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The Wolf of Aragon

By
Henry Kuttner

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The steel-clad horsemen of Aragon and Castile had thundered forth, bringing the cross of God into heathen lands. Fra Junipero wandered through *Nueva California* and swift hoofbeats rang upon the Mission Trail, from the northern fogs southward to the pines of Monterey and still farther south into a warm and sunlit land, laved by the blue waters of *Mar Pacifico*.

Yet the din of sword-clash was not everywhere. After the vanguard came the settlers and the agriculturists. The knights of *España*, some of them, forsook the spear and blade to eat of the lotus of sleepy Mexico. Hatred was fading and only the priests remembered how Montezuma had died.

Laughter came again to old Mexico. In their white *haciendas*, courtly, bearded men sipped their Amontillado and ruled with gentleness. Only from the coasts and from the south came the muffled thunder of battle, now fading, now blazing forth again. But the wars were over. Conquered Mexico shrugged, settled down to its eternal siesta and waited to destroy the invaders—*mañana*.

The *ranchero* of Don Philip Vasquez lay amid sunlit fields and hills. Eastward the peaks rose and from the west came sea-winds. Long ago Don Philip had ridden through Mexico with a red sword, but that time had long since passed. The black eyes of an Aztec girl had turned his heart from war and so he had asked Fra Francisco to wed them.

Now Don Philip slept beneath the cross and the *padre* was old and brown and shrunken in his little mission, miles from the *hacienda*. The Aztec girl, too, was dead. But the son of Don Philip was a man, equally at home with sword and guitar, on his great black stallion or serenading in the moonlight. Eventually he serenaded one girl only. Fra Francisco was to wed them in the little chapel a week hence.

Then a summons came to Juan. Silently in the night he rode eastward on the stallion.

It was a fine figure of a man he made, cantering at ease, slim as a sword-blade, with a keen, bronzed face and eyes like a hawk's. But his lips were not as hard as Don Philip's had been and he smiled often, flashing his white teeth. Yet he did not smile now. His mouth was grim as he mounted the slopes and paused at last at the mouth of a mountain cave.

Fra Francisco would have given much to have discovered this place. He would have called it unholy and a home of devils. Juan, however, dismounted without trepidation.

From the cave strode a giant of a man, without ornament save for a single feather in his sleek black hair. He did not look old, but his eyes were incredibly ancient. Juan had heard of this man, who had been born, it was said, in Montezuma's time.

"You are Ixtal?" he asked.

"I am Ixtal." The voice was deep and sonorous, yet friendly enough. The giant beckoned Juan into the cave. "Come. We must not talk here."

"Why have you sent for me?"

There was no answer. Juan followed Ixtal into the black hollow. The native took a torch from the wall and kindled it, then went on. They walked for perhaps ten minutes before a blaze of light blinded them. Juan paused on the threshold of a cavern.

A geyser of natural gas, blazing with blue brilliance, spouted up from the rock floor. Beyond it was a pyramid, crumbling with immemorial age. It was not large and was almost a ruin, yet a sense of vague awe crept over Juan. Atop the structure was an altar, on which a small fire flamed.

Ixtal paused near the blue geyser, his face blue-bronze in the strange light, his muscular body that of a chiseled statue. His beak of a nose thrust forward as he stared at Juan.

“Why have I sent for you?” he repeated. “I have heard of your marriage.”

“What is it to you?” Juan demanded.

Ixtal gestured toward the pyramid.

“The Spaniards have conquered Mexico and brought their God to rule. But we of the Aztec have older gods and their worship has not died. Hidden in secret places, from Sonora to Xochimilco, the old lore is still taught by such priests as I. A few have remained faithful among the people. We do not like to lose these few.”

Juan blinked. The blue fire hurt his eyes.

“But I—”

“Your father, Don Philip, came from Castile. Your mother was a full-blooded Aztec. She came of the old race and knew the old worship. Her blood is strong in you, Juan. You intend to marry a Spanish girl. We do not desire that. We have no power to command you.” Ixtal’s uplifted hand halted Juan’s angry protest. “Yet, because of your heritage, we ask you to wed an Aztec maiden. The ancient line is fading and dying. We wish to preserve it, so we ask this single favor of you.”

Juan did not answer immediately. He could not but respect the grave old savage who faced him.

“I cannot do this,” he said at last. “As you say, my mother was Aztec, but I am partly Spanish and owe you no allegiance.”

“We ask for none. It must be given freely, or not at all.”

“I love Rosita and must marry her. That is my answer.”

Ixtal nodded with visible sorrow.

“The Aztec passes. The priests of the Feathered Serpent die one by one. Our power is gone.” His head turned, his somber eyes resting upon the pyramid. The blue pillar of flame pulsed and throbbed, with a faint hissing sound. Slowly it sank and then rose again. Ixtal whispered: “Night falls on Mexico. I think doom will come upon you, too, Juan Vasquez.”

“You put a curse on me, then?” cried Juan.

There was a sadness in the strong, bronzed face.

“Not I. If I could aid you, I would. But I see a cloud sweeping through Mexico and it will bring horror and destruction to you. I see a bearded man in armor and hear his laughter, which is without mirth. Look.”

He pointed to the flame-pillar. Juan turned, stared deep in its heart. At first he saw nothing. Then, within the flickering blue, a picture formed. He saw a dove with blood upon its white breast, and a crushed rose. They faded, giving place to a swarthy, bearded face in a dented helm, his red lips thick and sensuous and twisted in a smile to reveal yellow teeth. The eyes were pale and blue as ice.

A chill crawled down Juan's back. He looked away. The pictures were gone. Only the pillar of blue light flamed up, rustling. Ixtal folded his arms.

"Remember this, Juan, and perhaps you can guard against it. And remember, too, that the gods of your ancestors will always be here, waiting. You have forsaken the Feathered Serpent, but he is not an evil god. He helps his own. In your time of trouble, come to me."

Juan bowed his head.

"I shall remember, Ixtal. I wish I could say more."

"It does not matter."

Without another word Ixtal turned and walked slowly toward the ancient pyramid, into which he vanished through a dark portal. Juan hesitated, then took up the torch to retrace his steps. Never, he told himself, would he enter this haunted cavern. What had he to do with the Feathered Serpent? Mexico was a warm, peaceful land and Rosita waited....

For a little while Juan knew happiness and forgot the Aztec cave. The bells rang a benison above the chapel and Fra Francisco's seamed face wore a smile as he performed the marriage ceremony. Afterward the lovers walked in the walled patio, where white fountains tinkled, and watched purple night fall over Mexico.

"I love you, *mia corazon*," he whispered.

"And I love you, Juan," Rosita breathed.

She was a small girl, tender and fragile and beautiful, with tiny hands and feet and lashes that curled softly on her pale cheeks. Juan's love was a deep ache within him.

From the blood-stained chaos of Europe came the Wolf of Aragon. A renegade and a killer, driven across continents by outraged kings, Don Diego of Aragon went yelling and slaying into the New World. Plunder and murder followed his steed's hoofbeats. Behind him came his outlaw band, giants in armor, baying and killing, laden with the loot of the dead. Mexico cowered before them.

The governors of the Pacific were torn by internal dissension and jealousy. Nepotism was rampant. The armies mutinied often, ill-paid and worse fed. Mexico was in practical anarchy. The Wolf of Aragon blazed like lightning through the land, striking, slaying, fleeing before men could gather to resist him.

Frightened, the natives turned to their white leaders for aid and found none. The Yaquis muttered. Only the *padres* tried to help, but they were slain without mercy. Don Diego rode his horse into missions and desecrated the altars. He crucified priests, while his mocking laughter rang out above the clamor of the bells. Aid was coming from Spain, but it would not arrive for months.

"Fra Francisco is not safe in his mission," Juan told Rosita. "Yet he will not leave."

"Why do you not bring him here, *corazon*?"

"That was in my mind," Juan admitted. "It may be that I can induce him to come. He looks on me as a son. But I do not like to leave you, even for a moment."

Rosita laughed. "Here in your *hacienda*, I am safe, Juan. Your men are well armed and the Wolf is far from here. Ride to the mission and bring the *padre* back with you. I ask it."

"Good." He smiled. "My stallion travels fast. I shall be back before nightfall."

He broke a rose from a bush and twined it in his lovely wife's dark hair. The blue sky was cloudless. A white dove beat above the wall and hovered. No evil could enter here, Juan thought.

He left Rosita and rode the black stallion north. Slowly the day dragged past. The winds told Juan nothing of what was happening at the *hacienda*. His heart was light as he rode back, Fra Francisco beside him on a gray gelding. The *padre*'s dark garments flapped about his lean figure. His face was drawn and haggard.

"Perhaps it is best that I stay with you for awhile," he said, as though trying to convince himself. "I hid the mission candlesticks well and the Wolf will not attack an empty mission. The natives have gone to hide in the hills. Yes, it is best, Juan."

The younger man grinned with a flash of white teeth. He touched his heels to the stallion's flanks.

"Let us hurry, *padre*. We have roasted a steer for you and brought out my father's wine."

"Wait!" Fra Francisco said suddenly. He rose upright in his stirrups, peering under a shading palm. "Juan!"

Far in the distance, smoke rose from the *hacienda*—black smoke, roiling thickly. No bells chimed welcome. Vultures were circling in the sky.

"Rosita!" Juan whispered.

He sank his spurs deep into tense flesh. The stallion sprang forward like a loosed arrow. His hoofs crashed and thundered on the trail. Fra Francisco followed, but could not keep pace. He was left far behind as Juan rode to the *hacienda*.

He arrived as the young man staggered out of the *patio*, his face drained to an ashy pallor under its tan. The *padre* crossed himself.

"My son!"

"The Wolf has been here," Juan said in a dead voice.

"Don Diego?"

"My men are dead. And—"

Juan did not finish. His gaze followed Fra Francisco's to where a crushed, slim form lay broken among the roses. A white dove circled overhead, blood on its feathery breast. The *hacienda* was burning.

The stallion came cantering up. As Juan looked at the animal, a new light came into his eyes. With a muffled curse he swung up into the stirrups and saddle.

"Where are you going?" the *padre* cried.

"After the Wolf," Juan gritted. His hand went to his sword-hilt. He ignored Fra Francisco's involuntary protest. His voice was like iron. "Some of my men may yet be alive. See to them, Father."

He turned the stallion and was gone in a thunder of drumming hoofs. He rode like a demon, his face a set, expressionless mask, the grim light of murder burning in his somber eyes. Juan's world had crashed in ruin about him.

"I love you, *mia corazon*."

But Rosita was dead now. Don Diego of Aragon had killed her. Juan suddenly remembered his visit to Ixtal, the priest of the Feathered Serpent, and the visions he had seen. A dove and a crushed rose and the face of a bearded man with pallid blue eyes....

Hours later, Juan came upon the men he sought. They rode in a compact band, sated with their triumph. At their head was a man in a dented helm, his red lips twisted in a reminiscent smile, his blue eyes cold. Behind the Wolf of Aragon rode his plunderers, the dregs and outcasts of Europe, forty men in armor. These were the ones who had spread death in Mexico.

Juan had eyes for but one. Savagely he roweled the black and charged into the midst of the throng, sending men hurtling right and left as his keen blade whirled like a scythe. Don Diego wheeled his horse. His sword came out, gleaming in the golden moonlight. Laughter touched the sensuous, cruel lips.

“*Ohé!*” he cried. “What is this? By Satan, the man rides alone!”

Juan did not hurl back his defiance. His sword hacked and thrust. He closed with Don Diego. Abruptly his horse went down, dying from a thrust in the belly. The beast screamed like a human being. Juan fell free, landing catlike on his feet. He ran at his opponent, disregarding the mob surrounding him. His sharp sword cut through Don Diego’s guard. Its point ripped down the bearded cheek. Blood spurted as the horseman threw himself back.

Then hard hands seized Juan. He was tripped and flung down. His sword was torn away. He fought furiously, in fierce silence, but without avail. In a few moments he lay helpless, bound at the feet of the Wolf. The murderers formed a ring around the pair. Don Diego was stanching the wound in his face. No emotion showed in his pitiless blue eyes.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

Juan did not speak. He glared and that was all. The armored man laughed.

“Well, no need to ask. We have made enemies in Mexico and this, it seems, is one of them.” Don Diego’s stubby finger traced the wound Juan had made. “Yet he drew my blood. None has done that and lived.” The Wolf laughed lightly. “Fortunes of war, my friend. You gambled and lost. So you must pay—and your payment will leave you with nothing.”

He turned to scan the broad expanse of Mexican plain, pale and ghostly in the moonlight, studded with chaparral and cacti that thrust up long, dark arms.

“Good,” he mused. “We have honey in that gourd, I think. Pablo!”

A short, dark man, his face pitted with the pox, came forward.

“*Si?*”

“That is an ant-hill.”

No further word was spoken, for the savage men of Don Diego were well trained in their deeds of cruelty. The Wolf watched, smiling, as Juan’s clothing was taken from him and his body smeared with honey. The Wolf’s light laughter rang out in the night as the youth was staked out on the ant-hill.

The blood of Juan’s ancestors came to the fore now. His face was rock-hard, grimly expressionless. Only once he spoke, when Don Diego vaulted to the back of his horse.

“I give you my word that I shall kill you, Wolf.”

“And you have my leave to try,” Don Diego taunted. “*Hasta mañana*, then.”

He set spurs to his horse and galloped away, his men following in a long string. Dust rose whitely in the moonlight. The thunder of hoofs died into the far distance. There was only stillness.

The cold wind chilled Juan. He lay motionless, staring up at the stars. His body felt numb, like his mind. Since Rosita’s death a sheath of ice seemed to have covered him. Through that barrier he could feel nothing. Only, deep down within, a burning longing for vengeance glowed, a deathless hatred for the Wolf of Aragon whose mailed foot had crushed the *hacienda*.

Then the ants came....

Some time after consciousness faded in the fires of agony, Juan awoke to find himself looking up at the face of Fra Francisco. He lay on the open plain, his skin covered with an unguent that soothed the pain. It was near dawn.

"I followed you," the *padre* said. "How do you feel?"

Juan sat up stiffly.

"Were any of my men alive?" he asked.

"Not one. And—Rosita—"

"Yes?"

"She lies in the chapel."

"Good," Juan said coldly. "Give her Christian burial, Father."

The priest's eyes were startled.

"What do you mean?" he asked anxiously.

"Our paths part here," Juan stated, rising without aid. "We may not meet again. I seek vengeance."

"The Lord, in his own time, will punish the wrong-doer. Come back with me!"

But Juan did not hear. Drawing his tattered garments closer about him, he turned without a word and strode into the sunrise. Behind him Fra Francisco stood silent, then knelt to pray.

Juan Vasquez did not follow the trail of the Wolf. He had already learned the futility of single-handed attempts. He would get the aid of the natives, the Yaqui Indians who had felt the cruelty of Don Diego.

At a hut miles distant, he took a horse and went faster thereafter. He sought to rouse the Yaquis. The Spanish rulers could not help, so Juan did not waste time with them. He rode fast and found only fear, for the Yaquis had learned to dread the iron might of the Wolf. Leaderless, they would do nothing. Juan cursed and cajoled them, in vain. And ever the whispers came that Don Diego was riding through the south, pillaging, murdering, ruining.

At last Juan knew that he must rely on the oldest aid of all. He rode eastward to a certain mountain cave. He remembered well the path. Soon he stood in a great natural cavern that was lit by a geyser of flaming blue gas. Beyond the pillar sprawled a crumbling pyramid.

"Ixtal!" Juan called softly.

Only silence answered. It had been long since Juan had seen the priest and death might have come even to this deathless cavern. But suddenly something stirred and the giant figure of Ixtal stood beside the pillar of flame.

"Night falls on Mexico," the ancient Aztec whispered. "Your doom has come upon you, Juan Vasquez, as was foretold. I could not help, though I wished to do so."

"Once you said that the Feathered Serpent helps his own," Juan reminded.

Ixtal bowed his head.

"He will aid you in your vengeance."

"Give me Don Diego!" breathed Juan.

The priest pointed to the blue flame. It wavered, shook. In its depths a picture formed. At the head of his column the Wolf of Aragon was riding across a plain, tall with bleached grasses, that stretched to the horizon.

"Death comes," Ixtal said.

It came redly. Flame swirled out of the far distance. Smoke billowed across the plain. The wind blew it down on the riders. Juan leaned forward tensely, the fire of revenge in his eyes. Now the riders were having difficulty managing their mounts. The horses plunged and cavorted. The fires spread out in a ring, circling the band. The dry grasses were burning fiercely.

Through the thickening smoke Juan caught glimpses of dark figures moving blindly, stampeding in panic. Horses threw their riders, crushed them. Above the tumult towered the figure of Don Diego, trying to marshal order out of chaos.

It was a useless attempt. He gave it up at last and charged straight at the ring of flames. He burst through.

The fires passed, leaving charred, blackened huddles. Of Don Diego's band, only one man was left. The Wolf of Aragon set spurs to his steed and thundered away.

The picture in the column was gone.

"He rides to the sea, to take ship to Europe," Ixtal said. "You must overtake him before then."

"My horse is tired," Juan muttered.

"You will need no legs but your own," Ixtal said cryptically. "Your blood is Aztec blood. Over it the Feathered Serpent has power."

The priest gestured. The column of blue flame blossomed out. It arched into a great cup. The cup bent as on a stem, touched Juan—folded its flame-petals about him!

It was gone. Beside Ixtal stood no man. A wolf crouched there, a great, gray wolf shuddering convulsively under the shaggy pelt.

"Run fast," the priest whispered. "Haste, Juan Vasquez, for your enemy is fleeing even now!"

Like an arrow the wolf shot across the cave and vanished into the tunnel.

Through the night it sped swiftly. The mountain slopes gave place to rolling hills and then to plains. Tirelessly the beast's legs carried the were-thing on its errand of death. The white fangs were bared in a snarl.

Juan Vasquez had returned to his ancestors' gods, and they were gods of vengeance!

Through Sonora the werewolf fled. Dawn came with a rainbow burst of colors to the east. And at last, far ahead, the figure of a man on horseback was visible.

The grass offered some concealment. A dark shadow flitted stealthily after the quarry to give Don Diego no chance to suspect pursuit. The wind was in the right direction, so the horse would not sense danger until too late.

It screamed and went down, hamstrung, kicking, almost crushing Don Diego as it fell. The Spaniard leaped clear. He caught a glimpse of the wolf flashing to concealment. He drew his pistol, primed and ready. He did not fire. He waited.

The shrieks of the horse were earsplitting. But Don Diego remained motionless, till the wolf slunk out of concealment and stood fifteen paces away, watching him.

The hammer clicked. At the same moment the wolf sprang aside, then drove forward like a thunderbolt. Don Diego threw up one arm to protect his throat, trying to draw his sword with his free hand.

Abruptly he was standing alone, gasping with amazement. His pistol was gone. The wolf had seized it in its jaws and was racing away. Don Diego laughed with genuine mirth.

"A clever *lobo*! But I am also a wolf, my friend, and my steel is sharp. We shall see who wins this round."

He cast a swift glance over the plain, suspecting that there might be a pack. He could see nothing but the endless prairie, its dewy grass rippling under the morning wind. Nor was there any trace of the wolf now.

Don Diego shrugged. It would have been worse, had the accident happened hours before. Now he was not far from his destination. He would walk warily, one hand on his sword. As for the horse, he disposed of it with a swift thrust through the neck. The animal quivered once and lay still.

Don Diego walked eastward. After a short time, perspiration streamed from his sunburned brow. The heat of a Mexican day stifled him.

He kept his helmet on, for fear of heat exhaustion. Though the metal became burning hot, the leather pad beneath it protected his skull. His armor was too heavy and unnecessary. This he discarded piece by piece, but kept his sword and poniard.

He was not used to walking. His thighs and calves ached. Once he sat down to rest, but got up again warily at a glimpse of a gray shadow amid the grass. He laughed again.

On he went and on, discovering that there was a reason for the midday siesta. Walking in that burning oven-heat was impossible. At last Don Diego sat down again to rest, his sword across his knees. This time, he promised, the wolf would not drive him on.

Imperceptibly, in the drowsy, buzzing stillness, sleep came upon him. A vague premonition of danger made him awaken, one hand driving instinctively to his sword-hilt. He started up, eyes wide, as he realized that the weapon was gone without trace.

He spun around, an oath contorting his bearded lips. But only the drowsy silence was there and the hot, grassy plain.

He reached for his poniard and went white. It, too, was gone. He was weaponless!

Had it been the wolf? He shook his head stubbornly. No beast could have had the intelligence to steal his weapons while he slept.

There was the creature now. It came trotting out of the undergrowth and halted a dozen feet away, tongue lolling, eyes intent. Its fangs were murderously sharp. Suddenly it snarled.

Don Diego reached down for a rock, but could find none. The wolf stepped forward and the Spaniard was forced to retreat. Instantly the animal whirled and vanished into the brush. It did not reappear. Don Diego stood uncertainly for a moment, then began walking again toward the east. He kept a wary eye alert, but the wolf did not reappear.

The afternoon dragged on. The sky was blue, cloudless and insufferably hot. The parched plains sent up wavering distortions of heat, yet Don Diego kept on, hoping he had left the wolf behind. He did not pause till his legs were exhausted.

It was sunset and he was still in the midst of the *llanos*. A shadow moved not far away. Red eyes glowed. He heard a low snarl.

Don Diego got to his feet, staggering. The wolf vanished, but reappeared when he sank down again. He rose and continued stumbling toward the east.

When he kept moving, he had found that the wolf stayed at a distance. So all that night the Spaniard tottered on, his throat parched and dry. Ever the wolf stayed at his heels.

At dawn the Wolf of Aragon came to a little spring. Thirst overcame caution. He flung himself down and buried his face in the cold water. Simultaneously a twinge of sharp agony raced up his right leg.

He whirled in time to see the wolf flee into the brush. He tried to stand, only to fall helpless. Blood was streaming from his ankle. Throbbing agony pounded within it.

The Achilles tendon had been neatly cut by knife-sharp fangs. Only with the aid of a skilled surgeon could Don Diego ever hope to walk again.

He was not smiling as he washed the wound and bound it with strips torn from his garments. That done, he sat and considered. It was not far now to the coast, where he could get aid. There were places there that would harbor even the Wolf of Aragon.

What other alternative was there? To remain, with the wolf growing bolder and bolder? No! Don Diego would make a crutch....

There was no wood on the *llanos*. He found only flimsy stuff that splintered and broke under his weight. So, gripping a sharp-edged stone in one hand, he began to crawl.

He hoped the wolf would come close. There were more stones in his pockets. Perhaps he could kill the beast with a well aimed blow.

As though divining his intentions, the wolf followed just out of reach. It seemed to have almost human—or, Don Diego thought, diabolic intelligence. Somehow it never was as good a target as it seemed. It dodged easily whenever the Spaniard hurled a stone.

At last the missiles were all gone. The blazing, merciless sunlight poured down. The wolf drew closer.

By this time Don Diego's clothing was in rags and his knees were mere raw pads of bloody flesh. His hands were masses of sheer agony, yet he dared not pause. The fierce flame of life that burned within him would not let him even consider the thought of death. Somehow he must outwit the pursuer. The coast could not be far now.

The shallow blue eyes were wide and red-rimmed. The helmet had long since been lost. Night came on, but Don Diego did not sleep. Unceasingly the wolf drove him.

The Spaniard did not realize it when he was herded from his true path and turned back inland again. Nights and days faded into a dull monotony of incredible pain. Sometimes he would find water. The wolf would let him drink then, after having guided him to the waterholes.

When he grew hungry, there would be a freshly killed rabbit near him when he awoke, for sometimes he was allowed to sleep, though not for long. Nor was he permitted to eat and drink much. Always hunger and thirst gnawed at the Wolf of Aragon.

Days ... nights....

Once another wolf came down from the hills, scenting blood and prey. The gray wolf fought the intruder and killed it. Then Don Diego fed on raw and sinewy meat.

Nights ... and days ... and thought faded from the Spaniard's mind. Nothing had ever existed before this torment. There was nothing but the necessity of keeping moving, so that sharp teeth would not nip and hurt him. If he crept on, there would be food and water.

Days ... and nights....

Captain Ramon Alvarez made a hurried gesture to his orderly and held up his hand in the order to halt. His command, a file of uniformed men, reined in their horses. The orderly's musket sprang to his shoulder.

"Wait!" Alvarez said. "A wolf is following that man. Fire!"

A shot boomed. The wolf sprang high in the air and fell in a huddle of gray fur. The crawling man kept crawling, ignoring the loud explosion as if he had not heard it.

Alvarez dismounted and walked with his orderly to the half-naked, ghastly figure. He took a canteen from his belt and held it to the twisted lips.

But the man had forgotten how to drink. Captain Alvarez looked down in sick disgust at the monster that was lapping muddy water from the puddle in the dust.

"Lord!" he breathed. "Is this—"

The orderly nodded.

“*Sí, mi capitán.* It is Don Diego, the man we were sent from Mexico City to capture.”

“He is smiling,” Alvarez said, shuddering.

But Don Diego did not smile with mirth. His teeth were bared in a snarling grimace. Hair grew thickly over his face, hiding all but the deep-set, glaring eyes and a beak of a nose.

He turned and began crawling away.

Alvarez sprang after him. The creeping man snapped at the hand that was laid on his shoulder. He howled like a beast. He was bound and flung across a horse that reared and snorted at the touch.

Alvarez snapped commands. The silent mounted men sat upright in their saddles. The troop rode away, bearing their captive.

Not one noticed that, amid the grasses, lay the corpse of a man where a wolf’s carcass had been shortly before. Juan Vasquez lay motionless, a gaping bullet wound in his breast. On the tired young face was the shadow of a satisfied, ironic smile.

He did not hear the long, quavering howl that burst from the lips of a thing that strained and fought against its bonds. But Alvarez heard, looked back at Don Diego and crossed himself.

“This is a strange land,” he said.

His orderly, riding beside him, nodded unhappily.

“*Sí, mi capitán.* It is indeed a strange land!”

[The end of *The Wolf of Aragon* by Henry Kuttner]