confines of the shelf, scanning the upshoots of rock for [278] possible ways out. Then he seemed to dismiss possibility of trouble from his mind and returned to where Grant was sitting.

An hour passed. Perhaps they were dozing when the rattle of a shower of rock down the cañon side galvanized both. Up there they saw the figure of big Quelele. Like a wild goat he was leaping from foothold to foothold downward; he was in mad haste.

The big Indian risked his neck a dozen times before he came panting up to the watchers. He waved to the brink of the cliff.

"I been on top—watching—I see long way off—Urgo—rurales. They come—fast!"

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[279]

CHAPTER XXIV

STORM

Bim translated Quelele's intelligence for Grant. "Our li'l friend Urgo's been burnin' the wind," was his dry comment. Grant sent a quick glance around the cul-de-sac of rock which encompassed them.

"Not the best place in the world to stand off ten men," he gave his opinion. "We ought to get our backs up against something that can't be surrounded."

Quelele read the white man's thoughts, for he pointed farther up the cañon beyond the lava cistern. There the gorge narrowed to a veritable doorway and the steps thereto were so precipitous that one ascending would have to scramble and claw a way on hands and knees; no possible chance for a rush en masse. Bim surveyed the natural citadel with the eye of a trained Border man who occasionally has to reckon with such elementals as the killing power of a rifle bullet and the protective quality of a 'dobe wall. Finally he screwed one eye at the crack of sky [280] showing between the escarpments and shook his head dubiously at what he saw there. Quelele, who had had the superior advantage of a wider view from his aerie on the cliff top, bowed his arms in the shape of a ball and waved a hand to the west.

"Papago says it's a big storm brewing over yonder," Bim explained. "When these thunderheads finally get all boiled into one and come a-runnin' it's a case of take to cover. If this thing is the regulation rim-fire sock-dollager they's goin' be a sight of water pass over where we're standin' before long. Me, I'd rather be somewhere else than in this dry channel."

Grant did not linger to discuss strategy longer. He went to where Benicia was sleeping in the shade of a boulder and gently touched her on the shoulder. The girl sat up, startled.

"We have to be moving," Grant told her. "Quelele has just reported Urgo and his rurales out on the desert and coming our way."

"And El Doctor?" she quickly interposed. "He has returned from the cave?"

Grant shook his head. Bitter disappointment flashed into her eyes at the realization of how fate had played to interpose the grim business of a fight just on the minute of realization of her great [281] hopes. Grant, stooping beside her and watching the play of emotions on her features, saw quick remorse chase away the frown. Impulsively a brown hand reached out to play upon the back of his.

"Grant, beloved"—how like the overtones from her own golden harp the contralto richness of her voice!—"I am desperately selfish and you will not understand.—Thinking only of my own purpose—bringing you with your wound still unhealed out to this place to face—death perhaps.—And you do this for me—"

"'Nicia, little girl—" He could go no farther than those words, for the song in his heart was overwhelming. At last—at last the trammels of the girl's heart were shaken off and the call he'd waited for so long had come! Call of the heart of her to his.

She was on her feet, vibrant with energy, alive to the exigencies of impending action. Bim was saddling the horses and Quelele had the pack on the mule when they joined them. Bim briefly explained to the girl his survey of the gorge for strategical strength; at any cost they must move up until they could find some sheep trail or other practicable ledge giving escape from the flood [282] water channel. "If that doddering old medicine man would only quit his sing-song business and

come back for a rifle we'd be that much better off," the big fellow grumbled.

When all was in readiness Quelele led the way up the tortuous watercourse and through the mighty gates of porphyry nearly blocking the farther reaches. They were forced to lead the animals, whose sure-footedness was put to the test every yard of the advance. Beyond the great pillars the gorge opened to a rough amphitheatre with less steeply sloping sides. A narrow upward-springing ledge of rock led away from the dry watercourse to a rock pulpit some seventy-five or a hundred feet above. This they followed, to discover there was space for their horses to stand behind the horn of malapais and still be screened from observation from below. Quelele made some mysterious passes with a tether rope which yoked all the animals to a single line that was anchored at both ends.

"Look," Benicia cried as Bim was taking the carbines from the saddle scabbards. They followed her pointing hand and saw a dark spot against the opposite wall of the gorge and higher than their level. A midget figure was outlined against the opening of a cave. It was El Doctor at his [283] business of propitiating Elder Brother—El Doctor, much needed behind the stock of a carbine. The men hallooed to him but he did not turn.

"Go over and get that crazy fool," Bim commanded Quelele. But the big Indian, instead of obeying immediately, turned up the ledge and made for a high point on the shoulder of the rock bastion constituting one of the portals of the upper gorge. They watched him as he scaled the almost perpendicular face of black lava. From the top Quelele had a view of the cañon's far-away exit onto the desert floor several miles from the niche where the treasure seekers had refuge. The watchers saw him lift himself cautiously over the top of his lookout and peer to westward. Then he came scrambling and sliding down.

"They come into the valley," the Papago reported. "Too late to get El Doctor."

It was Bim with his desert craft who made disposition of the little force of defence. Quelele he sent back to the aerie with orders not to shoot until he heard shots from the whites; the Indian's fire from the rear, once Urgo and his men had passed the rocky portals, would throw the rurales into confusion. Grant and Benicia he disposed behind an outcrop of porphyry a little behind and [284] above the protected animals.

"Pick 'em off as they come through the Gate," he suggested. "An' don't try any fancy shooting; we haven't got any too many cartridges."

"But you—?" Benicia began. The Arizonan grinned broadly.

"Me, I always fancy a little solo game in this sort of rukus. I'm going on t'other side of the gulch. Cross-fire, you sabe?" He left them with a smile on his lips, and they watched him jumping lightly down from rock to rock. Almost before he had begun to clamber up the opposite wall he was lost to view amid the maze of fissure and castellated boulder. Grant and the girl were stretched out behind their primitive breastwork alone in this unfinished world of fire. They could see neither Quelele nor Bagley. Came to their ears the faint drone of barbaric song: El Doctor Coyote Belly at his traitorous devotions.

The whole gorge was filled with a saffron glare like the reflection from oil fires under a boiler, unworldly, portentous.

They waited, these two, in the immensity of earth's disgorged bowels. Side by side, elbows [285] touching, they counted the slow drag of minutes as naught in the balance against the deep joy of love militant.

A stir in the bed of the dry wash below them. Up went their carbines with cheeks laid against wood and eyes sighting along the lances of light. Again the stir down there. A gaunt figure rose from hand and knees to its feet, stood swaying for an instant, then pitched forward against the support of a slab of rock.

A very leprechaun of the rocks was it: ribs creasing burned skin about the naked torso; whity-grey hair streaming down to mingle with a beard; bare arms like a spider's legs and all cracked by the sun. The husk of Doc Stooder, plaything of the desert god, was come here, following the still living spark of instinct prompting a water search in a canyon. Come, too, to the secret hiding place of the treasure whose glitter had so mercilessly befooled him.

Grant, stupefied by the apparition of death and failing in any recognition of the skeleton thing as the bibulous doctor of Arizora, suspected a trick of Urgo. Again he laid his eye along his rifle sight, vigilant for what might ensue. The creature spread-eagled against the rock slowly pushed [286] itself upright with its hands; its shaggy head turned wearily as thirsting eyes scanned the dry chasm.

Then a shout from across the gorge. Bagley had leaped from his hiding place and was rushing precariously down to succour the ghost. Just as he reached Stooder and had thrown an arm about him to heave his wasted form onto a shoulder the crack of a rifle shivered the gorge's silence. Rock dust spurted within a foot of the rescuer.

The sun went out that second—instantly, like a powerful incandescent switched off. A yellow penumbra tinged the darkness.

Almost as one the rifles of Grant and Benicia jetted lead. Two more shots from the dry wash. The giant figure of Bagley with Stooder limp over one shoulder never faltered in its leaping and scrambling up the declivity to the shelter he had quitted. The two who had been following his flight with stilled hearts saw him disappear behind a great rock; an instant and a jet of fire lanced down thence at the attackers by the Gate.

A blob of rain large as a Mexican dollar smacked on Benicia's hand as she pumped the ejector—another and a third. Then the gorge was blasted by a thunder shock amid the peaks, and a stab of [287] lightning painted the whole pit sulphurous blue. By its flash the defenders saw scurrying figures leaping from rock to rock in the stream bed. Quelele, the quick of eye, fired his first shot by the light of storm fire; one of the rurales went down like a wet sack.

A second stunning burst of thunder which knocked out the underpinning of the sky. Then deluge.

It was not rain that fell; it was solid water in sheets and cones which hissed with the speed of its descent. Water so compacted that it was like a river on edge, engulfing. With it the almost continuous quiver and jerk of electrical flame. The gorge was become a watery hell. More than that, for Urgo and his men in the wash it threatened momentarily to be their tomb. Already a white streak of foam in the lightning flashes marked where the once bone-dry watercourse was changing character.

The rurales and their leader found the odds all of a sudden snatched from their hands by this frenzied ally of the hunted girl and her supporters. They had come eleven against five, with their quarry caught in a hole in the Pinacate sierra; before the cloudburst had endured three minutes [288] Urgo realized he had let himself and his men into a fatal trap. Their horses, confidently left behind them in the lower reaches of the gorge, must already have stampeded under the lash of the storm. Spiteful rifle flashes from both sides came with each baleful flicker of fire from the sky to deny escape from the rising waters up either wall of the chasm.

Now a dull roaring above the waterfall of the rain began to fill the gash in the sierra. Away back at the head of the gorge and where the slope from the twin volcano peaks shed water as from steep roofs into this common trough, a solid wall, capped dull white, came with the speed of a meteor down and down through the channel in the living rock. It rolled boulders the size of box-cars in its flood; a chevaux-de-frise of barbed cactus and scrub trees tumbled at its crest.

Even above the tumult of the deluge sounded the shrill alarm of the rurales as they broke position and turned to flee through the Gate. But already the flood was there, choking egress. They must scramble up the sides of the gorge like rats from a flooded hold; they must grope and cling by every illuminating flash of blue fire, waiting to see where the next handhold lay, how [289] near the hungry yellow waters rushed.

With Grant and the girl was nothing but security. Unprotected, they had bent their heads to the pounding mallets of water. When the firing abruptly ceased at the rush of their attackers for safety Grant heard the scream of a horse near at hand and remembered their tethered animals. Should they break away in their fright the plight of all five would be a desperate one.

"Stay here!" he shouted in Benicia's ear. "Going to the horses!"

Grant crawled and groped his way over the slippery rocks, each seeming to be alive with the film of rushing water across it. He clambered down and to the right until he came to the pulpit rock behind which the beasts had been tethered by Quelele. The mule he found down, hopelessly noosed in his hobble rope and slowly strangling; the horses were huddled, tails to the storm, dripping and dejected.

It took several minutes' precarious work to get the pack-animal to his feet and freshly tethered. Then Grant began the retreat to the breastwork where he had left the girl. It was largely a matter of guesswork. Once he found himself against an unscalable wall and had to retrace his steps. [290] Another time one foot slipped and he caught himself with his body halfway over the brink.

A flash of lightning showed him two rifles lying side by side on a ledge below him—his rifle and Benicia's; but the girl was gone. The fist of fear smote him terrifically.

He screamed her name above the bellowing of the flood in the wash. No answer. He ran along the ledge that had been theirs until he came to a downward terrace; to that he leaped and along its blind way he fumbled. Came the ghost of a scream, thin above the diapason all about. His name—"Grant!"

Then merciful lightning blazed blue and he saw. Below him on a broad shelf which overhung the whiteness of the torrent two figures, glistening like seals, were locked—they swayed.

The man launched himself blindly out and down. He rolled; he slipped and wallowed against and under great boulders. At the end of seconds seeming æons he came to the rock apron where he had seen the struggling shapes. Sound of stertorous breathing guided him. He rose from his knees before Benicia and another, who was trying to drag her along the ledge. A revealing flash of fire gave him just a glimpse of a weasel face—Colonel Urgo.

Not so much rage as loathly horror of an unclean thing sped furious summons to every muscle [291] spring in his body. With his shoulder planted against the Spaniard's chest for a leverage Grant tore loose the man's grip from Benicia. Before he could whirl to shift his attack Urgo had screamed an oath and was on the American's back, legs twining to cumber Grant's thighs, both hands clamped about his throat. It was the catamount's attack.

The first impact of his antagonist's weight nearly over-balanced Grant and precipitated both into the maelstrom of waters not six feet below their ledge. But, steadying himself, the American suddenly launched backward, pinning the lighter body on his back against a wall of rock. It was a terrific smash. Urgo's breath came in a whistle from it. His hands sank deeper into the muscles about Grant's throat, closing his windpipe. Deliberately the standing man took a few forward steps, then swiftly back against the wall again. An elbow of rock found the Spaniard's ribs and

cracked two. He shrieked.

Now Grant's hands went up to lock behind the head that sagged over his right shoulder. Strength of desperation flooded into his arms, for the weaker man had him throttled. Urgo must release his hold on Grant's throat or suffer a broken neck. The constricting hands slackened their grip ever so little. Grant bowed his shoulders, gave a mighty heave and swept the Colonel's body over his shoulder in a wide arc. The man sprawled, arms wide, through the air, struck the edge of the rocky apron. He clawed—slipped—clawed again, and disappeared. [292]

CHAPTER XXV [293]

TREASURE TROVE

The storm ceased with the same suddenness as it began. Hardly an hour had torrential waters lashed the cinder wastes of Pinacate when the black pall over the heavens broke away and the sun came out to suck hungrily at pools in the rocks. There was a headiness of wine in the air, a smell of wet soil mingled with spicy emanations from greasewood and *palo verde*. The desert's sparse growing things exulted in the breaking of long drought.

For a long time Grant and Benicia on their side of the gorge and Bim in his retreat opposite lay hidden, awaiting possible renewal of the attack which the storm had scattered. But the torrent that still raged down the bottom of the gorge had washed clean every vestige of an enemy. Quelele on his high post saw four scattered horsemen rushing pell-mell for the gateway onto the desert—last vestige of Urgo's rurales force, each man of which gave thanks to his patron saint that he had come out of the hell in the mountain cul-de-sac with a whole skin. [294]

Quelele also saw several specks dropping earthward from the clear blue; specks which rapidly grew from the size of gnats to the spread of small aeroplanes. King condors they, who had smelled a feast from afar—loathsome birds with a wing spread covering the span of thirteen feet. The coming of one of these foul creatures to his particular banquet even the sharp eye of a Papago watcher could not discern, for the scene was hidden from him by a shoulder of the cañon wall.

A stunted *palo verde* tree nearly stripped of its verdure by the whips of the rain hung half-uprooted over the rapidly diminishing stream in the wash. One branch had caught and held some flotsam from the high flood, now clear of the water. Just a shapeless bundle of clothes, lolling head, arms askew where broken bones had let inert flesh sag to the current. Just a grim caricature of something which so recently had walked in the pride of his imaginings.

The condor flopped clumsily to a branch stub six feet distant from the bundle of clothes, folded his great wings with a dry rustling of feathers, blinked the red lids of his eyes to focus his vision for expert inspection and studied the hank of cloth and flesh suspended in the tree crotch. The thing which flood waters had brought stirred slightly; eyes opened with a flutter. They met the critical gaze of the feathered pariah on the stub. The condor acknowledged this unexpected show of life on his banquet table by disturbed bobbings of the naked yellow head—the skin on his poll was wrinkled as an old man's—and a bringing of his off eye to bear around his sabre beak with the skew-like movement of a hen sighting a worm. [295]

The wreck in the bundle of clothes opened his lips to scream but the ghost of a groan came instead. It tried to lift a fending arm against the abomination so near; the muscles tugged at broken bones.

The condor appraised these manifestations of life carefully, weighed them by contrast with his experiences with crippled sheep and helpless calves. His talons stirred restlessly on the branch. First one, then the other lifted from the bark, stretched and flexed. The king of the higher airs was impatient. He spread his wings to balance him and clumsily hopped a few feet nearer, craning his wattled neck anxiously.

A shadow passed swiftly over the *palo verde* tree. A quick upward twist of the head gave the condor view of a putative and too-anxious fellow guest at the bounty spread there. Greediness pushed him. He spread his wings and hopped again— [296]

Then the desert exacted with cruelty recompense for the cruelties of Colonel Hamilcar Urgo. Abomination of his passing was meted him according to the abominations of his own devising.

An hour after the last rain drop the flood waters in the gorge had dropped to permit of reunion between the erstwhile defenders of the pass. Grant waded waist deep with Benicia in his arms; Bim, all smiles, was stretching out a hand from the off-side rocks.

"Well, folks all, looks like a pleasant time was enjoyed by all and one!" The big Arizonan's spirits would permit of no more concrete thanksgiving for a crisis passed. It was his way to find laughter the only vehicle for suppressed emotions and whimsicalities the best conveyance for thoughts which might sound "high-falutin'." The three stood mute, their eyes telling one another things which might have come flattened and blunted in speech.

"See me welcome an old visitor just before the curtain went up on the first act?" Bim turned to Grant, his eyes shining excitement. "Who d'you think? Ole Doc Stooder!" Grant gasped in surprise. His pal's grin faded as he added seriously: [297]

“Just about the end of his string, too. The rain sure saved him—couldn’t have lasted another hour—one chance in a thousand brought him here where they’s folks to look out for him—a friend, even, to coddle him back to health.”

“No, not one chance in a thousand,” Benicia caught him up with deep seriousness in her voice. “It is the desert way—to play with destiny, I mean, and seem to cause miracles.—But let me go to him if he needs attention.” She started forward, but Bim put out a staying hand.

“I wouldn’t, ma’am. The Doc’s not a purty sight right now. His body’s just drinkin’ in all the water that landed on him an’ he’s sorta in a daze—doesn’t say much of anything that makes sense. A little food which I’m goin’ to brew if I can find some dry sticks of wood anywhere’s round —” Simple charity dictated that Bim say no word of conjecture as to what brought Stooder to the desert. He guessed full well.

El Doctor Coyote Belly seemed to be materialized from the rocks so noiselessly had he approached the group. The old man’s face was ashen; unguessable terrors he had fought with and hardly conquered since last the three had seen him standing in the yellow storm glare before the cave of Elder Brother. [298]

“If my daughter will come now to the house of Iitoi,” he said to the girl in his native tongue, “she may take what Iitoi gives. The god has expressed his displeasure by the storm—but he will give.”

Benicia turned and put a wordless question to Grant. They started together to climb the precipitous rock ladder up the side of the gorge wall, El Doctor leading. Thirty minutes’ exhaustive effort brought them to the approach of a high-roofed cavern into which the westering sun laid a broad carpet of light. There in the shale before the cave mouth were El Doctor’s pitiful presents to the god—the arrow and prayer stick wedged upright, the beads and tobacco in a small basket. The whole ground about was littered with the shards of sacrificial pottery and scraps of basketry.

Benicia motioned to El Doctor to lead the way into the cave, but he shook his head in emphatic negative. Then she gave Grant a strange smile, almost that of a child who awaits revelation of a mystery. He saw in deep pools of her eyes a transcendent joy made almost pain by this moment of hope achieved. She held out her hand for him to take and they entered the cave. [299]

When their eyes had become accustomed to the sudden transition from glaring sunlight into gloom a faint glimmering at the far end of the sunlight path guided them. Ankle-deep in the dust of ages they groped. The glimmer waxed stronger. Suddenly Benicia stopped with a catching of the breath. Grant stooped and lifted a heavy object from a niche of rock, bringing it into the filtered stream of radiance.

It was a golden monstrance, dust coated. Faint twinkles of light glowed like firefly lamps from jewels set in the radii of a glory. A great diamond above the crystal box caught fire from the sun.

As Grant hastily bent to replace the sacred vessel his hand tipped the edge of a shallow basket. From it rolled a stream of moonbeam fire out into the zone of sunshine. Liquid globules of moon-glow, round and pellucid as ice crystals, seductive as the shadowed whiteness of a woman’s throat: the green pearls of the Virgin stripped by the impiety of El Rojo from the shrine of the Four Evangelists! [300]

Benicia slowly sank to her knees, words of prayer whispered from her lips. Prayer of thankfulness and dedication of the lost treasure to the sanctity of the Church.

Grant felt his presence in this solemn moment was an intrusion. He tip-toed back to the mouth of the cave and stood looking out. All the wildness and the savagery of Altar’s secret fane of the desert god lay burning and glistening with wetness in the westering sun. The waning torrent, sardonic gesture of plenty in this ultimate citadel of thirst, splashed jewels against the lancing light. Here was a world of the primordial—Creation arrested in its first hour.

A hand touched his arm lightly. He turned to find Benicia standing beside him. The sun wove an aura of vivid fire about her head. Her eyes raised to his were swimming.

“Now, heart of my heart,” she whispered. And all the love fire in her flamed from her lips.

THE END

Transcriber’s Notes:

Title page verso: printer’s information was not supplied in the source text.

A Table of Contents has been provided for the convenience of the reader.

Punctuation and spelling inaccuracies were silently corrected.

Archaic and variable spelling has been preserved.

Variations in hyphenation and compound words have been preserved.

The author’s em-dash and punctuation/endquote styles have been retained.

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