

Señor Flatfoot

Cornell Woolrich

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Señor Flatfoot

By CORNELL WOOLRICH

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Explosive and devious is the course of Latin-American politics —but not without fascination. Today's lesson includes a general with a failing for wristwatches; another general who added one and one to get approximately five; a non-com who preferred Marx to local history; and a girl who should have been labeled TNT

I

O'Rourke was enjoying a gin-and-lime under the arcade fronting the Plaza when the government changed on him. Or around him, whichever way you care to put it.

O'Rourke kept right on being good Manhattan, but Zacamoras did a flip-up from Federalista to Liberalista at one past five in the afternoon. By ten after it was all over.

A shot at the edge of the town was the signal. Then there were a lot more. *Sput-sput-sput-sput*. O'Rourke stayed where he was, lit another blistering native cigarette, and wondered what the boys back of Centre Street were doing just then.

A handful of men in dusty yellow khaki came backing slowly into the Plaza, occasionally raising antiquated Mausers to their shoulders and letting fly. This was the local garrison in retreat.

Other shots, from the outskirts, came back in answer. That was the oncoming Feds, or maybe it was the Libs; O'Rourke should know the difference.

This banging kept up questioningly for a moment or two longer, after the local defenders had moved out. Getting no answer, it broke off; there was a triumphant rebel yell, and a bevy of horsemen in cartwheel sombreros came clattering into the Plaza, wheeling and rearing their mounts in approved Wild West fashion.

After them, amid appropriate "*vivas!*," throwing-up of sombreros, and sky-shots, a Model T Ford arrived. From it descended the dreaded General Inocencia Escobar and his equally dreaded half-brother Angelito, "liberators of the people."

Their given names, from what O'Rourke had gathered, were slightly misleading. They were said to be bad medicine. To his

experienced eye they were just a pair of micky finns with no takers; he'd handled tougher guys every day of his life.

They stalked in and promptly turned O'Rourke's hotel into their revolutionary headquarters. When he went in himself later, he found them dining in state in the middle of the patio, with assorted underlings and soldierettes, at a long table made up of a lot of little tables pushed together.

Which meant O'Rourke had to do without supper or eat it in his lap. He didn't mind; he was getting sick of rice and beans by now anyway. He'd often wondered, since he'd been here, who was taking the most punishment the wanted killer he'd come down after, who was laid up in the hospital with typhoid, or himself, forced to louse around outside waiting for him to get well enough to travel.

He yawned and made the mistake of hitching up his cuff and looking at his wristwatch. An honor guard of two was promptly sent to bring him over. The generals had never seen a wristwatch before. O'Rourke accommodatingly took it off for them. There were too many automatics lying beside the knives and forks for him to be selfish about it.

Inocencia tried it on first. Then Angelito tried it on. Then it went all around the table from wrist to wrist, until it got back to Inocencia again. By that time O'Rourke wasn't sure he wanted to put it on again, without first dipping the strap in carboic acid or something.

"I'll buy," glared the general. "How much?" His expression indicated it wouldn't have been tactful to refuse to do business.

O'Rourke didn't mind. You didn't need a watch in Zacamoras as much as in New York; there was no place to go. He named a good stiff price.

The general didn't balk. He thumbed over an adjutant or quartermaster of some kind. "Pay him, Pablito," he ordered. The quartermaster whispered something in his ear.

The general looked unconcerned. "No?" he said. "Well, levy a contribution on the town, to replenish our war chest. Get hold of the *alcalde* and hold him as a hostage until he digs it up."

The mayor was going to be the fall guy. Inocencia turned back to O'Rourke again. "I'll give you an IOU, until our campaign funds have caught up with us."

"That'll be as good as gold," said O'Rourke caustically.

"You bet," agreed the general, quite without guile.

The quartermaster presented a voucher and he duly made his mark, an x, at the bottom of it.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" O'Rourke said with a straight face. "How does one tell the difference between your own signature and that of the other general, here?"

"Oh, that's easy," said Escobar blandly. "Mine goes up and down, like this: +. His goes from side to side, like this: X."

"You military men think of everything," said O'Rourke with mock admiration.

He went back to where he'd been sitting and waited to see what would happen next. A cowering old man was thrust forward between two soldiers. "You the *alcalde*?" glowered Inocencia.

"The *ex-alcalde*," corrected his half-brother. "We'll appoint one of our own tomorrow."

There was a whispered consultation. Then one of the two generals pointed a menacing finger at the quailing official before him. "We assess you ten thousand pesos for support of the cause. And it's got to be in by nine tomorrow morning."

"There isn't that much in the whole town!" wailed the victim.

"That's your tough luck. You're going to stay in jail until that money's in."

"But I'm an old man, I'm not well."

"We'll cure you. Take him away and lock him up, Pablito."

The terrified *alcalde* was trundled off, still protesting. "It always works," the general told his associates, with a ponderous wink. They all had a good belly laugh over it.

O'Rourke considered it pretty poor sport, but it was no skin off his nose. He was out of jurisdiction here. Just the same he wouldn't have minded having one or two of them,—especially

that quartermaster, Pablito—alone with him in the basement of a nice out-of-the-way Jamaica station house for a half-hour workout.

He checked upstairs around ten or so. But if he thought he was going to get any sleep, he didn't know his revolutions. One of the two generals—Inocencia, the one who had chiseled his wristwatch—requisitioned a large room a few doors down from his own, at the end of the same corridor.

Both rooms gave onto a long outside gallery or balcony, which ran around the entire face of the building at second-story height. The other general had apparently chosen quarters in the opposite wing; he didn't show up.

A sentry was posted outside the door, not so much for protection as to add a touch of swank; and from then on the amount of noise that went on in there made O'Rourke think the whole army must be bivouacked inside. But it was evidently only the general and a few choice staff-members having a nightcap to celebrate the afternoon's victory. It finally tapered off and the silence of tropic night descended on Zacamoras.

Then just as he was dozing off under his mosquito netting, a feather-light tap came on his own door. He knew to begin with it must be a mistake; he didn't know a soul in town except that guy in the hospital, and he had a leg-chain fastening him to his cot.

It didn't improve his temper any. He started to talk to

himself in a seething undertone, while he swung his feet to the floor and battled lengths of mosquito netting.

"They make me eat my meal on the cuff, they take my watch, they keep me awake half the night with their racket—and then their dates show up at my door by mistake!"

He knew it must be a woman; no man would have tapped so daintily. He got into his pants, strode over to the door barefooted, swung it back, and glared.

"No ice today, lady," he barked. Then he scotched it quick, and felt like a fool.

The girl before him wasn't anybody's date, least of all a revolutionary general's. She wasn't more than nineteen. Her skin had the camelia-like whiteness that comes from seldom being exposed to the sun. It made her eyes seem twice as dark as they were, which made them four times darker than he'd ever known eyes could be.

She was all in black, with a lace shawl hooded around her head, one end of it drawn across her mouth in semi-Oriental fashion. A small jet cross peering from her breast was her only ornament.

She drew back a startled step before his outburst. "Oh,—I'm so sorry, *señor*. I'm looking for this general Escobar." The way she said it made the "general" a discourtesy title, rather than anything else.

"Up there where that sentry—" he started to say. Then he saw the reason for her loss of bearings. The sentry had

momentarily deserted his post, presumably to hoist a quick one down in the patio. "That end door up there," he explained.

He stood there a moment looking after her. She was moving down the tiled corridor with such obvious trepidation, that he couldn't resist asking: "Pardon me, *señorita*, but—did you come here alone?"

Her dark eyes grew larger as she turned her head, as if he were only naming her own fears. "I had to. There was no one I could bring with me."

"Well, excuse me for butting in; but are you sure you want to go in there by yourself."

"I have to. You see, my father—"

"Oh, the *alcalde*. Yes, I watched that."

"He has a weak heart. I'm afraid the excitement and fright alone are enough to— We are raising the money. My brother is out getting it right now. I have come to intercede for him with the general."

"I know, but he's probably had a few drinks by now; see what I mean?"

She moistened her lips nervously. "I have a knife with me." It was evidently concealed in her dress.

"Want me to go in with you? Be only too glad to."

"Thank you, *señor*, but it is better if I go alone. People of his breed think that to show generosity is a sign of weakness. In the presence of a third person he is likely to make it a point to be relentless. It is only if I can see him alone that I have any chance of winning him over. That is why I came even without my brother's knowledge."

O'Rourke had to admit there might be something to what she said.

"Call out if you need me," he suggested crisply.

The truant sentry reappeared just then, wiping his mouth along his sleeve. "Ask your general if a lady may come in and speak to him," O'Rourke heard her murmur tremulously.

The sentry came out again, said: "Sure, any time—day or night." There was a leer in it if O'Rourke had ever heard one. The door at the upper end of the passage-way closed. O'Rourke closed his own door. He didn't get back under the netting, but decided he'd wait up until he heard her come out again. He lit a cigarette, to take the place of the netting while he waited.

The payoff came in no time at all. She'd been in there hardly five minutes than a short, swift scream came winging up in the silence. It sounded more indignant than terrified.

O'Rourke jumped, took a hitch in his belt, and started for his own door. Before he could get to it, he heard her come outside on the balcony that ran past both rooms. "Will you let me leave?" she said sharply.

O'Rourke turned and went out that way instead. She was alone out there, groping her way toward O'Rourke's room. A swath of yellow light behind her placed the general's room. He hadn't come out after her; evidently couldn't make the window embrasure, wide as it was, without a compass. She ran the few remaining steps toward O'Rourke with delighted relief.

"So he got out of line, huh?" he said gruffly.

"He's hopelessly drunk in there, and to make matters worse I find that the entire sum has already been raised and delivered to him by my brother and our friends, so I sought him out for nothing. He showed it to me in there.

"Now he still refuses to release my father. Need you ask what the new conditions are? He pulled the knife out of my hand like a stick of candy when I drew it to make him keep his distance. I left it in there with him."

"I think I'll go in and have a word with him," O'Rourke growled truculently.

She edged him back into the room before her. "No, don't, *señor*. You will only antagonize him, and then we will never secure my father's release. Come inside before he sees us."

"But he's coming after you now." A surreptitious footfall sounded on the balcony floor; vine leaves rustled as if somebody had brushed into them, then there was silence. "I'll quiet him down for the night," O'Rourke promised grimly.

Again she forestalled him. "Please! It will only make matters worse. The best thing is for me to leave quietly by the

door of your room."

He opened it and looked out. The ambulating sentry had again gone off looking for liquid refreshment. O'Rourke signaled to her that the coast was clear. "Let me take you as far as your door. The town's full of soldiers."

"No, it is not far. I will be all right. Thank you for your kindness, *señor*." She started to tiptoe down the passage, to avoid bringing the general out.

Suddenly the bottom of her dress flared like a hoopskirt and she had darted back and fled inside his doorway again. "My brother!" she whispered. "I recognized him on the stairs just now. He must be coming to find out why the release wasn't granted."

O'Rourke motioned her behind him, narrowed his door, peered watchfully through the crack. The man he saw was little more than a boy himself, with the girl's same fairness of skin.

O'Rourke saw him go up to the general's door, knuckle it lightly. The answer from inside was too low for O'Rourke to catch. He saw him try the knob, step in, and close the door behind him.

The girl brushed by O'Rourke, flashed him a look of thanks; there was a flurry of black skirts and filmy shawl, and she had vanished around the turn of the passage leading to the stairs.

O'Rourke kept watch to find out what luck her brother would have with the general. Young Pascal came out backwards, inside of five minutes. He closed the door and stood there for a moment, his face ghostly.

O'Rourke could see both his wrists shaking slightly as he held up something between them. It was a small oblong of paper, somewhat resembling the IOU the general had given O'Rourke earlier in the evening. O'Rourke guessed that it must be the order for the elder Pascal's release.

The boy hastily pocketed it, looked warily about him, then moved off in the same direction his sister had taken, trying to step as soundlessly as possible. One o'clock tolled dismally from the belfry of the venerable church.

O'Rourke closed his door and turned back into his room for the last time that night. "Heavy traffic," he grunted.

II

A commotion in the hall roused him sometime after daybreak. First he thought the opposition must have counterattacked; but there was no gunfire—only a constant stomping back and forth of many feet, and a welter of jabbering voices.

Someone—it sounded like one of the two generals—was

sputtering rapid-fire orders and imprecations right and left. "I will burn the town to the ground! I will shoot every able-bodied man! Who was in there last?"

"A girl, I think it was the old *alcalde's* daughter."

"Take a squad and get over there fast. If they've gone already, go after them. They'll head for the front lines, try to get through to the other side. But they've got to go on foot; we commandeered every horse in the place ourselves last night. Don't come back without them, *comprende?* They'll pay for this!"

O'Rourke finished his dressing fast, to get out there and learn just what the thing was. He came barging out still spinning the ends of his necktie around in a loop. "What's the matter, General?"

It was the one who hadn't taken his wristwatch—Angelito. "My brother has been foully murdered in the middle of the night!" he boomed, too excited to recall that, technically, it was none of O'Rourke's business and he had no right asking questions. He pointed dramatically to the open doorway behind him. "Come in and see for yourself."

O'Rourke did, without waiting to be asked twice. The general lay sprawled inertly across his bed, one leg trailing down to the floor as if he had started to rear up when it happened.

The mother-of-pearl haft of a small but malignant dagger sat like a valve directly over his heart. It had been driven in up to the guard. His arms had flopped wide at the instant of death,

palms up. They more than spanned the bed, for he had a good reach.

A neat little tortoise-shell scabbard lay on the floor close by. On it, in silver, was the initial P, in a wreath.

O'Rourke was thinking of the girl as he picked it up, tapped it thoughtfully across his pulse. "Want me to work on it for you?" he hazarded.

"Work on it? What for? I can work on it myself." The general, misunderstanding, reached down toward the corpse, wrenched, and the knife came up.

"There, what was hard about that?" he said, and carefully proceeded to wipe both handle and blade on a corner of the bedding. But then there weren't any facilities for handling prints down here anyway, O'Rourke reminded himself after his first moment of consternation.

He tried again. "I'm a detective. You know what a detective is, don't you?"

"No. What's a detective?"

"Look," explained O'Rourke patiently. "In my country we have people killed like that too. We have special men to find out who did it. I'm one of them. Why don't you let me find out who did it?"

"But we already know that, we don't have to find out. The *alcalde's* daughter, that Pascal girl, did it. The sentry saw her come in here last night."

O'Rourke thumbed the sentry disparagingly. "Can he tell you what time it happened? *I* can, and I wasn't even in here at all. It happened at ten past one."

The general made a rubber tire out of his lower lip. "How do you know?"

Which was just what he'd wanted them to ask. All this was by way of buildup, to get the job. He picked up the corpse's right arm, held it aloft, pointed to the wrist. A couple of little glistening shards trickled down inside the sleeve.

"What do the hands say? One and two. His arms flopped wide as the knife went in. One of them went a little too far over the side, hit the edge of the bedboard down there smack across the face of the watch, shattered the crystal. It stopped dead on the minute, at the instant of attack. Now do you see what a detective is?"

It went over big. A hum of admiration went up. It might have been elementary in Elmhurst or Elmira; down here it was black magic. O'Rourke cashed in while the cashing was good. "How about it? Will you let me handle it for you?"

"Can you do it as quick as that?"

"Not exactly, but what's the rush? I thought you people were never in a hurry down here?"

"But I want to shoot someone right today for killing my brother," the general explained reasonably.

"Do you want to shoot someone and then find out later you shot the wrong person?"

"No-o," admitted the general, but with an air of merely splitting hairs.

"Then just give me time, and you can shoot to your heart's content." Multiple feet were coming back along the passage-way outside. Rifle butts cracked to the floor. Luisa Pascal and her brother were thrust into the room. The boy's hands were bound behind his back; the girl's had been left free.

Her eyes met O'Rourke's briefly, but she gave no sign of ever having seen him before.

"We stopped them halfway to the opposition's outposts," gloated the subaltern who'd been sent out after them. "They'd gotten a lift in a burro cart driven by an old Indian woman who was gathering maguey leaves. We let her go on after we pulled them out of it."

"Where's the old man?"

"He wasn't with them; must be hiding back here in town." The girl and her brother exchanged a complacent look.

Escobar raised clenched fists high over his head in exasperation. "You fools! He must have been the old woman with a reboso covering his head. You let him slip through your fingers! I ought to—"

So the kids had sacrificed themselves for the father. More power to them, thought O'Rourke. He felt more than ever like giving them a helping hand.

But all sentimentality aside, the determining factor was that he didn't believe either one of them had done it. One o'clock had struck as young Pascal tiptoed out of the room. The girl had left even a minute or two sooner. The general had lived until ten after.

He was watching them closely. Their present actions showed that neither one of them had known until now that the general was dead. The girl gave a start; her gaze traveled speculatively to her brother, then she closed her eyes fearfully.

The boy looked at the pearl-handled knife, his face paled with recognition; then his glance sought out his sister's face in turn. "I did it," he muttered doggedly all at once.

The girl tilted her head defiantly. "No, I was the one who did it."

Each thought the other guilty; each was trying to save the other. O'Rourke had stopped thinking they were cute by now, was scowling at them. They were only gumming up the works.

"I want to talk to the suspects alone for a minute, before we go any further," he told the general. "It's always done in my country. You can stay here in the room; I'll just take them over in the corner one at a time."

He tackled the girl first. "He didn't do it. The church bell struck one when he came out, and the general didn't die until

one-ten. The watch on his wrist fixes that. I know you didn't either; I don't have to ask that."

"No, he was still alive when I escaped through the window. But if they try to shoot Ricardo for it, then I will say I did it."

"If I promise to do everything in my power to save your brother, will you agree to keep quiet from now on? It's going to be tough enough as it is."

She bowed her head.

"I place myself in your hands, señor," she murmured submissively.

... Then to the brother: "Your sister didn't do it."

"But it is a knife that used to belong to my father," breathed the boy fearfully. "I recognize it, and I didn't bring it here, so she must have."

"She did go to the general last night, bringing the knife for protection; he took it from her and it stayed in there with him. Answer me one thing: was he dead yet when, you went in there?"

"No, he was snoring through his mouth."

"Well, she left before you did. I was the means of helping her to evade him, so I ought to know what I'm talking about. Now are you convinced? Will you quit balling things up? As for that spiked release you signed yourself in there, did you put his full name to it?"

"Yes."

"He couldn't sign his name, so we can't use it as proof he was still alive when you left. On the contrary, it will count heavily against you; but maybe I can get hold of it and destroy it. Now for the present I can keep only one of you out of jail. So we'd better make it your sister."

"Naturally," agreed Pascal.

O'Rourke turned to the general. "They didn't both do it."

"Why not?"

"Because there's only one knife."

Another of those buzzes of amazed agreement went up. There was a lot of head-wagging, animated gesturing. O'Rourke hit while the iron was hot. "So hang onto the man, and let the girl go back to her house. You can always get hold of her again if you change your mind."

The general looked vaguely doubtful.

"A great general like you doesn't have young girls taken out and shot. Napoleon never had women shot." He didn't like the dead pan he got on this. "You've heard of Napoleon, haven't you?" he faltered.

"No. Who was *he*?" asked the general interestedly.

O'Rourke took a deep breath. This reminded him of kindergarten. He tried another means of approach. "Did you

lose one brother or two, General?"

Escobar glanced at the bier as if to make sure. "One."

"Then how many people should you execute for killing him?"

"All the people I can lay hands on," said the general hopefully.

"No. One murder, one execution. Two murders, two executions." He told it off on his fingers to illustrate.

The general looked anything but convinced, but he finally gave in, overawed by O'Rourke's appalling mathematics. "All right, throw him in jail and let her go. I'll see how I feel after we shoot him. If I'm still not satisfied, I can have her taken out and shot after all."

O'Rourke didn't argue that point yet. He motioned to the girl to get out fast, before they changed their minds. She stopped a moment before him, whispered: "You'll do what you can for Ricardo, *señor*? I'll burn a candle for you tonight."

He felt like saying "Better make it two; I'll need them." He gave her an encouraging wink instead. Escobar sent a couple of his men over with orders to stand guard outside her house and see that she didn't try to get away.

The girl safely out of it, the remaining prisoner was hauled

unceremoniously from the room on his way to jail. The dead general went next, and that cleared the decks for action.

Down here there could be no question of autopsies, photographs, print dusting, chemical analyses, or any of the rest of it. Burial had to be fairly fast because of the climate, too.

In other words, O'Rourke had to work from scratch; there wasn't so much as a tape measure or high-powered glass in the whole town. It was, roughly, like working on an early nineteenth-century murder case, with nothing more than your hands and eyes and brains.

"You knew, General, that the assessment on the city had already been turned in to your brother before he met his death?" he began, with a lot more assurance than he felt.

Escobar scowled blackly. This was evidently more of a sore point than the loss of his relative. "Of course. And now it's gone. That murdering *alcalde's* son stole it at the same time he took my poor brother's life. It was undoubtedly under those maguey leaves in the cart in which the father made his getaway."

"Excuse me, my General," faltered the subaltern nervously, "but we dumped out all the leaves, and there wasn't anything hidden in the cart."

The general scowled and appeared to be still unconvinced.

"Just who was present when it came in?" resumed O'Rourke.

"All of us."

III

O'Rourke was remembering that surreptitious football, accompanied by a rustling of leaves, that he had heard out on the balcony a moment after admitting the girl to his room.

It obviously hadn't been the general floundering after her in pursuit, as he had thought at the time, or he would have come all the way to O'Rourke's window himself. It hadn't been any third party leaving the room either, because she had just left it herself and there had been no one in there but the general.

That meant it must have been someone entering, by clambering up one of the balcony supports from below, using the thick vine-tendrils that twined around them for footrests. Not a very difficult feat, in any case.

A moment after he had entered, Ricardo had knocked on the door. The interrupted intruder, who hadn't counted on this, must have retreated to the darkened balcony once more, waited out there until he left, and then re-entered.

But this time the general had roused from his drunken torpor and had to be swiftly silenced with that knife the girl had left behind. With a sentry supposedly within hearing the intruder couldn't risk using any other means.

The point was, if his theoretical reconstruction was accurate, the murderer-to-be had spent a good five minutes on the balcony waiting for Ricardo to clear out of the room.

O'Rourke strolled out there to look it over. Practically the whole army had been in and out of the bedroom by this time, but as far as he knew no one had been on the balcony since the night before.

It was floored in red tile. A cast-iron railing loaded with vine leaves ran along one side of it, the whitewashed plaster wall of the hotel along the other side. A couple of lazy bottle-flies were droning about over the leaves. There must be caterpillars at work somewhere around too; there seemed to be traces.

He bent closer, peering at the leaves, handling them. He dropped down and went painstakingly over the tiled flooring, picking up something here and there. Not caterpillars; who ever heard of expectorating caterpillars?

He straightened up, strode back into the room, blurted out: "Who chews leaves in your army?"

Escobar looked insulted. "What do you think we are, cows?"

"Don't pass it off like that. There must be somebody who does. You men have been together throughout the entire campaign. You've had a chance to notice each other's little traits and habits, day by day. You ought to be able to answer that."

The general scratched the middle of his forehead. Then the back of his head. Then the side. "Leaves? Leaves?" He groped.

"I don't know about leaves. Sometimes I've seen Pablito, that's our quartermaster, stand before me waiting for orders with a blade of grass between his teeth."

Someone else in the room nodded, said: "That's right. I was up in a tree with him once, observing the enemy's position, and he kept pulling off leaves and chewing them the whole time we were up there."

O'Rourke opened his palm, showed them little tattered fragments, almost like confetti, he'd picked up on the balcony floor. They followed him outside; he pointed out the ripped ends on some of the leaves still on the vine, jagged tears such as no insect would have the strength to make.

They were all only in one small area, just to one side of the general's window embrasure.

Escobar couldn't see anything in it. "That's nothing," he said. "He must have been up here earlier, to apply for a little furlough. He went home last night, you know."

"Did he apply for his furlough out on the balcony?" O'Rourke asked.

"No, he couldn't have," admitted the general, kneading the back of his neck perplexedly. "I just remembered, we hadn't found out how to open those windows yet. You have to pull up that long rod that goes into a socket in the floor. We all took turns trying to kick them open. Finally one of the waiters came

up and showed us, but that was long after."

"What more do you want? Doesn't that show he came back later and climbed up the outside? Those tattered leaves are out on the balcony, not in here where he and the rest of you were earlier. Pablito's your man."

He saw he hadn't convinced them. They weren't used to taking trivial things like tattered leaves into account. Concrete things like who had been in a room last and whom a knife belonged to, were all their minds were used to grasping. He kept hammering away at them.

"Had the money been brought in before he left?"

"Yes. His horse was all saddled, but he came up a minute to take a look at it before starting."

"And were the windows open by that time?"

"Yes, the *mozo* had just finished showing us how they worked."

"So he knew the money was already up here. And he knew he could get in through the balcony, even if there was a sentry outside the door. The rank and file didn't know anything about this money coming in. And of your staff members who did, who else is away on leave today?"

"Only him," admitted Escobar unwillingly. "You see, he came from around here originally. His home town's Tlaxco, just across the mountain, so naturally he wanted to go back and look up old friends while we were campaigning this close by."

"Yeah, sure," said O'Rourke drily.

The general didn't want to give in. "But he left long before it happened," he argued. "The money was in here already by ten-thirty, and that's when he started out. You said yourself my brother didn't die until one-ten."

That lousy wristwatch gag, which had made such a big splash in his favor in the beginning, was now an obstacle. "How do you know he didn't hang around the out-skirts of town for the next few hours, then come back again, probably on foot, when you were all asleep?"

Escobar mulled this over broodingly. Suddenly he came to a decision. "Well, there's an easy enough way to find out for sure. It all depends on what time he showed up in Tlaxco. It's an all-night ride. If he left here when he seemed to, at 10.30, he'd get there by eight or nine in the morning. But if he didn't leave until you say he did, past one, the earliest he could get there would be noon. I know that road well."

He motioned forward one of the non-coms. "Espinosa, take another man with you, ride down to Tlaxco, and find out what time he reached there. Don't take his word for it, ask others."

O'Rourke said, "I'm going to be the other man he takes with him. I believe in getting my evidence at first hand."

"Can you ride?" the general asked doubtfully. "It's a ten-hour trip."

"Sure I can ride, I used to be a mounted cop on Lenox Avenue. How far away is the place?"

"About fifty miles."

"Then why should it take that long?"

"Because you can't go in a straight line." Escobar led him to the window. "See that baldheaded mountain there, standing straight up before you? El Pico Pelado we call it. The top is bare rock, no horse can get up over it. The trail has to go all the way around the base to get across to the other side. It more than doubles the riding distance."

"I'm still going," muttered O'Rourke doggedly. "I want your word, General, that you won't do anything to that Pascal kid until I get back."

"Why not?" The general shrugged amiably. "If Pablito killed my brother and stole the campaign funds, he's the one gets shot. I'll wait until I find out for sure."

They saddled the late general's own personal mount for O'Rourke, and he and this Espinosa started out at once. The archaic Ford couldn't be used because the Tlaxco road narrowed in places to a one-abreast defile, was impassable for anything on wheels.

It felt good to be on a horse again—at first anyway. The going was easy for a while—just a wide dirt road out of the town—although the dust was tough and the sun was tougher.

Then it started to tilt little by little in front of them and

narrow down, and from then on it was a steady upgrade. A small but rapid little stream suddenly turned in from nowhere and ran downward past them.

When they had progressed about a third of the distance up the looming height before them, they came upon its source, a slender but high-powered waterfall pouring perpendicularly down from some hidden spring high up near the top. A small amphitheater of large flat stones formed a natural pool at its base.

The mountain, which until now had been simply an inclined plane, thrust up vertically before them from this point on, abrupt as a cliff. The road, blocked, swerved aside and started that long loop around it the general had spoken of. It continued to climb, but in a spiral, like a trackless scenic railway—and just about as narrow.

They dismounted by the foam-lathered pool, watered their horses, filled their canteens, and smoked a cigarette apiece before going on. "No more water until Tlaxco now," grunted Espinosa.

"Wonder where it comes from?" O'Rourke said, craning his neck. "There's no snow on top of the peak to feed it."

Espinosa shrugged.

"*Quién sabe?* From inside somewhere. They say the Aztecs had a mine drilled into this mountain. Then when the Spaniards came, they didn't want them to find it, so they prayed to the mountain gods and—*fsht!* Water started to pour out of the mine bore, just like that. Foolishness!" he

pronounced contemptuously.

"Don't take much stock in local superstitions, eh?" O'Rourke suggested.

"Anything that isn't in Marx' *Das Kapital*, isn't true," was the somewhat startling answer he got on this.

They remounted and rode on. They had to go single file now, and they had to cut out the galloping. The mountainside was almost perpendicular on one side of them, and a steadily lengthening drop down into space was on the other.

They had left Zacamoras at ten that morning. It was well after dark before they finally made Tlaxco. The place was Zacamoras all over again,—same plaza, same arcades, same church. They asked directions and the house of Pablito's married sister was pointed out.

They knocked and an Indian woman came to the door, her hands all mealy from kneading tortillas.

"Pablito here?"

"My brother's been down at the *cantina* all day."

"We'd like to come in and look around."

She stepped readily aside. The bare-walled, dirt-floored rooms had nothing to hide and nothing to reveal.

"When did he get here?"

"At daybreak."

O'Rourke and his companion exchanged a long look. "You lose," Espinosa finally murmured under his breath.

"I never know when to give up," answered the American. "They're all his relatives in this house; they'd go to bat for him anyway. Where's his horse?" he asked the woman.

"Out in back."

He went out there to take a look at it, Espinosa at his heels.

"This the same one he rode out of Zacamoras?"

Espinosa peered at it in the dark. "Yes, I recognize it by the white star on its forehead."

O'Rourke bent down, felt its legs and examined its hoofs. "Doesn't seem in bad shape. How did he do it?"

"The answer apparently is that he left when he seemed to, and didn't have to force it any."

The American snapped one word. "Apparently." He moved over to a line stretched between two poles, fingered the saddle, blanket, and other equipment hanging on it. They were biscuit-dry after being out in the hot sun all day. He carried his question back inside to the woman.

"His horse stumbled and fell to its knees with him, when he stopped to water it at that mountain pool on the way. His things were still a little damp, so I thought I'd better see they got dried out."

Espinosa answered O'Rourke's questioning look. "It could happen. I've often stayed in the saddle myself at that place and let my horse wade in. Come on; there's nothing else this place can show us. Let's go look him up."

They found him, as she had said, in the *cantina* or local tavern; relating his campaign experiences to a circle of spellbound listeners and being very much of a hero. He didn't show any fear at sight of Espinosa, just the right amount of cordial surprise. "What are you doing down here?"

"Report back with me to Escobar. The funds have disappeared and his brother was knifed to death. You're wanted for questioning."

Pablito looked hurt. "That's a fine thing. So my own superior thinks I could do a thing like that." He gave himself a couple of wallops on the chest. "After I've sweated through the whole campaign with him, that's gratitude for you." He eyed O'Rourke malevolently. "Where does this gringo come in?"

O'Rourke took over personally at this point, being a firm believer in having suspects answer the questions and not ask them. "I hear you got in at daylight. Anyone see you—outside of your own relatives, that is?"

"Ask anyone in town," Pablito said sultrily.

They did. O'Rourke saw to it that they did. They combed the town, and all they got was affirmation. Even the *alcalde* was a witness in his behalf. "He had breakfast with me. He stopped by my house to say hello, and I insisted that he sit down with me. And I've never breakfasted later than 6.30 in my life. If there's any question about it, I'll ride back there and testify in his behalf," he offered staunchly.

They were all his fellow townspeople, O'Rourke knew. Still, would the whole town come to his defense as one man? He could fix one witness, or even two, but could he fix the whole town? The thing had him stopped.

IV

After spending the night at the *alcalde's* house, they started back the following morning. Pablito insisted on bringing one of his witnesses back. He picked a good one, too. The *alcalde*.

The defendant and his star witness rode in the lead, Espinosa and O'Rourke behind them. A short distance out of Tlaxco they passed under a row of trees growing close by the road. Pablito absent-mindedly snatched at a branch hanging low as he went by, pulled off a handful of leaves, began to nibble them.

O'Rourke's eyes narrowed and bored into the quartermaster's back, but he didn't say anything. The thing didn't have him stopped any more; just held up.

When they got to the pool at the foot of the cascade and stopped to water their horses, O'Rourke signaled surreptitiously to Espinosa to stay in his saddle. Then he watched closely to see what Pablito would do. He was the only one of the four to dismount.

"Horse slipped and ducked me head-first into there yesterday," he explained unasked. "I'm not taking any more chances."

O'Rourke leaned over his horse's head and scowled down at his own reflection in the quivering water. The guy was airtight on all sides.

It was late afternoon by the time they reached Zacamoras. "Well?" snapped the general to Espinosa, when they'd reported upstairs to his room.

"He got there at daylight. Everyone in the place says so, and the alcalde has made the trip back with us specially to testify to that effect. There was no sign of the money bags down there anywhere."

Escobar gave the American a disgusted look. "Hnh," he snorted. Pablito just stood there with his arms folded, a complacent expression on his face, like a man who has been much abused but is willing to overlook it.

"Wait out there on the balcony a minute," O'Rourke ordered him. He closed the windows behind him after he'd gone out.

"What did you have him do that for?" Escobar asked.

"I'll show you. Just let him stay out there by himself a couple of minutes." He waited a short while, then motioned the general.

"Take a squint out at him through the glass. You do it yourself. Don't open the window: just peep out without letting him see you. What's he doing?"

"Nothing." Escobar turned away again blankly. "Just standing there, nibbling on a leaf."

O'Rourke brought his hand down flat on the table before him, not violently but firmly. "Once more I tell you this is the guy that killed your brother, whatever time he rode into Tlaxco."

"And I say no man can get from here to Tlaxco between 1:10 in the morning and 5:30. It's humanly impossible," retorted the general.

He wasn't wasting any more time. "Attention, corporal. Pick four men for a firing squad, take the prisoner Pascal out, stand him against the wall of the prison courtyard, and shoot him immediately. As for the hiding place of the money, we can find that out from the girl afterwards; there are ways and ways. I'm ashamed of myself for listening to this gringo and waiting so long. He should have been dead already by now."

O'Rourke said, "Listen to me, will you..."

"I've listened to you long enough. You got my order, corporal. Carry it out, and report back as soon as you have."

"*Si, mi general.*" The corporal saluted, turned on his heel.

"Wait, will you?" O'Rourke groaned. "Don't be in such a hurry. I tell you you're letting this guy get away with murder."

The corporal had reached the doorway already, was about to step through it. "Can *you* ride between here and Tlaxco in four and a half hours or better?" the general demanded.

There was no choice in the matter. He had to talk fast, for the corporal was over the threshold by now. "Sure I can," O'Rourke said. "I'll show you I can. Only call him back, cancel that execution order."

A roar of laughter went up. The general made pinwheels at the side of his head to show he thought O'Rourke was crazy. He brought his fist crashing down on the table before him. "*Bueno!* You ride from here to Tlaxco, between one A.M. and dawn, and I will be convinced that Pablito did it. If not, we shoot the Pascal boy."

"That's a bargain." O'Rourke was in for it now; there wasn't much else he could say. If they'd watched his Adam's apple they would have seen it fluctuate above his collar.

"You want anyone to ride with you, American?"

"No. There's an old saying with us, 'He travels fastest who travels alone.' Just send someone down ahead to time me. That's all."

"I'll go," volunteered Espinosa, sympathetically. "He'll never make it in a hundred years, but he's got nerve for even trying at

all. I'll start now. Good luck, Oruke."

"I'm going to need it," thought O'Rourke glumly. It was hopeless, a physical impossibility; he knew that already. The most it was getting him was a twenty-four-hour stay on the boy's life. There was something phony about the way Pablito had accomplished it, but how was he to find out what it was in time? He'd been over the road for the first time in his life yesterday, and Pablito had been brought up around here, knew every inch of the ground by heart.

Escobar speared a warning forefinger at him. "And if you show up in Tlaxco any later than five-thirty in the morning—you know the answer." He mimicked sighting a rifle. "Boom!"

"Boom is right," thought O'Rourke.

He went back to his own room, rested up for the ordeal ahead, and reported back to the general a few minutes before one in the morning. He still ached all over from the two days' strenuous riding he'd already put in. But the point was, he could get over aching, young Pascal couldn't get over being shot.

A fresh horse was furnished him; they weren't stingy about that. He didn't even bother looking it over. He knew speed and endurance would play no part in this anyway; they couldn't possibly. There were stretches of that defile where no horse could go any faster than a slow walk.

He packed a battery light with him. It seemed a forlorn hope to expect its feeble rays to reveal some possible bypass or short cut along the way, when he'd failed to detect a single one in the full light of the glaring sun.

They had all come out on the balcony to give him the starting gun, so to speak. They were enjoying themselves hugely at his expense, especially Pablito. O'Rourke thrust out his jaw, mounted.

"Not yet," the general called down warningly. "You have five minutes yet. You leave at exactly one-ten as he did, according to what you say." He had obtained an everyday kitchen alarm clock from somewhere, was holding it up by the nipple of the bell, pointing to it.

"I give him those extra five minutes, I make him a present of them," Pablito jeered.

O'Rourke countered with a suggestion of his own as to what Pablito could do with them.

An old Indian woman sidled up to him out of the surrounding darkness, furtively pressed something into his hand. It was the little jet cross on a gold chain he had seen Luisa Pascal wearing. "The *señorita* heard. She sends you this for a *relicario*. She will pray for your success all night long."

He took the talisman, and smiled.

"Tell her now I surely can't go wrong," he murmured, with more assurance than he felt.

"Start!" bellowed the general across the balcony rail. "Ten after one *en punto!*"

O'Rourke wheeled his horse and set out at a leisurely canter down the dark Tlaxco mountain road. The lights of the Plaza blinked out behind him.

He paced along even more slowly than he and Espinosa had yesterday morning. He bracketed all the possibilities there were, while his horse's hoofbeats thudded a rhythmic accompaniment.

A short cut over the mountain, in the straightest possible line between the two places.

A short cut around the opposite side of it to the right instead of to the left.

A short cut down along the floor of the ravine between the mountain and its neighbor, instead of along the sky-trail clinging halfway up its side.

None of them was any good at all. The first two were physical impossibilities; the third was not a short cut at all, but a longer, far more roundabout way.

The offside stream showed up, murmuring plaintively in the night silence. "How did he do it?" he thought desperately. "I've got to get it soon. If I wait until I'm too far along, it'll be too late to help."

When he reached the waterfall he dismounted a minute, to water his horse and have a drink for himself. The animal overstepped the nearest of the flat slabs, stood with its forelegs in the pool. O'Rourke caught it, pulled it back over the brink.

"Come out of there, I don't want to ride on a wet saddle the rest of the way like he did," he muttered. But the girths and lower edge of the saddle were already soaked.

Heavy-hearted with a sense of impending failure, he remounted and started off up the precarious sky-trail.

He pulled his pocket light out, held it trained steadily against the mountain wall on his right as he rode along. But all it showed was inaccessible rock, with an occasional little stunted shrub growing out of a fissure where some soil had collected. If there'd been anything that offered a ghost of a foothold up, he would have seen it yesterday in the sunlight.

He let his horse falter to a dead stop, clicked the light off, reclamped it to his waist. It was going to be like this all the rest of the way, so there was no use going any further. He took out a cigarette and a sulphur-headed match, absent-mindedly stroked it along the lower part of his saddle.

It shouldn't have flared, but it did. That had been wet less than five minutes ago; he remembered it now. He reached down, tested it with his fingers. Riding in the dry mountain night air had already dried it. And the horse's coat as well.

He threw the cigarette away unused, straightened alertly in his saddle. Pablito's equipment had been damp enough when he got in for his sister to notice it—and he'd been riding for

hours. O'Rourke had only just come away from the pool and his saddle was already dry. Something didn't check there.

Espinosa's chance remark came back to him. "There's a story the Aztecs used to have a mine drilled into that mountain."

His eyes narrowed in the dark. He turned his horse about, gave it a decisive whack on the rump, went careening back the way he had just come. The pool—that was the only place along the whole route where there was the slightest variation in the looks of the surroundings. And it was the point where the detour began. Up to there, no mileage was wasted.

And yet as he drew up, dismounted, and carefully played his light all over the place, he couldn't see anything that would help. The rock wall here was sheerer than anywhere else, if possible. The waterfall fell with absolute plumb-line straightness.

V

O'Rourke kicked off his shoes, rolled his trousers above the knees, and stepped into the pool, playing his light down as he advanced. He could see the bottom without any trouble. It was solid rock, hollowed out and worn smooth by the water.

He kept on toward the waterfall until it spattered his shoulders, blew a fine curtain of spray down all around him.

He shielded his eyes with one hand, forced his light beam through it, turning it glittering white. Another big solid slab of rock behind it.

He circled around it to the side, pressed up against the rock wall, and aimed his light at it from that angle. There was a big fissure there, a fault in that upright slab that stood directly under the waterfall.

He moved in close, nearly blinded by the water tattooing on his head. His idea was simply to explore the aperture with his hand, although it was obviously too narrow to admit even a man, much less a horse.

But at the first touch of his fingers he could detect a distinct vibration, as if the upright slab were so finely balanced that even the downbeating water was enough to jar it. He swung at it, and to his surprise the fissure widened alarmingly, almost effortlessly.

There was an opening there, under this thin, screen-like slab. And the slab, huge as it was in diameter, was resting on so small a segment of its circumference that it could be swiveled a considerable distance without any undue effort. Only, as it came out now, it dislocated the waterfall and caused a terrific counterspray up above to shoot out at right angles.

He got his shoulders in under it, taking a chance on being crushed to death by the slab suddenly swinging back. He shot the light ahead of him. One glance was enough to show him that here was a definite cave. And a second glance revealed the distinct imprint of a horse's hoof on the moist, clayey floor.

If Pablito's horse had gone in there, his could too.

He drew back, climbed out, and led the horse into the pool after him. It balked as soon as he got it over close enough to feel the impact of the falling water. He had to get behind and crowd it forward.

To make matters worse, the downbeat of the water had once more battened back the delicately poised slab into place. He had to hold the rebellious horse by foreshortened bridle with one hand, claw the teetering obstruction out at the end of its arc once more with the other.

There was a short swift struggle. Either Pablito had to go through this too, or else his horse was more accustomed to squirming in through this watery trap. The animal finally scented dryness and security ahead, thrust his head and neck in, and the rest was easy. It was a fairly tight squeeze, but the horse made it; and O'Rourke himself had no trouble at all.

Within a matter of moments the beat of the water outside had tilted the jittery touchstone back into place. The din of the waterfall quieted to a low, steady drone. O'Rourke and horse both shook themselves free of the excess drops of water clinging all over them.

He could understand now why Pablito had remained damp all the way to his sister's house; he hadn't ridden in the open from here on.

He replaced his shoes, which he had slung over his saddle joined together by their laces, and looked around. He could tell at a glance that the place was not a natural formation. It had been hewn by hand out of the living rock hundreds of years before. He trained his torch upward, and saw immediately that there could be no question of remounting. The rock roof was too low. He'd have to go first and lead the horse after him, as Pablito must have done.

As a matter of fact, if it hadn't been for those prints he had detected, which were proof positive that Pablito had preceded him through here and lived to come out somewhere on the Tlaxco side of the mountain, he wouldn't have liked the looks of the undertaking any too much. Almost immediately beyond the mouth the passage narrowed down uncomfortably on all four sides. The bore slanted downward, into the very bowels of the mountain, at a grade that was none too easy to maintain footing on. He was subject to the constant risk of having his horse catapulted down on top of him; only the width of its hips, zig-zagging from side to side, served as a sort of brake on it.

The roof and sides were supported every few feet by age-blackened cross timbers, but the fissures that showed above and around them didn't inspire confidence. And even as close as he still was to the entrance, the air was none too good; was already close and stifling.

But Pablito had come out alive.

He played his light ahead down the inclined chute as he went. His horse was nervous and unhappy, with neck held

stiffly foreshortened the way it was obliged to, and he didn't blame it. The lack of ventilation was growing more noticeable all the time, and as the dampness around the entrance disappeared, they began to raise an age-old fine dust that tickled the nostrils and throat irritatingly. Sweat started out on his face and body from the closeness.

The bore reached a level plane at last, but there were various elbows and shifts of direction to be met with in it, and several times it opened up into wider cubicles, each one containing a black shaft. These were evidently the ancient diggings themselves. Once his horse shied violently, and he picked up a skeleton in the far corner with his light. One of the old Indian mine workers, or some more recent intruder like himself, trapped down here and asphyxiated? It didn't put him in a happier frame of mind. Suddenly, straight ahead, what he had been subconsciously dreading all along presented itself to view. The tunnel forked in two, with both branches dead alike, nothing to tell one from the other. This was no time, the way his lungs were clamoring for air, to take the wrong one. By the time he found out and got back to the fork, it might be too late.

He stopped dead, chewed his lips, rolled his torch all about the double entrance. The hoofprints of Pablito's horse might have been able to tell him, but he hadn't been able to pick up any lately; the flooring was bare rock this far in.

He couldn't stand there all night trying to make up his mind either; he was getting dizzy from lack of oxygen.

Suddenly he happened to glance up directly overhead. There was a dab of white chalk over the entrance on the right. He grinned as he understood. There must have been a first time for Pablito to work his way through here too.

Only he had probably come through from the Tlaxco side that first time. He hadn't taken any chances; he'd marked the one he'd just emerged from, so he'd know it when he started back. And the mark had stayed there ever since.

"Thanks, pal," O'Rourke muttered, and staggered uncertainly into the entrance to the right.

Confirmation came minutes later; and by that time he was already seeing black specks dancing in front of his eyes from the exertion of the upgrade and the lack of air.

Confirmation was another of those vestibules or loading platforms hollowed out around the passage; and in this one, sitting snugly over in the corner, were the twin money bags that had disappeared from the murdered general's hotel room two nights before.

"Got you now!" he muttered. "If this place doesn't get me first."

He slung the money bags around his saddle horn, nearly fell over beneath their weight, and shuffled on down the interminable shaft, one hand out against its sides now to keep himself erect. The last few minutes he was swaying from side

to side like a drunk, while his horse's breathing sounded asthmatically behind him.

His tongue was hanging out of his mouth by this time and his eyes were protruding from their sockets. Abruptly his light flattened out against what seemed to be a solid barrier of rock face to face with him, as if the shaft had come to a dead end.

He toppled down on all fours before it and started to shove with his shoulders and back. It wouldn't move; either he was too weak to be able to throw any strength or it was as solid as it looked.

The chalk mark back there may have misled him. Pablito might have put it up not to show the way out, but to show which passage the money was secreted in; and the actual way out might be through the other one.

If that was the case, he was finished now; he'd never be able to get back to the fork, much less retrace his steps along the second branch. He did what he'd heard of mariners doing to detect wind direction; wet his finger and held it up.

A slight coolness hit it on the side toward the rock barrier staring him in the face. A crack through which air was seeping didn't mean he could get out; it might only mean a slower death from thirst and hunger in a day or two.

He jockeyed his horse forward, brought its shoulder up against the barrier, hit it a couple of whacks with his open hand. The horse, trying to shy away from him, exerted more pressure than he had been able to. A lot of dust and small stones rained down around them, as if something had opened

momentarily and closed again.

He tried a second time. Suddenly the whole barrier went out at a sixty-degree angle, stayed that way. This time a regular curtain of dirt and gravel streamed down. When it had thinned out again he clambered up over the thing and found himself out in the open. It was harder to get the horse up but he finally managed, after it had skidded back inside two or three times.

He breathed deeply before he even looked around. There was no waterfall here to screen the exit; but a tangled thicket, almost of jungle luxuriance, served the same purpose.

He saw what had happened. The thin slab of solid rock he'd just dislodged was meant to be no more difficult to tilt than its mate at the other end; but since Pablito had last come through and replaced it, one of those minor landslides of loose earth and stones had come down and all but cemented it in.

There was no sign of the road, so he guessed that he'd come out somewhere beyond Tlaxco. To reach it he'd have to go back a short distance. But there were still stars over him, the sky was only just beginning to pale in the East, and he'd made it; that was all that mattered.

VI

Espinosa was sleeping in the same room in the *alcalde's*

house that the two of them had shared the night before when O'Rourke strode in, shook him vigorously awake. "Clock me!" he shouted with a defiant grin. "I just got in."

Espinosa stared unbelievably at the clock set out in readiness across the room, which he hadn't expected to use for hours yet. "Five-thirty in the morning! H-how did you do it?"

"The same way he did. Get up; we're starting back."

"What're you made of, iron? You just got in!"

"I know, but I'm not taking any chances, Pablito may try to talk the general into executing young Pascal without waiting for us to get back, and if I'm any judge, the general executes awfully easily."

... The afternoon sun was already on the downgrade when they rode back into Zacamoras. The reception committee was noticeably missing from the general's balcony as they dismounted under it, but they didn't think anything of that.

O'Rourke pushed into the room upstairs ahead of his companion. There was no one there; neither the general, nor Pablito, nor any of the usual retinue. A foot soldier answered his alarmed question when they'd gone chasing below again.

"He's over at the prison supervising an execution."

"That doublecrossing Pablito talked him into this," bellowed O'Rourke. "And not a telephone line in the town! If they've shot that kid, after all I went through—"

Probably no one had ever run through the hot, lazy streets that fast since the town was founded. Espinosa was blocks behind by the time the sprinting O'Rourke reached the barred main entrance to the low, adobe prison building. A woman in black was huddled there on her knees; pressed despairingly up against it. She turned a stricken face toward him.

It was Luisa Pascal. "Listen—the roll of the drums has begun already—"

O'Rourke battered frantically at the wooden doors with his gun butt. A frightened, cinnamon-colored sentry peered out at him. "No admission, by the general's order. There is an exe—"

O'Rourke corkscrewed his .38 around into the sentry's abdomen like an awl, thrust him back out of the way. The rolling of the drums rose to a crescendo. Through them pierced a sharp-voiced command like the crack of a whip. "Ready!"

He hurtled down the broad corridor that led through to the courtyard at the back. The second command had already sounded before he got to it. "Take aim!"

O'Rourke burst out into the open, yelled at the top of his lungs "Down, Pascal—*down flat!*" It was the only way to save him. The blindfolded figure standing there alone against the far wall flung himself face forward to the ground, lay there prone.

O'Rourke leveled his gun at the leg of the commanding officer standing there to one side of the squad, pulled the trigger.

"Fi—!" The man crumpled forward. A volley of musketry

rang out, thudded harmlessly into the empty adobe wall.

O'Rourke strode over to where Escobar stood, with Pablito and a select few grouped around him, taking it in. "You gave me your word," he flared hotly. "This is your man, standing right at your elbow. He rode through an old Indian tunnel under the mountain. I found the money-bags there to prove it. Ask Espinosa what time I—"

Escobar turned accusingly. But Pablito was no longer beside him; had streaked across the courtyard and was just about to gain the entrance.

"Gimme that!" the general snarled, and pulled O'Rourke's still smoking gun out of his hand. He dropped the fleeing quartermaster in the exact center of the courtyard entrance.

"He talked me into it," Escobar said indignantly. "He kept saying you'd never make it, so there didn't seem to be any harm in going ahead." He darted a resentful after-glance at the huddled figure, hitched the gun up once more. "Is he dead yet?"

"He's stone dead, my General," one of the men reported admiringly.

"Give these two a safe conduct to the opposition's outposts," suggested O'Rourke. The girl had come in, was hovering anxiously over her brother.

"Sure, why not?" said the general. He felt in good humor again, as long as he had shot someone after all. Then as he laboriously scratched an X at the bottom of the safe conduct, O'Rourke couldn't resist saying, "Remind me sometime to teach you how to sign your name."

The girl had come timidly over to him. "How can I ever thank you, señor?" she faltered, clasping his hand between both of hers.

"I don't want thanks," remonstrated O'Rourke, wrinkling his forehead at her. "You don't thank a duck for swimming or a bird for flying, do you? I just don't know any different, that's all. That's my job; that's why they call me flatfoot."

He paused, and for the first time in his life felt a shy embarrassment, mixed with certain other emotions which he did not venture to define. He reached into a pocket and drew forth a little jet cross on a gold chain.

"Yours," he said. "It helped, you know."

He saw only Luisa's smile; felt only her soft hand closing on his own, folding it over the amulet. "Please," she said, "please you keep it for me—Señor Flatfoot."

[The end of *Señor Flatfoot* by Cornell George Hopley-Woolrich (as Cornell Woolrich)]