

*The* RANCH  
*of the* THORN

*William H. Hamby*



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**THE RANCH OF THE THORN**



# The Ranch of the Thorn

*An Adventure Story*

BY  
WILLIAM H. HAMBY ✓



CHELSEA HOUSE

79 Seventh Avenue      New York City

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The Ranch of the Thorn

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# THE RANCH OF THE THORN



## CHAPTER I

### A CHANCE MEETING

**D**AWN breaks clear in Cordoba. The American was up early and came out on the wide veranda and stood looking down at the quaint old Mexican city.

He was a slender young man of twenty-eight or thirty, with thick brown hair and gray eyes, and he wore a light gray suit and a green silk tie. He had arrived at the Gran Hotel Zeballos the evening before and registered as Neal Ashton.

Life had just begun to stir in the still drowsy town. Three burros loaded with wood came down the middle of the street, their hoofs clicking loudly on the cobbled paving. A Mexican woman with a red manton about her head and shoulders crossed the plaza, a dark, thin old man passed on the opposite side carrying a long pole with a cluster of feathers at the end—a window duster.

The deep bells of the cathedral across from the plaza boomed slowly, incessantly. From narrow streets and byways came scattering worshipers,

mostly women in black, walking with silent feet, and heads bent as though carrying many sorrows. Like ghosts of the night that have lingered overlong, they slipped quickly into the shadowy doorway of the great church.

The first glint of the sun struck the the tops of the houses slantingly and touched the rank tropical foliage massed beyond the edge of town. Neal clutched the veranda rail with his fingers and his chest swelled with a deep, long-drawn breath.

A Ford came rattling fretfully up the cobbled street from toward the station and stopped in front of the hotel.

A single passenger got out. He was also an American, but his clothes, his air of familiarity with the place, and the gun on his hip indicated that he had been in Mexico some time. He entered the hotel, came up the stairway, and walked down the long veranda, looking at the numbers above the doors. All the rooms on the second floor opened out upon this veranda. He did not speak to Neal, but in passing gave him an investigating side glance.

At number fourteen he knocked and a big voice from inside called out something in Spanish, which evidently meant its owner would be out directly, as the newly arrived American turned back and dropped down into one of the wicker rocking-chairs on the veranda, pushed back his Stanley hat, crossed

his legs and lighted a cigar. He had a large head with wavy, sandy-colored hair, small blue eyes, set close together, almost colorless eyebrows, a wide mouth, and a nose that sagged down in the bridge, but swelled out at the end like the head of a spreading adder.

The door of room fourteen opened and a Mexican came out. There are as many sorts of Mexicans as there are Americans. This one was the large, strutting type—a huge man with great arms, thick neck, and swelling chest. He wore puttees, and trousers beaded down the seams, a silk shirt and a leather vest ornamented with silver. The vest was open. He had thick lips and large, insolent black eyes. Around his huge girth was a highly decorative cartridge belt, and a blatant gun rested on each hip.

The American greeted him with a half mocking:

“*Buenos dias, Señor Moses,*” and motioned for him to draw up a chair.

But the Mexican glanced inquiringly toward Neal, who still leaned on the banister and curiously but idly watched the color and movement of this strange city. The other American shook his head and shrugged indifferently. But the Mexican did not seem satisfied, and approached Neal.

“*Buenos dias, señor. Habla usted español?*”

Ashton, who had been watching him out of the

corner of his eye, turned and lifted his brows and shook his head uncomprehendingly.

"*Espense me.*" The big Mexican bowed, and returning to the chair by the other American, sat down, lighted a cigarette and began a conversation in Spanish. Neal watched him with keen interest. He may be a Mexican in good and regular standing, he thought, but at least one of his ancestors was an apostate Slav.

The conversation went on in Spanish, and Ashton turned his attention away.

"When did you come, Señor Williams?" asked the Mexican.

"This morning," answered Williams. "An early train from Mexico City. How is the ranch?"

"It is getting on." The Mexican shrugged indifferently.

"My agent has sold it again," announced Williams. "That is why I stopped to see you."

Señor Moses grinned. "I hope it is not a woman this time—the hell cats."

Señor Williams flicked at a fly with his forefinger, but did not smile.

"No—an easy sucker this time. By the way, what became of the red-haired widow from Arkansas?"

"Oh," the Mexican smirked and winked, "she's my housekeeper now. She eat out of my hand—or lick my boots."

The American shook his head sadly. "Moses,

you are a wonder—also a devil. Well,” he arose and threw the remainder of his cigarette over the banister, “this new gringo owner will probably be along in a couple of weeks. The telegram did not mention his name, but said he was soft. When you see him you will know what to do with him. I’ll stay out of it, unless you need help.”

The Mexican grinned sardonically. “The señor will not be bothered over so small a matter.”

“What time is Valdez coming?”

“Early, he promises.” And Espinosa got up and looked down the street to the south as though he expected him any minute.

As Neal finished breakfast the hotel porter approached his table and with a respectful gesture made known that the horse which he had ordered was outside. Neal nodded that he understood and with a smile expressed his thanks. Within an hour after his arrival last evening, the clerk, the porter, the waiters, everybody about the hotel had changed their idea of Americans. Although he had not spoken a word of Spanish, they had quickly caught his friendly spirit. He considered them human beings—and instead of swearing at them for not doing things his way, he was interested in their way, in their country, in them.

The sun was two hours high as Neal rode south from the city. The rank, tropical foliage lined the

road, with here and there a grass but half hidden reminding him of Kipling's India. It gave him the unreal sense of being in another world.

A delicious odor filled the air—something in bloom, for it was spring here even as in the North from whence he came. The air was delicious, for he was two thousand feet above the sea. Off to the west rose the magnificent, terrific old Orizaba which thrust its snowy crest seventeen thousand feet into the tropic sky.

He passed some donkey wood carriers—two Mexicans driving six burros loaded with wood. He met an Indian leading a burro which seemed almost submerged under bundles of sugar cane; a little farther on, another bringing to market two square boxes of corn, and, trudging behind, a woman carrying an earthen jar on her head. As far down the road as he could see, they were coming, one, two or three at a time, patient, offenseless. And he had expected to find Mexico bristling with danger! Nothing could be more colorful, or more peaceful than this.

At the bottom of a little hill he came upon a Mexican boy—a slender, dark-eyed lad of seven or eight—in trouble. The donkey he had been leading had slipped its load, and struggle as he might, the small chap could not get it back. He was in deep distress, but making no outcry for help.

Neal dismounted. "Hello, son," he said in

English. "What's the trouble?" The lad did not get a word of the English, but he did get the sympathetic boy-understanding twinkle of the gray eyes. His troubles were fled in a moment, he smiled broadly at the stranger, and gesticulatingly recited how the catastrophe had happened.

While Neal was adjusting the pack, two riders on very fine saddle horses came cantering up the road. Neal glanced up at them as they approached, and nothing he had seen in this colorful land gave him quite such a stir. Spain may have lost her glory, but wherever her blood flows through the veins, there is a lift of the head and a look of the eye that cannot be mistaken.

The man was a Spaniard—and a gentleman, straight, fine of features, and commanding of eye. The girl, his daughter, perhaps. They drew rein. It was curious no doubt to see an American help a peon boy reload a donkey. The man asked something in Spanish.

Neal, the work finished, turned and lifted his hat:

"Do you speak English?"

The Spaniard returned the friendly smile. "Very leetle. Es there some trouble?"

"No, everything is all right now." His eyes went to the girl—met hers for three fleeting seconds and then looked away hastily, as though afraid to stay. Neal did not know that in Spanish countries, instead of an affront, it is a compliment for a man

to look as straight and long and ardently as he pleases at a woman. But he had seen enough to remember for many a day. Limpid dark eyes, dark hair with a glint of golden brown in it, a face fair—the white flame of centuries of Spanish beauty.

“Can you tell me,” Neal had looked back at the man, “if this is the right road to the Ranch of the Thorn?”

The Spaniard wrinkled his brow, trying to puzzle out the English of the question. Neal was glad he did not understand quickly—it prolonged the conversation. Once again his eyes slipped against every effort of his will, to the girl, and again he met her gaze squarely. She smiled a faint, but very human smile, turned and said something to her father in Spanish.

“Ah!” The Spaniard’s face cleared, his eyes lighted as they do when they solve a puzzle for you. “The Rancho Huisache—The Thorn Tree—*muy bien! Si, si,*” and he pointed on down the road, and indicated a left-hand turn.

Neal once more looked with a sort of haste at the señorita. She must have understood English to explain to her father. “Do you speak English?” he asked her direct.

“No, no,” she gave her head a positive shake. “A ver’ leetle, but I wesh I speak it, *muy bien.*”

As they rode away Neal turned to the Mexican



boy and with a lift of the eyebrows and a nod inquired who they were.

“Señor Valdez.” The boy threw out his arms. “*Mucho grande!*”

“And you?” asked Neal.

“José Marquard,” and he shook his head with a grimace. “*No mucho buano*”—not much good.

Neal mounted his horse, laughing, then turned in his saddle to watch the two riders down the road until they were lost behind the banana fields. He rode on in a sort of trance. She was amazingly lovely! Three hours later he drew rein and looked down into the valley before him.

“The Hacienda of the Thorn,” he said slowly. “This is it.”

Four thousand acres of coffee in bloom—a mass of blossoms as white as the snows on Orizaba.

“It can’t be mine,” he said still dazedly. “It is not real. I am not here. Buckeye Bridge, Missouri—Cordoba, Mexico! It is a long jump, too long to ever jump back. Good-by, Buckeye Bridge!”

Chanting “On the Road to Mandalay,” he rode down to his new possessions.

## CHAPTER II

### A PARTNERSHIP

SEÑOR VALDEZ asked his daughter, Señorita Maria, to wait in the parlor of the Gran Hotel Zeballos while he talked with two gentlemen on business affairs. The Spaniard still held to the old traditions for his womenfolks—although insensibly those traditions had been slipping. Somehow the women took a tiny bit more liberty every year—just enough so that no one break was a positive shock to his sense of propriety. This habit of Maria's for instance, of riding about with him wherever he went was not quite ladylike, yet it was decidedly pleasant to have her along, for Maria made any journey interesting by her merry fooling, and her quick observations.

But scarcely ten minutes after Señor Valdez had left Maria safely and properly seated in the parlor, she appeared on the upstairs veranda, and approached most demurely where the three men were seated.

Señor Valdez arose; a slightly displeased flush crossed his thin face, yet he bowed graciously to his daughter. Señor Moses also was on his feet, bowing with his right hand over his heart. But the American, with the nose that swelled at the

end like an adder's head, kept his seat—and his cigar in his mouth.

“Señor Espinosa,” Valdez said with a slight inclination of the head, “you know my daughter.”

“I have that very great pleasure.” The big Mexican again bowed, and his large black eyes seemed to fairly stroke her cheeks and neck.

“My daughter, Maria, Señor Williams.” The father had turned to the American. Williams merely straightened up a little in his chair and nodded with a smirk which he intended for a smile.

“Hello, sis. Do you savvy good old U S. A.?”

Señorita Maria's eyebrows lifted the fraction of an inch, her black eyes looked very distant and impersonal.

“No Inglés, señor.”

Señorita Maria, with a fetching little twist of her dark head, begged her father's pardon for the interruption. “The parlor was so warm—and smell like goats. I come up for a breath of air.” She walked over to a wicker rocking-chair twenty feet away, and sat down with an air of content. Espinosa followed her and drew up another chair and began a spirited conversation in Spanish.

Valdez looked after him with a frown, but turned in a moment politely to Señor Williams.

“What I wanted to see you about,” began the American in fluent but choppy Spanish, “is this. I've got large interests down here, you know, and

I'm interested in the government even if I am a damned gringo."

"I have heard of the señor's interests." Valdez's face was politely nonexpressive.

"I am investing a pile of money down here," went on the American, "and I've got a right to demand some consideration."

Señor Valdez remained politely silent. If he had mentioned what he heard about the Señor Williams' investments in Mexico, it would not have been complimentary.

"If you people would back up fellows like me," went on Williams, swelling out his chest, "we'd wake this damned country up."

An ironic smile crossed the Spaniard's face. "Ah, señor, if you had heard so much bang, bang as I, the past few years you would pray the holy saints that the country would go to sleep instead of waking more."

"What I am getting at," said Williams, who much preferred to do the talking himself, "is this." He leaned forward in his chair, chin thrust out, the nostrils in the bulbous nose spreading. "I've got a big thing on foot—the biggest any man ever thought of in Mexico. This ranch, the silver mine, the oil concessions—are mere trifles compared to it.

"But Carranza is sore at the Americans. Personally I am for him, but he won't take anything from an American right now. While you, I under-

stand, are a pretty high-muck-a-muck with all the old-timers down here, and have a lot of influential relations at court and in office.

“Of course there is no use in beating about the bush. I know as well as you do, they are all damned grafters. They have all got their hands out. And I’m willing to pay, but I want to get the goods when I pay.

“They tell me you are rather short on dinero yourself. Now, if you’ll take this paper and get old Carranza to sign on the dotted line, I’ll give you ten thousand pesos.”

Williams settled back in his chair with an air of finality, and gave Señor Valdez a look of dramatic benevolence. It was a great offer, and he was proud of it and he’d put it straight.

The Spaniard’s dark eyes looked off across the plaza. His face was entirely unreadable, but his tone was very polite.

“The señor does me the honor of overestimating my influence with the government. But if he wishes to leave his paper in my possession I will examine it, and in due order will present it to the proper officials for consideration.”

“I don’t get much out of that,” said Williams, biting the butt of his newly lighted cigar. “What I want is action, not consideration.”

“Perhaps, then,” suggested Señor Valdez, “the señor should present it himself to the presidente.”

"Hell, no!" blurted Williams. "I don't want to get my head shot off. That is not the sort of action I'm after.

"Now, I've got the money, if that is what is troubling you. I put ten thousand dollars gold in the bank at Mexico City yesterday. The first payment on my ranch which I have just sold."

"If the señor wishes," repeated Valdez, "I shall be pleased to examine his papers, and see in what way they may best be presented."

A gleam of satisfaction came into Williams' eye. "Ah, ha," he thought. "Now I have him—they can't any of them resist real money."

The papers were turned over, and Señor Valdez and his daughter took their departure.

Williams watched the señorita's back as she turned down the stairs. He moistened his lips and shook his head.

"Some peach, Moses, some peach—or perhaps you would say a mango."

The big Mexican scowled, but his face changed to an obsequious smirk as the American turned upon him.

"She's got you hooked, Moses, I could see that with half an eye. You'd give the gold out of your teeth for a finger ring for her.

"But see here. There is only one way to get her, that is to handle the old man. She ain't strong for you, Moses. I don't want to trample

your pride, but I watched when you was talking to her. I know the signs. She likes you just about as well as a chicken does a weasel. If you are to get her, and I'm to get my millions, we've got to pull together. Sit down."

They sat down and lighted cigarettes. Señor Espinosa looked off down the street as the hoofs of two horses clattered along the cobbled paving. His eyes narrowed, and filled with fire as he watched the very graceful figure of Señorita Maria, riding teasingly close beside her father.

"Señor Moses," Williams spoke with the deliberateness in which he always approached a fresh plot, "there is talk of another revolution?"

"Much talk, señor."

"Who is it to be?"

"Oh, any one, señor."

"Very well," said Williams. "Valdez is a friend of Carranza's—if the old reptile ever had a friend. You be a friend to this new revolution, whoever starts it, and that way we'll land, no matter who wins."

"*Si, si,*" said Moses, "perhaps with our backs against the wall."

"Not for me," said Williams. "I'm an American citizen—they won't shoot me."

"It has been done, señor," said the big Mexican rather boastfully.

"So it has." Williams was thinking quite soberly.

“Well, you watch the kettle boil, and jump where there is the least fire. I’ll stay neutral.” Williams waved his hand. “Better trot on back to the ranch now. And remember when that new lamb who thinks he has bought it arrives, make it interesting for him.”

“*Si, señor. Adios,*” and he hastened away, as though to overtake the two riders just gone.



## CHAPTER III

### AT THE RANCH

ON the right-hand side was the coffee field, on the left sugar cane. Forty or fifty men were working in the cane field, stripping, cutting and loading the cane on the two-wheeled oxcarts.

Neal hitched his horse to the fence, and went across to the cane cutters. The Mexicans were wielding big, broad-bladed knives, almost as heavy as machetes; and a handful of cane went down with each clip.

“Do you speak English?” he asked an Indian with black, matted hair, and white cotton trousers.

“*No entende.*” The Mexican shook his head.

“Don’t understand, eh?” Neal smiled, and showed curiosity as to the cane knife. The Indian handed it to him, and Neal swung it into the cane.

“Sure cuts.” He nodded approvingly as he handed it back. The Mexican was instantly friendly; and motioned Neal to follow. At the far end of the line of cutters he brought him up to a dark-skinned back wading into the cane with long sweeps of his knife.

“Do you speak English?” Neal repeated the question.

The cane cutter dropped his knife so quickly it barely missed his sandled foot, and turned facing the white man.

"I shore does."

He was black as a charcoal pit, and as large as the Mexican Neal had seen at the hotel that morning.

"What are you doing down here?" Neal gave the black man a compatriot's grin. "From Georgia?"

"No, sah." The colored man returned the friendly grin most beamingly. "I's a Mississippi nigger. Dunno just how I did get down heah, but I's ramblin' roun' and here I got. I's a bad nigger, too." He put on a belligerent scowl. "What you doin' down here, white man?"

"Rambling around," replied Neal, grinning the more at the negro's sudden ferocious look. "Quit your work for a while; I want you to show me over the ranch; I'll make it right with the boss; I know him well."

The negro stepped forward willingly. "There ain't nothin' I'd ruther do than quit work. Which way, boss?"

"Let us go over into the coffee field first. What do they call you?"

"Blanco," grinned the negro. "That's cause I's so white."

"Is there any one else about the ranch that speaks

English?" asked Neal as they crossed the road into the coffee fields.

"There shore is," replied Blanco. "That there Missus Krider down there at the house can talk English—and she can talk a powerful lot of it." The nigger shook his head as though he would like to forget some of it.

"Who is Mrs Krider?"

"Who, her? Who's Mrs. Krider? Why she's the woman that—she's—Mrs. Krider that come from Arkansas."

It was late in the afternoon when Neal rode down to the hacienda, and met Mrs. Krider personally.

The buildings covered nearly ten acres, and were laid out in a rectangle. An adobe wall, nearly two feet thick, and ten feet high, inclosed the whole square like a fort. This continuous wall formed the back of all the buildings, which opened inward on the square or plazuela. At the front on the south the buildings rose thirty or forty feet—two stories high—with long, wide verandas, upstairs and down; and a high arched entrance through which teams or horsemen could pass into the inner court. This was the house proper, the home of the owner, the dwelling place of the superintendent and the various officials of the hacienda.

As Neal entered the wide, spacious hall, he felt a bit awed, but a thrilling sense of pride made him draw a deeply satisfied breath as he glanced about.

Three or four Mexican maids passed in and out, giving him a look, but asked no questions. A Mexican woman with a mop and pail came from a big room to the left—the dining room. Neal spoke to her in English. She shook her head, and said something in Spanish, then set down her pail, dropped the mop and hurried off toward the inner court. A few minutes later she returned, smiling triumphantly in the wake of a white woman with red hair.

“What are you doing here?” The red-haired one shot the question so sharply at Neal that he jumped.

“There is no doubt about your speaking English.” He smiled good-naturedly. But the scowl only sharpened on her features, the muscles of her neck swelled and her greenish blue eyes bored coldly into this casual American.

“I said *what are you doing here?*” She put emphasis on each separate word.

“I merely dropped in.” Neal would have been abashed, if it had not been for the big, romantic secret he was holding back. He would not tell them he owned the ranch until later.

“I’m tired of American grafters dropping in.” She spoke with a cutting edge to her voice. “They are scum of the earth.”

Neal looked at her openly for a moment. She was not, if one could forget her belligerency, at all

bad looking. Wiry, strong, but rather softened here and there by a faint plumpness.

"You seem to have a pleasant disposition," he said, lifting his eyebrows.

"No, I haven't," she snapped. "I have a hell of a disposition, and I've got a right to it! If you've got any business here, be talkin' it. If you haven't, get out!"

"I'd hate to get out so soon, for I've come a long ways."

"From where?" The first of the world's curiosity was to know from whence a wanderer came.

"Buckeye Bridge, Missouri. Ever hear of it?"

"No, but no matter what it's like, you was a fool for leaving it."

"That is what they all said." Neal was again smiling good-humoredly with that astonishing secret cuddled up close to his tongue. "Sit down," he motioned to a chair, "I want to talk to you."

"I haven't any time to sit down," she snapped, but sat down, and rubbed a corner of her apron between the palms of her hands. She was undoubtedly curious to know more of this mild, quiet chap who did not cringe nor run at her first bark.

"What did you come for?" She again assumed the offensive.

"To get here and to get away from Buckeye Bridge," he answered soberly.

"You see," he went on, "one time when I was

riding in from the hills just after dark, I passed a farmhouse. It was spring. The doors were open. There was a star over the hill to the west and a wind from the south—all at once I smelled coffee. Do you know that smell when you are hungry and sort of lonesome? I decided then and there some day I'd see coffee growing; I thought it would be sort of romantic."

Mrs. Krider gave a violent snort. "Romantic!"

"And then, too," Neal rubbed his left jaw, "ten or fifteen years ago when I was a boy, the lightning struck the cupola of the Methodist church, and knocked it askew—and they never fixed it. I got tired of looking at it."

The snappishness went out of the red-headed widow's eyes and she began to grin half sheepishly.

"We are all fools," she spoke as though looking back a long way, "damn fools. And that is why you ran away from Buckeye Bridge and came all the way to Cordoba?"

Neal nodded. "Yes, that is why I bought the Ranch of the Thorn."

"*Bought* it?" She was on her feet, her face paled, her nostrils twitching. "Good heavens, you haven't bought this ranch?"

"Yes. Why not?"

But she turned and almost ran from the room.

A little later a Mexican girl appeared.

"No English?" he asked.

“A’ leetle.” She showed white teeth. “Missus say show you room.”

The room to which the maid showed Neal was large, eighteen by twenty-four feet perhaps. One door opened out on the upstairs veranda, another onto an inner balcony that overlooked the patio. The walls were plastered and the floor tiled. Although the house was perhaps a hundred and fifty years old, the workmanship was excellent. The spacious room seemed almost empty—a bed, two chairs, a small table upon which was a coal-oil lamp. And yet it did not seem bare. Neal thought that he was going to like it that way—plenty of room and no useless clutter.

He went out on the veranda. It was near sundown. Along the little river two hundred yards to the south, the rank, tropical foliage showed a mass of dark green; and to the southwest the light glowed deep red on the snowy crest of Mount Orizaba.

Neal thrust his thumbs into his vest pockets and walked up and down the long veranda. The outside wall had been stuccoed, but he noticed it thickly pockmarked by holes—hundreds of them. “That is curious.” He turned to the wall and examined one of the holes, and gave a long, surprised whistle. He was quite sober as he resumed his walk back and forth, but directly began to grin.

“Bullets, by gad! There has been action here, all right.”

Then as the long shadow of the mountains fell quickly across the valley, and the tropic dusk came on as though fairly tumbled from the black ban of night, he repeated still grinningly:

“Cheer, and we’ll never march to victory,  
Cheer, and we’ll never live to hear the cannons roar,  
The large birds of prey  
They will carry us away  
And you’ll never see your soldier any more.”

He stopped and rested his hands on the banister, and looked into the tropic dusk. A faint star gleamed; a wild parrakeet screamed from a mango tree.

What a strange transformation from the old life. If he had died and his soul gone to another planet it could not have been more strange. And yet he felt at home—the softness of the night, the heavy fragrance in the air, this ancient Spanish home—all of it seemed natural.

Almost since he could remember he had carried the romance of some Spanish country in his desires. All his life in Buckeye Bridge he had read of caballeros and dreamed of señoritas. And as he went back and forth along the drab street of that little country town, the dust-grimed window of “Bud” Peeler’s pool hall, the grease-streaked front



of Jake's restaurant, the unpainted frame harness shop—all the listless, stale matter-of-factness of the place had eaten into his spirit like canker rust; and he had vowed some day to get away.

But with Neal a desire did not end with a vow. He began definite preparations for it. When his father left him five thousand dollars six years ago, he saved it, carefully invested it, and worked hard until it was doubled. Then out of a clear sky came the amazing opportunity, the chance of all chances. A wonderful old estate right in the heart of the coffee country in Mexico, the very spot on which his romancing had centered, was offered him at a great bargain; and he had bought the Ranch of the Thorn—unseen!

Now he was here ready to take possession of it. He smiled as he turned away from the banister. It must be nearly supper time. On an impulse he had told Mrs. Krider he was the new owner—he had intended to keep the secret longer. But he had another surprise which he would spring on them in due time.

Ever since he knew he was coming to Mexico some time—and that had been ten years ago, he had been studying Spanish. He learned it himself so that he could read it as well as English. Then he rode twenty miles time after time to talk with the only Mexican he knew of in the Ozarks. But that was not enough. He got phonographic records

of the language, and corrected his pronunciation from them. He would need to adapt it, and practice speaking it, but even now he could understand almost everything he heard. For instance he had understood quite well the conversation between that grafting American and the big Villa-looking Mexican at the hotel that morning. He got enough to be sure they were plotting some rascality. He gathered they were going to swindle some American on a ranch deal. Neal was glad he had taken careful precaution.

And the conversation between the señorita and her father on the road—he understood every word. It was beyond belief that on this, his first day he should have met her, the very incarnation of all romantic dreams of Spanish beauty.

The maid who had shown him his room appeared on the veranda.

*“Cena, señor.”*

She led him down the stone stairs, to the big dining room that opened off the hall.

On a Mexican hacienda most of the peons provide their own huts, and all of them their own living. But the administrator, his field superintendents, and even some of the skilled machinists live in the big house.

There were fourteen of them, seated at the long table as Neal entered. They were all Mexicans except two or three of the sugar men who were

Cubans. A big Mexican sat at the head of the table, and there was a vacant chair at his right and left.

Almost at the moment Neal entered from the hall, Mrs. Krider entered from the kitchen door, and came briskly up to the chair at the left. All of them arose at Neal's approach, and the big Mexican turned to greet him.

"Señor Espinosa," Mrs. Krider said jerkily, "this is Señor Ashton."

Neal felt a vast misgiving open under him suddenly—like a man who jumps and finds the net is gone.

Señor Espinosa was the big Mexican of the hotel.

Neal shook hands and took the chair with a sickening effort to believe this Mexican Moses and the rascally American had been talking of some other ranch and some other sucker.

After supper Señor Espinosa invited Neal out into the patio, and Mrs. Krider came along. The patio was beautiful, but undoubtedly had been badly neglected. The flowers and potted plants and the two small trees were scraggly from want of water. He could guess that Mrs. Krider would not care much for patios.

The three were seated. The Mexican offered Neal a cigarette which he declined. Lighting one himself, he turned to Mrs. Krider and asked in Spanish if she knew what the American was there for.

Mrs. Krider's face looked sharp as the edge of a machete in the lamplight, and she replied in Spanish that she did not know what he was there for, but supposed perhaps he was a sugar buyer.

Neal understood perfectly, and was grateful to Mrs. Krider. Maybe he would have a chance to get onto their game before they knew who he was.

Mrs. Krider left them, and Espinosa talked in broken English with his visitor. Neal made inquiries about sugar and coffee, and ranch products in general, leaving the impression of the Mexican that Mrs. Krider's guess had been right. But he saw the Mexican was rather suspicious and did not look upon his stay at the ranch with favor.

Neal said good night to Espinosa and went up to his room. He sat on the veranda in front of his door until nearly midnight. He had just gone into the room with the thought of turning in when there was a light knock on the inner door. He opened it with a degree of caution.

It was Mrs. Krider with a shawl thrown over her head and shoulders like a Mexican woman.

"Go to-morrow," she whispered, "and take the first train, and never come back, you poor damn fool!"

## CHAPTER IV

### MRS. KRIDER SPEAKS

NEAL fastened both doors of his room and lay down across the bed with his clothes on, his shoes sticking out over the edge through the mosquito netting. Mrs. Krider's warning meant one of two things: Either she was helping the Mexican scare him out, or else he was in danger while on the ranch.

For three hours he went over in his mind every step of the transaction. He had seen the advertisement of the ranch in a St. Louis paper, and had written an inquiry. That led to his acquaintance with Dickman. Dickman had seemed most open and fair—and Neal had observed, so he thought, every precaution. He had even sent the papers to a different Mexican lawyer than the one Dickman suggested and that lawyer had reported everything perfectly legal and in form. Also he had slipped off and come down here two weeks earlier than Dickman had expected.

Surely there was nothing wrong, and yet he persisted in recalling rascally transactions in real estate right at home, even in that most moral and suspicious village of Buckeye Bridge, of the most investigating of States—Missouri.

If that could happen, how many more chances there were for fraud in a foreign country under a doubtful administration.

At breakfast Señor Espinosa was most solicitous as to how Señor Ashton had slept. And he was suavely apologetic over the impossibility of his going with Neal to Cordoba that morning. There was trouble in the cane field, and it was most important that he stay on the ranch that day. But Señor Ashton's horse was ready. Neal had not expressed a desire to have his horse ready, but it suited his plans well.

Neal waited until Moses had gone to the fields, and then he went out into the court where Mrs. Krider was driving a dozen Mexican women to greater speed in hand picking twenty bags of frijoles that were to be sent to market.

"Mrs. Krider," Neal spoke in a low voice, "I want to see you at once. Come up to the veranda in a few minutes, opposite my room."

Mrs. Krider sharply invited him to go take a bath in sulphur and brimstone, and went on with her work. But Neal returned to his room and placed two chairs just outside the door on the veranda, and sat down on one of them. He had to wait only four minutes.

"Get inside your room, you fool," she said sharply. "Do you want to get me killed, too?"

Neal put the chairs back in his room, and closed

the door that opened on the inner balcony. Mrs. Krider walked the length of the veranda as though inspecting the work of cleaning the rooms, returned and stepped inside Neal's and dropped into a chair.

"Now, what is it?" She spoke angrily.

"What is up?" Neal asked.

"One fool up and another down," she replied.

"How was I cheated in buying this ranch?"

"How do I know?" she snapped.

"You know everything." Neal was frowning, and his gray eyes were seriously insistent. "What about it?"

"All I know," she gave her muscular neck a jerk that shook a wisp of red hair across her forehead, "is that all men are rascals and liars—and you are probably the biggest of them all."

"Mrs. Krider," Neal spoke very soberly and looked steadily into the greenish-blue eyes, "I don't doubt but you have suffered at the hands of man and ill fortune. But you know that I have a right to what I ask, and you know I would not betray those who befriend me"

Mrs. Krider gave her elbow a sharp jerk. Her face grew very red; she bit her lip, as though on the point of a violent outbreak. Instead she clutched the corner of her apron and gave her eyes a hard, angry swipe, taking away a couple of tears.

"Oh, I'm a miserable fool to ever believe any of

them," she said as though to herself, "but I can't help it.

"Here's all I know about it," she began in a rapid, acidulous tone:

"There have been seven people bought this ranch in the last ten years—all of them paid at least \$10,000 down. Not one of them ever had possession more than two months. Most of them not a day. Did you notice those two wooden crosses down there by the river?"

He nodded.

"Two owners who came to take possession. One of them was the man that brought me down here."

"How do they get rid of them?" Neal felt himself growing sick.

"They are grafters, and have a whole lot of fake schemes. They just use this ranch to raise money for their other schemes. I don't know how they do it. There is something wrong with the deed, or it is closed by a mortgage, or the title is not good, or they just get rid of them like that." And she pointed dramatically out of the door toward the wooden crosses



## CHAPTER V

### SEEKING THE FLAW

NEAL had to use his Spanish at Cordoba to find the records of title to the Rancho Huisache. He made himself understood and was surprised to see how well the records were kept.

Dickman in selling him the ranch had represented that he had bought it for 70,000 pesos from an American named Williams and a Mexican named Espinosa, who owned it jointly. He paid them, he said, 30,000 pesos in gold, and gave back a mortgage for 40,000 pesos due in ten years.

Dickman, on account of his wife's health, was unable to go down and take possession, therefore was sacrificing it to Neal for 60,000 pesos—\$30,000 in American money, Neal to pay down \$10,000 in gold, and assume the mortgage.

The records which Neal examined feverishly seemed to corroborate everything Dickman had said, and everything Neal's Mexican lawyer had reported correct. The title to the ranch had been vested in Bernard Williams and Manton Espinosa. A deed was recorded to R. P. Dickman and a mortgage for 40,000 pesos was shown.

Neal filed his own deed for record and left the

office much relieved. And yet there had been seven others, according to Mrs. Krider, who had bought this ranch and never got possession of it. Perhaps they were easily scared out; but no doubt at least two had made a fight, the two whose graves were down there by the river.

Neal sat down on an iron bench in the plaza to think it over. A young Mexican dandy in white flannels sauntered by, a wrinkled old beggar, a woman with a red shawl, carrying a baby, passed. The cathedral bell tolled. Strange birds sang or screamed in the foliage overhead. It was a far-off world, a long way from placid, safe old Buckeye Bridge. They had all warned him not to venture down here—called him a fool.

A small street car came clanging up the main street pulled by a Ford engine. Neal grinned. Even here Yankee wit had found a track on which to run. There must be ways a similar wit could learn to stay.

He got up and went across to the Gran Hotel Zeballos. The clerk greeted him with real enthusiasm. He should have the best room in the house. No, Neal wanted information. "Had there," the clerk was surprised to hear the American speak in Spanish, "been lawsuits—trouble over the Rancho Huisache?"

"*Si, si,*" the clerk nodded, but showed a reluctance to go into detail.

"In such cases," asked Neal, "who was the lawyer for Señor Williams and Señor Espinosa?"

"The Abogado Sanchez," answered the clerk.

At three o'clock just after the midday siesta, Neal entered Abogado Sanchez's office.

"My name is Smith," he said. "I am connected with Señor Williams."

Sanchez was instantly very friendly. Señor Smith must have another chair, not one that had a split on the bottom. Señor Smith must sit near the window where the breeze was cool.

Neal accepted this superfluous attention gravely; then frowning slightly, remarked:

"The ranch is sold again and we want you to take it back from the new sucker."

"*Bueno!*" Sanchez laughed. "And on what grounds this time?"

Neal took from his pocket his copy of the mortgage from Dickman to Williams and Espinosa.

"Here is the obligation the new sucker assumes."

The Mexican lawyer read the mortgage over slowly, frowning and running his fingers through his thick black hair.

"Ha," his face lighted with sudden understanding, as he found something. "Very clever. It will be very easy. You send this señor——"

"Ashton," supplied Neal.

"Ashton—*bueno*—send him in to see me and I will manage it quickly. He very big fool."

"He must be," nodded Neal. "Everybody says he is." He reached for the papers, returned them to his pocket. "All right, señor, I'll send Ashton in to see you by and by."

There was something wrong. The lawyer had found it. Neal felt the emptiness in the stomach, the dizziness of the head of one toppled off a building.

He went up the narrow, cobbled street, walking rapidly, his face flushed, his hands clinched. He would get to the bottom of this. He must know what he had to fight before he began.

The clerk at the hotel gave him Williams' address at Mexico City and Neal caught the evening train. When he got into the Pullman he had his plans made. Williams had not expected him for two weeks. He would also walk in on Mr. Williams as Señor Smith. He might learn something.

Once more Neal took the papers out of his pocket and read them over as he had a dozen times.

There could not be anything wrong, that is, unless it was some obscure technicality.

He sat in deep rejection, thinking it over carefully. There must be something wrong but he could not find it.

He turned and put up the window for the car was warm. It had rained earlier in the evening, but the cloud had passed on into the mountains, and the full moon was rising clear.

The dense tropical foliage was still adrip, and the air was filled with the heavy perfume of exotic blossoms.

Neal leaned his head out of the window and looked toward the mountains into which they had begun to climb. The rain cloud had banked blackly against the higher crags, and magically the rising moon arched upon it a gorgeous rainbow. It stirred Neal, for he had never before seen a rainbow by moonlight.

The train stopped at a little station. Venders swarmed down upon the coaches from every direction, their shrill, half-musical cry, a mixture of fierceness and plaintiveness, gave the tropic night a strange touch. The second-class coaches ahead fairly swarmed with passengers, and their heads were thrust in clusters from open windows as they bargained with the venders. The Mexican peon seems to have no regular time for food. He eats whenever he has a centavo with which to buy. Bananas, melons, joints of sugar cane, tortillas and dulces—sweets—in every conceivable shape.

But it was not all food these night merchants sold. One after another came under Neal's window and held up cylinders of bark filled with hyacinths; and the odor of these rare blossoms drowned all other scents of the night.

The train moved on. Neal still sat with his head from the window, watching the diminishing

specks of human beings on the station platform, watching the dark, rank foliage in the deep little cañons, watching the moonlight on the mountains ahead. The richness and strangeness made him forget the oppression of his own problems.

Something was running alongside of the moving car—galloping swiftly. It was an animal with a white spot on its forehead. Another came a little behind, a brindled one, and still another trailed farther back. He knew what they were—he had heard of them—the homeless dogs. Dogs who had no masters, no homes, but followed the trains for the remnants of food that would be thrown from the windows.

He watched them dwindle away down the moonlit track as the train gathered speed. But still they ran, still hoping for one more bite of food.

It was pathetic, he thought, their foolish persistence in chasing a vanished hope. And wasn't he doing that? Suddenly his own troubles came back to him. No doubt these rascals had him entirely in their power. What their trick had been he had not yet discovered; but it was fairly certain they had turned it so effectively that he would never get a dollar of his money back. No doubt he was as foolishly chasing his vanishing investment as these dogs were the moving train.

The train was going slow. The road had begun to climb—it climbs five thousand feet in twenty

miles. The engine puffed laboredly, the wheels whined on the steel rails. Another little town was just ahead, and as the train panted up to the station and stopped, Neal glanced back. He felt like giving a shout. There came the dog with the white spot on his forehead, and the brindled cur, and the black one. They had followed the train from one station to another, caught up with it, and got another meal. Later he learned these wild dogs did that regularly over this strip of steep grade.

The night was getting cooler and he put his window down. He felt better. If a stray dog with no other guide than a hungry stomach could chase an impossible hope and catch up with it, he was not going to give up at the first snatch some thief made at his own prospects.

Most of the passengers had gone to bed and the porter wanted to make up Neal's berth. He got up and went to the smoking compartment at the end of the car.

There were only two men there, both Mexicans. One was a squat, broad-shouldered man, with a short, thick neck, and square head, and deep-set black eyes. His skin was thick and oily and deeply seamed, and he had large hands that indicated great strength. He was dressed in a rough corduroy suit and heavy shoes, and a woolen shirt. But there was force in the man, and intelligence; a formidable

but not disagreeable personality. The other was a dandyish young Mexican with a smooth face, and a traveled air, who smoked cigarettes in a long pearl cigarette holder. They both glanced up as Neal entered but resumed their conversation casually. Yet Neal knew they had changed the subject.

“Do either of you gentlemen speak English?” he asked.

They both looked up politely, and shook their heads.

“No Englese,” said the young man.

“Do you know what time we get to Velasco?” he asked in English.

They were both quite emphatic in their “*No entende.*” And in turn asked him a question or two in Spanish. He shook his head as not understanding and settled down most innocently to smoke.

Relieved of any fear of being understood, the two Mexicans dropped back to their original discussion.

Neal, slowly smoking, and with eyes half closed, followed the conversation easily. The young man, he gathered, was from the North, and was perhaps a lawyer, or some district official. He mentioned Senora and Chiauchiau. The other man was apparently from some mountain village south of Cordoba.

“And you do not like our presidente?” The



foppish young man smiled out of the corner of his eyes.

The heavy Mexican's big hands clutched until veins showed on the backs of his hands like strings of hemp. His face grew ugly in its contortion.

"Diablo! No—I hate him. He kill my father—and my brother. He have them shot like dogs, and hung them up in the plaza at Pueblo for the people to see. And for what? They do nothing. They are innocent. Some men tell lies on them, and say they start revolution."

The young man talked about something irrelevant for a time, very suavely.

"Do you think Señor Valdez like the presidente?"

"Yes," said the older man, "he is loyal to the devil, Carranza."

"And Señor Espinosa, of the Ranch of the Thorn, what of him?"

The heavy man's coarse face cleared. His eyes brightened, as he nodded. "He is for us. He very brave man, and he send word he join me, whenever I send call."

There was further talk about states and cities, and political leaders which was all strange to Neal. But he heard the strong men of Senora mentioned—Obregon.

And then finally the young man came back to a direct question.

"Where can you get money for your men? We

are very poor in the North. No money to spare—no rich man is helping us.”

“Oh,” the heavy one spread out his big hands. “It take very little money, where there is so much hate. We fight on tortillas and frijoles. But guns, of course, and ammunition we must have. Señor Espinosa says that perhaps Señor Williams can find the money.”

The porter came through, as the train stopped at Velasco and the heavy Mexican got off. The other went back to his berth in the Pullman.

Neal did not go to bed at once. Something was afoot, and Espinosa and Williams were mixed up in it. Would it involve the ranch, and would he be a target for a new revolution?”

He lifted the window and looked out. The moon rode high. It was wild country now—high crags and deep black cañons, a wild, stirring country.

The track made a wide curve. He could see the rails ahead in the moonlight, and then it seemed swallowed up as though the road was lost in blackness. As the porter came back, Neal pointed ahead:

“A tunnel?” he asked.

“No, señor, the Cañon of the Moon. Very steep walls.”

A half mile off to the south Neal saw a huge black rock towering hundreds of feet high in the moonlight. It stood apart from the mountains on

a little shoulder with a rim of scrub trees about it. The porter followed Neal's eyes.

*"Piedra del diablo,"* he said with a shrug.

"The Rock of the Devil," Neal repeated as the porter went to answer a ring. "If the devil needed a rock behind which to hide, I don't know a better one."

## CHAPTER VI

### MR. SMITH CALLS

**B**ERNARD WILLIAMS had an office on Cinco de Mayo Street near the National Railway offices. It was a high-class block, and Señor Williams' office was innocent enough apparently. There was a big folding desk, three or four chairs, some maps and a typewriter. All American stuff. The office might, so far as appearances went, have been in Yonkers, New York, or Kansas City, Missouri. Even the one word on the door—"Investments"—was conservatively American.

Señor Williams had not a great many callers and they came only one or two at a time. They were of two classes: Americans newly arrived, who were received in the outer office; Mexicans, or Americans long in Mexico, and they were taken to the private office.

To the first there was much talk of Mexico and its resources, of opportunities—mines, oil, rubber, hemp, coffee, commerce. With the other class the conversation was of concessions, titles, intrigues, revolutions—and was carried on in a lower tone.

Bernard Williams had been in Mexico ten years. There were those who thought he was worth several

million dollars, and there were others who were afraid he would not have the two pesos due for pressing his suit. But whether he was a millionaire now or not, there was no doubt of what he intended to be. He seldom missed a chance to damn Mexico, but he did not intend to leave it until he could take back a great wad of money—and it did not matter whether it was Mexican or American money.

First and last he had acquired considerable real property, but he wasted no time or effort trying to make it pay in itself. He never got a mine from which to dig silver, or a tobacco field from which to make cigars, nor a lease upon which to drill for oil. It was always to resell, to pool into fabulous corporations of some sort, and exploit in America. His system was expressed in a moment of frankness. "Hell, what is the use wasting your time trying to produce stuff? There's too much already. A drag for gathering it in is what I want."

Of course the more real stuff he had behind his exploitations, the easier the work and the less the danger. It had been his object all these ten years to get hold of some real big concession—one worth actual money, get it through political graft, make one big killing and then get out.

He had got that concession—almost. All he lacked was Carranza's signature. It was a scheme he had thought out himself, involving free ports and vast manufacturing concessions, whereby raw ma-

terial might be shipped to Mexico, manufactured with cheap labor, and redistributed to Europe and South America without any duty coming or going.

But as the devil's luck would have it, the thing had come to a head at a time when his finances were at the lowest possible ebb. And then had come the good news in the telegram from Dickman—the Ranch of the Thorn was sold again, and Dickman was wiring the ten thousand to a bank in Mexico City.

Williams sat tipped back in his swivel chair, his legs stuck far out, and crossed at the ankles. He was intermittently chewing the end of an unlighted cigar, as he dictated to a slender young Mexican stenographer a letter of congratulation to his American agent. He had put off the letter until he returned from Cordoba.

“It came at the psychological moment all right,” the dictation ran, “but we will need more. The way things are down here now, money will get most everything, but you can't get much of anything, not even a wink, without it. These damned greasers are strong on the palaver, but mighty shy on performance unless there is a pile of dinero where they can get their fingers on it.

“I hope you'll be able to shoot some wise guys down this way that are looking for the chance of their lifetime to invest in Mexico. I can sure steer them straight—and we need the money. If this thing only goes through—and it will or hell will be

bent double—it will mean the wind-up; yours truly won't ever need to go to the poorhouse, and neither will you."

Providence does not distribute solely to the just. Quite often the unjust get a very sizable hunk of luck. Bernard Williams had not affixed his signature to that letter before a Heaven-sent American walked in—a slender young man with brown hair and friendly gray eyes, and a deep but mild voice.

"I understand you have some good investments," opened the visitor.

Williams' small eyes looked a benediction, but the nostrils dilated, making his nose swell at the end like the head of an adder.

"Yes," he made the tone sound cautiously conservative. "For the right man, Mexico offers some very good opportunities."

He sent the Mexican stenographer out for some drinks to celebrate his rejoicing over meeting a fellow American, and proceeded to draw out that American, named Smith, by talking mines, oil, cotton, rubber—a great many things, watching to see which awoke a response in the visitor.

But Señor Smith by and by interrupted with a slight wave of the hand, and said in a soft, apologetic tone:

"I may as well confess, I'm looking for something big and something easy. I've lived in a small town where everything is measured by the yard or the

pound. I want to cut loose." He indicated the sky was his limit. "I want to take a shot at easy money. If you've got something that is a whole lot of a gamble, but with a pretty good chance to make a pile at one throw—let me in on it."

Williams put his right hand up to the sagging bridge of his nose, and caressed the bulbous adder's head below; he moistened his lips, hitched his chair nearer, and leaned forward. This was the easiest one of all the gulls ever sent his way.

"If you are a real sport," he said with a wink, "I can let you in on something so big it will make your head swim. How much——"

"Oh," Señor Smith waved indifferently, "a good deal. You see I've recently inherited quite a bunch of money—and darned if I want to go into business with it."

Once more Williams moistened his lips and rubbed a large flat hand over his left thigh. In great confidence, under dire injunction to secrecy, he confided:

"There is right now one of the biggest opportunities ever offered in Mexico, an opportunity I dare not touch. Another revolution is coming as sure as fate and a good deal faster. But I'm a friend of Carranza's. He's always shown great liking for me, has me out to his home for dinner two or three times a month, and asks my advice on all sorts of foreign policies. Now I'm not the man to go back on a friend even when I know



he is going to lose. So, sink or swim, I've got to stick it out with Carranza—although I know that in less than three months he's going to be downed.

“Now here is the chance—I've been wishing I knew an American with money and of the right disposition to take it. The revolutionists will need money worse than the devil needs ice. They need it now worse than they will two months from now, for just as quick as the big fellows up in the States know that a real revolution is on they'll jump in and finance them.

“I happen to know one of the leaders very intimately. I must stay out of it entirely. But I can send you to him. He lives down near Cordoba—where you saw me at the hotel and heard about my investments. In fact that was he that you saw come to meet me at the hotel.

“The one,” suggested Smith, “whom you called Señor Moses?”

Williams nodded. “Yes, he is a real Mexican, but he has some Slav blood in him—enough to make him thrifty.

“Now if you'd put up fifty thousand, say, or even half that much, with Moses for the revolution, they'll give you anything you ask; you'll be a millionaire in three months after they get into power. Concessions? Monopolies? Why, man, for \$25,000 you can get concessions from them worth millions!

"If I wasn't just tied up with Carranza I'd be worth 20,000,000 pesos in five months. While as it is I'll do well to be worth two million."

Señor Smith thought the suggestion most alluring, and asked full details.

"I'll look into it at once," he agreed "It seems the sort of thing I'm likely to be mixed up in. Sort of romantic, you know. But also I want to buy a ranch. They told me at Cordoba you had one to sell. That is really what I came up for."

Señor Williams rubbed his spreading nose and recrossed his legs, and frowned thoughtfully a moment.

"Yes, I have a ranch. But temporarily it is tied up. I sold it to some cheap piker up in the States who paid a little down, but failed to come across with the rest. I have a mortgage that is past due. But before I could sell it to you I'd have to foreclose it."

"How long will it take?" asked Señor Smith innocently.

"Oh, not long. If the greenhorn knew Mexican law, he might stand us off a while, but he doesn't. So we'll just bluff him out or pay him a small sum to deed it back to us. I think I could guarantee title within three months. If you care to look it over I'll wire my superintendent, who, by the way, is the Mexican Moses I spoke to you about. And believe me he is some son of the bullrushes."

“All right.” Señor Smith arose. “Wire your man to meet me at Cordoba to-morrow.”

And turning at the door: “You’ll hear from me a little later. *Adios, señor.*”

The large, heavy face lost several shades in its enthusiasm as Williams looked at the door through which the visitor had passed. He felt the first faint trace of misgiving, the bulbous nose swelled as he wrinkled it like an animal sniffing danger.

“He seems innocent, but a little too damned innocent. I wonder if his name is really Smith?”

## CHAPTER VII

### SENORITA MARIA

BACK at his hotel Neal again took the copy of the mortgage from his pocket. Williams had just said he could close it at once; and Sanchez had found something wrong with it. But Neal had not, and the Mexican lawyer to whom he had sent it had not. Once more he began to read it over carefully. This was the copy of the mortgage Dickman had showed him at Buckeye Bridge while the deal was pending.

Suddenly as he stared at the paper something went through his consciousness like a hot wire.

"Fool is right!" he said aloud. "Damn fool is better."

How a man could read over a paper a dozen times and not see a thing like that was incredible!

The mortgage was dated in February and instead of falling due in ten years, fell due in ten days!

Neal would swear it was ten years in the original copy. He held the paper to a better light. Yes, there had been an erasure.

"I see now," he thought bitterly, "how they have swindled me."

The real mortgage was fixed up on purpose for this deal and read "ten days after date," Dickman had a fake copy of it reading "ten years after date" which he showed Neal while the trade was pending. After Neal accepted the terms and suggested he send the copy of the mortgage to a Mexican attorney for verification, Dickman had erased the "ten years" and inserted "ten days" so the Mexican attorney would find the copy agreed with that on record.

Neal had given the latter only a casual glance and had failed to note the change in time.

He left the hotel and caught a train back to Cordoba.

Neal glanced out of the window as the train pulled up at the station. The big Mexican foreman was leisurely swaggering up and down the station platform, casually striking his beaded leather trousers with a riding whip. He was awaiting the arrival of Señor Smith.

As he got off and approached Espinosa, the Mexican gave him a brief, surprised glance, and looked away at the other passengers for his man.

"I am Señor Smith," announced Neal, and the Mexican gave a visible start. "Take my bag. Have you horses? Or the machine?"

"Horses, señor," the Mexican answered.

"I have come back to look over the ranch," Neal remarked as they walked down the street toward

where the horses were hitched. "But I am to be known as Señor Smith. Call me that on the ranch. And do not forget it."

"*Si*, Señor Smith." The Mexican was looking at him slantwise—very puzzled. Was this a trick, or was really Señor Smith on the inside of the intrigues? At any rate it would pay him to walk softly until he found out.

At the hacienda Neal slipped out of the saddle.

"Send a horse to the door at five o'clock," he said to Espinosa. "A good one, please." The "please" was mere polite authority.

Neal went into the house leaving the horses to the Mexican.

If Espinosa had been surprised at Neal's return, Mrs. Krider was struck speechless by it. She was just passing through the hall with a broom in her hand and a look of retribution in her eye, when Ashton entered.

At sight of him she stopped with a suddenness that almost upset her. Her muscular neck twitched, her red hair toppled over one ear, and her face went pale and then red. Her eyes looked anger and her lips opened, but she did not speak for a moment. Whether her violent emotion was hate or fear or mere surprise Neal could not tell.

"The prodigal fool has returned," he said lightly, "but don't kill the calf yet; save it for his birthday."

Mrs. Krider seemed to struggle with two or three things, violent things she wanted to say, but changed her mind and did not say any of them—glancing down and seeing the broom in her hand, which a maid had used neither wisely nor too well, Mrs. Krider remembered her errand and strode toward the stairway, merely remarking as she passed:

“He won’t have any birthday.”

The sun was yet far above the line of mountains to the west when Neal rode off alone. Señor Valdez’s ranch was in the foothills twelve miles away, and Neal put the horse to a fast trot. He wanted to reach the hacienda before dark.

He had kept up a front with Williams and Espinosa and Mrs. Krider, but inwardly he felt all gone—utterly bankrupt. A twenty-thousand-dollar mortgage already due! By selling everything he had left at Buckeye Bridge, and counting every dollar he had brought with him, he could not raise more than twenty-five hundred. They would take the ranch, and he could not even punish the rascals, for Dickman would swear the date on the mortgage was plain, and there had been no fraud.

He stopped his horse for a moment at a high turn of the road, and looked back. The sun was behind Orizaba, and the long shadow fell across the tropical valleys below. The broken foothills, the fields of cane and coffee, the white walls of a hacienda here and there, and the spires of a church rising from

the wilderness. It was a wild, stirring country, full of soft shades and gentle winds, but underneath were things that bit and stung, and passions that burned. It stirred him as no place had ever done, stirred him with a fierceness of joy and sorrow equal to its own.

“And the worst of the whole damnable deal,” he said as he turned his horse to the west again, “is that it robs me of my long dream of romance.”

Yet in a little while he was whistling an air from a Kipling chantey, and watching with keen curiosity the strange trees and vines that lined the road.

It was still light when he approached the hacienda, set on a small plateau halfway between the mountains and the valley. The courtliness, the dignity, the romance of the great house sitting there like a castle against the green background of the mountains, stirred Neal into forgetfulness of his troubles. What a picture! He felt almost awed as he dismounted. This man lived as a duke or a king used to live.

“Is Señor Valdez at home?” he asked a servant who had come forward.

“*Si, si,*” the servant nodded in cordial friendliness, and went to the gate with him and rang the bell.

The heavy gate in the thick, high wall swung open without any one touching it, and Neal entered the court. This place, different from any he had seen, had a garden and trees inside the wall, in front of the house.



The house, built like a Moorish castle, rose forty or fifty feet high, the walls were of ivory-colored stucco, and over the west wing climbed a great vine. In front was a screen of eucalyptus and hardwood trees. The first hint of twilight threw the garden into cool green shadows.

The reception hall which Neal entered was thirty by forty feet, with a ceiling twenty-five feet high. The floor was tiled, the furniture of heavy mahogany, and there were paintings and antiques on the wall.

“The Señor Ashton does our poor house ver’ great honor by his call.”

The Señorita Valdez had appeared from somewhere, and came toward him with an almost darting grace of movement. A light silk mantoon of rich rose color was thrown about her shoulders, and her black hair and the whiteness of face were accentuated by the semidusk. She held out her hand.

Neal took it and held it, not knowing what he did, for as he looked into her eyes, almost on a level with his, he seemed floating on some delicious wave of unconscious reality.

“Will the señor come into the patio?” She slipped her hand from his. “It is cooler there. I will call my father.”

Neal followed into the patio inclosed by the wings of the house, and sat down on a bench by the fountain. There were flowers and palms, and the feathery

leaves of a pepper tree stood out against the dark blue sky overhead.

Neal was angry at himself for not detaining the señorita. The mere matter of twenty thousand dollars seemed utterly trivial compared to an hour in this enchanted spot with Maria Valdez.

But he abused himself without need—as we often do—for in a few moments the señorita returned.

“He will be here ver’ soon.” She was standing a few feet from him and reached up and broke a small twig of the pepper tree and wrinkled her nose as she smelled it.

“Won’t you sit down?” Neal had arisen and indicated the bench. “You speak such good English—you can tell me many things.”

“Oh, I could tell nothing that would be worth the señor’s listening.” She gave a bewitching shrug of the shoulders and flirt of the head. “Women have ver’ little—what you call hem?—brains.”

“If they haven’t more than some men I know,” Neal laughed ruefully, “the Lord have mercy on their heads. Please sit and talk with me a little,” he implored, and to his utter amazement heard himself saying: “It will be moments I shall never forget so long as trees grow and water runs.”

She laughed deliciously and, with another flirtatious shrug of the rose-covered shoulder, slipped down upon the bench.

“Ah! The señor is a most irresistible flatterer.”

Then looking at him intently with her limpid dark eyes, her smooth white forehead wrinkled into a puzzle, and in a tone of quick sympathy:

“The señor does not look so happy as he did on the road three days ago. Has he found trouble in our country so soon?”

“He brought it with him.” Neal was surprised at her quick discernment. “A pack of it as heavy as the snows of Orizaba.”

“Oh, but by and by,” she lifted her brows and looked at him hopefully, “in July—August maybe, the sun will melt the snows of Orizaba—and they all run away. Maybe the troubles of señor will run away so.”

“I will not have to wait so long,” said Neal, who never before had known how to compliment a woman. “One smile of the señorita will do more for me than a month of sun will for Orizaba.”

“Father is coming.” She arose with one graceful turn of her body. “He will not like for me to be talking to young man when he is not present.” A most roguish flirt of her head and flash of the black eyes. “And so dangerous a young man—so ver’ nice a flatterer.” Then swiftly sober again: “I hope he help señor with his troubles, for so kind and gallant a señor should have a merry heart.” She vanished into the house as the father appeared in the patio.

Señor Valdez greeted the visitor hospitably, and,

much of his surprise, Neal returned the greeting in very good Spanish.

The host called a servant and had a small table brought with cigars and glasses and a bottle or two.

They talked for an hour, about everything except what Neal had come to discuss. Valdez was a charming host, and his mind was both keen and mellow. He had seen and read much, thought and lived even more.

“Señor,” Neal said at last, “I fear it is very bad manners to intrude one’s troubles on even so generous a neighbor as you, but I’m in a devilish mess, and need information and advice.”

He told him the whole story of his purchase of the ranch, and the discovery of the rascally manipulations of the mortgage.

“Now I am not going to give up without a fight,” concluded Neal. “But so far I don’t see any way to win. I am not acquainted with your law. How long can I hold on to the ranch, before they close me out under the mortgage?”

“If you were in possession,” Señor Valdez answered soberly, “you might manage to retain the ranch a year—or possibly longer”—significantly—“if you lived.”

Neither spoke for a moment. Then the Spaniard added:

“There has been much trouble at the Ranch of the Thorn. It is a very fatal sort of place.”

Neal asked more information about the Mexican law and methods of procedure. Valdez, always the courteous gentleman, refrained from intruding advice. But Neal knew he felt that it was exceedingly foolhardy for him to attempt to retain the ranch.

“I must go.” He arose. Valdez insisted he must remain for the night, but strong as he wished it, Neal felt he should go.

“I will send the jefe of my guard,” said the host. Valdez, as Neal learned later, kept an armed guard of a hundred men. The chief of this guard was called the jefe of the guard. Just as the two men started out of the patio, a slender, swift figure crossed to them.

“Father,” said Señorita Maria, “Señora Tia Alicia wishes to see you just a moment about the baskets for the market.”

Valdez excused himself and went in.

Señorita Maria stood still, her face upturned to the sky spangled with brilliant stars, the mantoon about her head and shoulders, looking in the faint light like some priestess of beauty.

Neal took a step nearer. They were only a little apart—her lips were almost on a level with his, and from her hair came a faint, intoxicating perfume. The palm and the pepper trees were dim shapes, and high above floated the stars in that sea of dark gray. Neal felt himself slipping, float-

ing. He could scarcely breathe, his heart beat one continuous stream—he was lost.

“Señorita.” He spoke intently and stopped.

“*Si señor?*” came softly.

“Always I followed the road of stones and thorns until I met you—and now I walk on flowers that lead to——” Again he paused.

“To what, señor?” she prompted almost under breath.

“The impossible,” he finished at the sound of Valdez’s returning steps.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A MIDNIGHT RIDE

FOR several miles the jefe of the guard rode in front, bristling with protection. He was a large man with a bull neck and wore a wide-brimmed hat. He carried a pistol on each hip; a knife at his back, an automatic in his shirt front, a sword at his side, and a carbine across the saddle horn. His was no mere comic strut, either. He had been chosen for his job because of his execution.

Where the road widened Neal rode up beside the jefe, not from any fear of the night, but to talk with him. The guard was surprised when Neal spoke to him in Spanish, and at once was very friendly, for even so bold and armed a man as the jefe felt the lonesomeness of the night road.

He admitted to Neal that he had killed very many bad men. How many? Twenty, perhaps thirty—maybe more. One could never tell how many of the wounded, that got away, died.

Señor Valdez, he said, was a very great man—and very rich. The señorita Maria? The stars themselves worshiped the señorita. He had known her ever since she put on her first little red shoes. Always she was very full of fun, and got into

very much mischief. She would fight, too—not afraid of anything—and sometimes she got very angry. But she over it very queek. She very kind to the animals, and always run away when anything must be killed.

Neal tactfully but fearfully wanted to know if she was to be married soon. If there were sweet-hearts.

“Oh, yes, very many when she go away to school in New York—Paris. But here not many dare lift their eyes to Señorita Valdez. Señor Espinosa come two or three times, but Señor Valdez not like hem.”

“What sort of fellow is Espinosa?” inquired Neal. “I’ve only met him twice.”

“Very bad man.” There was strong dislike in the jefe’s tone. “But not very brave. If I meet him in the road and say: ‘Señor, when I count ten I shoot you;’ before I count five he will run.”

“Have you ever tried it?” Neal hoped it was true.

The jefe shook his head. “No; but some time perhaps I will. Only I may not count more than four before I shoot.”

Neal made no comment, but he hoped the jefe would make good that threat. His only hope of realizing anything at all from the ranch was to get possession and then hold on as long as the



law would allow. Espinosa was his most dangerous obstacle.

If Espinosa refused to acknowledge him as the owner—and he most certainly would—the only way of gaining possession would be by suit at law, and they probably could delay that until the mortgage was foreclosed.

“Señor,” Neal said as they turned down to where the Hacienda of the Thorn showed dimly white in the starlight, “have you a man in your company whom you can trust, one not known to Señor Espinosa?”

“*Si, si*, many of my men are not known to the señor.”

Neal drew a little closer alongside and laid his hand on the neck of the jefe’s horse. “My friend, would you do me a very great favor?”

“Señor,” the big Mexican drew his horse to a stop and lifted himself up in his saddle, “I saw Señorita Maria’s face when she look at you at the gate. I will do anything in the world for the señor.”

It was not the pledge of service that thrilled Neal, so much as the reason for it. The señorita had looked glad when he appeared at the gate.

“Thank you, my friend,” Neal said warmly. “And both you and your man shall be well repaid. Send him to-morrow to Señor Espinosa. Have him say:

“‘I come from very great man to warn the señor about the Señor Smith. He is not what he seems. Be very careful that nothing happens to him or there will be great trouble. He is on a secret mission.’”

“Ha,” exclaimed the jefe appreciatively. “The señor is a very clever man. That will scare that son of a pig very bad. It shall be as the señor wishes.” And he repeated the message over three times to be sure he had it correctly.

“I will not need you farther,” Neal said. “Yonder is the ranch.” He pressed a ten-pesos gold piece on the guard, and rode on down alone.

It was nearly midnight, but Moses was waiting for him.

“I was getting very uneasy,” he said as Neal dismounted, and turned the horse over to a sleepy, ragged peon. “Not knowing where you went.”

Neal bit the corner of his lip at the hint for information, but did not offer any.

“It is very dangerous,” went on Moses, “this country, for one not accustomed to fighting.”

Neal looked at the big Mexican for a moment and felt he would like to take that sneer off his face with a machete. But there was nothing but politeness in Espinosa’s words.

They went in. Would the señor like something to eat or drink before he retired? Yes, Neal was hungry. They went into the dining room and

Moses, still not knowing that Neal understood anything but English, called a young Mexican girl and told her in sneering Spanish to get the American pig something to eat—anything would do—the worst they had was too good for the damned gringo.

The order delivered, he turned with a half-mocking smirk to Neal.

“And what does the señor wish to do to-morrow?”

“We shall see,” Neal said quietly, “when to-morrow comes. Good night, señor. You need not wait up—I know my room.

“By the way,” he called as Moses started out with an offended strut, “have that negro Blanco, sent to me at eight o’clock in the morning. He speaks English, you know.”

“Very well, señor,” Espinosa said aloud; then under his breath: “I must watch that damned gringo, he is up to something.”

Neal went up to his room but did not light a candle. It was pleasantly warm, and he took a chair out on the veranda, and sat enveloped in the deep shadows, thinking over his adventure at Señor Valdez’s hacienda. Señorita Maria was so vividly in his consciousness that she seemed present there with him in the soft darkness. He could almost put out his hand and touch her.

The witchery of her dark eyes, the adorable flirt of her head, the tantalizing quirk of her

mouth—— The spirit of romance incarnated in a lovely body!

The sound of a boot striking the cobbled paving in front of the gate made Neal lean forward and peer down into the dim starlight. Some one was walking away from the gate cautiously, and from his size he guessed it was Espinosa. Before he was lost in the darkness, Neal made out two other figures, that rose up as though they had been lying on the ground waiting. The three moved off toward the splotch of jungle along the river.

Neal's mind came back from romance to the grim problem of dollars and dangers. He saw now this ranch was worth three or four times what he was to have paid for it, so of course they did not intend he should ever come in possession of it.

As Mrs. Krider had intimated, they would use the trick of law if possible. That failing there were the little wooden crosses down there, toward which Espinosa and his conspirators were now moving.

To hold his title through the court he would have to do one of two things: Pay off the mortgage now past due, or prove the mortgage had been fraudulently drawn. To raise the money was not even thinkable. He could not raise another thousand dollars if his neck depended upon it. His chances in court were practically as hopeless. He knew nothing of their law, of their procedure. He had no friends and no funds to help the case along.

His chances of winning out in a fight with Bernard Williams and this Espinosa, trained grafters, with a well-organized band of followers, seemed fantastically small.

And yet this was a wonderful ranch, the sort of thing he had set his heart on. And over there to the west was the Ranch of the Star, where slept to-night the adorable Señorita Maria. To let go meant to lose both his past and his future, his money and his dreams. To win meant——

Once more his speculations were broken. The three figures were coming back from toward the splotch of jungle by the river. They passed as noiselessly as possible over the cobbles, not speaking, and entered the big gate in the wall through which the teams and carts passed.

Neal slipped into his room and out again, through the door that opened upon the inner court. The three had stopped.

“Guizman,” Espinosa was speaking, “you stay here and watch this gringo. Pedro will go back early to-morrow to the camp.”

Neal went back into his room, closed the door and fastened it, and then lay down across the bed with his clothes on.

## CHAPTER IX

### MR. WILLIAMS GETS BUSY

**B**ERNARD WILLIAMS did not feel as satisfied after Señor Smith left his office as he usually did at the conclusion of an interview. It had gone too easy. Of course, occasionally good luck like that happened. A few times in Señor Williams' checkered career some bird with a well-feathered nest had flown in and asked to be plucked. But usually it took salt on their tails in the shape of references, samples, official reports of borings, statistics and a whole lot of convincing persuasion.

Of course this man Smith might be one of the Heaven-sent suckers, but it seemed improbable that one would arrive at the exact moment when he was worst needed. If Señor Smith really went back to Cordoba and turned over \$25,000 in gold to Moses then this was the greatest little old world ever flung into space

At least it was worth hoping for, but at best not safe to check on. In the meantime he would be up and stirring. Rumors of a new revolution were coming thick and fast, and if his gigantic project for free ports went through he must get Carranza's

signature while he was yet able to sign. That damned Valdez must be stirred into action.

Williams had looked into Señor Valdez's affairs. While his ranch was one of the finest in eastern Mexico, money was very scarce, and the señor had had great difficulty in borrowing enough to meet his pay roll. The World War had boosted prices of almost everything else, but strangely it had simply shot the bottom out of the coffee market. Besides it had made shipping very difficult. Thus, while Señor Valdez was actually worth twenty million pesos in land and stock he was desperately in need of money—even a thousand dollars in gold was an item with him. And the ten thousand that Williams had offered might save his whole crop.

“That being the case,” Bernard Williams reasoned, “he'll stand some pressure. That is the system—discover how much pressure each man will stand without blowing up and then apply it.”

Williams sent off a telegram that morning and a letter, the telegram to Señor Valdez.

Come to Mexico City at once. Bring papers.

The letter to Espinosa.

Am calling old Valdez into the city. Will keep him here two or three days. This is your chance to get busy with that peach of a señorita. Better move fast, for I may take a notion I want her myself.

Show Señor Smith, whom I sent down, a good time.

If he turns over twenty-five thousand in gold to you, ship twenty thousand of it to me, and keep five thousand of it to buy stockings and hair ribbons for the Maria peach.

I'll be down shortly.

Then Williams left his office and went down to the Zocolo. He walked slowly around the entire square, pausing in front of the National Palace, watching and listening. Mexicans with fierce eyes and mustaches went in and out. Official-looking persons drove up in cars and disappeared within. The soldiers who stood guard at the entrance of the middle arch, which led to the executive offices, from time to time exchanged significant glances as a colonel or general passed within.

Williams watched for an hour and then went around to the Monte Piedad, the national pawn shop. There was a line in front of the appraisal window running clear out into the street: Women with children holding to their skirts, carrying pieces of battered silverware, men with opera glasses, girls with rings, an old man with a lamp, a woman with a child's cradle, all crowding up to get a few pesos or centavos on their property.

Williams turned away shaking his head and sniffing his bulbous nose. There was something in the wind and no mistake about it. These people felt the rising of a revolution as wild animals in the woods feel the coming of a fire.



“I’ve got to move fast.” He walked across to Bolivar Street. “If Valdez can’t work it there are two men that can. But they come high, the damned grafters. If only I had twenty thousand more in gold!” His short, stubby fingers shut into his thick palms. “To miss ten million for lack of only twenty thousand, wouldn’t that be the curse of luck!

“I’ll go after Señor Smith.” He turned with quick resolution. “If he has twenty-five thousand about him I’ll get it.”

## CHAPTER X

### THE MESSAGE

SEÑOR ESPINOSA was riding across the coffee fields in the early afternoon. He had men hoeing among the coffee bushes, and Espinosa was an exacting taskmaster. Of amazing physical vitality himself he was seldom tired, and he had learned that the way to please Señor Williams was to get things done. The Señor Williams wanted the ranch looking always very good, for sometimes the men who bought it came to see it first. And every time it sold Espinosa got 1,000 pesos, and every time they got rid of a buyer he got 1,000 pesos more. Not only so, but Señor Williams was to divide some very large profits on other things with him.

There are several very common misconceptions of Mexicans. One of them is, that a Mexican is a shiftless, lazy ne'er-do-well, who is perfectly contented on a crust and a cigarette. It is not so. Most of the Spaniards who came to Mexico were from the north of Spain, fair-skinned, brown-haired and thrifty as a Connecticut Yankee. Their descendants, mixed with Indian blood, are fond of money,

and are ambitious to get on, and, given half a show, will work hard.

Espinosa was ambitious. He had come far in his twenty-eight years; from nothing to the administrator of a big ranch, and by saving his wages and otherwise he had accumulated considerable property of his own. He was fond of display and spent money on clothes and ornaments. Also he was fond of women, but spent very little money on them, often instead he would take money from them. A Mexican of his type is very cruel to women.

As Espinosa rode leisurely along the road that ran through the coffee field, looking to the right and the left, he idly tapped his boot with his riding whip. He was puzzling over his new problem, the damned gringo who at first had told him his name was Ashton, but later returned and asked to be called Smith. This gringo was a weak one—a glance showed that. His hands were soft, he had no muscle, he came scarcely up to Espinosa's eyes, and the big Mexican knew that with one swipe he could crush the life out of him. The fellow was ignorant, too, didn't know what a boiling vat was in the sugar mills. Espinosa could get rid of him at any time, in a half dozen ways. But he was waiting for word from Señor Williams. That telegram meant that Williams had some reason

for wanting him to stay on the ranch. He would just wait.

But another thing puzzled and annoyed Espinosa. The gringo had been going about the fields all day with the negro, and whenever he stopped to talk with the peons a few moments, the fools acted as though they were pleased, and when he had passed on, they wagged their heads at each other as though something good had happened. What was it the gringo was doing and saying that made them seem so tickled with themselves?

Espinosa crossed over into the sugar fields and stopped beside a bunch of cane cutters.

“What was the gringo saying?” he asked one of the hands. The peon’s face looked blank and he shook his head.

“Ah, nothing; only how did I cut a hole in my breeches without cutting my leg?”

Espinosa asked others, but got equally evasive answers. What they told him was mere piffle. Perhaps after all it was because the American was a fool that these Mexican fools seemed pleased by what he said.

Espinosa jumped on his horse and started galloping across the fields toward the ranch house. He would make that Krider woman tell him all she knew about the gringo. She knew more than she let on. He was convinced of that. He even had

a dark suspicion that she had caused him to come to Mexico.

At the gate a Mexican, crouching by the fence, leaped up and came quickly to Espinosa's horse and caught the rein. The big Mexican started to strike him with his whip, but the poor devil lifted his hand and said piteously: "No, no, señor—no strike. I bring message from very great man. He say——"

"He say what?" Espinosa leaned over the saddle eagerly.

"'Beware Señor Smith—see nothing harm him. He on secret mission!'"

And with that the Mexican loosened the reins, leaped over the fence and was gone in the brush beside the road.

## CHAPTER XI

### BLANCO STICKS

AFTER lunch Thursday, Neal walked out into the coffee fields. The weather was delightful. There had been a heavy shower the day before, and the glossy green leaves were washed clean and the ground strewn with the white petals of the coffee bloom.

The coffee tree is not a tree, but a bush, about the size of a lilac bush. They are planted about six feet apart and few of them grow higher than a man's head. The leaves are a bit like those of a persimmon tree, and a cluster of blossoms appears at the root of the leaf, where later the berries grow, five or six in one cluster. Coffee grows in an altitude of not less than 1,700 feet and not more than 3,500. The weather must never be too hot and never cold. To protect the berry from too much sun it is necessary to have shade. The best shade for coffee fields is the huisache, a thorn tree which casts a scattering shade similar to a locust tree. A coffee field looks like a scattering grove of locust trees with thick green underbrush. The underbrush is the coffee. The trees must be cultivated regularly, for the amount of coffee de-

pende upon the care of the soil. The young coffee plant begins to bear in eighteen months and, if cared for, continues to bear for a hundred years.

Neal noticed with the pride of an owner that the trees looked vigorous and healthy and were full of blossoms and young berries. The soil was loose and rich and had been kept well stirred. He went toward a half dozen peons hoeing among the trees.

*"Buenas tardes."* Neal spoke pleasantly.

They all straightened up and smiling replied with real enthusiasm. *"Buenas tardes, señor."*

Long before the radiophone, there was both an animal and a human wireless. All the beasts of a jungle know when an enemy is loose in the woods. And a thousand men scattered about on a job can get the measure of a new man in a few hours. They do not have to talk with him themselves, they do not need his past history. They may make all sorts of wrong conjectures about him, and may get fooled; but they come to a common understanding of like or dislike, of fear or fellowship in a very short time.

For three days Neal had gone about the ranch, casually greeting the laborers here and there. He stopped now and again and talked with them always in a natural, unforced way. Once or twice when he saw something funny he joked with them about it.

Wherever he went he left them intensely curious as to who he was, and what he was doing on the ranch. Nothing he said, however, gave them any clew.

He crossed over from the coffee field into sugar cane and signaled to Blanco to come to him. They went off and sat down in the shade under a mango tree. Nothing warms up a negro's heart like a good shade.

"Blanco," he asked, "how much do you like Señor Espinosa?"

"Ah likes Espinosa?" The negro scratched his ear, and slowly shook his kinky head as though the problem was beyond him. "Ah likes him just about one fo'th as much as Ah does one of these heah bloodhounds on a dahk night."

Neal grinned for a moment, then pinching his chin between thumb and forefinger, looked off toward the ranch houses and frowned.

"Blanco," he said in a troubled tone, "I am going to tell you something. There is to be trouble on this ranch. It will be between Espinosa and me. I don't know which will win out. He has got all the edge, but I've got you."

The sooty face grinned broadly.

"How come you got me?"

"Oh, naturally you'll stick to me." Neal's gray eyes looked steadily at the negro. "You'll go to



heaven if you do, but you'd go to hell if you stuck to Espinosa."

"That ain't the p'int." Blanco shook his head dubiously. "It ain't whar Ah'm goin' but how soon Ah'm goin'. Ah'd ruther go to hell thirty years from now than go to heaven day aftah tomorrow."

Neal laughed. "The point is well taken." In a moment he was sober again, and frowned doubtfully. "I am sure you'll be in greater danger on my side than with Espinosa. He is a bad man, they say, and quick with a gun. You see, I bought this ranch, but they are planning to beat me out of it. And all the odds are against me. I have about one chance in eleven of beating them."

The negro reached into the pocket of his white cotton trousers and brought out a long-bladed, vicious-looking pocketknife and began to whet it on his shoe. He whetted for two or three minutes without a word, then felt the edge, and with his head bent over looked up so the whites showed under his eyes.

"When does us begin to carve 'em up?"

Neal laughed, but there was a catch in his throat. He had not misjudged his man.

"Not until we have to. Don't the Mexican's ask you a lot about me?"

"They shore does."

"Well, from now on tell them there is soon

to be a new owner of the ranch, and that they are to have more wages and a fiesta every month!"

Blanco grinned broadly. "That shore'll be good news. Boss, you know how to manage Mexicans and—niggers."

"You can circulate around now. By the way, where is Espinosa to-day? Have not seen him since morning."

"He's gone a-courtin', I reckon. I saw Señor Valdez going to Mexico City this mornin', and when I told Espinosa about it, right off he went to his house and 'dolloed up and went a-gallopin' off to the west."

"Blanco," Neal spoke with sudden authority, "go get me the best horse on the ranch—and hurry."

## CHAPTER XII

### DISTRUST

IT was near sundown as Neal approached the Hacienda of the Star, as he had named Señor Valdez's ranch. He drew his horse down from a gallop to a walk. He did not know yet why he had come, and certainly there would be no excuse for charging full tilt at the gate.

He had not thought much on the way except to urge his horse to greater speed. He had formulated no excuse to offer Señorita Maria for this unexpected call. He only knew he felt an urge that he could not explain to get to her as quickly as possible. It was preposterous of course to think she was in danger. Her Aunt Alicia and all the servants and the jefe of the guard afforded a surplus of protection. Besides, Señorita Maria was perfectly capable of taking care of herself.

No, it was not a sense of danger for the señorita that urged him on, but of desecration. Neal, during those long years of uneventful life in the prosaic, sleepy village of Buckeye Bridge had dreamed not of women, but of one woman—a woman of sur-

passing beauty, of rare fineness, touched with fire, and romance, and mystery.

Señorita Valdez was that girl; he had known it the moment he met her in the road that first morning. And the thought of Espinosa, the thick-necked, bold-eyed, insolent Mexican even coming into her presence angered Neal and made him push his horse into a gallop.

As Neal rode toward the hacienda he was again struck by the gorgeous unreality of the place, the high, white ivory wall, the rich foliage, the perfect lines and exquisite color of the splendid house—a Moorish castle in a tropical wilderness.

The big gate opened, a man came out and mounted a horse, and rode down toward him.

It was Espinosa.

They both drew rein as they met and their eyes clashed. Neal, slender, quiet, unarmed, looked utterly defenseless. Espinosa, huge, fierce, and arrayed in the gorgeous costume of a caballero, carried a big gun on each hip and appeared the incarnation of aggressiveness. Yet as their eyes met, Neal's did not flicker.

Espinosa's face was still flushed as though he had left the hacienda under strong excitement—whether of pleasure or anger Neal could not tell.

“Where is the señor going?” the Mexican asked with his polite inflection, but an insolent undertone.

“Where you should never go,” replied Neal.

“And from where you should never return,” retorted Espinosa with a smile of hate.

“Yet perhaps I will.” Neal’s gray eyes narrowed slightly. “But don’t wait up for me, señor.”

When Neal rang the bell, the gate did not open promptly as on his first visit. He waited and then rang again. There was another long wait and he grew uneasy; suppose he should not be admitted, or worse, suppose something had gone wrong.

But a servant appeared and let him in.

“I wish to see the Señorita Valdez,” he announced as the servant led him across the gardens to the house.

There was another wait in the hall, and then he was taken to the patio. Señorita Maria was seated by a small table with her aunt, who was doing some sort of hand embroidery.

The señorita received him very formally. At first he hoped it was merely because of Tia Alicia’s presence. But her polite and very cool exchange of civilities soon discouraged that notion. Neal was troubled—more he was alarmed. Perhaps her former friendliness had been but a mere flirting, and angered by that uninvited call she wished to put him in his place.

“Do you speak English?” he asked Tia Alicia.

“No, señor.” The aunt shook her head.

“Then,” Neal remarked, turning to Señorita Maria,

“we will speak in English. Has my superintendent been annoying you?”

The girl's face flushed scornfully, her eyes looked dangerously dark.

“Señor Espinosa is a friend I have known long time. He is not likely to be the one who annoys me.”

The rebuff brought the blood to Neal's face, and he felt a sickening anger at himself. What a fool he was, rushing off here to defend a girl against one of her own people, one who had been a friend for years.

His eyes looked away at the palms, then up through the pepper tree to the sky. The swift, tropical twilight was thickening, and one star gleamed.

“The Ranch of the Star,” he spoke reflectively, “and the Ranch of the Thorn. Mine is the Thorn, señorita, and it shall not again annoy the Star.”

He arose and bowed. Her face changed color, her eyes grew more stormily black, her smooth, soft lips shut tight.

He turned to leave. A dozen steps and she had followed him.

“Señor,” the word was a command, and he turned, looking at her with a puzzled frown. In the early dusk the dark hair, the fair face, lit by the angry eyes, was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

“Señor,” the tone was not so well controlled, “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you! Go very queekly and never come again.”

“But, Señorita,” he protested, deeply hurt, “why——”

She clapped for a servant.

A few minutes later Neal was riding dazedly down through the dusk away from the Ranch of the Star.

In sheer exasperation he kicked his heel into the horse's ribs, and then apologized to the horse.

“Mrs. Krider is only half right,” he spoke aloud as the horse galloped down the road. “She said I was a fool, but I'm a double-dyed fool, a blundering, stammering, idiotic ass. My one chance of lasting even a week down here was to get possession of the ranch. Now I've aroused Espinosa's open hate and suspicion. My only hope of happiness was Señorita Maria and I've made her hate me.

“A gosling that walks into a vat of boiling molasses is a King Solomon compared to me—damn!”

Señorita Maria ran up three flights of stairs to the lookout and threw open the shutters.

The sun was behind the mountains, but a pale pink glow of twilight lingered for a few brief moments. Across the open mesa a single rider

spurred his horse angrily as though in great haste to flee the ranch.

The girl's face still burned hotly and her eyes followed that rider in tempestuous anger. Her fingers wrenched loose a bit of plaster from the stuccoed wall and flung it vindictively into the dusk toward the rider a half mile away.

Then the swift darkness of the tropics swallowed up the last pink glow, and it was night. She shuddered as with cold. The hotness had passed from her cheeks and her heart. She felt little and alone, a slender wick of flame lost in a universe of darkness.

If her mother had been alive she would have crept down and curled up in her arms. But her father did not like waves of emotion. They washed away, he said, the foundation of your will. Honor and wisdom and patriotism were the things that counted with her father, and her, too. She straightened rigidly. Only she was not wise. But she could hate as her father hated all traitors, and she could stand with a will of iron against the wash of sentiment, the warm engulfing waves of emotion that almost drowned her at times.

The lone horseman was gone now, swallowed by the darkness and the jungle beyond the mesa. She would go down and talk to her father.

Señor Valdez was in the library, a large room with



only one door, which opened not into any other room, but on the inner court. The heavy reading table and the chairs were of ebony, the floor was tessellated, on the walls were a half dozen paintings of old Spain, mostly portraits of distinguished ancestors of the señor. In the left corner of the room near the door was a heavy cabinet with many drawers. It was carved and decorated by an infinite amount of the finest workmanship, and had been brought over from Spain in the early part of the sixteenth century. Beside it was a small trunk with bands of beaten silver, the panels between covered with silk. That, Señorita Maria knew, had been her mother's trunk. It too had come from Spain with her great-great-great-grandmother. Hung on the walls thrown over the bookcase, draped over the cabinet, were rare Oriental tapestries. There were pieces of Chinese cloth as firm of texture and bright of color as when first loaded on Spanish ships three hundred years ago.

When the roving traders of the sixteenth century discovered that the land which Columbus had discovered was America and not Asia, they still persisted in making the discovery a short cut to the Orient. Cargoes of precious stuff were brought across the Pacific from India and China to the west coast of Mexico, carried by pack trains up through Colima, Guadalajara, Mexico City, and from there down to the eastern seacoast to be reshiped to

Europe. Inevitably in transit much of these precious cargoes were left in Mexico and still enrich the homes of the old grandees. Some of this rare old stuff has been scattered about through the fortunes of war or the forces of poverty, and may be found in the most unexpected places.

Señor Valdez was sitting by the lamp on the table reading when Maria entered. He arose. The señor always treated his daughter with the same formal respect he would show a countess.

Maria gave him a nod—there was always a bit of endearment in this nod for her father—slipped into a chair on the opposite side and leaned her elbows on the table. With the tip of her second finger she made marks on the ebony.

“Can’t quite write my name in it, but there is some dust here, daddy.”

He had resumed his chair and looked at his daughter with straight, inquiring eyes. She had come for something. His face even when turned upon Maria, held that look of aloof dignity of race and long mental isolation. The señor lived much in a world of thought and speculation, which, being a true Spaniard, he did not consider it worth while to discuss with his womenfolk.

“Daddy,” that was one English word Maria loved to use, and, as she said it, he knew she was swinging her foot under the table.

"Si, Maria," he waited for her to go on, for back of the iron look in his dark eyes always lurked an unexpressed fondness for his little girl.

"Daddy," she looked up and her large, black eyes were wistful, "are all Americans liars?"

Señor Valdez smiled.

"The Holy Book, I believe, says all men are liars; I suppose that would include Americans."

"The Holy Book must exaggerate," said Maria, "for you are not a liar."

Señor Valdez laughed, and then frowned when he remembered a girl should not make such comments on the Holy Word. But Maria forestalled reproof by another question.

"Do you love Señor Espinosa very much?" She darted at him a provocative look.

Señor Valdez shrugged with distaste.

"No, he is low born and I doubt his loyalty."

There was a moment's pause, Maria's eyebrows went up, her eyes looked down to a finger idly marking the top of the table.

"He does not look like a liar nor talk like one."

"Of whom are you speaking?" The tone was peremptory.

"Of Señor Ashton."

"We do not know him." Señor Valdez spoke in a neutral tone, but there was no shrug of distaste. "Merely a stranger that we offered the courtesy due

any man who comes to our gate. We have seen him but twice."

"Sometimes," Maria could not resist a coquettish smile, "one learns much of a man in a twice."

"Daughter," Señor Valdez leaned forward in his chair and looked at Maria straightly, "these are troublous times. Poor Mexico has suffered much from within and without. Much of her troubles are of her own brewing. But she has suffered at the hands of America too. Perhaps more from misunderstanding than ill will, but anyway America has helped enemies more than us. There are those here who would stir up revolutions for their own greedy ends. They want our rich mines and oil and coffee and sugar as prizes for backing corrupt leaders.

"Many Americans are our loyal friends, many are not. We do not know them. This man who comes with friendly speech may be one or the other. But he is a stranger, not of our people, not of our class. Do not forget that."

Señorita Maria marked idly on the table, her lips closed, her face blank.

"I will not, father."

"And, Maria"—her father got to his feet, an unusual sign of deep concern with her—"the clouds are lowering over our poor country again. I fear the storm will break soon. And this time only the merciful God knows what will be left.

“Times are very difficult. I must be away for some days in Mexico City. You will watch all strangers that come. Be very discreet, see they get no information—and *do not trust the señor Americano.*”

## CHAPTER XIII

### A SETBACK

ONE may acquire a southern lisp, a Boston accent, a seat in Congress, a million dollars, or almost anything else in the world but one—the instincts of a gentleman. That is a thing one cannot pick up. If he has not got it, he has not got it, and that is all there is to it. And it means no more or less than this: An intuitive understanding of the other fellow and a nice regard for his feelings.

Bernard Williams had lived in Mexico a long time. He was sure he knew all about Mexicans—the damned lazy greasers, the scheming liars, the greedy grafters. He could sit and tell you by the hour of this one who had failed to show up on a job, of that one who had promised to pay on the third, and did not pay on the thirty-third, of another that worked a graft for ten thousand pesos. And he would wind with: “If the damned —— would let us take things over, we’d show them how to do things.”

But Bernard Williams never proceeded to show the visitor how *he* did things. That was far in the background. And in spite of his years of contact

with the people, he knew less of the real Mexicans than a sympathetic understanding traveler might have known in one day. They traded with him and sometimes worked for him, because one must have bread. But they never told him anything about themselves, and what they really thought and felt was as far from him as the Andes from an Iowa farmer.

When Señor Valdez entered the office on Cinco de Mayo Street, Williams saw only one thing—the Spaniard had been prompt to answer his summons and therefore must be very hard up and ready to do anything for the ten thousand pesos. Accordingly he assumed the air, if not the tone, of a ward boss ordering a henchman about.

“Been to Carranza yet?” he asked abruptly, even omitting the “señor.”

Valdez touched his pointed beard with the tips of his fingers and shook his head.

“Not yet, señor.”

“We’ve got to get a move on us,” said Williams hustlingly. “The old man’s life is not insured in our favor, you know. I’ll order a cab, and we’ll drive down to the National Palace and you can go right up and clinch matters this morning.”

Valdez’s eyes held a half melancholy look of patient politeness.

“One does not see the presidente, señor, without an appointment.”

"Well, when can you get an appointment? How long will it take? I thought you were such a high muck-a-muck you could walk right in and wipe your feet on his parlor rug."

Señor Valdez shrugged: "One does not force his presence upon even a friend. Perhaps it might be arranged to-morrow, perhaps within a week."

Williams exploded irritably. "Oh, damn this mañana stuff! Why can't you people ever get down to business and cut out the palaver."

"Señor, with us," Valdez spoke with tired dignity as though explaining to a dull, persistent child, "there are things more important than business."

"Not on your life," laughed Williams disagreeably. "You may think there is, but when it comes down to the scratch you'll drop everything to grab the almighty dollar."

"Well," Williams continued, frowning with restrained impatience, "if you can't see him to-day then do it to-morrow, or the day after at the latest."

Valdez had taken the papers from his pocket, looked at them particularly to see if they were the right ones, and then handed them to Williams.

"Señor, there are, I believe, the papers you intrusted to my unworthy keeping."

Williams took them, and wriggling his colorless eyebrows, looked blank surprise.

"Yes, but keep them. They are the ones Carranza is to sign."



"I do not wish to present them to the presidente." Valdez had arisen.

"Why?" Williams' adder nose swelled at the end. "What is the big idea? Isn't ten thousand in gold enough for one day's work?"

"Too much, señor." A subtle irony was in the cultured tone. "Good-by, señor." A slight bow and Señor Valdez turned and passed out of the door.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Williams' face was almost purple. "Got cold feet at the last moment. That leaves it up to Medoza, the grafter. He can get the signature but it means twenty thousand.

"I must go after Smith and sell him that ranch."

Sunday afternoon Espinosa met Williams at Cordoba. They said little until they were well on the road out of town. The Mexican was in a sullen mood.

"What is the matter, old sport?" Williams spoke jocularly. "Lost ten centavos on a chicken fight? How is Señor Smith getting along?"

"Ah, Señor Smith." The big Mexican spat vehemently, and the muscles of his arm swelled as his fingers clutched the riding whip. "The damned gringo, the devil take him."

"What has the innocent little Smithy done? Haven't had trouble, have you?"

Espinosa's large, dark face grew a livid red. His eyes looked murderous.

"Bah!" He spat violently. "I keel hem if it not been for señor's telegram."

"That's right," Williams' tone was joshing; "restrain your murderous impulse. Señor Smith wants to buy a ranch, and we need the money. The other fellow has not come along yet?"

"No one else, señor."

Williams chuckled as they rode on. This was good news. He would perhaps be able to sell to Smith and get rid of him before Dickman's buyer arrived. Anyway they would get Smith's money.

"You must be good to Smithy, señor," Williams said placatingly. "He has got much dinero that we need in our business. What has the chap been doing? Wandering around with his head in the air, sucking in romance?"

"He meddle with the men in the field." Espinosa's wrath went too deep to be chaffed away. "He tell them they should get seventy centavos a day instead of sixty. He say to me, 'Fix that cane mill; too much juice go to waste.' The fool! As if he knew about a cane mill. And he have all the women cooking. He say he give a fiesta to-night. He waste a hundred pesos' worth of food."

This was the best news Williams had heard. It meant that Smith had made up his mind to buy the ranch. But the Mexican's smoldering wrath broke out again.

"The damned gringo son of a pig go to Señor Valdez."

"He did?" Williams sat up startled. "When?"

"Once when he first come. Again Thursday, while Señor Valdez away."

"The devil!" Williams was scowling. "What did he go for?" Perhaps that was why Valdez had turned back the papers.

The Mexican shrugged both shoulders contemptuously.

Williams grinned.

"The fool he just go."

"Do you suppose he saw the señorita?"

Espinosa swore fluently, bitterly in Spanish.

Yes, the son of a pig had seen the señorita. But what he said no one knows.

"Ah," a gleam of malice came into his big eyes, "I fix hem. The señorita is mine—I take her by and by and Señor Valdez can go to purgatory."

It was sundown as they approached the hacienda. Off somewhere a Mexican was strumming a guitar. At the edge of the grove of live oak and bamboo where most of the peons' huts were half hidden by the rank foliage there was singing and laughter. Williams had never heard such sounds of lightness and merriment on this ranch before.

"Señor Smith's fiesta is starting early."

Espinosa merely spat at the ground.

Blanco, the big negro, met them at the gate,

and took their bridle reins. His sooty face lighted with a broad grin, as he addressed Williams in dark Georgia English.

"The boss wants to see you-all in the dinin' room."

"*The boss?*" Williams grinned, but his nose swelled a little disagreeably. He didn't like to be ordered around on his own ranch.

Instead of going in, Williams gave Espinosa a signal with a twist of his thumb and they walked around the house to the corrals.

"Tell me a little more about this fellow Smith," said Williams. "He seems to be taking a whole lot for granted, even for an American."

But Espinosa was scarcely articulate on the subject of Señor Smith; most of his information consisted of alternate oaths and spits at the ground.

Three Mexicans were saddling horses.

"What is this for?" Williams always spoke with rough authority when on the ranch.

The peons lifted their brows and shrugged. "We do not know. It is the order of the Señor Americano."

"The devil!" Williams scowled as he and Espinosa walked on toward the sugar mill. "He is a little high-handed for a mere visitor.

"See here, Moses," he turned on Espinosa, "you don't suppose this fellow could be connected with the revolution—or anything like that, do you?"

Then Espinosa reluctantly told of the peculiar message he had received about Señor Smith.

Williams scowled harder than ever and his nose swelled at the end.

“It doesn’t look good. I tell you we’ll just nip anything like that in the bud. I’m going to pin the presumptuous donkey down and find whether he is a real buyer or not. I’ll make him say yes or no on the spot. If I discover he is up to some sort of a trick——” He looked at Espinosa significantly.

“I’ll see Guizman and Barcola at once.” Espinosa jumped eagerly at Williams’ implied meaning. “They will attend to the gringo son of a pig during the fiesta to-night.”

“But remember,” Williams ordered severely, “not unless I give you the signal. If he really is a buyer for the ranch—and has dinero—Heaven sent him. And never lay hands, Moses, on a Heaven-sent visitor.”

“*Si, si,*” assented Espinosa. But added reassuringly: “He has no dinero, señor. The devil sent him only to make trouble.”

As Williams turned back to the house the big Mexican hurried off to find his two most trusted assassins, and to give them directions for the fiesta.

Neal had waited in the dining room for the arrival of the two men. He had seen them ride up, had

given Blanco his instructions. When they did not come in he began to grow uneasy. Had they become suspicious or worse, had they discovered his real identity?

He had known it was only a matter of a few days at best before Williams discovered that he was Ashton, the dupe of Dickman's late sale.

He sat down at the table in the dining room and waited. Whatever Williams and Espinosa were up to, curiosity if nothing else would bring them in to see him.

Neal appeared to be figuring with a pencil on some loose sheets of paper before him when they did enter. He merely looked up and nodded.

"Be seated, gentlemen."

And as Williams took a chair he glanced through the open door and saw Blanco and three Mexicans standing as though in call, their eyes watching him and Espinosa.

## CHAPTER XIV

### BLUFF!

POETS and romancers have recounted thrilling stories of knights who rode straight from the arms of their true loves to victory. But if the statistics were all in you would find most fights have been won by newly jilted lovers. It is in that devil-may-care state which follows the utter collapse of a romance that a fellow strikes out most recklessly and ruthlessly.

Neal had never been disappointed in love before, because he had never been in love before, so he knew neither symptoms nor remedies.

After his violent and unexplained rebuff by Señorita Valdez he had been filled with a vast emptiness of gray gloom. It did not make a bit of difference whether he kept the ranch or lost it; it did not make any difference whether he lived or died. What did any of it amount to, what did it all amount to if the star of his romance had been plucked out of the sky by the dirty hand of a half-breed? That is what it came to. He was convinced of that. She was in love with Espinosa—there was no other reason for her violent rebuff of him.

Very well. They had swindled him out of his money, they had robbed him of the shimmering romance of this tropic land, and left it a dark, sinister stretch of poisoned wickedness. So be it. He would fight. The long years of peace and dreams sometimes turn into a fury of vengeance.

Before, he had intended to use diplomacy—caution. He would master the ins and outs of the ranch, learn the cane and coffee growing, become acquainted with all the details of administration before he undertook to depose the administrator. But now caution puffed away like a whiff of dust. He was going to start something.

Bernard Williams' small eyes shifted inquiringly from the black face of Blanco at the open door to Espinosa. The Mexican merely lifted his brows, and gave a faint shrug of his large shoulders as though to say all arrangements had been made. Williams' adder nose swelled, but his tone was affable as he turned to Neal.

"Well, Señor Smith, how do you like my ranch?"

"I like the ranch." Neal looked at him coolly. He had been figuring on a sheet of blank paper and the pencil was still in his fingers.

"You have decided to buy it, then?" suggested Williams, putting his elbows on the table and concentrating on his prospect as he always did in closing a deal.



Neal's eyes were following the tip of his pencil as he lightly sketched a long, narrow box.

"I have already bought it." The tone was coolly matter of fact. The pencil finished putting a dark, heavy lid on the box—it looked like a coffin. "I bought it from Dickman before I came to Mexico."

The Mexican's chair scraped on the floor. Williams laughed—at least the sound was meant for a laugh. It took him so at a surprise that he needed a minute to get his mind working.

"Oh, I see." He was sober enough now—almost sympathetic. "You are the man Dickman wrote me about."

"I am Neal Ashton." The tone made the name stand out as though it were visible in the air.

"I see." Williams was still floundering for the right opening. "I am sorry," his tone contained the apology a policeman might offer before biffing a troublesome customer, "that Dickman could not give you more time on the main payment. He wrote me he had taken a small deposit; but the purchaser had failed to come through on time with the rest." Neal sat still, save that his pencil was lightly sketching a horse—and his eyes followed the pencil.

"Of course you understand," Williams spoke a little uneasily—it is hard to put over anything with a fellow who only listens—you don't know how far you have got at each step—"of course you under-

stand, that your getting the ranch depended upon your paying off the mortgage which was due April 15th. You see, you simply paid Dickman \$10,000 for his equity in the ranch. But as you did not come across with the rest and pay off the mortgage we simply closed it."

"In one day?" Neal's tone was lightly ironic; the pencil was sketching the sides of the horse, a very dark horse.

Williams moved his elbows on the table as though getting a firmer position.

"Well, rather, we did not need to legally foreclose it at all, *we just kept possession.*"

Neal sketched on—the pencil slipping on the paper the only sound in the room.

"You know the law in this country," it was not the first time Williams had invented Mexican laws on the spur of the moment, "is this: If you have a mortgage on a piece of property, and the man who gave it leaves the property in your possession, then when the mortgage is due it is just automatically yours without any action at law."

Neal dropped the pencil as though tired of drawing and looked up, glancing around the room. He signaled for a servant.

A Mexican girl appeared almost instantly from the inner doorway.

As Neal turned to her, Williams caught Espinosa's

eyes and gave him the signal, and the big Mexican pushed his chair back to rise.

“Señorita,” Neal addressed the servant with the same human respect he showed all classes, “bring coffee, some cold meat and fruit. The señors wish a bite of food before their long ride.”

“*Si, señor.*” The girl gave a little curtsy and showed very white teeth as she hurried away smiling.

“Long ride?” Williams’ nose swelled most positively and his tone changed to a belligerent threat. “Just what are you getting at, Smith——”

“Ashton,” corrected Neal.

“Well, Ashton, or anything else you please. Just what do you think you are doing anyway here on my ranch?”

Neal arose. Both the men watched him closely to see he did not reach for a gun. Instead, his right hand rested on the back of the chair. He was slender and not muscular. His hands were long and soft. Certainly he did not look like a fighter. But there was no mistaking that he was a man to reckon with.

“Williams,” he looked down at the bulbous nose, and there was an ironic devil in his gray eyes, “you sold the ranch once too often. I am in possession. If you get it again it will be by due process of law through every court in Mexico.

“When you two have eaten, you ride to Cordoba.

We are having a fiesta to-night and I am particular about the company my peons keep."

Turning to the door he gave a signal. The big negro and three strapping Mexican field hands stepped inside.

"Blanco," Neal spoke with authority, "when the señors have finished you four ride with them to Cordoba and bring the horses back."

"Good evening, señors," and Neal walked from the room without looking back.

## CHAPTER XV

### NEAL TAKES POSSESSION

AS Neal climbed the stairs after the scene with Williams and Espinosa, his knees were so weak that he sat down on the top step. He felt positively sick. It was the first time he had ever tried to put over a real bluff and Heaven knew whether or not it was going to work. He had discovered that the Mexicans on the ranch nearly all hated Espinosa, but to a man were deathly afraid of him. If the three peons that Blanco had picked to help him ride these fellows off the ranch knew what they were doing they would die in their tracks. But Blanco had merely told them they were to act as guards to protect Señor Williams and Señor Espinosa from bandits—and Neal had instructed Blanco to keep them well in the rear out of reach of conversation.

If it really worked and the big negro succeeded in putting the two off the ranch it would be an initial victory of big importance. It would only be temporary, reflected Neal, but it would leave him in definite possession of the ranch, and they could dislodge him only after a legal foreclosure of the mortgage.

Anyway, he began to chuckle at the thought of

those two desperate villains riding solemnly to town in front of Blanco's gun; it would be a rich piece of satisfaction if it worked.

The fiesta was in full swing when Neal went out an hour later. One blessed thing about a Mexican peon is he does not need anybody to entertain him. Turn him loose with a bite to eat and drink and he will take care of his own amusement.

Neal had ordered a steer barbecued, stacks of tortillas, and pots and pots of frijoles. There were loads of fruit—and drinks. The Mexicans love to drink. At every station where the train stops, at every corner in town, there are bottles and pails and glasses of drinks, most of them harmless concoctions of orange and pineapple juice or even mere sweetened water. Pulque is the common intoxicant, and is about as alcoholic as three per cent beer. Tequilla is the drink with the violent kick. A man is drunk almost as soon as it is swallowed. But the peons get little of it.

Neal had seen to it that drinks of orange juice, pineapple, and milk of coconut, all with ice, should be served bountifully first. After they were well filled up pulque was produced in abundance. So nobody got drunk, and the fiesta was hilarious without being dangerous.

The Mexican is naturally very peaceable, very friendly; only when stirred by a violent drink or a violent sense of wrong does he start trouble.

Neal passed about among them, eating and drinking with them, and much to their hilarity dancing with some of the women, particularly the very fat and ugly older señoras.

At ten o'clock he called them all together and made them a little speech in Spanish. It was a simple, sincere talk in a conversational tone.

“My friends, I am the new owner of the Rancho Huisache. I have taken possession to-day. I am a stranger, but already I like your country and I like you. The ranch has not always made money. We will need to work very hard and very carefully. From to-day—from now I give you seventy centavos a day instead of sixty. If we make money, I will give you ten more next year. And we will have another fiesta by and by. I want you to be happy on my ranch, but you must work like devil-boys.”

They laughed and waved their arms and shouted, “*Si, si!*”

Neal knew, as the fiesta broke up and the peons returned to their grass houses or ramadas, that he was a very popular man. These warm-hearted, impulsive children had swung over to him in their affection in a single week.

“They love quickly as they hate quickly,” he said to himself. It gave him a sense of being enveloped and surrounded by their good will. And

that feeling was a mighty comfort in this alien land where he had recklessly decided to fight to the death for what was his.

Neal lingered outside after the rest had gone. Already most of them were in bed. Stillness was broken only now and then by a scrap of distant conversation or a brief outburst of belated laughter.

He was listening for horses' feet. All the evening he had gone about, half expecting at every turn to face an enraged American and a big Mexican who had escaped their guards and come back. Both of them were no doubt hard fighters, and that Blanco should succeed in riding them all the way to Cordoba seemed improbable.

But even if he got them only off the ranch it left him in technical possession, and gave him a chance to fight.

There was no sound of galloping horses on the road, and he turned toward the house, going in by the corral to see the stock was all right.

The corral was inside the rectangle of high adobe walls which inclosed all the hacienda buildings, on the north side of the plazuela or square.

The animals seemed all right, and he went on toward the house, passing along the east side of the square. Along this wall was a row of one-room adobe houses in which lived the keepers of the stock and the servants who worked about the



house. It was a warm night and these rooms had no windows—the doors were open, for those who slept inside the wall had little fear. All the lights were out, and the open doors showed as black spots in the deeply shadowed wall.

Neal's mind was still on Espinosa and Williams. He paused to listen again for the returning horsemen and did not notice that he had stopped directly in front of one of the dark doorways.

Inside two Mexicans crouched, and held their breath. They had been watching his approach since he left the corral. They were barefooted and held long knives in their right hands. One of them started to slip his left foot outside the door. The other touched him as a sign to wait.

Neal again failed to hear any sound of riders on the road, glanced up at the stars a moment and then sauntered on.

The two Mexicans crept out of the door as silently as patches of shadow and slipped after him. They were within ten feet, and half lifted their knives ready for a spring.

Perhaps because Neal had been expecting and listening for the return of Espinosa, his hearing was very acute. He caught the sound of a slithery step behind him. He wore a light summer coat in the side pocket of which he carried an automatic, and his right hand was on it now. Walking on as

casually as though he had not heard, he took his hand from his pocket—the gun with it, brought it up in front of him and pointed it back over his shoulder. Without checking his walk or turning his head he fired twice straight back.

There were two sharp yells and the sudden scrambling of feet. When Neal turned the two were halfway to the corral and running in a way that indicated neither had been badly hit. He did not fire at them again but went on to the house.

Neal stopped in the patio and sat down on a bench. He was not very much shaken by the incident for the reckless mood was still upon him. He had not much doubt, however, that he had been pretty close to the finish.

“I wonder,” he looked up at the stars, “if she would have cared.”

His mind was forever slipping back. Was she sleeping? Or did she, waking, see that star? Why had she turned against him so quickly? Which was the real Maria? That vision of fragrant loveliness that stood so close that first night when he lost his heart everlastingly? Or was the real señorita the angry one of flame who had driven him from the hacienda with burning words of hate?

“Where is Señor Espinosa?” The voice which cut into his romancing made Neal jump. A woman, tall, threatening in her swift directness, came across the patio and stood before him.

"At Cordoba, Mrs. Krider," Neal replied. He had not been able to figure out Mrs. Krider at all. Her seeming antagonism for him and her apparent partiality for the Mexican stirred his resentment.

"What is he doing at Cordoba?" Mrs. Krider's sharp voice demanded accusingly.

"Playing poker, perhaps," Neal replied indifferently, "or drinking tequilla. How should I know?"

"Neal Ashton," she pointed her right hand at him and spoke like a judge pronouncing sentence, "I just heard what you have done. You are the biggest, the damnedest fool that ever strayed out of a kindergarten. For God's sake, why don't you go back to Buckeye Bridge?"

"Mrs. Krider," the edge went off Neal's resentment, for it seemed as though she was rather pleading with him than accusing him, "they haven't fixed that crooked spire on the Methodist church yet. I can't go back to Buckeye Bridge.

"I'm either going to live here or you can fix up one of those little wooden crosses for me down there by the river.

"Good night and pleasant dreams."

She was gone as quickly and violently as she came. Neal walked about the patio restlessly for some time. Then, looking up at the star again, shook his head.

"I am a fool—I know it. I've dumped my money

into their pockets. They'll take the ranch away from me and they'll get me. But now that I have pitched in so much here goes all the rest. Señorita Maria, I love you, and I'm going to tell you so even if I'm stilettoed and damned for it."

## CHAPTER XVI

### IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE LAW

AT one o'clock that night three men—two Mexicans and an American—sat in an abogado's office in Cordoba. The American was the maddest man in Mexico, excepting his Mexican companion. The lawyer was suavely endeavoring to reduce the pressure of their wrath.

"Of a sureness I can regain your ranch, Señor Williams," declared Sanchez, the Mexican lawyer, positively. "It may take a little time, but it shall be attended to with all dispatch."

The heavily seamed skin on Williams' jowls was livid, his colorless brows worked up and down painfully, his short hairy hands clenched.

"I will simply go back in the morning and——"

"No—no—no!" The abogado lifted protesting hands. "That will never do. It must be in accordance with law."

"Law! *Diablo!*" Espinosa spat. He too was going back in the morning—and——

"It must be so, señors," the lawyer urged most strongly. "If there should be any killing there will be trouble—much trouble. I am persuaded this man Señor Smith has some one behind him. They

will stir up Mexico City, and back in the States there will be inquiries and investigations, and there are extradition laws, Señor Williams.

“Even should no great punishment come your business, Señor Williams, it will be hurt very bad. You remember the trouble once before——”

“That’s so,” admitted the American. “I would hate to have the devil of a row raised just now. But what is the quickest and surest way to do it?”

“By legal process,” replied Sanchez. “We will start proceedings to-morrow.”

“There is no doubt but we’ll win?”

“Oh, not a doubt in the world, señor.”

“But that will take time.” Williams was still reluctant. He needed an extra ten thousand right now. Instead of getting it as he hoped from Smith, Smith had ridden him off the ranch under guard.

“But señors,” the lawyer leaned forward in the lamplight and locked his hands together, “this Señor Ashton perhaps very quickly will be willing to give up the ranch and get away.” He paused a moment. “If Carranza shall learn this señor is a meddling American trying to stir up a revolution——”

“That’s the dope.” Williams wagged his head approvingly. “And we’ll see to that.”

“Or,” continued the abogado cunningly, “if the revolutionists should hear that Señor Ashton is a friend of the presidente——”

"*Bien!*" exclaimed Espinosa. He fancied far more the swift unlawful thrusts of the outlaw gangs, than the law of mortgages. Anyway he fancied from the instructions he had left before he was bodily ridden off the ranch, nothing would be needed.

"Besides," continued the lawyer, piling hope on hope, "the Señor Ashton will not know what to do on ranch. His men will quit. The sugar mill will be all wrong—the cattle, the horses—everything will be trouble—señor will be losing money very fast. He will want to quit. In a week, in two, perhaps he will come in and say, 'Give me one thousand pesos and I'll give back the Ranch of the Thorn.'"

"Not a damned centavo." Williams slapped his leg emphatically.

"No?" The lawyer raised his brows, questioning the wisdom of that. "It might be better so."

"Not one damned centavo," repeated Williams, recalling the humiliation of that enforced ride.

"I'll have that ranch back within a month, and my guess is that if Señor Ashton's friends want to put flowers on his grave they'll have to buy them at Cordoba."

The big Mexican rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth, and then spat on the lawyer's rug.

"Buzzards will be his flowers."

## CHAPTER XVII

### INSIDE NEWS

NEAL rode out through the fields next morning. The work all seemed going on as usual, except that the men were putting in more vim than before. Especially did they spurt up at sight of him.

Espinosa had been a good superintendent, Neal had to admit that. The various gangs of workmen were well organized—one bunch handled the cane, another the sugar mills, a third took care of the coffee fields, a fourth managed the stock and did the hauling. Each group had its own foreman, which was very lucky for Neal, as the work could go ahead until he found a good man for superintendent. Possibly he might learn fast enough to become his own superintendent.

He was definitely planning to retain the ranch for a year. Señor Valdez had said, under the Mexican laws a man could not be evicted from his property under a mortgage foreclosure for at least twelve months. Neal was determined to take advantage of every technicality. If possible he must get a little out of the ranch before it was taken from him.



After making a circuit of the fields he returned to the sugar mills.

A string of carts, each carrying two or three tons of cane was drawn up waiting their turn to unload on the long moving belt that carried the cane into the jaws of the grinder. The sugar mill was the most vital spot to watch just now. Bad management here might lose hundreds of dollars a day.

Neal stooped over and picked up a handful of the bagasse—the crushed stalk after the juice has been squeezed out of it. As he stood there, running it through his fingers to see if it was as dry as it ought to be, he noticed a small boy edging nearer and nearer to him. The little chap's face was full of fear and urgent haste, yet he was reluctant to intrude his presence on the great American ranch owner.

"Hello, muchacho." Neal dropped the dry cane stalk and smiled at the boy.

"*Buenos dias, señor.*" The little chap drew a quick breath of relief and edged a step nearer, and stood raking with his toes in the bagasse. He had quick black eyes, a clear brown skin, and a most winning smile.

"Where have I seen you before?" asked Neal. "Do you live on the ranch?"

"No, señor. On the road, the señor helped me load my donkey."

“Oh, yes,” Neal laughed. “I remember now. Your name is José Marquard.”

“*Si, señor*—and my father’s name.” And without any warning he sprang at Neal and grabbed him around the legs and buried his face on his feet and began to cry. “He is gone, my father. I think they kill him like my grandfather, and my uncle Juan.”

Neal sat down and put his hand on the little chap’s shoulder, and quieted him until he could tell his story.

“I think,” said Neal when he had finished, “they have not killed your father. He has gone away. Since they killed your grandfather and your uncle, he would be very watchful, and I don’t think they have caught him. You stay here on the ranch until we hear from him.”

The little fellow grabbed Neal’s hands and kissed them.

“The señor is ver’, ver’ good.” Then comforted, he began to smile eagerly. “But what am I to do—I work.”

Neal took him into the house.

“Mrs. Krider,” Neal patted the boy’s shoulder, “this is José. He is going to be my house boy and run errands for me. Find a small room for him near mine.”

Mrs. Krider merely lifted her reddish eyebrows

and gave her elbows a significant jerk. Her look and gestures always implied that whatever Neal did, he was a fool for doing it—but she obeyed.

“So?” she assented. Then giving her head a jerk toward the entrance to the hall: “There’s two men in there to see you.”

Neal, expecting it was Espinosa and Williams returned, braced himself for a clash and went in. But it was not. One of the men he recognized as Abogado Sanchez, the other he learned directly was an officer.

Neal took a chair and called a servant to offer the usual hospitalities.

The abogado began in a very polite, remote way to hedge around the business in hand. He had lifted his glass as Mrs. Krider who had to cross the end of the hall to get to the stairway, passed the boy. Sanchez almost dropped the glass.

“Who is the muchacho?” he asked with attempted unconcern.

“José Marquard,” replied Neal. “He is my house boy.”

“I see!” There was a significant inflection in the abogado’s tone. Then in his roundabout way he told Neal that the officer had come to collect the money due on the mortgage.

Neal knew this was the legal formality for starting action to foreclose. He began to say he had

no money and could not pay it, but checked himself. Instead he replied in a very businesslike tone:

“The mortgage will have to be proved legal before I pay it. I have evidence that it is fraudulent.”

The threat went home. The abogado was upset, but began at once to protest vehemently that of all the mortgages ever recorded this was the best and most just and most absolutely correct.

Neal made no comment. So Sanchez repeated at great length what he had said before.

“Is that all, gentlemen?” Neal rose.

“What is the Señor Ashton to do about the payment of the mortgage?” Sanchez demanded, rising also.

“The Señor Sanchez will have plenty of time to write a receipt before the Señor Ashton pays.”

The abogado and officer took their departure. Sanchez was sure of his ground, but the interview had upset his calculations. This man who had come to him as Señor Smith and trapped him into giving away information, and who had ridden Señor Williams and Señor Espinosa off the ranch, and now seemed so confident and self-assured, was disturbing. Could it be that he had some legal loop-hole, was he backed by some powerful influence? He might fight it longer than they expected. He might—no, Sanchez would not admit he might win, but he could not help thinking of what a bad thing it would be for the abogado if he did.

"Ah, well," he shrugged, "the law did not always need to take its course." The son of José Marquard his house boy! Marquard, whose father and brother Carranza had ordered slain and put on public exhibition. And now José himself had turned revolutionist. Undoubtedly this foolish American was playing with fire.

Neal had returned to the field. He was talking with the foreman of the cane cutting, when he saw his newly appointed house boy running from the house toward him.

"Señor," José was panting in his haste, "Señor Valdez wishes to see Señor Ashton."

"Well, what in the devil next!" Neal thought as he followed the boy back across the field. "I wonder if I have violated the code in calling on the señorita in his absence. A duel perhaps. That would be the end of a perfect day!"

But there was no indication of a duel in Señor Valdez's eyes as he arose and took Neal's proffered hand. Instead, both the smile and the handclasp were distinctly friendly.

They sat and chatted for half an hour. Neal felt again the charm of the man—the keen subtle understanding, a rare courtesy, and back of it all a fine, but tempered, kindness. He had the quick responsiveness of his race, but not the excitable tones and extravagant gestures of many Mexicans.

Neal accepted his presence as purely a social call.

He had learned more by instinct than experience, that here a visitor did not state his business—nor the host demand to know it—the moment he was across the threshold. Everything was assumed to be friendship and pleasant social intercourse, until necessity forced one to reluctantly state that he came to purchase a bull or sell a cane mill, if the señor would be so gracious as to consider such a proposal. It was not, Neal reflected, a swift way to transact business, but it was a pleasant way to live.

Once or twice Señor Valdez lapsed into a momentary silence, and there was a gravity in his face and dark eyes as he reflectively touched his pointed beard with the tips of his fingers. Neal was sure he had come to say something and wondered what it was. He could only wait, but he thought to bring things to a head by suggesting they go up to the veranda along the second story, as it would be cooler. But Señor Valdez merely accepted the suggestion graciously, as he would have any other suggestion of his host, and they went up and sat in wicker chairs on the long, wide veranda which overlooked the road and the little river. The strip of jungle along the stream was not more than a hundred and fifty yards from the house, in easy range, it occurred to Neal, of a fairly good marksman.

The same thought or some other of significance

came to Valdez. He slightly turned his head, and Neal became aware that he was looking at him very closely, perhaps doubtingly.

But if there had been doubt in the señor's mind it seemed to pass in a moment, but his eyes appeared to be watching the thicket down by the river most keenly. There was a look in the alert, finely cut face, that told Neal this man with all his urbanity would be a deadly fighter. And, somehow, he believed he sensed danger. In a moment the Mexican said with a touch of apology in his tone:

“Does not the señor think it might be well for us to sit inside the room?”

They went inside and sat out of range of the open door.

“These are troublous times for poor Mexico.” Señor Valdez shook his head sadly. “And I fear they will become more so.

“Señor Carranza has offended America and most all foreign countries. He is a very obstinate man and very unpopular. His own people do not like him. He has been cruel and stupid in suppressing disturbances.”

Neal was astonished at the frankness of the statement, especially at this time, when it was felt dangerous to even mention politics.

“I am loyal to the government,” went on the señor, “because we have had too much trouble already. Peace is worth more than politics. I

have tried to be a friend of Carranza, but," he shook his head, "it is very hard. If one but attempt to suggest a policy to the presidente, he loses his friendship.

"Trouble is coming," Valdez's face was very, very grave, his fine dark eyes were sorrowful. "And I fear it will be very bad; I shall take no part in it."

"Of course I shall not," said Neal. "Not being a citizen of your country. I would not meddle in its political affairs even if I knew enough about them to have a fair opinion."

Señor Valdez's eyes met Neal's, and smiled warmly, humorously.

"I wish America would send us many citizens like you."

"You mean there are others that might be spared?"

Señor Valdez smiled but shook his head noncommittally.

"I know there are," Neal nodded emphatically. "There is one at least at Mexico City that ought to be sent to no man's land."

The señor laughed understandingly.

"I have not of fondness very much for Señor Williams."

Neal had already told him of his experience with Espinosa and Williams.

"When I was in Mexico City a few days ago," Señor Valdez's mind reverted to political matters,



"I heard the government is nearly bankrupt, and will very soon issue paper money."

"What will that mean?" asked Neal.

"The paper money it will not be worth much." The señor shook his head. "That will be very bad for some but very good for others." He arose. "The sun will be down directly—I must ride."

They went down the stairs and Neal walked out with him to where the jefe of the guard sat on one horse, holding the reins of another.

"The hospitality of the Ranch of the Thorn," Señor Valdez shook hands with Neal, "has been most happy."

As the señor turned his back to mount his horse the jefe of the guard looked at Neal from under his wide hat, and winked.

"The señor found the hand I sent him satisfactory?"

"Very satisfactory," Neal grinned in return. "If I should need more hands——"

The jefe shrugged and turned his head sidewise like a wise old bird studying the weather.

"They shall be sent—if they can be spared. But——" There was a dubious shake of the big head.

Neal went back up to his room. It was near dinner time. He stood for a few minutes in the door watching the two men ride away.

“Now why did he come?” he asked himself. Undoubtedly this visit had some significance. “If it were in Buckeye Bridge,” reflected Neal, “I would know. But Señor Valdez,” he shook his head, “he is a mystery. Splendid fellow though. No wonder Señorita Maria——” He brought himself up sharply.

“I believe he likes me.” Neal’s mind was still on his visitor as he went down to supper. “If so, then he came to help me in some way. How? Information, warning, advice?” Valdez had offered no advice; but he had implied a warning, a most subtle but definite warning of trouble coming. Was it a hint to Neal to keep out of Mexican affairs? Perhaps that was it. But what else had he said? Oh, yes, that Carranza was going to issue paper money. That was positive and apparently inside news.

But how could that be of special significance? It meant nothing to Neal what sort of money Mexico used. And yet, now that he recalled the way Señor Valdez had said it, he believed that was what he had come to tell him.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A FRIENDLY WARNING

IT was three o'clock when Bernard Williams got to bed, but he slept late. When he awoke his anger had cooled down enough for him to appreciate the advice of his lawyer. As much as he might like to go back to the ranch and shoot up Neal Ashton, that way led to trouble. Once before when a pseudo purchaser of the ranch had died from an accidental gunshot wound—the accidental gun being in the hands of one of Espinosa's men—there had been quite a stir. Even the American consul held an inquiry, and for a time it looked as though Williams was going to be pretty badly implicated. It had been expensive getting out of it. And while Williams liked revenge now and then mostly he liked money.

Yes, it would be decidedly better to let the law take its course, if it was not too slow, than to risk a lot of undesirable publicity at a time when the biggest project of his life swung in the balance. While some Americans might be killed in Mexico without creating a ripple back home, once in a while the papers took up a death in a way that made a devil of a row.

Espinosa was on the hotel veranda, puffing smoke like a volcano when Williams came out. Sleep had not tempered the big Mexican's hate; he lowered more bloodthirsty than ever.

"Moses," Williams sat down and yawned, "I guess old Sanchez has the right dope. He is slow as molasses but right as rain. We'll have to let him get Ashton out by law."

Espinosa made no other reply than a contemptuous shrug for the opinion of lawyers.

"Of course, it is a bad time," Williams reflected glumly. "He'll probably waste the cane crop. But on the other hand he'll have to meet the pay roll. There is one thing we must watch closely—that he does not try to get away with the stock.

"Here is what we will do. We'll just lay low and pretend we are whipped—until we are all ready to close him out. In that way he'll think he owns the ranch, and will take care of it, and not try to steal any of the stuff."

Espinosa again shrugged but did not argue the matter. What was the use. He had his own secret plans already laid.

"I'll take you back with me to Mexico City." Williams guessed that it would not be safe to leave Espinosa in reach of Neal Ashton. "I've got a lot for you to do up there."

"No, no!" The big Mexican turned a red,

troubled face to the man who had dominated him for years. "No, I do not wish to go to Mexico City."

"My dear Moses, why not? Mexico City is your Jerusalem."

Espinosa rubbed the ashes off his cigarette on the veranda rail and looked down into the plaza. On a bench sat two shabbily dressed Mexicans, one of them with his arm in a sling. Espinosa recognized them and knew they were waiting for him. A look of cunning came into his eyes, and he turned a smirking face to Williams.

"If the señor will be so kind I do not wish to go to Mexico City for a few days—there are——"

"Reasons," finished Williams, grinning, "and they are ladies. Who is it that has you hooked this time? That Valdez bambino?"

"*Si, si,*" Espinosa assented. "It is the Señorita Maria who has my heart, and I would die if I did not see her again soon."

"I am inclined to think," said Williams dryly, "that you'll die if you do. But it is your own funeral."

"*Gracias, señor.*" Espinosa said it feelingly. "I will go see the señorita and then I will come to Mexico City very soon."

"All right." Williams leaned toward him and fixed him with his small eyes, and the end of his

nose swelled threateningly. "But see here, you slippery Mex, hands off of Ashton until I say the word. Understand?"

"Most *ciertamente!*" agreed Espinosa piously. "It shall be as the señor wishes."

Espinosa went down and walked across the plaza, and passing the cathedral turned off on a side street. Scarcely had he disappeared around the corner when two shabbily dressed Mexicans, one with his arm in a sling, got up and slouched off in the same direction.

Five minutes later they joined Espinosa at a board table in the back of a dirty *pulqueria*.

The big Mexican glared at them as they sat down.

"Well?"

Guizman, of the broken arm, shook his head.

"He is a devil! He see out of the back of his head!"

"We slip on him," the other leaned toward Espinosa and spoke rapidly; "we so near we could almost touch him—we make no sound, not so much as the footfall of a fly on the table there. Without moving he shoot straight behind him and hit Pedro in the arm."

"And then you run," sneered Espinosa, bitterly disappointed. He had expected to learn that Ashton was already out of the way.

"I tell you he is a devil," whimpered Guizman. "The Evil One protects him. Only last week Kessig

hide in the cane to shoot him as he go by. The gun it would not go off."

Espinosa drank a large mug of the sickish *pulque*, set down the mug, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"Have you seen Marquard?" he asked.

"*Si*," they nodded. "We saw him early this morning. He is hiding in the hills. He has nearly a hundred men."

"Perhaps," commented Espinosa, "among them are men who are not cowards, who are not afraid the American son of peeg is protected by the Evil One. Go to the camp of the revolutionist and tell Marquard that you have run away from the Ranch of the Thorn because Señor Ashton is going to make his men fight for Carranza."

"*Si, si*," they assented readily. Anything but to go back to the ranch and try again to assassinate the man who shot out of his back. "*Muy bueno*, that will fex Señor Ashton. Señor Marquard, he is like the adder—when he strike, he strike quickly and hard."

Espinosa saw his men off toward the mountains to join the gathering band of revolutionists, then he hired a horse and rode southwest toward the ranch of Señor Valdez.

Holding the reins in the left hand, the fingers of his right clinched as he spoke aloud:

"Ah, ha, if I find the presumptuous peeg at

Señor Valdez's again Señor Marquard will not need to strike!"

There is a popular illusion that a man in love is forgiving and generous, fairly overflowing with good will. This is an utter fallacy. Love and hate are as closely interlocked as lead and silver in native quartz. A man seldom loves a woman without at the same time hating another man, or even a woman. And if he is madly in love he is madly fierce, domineering and unforgiving. This is particularly true of all those who have a drop of Latin blood in them.

Espinosa was in love. He wanted Señorita Maria more than any woman alive. Yet there was a cross current in Espinosa which made him want money and advancement more even than he wanted this lovely girl. Between his love for her and human life there would be no hesitancy. He would freely kill a dozen men to get her. But between her and fifty thousand pesos he would think it over.

It was because of pesos received and pesos hoped for that he had been loyal to Bernard Williams. And for the same reason he would not follow Williams' orders as far as self-interest seemed to dictate.

On the ride to the Ranch of the Star he divided his time between spitting curses upon Neal Ashton, and in improvising winning speeches and effective struts with which to impress Señorita Valdez.



The jefe of the guard happened to be lounging outside the gate when Espinosa arrived. The jefe had seen him coming and had posted himself in this nonchalant attitude, his back against the wall, the wide hat pushed back on his head, his broad girth displaying two revolvers and two belts bristling with ammunition.

"*Buenos dias, señor,*" Espinosa threw a condescending greeting.

"*Buenos dias,*" grunted the jefe puffing slowly, without stirring from his leaning posture.

"Where is the bonita señorita this morning?" Espinosa had drawn rein, waiting for the gate to be opened.

"Señorita Valdez is where the blessed saints would wish her to be," replied the jefe. The bold eyes in the full plump face did not flinch before Espinosa's bespangled insolence. He hated the man.

As the gate was not opened and the jefe did not stir, Espinosa spoke peremptorily.

"Will you be so gracious as to tell the señorita I wish to see her?"

"The señorita is at her prayers," said the jefe.

"At this time of day?" Espinosa lifted incredulous eyebrows.

"The señorita is very devout," lied the jefe.

"For whom does she pray so often?"

"For those she wishes to live and for those she wishes to die."

“And who is it she wants so much to live?” Espinosa thought he knew and smirked; “and who is it she wants killed?” He swelled out his chest.

“Who knows?” The jefe shrugged and reluctantly opened the gate himself. A visitor must be admitted unless his presence was forbidden by the señor or the señorita.

But Espinosa waited a long time in the court. He walked about impatiently, standing under the tree, or striking an attitude at the fountain, or strolling around the graveled walk. She might come at any moment and he must be impressive.

“Ah, Señor Espinosa,” she came at last, and held out her hand in friendly greeting. “It is very nice of you to call.”

He swept his hat low toward the ground, and bent over her hand.

“Bonita Señorita, my heart is like a caged panther when I am away from you.”

Señorita Maria gave a pleased but incredulous laugh.

“Señor, a panther is a very bad beast; I would be afraid of so wicked a heart.”

“No, no, señorita, I do not mean my heart is a panther; for you it is like a dove.”

“Oh, I see.” She said solemnly. “You have a whole menagerie in your side. Do not so many birds and animals make your side to hurt?”

Espinosa felt angered, but hid it as best he could. He did not like to be laughed at.

She invited him to sit down, and she took the other end of the bench. Tia Alicia was in the patio with her eternal crocheting.

"I came to speak to you again, señorita," he said pompously, "of a very important matter."

"It is of yourself then you wish to speak?" Señorita Maria looked at him from the corner of her eyes.

"It is." He missed the irony. "And of another also." He frowned prodigiously and shook his head in ominous concern.

"Señorita, I wish to warn you again of the Americano, Señor Ashton. I am, as you know, a most good friend of the presidente. I have secret agents watching those who would start a revolution. These agents, who are most trusted, and most true good friends of the presidente, bring me word last night that the Señor Ashton had met in the coffee fields of the Ranch of the Thorn the leader of the most bloody bandits and revolutionists that have ever torn our poor country. You know who I mean?"

"Is it—Señor Marquard?" she asked with a clutch in her breath.

Espinosa nodded. "He is the one. This Ashton met him in the coffee fields and plotted with him to

overthrow the government and to kill and plunder all the friends of the presidente. The Americans to furnish money, much money. And he is to come to this heavenly hacienda of my good friend Señor Valdez to learn when and how it may be most safely attacked by the cursed bandits."

Señorita Maria's face was very white. Her hands were clinched into small balls of fury. Her eyes were like black flames.

"The devil, the accursed devil," she said fiercely.

"Señorita," Espinosa arose and bowed with his hand on his heart, "my sword is yours. I will fight and die for you, beautiful one. You are the flower of my heart."

"Ah!"—the whiteness left the face, roguery came back into her eyes—"what would the panther in your heart do with a flower also?"

Espinosa stiffened. He assumed his most impressive strut.

"The señorita makes jest of my poor services—I will bid her good-by."

"No, no," penitence came into the lovely eyes. "I do not mean to hurt señor, who has been so very kind as to bring me warning. I thank you, señor, and if I should need your protection I will send for you."

Espinosa turned on her a burning look of adoration, a look of ardent desire. It was all he could do.

“If the señorita wishes me to remove the Americano——”

“No,” the word escaped in a fierce breath. “No, the señor must leave that to my father.”

“Very well, señorita.” And Espinosa bowed himself out and rode away with a feeling that he had not been properly appreciated.

## CHAPTER XIX

### NEAL PROGRESSES

THE slow, steady stream of ox carts poured the cane into the mill, the juice ran into the vats, was boiled, crystallized, and the sugar loaded into sacks. The Mexicans with hoes kept the coffee field clean, and the trees were full of the little green berries, some of them now almost as large as a cherry. The cattle were undisturbed on the ranges and the horses were safe in the pasture. Nothing could have been more dreamily peaceful.

Neal had expected trouble after the deportation of Espinosa and Williams, and had been surprised when it did not come. Except for the two Mexicans who had tried to assassinate him that night everybody had been very friendly and very kind. He had established the identity of the two assassins the next morning, but as they had disappeared he dismissed the matter.

Neal's biggest surprise was that he could make sugar right on the ranch and sell it at once for a very good price. Thus not only could he meet his pay roll, but would be able to lay some money by from the cane crop.

Friday afternoon Neal came in from the field

early and went into the little room just off the hall which he had fitted up as an office. After figuring for a few minutes he sent for Mrs. Krider.

The red-headed widow came in with the look of resentment which she always wore when interrupted at her work. She kept up her antagonism and her scornful contempt of Neal's folly. They had not exchanged a dozen words more than necessary for carrying on the house. Mrs. Krider ran the place as suited her and asked for no instructions. As she did it amazingly well, Neal offered no suggestions, merely inquiring from time to time what supplies or funds were wanted. He did not even ask for an accounting.

"I paid the field hands yesterday," Neal said. "I would like for you to pay the women and the house servants. How much do you require?"

"Two hundred and twelve pesos," she answered without a moment's hesitancy.

"Is that all?" He was surprised at the smallness of it. There must have been at least twenty or more women and girls working about the hacienda.

Mrs. Krider put up her right hand and jabbed a hairpin a little deeper into the knotted red hair.

"If it hadn't have been, I'd have said so," she replied sharply.

"All right." Neal smiled in spite of his attempt to keep up a dignified antagonism. He evened up ten stacks of silver of twenty dollars each, and

counted out twelve dollars more. "There you are. Now how much do you draw?"

"Sixty pesos," she said crisply.

He put out five more stacks of silver.

"We'll make it a hundred," he said lightly.

"Like hell we will!" She flared angrily, and shoved two of the stacks back. "When my wages are to be raised, I'll raise 'em."

Neal whistled and grinned. He was feeling good to-day. A man usually does when he is easy with his pay roll.

"You are a queer one. I did not know a woman ever turned down money."

"Well, they do, turn down both money and men sometimes. One is as worthless as the other. Only you can get rid of the money lots easier."

She scooped the silver into her apron, turned a belligerent back on Ashton and started for the door, but stopped and looked back over her shoulder. For a moment a grin twisted the corner of her mouth.

"Better send the extra forty up to Buckeye Bridge to have that church spire straightened. You are going to need to go back mighty shortly."

Neal was grinning as he mounted a horse and rode off to the west, twenty minutes later.

"And I learned about women from her," he chanted. He was thinking of Mrs. Krider.

It was queer that they, the only two Americans on the ranch, should have the least conversation



with each other. But it often happens so. One would imagine that meeting a fellow countryman in a strange land would be a great joy—instead it is often an unmitigated blight. The same sort of thing is true in our own country. The sparser the settlement the deadlier the quarrels. Mrs. Krider puzzled Neal. He could not figure her out, but he had no ill feelings toward her. Instead she rather amused him and he certainly appreciated her management of the hacienda. Whether she had been infatuated with Espinosa, or whether she liked the climate and the country so well she did not want to go back, he was unable to guess.

It was toward sundown when Neal neared the Ranch of the Star. He drew rein and sat looking at the glimpse of high ivory walls amidst the rank tropical greens. Toward the sunset rose the serried ranks of mountains, with last of all Orizaba's snowy crest cutting clean into the purple sky. In the lower lands to the east lay the shadowy richness of tropic and orchards—lost in a wilderness that seemed scarcely touched.

All the way Neal had been torn by fierce passions and doubts and torments that he never dreamed was a part of human experiences. This feeling for the lovely *Señorita Maria*, who had scorned him, was so much deeper and more tempestuous than any emotion of his life that it seemed to belong to some one else. Now as he neared the gate of her garden

that feeling was accentuated. It was all unreal, fantastic, impossible. And yet it was romance. It was his. No one, no American with a mortgage, no Mexican with a gun, no rival of the blood could take it away from him. He would see her, tell her of his love so fiercely she would have to love him in return.

Nevertheless he was trembling as with an ague as he dismounted and rang the bell.

Through the bars of the gate he saw a movement among the rank ferns in the garden, a mere glimpse of the blown end of a silk scarf, and his heart stopped beating.

Almost immediately a servant opened the gate, and as it clanked shut behind him Señorita Maria stepped into the graveled path but a few feet ahead.

She was dressed in white save for the rose-red mantoon thrown about her shoulders. Her hair was piled about her head, and her large, dark eyes met Neal's squarely, inquiringly.

He stood in the path unable to speak, his face pale and his hands trembling so he clinched them shut. Now that he was in her presence he seemed entirely powerless to pour out the torrent of fierce love that had been dammed up in him these weeks.

She was so utterly lovely standing there in the early glow of coming twilight, so fine and almost fragile, in spite of that latent fierceness of passion and strength, that his emotions were transformed.

He did not want to seize her and crush her and demand her love. He wanted to woo her with moonlight and song and the rhythmic beat of the hearts of poets. He wanted to kiss her fingers, and touch her hair and look into her eyes and cling to her hands.

She was the first to break the silence.

“Et has been ver’ long since the señor honored our lonely hacienda.” She spoke in quaint English, coming toward him with outstretched hands.

Neal laughed—it was that or cry, so great was his relief at her friendliness. He held her hands close.

“Señorita, every night when I have seen the star my heart ached because I was not here.”

“Ah!” She gave her dark head a delicious little toss. “The señor has not forgotten how to flatter.”

“It is not flattery,” he said seriously. “Flattery, señorita, is merely saying words to make feelings in another. With me the feelings make the words.”

She smiled, and her dark eyes were of the most limpid softness.

“The señor is a philosopher, too. He know just why hes heart go pet-a-pat, or chug, chug, or dub, dub!” Her laughter seemed to make crinkles of merriment in the air about them.

He joined in her drollery, and she turned toward the house he walked close beside her.

The wind lifted the end of the rose-red mantoon

and it touched his cheek. She noticed it, and catching the end of the scarf in her hand drew it back and struck it with her fingers.

“Naughty!” she said, shaking her head reprov-ingly at the fringe of the mantoon. “You must not be deceived by a señor’s flattery. The señors come and say pretty speeches,” she continued drolly to the offending mantoon, “and then they ride away and leave you only the wind to play with. And the wind,” there was an aching chord in the fooling tone, “come from so far away, and is so lonely, and is so full of sorrow, et steals your soul away, and leave your poor leetle heart cold.”

“Señorita!” He stopped before the path turned into the arched entrance of the great house. But he could not go on. He was too stirred for articulate speech.

“Perhaps,” she tilted her head and looked at him roguishly from slanting eyes, “the señor wishes to explain his long absence.”

“Why, I thought you didn’t want me!” He was surprised. “You ordered me to leave.”

“But how,” she said lightly, “is a señor to know unless he comes again to see?”

“Sure enough,” he laughed. “But I thought you were angry at me.”

“Ah, so I was.”

“And that you hated me.”

"Most fiercely, señor!" She said it in an awful tone.

"Why?" he asked anxiously.

She lifted her face toward the west; the red glow glinted her hair and touched her cheeks and lips with a bit of fire. Her eyes looked pensively, puzzlingly at the sky.

"Who knows, señor? Can one tell why a hawk flies yonder instead of a nightingale? Or by and by that it is the nightingale instead of the hawk?"

Then bringing her face about she gave that tantalizing flirt of the head.

"Watch out, señor—the hawk fly again some time."

She started in.

"Wait," he urged.

"No, no," she frowned. "We must go in—my father and Aunt Alicia will feel most scandalous in their proprieties for me to be in garden alone with a señor who is so great a philosopher that always he wants to know why everything."

Neal and Señor Valdez visited and smoked in the patio until dark. Then Tia Alicia came out and asked them to come in.

The visitor was to take food with them. The Mexicans usually do not eat a heavy meal at night. Rolls and some fruit, a cup of tea or coffee. But it was the happiest meal Neal ever partook. The table was handsomely set with heavy linen and old silver; silver candlesticks in the center. Neal sat at

Valdez's right and Señorita Maria at his left. His eyes could be upon her most of the time.

The family seemed in good spirits, and there was much droll fooling in which even the dignified Valdez took part.

At half past nine Neal insisted he must return. Señor Valdez again called the jefe of the guard to accompany him.

"Señor," Valdez said in parting, "the government will begin issuing paper money to-morrow."

"Is that so?" Neal accepted it as a bit of news without any special significance. In fact he was so anxiously watching and hoping for Señorita Maria to reappear before he left that he scarcely thought of it at all.

She did just for a moment. He had started reluctantly out through the great hall with the jefe, when a vision of loveliness suddenly appeared at the foot of a stairway, a candle in her hand.

"*Buenas noches, señor,*" she bowed. "Remember the hawk follows the nightingale——"

Neal and the jefe rode along in silence. Neal was too rapturous to talk. The glittering stars, the soft wind, the fragrance of the tropic night all seemed a part of his mood.

There were no words for his love for Señorita Maria. It took this vast stretch of mountains and jungle and starlight and wind, filled with sweetness and fierceness, of peace and turbulence, of mystery

and danger to contain his love for her—and she had been kind!

Below them lay the Ranch of the Thorn sleeping in the dark save for two lights that shone dimly in windows of the hacienda. The strip of jungle showed darkly along the river; the coffee fields were a splotch of darkness beside the open sugar lands, rich and full of color and romance and promise of great wealth.

His ranch! He might after all beat them and keep it. He felt to-night as though he could fight all the sinister forces that were loose in this land of uncertainty and win! If he did—then Señorita Maria——

“Señor,” the jefe drew rein, “Señor Williams and Señor Espinosa were in Cordoba to-day. I had gone to the *estación* to meet Señora Alicia and I saw them at the Gran Hotel Zeballos. They plot something very bad for the Señor Ashton.”

## CHAPTER XX

### PAPER MONEY

**B**ERNARD WILLIAMS, Espinosa, and Abogado Sanchez were holding a night session in the lawyer's office. Williams had come down from Mexico City in response to an urgent wire from the abogado.

"Señors," Sanchez rubbed his palms together and wiggled his scalp of black hair in an excess of satisfaction, "I have work ver' hard to get the señor's ranch queek—and now I have it."

"You mean you've got possession of it?" Williams leaned forward so excitedly his chest lunged against the table.

"No, no!" Sanchez held up a delaying hand. "Not yet of a *ciertamente*, but ver' soon—almost at once."

"Oh, hell!" Williams leaned back disgustedly. "Something is always just about to happen with you damned procrastinators. It is always *mañana, mañana*. Why don't something once in a while happen to-day?"

"But the señor does not understand."

The abogado protested, distressed at the reception of his good news. "The law cannot foreclose in



a few moments like the señor wishes. It takes time—ah, a ver' great deal of time—usually.

“But I”—he shrugged appreciatively—“I have ver' great influence, I hurry it. Now, if the señor will only wait, I will explain.”

Williams sullenly lighted a cigarette and blew a whiff of smoke through his bulbous nose. Things with him had been edging closer and closer to the precipice.

“Well, shoot,” he said in a bad humor.

“Ordinarily, as I told the señor,” Sanchez began, “it would take one year to foreclose the mortgage. Besides, this Señor Ashton will try to prove the mortgage is not of an honesty. That might take longer. But the presidente has appoint a new judge, one of his particular friends who come here this week. ‘Ah, ha!’ I say. ‘Now we will get action for Señor Williams.’ I go to this judge ver' privately and say: ‘There is an Americano on the Ranch of the Thorn who is ver' troublesome man. He is a friend of José Marquard the revolutionist—José's son he keep at the hacienda, while José make war on Carranza's government. ‘This Americano,’ I say, ‘hold the ranch illegally. It of a right belongs to Señor Williams and Señor Espinosa. Both ver' good friends of the presidente. They have a mortgage that is past due. But this bad Americano, Ashton, will not give up until all courts are tried out. Now,’ I say, ‘how can we get rid of this Ashton ver'”

queek?’ The judge he ask many questions about the mortgage and I tell him. He ask if the mortgage covers the stock and the tools and the provisions on the ranch. I tell hem it does. ‘Ah,’ he says, nodding wisely, ‘there we have it. Get Señor Williams and Señor Espinosa to swear that the stock and tools and provisions are being wasted or stolen—that they are not cared for—that Señor Ashton is selling provisions dishonestly. Then I will issue order and the officers will go out and bring in all the stock and all the tools and all the provisions, to keep under the court’s direction until the suit is settled.’ ‘Caramba!’ I said. ‘That is wonderful. We have hem, for all the people will leave. He cannot farm. He cannot pay. And when they all leave, he leave also. He cannot stay alone.’”

Williams had ceased puffing his cigarette—and his adder nose swelled.

“Good work, old torts,” he exclaimed approvingly. “That really is some stunt you’ve thought up. Once the gang of field hands down there is scattered, we can get Señor Ashton out of the way as easy as killing a fly. When can all this be done?”

“We will make out the papers in all haste—tomorrow,” said Sanchez. “And the officers will go the next day and take away everything on the ranch.”

“*Bueno,*” broke in Espinosa, “and I will be one of the officers.”

“Go to it,” said Williams. “I’ll sit tight here at

Cordoba and see that the court does not eat up the supplies."

The three adjourned until ten the next morning when they were to meet in the courtroom at eleven o'clock.

At half past eight next morning Espinosa rapped on Williams' door.

"Well?" Williams' voice always demanded an apology of any one disturbing him.

Espinosa stepped inside, a look of news on his face.

"The Americano son of a peeg is here," he announced. "He is out on the veranda now—smoking."

"Fine." Williams' nose swelled with gratification. "He's got wind of what is up and has come in to beg for terms. But not one centavo, not one damned centavo will I pay him."

"You do not think," the big Mexican showed a trace of uneasiness in his large, black eyes, "that he might do something?"

"Not a thing. He is hog tied now. We got the judge and the law with us—and we will go the limit."

The jefe's warning the night before had brought Neal to earth with a jerk as though he had been snatched bodily out of the clouds by the feet.

His chances for romance with Señorita Maria depended upon his chances of holding onto the Ranch of the Thorn. And that he suddenly realized was about one in a million.

That the wily villains and the bloodthirsty Espinosa had given up the fight was of course preposterous. He had been subconsciously expecting some open or secret attack every day. But what was it they were plotting at Cordoba? It must be something connected with law and courts.

He slept little, and that uneasily. At about three o'clock in the morning the significance of what Señor Valdez had been telling him brought him up with a jump. He dressed hurriedly and routed out Blanco. It was a weird hour, but there was a late moon, and they saddled two horses and rode to Cordoba in time for breakfast.

He learned from the clerk that Williams and Espinosa were still at the hotel. For an hour after breakfast he sat on the upstairs veranda smoking and watching while Blanco went out on the streets to hear what he might hear.

At nine-thirty Neal saw Abogado Sanchez enter the courthouse. He was sure now Williams and Espinosa were planning some action in the court. He waited a half hour, went down and crossed the plaza to the courthouse, stopping at a bank on the way where he kept his account.

He entered the courtroom and sat down on a bench beside an old Indian with a striped serape over his shoulders, his black hair matted down over his ears, his wrinkled old face like a mask. Across the aisle was a Mexican woman with a baby in her

arms, a look of infinite sorrow on her face. In front of him sat a fierce young Mexican who had been bold in crime but now sat cringing before the court.

For an hour Neal watched and listened as the proceedings dragged along, impeded always, as in the courts of all the world, by the wrangling of the lawyers. Except for the different faces and the different language, this, he thought, might be the summer term of circuit court in Buckeye Bridge. There were the same circumlocutions and technicalities and evasion of the direct, common-sense issue.

The case on trial was finished a few minutes before eleven. Neal looked around the courtroom. Williams and Espinosa had not yet appeared. He wondered if he had made the wrong guess. But when he looked toward the door a moment later the big Mexican, dressed in a new and more gorgeous outfit recently purchased in Mexico City, entered with a swagger, and the American with the adder nose followed. Abogado Sanchez hurried forward, greeted them effusively and led them to a front seat.

The two saw Neal. The Mexican scowled fiercely, but Williams grinned with relish. He always liked to be an eyewitness when one of his enemies was going to be floored.

The abogado arose and hoped the very august

court, and the most honorable and just and distinguished of judges would allow a very humble and obedient servant of the court, namely Abogado Sanchez, to present an urgent petition for the relief of two very estimable gentlemen, namely and to wit: Señor Bernard Williams and Señor M. Espinosa.

The court politely assented to hear the petition.

Abogado Sanchez began to read. The petition was five pages, largely closely typewritten, and filled with enough extreme adjectives to stock an amateur novel.

But Neal leaned forward, not to miss a word of it. Until now he had been entirely in the dark as to their real plot.

After two or three pages of preamble he got the gist of it—saw what they were driving at. The petition accused him of wasting, neglecting, misusing, misapplying, destroying, wrongly stealing and absconding with loose property on the Ranch of the Thorn.

“Thereupon, we pray the court”—Neal leaned a little farther forward, listening intently—“to take into its custody and keeping all the stocks, tools, provisions, food, moneys and all other movable property and to hold same until such time as the mortgage may be legally foreclosed.”

Neal's eye left the lawyer and went to the judge,

and he knew the judge intended to grant that petition.

The lawyer finally ran himself out of words and sat down. Neal glanced toward Williams and Espinosa. Both had turned their heads and were watching him. Espinosa leeringly lifted his heavy brows and gave the corner of his mouth a triumphant curl. Williams openly grinned, the end of his big nose puffing out as though inhaling incense.

The judge asked a few questions and made a memorandum on a slip of paper. He was about to grant the petition when the court was surprised and somewhat annoyed by a slender young man arising in the middle of the room.

"Your honor," Neal spoke in careful Spanish, "I am Neal Ashton against whom this action is aimed. May I, acting as my own attorney, be heard in defense?"

"Most *ciertamente*," the court nodded courteously.

"I merely ask," said Neal in an even but convincing tone, "an opportunity to prove the charges in the petition maliciously false."

"The señor," said the judge, "will have such an opportunity. But as the matter is very urgent—there being a charge supported by the oaths of two reputable citizens, of the destruction and misuse of property, the court will be compelled to take charge of said property at once and hear the arguments

and evidence later. If the señor then proves his case the property will be returned to him."

"But," protested Neal, "that will cause my workmen to be scattered for lack of food and pay; it will damage the crops, ruin much of them. It will cause great loss and suffering. It will, in fact, compel me to abandon the ranch."

Williams punched Espinosa with his elbow. The abogado's eyes flashed at him a signal of victory. The judge looked down at his desk and shrugged most desolately.

"It is very unfortunate," he said compassionately, "and it gives the court great sorrow to work a hardship on Señor Ashton. But the law must be followed. So long as the señors hold a mortgage on the stock and ranch, most especially since it is past due, and they pray the court for action the court must act."

Neal hesitated a moment, opened his lips as though to speak, but moistened them and glanced at Espinosa and Williams. The American had stretched his feet out in front of him and crossed them, and looked up at Neal with a taunting twist of his loose mouth.

"Has the court seen and read the mortgage?" Neal asked.

"It is here." The judge picked it up from the desk.

"If I should make a small payment on it, all I



have, would the court allow the stock and tools to remain on the ranch until I can be heard?"

The judge shook his head.

"The mortgage must be paid in full to prevent action."

"How much is it?" Neal inquired.

The judge asked the Abogado Sanchez if he had figured the interest. He had. The amount was 40,765 pesos and 21 centavos.

Neal looked as though stunned for a moment.

Williams and Espinosa glanced at each other and lifted their brows in pious rejoicing at an enemy's funeral. The court stirred and the judge's lips parted to render judgment.

"Very well," said Neal deliberately, "I'll just pay it off."

Williams lurched forward as though his lounging spine had been touched by a red-hot iron. He gathered his legs under him with a scrambling noise, and got to his feet in a stagger.

"He can't do it! Action is already started to foreclose." The last thing in the world Williams thought of was the payment of that mortgage. The ranch was easily worth twice the amount. They had always been most careful to sell to men who *could not* pay it out.

Whatever faults a Mexican judge may have, no matter how he may twist the tail of justice with technicalities, when a thing is obviously the law

he will decide against his own brother or the presidente himself.

The judge nodded his head affirmatively.

“Yes, the señor has a right to pay the mortgage.”

Neal had drawn a paper package from under the bench and advanced to the clerk's desk. The judge passed over the mortgage and asked the clerk to figure the exact amount and add the cost of all action to date.

Neal tore open the paper wrappings and began to count out original \$1,000 packages of unopened currency.

“What!” Williams was again on his feet, his loose jaw working, his bulbous nose swelling, his neck livid. “Not with that stuff, not by a damned sight! That paper money is worth only ten cents on the dollar!”

Neal looked up from his counting and smiled at the judge and said confidentially:

“The señor seems not to have read the proclamation of our most excellent presidente, declaring that paper money must be accepted as face value for all debts.”

Again the judge nodded affirmatively, and there was possibly a glint of satisfaction in his black eyes, for he had liked the appearance of this American much better than the one with the big nose.

“Yes, the señor has a right to pay the mortgage

with paper money. It must be accepted and the mortgage canceled."

"But hell fire and damnation!" raged Williams. "That means I am getting only \$2,000 in American money for a ranch worth fifty thousand. I won't accept it, I'll be damned if I do."

The judge shrugged, there was undoubtedly a gleam of malice in his dark eyes as he turned to Williams.

"It is not a matter of choice with the señor. If he is losing, that"—another shrug—"is unfortunate. But the law must be observed. We will now proceed with the next case."

As Neal came out of the courtroom with the canceled mortgage in his pocket, Williams and Espinosa were waiting for him—but so also was Blanco. The big negro stepped forward to Neal's side most obviously ready for any action that started. Also there were two soldiers standing, with arms, at each side of the door.

Williams approached Neal menacingly, but the slender young chap merely looked him straight in the eye and smiled.

"Do you know what I think of you?" Williams glared at Ashton.

"Yes," Neal's smile was infuriating, "but you can never guess what I think of you."

"I think," said Williams heavily, "that a man who will take advantage of a fellow countryman to palm

off depreciated Mexican paper money in payment of a debt, is a damned thief."

Neal laughed at that.

"The yellower a snapping cur, the louder he howls when bitten."

"I'll tell you one thing," Williams' small eyes looked venomous, "you can't get away with it—not down here."

With that parting threat Williams and Espinosa turned across the plaza toward the hotel. Neal and Blanco started for their horses.

"First thing," said Williams bitterly, "I think I'll kill that lawyer."

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE OWNER OF THE RANCH

AS they rode out of town Neal chanted "On the Road to Mandalay."

The mangoes were ripe, the air was perfumed, the world swam in glory for him. He would see Señorita Maria to-night.

"You shoah got that white man's goat." Blanco grinned.

Neal laughed.

"They did look sick, both of them, when I produced that stack of paper money."

Blanco sobered and shook his head, the whites of his eyes showing.

"I hopes youh-all is powerful quick on triggah. They's shoah goin' to try get you now."

Neal also sobered. Victory had its price. Sometimes it has cost so much of life's blood one has no spirit left for its enjoyment. Sometimes it carries such a bad conscience that shame spoils the zest of it; and again it plants danger that springs up like dragon's teeth to harass the victor until he at times wishes he had been defeated.

Neal had a clear conscience and victory had come quick and unexpected. It was even one of those

sardonically humorous pieces of justice which Fate sometimes deals out, that Williams, who for years had kept a mortgage on his ranch so as to cheat others, should suddenly have to accept depreciated paper money worth ten cents on the dollar in payment. But beaten at law they would undoubtedly resort to the most desperate unlawful means to get him.

"Yes, Blanco," he said soberly, as they jogged along beside an abandoned coffee field, "as it happens I can shoot a gun. Those who go to movies and read wild-West literature imagine the only men who know which end of a gun shoots are west of the Rocky Mountains. But it happens my placid old State of Missouri has won most of the shooting contests. But I don't want to handle a gun, I don't want even to have to carry one."

"Well, what you want," exclaimed the big negro strongly, "and what is, ain't very close kin. You shoah got to carry a gun and have your finger dancin' for that there triggah if you-all expects to live till watermelons are ripe."

As Neal rode into the hacienda he had a different feeling of ownership. Before, he had felt as if it was all a magnificent piece of bluff, temporary at the best. Now the ranch was his. Really his. The papers all recorded, the debts all paid. Rightly managed it would be better than a gold mine. And his eyes swept the buildings, the timber, the fields; it

was beautiful. It could be made a veritable dream of magnificence, loved as a home by the hundreds of these simple-hearted children who worked the fields, known far and wide as the best coffee ranch in Mexico. Thousands of miles away men riding horses at night, campers on the road, tired men returned from the day's work, would catch the whiff of coffee which spoke to them of rest and satisfaction, and set them dreaming, as it had him, of far lands and gorgeous scenes. It would be his coffee—carrying the incense of his own romance back to the plodding dwellers in the lands of matter of fact.

“Blanco,” Neal grinned at the big negro as they stopped their horses in front of the house, “I think you may tell the story to the hands of the way we got the best of Espinosa and Williams. Success makes authority.”

Neal thought to himself: “And I’m going to tell Mrs. Krider.”

Perhaps it was because of her prophecy of failure, perhaps it was because of her long and bitter opposition, or it might have been a desire to win her as an active ally, Neal did not figure it out, he merely was determined to tell her all the details of his victory.

The widow came to the office looking as though she was being dragged into something very distasteful. But Neal noticed she had her hair done up

more becomingly than usual and wore a new print dress with lilac blossoms on it.

“Sit down, Mrs. Krider.” He nodded to a chair. She sat on the edge of it, her hands resting on her knees as though intending to stay only a minute.

“I have news for you.” He could not suppress the satisfaction that rounded out the tone.

“Every time I see you alive it is news.” She lifted her brows.

“I really own the whole ranch now.” He reached for a pencil on the table. “I have paid off all the debts.”

He looked down at the end of the pencil as he sketched the picture of a possum hanging by its tail while he waited for her reaction. A long-drawn, gasping breath was her only response. When his eyes lifted he saw her face was flushed deeper than he had ever seen it, and her eyes were looking at him very intently—reproachfully he thought.

He puckered his brows and smiled slowly at her.

“When I sell the coffee I am going to send money back to Buckeye Bridge to have the church steeple straightened, but I am not going back.”

“No,” there seemed to be grim fatalism in her set jaw and sharp tone, “you are not going back.”

“See here, Mrs. Krider.” Neal twisted in his chair a bit uneasy under the look of her eyes and tone. “I can’t make you out. I don’t know why you hate me, why you wanted to run me off the



ranch. I like your work. I want you to stay and am willing to pay you much more wages. But we must come to some sort of an understanding. I am not comfortable in the presence of antagonism. We must not go on fighting. What is it all about?"

He kept his eye on her questioningly, and he was not sure whether she was going to cry or curse. But after a stirring moment, she did neither.

"Neal Ashton, you are a fool."

"You have told me that before—frequently." He smiled.

"But I don't hate you. I like you better than nearly any man I ever saw. I know that you have got the devil in you somewhere, that you are a liar and are yellow, and that every woman ought to hate you and all other men. But," she shook her red head and shut her thin lips, "it hasn't cropped out so far. That is what makes me mad. It is queer, too, that you have not been killed. I thought at first you was a poor, green country boob and was really sorry that you had lost all your money. But either you have more sense than you look or you have had the devil's own luck."

"Thank you." Neal was getting into the thoughts of the woman now.

"But understand," she said seriously, "I don't trust you. I've been fooled and cheated and badgered and abused by men too often to have any faith in any of them. You'll turn out rotten like all the

rest and probably prove the damnedest yellow cur in Mexico. But I can't help wishing you'd go back to Buckeye Bridge."

"Why?" His eyes still questioned her.

"They will kill you." Her voice dropped to a fatalistic monotone. "They always do. Espinosa is a devil. There is something about him——" She broke off, leaving the rest to imagination. "I hate him much of the time. And he is a devil always. He is as sure to kill you or have you killed as those damned parrakeets are to wake me up with their screaming in the morning."

"But suppose," he suggested grimly, "I should kill him."

She shook her head violently.

"It can't be done. It has been tried too many times. One can't kill the devil."

He studied her a moment, wondering if, after all, the woman was a bit mad.

"Anyway, Mrs. Krider," he said in a friendly voice, "I expect to run the Ranch of the Thorn so long as I live. And until they do kill me suppose we be friends." He put out his hand.

She breathed tumultuously; the lilac sprays in the new dress rose and fell upon her bosom; she slowly started to put out her hand, snatched it away violently and ran from the office.

Neal went up to his room to change his clothes.

He was dressing with a great deal of care when there was a knock at his door.

It was Mrs. Krider. There was an appeal in her eyes—clear blue eyes. In spite of all her sharpness and harshness there was kindness in the woman's heart, and Neal knew at last that he had touched it.

"Don't go to Señor Valdez," she said persuadingly.

"Why not?"

"It is dangerous."

"Mrs. Krider," he grew slightly vexed, "everything I've started to do you have told me not to do, that it was dangerous."

"No" Her lips parted in the first smile he had seen on her face. "There was one thing I told you to do that was safe—go back to Buckeye Bridge. But this," she scowled heavily and her eyes clouded ominously "going to Señor Valdez is the most dangerous thing of all. Another revolution is coming quickly," she spoke low and glanced up and down the veranda to see no one was in hearing distance; "they will attack Señor Valdez first. He has been loyal to the government and they need the loot. They are watching his ranch now. If they know you are a friend of his——"

She left the rest to his imagination.

"How soon is the revolution going to break?"

"No one knows. Maybe a month—six months—maybe to-night. It is all ready—only waiting the word from some leader."

“On which side is Espinosa?” His eyes watched closely the effect of the question. The Mexican’s name always stirred some violent emotion in her.

“Whichever side that wins.” She shut her lips tight. “He wants money and Señorita Maria. He will fight with the side that helps him get them.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Krider.” There was genuine appreciation in his gray eyes. “Will you tell Blanco to saddle our two best horses and lay out the four best guns on the ranch. Have them ready in twenty minutes.”

Neal got up directly and went into the court to see if Blanco had the horses ready. From around the coffee pulper a small figure pitched at him as though thrown from a sling shot. It was José Marquard. The boy clutched his arm about one leg.

“No—no—go, señor. No, no, go.”

“What is up now, muchacho?” Neal ran his fingers through the boy’s thick black hair and smiled down into the agitated face. “Is it a saint’s day or do you object to me leaving the ranch on general principles? It seems everybody around here is opposed to me taking a horseback ride.”

“Et is dangerous, señor. They keel my señor.” The arm convulsively closed around Neal’s leg, and the boy’s eyes pleaded desperately. “He mus’ no go. He mus’ no go.”

Neal looked at him gravely, wondering how much was childish fright and how much real knowledge.

The boy might have overheard plots that had escaped his elders.

“Let’s go over here and talk it over, José.” He led the boy to a bench under a tree in the patio where no one was in hearing. “Now, boy,” he laid his hand affectionately on José’s shoulder, “why don’t you want me to go away to-day?”

The little Mexican looked about furtively, apprehensively. Then he leaned closer and hissed into Neal’s ear.

“They hide in the woods down by river. They keel señor, the *devils!*”

Neal smiled at the fury in the little chap’s eyes, but he was touched by the boy’s loyalty.

“Is it Señor Espinosa?”

José nodded.

“Has he men here on the ranch who also would kill me?” Neal asked.

Once more desperate fear swept the boy’s face, he gave a furtive glance around, and nodded positively.

“*Des, tres hombres.*”

“Two or three men, eh?” Neal puckered his lips. “And the rest—they do not want Señor Ashton killed?”

“No, no!” The boy shook his head emphatically. “They very good friends to the señor.”

“About Espinosa,” Neal looked at the boy steadily. “Did you see him in the woods by the river?”

The black head shook reluctantly.

“Did any one tell you he is there?”

A still more reluctant shake of the head. Then an outburst.

“But he is there, señor.”

“If you did not see him how do you know?”

“Because he is a devil and he wish to keel señor.”

Neal laughed with relief. It was mere boyish fright after all. Nevertheless he would keep his eyes open.

There was the clink of horses' feet on the cobbled court. Blanco was leading out their mounts.

“Ready, Blanco?” Neal got up and went toward the horses. The little Mexican boy followed after him, terrified over his master's danger, but more afraid of offending him by further protest.

“Got the guns, Blanco?” Neal examined the saddle and the girth. It was a matter of habit with him to never mount a horse until he knew the saddle was right.

“I shoah has.”

“Blanco,” Neal rested his left hand on the saddle horn and turned on the big negro, “I am going to Señor Valdez's ranch. I expect to return in the night. Are you afraid to go with me?”

“Ah should say Ah is.” A shake of the head made it emphatic.

“Very well”—Neal shut his lips closely—“you need not go.”

The negro looked at him astonishedly, then asked:

“Is you afraid to die?”

Neal shook his head dubiously and grinned.

“I am afraid I am, Blanco.”

“Den,” said Blanco solemnly, “you needn’t never die.”

“Needn’t ever die? A fellow can’t help that—at times.”

“No, sah”—Blanco put up a foot for the stirrup—“nuther can I help goin’ along with you—sometimes. You axed me if I was scared to go—I is. But if I didn’t do nothin’ down heah, I wasn’t scared to do, I wouldn’t do nuthin’ but hide in the cane—and I’m a little scared to do that.”

Neal laughed, but again was moved by the black man’s loyalty. He had two friends at least that he could trust—the boy and the negro.

“All right then”—he swung into the saddle—“we’re away to the hills.”

Glancing back as a peon swung the gate open for them, he saw José standing where he left him, his little dark face pitifully twisted, his lips moving and his hand making the sign of the cross.

“That is a good kid, Blanco.” Neal felt a swelling of the throat. “If his father is really killed, I am going to adopt him.”

“Pro-vided,” added the negro solemnly, “you ain’t killed yoreself.”

## CHAPTER XXII

### DOOMED!

**I**N the shelter of the rank growth along the river two hundred yards from the hacienda, eight Mexicans lay sprawled on the ground. One, a huge fellow with a thick neck and big head, sat up leaning against a tree smoking a cigarette. His legs were encased in closely fitting trousers with bead work down the seams. He wore a silk shirt and a leather vest with ornamented handwork on the front. A wide-brimmed hat lay on the ground beside him. Around his thick waist was a decorative cartridge belt to which hung two big army revolvers.

As he smoked, the Mexican's large, heavy-lidded eyes watched the front of the hacienda through a gap in the underbrush. He had been watching two hours, noting every movement about the ranch.

"Ha!" He emitted a breath of satisfaction as two horses were led out in front of the house.

Espinosa did not stir when Neal and the negro mounted the two horses and rode toward the west; but the puffs of cigarette smoke came faster and the eyes narrowed.

"Ha!" the tone purred. "The fool goes back to Señor Valdez. It is easy now."



Thank the saints, Señor Williams had given him a free hand. Espinosa would have acted anyway, hate had gone so far beyond greed, but it was well to have the approval of Señor Williams. Of course, as Señor Williams had pointed out, the removal of the American son of a pig would not unpay the mortgage. But—Señor Espinosa had thought of this—the revolutionist might wipe out the records by burning them up, then Señor Williams would hold the ranch on his old deed as there would be no witnesses against his title.

Espinosa's puffs of cigarette smoke grew slower and slower as his eyes watched the hated American and his black servant disappear up the road toward the Ranch of the Star. But his eyelids lowered until only long slits were left, and the hate was shot through with gloating anticipation. This would be his last ride.

Espinosa still smoked and thought until the first long shadows fell across the ranch. Then he roused up his men. It was seven o'clock. Ashton would leave Señor Valdez's hacienda about ten. It was two hours' ride. They must be in plenty of time.

He picked three of his best men, which meant the worst, and took them aside from the rest.

"The Americano has gone to Señor Valdez's. Take your horses and ride after him. Just at the edge of the mesa hide in the brush beside the road.

You can see him coming across the open space from the hacienda. Be ready. When he is close shoot all at once.

“Let them lie where they fall and their horses go loose. You ride on and turn south to the camp of Señor General Marquard.”

The instructions were repeated clearly and emphatically. And the three rode away.

Espinosa returned to the others and selected three more. Taking them aside to their horses and without any intimation of his command to those already gone, he ordered:

“Señor Ashton has gone to Señor Valdez’s with only one servant—the negro. By and by they will return. You ride to where the road crosses Silver Creek—it is about halfway to the hacienda—you know the place. Hide in the willows on the bank. As the cursed Americano and his negro ride into the water you can see them clearly. All fire at once. Leave them where they fall, let their horses go. You ride on and turn to the south and join the camp of Señor General Marquard.”

These three rode off. Espinosa returned to his remaining man—his trusted bodyguard.

“Pedro,” he said, “even a fox cannot escape three deadfalls in one night. We will go up to the hacienda and wait the return of the empty saddles.”

“No, no,” protested the astonished Pedro. “You not mean to go to the Hacienda of the Thorn.”

"Certainly yes," Espinosa laughed. "I am hungry and thirsty. Come on, my timid one. There is no rabbit at the Ranch of the Thorn that dare touch Espinosa."

Mrs. Krider was directing the clearing away of the supper table when the big Mexican suddenly appeared in the arched doorway of the dining room.

"You!"

She clutched the edge of the table and her eyes stared as though fascinated by horror.

"Me, yes." Espinosa laughed and came swaggeringly across the room. "Come here, you red-haired she-devil and give me a kiss."

Still as though under some sort of spell, Mrs. Krider let go the edge of the table and slowly approached the big Mexican. He caught her by the wrists in a grip that would have cracked less fragile bones and kissed her.

He released her arms with a motion as though flinging them from him, and sat down with a swagger at the table.

"Now food and drink, my bony devil."

Pedro, who had been left outside, ventured to the dining-room door.

"And for me, Señor Capitan," he whined, "I die of hunger."

"Back to your watch, you lazy dog," Espinosa ordered, "and you shall have your bone later."

When Mrs. Krider had slightly recovered from

her dazed astonishment at Espinosa's return, she asked:

"What do you suppose Señor Ashton will say when he finds you back?"

Espinosa scowled with hate at the mention of the gringo's name.

"The Señor Ashton will never say anything again."

"What?" The question came sharply.

Espinosa, recalling an expression of Señor Williams, laughed sinisterly.

"The Señor Ashton is joining the Hell Club to-night."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### BLANCO HAS A HUNCH

THE sun still shone on the tops of the high trees as Neal and Blanco rode along, but the jungle came down close beside the road, and it was shadowy along the trail. Blanco edged his horse a little closer to Neal's.

"What was that there poetry you was sayin' the other day about the big birds or something?" The negro rolled his eyes from side to side of the road.

"Oh, that was Kipling," Neal laughed, and repeated:

"Cheer, we'll never march to victory,  
Cheer, we'll never hear the bloomin' cannons roar,  
For the big birds of prey will carry us away  
And you'll never see your soldiers any more."

Blanco shook his head.

"That fellah shoah knows how I feel right now." He repeated the verse over several times until he learned it. Then he rode along silent until the road crossed Silver Creek. He began to chuckle.

"Big birds of prey is shoah good. It's these heah Mexs all right. They pray at one crossroad and shoots some man's liver out at the next."

"What was that?" Neal drew on his bridle rein and listened. "Did you see or hear anything?"

"I been seein' and hearin' things all along." The negro's eyes showed a wide expanse of white, but nevertheless his hand was on his gun in a very businesslike way.

"Just a bird," Neal reassured.

"I reckon them big birds of pray is hangin' on our tracks all right," said Blanco. "But if it ain't ouah time to die they may miss when they shoot."

Somehow Neal had not taken his danger very seriously. One is inclined to discount warnings in this land of constant uncertainty. If he rode safely yesterday he feels it is safe to-day.

"You know," said the negro, rolling his words and eyes at the same time. "I's got a hunch we'll never get back alive."

Neal laughed. He took the darky's fearsome hunch as a joke.

"Blanco," Neal said soberly as he dismounted and rang the bell at Señor Valdez's hacienda, "you wait out here with the horses for a few hours."

"Few houahs?" the negro gasped. "Out heah in plain gunshot for a few houahs? No, sah, you not talkin' to me. I ain't the boy that stood on the burning deck. I'm going to get behind somethin' bullet proof."

Neal laughed, and asked the servant who opened

the gate to take Blanco and the horses around back to the corral inside the walls.

It was Señorita Maria that he asked for, but it was Señor Valdez who met him in the reception hall. And Neal fancied he was less cordial than before, more coolly polite.

The conversation did not go well. The señor's eyes shifted to the door frequently, his mind seemed to be preoccupied. His face indicated worry.

Neal's heart sank lower and lower. It was obvious this call could not be prolonged. He had no business excuses that would sound convincing. He told Señor Valdez about his purchase of the ranch, and thanked him for suggesting the paper currency. Valdez merely shrugged and said it was an accident—merely had thought of it as a bit of news.

Neal tried two or three other leads, but the conversation dwindled and died. Valdez did not invite him into the patio, nor offer cigars and refreshments. Most obviously for some reason he wanted him to go and go early.

But Neal felt he could not go without seeing Señorita Maria. He had been hugging his good news all day, waiting the time that he could tell her. The news, of course, was not the real thing he wanted to tell her—only the preliminary. He must see her. He could not ride back into the night with an ache like this in his heart.

What was the matter? Were they angry at him? Had he done something unpardonable? Did they suspect him?

Once more he assailed Señor Valdez's hospitality. He talked humorously of Blanco. Recounted amusing incidents that had occurred on the ranch. But as dusk deepened the señor grew more and more restless, as though only by a supreme act of courtesy did he refrain from asking the caller to depart.

Neal gave it up. He would depart before he was ordered to go. The jefe of the guard showed him through the garden.

Just before they reached the gate there was a swish in the shrubbery, and Neal whirled quickly.

"Diego," an imperious voice spoke to the jefe, "go to the house and bring my mantoón, it is cool."

The jefe bowed low and hastened away. Neal stood looking longingly at the slender dark figure in the dusk, until the guard was out of hearing.

"Señorita Maria," he said softly and took a step toward her.

She lifted her hand in a gesture of repulsion.

"Why did you come here to-night?" The question was thrust at him like a glove flung into his face.

"Ah, the hawk is flying to-night," Neal remarked teasingly. "Or perhaps it is an eagle."

"Why did you come?" The question was flung out fiercely again.



"To see you, señorita," Neal answered earnestly. "There could be no other reason. There is nothing that counts but you."

She stood perfectly rigid a moment, her head lifted high.

"You are a traitor," she said slowly, witheringly. "You came to spy on our hacienda for the bandits and the rebels. I hate you."

Neal was aghast. And that was the trouble. Somebody had been lying to them about him—Espinosa, that was it. The charge of treachery stung him. Even the woman one loves cannot call him a traitor safely.

"Señorita," he said with dignity, "your charges are wrong and foolish. I know no rebels. I have nothing to do with politics. And why should I plot against the one most beautiful girl in the world? The one that I love as the sun loves the day and as the stars love the night."

She wavered in the dusk for a moment, her head still held high. She put her hand up to her heart.

"You have José Marquard, the son of the rebel leader," she said as though trying to be convinced.

"He came as a waif, thinking his father was killed. I'd take in a stray dog like that."

Again she stood in silence as though thinking it out. The wind stirred the garden and touched the dark hair. Her face was white in the dusk. Neal

looked at her with a fierceness of longing that shook him to the center of his consciousness.

Suddenly the rigidity went from her body. Her head drooped forward, her shoulders relaxed. Then she sprang at him. He did not know whether she was coming with a stiletto or an embrace and so fierce was his emotion he scarcely cared.

She seized his arms and her fingers bit in the flesh. Her face was close to his, he felt her breath upon his cheeks.

“Go, señor, queek!” Then swiftly changing: “No, no—do not go—stay! They plot against you—they will keel you! They lie—all of them lie! They try to make me hate you! But you have told the truth! It is in your eyes!”

Neal’s blood rushed through his veins until the stars looked like flaming torches.

“Señorita, this is the truth, the great truth—I love you beyond the wind, beyond the stars, beyond eternity.”

Her fingers left his arm and met with swift endearment about his neck. She was in his arms and their lips met in a kiss of fierce ecstasy.

“Señor!” The voice cut into the night like a sword. The girl sprang from his arms and turned toward her father.

“Señor,” again the voice was cold as cutting steel, “your horse is ready. Never again ring the bell at my gate.”

A hundred yards out upon the open mesa Neal stopped his horse and turned to look back at the hacienda.

It was early yet. The last red fringe of day had just been whisked from the white shoulders of Orizaba. A million stars sowed the darkness with tiny flecks of dim light. A crescent moon, hung halfway up the sky, silvered the pale walls of the hacienda. The wind came in soft waves of exotic fragrance.

Neal was so deeply, so tremendously happy, the soul of him seemed to fill the night, seemed to embrace the light of all the stars and the perfume of all the winds.

She had kissed him! She loved him!

Romance! Which sent obstacles—the wrath of parents, the plots of enemies, the stings of misfortune—spinning into forgetfulness like bobbing corks on a swirling stream.

Neal drew a long breath. His heart seemed crowding for more room.

Blanco, who had not spoken since they had ridden away from the hacienda, broke the spell.

“I’s got a hunch we better not go back the road we come.”

Neal laughed in sheer joy of recklessness.

“To hell with your hunch! Come on.” He turned his horse and galloped across the open mesa to where the road plunged into the wall of tropical growth.

Just at the edge of the open space Neal drew rein to look back again. The night was very still. The wind stirred the rank leaves. A bird screamed off in the jungle.

Blanco, fearfully peering into the darkness, shivered.

“For the Lawd’s sake, come on,” he begged. “We’s sittin’ out heah like crows on a limb waitin’ to be shot.”

Neal laughed again and rode on down the dark road. Although the trail was narrow in places and rank ferns and limbs of trees leaned over it, Blanco crowded his horse up beside Neal’s and rode neck and neck.

They had gone about two miles when Blanco reached over and caught the rein of Neal’s horse and whispered awesomely:

“White man, I’s tellin’ you dar is somethin’ wrong with this heah night.”

“Blanco, you have got the jumps.”

“Sh!” warned the negro. “I’s got a hunch we is goin’ to be killed.”

Neal did not laugh this time. The superstition of the negro, and something uncanny in the night got hold of his nerves. They sat and listened a few minutes. Neal picked up the reins. This fear was foolish, but again the negro’s hand went out and caught the bridle rein.

“Sh—listen!”

Unmistakably there were sounds this time—a horse's hoof striking a rock, a murmur of voices down the road ahead. Neal acted quickly. They dismounted and led their horses a safe distance into the thicket and then slipped back to a clump of bamboo beside the road.

The three Mexicans were making no effort to conceal their movements; they came riding along and talking in quite a hilarious way.

"I am going to have his gun," said one.

"I'll have his pocketbook," announced the fellow riding in front.

"No," called the one behind, "you can have the black one's teeth—you need them."

They all laughed.

"But," reminded the third, "el capitan say leave hem lie where they shot—we not to touch them."

"What difference," grumbled the leader, "so long as they are dead?"

"Why does Espinosa want the gringo killed?"

"Who knows? Perhaps he get too many kisses."

"Then we'll have a long wait. He won't leave until moon-down."

There was a laugh and three rode on out of hearing.

"My Lawd!" Blanco's teeth fairly clicked. "You suppose that's all of 'em?"

Neal did not reply. He felt weak, as a man who has leaped a wide chasm and, finding himself safe,

looks down to to see what he missed. These assassins had planned to lie in wait for them, and only the miracle of an early return had saved them.

"That was a narrow escape, Blanco," Neal said soberly.

"It shoah was." The negro shook his head awesomely. "We's close enough to a tombstone to shake hands wid the angel on it. Whenever one of these heah hunches speaks to me, I's shore listenin'."

There was no particular thought of further danger, yet they naturally rode with caution and kept a close watch ahead for any suspicious movements in the dark.

The road turned down Silver Creek for two hundred yards before it made a crossing. The ground was soft and the horses' hoofs made little sound. They were riding at a walk and were saying nothing.

Just ahead the road made a turn for the ford. The creek here was twenty yards wide, shallow and babbling.

It was Neal who put out his hand this time. Blanco stopped with promptness. A sound had come from across the creek as of a horse stamping in the thicket.

Neal sat and listened. The sound came again. Horses were hitched in the woods across. Perhaps another band of assassins were lying in wait.

That was it. Neal's quick mind caught Espinosa's strategy. He had planned to be thorough. He had sent out two bands to be posted at different places. If their victims escaped one the other was to kill them.

Neal dismounted and signaled Blanco to do the same.

"Will the horses go home if turned loose?" he whispered.

The negro nodded. Neal struck his horse lightly across the withers with his riding whip.

The two horses jumped and went galloping to the ford and splashed into the stream. Neal and the negro again hid beside the road where they could see the ford.

As the horses went on up the other bank they saw men cautiously come from the cover of the thicket. The animals snorted and galloped on.

The Mexicans brought out their own ponies, mounted and came across the creek.

One of them crossed himself:

"Our work is over," he said; "the gringo is dead. We ride to camp."

Espinosa still sat at the table. He had been eating and drinking more than an hour and was enjoying to the full this meal on his dead host. Mrs. Krider sat at the side of the table listening to him, ready to wait upon him.

Pedro again appeared at the door.

"Señor," he was excited, "the empty saddles have returned."

"*Bueno! Bueno!*" The Mexican threw up his right arm in a gesture of victory. Mrs. Krider's fingers clutched the edge of the table and her lips quivered a moment.

"Put our horses up," ordered Espinosa, "and come in and have a drink. On a night like this even a dog may drink with his master."

The big Mexican and his servant were taking their fifth drink when Pedro, who faced toward the doorway, let his glass slip from his hand. Espinosa seeing the horror on Pedro's face, turned heavily in his chair. His own large face grew splotched, his eyes looked wild, his fingers fumbled toward his holster. There in the doorway stood two ghosts—a white one and a black one.

But before the drunken fingers found the butt of his pistol both his hands lifted automatically into the air. Neal walked up to him slowly, a gun leveled at his chest.

"Señor," he said deliberately, "I am merciful tonight. But the next time we meet death will walk between us, his face your way. Come. We ride."

At daylight Neal put the big, cursing Mexican on a train at Cordoba, bound for Mexico City.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### TROUBLE AHEAD

**I**N a world of labyrinthine pitfalls it is difficult for the wisest man to pick the safe path. No wonder the ignorant perish like flies. Their beliefs are founded on rumor, their actions prompted by inflamed prejudices.

The Mexican people are not stupid. They have plenty of natural wit, but unfortunately a very large per cent are illiterate. They lack any common means of knowing the truth about public affairs. They have to get their information about men and movements by word of mouth. And much as we decry the unreliability of the press it is infinitely more accurate than the gossip of the most intelligent and truthful people.

In London a year or so ago, for one day no daily papers were issued. Within twelve hours the whole city was rife with the most fantastic rumors of horrible national calamities. While we may not believe all we read, we know that any fantastic rumor is impossible or the thing would have been in the newspapers.

Mexico lacks this corrective force, this national means of getting to practically all the people the same

information the same day. Thus they are left open to the dangerous influence of the demagogue, the mercenary secret agent and the virulent propagandist.

Mexico was tired of revolution, and yet hate was rife and small leaders here and there kept their bands organized ready for another raid, another attempt to overthrow the government.

Carranza's hold was slipping. In spite of the poverty and tiredness, here and there in different parts of the country opposition began to arise. Everybody knew that a leader of force could overthrow the government. It was only a matter of weeks or days until such a leader arose.

Then one day the news spread through Mexico City.

"Carranza has broken with General Obregon."

The news was electric. General Obregon had been Carranza's best friend and was the strong man of the north.

The people held their breaths to see if the break would be patched up. Instead Carranza loaded troops upon a train and ordered them to Senora to arrest the governor. Obregon sent a wire to the presidente.

If troops enter Senora it means war.

The troops did enter Senora or tried to, and the war was on. Immediately State after State joined the revolt; and Obregon raised an army and started for Mexico City.

Bernard Williams walked the floor of his office on Cinco de Mayo Street like a caged bear that had been stung by bees. As often as the newsboys appeared on the street shrilly crying a new edition, he sent his Mexican stenographer out for a copy.

But each edition, instead of allaying his' fears, caused him to grow more and more alarmed. The revolution was rising like steam in a gauge. The explosion would follow quickly.

Williams' bulbous nose swelled and reddened. His small eyes filled with ferocious resentment. He lighted cigarette after cigarette, and threw them on the floor with only half a puff.

He had spent eleven of the twelve thousand dollars in American gold which he had realized on the Ranch of the Thorn on Mexicans who professed to have great influence with Carranza, in an effort to get his signature to the free port concession. But the papers were still unsigned. Now the great collapse was coming. Carranza would no longer be presidente and he, Bernard Williams, who had worked so hard, would have his pockets cleaned to the seams.

He cursed Carranza. He cursed Mexico, he cursed every Mexican he knew, and last and most blightingly he cursed Neal Ashton. Through every other revolution the Ranch of the Thorn had been his

mainstay, always there to fall back on for another start. Now even it was gone.

The office door opened, without a knock. Williams swung about with his hand on his gun.

Espinosa dropped his wide-brimmed hat on the floor, and swept the office with large, malicious eyes.

"Good news, señor," he said suavely.

"Like hell you say!" glowered Williams. "Where does the good news come in?"

"The revolution." Espinosa lighted a cigarette and took a chair, and crossed his large legs. "It breaks."

"How in the devil is the revolution good news?" growled Williams, scowling malevolently.

Espinosa's eyes looked down at the toe of his gaudy boot.

"Now we can strike," he said significantly.

"Strike?" bellowed Williams. "Strike whom?"

Espinosa shrugged.

"Our enemies."

Williams slammed down in a chair and leaned toward the Mexican.

"Damn it, just what are you getting at?"

Espinosa got up and looked in the private office, and the closet, and then locked the door. Returning he sat down and spoke with low-toned satisfaction.

"The revolution, it will be a success."

"Of course it will. That is the devil of it. Where do we come in?"

Espinosa took the cigarette from his mouth and blew the smoke from his nose.

“As the señor advised I join the revolution. I joined last week. Señor Marquard is the chief for that country. He would not act until a leader appeared, strong enough to make sure Carranza will fall. Now he will act.”

“But——” impatiently broke in Williams.

“One moment.” The Mexican lifted his big hand. “I will be a capitan, maybe a colonel under Marquard. We will attack the American swine at the Ranch of the Thorn.” He spat on the rug. “And then Valdez.”

“What good will that do us?” Williams wanted to know.

“Ah, señor,” Espinosa put his hand on his heart and bowed, “it will give me my heart’s desire—the beautiful Señorita Maria—and you, you may have back your ranch.”

Williams got on his feet.

“By hell, you have a head on you if you are a damned Mexican. Now if I could only get old Carranza on the dotted line before they plug him with a .44 bullet we’d be riding strong. I tell you,” Williams broke into a new hope, “I’ll go myself. I’ll beard him in his castle and get his signature or die in the attempt. I’ve got one more pull, and it’ll get me in.”

He was already reaching for his hat and cane. Espinosa arose and moved toward the door.

“*Adios, mi amigo.*” The Mexican was jaunty now with the taste of coming revenge in his mouth. “Tonight I am with Señor General Marquard. To-morrow night——” He kissed his fingers toward the sky and winked hard.

## CHAPTER XXV

### LOVE LETTERS

**T**HURSDAY morning Neal saw that there was something apprehensive in the movements of his men. As they went to work they had an uneasy look of animals who feel an approaching storm. They worked aimlessly as though their minds were on something else and stopped often to look behind them or to scan the far line of fields.

About ten o'clock Neal went over into the coffee field. He loved to walk among the trees. Some of the berries were grown now—almost as large as cherries, and the limbs were full. Those who knew told him there never before had been such a crop on the trees in the life of the orchard.

The glossy green leaves, the clusters of berries, the sturdy bushes, the sprinkled shade of the huisache, meant more to him than the promise of a good bank account and freedom from money worries. It meant the rich aroma of romance which he would send in cargoes to be scattered to all parts of the world. What rest from tiredness, what good fellowship, what fragrant dreams over the million cups that would be brewed from the coffee on these trees.

And his own wonderful romance would be mingled in the fragrance of every cup.

An old man was running desperately along the road, stopping often to look back. Twice he stumbled and fell. Neal wondered, for a Mexican does not run merely for exercise. The old man passed out of sight. Five minutes later as Neal went toward the house, two men rode galloping down the road in the same direction. He stopped and watched them until they turned into the timber along the stream. They looked like Carranza troops. Neal started on. The crack of a rifle brought him up sharp. Two other shots followed.

A few minutes later the two horsemen reappeared riding leisurely, jestingly back toward town. It might have been nothing, but Neal thought of the running old man, and a sinister chill crept along his spine. The two soldiers had just made the turn beyond the coffee field when again came the crack of guns in quick succession.

Gunshots on a country road were not uncommon, and Neal had almost dismissed the matter from his mind by noon. But as he started to the house to lunch Blanco rushed up to him, his eyes rolling, his mouth open.

"Dey killed two up theah!" He pointed in the direction of the last shots.

"Who did?"

"These heah revolutionists, I reckon." Blanco



wiped his cotton sleeve across his forehead. "Anyways they killed two soldiers up theah and buried 'em under the fence."

"Does any one else know?" Neal asked.

"No, sah, I just found 'em—I's by myself."

"Don't tell anybody," Neal ordered, "until I find out something about it."

But the field hands had heard the shots and their look of apprehension had increased. He saw they were at the jumpy state where an unexpected scare would start a stampede.

Instead of going in to lunch Neal went up to his room. He laid out two guns on the table and took stock of his ammunition. He examined the door to see what chance there was for an effective barricade. The ranch had stood a siege at least once before as evidenced by those thousands of pockmarks in the stucco outside. But that, he had heard, was merely a gang of bandits on a raid.

This looked like a real revolution. If so, there would be at least a semblance of order, and an effort to protect property. Revolutionists who expect to win and rule afterward want something left to collect taxes on—also they want as much good will as can be carried over.

He sat down to think out a course of action. Either he must arm and organize his men to put up a hard fight if the ranch was attacked, or else they must offer no resistance at all.

If either the revolutionist or the Carranza troops attacked the ranch it would be for plunder, and they would attack in considerable numbers. Neal mistrusted his chances for defense. The men were loyal as workers, but most of them had suffered bitter experiences from the hands of revolutionary bands, and they were in mortal terror of them. Neal doubted if he could count on more than a half dozen putting up a stiff fight.

In that case it would be far better to offer no resistance at all—that is to any organized band of troops. Of course they would not let straggling bandits carry off their stuff. But if the revolutionists approached he would merely try by strategy to save as much of his stuff as possible.

He put one gun in his pocket, but dropped the other in the drawer of his table, and went downstairs, and called Blanco.

“Tell the men,” he ordered, “to meet in the corral after they have eaten. I want to speak to them.”

He asked Mrs. Krider to come to his office.

“I guess the revolution is about to break,” he said to the red-haired widow as she took the straight chair by the corner of his desk.

“It is.” She inclined her head fatalistically.

“In the fighting,” he balanced a pencil on his thumb, “the ranch is pretty sure to be raided by one side or the other, maybe both. I have decided I am not able sufficiently to fight them.”

"We certainly are not." Mrs. Krider agreed for once and most emphatically.

"Without taking sides," Neal went on judicially, "I am going to try to manage whoever comes along and save what I can."

"You are not going to try to stay on the ranch?" Mrs. Krider blazed with amazement.

Neal nodded.

"I most certainly am."

He smiled quickly as she opened her lips to speak.

"Don't say it, Mrs. Krider. You have said it before. Perhaps I am a fool, but not as big a one as you think. I really do not believe there is as much danger as you imagine. Anyway, the ranch is all I have and I am going to stay with it, but I am going to give everybody else a chance to leave. You and all the women and girls better go to Cordoba. I don't want——"

Mrs. Krider gave the corner of her mouth a sarcastic twist.

"You don't seem ever to learn. Down here women are less important than men and need less protection. If the men stay, we stay. I'm not in as much danger as you are, for I haven't any special enemies."

"I advise you strongly to go. But in a revolution one never can be sure but the place he is going to is not more dangerous than the one he left; so I'll let you decide for yourself."

"I stay." She rose and gave her shoulders a

positive jerk. "And of course the rest of the women will stay with me."

"Thank you." Neal merely inclined his head as she left the room.

Outside in the corral the hands had gathered. Neal saw their uneasy, dogged look. They were expecting to be asked to fight, and were secretly planning in their minds what would be the best time to run away.

"Friends," Neal got up on the corner of a cement hog trough and spoke in a clear, friendly tone, "there is a chance the ranch may be attacked. I am an American citizen and have no right to take sides. I expect you to take no part as long as you are on the ranch. We shall offer no resistance. Don't carry guns to the field with you. Do not fire at men who ride up here. We will receive whoever comes as friends. Now, I think you will be safer working here in the field unarmed than you will be in hiding and running about the country. Most men killed at times like this are men shot in the back running away with guns in their pockets."

The field hands scattered to their work in lighter spirits than they had felt for days. They had expected to be called upon to fight, and had come together furtively planning when it would be best to make their escape. The words of the señor were true. It would be safer working in the fields than running through the woods.

Neal returned to the house, his mind already busy with another and greater problem. How was he to see *Señorita Maria* again?

In Buckeye Bridge a girl's father did not count for much with the young man. It was different here. Especially when the father had a hundred trained guards at his command. But there must be some way. And it must be found very, very soon. Time that stretched between him and *Señorita Maria* was intolerable.

The *señorita* was with him wherever he turned, at every hour. Through all this fierce uncertainty as to whether he would be a broken, penniless derelict in a strange, cruel country, or a wealthy hacienda owner in a land of romance; whether he was to live, or whether he was to be killed by stealth; the thought of *Señorita Maria* was like distant music, like evening incense. When the heart is aflame all other fires are but the red roses of adventure.

Espinosa was in love with her, too. That is, he wanted her. Neal could not think of any of Espinosa's feelings being love. And as long as Espinosa was at large, the path to the Ranch of the Star would be waylaid by assassins. But Neal might dodge them; it was *Señor Valdez* that he feared most. This was Mexico, this was Spain of two hundred years ago. When *Señor Valdez* ordered a man to stay beyond his gates one would be

riding toward something very different from romance if he disobeyed.

Yet Neal must get word to Señorita Maria. He called the big negro.

"Blanco, do you know of a Mexican on the ranch who could ride to hell and back over high waters and not get either drowned or singed?"

Blanco shook his head and grinned.

"I knows a lot of 'em that could get to hell; but none of 'em that could ever get back."

Neal laughed. "And yet you like 'em, Blanco, as I do. Good fellows in their way and loyal to their friends. What I want is to send a note to Señor Valdez's ranch."

"José," suggested the negro.

"Sure enough!" Neal exclaimed. "José is just the chap. Nobody will bother a boy. As long as there is a thread of manhood as large as a cobweb in a fellow he won't mistreat a boy. And no man on the ranch knows his way around better than José."

Blanco went for the boy while Neal carefully penciled a few lines on a leaf of his notebook. He thought it better to write it in English. She could read it, but few others into whose hands it might fall could. Instead of the stilted veiled note that he would have written to a girl at Buckeye Bridge, Neal unconsciously fell into the romantic, passionate language of his inamorata.

Señorita, when the sun first touches the snows of Orizaba, I kiss you awake. In the noon sun, my love covers you as the shade of the trees. In the quick fragrant dusk I come to you and hold you in my arms until all the stars turn into rose flames of love. Send me one word.

Blanco came with the Mexican boy. Neal tore the leaf from his notebook and folded it carefully.

"José," he looked at the boy straightly, "are you my friend?"

"*Si, si!*" Most emphatically.

"Can you get this note to Señorita Maria?"

José nodded assuredly. "I will go the back way—in among the servants. I will get the señor's note to the señorita."

"If you do," said Neal, "I will give you ten pesos. If you bring me a reply I will give you twenty pesos."

"No, no!" the boy shook his head. "Et is for my friend I take et."

"Then I will be your friend always. But may not a friend give another a present of twenty pesos, José?"

"*Oh, si si.*" The boy agreed readily. "One may give his friend many presents."

"You are not afraid, José?"

"No, no."

"There will be no danger to you?" Neal did not think there would.

"No, no," José lied faithfully. He knew there would. In times of revolution boys died, too.

With the lights all out, Neal sat in the doorway that opened from his room upon the upper veranda, listening and watching for a rider in the dark. It was midnight and José had not returned. He had abused himself with every harsh name he could recall for having sent the boy. If anything happened to José he would hate himself forever. It would be useless to go in search of him. If nothing happened he would return; if anything had, it was too late. Yet an hour more of waiting and Neal would be riding after the boy.

Near one o'clock there was the sound of horses' hoofs—running. Neal leaped up and hurried down, ready to open the gate. His heart jumped with relief as the rider came near. It was the boy. He caught him in his arms as he leaped from the horse.

"Did you give it to her?"

"*Si, si.*" The boy's heart pounded hard. He had been scared after all.

Neal did not question further until they were in his room upstairs. There José told how he had gone the back way and behind the walls where he had beguiled one of Señor Valdez's servants to take him inside. He had told one of the señoras that he was the nephew of the jefe of the guard and he wanted to speak with Señorita Maria.



The señorita was in the garden—it was the time of sundown. He slipped to her the señor's note.

“Did she read it? What did she say?” Eagerly.

The boy's black eyes lightened. “Ah, señor, she said nothing. She pressed her hand here.” He put his palm over his heart. “She turned very white, then very red. She drew deep breath and look up at the sky—very happy.”

“Did she send any reply?”

José nodded and brought a crumpled bit of paper from inside his shirt.

Neal's fingers shook as he unfolded it by the lamp.

“Ah, señor, the nightingale flies to-night. The hawk he is far, far away. When the señor think of poor leetle Maria, she think of hem two times more.

Neal folded the note and put it in the pocket next to his heart. He felt that until this moment happiness had been a mere myth. But there was something yet unsaid in the boy's face.

“Did anything else happen?”

José frowned puzzled. “Yes, something most curious. Señorita gave him cakes and fruit. She stroked his hair. She very lovely. Then she go with him to his horse. He get on saddle, she stroke his hand and ask his name. When he say, ‘José Marquard,’ she, quickly like lightning, become so angry he fear she kill him. Her eyes they look like

black daggers and she say over and over 'The traitor. He send spy.'

"I very scared," finished José, "and I ran my horse away very fast." Then in puzzled reflection, "I wonder why she like señor so well one minute, and call hem traitor the next."

"I wonder," Neal's happiness had gone like a lamp snapped out by a bullet. "Thanks, my boy, run along now to bed."

And Neal blew out the light and sat in the dark until daylight.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE ARMY ARRIVES

TWO days passed and no further sign of the revolutionists. Neal and Blanco had found the body of the old man whom the soldiers had shot, in the jungle along the river, and had buried it. Neal had a feeling the ranch was being watched, perhaps surrounded, but no attack was made.

Saturday morning he was in the office making out a list of supplies to send in to Cordoba that afternoon. The men were all in the field, most of the women were down by the little stream busy with their washing. Blanco came rushing in, stumbled over a chair and fell in the hall.

"Oh, Lawdy, massa!" He groaned and scrambled to his feet. "They're comin', boss," he gurgled as he reached the office.

Neal got up and went out on the south veranda. Emerging from the timber along the river was a fringe of men with guns closing down on the ranch, as though ready for the final dash. At sight of him a dozen guns cracked and three or four scattering bullets spattered against the stucco wall.

Neal did not run to cover. There was a chance one of the bullets might hit him, but more chances

that they would not. He walked to the front of the veranda and sat down on the rail. He wanted them to know he was not fighting but was not afraid. They must not feel they had captured the ranch. Three or four other shots spattered wild, then the firing stopped. The men closed up their ranks and came on toward the house, curiously and warily. It might be a trap, they thought.

It was harder for Neal to sit there after they quit firing than before. The life of the owner of a ranch was not worth much when bandits caught him. They came nearer—he could see their faces—hear their voices. One of them at any moment might take a shot at him at close range. And once the firing started again it would be the end of him.

They were marching more rapidly now. There were three or four hundred of them, and they came on with greater confidence. They could see no sign of guns sticking from windows or from behind doors. Their leader halted the soldiers in the yard not thirty yards from where Neal sat and smoked. Neal arose deliberately and came down the steps to meet the officer.

*"Buenos dias, señor."* Neal spoke courteously.

*"Buenos dias,"* replied the officer. He was a swarthy, squat Mexican with thick shoulders, and wore a nondescript uniform that bore all the marks of official rank from that of a sergeant to a general.

But Neal was not deceived by the grotesque uniform—this fellow was a formidable fighter—and there was a sullen, purposeful look in his dark, pock-marked face.

“Señor,” Neal extended his hand, “my ranch is poorly prepared to entertain you, but such as we have is yours.”

A gesture of politeness, especially when backed by real kindness is almost irresistible in Mexico. Even the man who is appointed to kill you will respond to your civilities. The swarthy commander took Neal’s hand and bowing thanked him for his gracious hospitality.

“Invite your officers,” Neal suggested in Spanish, “to come in with you, and have refreshments. I will send servants to bring food and drink for the soldiers.”

Neal sent out first a package of cigarettes for each man. Nothing will come nearer saving a fellow’s life in a camp of bandits than a package of cigarettes.

As Neal sat down with the commander and four of his officers he knew that he was under guard. In spite of the general’s politeness they had guns and knives in readiness to stop any move he might make to escape.

The frightened servants, at Neal’s command, set before them bread and cold meats, fruit and beer and tequila and cigarettes.

When they finished there was a moment of awkward silence. So far Neal had kept up the illusion that these men were honored guests, and he the gracious host. It was a little difficult for the commander, rough fighter as he was, to break the news that Neal was to be shot, and the ranch looted. But that was unmistakably what they had come for.

Neal felt the ominousness of the silence and again took the initiative.

“Señor general,” he said judicially, “I am a poor man, but recently come to your country with no money. But if your men need provisions, there are five, perhaps six, fat steers in the corral—and a few sheep. There is sugar also, and potatoes to which you are welcome.”

The commander, as though with a physical twist, broke the spell of politeness and got to his feet. His men instantly arose.

“We’ll attend to that,” he said gruffly. “An enemy of liberty does not buy his life with five head of steers.”

Neal had also arisen. He looked unflinchingly at the commander.

“Just what does the señor mean?” he asked in Spanish.

“That the Señor Ashton is a friend of the hated Carranza and an enemy of our glorious cause.”

At the mention of Carranza a look of the blackest

hate came into the commander's face. Neal knew that murder was near the surface and spoke quietly.

"Señor Ashton is an American citizen and does not presume to take a part in the quarrels of Mexico. He is a friend to any man of honor."

"The señor," scowled the commander, "has plotted with the hated Carranza, the vile beast who killed my father and my brother and my son. No friend of his shall live."

The four officers had drawn their revolvers and formed a half circle about Neal. He knew his life was forfeit. For a moment a wild terror swept him, and left him feeling weak as a reed. But he managed to keep steady on his feet. He was thinking of Señorita Maria—after all, was everything to end in dark oblivion?

"The señor has been misinformed," he said to the commander. "No doubt my enemy, Señor Espinosa, has lied to him."

The commander's face grew darkly menacing.

"It is the Señor Ashton who lies. El Capitan Espinosa is an honorable friend of liberty. You are our prisoner." He nodded to his men.

Two of them seized Neal's arms, the other two shoved pistol barrels into his back.

They turned to march him to the door. Neal saw his house boy, José Marquard, crouched on the stairway. The boy's eyes were wild, his face working.

With a fierce cry he sprang toward the soldiers who started back at his unexpected onslaught.

The commander with a guttural cry swooped down and grabbed the boy. Neal jerked loose and started to strike the general, thinking he was going to hurt the little chap. Instead, the swarthy commander had José hugged in his arms and was patting him between the shoulders and calling him endearing names. The commander straightened up in a moment and looked at Neal.

“Señor,” he said, “how does my boy come to be in your house? I thought he was dead.”

The boy released from his father’s arm, jumped to Neal’s side and grabbed one of his hands in both of his.

“*Mi amigo, mi bueno amigo!*” He cried. And repeated over and over that Neal was his very good friend, his very dear friend.

Then he told excitedly how he had come when he thought his father dead, to the Ranch of the Thorn, and how the Señor Americano had taken him in.

The commander turned and bowed low to Neal. “Will the Señor Ashton accept the gratitude of José Marquard and his fellow patriots for his gracious hospitality? If the señor will be so good as to sell us a small amount of provisions we will be deeply grateful.”

Neal went out with him to the army smoking in the shade. The soldiers saw instantly that he



was in well with the commander, and gestured and smiled amiably as he passed along the line, asking if they wished anything more to eat or drink. Three steers and a few hundred pounds of potatoes and two sacks of sugar were all they would take. The commander led his son to the horse which had been brought up. Neal saw the lad looking back at him sadly. No Mexican boy had ever had a better time than José on the Ranch of the Thorn.

“Señor,” said Neal, “if you feel the lad would be safer here with me until the war is over I shall be happy to take care of him.” The father looked down at José thoughtfully. A Mexican loves his children and wants them with him. But Marquard knew there was hard riding and fighting and danger ahead.

“*Bueno,*” he said decisively, and turned the boy back to Neal. “The saints protect the señor for his goodness.” He mounted his horse, saluted and marched his men away.

Neal sat down on the edge of the veranda and leaned against a post as he watched them go. When they were out of sight he felt as weak as though he had been poured against the post. If it had not been for the accident of the boy being with him, he would now be buried down there by those crosses under a fresh layer of earth. Lucky, too, that Marquard and not Espinosa had been in command. When Espinosa came there could be no nonresistance.

The hands had hurried out from the fields when they saw the soldiers come to the house. They had watched for the smoke to rise, watched to see the stock driven away. And when the revolutionists had ridden off without molesting the ranch the superstitious peons came out of hiding and approached the house with a feeling of awe. Señor Ashton was protected by some supernatural power. Some special saint was looking after him.

Blanco alone talked it over with Neal after supper.

"I shoah nearly busted mah ear listenin' for you to be shot," he said.

"Where were you?" Neal asked.

"I's hid in the coffee drier," he confessed grinningly. "Shoah did." Blanco shook his head at the incredibility of it. "Youah shoah luckier than Señor Valdez will be."

"Valdez?" Neal stiffened. "You don't suppose they will attack his ranch."

"They've done done it," nodded Blanco. "I heard two of 'em talkin' about it when they was foolin' around the coffee drier waitin' for pulque. They was goin' to join Espinosa and attack 'em at dark."

## CHAPTER XXVII

### REVOLUTION!

NEAL rode alone. He had not asked even Blanco to accompany him. There are dangers a man would rather encounter single-handed.

No one had ever loved his life more, and none had ever thought less of it than Neal did to-night as he galloped up the trail toward the Ranch of the Star.

It was near midnight and a half moon near its setting threw a pale weird light over the tropical jungle beside the narrow road. The night was still and heavy with brooding, sinister shadows. Neal had a feeling that he was too late. That murder had already been done and the assassins escaped into the poison night of weird shadows. At every turn he might meet them, might ride straight upon their bloody knives and ready guns. But life meant only one thing to Neal to-night. There was only one urge. He must find Señorita Maria. If she were alive he would make a way to her. If she were dead what a damnable blank, sickening chaos it would be! Nothing would matter.

Far up the road came the sound of galloping horses. He stood aside, concealed in the black

shelter of the jungle. The soldiers galloped by—a dozen of them—officers, their swords rattling against their saddles.

Neal rode on. Again he turned out. Voices this time, angry, half drunk, quarreling voices. Soldiers on foot. They, too, passed.

The moon was still not quite gone when he emerged upon the open plateau in front of the hacienda. There was nothing astir in the open space. The hacienda was still and showed no lights.

Possibly the attack had been abandoned, or had been merely a rumor. A little flare of hope lighted Neal's feeling of dull fatality. After all she might be sleeping safely in her chamber yonder, with the sweet scent of gardenias blowing through her window.

But as he galloped toward the wall, the hope died. The gate was wide open, torn from its hinges and flung broken beside the entrance.

Neal jumped from his horse and entered through the archway. In the dim, weird light he saw the doors and windows of the hacienda were all open—and the house silent.

He stopped to listen. Distantly he thought he caught the sound of human voices. Then stillness again.

He moved along the path as though walking in a dream through a deserted city. His foot struck something that made him recoil. It was a body.

He bent over and peered at the dead man. It was the jefe of the guard.

There were other dark things like this across the path, strewn along the edge of the garden. Bodies. A night-marish horror gripped him, but among the scattered dark figures was a bit of white—a woman's dress. He ran to her and stooped over. It was one of the servant girl's; a dark splotch on the walk. Her throat had been cut.

It was not merely loot they had come for here; but they had taken terrible vengeance on Señor Valdez and his followers for their loyalty to the government.

Neal walked on toward the house, gripped by horror beyond comprehension. A city of dead with the weird faint moon's gray light on the white walls and dark doorways.

He passed through the arched entrance, cluttered by loot that had been broken and abandoned. Through the dark hall he felt his way. Twice his foot touched dead bodies, and he stooped and touched them to be sure it was not—she. Out in the patio were more discarded loot that had been flung down from the verandas above. The doors of all the chambers up there were open—mere blank splotches in the wall.

Were they all dead? Or did some escape?

“A cigarette, señor?” Neal whirled, startled by

the voice. It was a man half propped against the pepper tree.

“Who are you?” Neal approached.

“One of the servants they thought dead,” he replied.

Neal lighted a match, bent over and looked at the fellow’s face and dress.

“One of the robbers,” he said.

“No, no,” protested the wounded man. “I am a loyal servant of Señor Valdez.”

“Save your lies for the devil.”

“Merciful God!” wailed the fellow. “You are not going to kill me?”

“No,” said Neal. “I’ll leave you to others. Tell me what happened.”

“We got ’em when they weren’t ready,” the fellow boasted. “But the devils fought even then. Killed ten or fifteen of the glorious army of freedom. They thought I was one and left me. But I came to directly.”

“What of Señor Valdez?” Neal’s throat felt parched.

“They got him, too,” said the revolutionist cheerfully.

“And—and”—Neal choked—“Señorita Maria?”

“Ah,” the man had started puffing his cigarette. “El Capitan Espinosa had spoken for her.” Then bitterly: “Whether one fights for the freedom or

for the damned government the capitans get their pick first."

There are a few people whose every resource of muscle and brain and nerve may be poured into one purpose. Neal was of that sort. The weird night, the blind hate, the horror of the silent dark strewn with dead bodies left him, as though blown away by a sudden puff of wind.

He was instantly wary, resourceful, purposeful. He lighted a match and bent over the wounded revolutionist.

"How badly are you hurt, my friend?"

"Oh," exclaimed the fellow, recognizing him in the flare of the match, "Señor Ashton."

"Yes, and you?"

"I smoke your cigarettes and eat your good beef this evening."

"So," and Neal felt luck was breaking with him. "You are one of Señor Marquard's men?"

"*Si, si.*"

"I am a friend of the señor general," said Neal. "Tell me how you are hurt and I will help you."

"My leg is broken below the knee. There is a bump on my head and a cut in my left shoulder. But it amounts to nothing."

"Put your arm about my neck. I'll help you to my horse and get you to a doctor."

Two or three times Neal had thought he heard

voices, half whispered, excited voices. No doubt it was some of the servants slipping back to see if the danger was passed. Those who had resisted and those found in the house had been killed. But of course most of the people on the ranch had certainly gone in hiding and had not been pursued.

"How is that?" said Neal lifting the wounded man on his one sound foot. "Can you stand?"

"*Si, si.*"

There was a movement along the veranda above. A tall figure covered in a long black wrap stole stealthily to the rail and leaned over and peered down into the dim murk of the patio.

"We better hop along now," Neal said in English. "They'll be coming back directly. Which way did General Marquard go?"

"To the west, señor.."

Neal had no intention of taking him to rejoin his company but had merely used that strategy to learn what he must know.

Neal got him on his horse and mounted into the saddle. The fellow was behind and could hold on very well.

"I will take you to my ranch," said Neal, turning east. "You will be safe there, and your wound can be attended to."

"*Muy bien,*" exclaimed the fellow gratefully. His only desire was for a place to sleep and get well.

"I am not a friend of Carranza's," said Neal,



“but it need not be known that you are a revolutionist. They will ask no questions at my ranch.”

“The señor is an own brother to the most blessed saint.” The rough fellow spoke with devout gratitude.

Neal rode along at an easy gait. While he hated Espinosa he was glad in a way that Señorita Maria had fallen into his hands rather than some others. Espinosa wished to marry her, for he wanted to get possession of her father's ranch. While he would stop at no brutality to force her, if it became necessary, at first he would pose as her protector and try to persuade her to marry him. That meant, thought Neal, that he had a little time—possibly several days in which to attempt her rescue. He was not rushing blindly now at death. He was scheming with all the cleverness of desperation.

“I am no friend of Carranza's,” Neal again repeated as they turned down toward the Ranch of the Thorn, “but I am a friend of Señorita Valdez. And I am no friend of your Capitan Espinosa. Tell me which way they went and where I will most probably overtake them. I must find her.”

“Ah, señor,” muttered the half-conscious peon, “it is always either the heart or the dinero that lead men to death. With you it is the heart. I do not blame you. The señorita, I saw her once—and I swear by the saints she is worth dying a thousand times for. I do not know where you will find them—

but this I heard. Word came yesterday that the hated Carranza will try to flee. They expect him to try to escape by Veracruz. When the word came the señor general said we must ride west along the railroad. I think they expect to be on watch for the train."

"Very good." Neal felt this was rare information—almost providential. "You know the country. If Señor Marquard intended to attack the presidente's train, where would you guess he would lie in wait?"

"Ah, I remember now." The fellow had a flicker of caution. "You swear you are not Carranzista."

Neal made the sign—and swore.

"I will not tell the Carranzistas what you tell me."

"I heard the señor general mention the Cañon of the Moon. It is ten miles beyond Velasco."

The gray streaks of coming daylight mottled the east as Neal and Blanco rode out from the hacienda.

"You can bring the horses back from Cordoba," said Neal. "I'm taking the train toward Mexico City."

"No, suh," replied Blanco positively. "I ain't gwine to bring no hosses back. You think I's gwine to run that ranch with these heah rebels shootin' up all the woodwork, includin' the plaster? If you's gwine up to Mexico City to have a good time, so's I."

"But Blanco, I'm not going to Mexico City. I am

going, as the poet says, right into the jaws of death. I may not have a very good time.”

“Well, I reckon you’ll need somebody to snatch you out. I’ll go along. When it comes to runnin’, I’m a powerful good helper.”

They left the horses at Cordoba and took the evening train for Velasco.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### ON THE TRAIL

THERE is no color line in Mexico, and just then Neal was perfectly willing to forget there ever had been one in Missouri. He was glad enough to have Blanco sit beside him in the first-class coach.

Neal had been in great danger every day since he took possession of the Ranch of the Thorn, but somehow it had not impressed him deeply. He had gone about his work without any special consciousness of risk. He had never spent much time worrying over what might happen to him. But now he was going deliberately, swiftly, straight into danger, and he knew it. It is one thing to know one has a chance to get hurt, and quite another to know one has a very slim chance not to get hurt.

As the train thumped along, already climbing the grade into the mountains, Neal's eyes searched the passengers in the car, the train crew, looked out of the window, and then back to Blanco at his side.

"Do you see anything wrong about this car?" he asked in an undertone.

"You bet I does." Blanco was glistening with black solemnity.

"What?"

"It's goin' the wrong way."

Neal grinned. Even in the tenseness of danger, his mind was not obsessed with gloom.

"I mean," he said, "do you see anything unusual in this car?"

Blanco nodded. "I sees about fourteen of these here revolutionists with pistols in their shirts and knives in their britches."

"And the train crew is worried. They are on the jump at every sound. They are afraid the train will be wrecked."

Blanco gave a start. "Let's get off."

"We can't," said Neal. "Anybody that should jump off this train now would get shot in the back."

The engine rumbled on, the wheels clicked over the joints in the rails. Through the jungle along the streams the broken foothills of the mountains slipped by in the dark.

"Does you mind," Blanco touched Neal timidly on the elbow, "tellin' me just what it is we is goin' after?"

"We are going after Señorita Valdez." Neal's mouth shut hard.

"And whar is she?"

"Somewhere in these mountains, the prisoner of Espinosa."

"Good Lawd!" Blanco's forehead showed drops of sweat. "I'd ruther try to take a lamb away

from a Bengaul tiger, than a lady from that devil. We shoah enough is headed for trouble."

"Yes," agreed Neal. "And the worst of it, Espinosa is now a captain in the revolution, and he has told his men that I am a friend of Carranza's. If they take us our lives will be worth about as much as two boiled beans planted in a hill."

There was a shrill whistle. Everybody in the car started nervously. There was a tension, an apprehension that feared danger in every move. The country knew the revolution had broken in the north, and the flames might leap out anywhere at any time.

"What's that?" Blanco's mouth opened wide, his black hands clutched the back of the seat in front.

"Nothing, except we are stopping at Velasco."

Velasco is a little mountain town of seven or eight hundred regular inhabitants and four or five thousand irregular ones. If the census should be taken just as the train comes in, and included the venders of carved sticks, tortillas, dulces, boiled eggs and roasting ears, together with the stray dogs, the population would be well into the thousands.

It was nine o'clock in the evening when Neal and Blanco got off the northbound train, and were immediately set upon by women with pans and baskets and plates of food, and by wrinkled old men with curios, canes and umbrellas.

Neal ran his eye over them and picked one that

he guessed might be most communicative, an Indian girl, mixed with lighter blood, of peon class, but with an intelligent, good-natured face. She carried a bark tray of bead work—her own and her grand-ma's handiwork—which she was offering for sale.

“Blanco,” Neal said in English, “I am going to talk to that girl with the beads. You draw all the rest of this mob off, by pretending to want to buy everything. Buy a little from everybody that gets to you.”

In a moment the negro was hemmed in five deep with venders trying to get to him. He was grinning from ear to ear, and joshing, and bantering, hugely happy.

Neal had got the Mexican girl a little to one side—two or three others thrust things at him, but he waved them away.

“Señorita,” his voice was soft as a high-bred Spaniard's, “tell me how you make the beads.” Her eyes widened with interest and she began to talk very rapidly.

“I'll take this string.” He bought the one she held in her hand. “And this. How much?”

“Four pesos, señor, *muchas gracias.*”

“Señorita,” Neal's voice dropped to a low confidential pitch, “did soldiers pass through here to-day?”

The girl looked swiftly about her, and then back

to Neal and frowned doubtfully. He was not only a generous señor, but a very handsome one, and she wanted to please.

"It is all right, señorita." Neal guessed these people would be revolutionists. Mountain people usually are. "I am a friend of Señor General Marquard's."

"*Si, si,*" she ducked her head with a quick nod. "They pass over there," she pointed south, "about four o'clock. Some come to buy frijoles and tortillas."

"Do you know where they camp?"

"One who come to our casa said they camp ten kilometers west."

"In the Cañon of the Moon?"

"*Si, si, señor.*" Her eyes brightened with relief that he knew already.

Neal started and turned away. She touched his arm.

"Would not the señor like to buy this string of beads also? *Muy bonito*—for his sweetheart. Only two pesos."

Neal dropped two more silver dollars in her hands.

"Keep them for yourself."

She gave him a flirting look with her eyes.

"Your sweetheart thanks you, señor. You are more generous than El Capitan Espinosa."

"Was Espinosa here?" Neal turned back quickly.



"*Si, si*—he beg peeg! He think he can kess everybody."

"What time was he here?"

"About six o'clock, after the rest had gone."

"Was he alone?"

"No—no. Four soldiers with him with many guns on them."

"Was there no *señora* or *señorita* with them?"

She shook her head and rounded her lips as in a pout.

"Is the *señor* pursuing the *señorita*?"

Neal did not answer, but asked sharply:

"Did you hear Espinosa mention a *señorita*?"

She nodded and turned her head with an impudent sort of flirtation.

"Yes. He say to me: 'Your lips are sweet, but not so sweet as the beautiful *Señorita Maria*.'"

"The dog!" The exclamation of hate escaped Neal.

The girl lifted her brows.

"And you hate him, too?"

"Yes," replied Neal savagely.

She came a step nearer him—her face was just under his chin—glanced quickly about and spoke low:

"Then I tell you where he camp. Just this side of where the *ferrocarril*—the railroad—enters the Cañon of the Moon there is a great black rock on the south. He camps behind that rock."

Blanco was just concluding his tenth purchase,

a dozen bananas this time, when Neal pushed through the crowd of venders and caught him by the arm.

“Drop the stuff!” he ordered. “Come.” They pushed their way clear and struck off up the railroad into the dark.

“Blanco,” Neal said solemnly, “if you have ever hankered to die in a good cause your chance is coming to meet you to-night.”

## CHAPTER XXIX

### THE PRESIDENTE'S SPECIAL

**B**ERNARD WILLIAMS had walked completely around the square of the Zocolo four times, pushing his way through the gesticulating, staccato crowds. Mexico City was in a ferment. Rumor spilled everywhere and increased the foaming uncertainty. It was known that six of the States had definitely joined the revolution, and perhaps others. It was suspected the minister of war was on the point of deserting Carranza.

All the windows of the National Palace were alight—there were cabinet meetings, consultations of political leaders, and the coming and going of generals.

Carranza, so the rumor went on the street, was still at his presidential desk up there in the center wing, laying plans for the annihilation of the revolutionists. But as none of the arrogant presidente's plans had succeeded before, the crowds shrugged their shoulders, and laid wagers on his head.

Obregon and his army of Yaqui Indians from the North were very near the city—just outside, the rumor said. Many thought the capital would fall to-morrow.

Bernard Williams agreed with them. He was certain Carranza could not hold on more than four days at best. The big bulbous nose swelled with anger. He gouged his finger nails into his palms, and cursed under his breath as he shoved his way once more to the entrance of the Palacio National.

For days Williams had used every stratagem and almost every peso in his effort to get to Carranza. The presidente had promised three times that he would sign the concession very soon. But to-night Williams still carried the papers in his inner pocket unsigned.

He stood by the big arched entrance through which machines came and went and soldiers clanked back and forth.

“A million—five million just there.” He put out his big hand and clutched as though the money were in the air beside him. “And then the whole thing to go up like that,” he snapped his fingers, “for the lack of a signature. By hell,” he was almost crazed by his impending loss, “I’ll get to him yet or commit murder.”

Three generals in gorgeous uniforms came down and a dozen minor officers with major decorations crowded around them. A score or more of important-looking gentlemen came hurrying along at the same time. There was a jam in getting out of the entrance. A machine honked and honked, trying to make its way through—the generals and

the high-hatted statesmen crowded to one side. Two of the generals were jammed close to Bernard Williams.

"Si," one of them was saying to the other in an undertone. "From the castle of Chaultepec at eleven o'clock."

The jam passed. The rumor spread that Carranza had not been in the palace after all, and the crowd began to scatter.

Williams, turning aside, was wondering what that, "From castle at eleven o'clock," meant, when a young American ran into him.

"Hello, Williams." It was a reporter from a New York newspaper. "Hear the latest?"

"No—what is it?"

"The Kingdom of the Ass has fallen." The reporter grinned irreverently. "They are making up a special down in the yards now. Carranza and all his cohorts, including a lot of the girls, are going to beat it from the castle at eleven o'clock, and hit the line for Veracruz, while the going is good. They have a ship there waiting for him. And between me and you," the reporter punched Williams with his elbow, "I've got a tip that the old boy is taking all the real money of the republic with him—merely leaving his paper currency."

The news strung Williams' nervous system on a network of barbed wire.

"I'm going to be on that special," added the

reporter, "or die in the attempt. My Lord, what a scoop!"

Williams felt the papers in his pocket. Even yet Carranza's signature would make them legal.

"So am I," he said, grabbing the reporter by the arm so as not to get lost from him. "How will we do it?"

The reporter had got several good stories out of Williams and felt that company at one's funeral would not be a bad thing anyway.

"Hanged if I know, but stick to me. I usually get there."

They got out of the crowd and the reporter grabbed the door of a car that slowed up at the curb, jerked it open, and shoved Williams in.

"*La Estacion Veracruz,*" he ordered the driver.

The machine shot out, miraculously dodging pedestrians that scurried about the street and other cars that skittered wildly here and there.

The station loomed up, a solid, imposing structure of English build, speaking of a permanence of rule and dividends that seemed strangely out of place in the wild night.

In the yards engines puffed and backed with the click of couplings as coaches were shoved together.

"This way." The reporter dodged through the gate, unheeding the vociferous protests of the guard. Williams followed close on his heels. They raced down a side track to where a half dozen coaches

were attached to an engine. The reporter gave them a hurried inspection.

"Wrong!" He cut off across the yards to where another train was being made up, a mixed train of box cars and second-class coaches.

"Wrong again!" For a minute he stood baffled.

"Good Lord, I can't afford to miss that special. Where in the devil is it?"

There was a ringing of bells, an engine came puffing up a side track on the far side of the yard. It was backing in as though heavily loaded.

The reporter leaped across the rails, dodged ahead of two moving engines and made a run for this last train.

There was a long string of cars, five Pullmans, three day coaches, three freight cars. But none of them were lighted.

"Hurry," the reporter called back over his shoulder, "they are about to pull out on the main track."

The two men were alongside the train when the bell signaled to start. The reporter saw through the darkened windows of the Pullman figures moving hurriedly back and forth.

"We've got it!" he exclaimed. "Make a jump for it. As well get killed one way as another."

The vestibules of two Pullmans were still open, and other belated figures with grips and bundles came hurrying down the tracks and piled in. A

lordly looking man in a top hat hurriedly mounted the steps.

“Now!” the reporter leaped on. Williams followed, his foot on the lower step, his hand on the rail.

The guard stopped them. Demanded in a hissing curse to know who they were.

The reporter replied in a hissing curse for him to get out of their way.

“We,” he said imperiously, “are the owners of the ship on which the presidente is to escape.”

It was no time to examine passports—the guard let them by.

The bell clanged more loudly. Two whistles—and the long train pulled slowly from the yard, gathered speed, and in twenty minutes the turbulent city of the Montezumas was left weltering in its own destruction, while the presidente and his party sped toward the east and the sea.



## CHAPTER XXX

### STRATEGY WINS

THAT must be the Cañon of the Moon." Neal stopped and pointed ahead to where the twisting, climbing railroad crawled into the gap between two very steep mountains darkly outlined against the star-flecked sky. "And there," Neal looked off south until his eyes made out a blacker shape against a dark mountainside, "is the big rock."

"Mabbe so, mabbe so." Blanco sat down on an iron rail and panted for breath. Ten miles of steady climbing is trying on lungs.

"And them devils," said the big negro lugubriously, "are lyin' all around there thick as alligators in a bayou."

Neal's eyes were measuring the distance and searching for some way of approach. They were up now five or six thousand feet above sea level. It was a helter-skelter world of shadowy cañons, dark chasms, and broken mountains. To the east the dim starlight world fell away into a great, formless abyss. To the south the gaunt outline of Orizaba stood out against the stars. It was still— weirdly still. Blanco's doleful voice broke the silence:

“Cheer, for we’ll nevah march to victory,  
Cheer, for we’ll nevah hear the bloomin’ cañons, roar,  
Cheer——”

“Shut up!” Neal snapped sharply. The thing sounded too cussedly probable to be funny.

“Come on.” He left the railroad and turned to the south along the mountainside toward the big rock.

After scrambling through chaparral and over rocks, and gashing themselves with cactus, they came upon a narrow road that led up somewhere from below. Neal stooped and felt the ground. It was freshly broken. Horses’ hoofs! They were on the right track. The revolutionists had passed this way.

He touched Blanco and signaled for silence and caution. It was not needed. If Blanco could keep his teeth from hitting there was no danger of his making a noise.

Neal slipped forward stealthily as though stalking a tiger—it was more dangerous. This was Espinosa’s camp, and if they fell into the hands of Espinosa they would live just long enough to see the sun rise.

Neal was acutely conscious of the danger; but he did not think of it as danger, but of failure. All the dull pattern of years of placid safety in Buckeye Bridge had been broken up and melted into the fiery passion for the beautiful Maria. All

his life seemed poured into the one purpose of saving her from Espinosa. He must be wary and cunning for her sake. But he kept his hand on his gun; he'd rather die fighting than blindfolded with his back against a rock.

The wind rose restlessly from somewhere in the shadowy depths below and came with a brief swirl and then passed on and died. A scream tore the night. Neal jumped and Blanco started to cry out, but choked it back to a gurgle. After all it was only one of those raucous-voiced night birds of the tropics which sound like lost souls entrapped.

The road climbed toward the big rock, not two hundred yards away, and the shelter of trees fell away so they might be seen.

Neal stopped. It was foolish to walk right straight upon death. What could be gained by it? And yet Señorita Maria was there, the prisoner of that brute. He ground his teeth and went on a dozen steps.

"Stop!" Four soldiers rose up from the side of the road.

"*Buenas noches, señor.*" Neal was astonished at his own coolness.

They were caught. They would be shot here or taken to Espinosa. Neal meant if strategy failed to run for it, and touched Blanco's foot with his as a signal to follow his lead.

"Who is it?" asked the guard. Few revolution-

ists have patience or ability to drill their men to strict military discipline. It is pretty much a matter of hit and miss. These were not trained soldiers.

"A friend of General Marquard's," replied Neal readily, "with a message about the Carranza train."

The guards were much excited. Was Carranza really running away? Was the train coming? Would there be loot on it?

"The message," said Neal taking a cigarette from his pocket and lighting it, "is only for the general." In the flare of the match he got a glimpse of his four captors. They were capable-looking fellows and had good guns, and were not off their guard.

The leader asked the fellow beside him what he thought. The fellow replied dubiously.

"We'll take you to el capitan," said the leader, "and he'll send the message for you."

"The message," repeated Neal decisively, "is for General Marquard alone. It comes from General Obregon and must not be delayed."

The guards parleyed in an undertone for a moment again still in doubt.

"Anyway," said Neal at a venture, "el Capitan Espinosa would be very angry at being disturbed."

"Si," agreed one of the guards, "it is so."

They were impressed by Neal's knowledge of the name of their capitan and his habits.

"The señor general," said the leader, "is on the side farther west. I will go with you."

"*Gracias*, señor, it would be most kind," replied Neal, "but I do not wish to make trouble for you. If you should leave the guard without permission would not that endanger your life?"

The leader was again stumped and consulted his fellows.

"*Gracias*, señor," Neal deliberately started away with an utterly nonchalant air, yet with his hand on his gun. "We'll find the way."

Two of the guards followed them down the road evidently in doubt whether to let them go, but reluctant to risk detaining them.

Neal slackened rather than quickened his pace, but appeared not to notice they were followed. When they got back to the railroad he turned west toward the cañon, and the two soldiers, seemingly convinced now that they were really messengers seeking Marquard, turned back toward their post.

"We'll go a little way," said Neal, "and hide until daylight and then double back. There is no chance to do anything in the dark unless we know the lay of the land. Here," indicating a spot where the railroad turned into the cañon, "is a good place to hide." They were still in sight of the big rock where Espinosa's camp slept. Behind a clump of bushes a couple of rods north of the track they stretched out on the ground, Blanco to drop to sleep in five minutes, Neal to listen and to plan.

Lying there on his back looking up at the stars he took stock of his chances to rescue Señorita Maria and found them exceedingly slender. If Espinosa held her a prisoner in his camp, she would be closely guarded, for the big brute would take no chances of losing her now that she was in his hands. It was two men, both strangers to the country, against a hundred who knew every foot of ground for many miles. And if Espinosa had sent her away to some rendezvous in the mountains it would be all the more hopeless, for added to the danger would be the difficulty of finding her.

Neal closed his eyes. He could see her as she stood before him in the garden that evening when she talked of the nightingale and the hawk. The flare of her personality, the exquisite fineness of her body and spirit, her perversity, and inimitable loveliness made her stand out in his consciousness as vividly as though she stood beside him. She was the very heart, the essence of all the night, of the day, of the winds and perfumes, of the whole universe.

For that brute to lay his hands upon her! Neal sat up, his muscles cording until they ached. Never before had he known hate to the very bottom, nor wanted to kill a man.

The night stillness was smote by a clink, a sound as though a hammer struck steel. It came again. Loud and vigorous, not a hundred yards

up the track. Neal put out his foot and kicked Blanco in the ribs.

"They are getting ready for Carranza," he whispered as the negro roused up. "Tearing up the tracks."

"Yeah," responded Blanco, "that gives us another way to get killed. Carranza's soldiers will reckon we put the ties on the track."

"Espinosa on the east, Marquard on the north, and Carranza coming from the west," summed up Neal. "We do seem pretty well boxed. But let's lie low and see what we can see for a while."

Daylight came, and then the sunlight struck glintingly along the curving threads of steel below.

"They have done a good job of it," Neal said. "They've torn up about ten rods of track."

"What's 'at?" The big negro rolled his eyes and opened his wide mouth. "'Pears to me I heard a bulgine whistlin'."

"You did," Neal nodded. "A train is coming down the cañon. Suppose it is Carranza's?"

"Lawd forgive all my sins if it is," prayed Blanco. "For I's got a hunch, a mighty strong hunch, we's goin' to be dead before that sun is an hour high."

## CHAPTER XXXI

### THE CANON OF THE MOON

FOR hours the presidente's special had run cautiously, but continuously, stopping only once or twice for water. Everything had gone smoothly. They had crossed the wide, mountainous plateau, leaving Mexico City and its turbulent revolutionists far behind.

Daylight had come and sunrise. The long train turned down the grade which drops five thousand feet in thirty miles. Perhaps no man's eyes ever beheld a more magnificent spectacle than that which unrolled as the train crept down this daringly built road.

"See, señor." A high-bred Spanish gentleman with a pointed beard and dark, intelligent eyes touched Carranza's arm and pointed out of the window—chasms and cañons, and mountains with serried ranks of pines, and dashing waterfalls. "Is it not magnificent?"

Carranza nodded, but his face showed only blank abstraction. They were at breakfast, and he was still bitterly resentful at America and Europe, at the revolution, at fate itself. That such a great



ruler as he should be so little appreciated was damnable.

“Yes,” he said gloomily. “It is a great railroad, but they have not paid taxes.”

The dining car was filling—secretaries, high officers, generals and colonels, and women still wearing evening finery. The special carried about three hundred adherents of Carranza’s. As the American reporter had predicted there were ladies present.

They had drunk a good deal but slept little, so all of them looked a bit ashy in the early morning. Yet, having gone so far in perfect safety, their apprehensions had begun to evaporate. Some one told a story, and laughter broke out. The spirits of the dining car began to lighten. They were going to get away to Europe, Spain, France, Italy or South America. Life was not at all unbearable. Didn’t the car ahead carry heavy boxes guarded by half a trainload of picked soldiers? In those boxes was gold—all the gold of the republic—sixteen million dollars! Ah, yes, there were good times ahead. The spirits of the breakfasters rose. They called for morning drinks, they exclaimed over the scenery, then damned Mexico and thanked the saints they were leaving it.

It was a hastily made up nondescript train, but included about all the conveniences a presidente and his friends might want. There were two cars filled with saddle horses if they should need to ride. There

was a flat car upon which the presidente's three private automobiles were parked. There was an abundance of food and drinks, boxes of jewelry and trunks of hastily gathered clothes. And it was all protected by more than a hundred and fifty loyal soldiers, with generals enough to command an army division.

Among the motley refugees were four Americans—three of them reporters, each of whom had fancied his clever stratagem in boarding the special meant a record-breaking scoop for his paper. The fourth was a large, red-necked man with a nose that swelled at the end like an adder's head. And of the four he was the only one who had not slept.

All night Bernard Williams had been importuning generals and colonels and secretaries and subsecretaries, and even señoritas or señoras with hiccups, to take him into Carranza. Each of them had promised him an interview as soon as the presidente arose.

One, a private secretary to Carranza, to whom Williams had made lavish promises of fat positions in his American companies, came in as the train began its descent down the long grade.

"Señor," the secretary bowed, "the presidente is at breakfast. He will see you now."

Bernard Williams got up so quickly he stepped

on the feet of the reporter in the seat beside him. Luck at last had turned to him. Ah, persistence and bravery did it! A surge of hope made him almost jaunty.

“So long, fellows. What shall I ask the presidente for you?”

“Ask him,” said the reporter whose instep had been bruised by Williams’ big, scrambling feet, “if he wants you both buried in the same grave.”

Bernard Williams followed the secretary forward to the dining car, his heart thumping in time to the clicking of the descending train. His effort and money and long scheming had not been wasted after all. Carranza was still presidente, and his signature would make the concession as binding as though he were not eloping with the entire contents of the treasury.

The secretary indicated that Williams was to wait, standing at the end of the dining car, while he took the papers to the presidente.

Carranza looked down at the document the secretary obsequiously put before him, and scowled.

“What is this?”

“The most worthy concession, señor,” said the secretary, “of the loyal friend of the government, Señor Bernard Williams.”

“Ah, yes,” Carranza spoke absent-mindedly, “I believe I did promise to sign this. What is it about?”

But it doesn't matter now anyway. Give me a pen."

The secretary handed him the fountain pen which Williams had sent along with the paper.

Carranza stretched the document out on the table, found the line on which he was to sign and took the pen in his fingers.

Bernard Williams swallowed and held his breath. It would be over in ten seconds.

"Señor," the man with the pointed beard at his table, touched the presidente's arm again, "this is the most wonderful scene of the entire trip."

The presidente laid the pen on the paper and turned to the window.

"What is it, papa?" A señorita came across the dining car and stood beside the man with the pointed beard.

"The Cañon of the Moon," he replied.

Williams breathed a curse. You never, never could get them pinned right down to do it now. Oh, well, two minutes more, five—what difference? It was sure now. And yet he watched uneasily the viewing of the scenery. He knew that man with the pointed beard and the girl beside him, and hated them.

The train dropped swiftly into the cañon. The steep mountain sides, covered by serried ranks of pine, rose up steeply on both sides, so steeply that the cañon was still in deep shadows.

A jerk—the engine's sharp whistle, the squeak of brakes. The train ground to a sudden ominous stop. All of them leaped to their feet and asked one question:

“What is the matter?”

## CHAPTER XXXII

### THE FLIGHT

FROM their hiding place Neal and Blanco listened to the gathering roar as the train thundered through the cañon toward the broken track before them.

"I got a hunch," Blanco shook his black head with a doomed air, "dem Carranza soldiers won't leave enough of us for these heah revolutionists to shoot at."

"Cheer up," said Neal, grinning. "They are not the best shots in the world and we have good legs."

But glancing back down the tracks he saw at that moment a detachment of revolutionists—Espisona's men—lining up across the road to the east.

They were trapped sure enough, and Blanco's hunch looked like a real premonition.

The train came in sight—a long, heavy train of sleepers and day coaches and box cars and flat cars, running cautiously.

Suddenly the sharp whistle and the squeak of brakes. The engineer had seen the torn track in time. The train came to a stop scarcely two

hundred yards from where Neal and Blanco crouched hidden in the clump of bushes.

Heads appeared at windows, soldiers and guns bristled in the open doors of the box cars. The trainmen got down and came forward to view the gap in the road. The people began to ooze out of the coaches, a trickle at first; then when there seemed to be no danger they poured out like ants from a disturbed hill. Men in silk hats, and glittering uniforms, women in the flimsy finery of evening clothes, soldiers, porters, the large fat cook from the dining car. They were silent at first, apprehensive. But when no enemy appeared they began to talk and gesticulate. Their sharp, excited comments reached Neal and Blanco.

"I wonder," mused Neal, "just what is old Marquard's game. Surely he is strong enough to take the train."

He was looking off up the north side of the cañon, trying to discover some movement among the pine woods.

A white puff of smoke—a second's wait, and then a boom that echoed across the cañon.

Instantly the passengers scurried like frightened ants, running this way and that. The shell had plowed up the earth fifty yards beyond the train.

The soldiers formed in line hurriedly and aimed their guns up the cañon side toward the invisible enemy.

Another long boom! The shell dropped clear of the train, down the track this time not far from Neal and Blanco.

The soldiers fired up into the woods. Then came the rattle and scattering bang, bang, bang of rifles answering from the mountainside. The bullets spattered about the train.

The wildest confusion broke out. Carranza, with two guards and several civilians, came out of the car, gesticulating excitedly. Men with axes hurried to obey. They hammered back the doors of the box cars, and horses leaped out snorting and flinging their manes.

The animals were quickly saddled. Shots came intermittently from above, but were not very fatal. Only two men were killed and four or five others wounded.

"More likely to hit us," said Neal. "Look, they are breaking open the boxes of gold." There was a rush to the car, and gold was spilled on the ground, on the steps of the car, across the rails. Men and women were grabbing—filling their pockets, holding up their skirts to be loaded. Even soldiers left the line to fill their pockets with the gold.

"I don't see," thought Neal, "why Marquard does not rush them. He could take the whole bunch now with a hundred men."

But the firing had not increased. Every few



minutes the small cannon sent a shell thumping down, but each time it missed.

“They are getting on horses,” said Neal. “They are going to try to beat it through the mountains. And look there! Those men are trying to get an automobile off that flat car. By thunder—those are Americans!”

“Bless the Lawd!” exclaimed Blanco.

“They are going to try to run it back up the railroad,” surmised Neal.

“Let’s make a run for it and jine them,” proposed Blanco. “I’d as soon die runnin’ as lyin’ down.”

“No.” Neal stopped him. “Don’t run, but walk. Everybody shoots at a running man. We’ll just mosey up there as though we belong.”

The Carranza followers weer too excited to pay any attention to a couple of unarmed stragglers joining their party.

Neal climbed on the box car beside the automobile. The three sweating Americans also took them for fellow passengers of the ill-fated special.

“Hello,” a white-haired chap said to Neal. “Didn’t know you was on. Lend a hand here—let’s skid this thing down. We got enough gas to get her away from here.”

“We are American newspaper men. Put up a white flag. Maybe they’ll lay off us.”

Blanco was pushing and pulling with all his

might; he let go and jumped every time the cannon boomed.

"I's got a hunch," the negro said as the car moved down the skids, "that I'll nevah live to ride in that thing."

"Pile in, fellows," ordered the reporter as the car came to some sort of balance on the side of the dump. "I'm going to try to climb her out of here."

Blanco, who had disappeared, came rushing out of the dining car with a Pullman tablecloth.

"Will dis do for a white flag?" His teeth chattered. "It shoah is the littlest tablecloth I evah saw."

"Get on top of the car and begin to wave it," ordered Neal. "And," he turned to the chap at the wheel, "you better be moving before the crowd down there sees what we are up to, or they'll swamp us."

Blanco was standing up, waving the tablecloth. The cannon boomed again—he dodged. There followed the rattle of rifle shots. Blanco rolled his eyes.

"Good-by, sun—I's got a hunch I'll nevah see you again."

The three reporters and Blanco were in the car. Neal still stood with his foot on the running board looking toward the escaping Carranzistas. The white-haired reporter was pushing on the self-starter.

A large man with a bulbous nose came dashing along the embankment with a paper in his hand.

"Damn it to hell, he got away without signing it after all!" he cried, scrambling into the machine so hastily he fell over a reporter's knees. As he righted himself he saw for the first time the man standing on the footboard. His mouth opened, his face worked. He almost screeched as he thrust jabbingly at Neal.

"There is the man that beat me out of my ranch!"

The car was slantingly on the dump, and Neal was on the lower side. For a minute he looked into Williams' contorted face, and grinned sardonically.

"Get in," ordered the reporter at the wheel as the engine began to hum. "Wait until I've saved your lives before you birds kill each other."

But as the car started to move slowly, Neal made a sudden fierce grab, caught Bernard Williams by the coat collar with both hands and gave a yank that almost upset the machine. He and Williams went tumbling down the embankment as the automobile climbed onto the railroad bed.

With a yelp of despair at the sight of the moving car Williams tried to scramble up the bank. But Neal tripped him.

"No you don't. You go with me to find that precious partner of yours—Espinosa."

Neal looked back. The party on horseback, with

a line of soldiers before and on each side of it, had started up the shoulder of the mountain. Three of the riders were women. And one! He stood staring as though daft. No, it could not be a likeness! It *was* Señorita Maria!

As Williams got to his feet, the automobile was a hundred yards away, gathering speed as it bumped along the ties of the railroad. He turned to curse Ashton, but Neal Ashton was fifty yards in the other direction running desperately after the Carranza party on horseback.

Bernard Williams climbed up the bank and stood teetering on the end of a tie, looking up the track and down, utterly at a loss which way to run.

The small cannon on the side of the mountain boomed and he jumped, slipped and fell, skinning his knee on the iron rail. He got to his feet, his heavy face twisted with pain, cursing blindly all the gods there be, especially those that be over Mexico. Yonder through the timber rode away with the fleeing presidente his one last chance of a fortune. Up there on the mountainside popping away was a very excellent chance for an untimely death. When a man's life achievement is merely a pile of twisted schemes, one solid, unexpected thump of reality may send it crashing down into the cañon of broken things.

Bernard Williams had nothing left—nothing but

his life and his legs. He started to run up the steep grade, panting as he ran. Behind him there was a fresh outburst of rifle fire from the side of the cañon. He looked back and the revolutionists were swarming down from every side upon the train like ants upon a crippled beetle.

Williams stopped, out of wind. No one seemed to be pursuing him. They were too busy. They were pounding at doors of a freight car with the butts of their guns. Two soldiers grabbed up a rock between them and swung it against the unyielding oak door. There was a surging back and forth. The crowd gave way. Somebody had got an ax.

The door was chopped down. Soldiers scrambled over each other to get in. A heavy box rolled from the door and dropped beside the track. They smashed it open and everybody rushed in grabbing, scrambling, fighting. Other boxes were thrown out—twenty or thirty. Soldiers and stranded passengers left behind by the fleeing presidential party swarmed upon them.

“Gold!” Williams’ throat grew dry. His eyes gloated. That reporter was right. Carranza was fleeing with all the gold in the national treasury.

He turned and trotted back down the track, puffing and sweating. Twenty boxes were open. Gold coins spilled upon the ground lay scattered on the gravel roadbed. Soldiers had dropped their guns, thrown them away, and were stuffing their

pockets, knotting the yellow stuff in handkerchiefs, filling their hands. Women left over by the fleeing party, women whose trade was for gold, gathered their laps full of it and went staggering away, where to, they did not take time to think. Men waddled off, their loaded pockets dragging their trousers almost to the losing point, their coats sagging heavily, their hands filled.

Bernard Williams dived in. Nobody took time to ask him any questions or give him any orders. There was plenty of gold for everybody. It was merely a matter of getting away with it. He filled his pockets feverishly. Directly the officers would regain control of their soldiers and the gold would be carried away and buried for the good of the revolution. But now it was a free-for-all.

Loaded in every pocket as much as the cloth would stand, and with thirty pounds more of gold coin tied up in a bag made of his coat he once more started back up the track. Others similarly loaded, were hurrying along in the same direction, hoping they might get to a town and find a train that would take them back to Mexico City.

Bernard Williams made surprising headway for a heavy man. He had, he guessed roughly, nearly twenty thousand dollars on his person. All was not lost. If he only got safely back to Mexico City with this there was much ahead.

When he had climbed as long as his muscles

would endure, he left the track and hid for two hours in a thicket of chaparral. But he did not dare sleep. It was one o'clock in the afternoon when he began to climb again.

By sundown he had left behind all the others who had started toward Mexico City with their stolen treasure. His belief in his luck came back.

"By hell," he stopped and mopped his face on his shirt sleeve. "I am going to make it after all."

The sun was cut off by the higher mountains to the west. The long shadows across the mesas and cañons to the east signaled the coming of darkness. Williams began to look about for a good hiding place for the night.

The road was steep here, and the mountainside almost barren. But ahead yonder a few hundred yards was a dark cluster of cedar in a little sag to the left of the track. He gathered his wind for a final sprint.

But dark came swiftly. The stars were glittering in a black velvet sky before he reached his hiding place. Once he stopped and peered ahead uneasily. It seemed to him there was something on the track—might it be a hand car coming down? He got from between the rails and walked on the ends of the ties. The thing, he decided, was not a hand car. It might be merely a dark splotch of spilled tar on the track or an optical illusion. Anyway

it was beyond his clump of cedar where he would hide for the night.

He found the shelter a good one—a wind break as well as a hiding place. And by wriggling his back in the sand he made for himself a fairly comfortable bed.

He stretched out. But the hip pockets filled with gold coin bothered him. He sat up and emptied them carefully, laying the gold in a pile on a rock near his right hand.

Thank Heaven for a chance to rest from this load. He stretched the cramp in his muscle and started to lie down again, but his back met something—something pointed, round, cold. His blood froze as though his veins were pipes of ammonia. The thing in his back was a gun.



## CHAPTER XXXIII

### IN THE ENEMY'S CAMP

WHEN Neal overtook the fleeing presidential party only a fragment of Carranza's guard remained. Most of the soldiers had scattered in the woods, preferring to take their chances alone. Now that the gold was being left behind why follow Carranza anyway?

Of the thirty or forty who remained loyal, twenty marched behind to protest the presidente from pursuit. Neal joined these. He told them he belonged to the presidential party as an interpreter. They gave him a rifle and he became one of the guard. The going was rough and they had no difficulty keeping up with the horsemen. Anyway Carranza had no desire to outrun the remnant of his guard.

That Neal was in most desperate danger was obvious. Espinosa must be the leader of the attack, and the hunger of Espinosa's heart was to put a knife in Ashton's.

Besides Marquard, who had originally suspected Neal of being in league with Carranza, would be certain of it when he found him among the guard of the fugitive presidente.

And that they would be captured by the revolutionists was about as certain as that a tree will

fall when chopped down. Neal knew that Marquard had a strong following, and the mountains and pueblos and crossroads and ferries would all be in the hands of his people.

No, there was not one chance in ten thousand of their escape. Yet Neal was buoyantly happy. Señorita Maria rode yonder and death stalked behind, and he was between them. This was the supreme romance.

At four o'clock in the afternoon they had made twenty or thirty miles. The country was wild and broken, and they were angling across the foothills toward the sea, where the fleeing presidente hoped to get some kind of boat.

Neal was surprised that they had not long since been overtaken by the revolutionists. Undoubtedly Marquard and Espinosa had enough men to attack them anywhere with safety. Of course they had stayed to loot the train. But for hours he had expected to see them close in pursuit. Yet not a man had appeared.

They had turned down the east slope of a mountain—the way was fairly open and the tired horses were spurred to greater speed. For a mile Neal and his fellow guards had to scramble along almost at a run to keep up.

The party ahead came to a sudden stop.

“What is it?” Neal asked a fellow guard as they came near.

"They have met peons and are asking the way," the soldier replied. The guard came up close.

Carranza and his generals were talking to a half dozen nondescript fellows on foot—peons. The spokesman of the strangers was a squat, heavy fellow, wearing a wide straw hat, dressed in cotton trousers and sandals, with a coarse striped zapote over his shoulders. Both he and his fellows were unarmed. That is, if a Mexican is ever unarmed.

There was something familiar, Neal thought, about that squat Mexican. The movement of his arms, the sound of his voice recalled something.

He had it! It was Marquard in disguise.

The recognition sent Neal's heart pumping so hard he felt the blood in his temples. The wily old fox was leading Carranza into a trap. Neal understood now why they had not been attacked before. Obregon doubtless had ordered that Carranza be captured alive. He had no wish to have the blood of a presidente charged up against him. So Marquard, who hated Carranza because of his murdered father and brother, had purposely failed to capture him alive. The presidente had escaped from his train into the fastness of the mountains.

Now an unarmed peon band met the fleeing party and offered to guide them safely through the mountains and down to the sea, and Marquard, disguised, was the leader of that band!

Neal knew what that meant to Carranza. But

there was no way to prevent it; already the party had accepted the guidance of Marquard and his men. Neal was not much concerned about Carranza. But Señorita Maria and her father, and Neal himself! What of them?

Marquard obviously hated Valdez as a friend of Carranza's. And now he would find Neal marching with Carranza's guard! And Neal was certain now that Espinosa was lurking somewhere not far away in charge of Marquard's whole army.

So wrought up was Neal's mind with the danger ahead, that he stumbled twice over boulders and fell, once bruising his leg, and again skinning his arm. But he was scarcely conscious of the smart, or the blood that trickled down the leg of his trousers.

If he could only get word to Valdez and his daughter to break away from the party. No use to warn Carranza, not while that wily old fox Marquard led the way, his eye on every movement. There was no escape from him.

While Neal still battled in his mind for some loophole that offered a glimmer of hope for him to escape with Señorita Maria, he noticed the party was being led down a narrow peninsula of land that ran out onto a very sea of deep, wide cañons. The neck of land narrowed and narrowed. It was timbered with pine, but glimpses through

the trees both to the right and left showed abysmal shadowy depths on either side.

Night was coming. At the very end, where the narrowed bit of land dropped off sheer into nothingness, they came to an Indian village—a semicircle of a dozen small adobe houses, their backs to the cañon, the doors facing inward. The village had been built no doubt for defense; it could be attacked only on one side and that down the long, narrow ridge along which they had come.

The horsemen had stopped and were looking over the vast cañons with evident uneasiness. Neal and his guard came close before halting. Neal heard the wily old Marquard saying with shakes of the head:

“A thousand pardons, señor, but I missed my way. We should have turned to the east, at the waterfall, ten kilometers back. But it is night now and the way is very dangerous and hard to follow. We must camp here, where the señor presidente will rest in comfort until morning.”

The party assented. They could do nothing else. The presidente took possession of the largest of the houses, a two-room adobe that stood at the end of the village at the edge of the precipitous chasm. Señor Valdez and his daughter were given the one next to it. And the generals and officers were quartered in the others. The soldiers were

to camp at the edge of the pine woods just outside the village where they could guard the only approach.

Marquard and his peons took one of the old abandoned buildings across from the soldiers' camp and built a fire in the earthen oven and began the preparation of supper.

Neal sat by the fire the soldiers were building and looked moodily toward the village. Already it was night, the great wide cañon was full of blackness, and the little adobe village seemed swimming in a vast emptiness of dim starlight.

Neal yet did not know what move would be less dangerous. Only he had marked well the hut in which Señorita Maria had entered. Whatever came he would be on guard there to live or die with her.

He wondered what time the wily Marquard would bring up his troops. Would he kill everybody? Or would they rush the camp? The general had not recognized Neal, at least had not seemed to.

Some sort of supper was improvised; all ate hastily and in almost silence.

Then the village was still and in darkness. The weary fugitives were quickly asleep or at least resting. Fear hung so heavily over some they could not sleep.

The soldiers had stretched out on the pine needles—all asleep but three, posted as sentinels. Neal still sat by the smoldering fire and waited.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### THE AVENGING SHOT

NEAL was waiting for deeper sleep to fall on the camp. Before dark he had sauntered about the village and along the rim of the cañon that hemmed them in on three sides. The most effectual wall in the world is a thousand-foot hole. They were shut in and no mistake. The face of the cañon was almost perpendicular. Not even a mountain goat could go down that wall.

Only at one place, near the north end of the village, did he discover a narrow path that led over the edge of the rim. This path found a perilous way along the face of the wall for fifty yards and there it appeared to end in empty space. Neal guessed it led to a cave or a spring, but he did not dare explore it.

He had watched the horses tied and had fixed in his mind the three he could get most quickly. But among the many impossible plans that he tried out in his mind for the escape of Señorita Maria, this one of riding away was the most hopeless. The woods across the narrow strip of peninsula north of the camp were alive with Marquard's and Espinosa's men. Marquard would take no chances

on Carranza's escape, and Espinosa would run no risk of Señorita Maria slipping through his net. Yet, of course, if all other things failed and it was a last throw with death, Neal would get Señorita Maria and ride for it.

His most feasible plan, however, the one on which he hung most hope, was a direct and frank appeal to Marquard to spare Señor Valdez and his daughter. But Espinosa complicated this plan. Also Marquard would be strongly suspicious of Neal when he discovered his presence in Carranza's camp.

Yet he was determined to try this first. If it failed, he would get warning to Valdez, and when the attack came, would endeavor to slip him and Señorita Maria down the path in a possible chance of hiding. Altogether it was a very desperate situation.

It was deep dark now in the pine woods, and the cañons were seas of inky blackness. The adobe huts, crude ancient symbols of shelter and protection, squatted close to the earth in the vast, infinite stretch of faint starlight.

The peon guides had eaten their supper and their fire burned low. The squat one got up and stirred it and spoke to two of his men, ordering them to go bring more wood.

The two fellows went off slouchingly, saying as they passed the Carranza sentinels, that they were going for wood.



Neal watched their movements closely. Back there within gunshot of the camp were undoubtedly soldiers resting on their guns awaiting orders from their commander. He guessed these two wood gatherers were messengers.

They were gone fifteen minutes. When they returned bearing arms full of dry pine limbs, Neal caught a discrepancy in their size. The two who had gone out were about of a height—as they came back, one stood fully six inches taller than the other, and had huge shoulders and arms.

They threw a few sticks on the fire, and the tall one sat down by Marquard. One of the sticks flared up and Neal got the outline of the big Mexican's head and face. It was Espinosa.

Neal's chance for an appeal to Marquard was gone. If Espinosa knew he was in camp his life would not be worth a pinch of fog. While the two across the way were deep in a low-toned consultation, Neal got up and moved away from the camp of sleeping soldiers. He stopped with his back against the wall of the first adobe house, where he could not be seen in the shadows, yet could watch the movements of Marquard and Espinosa.

They got up directly and approached the three Carranza sentinels on guard. Whether they were already traitors to the fugitive presidente or whether Marquard's low imperative tone frightened them into

silence Neal did not know. But the three silently handed over their guns to Espinosa and marched off into the woods with the squat Marquard.

Things moved swiftly then. Espinosa gave a word to the five revolutionists supposedly sleeping by the fire. They were up instantly and each had found a gun.

Among the pine trees dark forms began moving. Marquard was back with his army, slipping on the sleeping soldiers of the hated Carranza. The skirmish would be brief.

Espinosa left the group by the fire and came down the street toward the adobe house. "He is going for Señorita Maria!" thought Neal.

He passed within ten feet of Neal in the shadow of the wall. Neal drew his gun and slipped after him.

Espinosa heard his step and turned quickly.

"I'm general Marquard's interpreter and secret agent." Neal disguised his voice and spoke in a low, confidential tone. "I will show the señor where the presidente sleeps."

"*Bien!*" Espinosa's suspicion was allayed. "And where Señor Valdez sleeps."

"*Si, si,*" assented Neal. But the big Mexican was on his guard and stepped back for Neal to walk in front. He led the way to the second adobe hut.

"This is where Señor Valdez and Señorita Maria sleep," he announced stepping back from the door.

"I wish to speak to them a moment," said Espinosa. "Stand guard." He stepped up to knock on the heavy wooden door. But before his knuckle touched the wood the round barrel of a pistol touched him in the back.

"Raise your hands!" Espinosa instantly obeyed.

"I am Neal Ashton." The words and the quiet, deadly hate in the tone made the chills play along the back against the muzzle of the gun. "If you don't obey exactly and silently I'll kill you.

"Turn to the right. Go between these houses. Now close to the rim. Not too close, you fool, that is a thousand feet straight down."

Marching him before him, Neal forced the Mexican down the narrow path that he had discovered along the face of the cliff.

Very slowly Espinosa felt his way along that narrow ledge, clinging to the wall with his left hand. He was trembling so his legs were in danger of giving way, for this uncanny devil back of him was dangerous.

The path did not lead to a spring, but to a small cave in the rock wall where the villagers had at times hidden provisions.

Neal took Espinosa's pistol and belt from him and pitched them over into the cañon.

"Sit down—your back this way."

Espinosa felt cautiously with his hands to make sure it was safe to sit down. At last he had settled himself securely on the ledge, his legs sticking out over the abyss.

“Stay there,” ordered Neal, “until I order you released. I’ll leave a guard at the top who will shoot if you start up.”

Neal hurried back up the path to the top. His bluff would hold the frightened Espinosa for a time at least, and now he must get to Marquard at once.

The village was full of dark, silently moving figures. Marquard had taken the sleeping soldiers without a shot—without even arousing Carranza’s friends in the huts.

Neal followed without being questioned. They were all alike in the dark, and they took him for a revolutionist.

They moved toward the lower end of the village—to the large house nearest the point. A low, sharp order. They halted.

Neal was near enough to see the dark figures forming in a semicircle in front of Carranza’s hut. There was an empty space of twenty yards in front of the door. The men in the street became still.

One dark figure crossed that space and stood before the door, a low, squat figure, carrying the

accumulated hate of many wrongs. He raised his fist and knocked on the door.

The street was still, not even a foot shuffling. The knock could be heard a hundred yards. Neal's heart was pounding like the throbbing of a pump.

Slowly the heavy door swung back—a dark gap in the wall—a figure in night robe stood out imperiously.

Neal looked off at the stars, so far, far away that a soul must get lost in the windy spaces of eternity before it reached them. A wind stirred from the darkness of the cañons and went moaning off through the pines to the north.

Twenty heartbeats seemed an age.

“What is wanted?” A voice in the doorway was angry at being disturbed.

The dark, squat man struck a match and held it so the light fell on Carranza's face.

“Only to see how you are resting, señor.”

Twenty guns flamed at once. Their reverberations ripped the wide empty night for a moment, and then stillness and blackness.

“Next,” came the savage command of the squat general.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### SAVED!

THE firing squad shifted a dozen steps to the left and formed in front of the hut of Señor Valdez and Señorita Maria.

Marquard himself stepped up and knocked on the door. It opened, and Señor Valdez stood outlined in the darker shadow of the doorway. Marquard started to strike a match. With a fierce, half-stifled scream, Señorita Maria sprang past her father and stood in front of him.

“You shall not kill him!”

Neal broke the hypnotic nightmare that held him and leaped forward into the open space in front of Señorita Maria.

“Señor Marquard, I have a message for you.”

“Who are you?” the revolutionist demanded angrily.

“Señor Ashton of the Ranch of the Thorn.”

“The message can wait,” said Marquard. “Stand aside, my friend.”

“The message cannot wait,” Neal said emphatically. Turning to Señorita Maria and her father: “Go back into the house, I must speak to the general.” They obeyed and closed the door behind them.

Marquard caught him by the arm and Neal felt the power of the fellow, felt also anger in that grip.

"If this is a trick your life will pay for it."

"Let it be so," replied Neal. "The message is for you alone."

"Withdraw," Marquard ordered his firing squad. They rested their guns and backed away twenty or thirty yards.

"What is it?" He faced Neal. "Interrupting a general's vengeance is dangerous business. Is it about the boy?"

"The boy is well," replied Neal. "I left him sleeping—curled up in my bed. The message is from Obregon." Neal had in his pocket a printed proclamation issued by the general. "He orders," Neal said impressively, "that no unnecessary blood be shed. Those who commit violence will be held to strict account."

"But these are enemies of the republic." Marquard had felt shaky about the death of Carranza. He had intended to kill him regardless of consequences, but now he realized there might be consequences.

"Your enemy is dead," Neal spoke impressively. "Is not that enough?"

"But these are friends of his," protested the squat general.

"Make them friends of yours and Obregon's; then perhaps you will be forgiven for killing Car-

ranza. Señor Marquard," Neal's tone changed to one of friendly appeal, "you are a great fighter—a brave man—you have killed the one man who had wronged you. Señor Valdez never fought you nor the cause. He is unarmed; at your mercy. Señorita Maria is more to me than life. If Señor Valdez and she are attacked I, your friend, shall die with them and little José will cry in the night for his dead friend."

The Mexican's passions are not all hate. They as swiftly run to love and sorrow. The squat general was moved more by the thought of his little José crying over the death of the Señor Ashton than he would have been by the fall of a kingdom.

"I shall spare Señor Valdez and his daughter," Marquard said impulsively, "because my good friend wishes it."

"And the others, señor," pleaded Neal. "Spare them at least until General Obregon can pass judgment on them and absolve you from blame."

"We will see." Marquard sighed. "At least we will wait until to-morrow."

"Shall I not take a guide and a few soldiers and ride with Señor Valdez and Señorita Maria tonight?" Neal knew that by and by Espinosa was going to get up courage enough to creep back up that path—and his arrival would complicate things.



“As the señor wishes.” Marquard called three soldiers and ordered that horses be saddled.

Señor Valdez and Señorita Maria did not know why they were brought from the hut but expected they were to be shot. Nor did they know as they rode away into the pine woods under guard what was to happen to them. Two men rode in front, and two behind. Señorita Maria thought she recognized one of the men who rode behind.

When they had ridden for some miles in safety, Valdez spoke to his daughter:

“Perhaps I was wrong about Señor Ashton. He seems to have saved our lives.”

Her breath came sharply as though the very name stabbed her.

“A traitor,” she said fiercely.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### AN UNEXPECTED REBUFF

THERE are few tortures more intolerable than to be compelled to stay awake when nature cries for sleep. Neal sat stiffly on his horse holding to the saddle while they went on and on and on through the woods. For two nights he had not slept, for two days he had been on the rack. But they did not dare stop now. He had not escaped with Señor Valdez and Señorita Maria. They had only begun to escape—were offered merely a chance. He had to reckon with Espinosa yet. When Espinosa came up from the cliff and found that he and Valdez and the señorita had gone, seven devils would break loose in him. He would even quarrel with Marquard. Yes, Espinosa would be in pursuit, if he was not already on their trail, and they must go as far to-night as human endurance would permit.

At daylight Neal still clutched his saddle and rode numbly ahead. But he saw Señorita Maria reeling on her horse. She had not said a word, but the girl must be at the point of collapse.

Neal called a halt as the sun came up. They

were on a mountain slope with ground covered in pine needles.

“We’ll rest here a while.” The words came thickly. “You stand guard.” He indicated one of the least exhausted soldiers. Neal felt a remote impulse to go forward and help *Señorita Maria* alight, instead he tumbled upon the ground and was himself asleep in half a moment.

Neal was first to awake. It was afternoon. Even his sentinel had been asleep for hours.

He went up the side of the mountain two or three hundred yards to where he could look back on their trail. It was a miracle that *Espinosa* had not already overtaken them. If *Espinosa* came, it would be very difficult. The Mexican soldiers recognized him as their captain, and he would pretend to have later orders from General *Marquard*, to take charge of *Valdez* and the *señorita* and to shoot Neal.

They were coming! Neal had not reached the top of the mountainside before he saw six soldiers riding through the woods.

It was *Espinosa*’s picked band and they were on the trail. Neal could have got away. But nothing was a temptation to him that endangered *Señorita Maria*. He turned and went back down to his sleeping camp. He made his resolve quickly. He would have his gun ready. If *Espinosa* attempted to take them prisoners, he would kill him—it no

doubt would cost him his own life, but at least that would free Señorita Maria from Espinosa.

He did not even arouse the rest, but stood beside a tree a little way from the sleepers and waited the approach of the band. As they came nearer he failed to recognize Espinosa among them. His heart began an evener beat. He might beguile the rest.

"*Buenas tardes, señors,*" he said as the six drew up and stopped. They all saluted him as they would an officer.

"From whom do you come?" Neal had his hand casually but handily on his gun.

"From the señor general," replied the leader. He dismounted and came forward.

"We are at Señor Ashton's command," he said with a gesture of deference, "to help protect him and his friends."

Neal suspected a trick. This was the work of Espinosa. The villain was keeping in the background until Neal should be disarmed.

"But where is El Capitan Espinosa?" Neal looked scrutinizingly at the Mexican.

The fellow shrugged with both shoulders and threw out his hands, a gesture that indicated the worthy captain was in a bad way.

"He is over the bluff." The Mexican shook his head.

"How?" Neal gasped. Had he fallen off the path?

"The señor general," he went on to explain,

“find many letters with Carranza. One of them from Espinosa. Espinosa say in letter, he a very good friend of the presidente—that he is spying on Señor Marquard and his followers. He say that one of Marquard’s very best friends is the Señor Ashton of the Ranch of the Thorn, and he ask Carranza to send soldiers and kill the Señor Ashton.”

Once more the soldier shrugged and lifted his brows.

“And the señor general when he read the letter say, ‘Ah-ha, now we know who is our friends. Go pitch Espinosa over the bluff and then follow Señor Ashton and see no harm come to him. He very good friend.’”

They had food and then rode on. For the first time in many days the threat of impending danger was lifted. The sun glinted through the pine woods and fell on the yellow bark. The smell of the warm pine needles under crunching hoofs of the horses filled the air.

Neal, riding along behind Señor Valdez and Señorita Maria, could not help but glow at the thought of that deep gratitude they were feeling for him. During the night they had, perforce, ridden in silence. There had been no chance for speech since. But now that danger was past and they were at ease, he would ride up alongside of them directly. The señorita’s eyes would meet his and tell him what her lips could never tell.

"It is not very far now I think, señor." He had drawn up beside Valdez.

"Perhaps not." The reply was cool, the eyes of the señor straight ahead. Neal looked to Señorita Maria. She was sitting very straight and did not so much as glance toward him.

Neal felt a hot flush of embarrassment, followed by a chilling sense of calamity. There was something in her mind between them. Was it a mere whim or suspicion, or was it a revulsion of feeling? She had told him for one brief moment she loved him, but often it happened, so he had heard, that women's hearts as well as minds change suddenly and unaccountably.

Twice more Neal assayed to make conversation. But the merest civility from Valdez was the only response. Not a word or a look from Señorita Maria.

He dropped back and rode beside his guard.

Not again until they drew rein before the gate of the devastated Hacienda of the Star did they speak. Valdez turned to the soldiers:

"Señors," he said, with a sad, fine dignity, "I thank you for your escort. Such food and refreshments as my servants can supply will be at your disposal."

He turned to Neal. His eyes were troubled, the color left his face a mottled gray. Danger and suffering had told on him.

“Señor,” he said in a detached tone, “I owe you two debts. Because of the one I cannot repay the other. It is better that we never meet again. *Adios.*”

Neal, dumfounded, started to protest, to insist on explanations. But the señor already had turned his horse in at the wide, open gateway, and there was something so final and unapproachable in the proud still figure that the young man closed his lips and turned in pained appeal to Señorita Maria.

Her eyes met his this time very straight. The fire in their black depths seemed to freeze him. She was pale, her lips pressed together bloodlessly. So tense was she that he saw the pulse beat at her temple.

“Señorita Maria!” The name came almost as a cry of appeal.

Her lips parted in scorn, her nostrils dilated, and the eyes grew more intensely black. For a second her lips appeared about to form a withering word, but she turned her horse swiftly and rode after her father.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### MRS. KRIDER VISITS

AT two o'clock that night, his brain weary wrestling with the problem, utterly bankrupt in heart and totally exhausted in body, Neal fell asleep in his own bed.

Mrs. Krider came to his room three times during the morning to see if he was ready for food. At four o'clock she went back and he still slept. She felt his forehead to see if he had fever, but it was cool and moist as a child's. Little José slipped to the door a dozen times.

At last toward sundown Neal roused up. There was something the matter. Even in his drugged sleep some great depression had weighed him down. He sat up on the bed, tired, weary in muscle and in spirit. Romance—adventure—all the life of the tropics, the color of a strange land, had come to dust.

Mrs. Krider stood in the doorway.

"Good Lord!" she said sharply; "I thought you were going to sleep until Judgment Day."

Neal managed a crooked smile.

"I wish I could, and right on through."



“What is the matter?” The red-headed widow came in and sat down on a chair and rubbed the corner of her apron between her palms. “Disappointed because you did not get killed?”

“Something like that,” replied Neal. “How is the ranch?”

“Just the same as when you went off on that fool goose chase.”

“I wonder,” Neal was surprised that he could remember so far back, “if Blanco was killed.”

“Hardly!” Mrs. Krider snapped. “Not unless a black ghost can eat a half gallon of beans. He came in yesterday and told me all the fool things you been doin’.”

She bit her thin lips and frowned blightingly a moment.

“Why a man should fall in love with one of these black-haired, black-eyed she-devils is more than I can guess.”

Neal shook his head sadly.

“You haven’t seen Señorita Maria, Mrs. Krider.”

“Well, what’s the matter? Did she get killed?”

Again he shook his head.

“Mrs. Krider, I’ve discovered that turnin’ the world upside down, as you say, don’t get you very far—only far enough that one frown or one stinging thought will send you tumbling clear over the precipice into the chasm.”

She arose.

"You better stay in bed a day or two; I'll send up your supper."

Two hours later a red-haired, sharp-boned widow sat in a patio at the Ranch of the Star, facing a very slender, dark-haired girl with a face so white she seemed to have lost all the blood in her heart.

"Señorita," Mrs. Krider's voice offered no margin of diplomacy, "what's the row between you and Señor Ashton?"

Señorita Maria gasped quickly, as though stabbed. Her eyes looked so large and dark they were almost luminous.

"The señor is a ver', ver' wicked man," she said; "so—so—traitor."

"They all are," assured Mrs. Krider. "Señorita, I know men. They are a bad lot. They are liars and hypocrites and bullies. They are mean and yellow. They will say nice things to you and then betray you. I hate all of 'em. If you are goin' to hate all of 'em then it is all right. But you don't look to me like a girl that could. You look to me as though you'd have to have a man on the brain or your heart would evaporate. Now let me tell you. If you want a man, you won't find one that will beat Ashton——"

"Ah, but señora!" It was almost a cry again. "He betrayed us. He led bandits here! He helped

kill our people! My father was gone. I hid; when I crept back to see our poor people hurt and dead he was there"—she rose and pointed dramatically at the spot—"helping one of the bandits escape."

Mrs. Krider got to her feet.

"Well, señorita, he may have done that and a good deal more and still be the best man I've ever seen. I'm not recommending him. He may be a traitor, as you say. But he is fool enough to love you so much it makes your heart ache to look at him."

The señorita's face flamed as the red-haired widow left.

"He es a fool—to have sent *her*."

Señorita Maria sat quite still, her eyes looking far off. In the poise of her exquisite head, in the slight bending of the neck, in the faint quiver of her lips was a wistful loneliness that extinguished the flame of her anger a few moments before.

She got up and passed from the inner patio through the hall and into the garden. There was nothing fierce and regal in her movements now. Her shoulders drooped and she carried her head as though it was heavy with tired problems that never could be solved.

Drifting restlessly about she stopped now and again beside a brilliant cluster of blossoms, but seemed not to see them nor sense them. Her eyes

turned oftenest to the fast dying flame of red on the sky back of snowy Orizaba.

The light went swiftly as always. She lifted her face to the stars, her lips shut close to still their quivering. Then with a new and sudden resolve she turned hastily and went in.

"Where is father?" she asked Tia Alicia in the hall.

"Reading in the library."

Maria went to him. But Señor Valdez was not reading. Instead, he sat straight in a high-backed chair staring fixedly at a portrait of a fierce Spanish ancestor on the wall.

Maria went to him and sat on the arm of the chair. This was an informality that always shocked the Señor's dignity, but secretly warmed his heart.

"Is there trouble, daddy?" She looked at him affectionately. His stern figure and fierce eyes somehow made her want to cry.

"No, no," he denied positively. "The government is restoring order. The new presidente is doing very well. There is hope for the country, and the Hacienda is being brought back into shape after the revolution."

"But our poor people," said Maria, "that were killed—they cannot be brought back."

"Perhaps they would not want to be," said the señor who never showed emotion for either living or dead.

Señorita Maria sat silent looking down at her hands that locked about her knees.. She slowly swung her foot. The señor frowned, but she did not see. Her thoughts were elsewhere.

“Daddy,” Maria spoke slowly, “was there ever anywhere in all your books a traitor who was a good man?”

“No!” Emphatically. There was no scorn deep enough for Señor Valdez’s feelings for a traitor.

“But, daddy,” Maria had thought much over this, “might a man not seem like a traitor to us, and yet not be a traitor in his own heart?”

“A traitor is a traitor.”

Another silence. Maria’s foot ceased to swing. Her eyes lifted from her hands and rested a long time on an open book, face down, on the table. Her father had been reading his beloved “Don Quixote.” And she had laughed at the very traditions to which her father clung. Was it not odd, she thought, that one could love that which so contradicted one’s professed standards.

“Daddy”—the girl held her breath a moment before venturing the question—“if a man wanted us killed why would he save our lives afterward?”

Señor Valdez’s face flushed and then grew gray about the temples. His lips shut hard, he got up, brushing by Maria on the arm of his chair, and walked the length of the room.

“You are thinking again of Señor Ashton.” He said with a cold fierceness. “The man I cannot kill because I owe him our lives.

“He came and we received him as a friend. He plotted with the revolutionists and had come to spy out our weakness. He sent the son of the hated Marquard himself to see how we were guarded and how best to attack us.

“Did not you, yourself,” he turned his eyes accusingly on her, “see him carrying away one of the robbers?”

“Yes.” She drew a breath that made her chest ache. “But I wonder if always we can tell what is in the heart, by what we see.”

“I have forbidden him to ever enter our gate.” There was dangerous finality in the old Spaniard’s tone. “It is enough.”

“But, daddy”—once again the girl strove to find some possible explanation—“at first we liked Señor Ashton.”

“We liked the man he seemed to be.”

“And if we discovered he was really that man?”

“Impossible!”

“But if we did?”

“Then indeed would we be in debt to Señor Ashton, having so cruelly wronged the man who was our friend. But——” He shrugged violently as though to throw off a thought that had haunted him. “We

did not wrong him—he is a traitor to hospitality and friendship.”

Maria slipped out. In the patio she stopped by the tree under which he stood that first night.

“He doubts,” she was thinking of her father, “or he would not be so pos-i-teve.”

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### UNDER THE STARLIGHT

**A**FTER romance is shattered there is work. After loss and failure and bereavement there is work—always work, thank God. If the necessity for work were removed, the race would perish in two centuries.

Neal had much work to do. The cane was all ground and the sugar sold. The corn was in ear, and the food crops done. But coffee was beginning to ripen.

After an early supper Neal walked out up the road that skirted the coffee fields. He walked a great deal these days—sometimes even after fourteen hours' hard work, he walked for miles, that he might be so tired nature would force sleep. He was forever thinking of her when awake.

He turned aside into the coffee field. The promise of a big crop was being fulfilled. The bushes were loaded and the earliest berries had begun to turn red. They would begin to pick next week. On the same bush are ripe berries and berries half grown, so several pickings are required. He must see that the pulper and the drying machine were in order.

Thus another one of his long-desired hopes was to be fulfilled. Coffee from his trees, coffee that he



had seen a white sea of blossoms last April now reddening like berries on the bush, soon to be gathered and pulped and dried and polished and put in bags and sent to the far corners of the earth. Men beside camp fires along the wild unfrequented ways, and men at the doors of little homes in sheltered valleys, and men in rough overalls coming home to their rude shacks, and men in mahogany rooms, alike would catch the aroma, the incense of rest and refreshment, and their old dreams would troop back to mingle with a sense of present good. Ah, the fragrant smell of coffee, his coffee, from his trees, would stir men's hearts in a thousand ways.

But as Neal walked on among the low trees he forgot his own coffee—thinking of her he had lost.

The stars came out and the soft light of an early October night was diffused through the dark trees.

There was the sound of horses' hoofs on the road. Neal smiled—Blanco going to town. Blanco had seemed to have much money to spend at Cordoba since his escape from the wrecked Carranza train. Neal guessed where it had come from, but asked no questions.

The new government was running smoothly, and Neal had read that day in a Mexico City paper, with grim satisfaction, that one Señor Bernard Williams had been put on a ship at Veracruz and expelled from the country. Taking out of Mexico just what he had brought in—one rather shabby suit of clothes.

Neal turned back toward the road. He must walk a long way to-night for he was as restless as a spirit detached from its body.

He stopped and put out his hand and clutched the limb of a coffee bush. Something was moving among the trees—quick, darting movements this way and that as though looking for some one. It was a woman—a girl, tall, slender, and in a light dress, with a mantoon about her head and shoulders. His fingers closed on the limb, crushing a handful of coffee berries in his hand. His heart beat until it hurt his side.

The figure stopped—not twenty steps away. Was he seeing a ghost?

“Señor.” It was the softest of calls, but he would have heard it a mile away.

“Yes, Señorita Maria?” He started toward her.

“Oh!” she cried, coming forward with an eager, darting movement. “You are here!”

She stopped a few feet from him. All the hurry, the quickness of movement went from her. She stood in that easy relaxation of perfect grace and turned her face up toward the sky.

“Such a lovelee night!” Her tone and gesture was as though they were back in her own garden months ago.

“Yes.” Neal’s heart seemed turning over and over in its jubilation. “It is the loveliest night since the world began.” He waited for her to continue.

“Señor,” her tone was playful but had a touch of pathos in it, “I’m so ver’ bold a girl, ef my father and Tia Alicia knew, they would perhaps tie me up forev-ar. But the señor has not come for so ver’ long, I wonder if he might be angry at poor little me.”

Neal laughed with sheer exultation.

“You are delicious! Why, don’t you know I came twice and you even refused to let me in at the gate?”

She tilted her head flirtingly.

“Ah, señor”—her voice dropped into a troubled earnestness—“that was when I had ver’ black thoughts.”

“About me?”

“Yes,” she nodded. He saw the white throat swell as though chokingly.

“A long time ago,” she broke off a twig of the coffee limb from a bush and picked at the berries with her fingers, her head bent, “they told me the señor was an enemy in disguise—a traitor. I do not believe it here,” she touched her heart. “But here”—the tips of her fingers went to her forehead—“et sounded true. And poor little me cry in the night because my head and my heart they quarrel so much. Then the bandits came and killed our poor people and I hid for my life. After they go I steal back. My father had gone to Mexico City and I was alone. On the balcony I hear voices down in the

patio. One was the señor's voice—I always know the señor's voice. Et said to one of the bandits: 'I must get you away before they come back.' Then I know." Her face grew very tragic in the starlight. "The señor had led the bandits to our ranch. He was a traitor—and I hate hem, oh, so ver' fiercely!"

She stopped and looked up again at the stars. Her face was pale in the dim light. How much she had suffered!

"But by and by," the slender señorita spoke slowly as to the stars, "some one told me he was not guilty, but so ver' good man."

"Who told you?" He had held himself in control until she had finished. He wanted to see deeply into her heart while she was serious.

The reply came very low—almost a whisper.

"My heart, señor."

"Your heart," he said slowly, "was right, Señorita Maria." And he explained how he had ridden to the ranch that night to try to save her and how the wounded bandit had told him she was captured. And then of his fearful search for her among the revolutionists.

When he finished she moved a step nearer him. A moment her dark eyes were raised appealingly to him—then she turned her face away.

"And I so ver', ver' sorry," she touched her forehead again, "that my foolish head believe the señor a traitor. I tol' you so long ago that a girl she

have no brains. Señor, I do not deserve to be forgiv'." She pursed her lips and shook her head solemnly. "I should go and do a ver', ver' long penance. I should let my hair down over my eyes, and walk with pebbles in my shoes, and be ver' sorrowful until I old, ugly woman. And when I die and they put a board at my grave which say: 'She believe a ver' bad lie about the most kind and most wonderful señor.'"

She slyly lifted her head and looked at him side-wise.

Again he laughed, but there was something far deeper than merriment in it—a happy, tender caressingness. But he still held himself back.

"So you shall," he said. "No doubt your father will see to it that you do penance when he knows you come to visit a man he hates."

"Oh, but no. He always think the señor ver' wonderful man. He hate Señor Williams because he try to wrong señor. He es ver' fond of the señor."

"Then why——"

"Oh, because I tell him the Señor Ashton a traitor." Another shake of the head. "I ver', ver' wicked girl—I tell such bad lies."

The señorita had, so casually as not to be noticed, taken a little step now and again until she was nearer Neal—quite near—in possible reach of his arms.

Neal stood and looked at her in silence for a long, exquisite moment. She had the pride of generations of high-bred Spanish tradition. She had broken it to come to him! There could be no greater measure than that! And she had surrendered with such whimsical dearness. The soft wind, full of autumn fragrance, came through the trees. His heart rose until it seemed to fill all the night spaces with infinite happiness.

“Señorita,” his tone sounded mockingly gruff, “you have been a very, very wicked girl. And you must be punished most severely. It will take—let me see, ten, twenty kisses to——”

When they could speak again she lifted her chin and looked up slyly into his face.

“Et es ver’ nice penance—I guess I be wecked some more.”

“Don’t you dare,” he said, holding her threateningly tight. “For, Maria, dear,” his voice was very tense, “I love you so much—I love you.”

A little later as they walked to the road, she put out her free hand to brush a limb.

“When do the señor begin to pick the coffee?” she asked.

“Right after our wedding,” he replied.

“Oh—so soon!” she mused, “day after to-morrow. The hawk, I think he will not have very long to fly.”

THE END.



















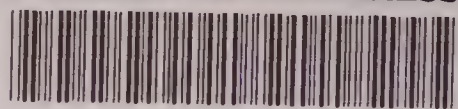






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