

*Angel With Spurs*

Paul I. Wellman

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# ANGEL WITH SPURS

A NOVEL BY PAUL I. WELLMAN

Author of  
JUBAL TROOP

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## FOREWORD

There is no manner of doubt that the Mexican Expedition of the “No Surrender” Confederates, under General Joseph Orville Shelby of Missouri, was one of the most *outré* of the episodes of the War Between the States.

It is true that it was little known at the time and is now almost forgotten. The nation, both North and South, was too engrossed in the vast drama of the breaking up of the Confederate armies in the East, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and the other events in the nearer theatre of conflict, to pay much attention to what was going on beyond the Mississippi.

Yet Shelby’s Mexican Expedition deserves remembrance. It represented the last effort of a cohesive segment of the Confederacy to save something from the wreckage. Although only about a thousand men crossed the Rio Grande with Shelby and marched towards Mexico City, the movement had in it the seeds of a mighty change in history. But for adventitious circumstance, it might have succeeded.

Shelby himself was a figure out of the Middle Ages, almost, with plumed hat and cloak, and flamboyant manner; but he also was one of the hardest riding and hardest fighting of all the Confederate cavalry chiefs, campaigning during the war over a sweep of country which dwarfed the arena of the Virginia struggle. Under an extravagant exterior he was essentially a realistic thinker, and his effort for the South deserves close consideration for that reason.

This book does not seek to offer a factual, day-by-day account of the expedition. It would be impossible in a novel to tell the routine story of such a march, and the author has sought no more than to give an impression of the adventure of it, and the difficulties and deadly perils of that thousand-mile campaign across unknown lands and against unknown foes.

Of the characters, Shelby himself, Major Edwards, Marshal Bazaine, General Jeanningros, the Emperor Maximilian, and sundry others are historical, and, where they have dealings with historical events, the pattern of history is followed in this tale—with due allowance for such small alterations as the novelist might legitimately claim the right to make. Of these events there is, fortunately, a fair record, in the written recollections of Colonel John C. Moore, Major John N. Edwards and others, together with newspaper accounts and reminiscences of General Shelby himself.

The entertaining personality of Major Edwards, adjutant of Shelby's Brigade, is particularly well documented. Where he expresses himself on persons or events in this book, the author has made shift to use his own words, as left by him in his writings, wherever it is possible so to do. So also, as nearly as may be, the actual conversations, as recorded, are given in Shelby's meetings with Jeanningros, Bazaine, and Maximilian.

Other characters are the invention of the author, and with them the fullest liberty has been taken. But it is interesting that many of the adventures ascribed to them actually occurred to men in Shelby's following, as for instance, the trick to save the supply depot, the duel decided by a cock-fight, the fate of the scouts at the river crossing, and the breaking-up of the raid on the sub-treasury at Austin. In all these, of course, some changes have been made to fit them more closely to the narrative.

Finally, it is to be remembered that the men and women on these pages were living in the year 1865. Conversations and actions were florid. The flourish, in speech or gesture, was much admired—and is so presented.

PAUL I. WELLMAN.

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The week had been one of unmitigated drought, unusual for May, when northern Texas ordinarily looked for rains. Above, the sky was a metal bowl, reflecting in continuous malevolence the wrath of the molten sun. Intermittently a breeze swept up from the south-west, but in it was no coolness. The kiss of it was hot on the cheek, and it curled the leaves of the jack-oaks and the blades of the early corn, for it came directly from the Texas desert. To the eye distant objects appeared distorted in the heat shimmer arising from the parched earth, and all roads were ankle-deep in fine sifted dust.

The village seemed to crouch in the oven heat, as if shrinking from the wrath above. This was Tyler, Texas, and in 1865 it contained altogether no more than a scattering of houses—mostly log or frame, the latter guiltless of paint and with the pitch frying out of the warping boards. A dusty road slid through the town, its edges choked with rank, dust-covered weeds. At the northern edge of the hamlet, where the wheel tracks wriggled away and disappeared finally into low-topped jack-oak woods, three log buildings stood. They were of a pattern, and seemed aloof from the village. Before the central structure, on a stripped pine pole, limply stirred a flag—a rectangle of faded scarlet, slashed across by a St. Andrew's cross of star-spattered blue. Save for this flag there was nothing to identify the three log buildings as constituting a Confederate military supply depot.

In the shade of the central building, on the northern side, lounged six men. They sat or leaned in various inert and negligent attitudes, as if the heat had sucked from them every atom of energy. One squatted on his heels, his arms resting on his knees, his battered felt hat drawn low over his eyes. Another was doubled up like a jackknife, his back against the log wall, his knees under his chin. Others sprawled flat on the ground. All were alike in that they were ragged, that they were sunburned to a common mahogany brown hue, and that they were bearded to the eyes. Most of them were chewing tobacco, and the slimy pools of their expectoration were about them.

These men were soldiers. More than that, they were members of one of the *corps d'élite* of an uncommonly hard-fighting army. But no one could

have known it merely by seeing them thus; they looked like a set of singularly disreputable tramps.

In the manner of soldiers they were complaining—of the inaction, of the food, of the weather, of anything to which they could lay their tongues for complaint, that being an end in itself to be sedulously cultivated by soldiers of every nation and every war.

“Gawd a ’mighty an’ damnation!” one whined. “Them grey-backs is eatin’ me alive.” He scratched dejectedly. “Somebuddy give me the loan of a chew?” He looked around. Nobody paid the slightest attention to him. He assumed a look of patient exasperation, rose and shambled off behind the building.

“Ain’t we never goin’ to git relieved?” another man asked plaintively. “Kirby Smith an’ them has been settin’ along the Red River so long it looks like they’d have wore out all the wimmen in south-east Arkansaw by this time. Think they’d be movin’ if only to find somep’n fresh——”

“The gen’ral staff needs yo’ at headquattahs, Cass,” said the man who was squatting on his heels. He had not changed his position or shifted the direction of his brooding gaze.

“Wall, I could tell ’em a thing or two about the conduct of this here war,” said Cass defensively. “Wonder whut Janeicke’s come down hyar fo’?”

“If yore so God-damned smaht, huccume yo’ don’t know that ’thout askin’?” sneered the heel-squatter. Cass was crushed into silence. The men continued their drowsy contemplation of the baking scenery.

Before the door of the building, tethered to a hitching-post, stood a horse, his head hanging low, sweat, which had gathered dust until it became mud, crusting his sides. The horse bore a battered McClellan saddle, and to the left of the pommel was fastened a scabbarded sabre which slanted downward beside the animal’s shoulder. Under the saddle flap on the right hung a carbine in its boot. The rider of that horse had just arrived, and was inside now talking with the officer in command of the depot, Captain Bennett. That he was from army headquarters these men knew. They had seen no one from headquarters for two weeks, and they all knew that events of great moment were toward. Rumours and reports had circulated freely, enough to set ordinary men crazy with speculation. But so long had these men been in the army, and so accustomed were they to receiving their information through the well-defined official channels, that this was the limit of their speculation on the nature of this messenger’s errand.

Time dragged. The rider from the north appeared presently at the door and gazed about. He was a huge, gaunt man, striking because of a long black beard, liberally shot with grey, which hung like a horse's tail from his chin. On his arm were a sergeant's massed chevrons. Every lounging soldier knew him—Esau Janeicke, an Ozarks hunter, hard and canny as a jack-oak, an unbelievable marksman with his Sharp's rifle, and Shelby's favourite scout because he had a peerless eye for the country, an instinct for fords, and a sixth sense which told him when an enemy was around.

“Howdy,” said Janeicke, turning about him a gaze half-fierce and half-whimsical. He had not bothered to greet them when he rode in a few minutes before. “One of you boys take my hoss to the corral,” he said. The man called Cass rose and led the animal back behind the building, and the sergeant turned back within.

More time passed. The man who had been seeking a chew of tobacco came slouching back, having found what he sought. His comrades chaffed him sleepily, then relapsed into silence. From above, the heat beat down more fiercely. Sweat drops ran out from under their hat brims, and trickled down their cheeks into their whiskers.

“Gawd, Catfish, is it allus like this in Texas?” groaned one of the soldiers at last. He was excessively lean and even his sparse beard did not disguise the fact that he was hardly more than a boy.

“Nope,” said he of the squatting heels imperturbably. “It's usually hotter.”

“Hotter? Why, it's hotter'n a bitch-wolf in a prairie fire now,” complained the first. “What's it gonna be like in July?”

The question was unanswered, for the squatting soldier had risen suddenly and alertly to his feet. Standing thus he was revealed as a small, slant-shouldered man, and the reason for the nickname “Catfish” also was explained. His mouth was wide as a frog's, and turned down at the corners like that of the sluggish pout of the western rivers. On the company rolls he was listed as Corporal Jasper Carruthers, but not since his first day in the army had he been called anything but Catfish.

The corporal's attitude now was all concentration. Behind him the others rose slowly to their feet also.

Debouching out of the woods, two hundred yards away, with a cloud of dust towering above it, was a column of horsemen.

Three hurried steps the corporal took to the doorway of the building, and looked within.

“Cap’n Bennett, seh,” he said, “pahty of riders from the nawth.”

The interior of the building appeared gloomy after the brightness of the outside. Catfish Carruthers saw Captain Bennett seated behind a table of rough pine boards, talking to Janeicke who stood hugely before him. The captain rose to his feet, a supple, slack figure in a worn grey uniform, and strode to the door.

As he did so, the sunlight lit his face—a youth’s face, made still more youthful by the fact that he wore no beard, in contrast to his men who all were bearded. Clay Bennett was twenty-three and looked it—young to hold the responsibility of a captaincy in a military body like Jo Shelby’s hard-riding cavalry. But there was that about him which hinted at what had won him his rank. He had a short, straight nose and a square, somewhat bony chin, slightly cleft. His mouth was very wide, with lips still retaining a faint reminiscence of a boyish curve in spite of the brand of habitual sternness placed on them by four years of war. His cheeks were gaunt, dug in by hard living, and his grey eyes looked out with almost startling vividness from the deep weather-beaten tan of his face. Just now Captain Bennett was bareheaded, sandy hair swirled back in a natural cow-lick from a forehead only slightly lined. His clean jaw was that of a fighter, but there was that in his face that indicated he was also, in a way, a thinker. With a finger he caressed a slight sandy moustache—the smallness of which, incidentally, caused him private anguish when he compared it with the facial adornments of more mature or hirsute companions.

The captain was intently studying the oncoming horsemen, and with infinite distaste in his eyes. For days Clay Bennett had looked at frequent and long intervals up that road to the north—looked hopefully, sometimes despairingly—looked until his eyes were like old wounds. But now . . . ?

He turned impatiently from the door. “Catfish,” he told his corporal, “get the men inside and post them. I don’t know who these people are. It may be a fight. Understand?” As the corporal snapped his orders outside, the captain stood deeply thinking. The men came in with a rush, seizing carbines, taking positions. After a moment Clay called Catfish aside, and with him the newly arrived Sergeant Janeicke, and gave them some low-voiced instructions. Both men nodded, the sergeant left the building by a rear door, and the captain turned and stepped out of the front of the depot building.

Walking very erectly, he crossed the small parade ground until he stood directly in front of the peeled flagpole. The oncoming horsemen had almost reached him. Already their leader was pulling to a stop. Instead of halting in column, the riders behind spread out loosely and crowded forward to see, so that they formed an irregular front of horses' heads and bearded faces almost on a line with their chief. Every eye converged on the young officer who stood on foot before the flagpole.

"Howdy," began the leader of the newcomers. "I am Major Gideon Gonder. Who, seh, do I have the honour of addressin'?"

"Captain Bennett, Shelby's Brigade," returned the other shortly. "What can I do for you?"

"To speak it plain, we come to take over this military depot." The man spoke with a surprising assurance.

"By what authority, sir?"

"By the authority of the State of Texas!"

"Since when," asked Clay, "has the State of Texas begun taking over government property belonging to the Confederate States of America?"

The man who called himself Major Gideon Gonder shifted in his saddle so that the leathers squealed under his weight. He was a big, bulging man, in his middle forties, by all appearances too heavy for much riding, with a bulbous nose jutting over a kinky red beard and shrewd piggy eyes glittering beneath his hat brim.

"There ain't no Confed'rit States—no more," he said, with an edge of malice.

Clay heard him without surprise, but with a sensation of sickness. Even a thing you have expected for a long time can do that to you when it is bad enough. The major must have seen some fleeting change in his expression, and considered that a sensitive point had been touched.

"So," he continued in his curious flat drawl, "you hain't got no more right to possession of them goods than any greaser Mexican. Cap'n Bennett you say your name is? A Missourian, eh? Well, them army supplies belongs to the State of Texas; an' as a commander of this here contingent of Irreg'lar Texas Cavalry, I hereby levies on 'em."

Nothing occurred to Clay to say, so he said nothing. But standing with the log depot buildings baking hotly behind him in the Texas sun, he studied the man on the horse and noticed that the old uniform coat, which wrinkled

and pulled over the major's pot-belly, was filthy and grease-spattered—but blue. And that unfaded spots on the collar still indicated where the “U.S.” insignia had been ripped off. Moreover the man did not talk like a Texan, although undoubtedly Texans were in the wild mob behind him. It was plain to Clay that the major was no legitimate Confederate officer; but that made the situation only more complicated.

On this last day of May, in the year of disaster 1865, the armies were fast breaking up; and the whole South—Texas in particular—was filled with marauders. Captain Bennett would have felt relief in turning over the dinky little depot under his charge to any proper Confederate authority; might even have surrendered at discretion to a legitimate Union officer—if he came with a force big enough. But these before him were bushwhackers, neither friends nor honourable foes.

He could almost feel his own men watching him from the depot buildings. They were wondering what he would do. For the present he stood stiffly facing the disordered front of mounted guerrillas, and did nothing.

Major Gonder's little eyes glittered dangerously, but his voice remained smooth: “I got thirty men here. I jedge you got about six. Resistance, you see, would be foolha'dy.”

His manner was indulgent; and therefore irritating. But Clay, looking over the slovenly array that confronted him, was forced mentally to agree that the major had by no means overstated the situation. The thirty looked ready for anything. If ever Clay had beheld a slouchier body of men, or a more vicious, the unpleasant recollection escaped him now. The faces were hairy, hard, and nearly all bore the hound look. Running along their front the captain's eye paused. Where under the sun did a horse like that get into a company so disreputable? He had not seen such a horse for ages—a sorrel gelding with a blazed face and white stockings, blood showing in every line of him, prancing as if he had springs in his long, slender legs. How did it happen that the leader of this gang of outlaws had failed to appropriate that horse for himself? Perfunctorily Clay's gaze took in the rider—a boy, thin-faced, narrow-shouldered, and beardless, in a ragged Confederate uniform many sizes too large for him. Altogether too young for this sort of thing. The captain judged him about fourteen from his looks. Smudge of dirt across one side of his small face. Eyes—wide, sullen eyes. Clay glanced a second time at those eyes. An elusive gleam was in them . . . gleam of what? Almost he could have sworn it was recognition, and he wondered momentarily if he had seen that boy before somewhere. In four years of soldiering you can see much country and many people . . .

Major Gonder coughed impatiently, and Clay, brought back to the present, knew further silence would be dangerous. He tried to think how Shelby would speak; or how Major Edwards, the brigade adjutant, would speak. His own unready tongue shackled him.

“I’m interested, major, in your first assertion,” he said, as silkily as possible. “Would you be so good as to amplify? I mean what you said about the Confederacy. We have been much cut off here at Tyler . . .”

“Most ce’tainly, cap’n.” Gonder’s face smoothed out. “Gen’ral Lee has surrendered his army at a place called Appomattox Co’t House, in Virginia. Gen’ral Joe Johnston also has surrendered—at Durham’s Station, No’t Ca’lina——”

“Of these we had some report.”

“The last step, seh, was the agreement, five days ago, by Gen’ral Edmund Kirby Smith, commandin’ the Army of the Trans-Mississippi, to terms of surrender offered by the Federal fo’ces in Loosyanna.”

Clay took good care, this time, that his face did not betray him. There was no reason to doubt Gonder’s statement—it meant that the last considerable force of the South was gone. For a moment he chewed the cud of that, and found it wondrous bitter.

The major’s horse jerked up his long head and his hoofs stirred restlessly as Gonder gathered the reins. Behind Clay the log buildings seemed to hunch together as if expecting a blow. In those three buildings lay twenty thousand dollars’ worth of goods—goods the captain had been ordered to guard. A carbine barrel glimmered at a window. Catfish and his men were ready; yet six, even of Shelby’s troopers, could hardly be expected to hold off thirty outlaws. As for Clay himself, if it came to an attack, he would assuredly be the first shot down, and this knowledge caused his chest to tighten and his mouth to go dry. Clay Bennett never had made pretence of enjoying danger. Often he had envied men like Shelby, who grew gayer as the bullets flew thicker, and who seemed to derive inspiration for witty remarks from the sight of death striking about him; or Major Edwards, who under conditions of peril, sonorously quoted Shakespeare or Sir Walter Scott. He, himself, never found much to inspire him in the near presence of death, and he sought only to do his duty and make as good a showing as any other man.

As for the present situation, time was what he most greatly needed, and slow of tongue as he was, he was under the necessity of fencing for it. “One

more question, major,” he said. “Have you heard what happened to the command of General Joseph Orville Shelby? It was from him I received my orders.”

“You can rest your mind easy about Jo Shelby,” responded Gonder with a knowing grin. He thought he saw the trend of the question. “Without doubt he has surrendered with the others—Kirby Smith, Magruder, Buckner, Price, an’ the rest. Matter of fact, if the capitulation went accordin’ to schedule, your Jo Shelby’s no longer a general at this very minute. He’s a fugitive, or a pris’ner, or mebbe—if he’s lucky—under parole. In any case he’s ceased havin’ any further author’ty over you.” He probed into the depths of his tangled red whiskers and scratched ruminatively there. “I’m waitin’, seh, fo’ your reply,” he ended.

In spite of everything—the armed threat, the ugly gang, and all the other surrounding circumstances, there was about the major such an air of earnest reasonableness, and his rascality was so sincere and unblushing, that Clay felt a sensation almost of amusement.

“Major Gonder,” he said, still playing for time, “I fear you are not abreast of some of the latest events. It might interest you to know that I’ve just received a message from General Shelby himself. A detachment is on its way to relieve me. It should be here any moment now.”

All the guerrilla faces wore the sinister curve of derision.

“Now ain’t that interestin’?” asked Gonder, turning in his saddle with a fox laugh at his men. “Here we been layin’ acrost the road no’t h all mawnin’—an’ never seen nothin’ of no courier.” The sneer disappeared and he turned on Clay, suddenly fierce. “Do you turn over this depot peaceable,” he rasped sharply, “or do we take it from you?”

Clay’s mind raced desperately. It was true that he had received a message from Shelby—although it contained hardly the facts he had stated to the major. This was the message that had just been brought by the scout, Janeicke. Hopefully, but fruitlessly, the captain’s eye swept beyond the rank of guerrillas to the edge of the woods where the road came out of the jack-oaks. No help from there. The weight of his responsibility seemed suddenly very heavy, but he still had a card to play—an expedient sufficiently tenuous, which he had prepared at the last moment when he saw the approach of the bushwhackers.

“Catfish!” he called, his voice hard and tight. “Bring out that keg!”

Then he turned to the major and did not mince words. “Remove that bunch of scalawags from this government property, sir!”

Trying to appear as casual as if he had the full power behind him to enforce that order, he drew from his breast pocket a cheroot, and lit it.

Gonder’s eyes narrowed and his face reddened ominously. But something—perhaps Clay’s very assurance—checked him. From the warehouse emerged the slight figure of the corporal, carrying a thick, iron-bound little cask. The major stared.

“Look out—powder!” came a shout of warning behind him.

But by then Catfish had reached the captain’s side and set the keg on the ground. Gonder’s whiskered jaw dropped. The corporal had drawn the plug from the cask and left a crooked trail of black granules running all the way back into the warehouse. To every bushwhacker it became a matter of extreme urgency to know what lay inside the log building—at the other end of that black powder line. Pop-eyed they stared, while Clay, puffing a white cloud of tobacco smoke, seated himself on the keg.

Behind the major came an apprehensive cry: “Look out fo’ that seegar!”

Clay heard the ominous double-click of a rifle hammer and spoke quickly:

“Don’t any of you try shooting me off this keg. If you do a lot of us will go to hell together! That train leads to the magazine, and there’s a sight of powder in there—about a ton, near as I can figure. Even if you shoot me, you can’t keep me from dropping this cheroot on that powder train!”

He let that sink in, wondering why his pulse did not beat more quickly. Because there was no powder magazine in the warehouse. As a matter of fact, the cask on which he was sitting contained the only powder at the depot—an odd keg, shunted aside for some reason. Thirty pairs of eyes glared murder at him, and he found time to be curious as to why anyone, even in Texas, should for so much as five seconds be fooled by a device as hoary as this of the powder magazine. So little would be required to unmask it—if one of the outlaws rode his horse forward only a step, action would be forced on Clay, and the subterfuge exposed. Yet the thirty sat and glowered without moving.

“Listen,” he said, as earnestly as he could speak. “You’re not dealing with militia. You’re dealing with Shelby’s men. Ever hear of Shelby? If so you’ll not be fooling yourselves that we’ll hesitate to blow up this depot before we’d give it up—and not a man here could escape the blast!”

Ten tense, silent seconds ticked past. Ten more. The suspense grew almost unbearable. Then, to his intense relief, Clay saw signs of breaking among them. Some of the men in the rear began clawing their bridle reins and shifting their horses backward. The captain flicked the ash from the tip of his cheroot. Every guerrilla eye followed the white particles as they fell . . . blinked involuntarily as they dropped full on the crooked powder band. The ash was dead; there was no spark. To a man the outlaws felt an immense relief, but the conviction was growing in them that the officer sitting on the powder-keg was a lunatic. Next time he flicked the ash it might carry fire with it to the magazine.

“Hell’s fire, them goods ain’t worth it!” someone muttered. “I’m leavin’!” Hoofs pounded, horses wheeled, dust rose like a fog.

And then Gonder laughed. It was shocking in the tension to hear him. Only he and the boy on the sorrel had stood fast, but the other outlaws checked their horses and stared at the major.

“Powder!” he guffawed. “Haw, haw! It won’t do, Bennett! I seen your man stop jest inside the door an’ pull the plug of that kaig. If he’d been layin’ a train, he’d of pulled the plug an’ laid the train clear black to the buildin’s inside room where the magazine was. Ain’t no powder in there!”

From the outlaws rose an ugly growl.

“My compliments, major, on your powers of deduction,” said Clay instantly, forcing a smile but inwardly cursing the stupidity of Catfish. He tossed away the half-smoked cheroot. Death is not attractive when you are twenty-three, but he was a captain of Shelby’s Horse, and there was the more need now that he uphold the traditions of that headlong body before this scrofulous crew. A man can but do his best, and Clay steeled himself to do it, for even now he had no intention of surrendering the depot. If only that for which he was watching would materialize . . .

Mentally he debated the chances of a dash for the store-house and reckoned them at less than zero. Then, all at once, he relaxed; the thing he wished for had appeared.

Clay, facing north, could see the road, where it emerged from the low jack-oak woods. Behind the trees the road was hidden, but now above the foliage that formed a background to Major Gonder’s portly figure, the captain saw a rising cloud of dust.

“I’d like you to look behind you, major,” he said, and every guerrilla head turned.

It is a well-understood circumstance that a dirt road, heavily used in dry weather, becomes deep in dust so fine that any creature or vehicle travelling over it raises a thick cloud behind. A column of marching men or horses, by keeping the dust stirred and winnowed, creates a choking haze that on a still day towers far above, marking the passage of the column across the country. An experienced eye can judge the size of a marching body by the dust it raises, and whether it is horse or foot by the speed it travels. Viewing that oncoming dust cloud, Gonder instantly estimated not less than a full company of cavalry was under it—cavalry, because it came on faster than a normal infantry pace. To a man his bushwhackers interpreted likewise.

“Shelby!” rose their alarmed shout.

With a unanimity that was startling, they acted according to the promptings of discretion. Spurring, swearing, and lashing their mounts, the thirty whirled and galloped away through the town towards the woods to the south.

Two only hesitated—Major Gonder and the boy. About the latter was a glint of hard determination, but the former sat his horse and looked Clay in the eye with a humorous twinkle that was almost rakish when coupled with the whole aura of down-at-heels reprobation which hung about him.

“Seh,” he said, “it must be somewhat difficult fo’ you to discern any lion-like qualities in them followers of mine.”

In spite of himself Clay felt the inclination to grin; but checked it. Gonder continued:

“It’s my turn, seh, to present compliments—an’ apologies. You kept us prettily in play until rescue arrived. I now perceive I misjudged you. You have a haid on your shoulders that is older than a man might think to look at you.” He grinned disarmingly, tugging at his beard. “Now that my command has depa’ted, permit me to say that I admire your attitude greatly. Correct—extremely correct, if I may say so. I know my men, the scoundrels. They care more fo’ a whole skin than the riches of the world, let alone its glory. Since they have gone—an’ they will not stop this side of camp, which is ten miles out in the bresh—pe’haps you will so far fo’get the recent diff’rences between us as to do me the honour of havin’ a sociable glass with me? I know a bar in this very town, where they specialize in what is known locally as a Coahuila E’tquake. A most skilful blending, seh, of *tequila*, an’ Holland gin, an’ the juice of the lime, producin’ a gratifyin’ effect at rema’kably sho’t notice——”

But Clay, recovering from his astonishment, cut him short:

“No, I thank you! And get out! Major or no major, sir, if you’re still here when that column arrives, I’ll have you under arrest!”

Gonder regarded him with sorrow; sighed as one who, old in the ways of the world, grieves at the folly of youth; shook his head; and rode away dispiritedly, followed by the ragged boy on the high-stepping thoroughbred.

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Captain Bennett watched them out of sight, then turned towards the portentous dust cloud. It had halted its progress and was dissipating above the tops of the jack-oaks.

“Catfish,” he said, “go tell Janeicke to come on in.”

The little corporal saluted, disappeared behind the warehouses, reappeared on horseback, and galloped towards the woods. Presently the dust cloud lifted again and from the trees issued a strange procession. First appeared Catfish and the black-bearded sergeant. Behind them came—not a company of cavalry, but a cadaverous Negro in a two-wheeled cotton cart pulled by an old brown mule. But the oddest part of the spectacle was a flouncing trail of a dozen small trees and thick bushes, which dragged and rolled behind the vehicle, sweeping up, like a huge broom, a vast cloud of dust—a cloud with every appearance above the trees of being made by marching troops.

“Sorry I took so long,” said Janeicke as he rode up and saluted. “Couldn’t find no rig until I rounded up this nigger. Ye cain’t do the dust stratagem ’thout no wagon. I made tracks, soon as ye told me, but rollin’ stock ain’t frequent hereabouts. Rode back in the bresh two mile afore I run on to this nigger an’ his cotton cyart. Even then I had to make gestures, sort of, with a pistol, afore the black son-of-a-bitch would come along.”

Clay was edgy. He had gone through a close thing with those guerrillas, and it made him irritable. “Another minute, and you’d have been too damned late,” he growled sourly.

The sergeant lost his half-humorous expression. Wall-eyed with fright, the darky, having received his dismissal, whirled his cart about and drove away down the road at a gallop, not bothering to remove the trailing, bounding bushes, and leaving behind a towering billow of dust.

The “dust stratagem”—as Janeicke called it—was an old artifice of Shelby’s, who more than once had used it in tricking enemies into wholly unjustified disposals of fighting units. By it Clay’s mind was brought back to the general himself. In his pocket was Shelby’s message, handed to him

by Janeicke only a short time before. Major Gonder had made a bad slip—he had lied when he said his gang had watched the road north all morning, because had they done so, they could not have missed seeing the scout, who came directly from Red River. Clay reached into the inner pocket of his uniform jacket, drew forth the yellow envelope, and read again:

RED RIVER, MAY 25, 1865.

CAPTAIN BENNETT: DISTRIBUTE GOODS IN YOUR DEPOT TO DESERVING CONFEDERATE FAMILIES AND JOIN ME BY JUNE 7 AT AUSTIN.

SHELBY.

It was like Shelby, that note—just the kind of a message a captain on detached service might expect to receive from him. No military formality. No explanations. Just orders that on their face looked simple, but when analysed were studded with difficulties. Clay looked at Janeicke.

“You haven’t explained what in hell Shelby’s doing at Austin,” he said. “And I’ve just learned—from that bushwhacker major—that the army’s surrendered.”

“Guess the army did,” said the scout sulkily, “but not Ole Jo.”

“When did you leave him?”

“Five days back. We heard Kirby Smith was goin’ to surrender next day. But by then Shelby was headed south.”

“South? What for?”

“Beggin’ your pahdon, cap’n, but ye better axe him yoreself. All I know is he called fo’ vol’nteers an’ marched with a thousand men.”

For all his mystification, Clay experienced a sudden fierce leaping-up of hope. It had seemed the end of everything when he was told that Shelby’s Brigade, in which he had ridden and fought for four years, had ceased to exist. Such feeling was curious, too, because service under Shelby was hardly a thing to look backward upon with enchantment. On the contrary, it was notorious that the men of Shelby’s Horse chronically slept and ate too little, rode too much and too hard, and if there was a point of especial danger on the military periphery, were almost certain to find themselves there. But it was something like being married to a woman a long time. She may be cantankerous and hard to get along with, but she becomes a habit, and on being separated from her a man feels lost, or as if part of him is gone.

Other units of the Confederate forces west of the Mississippi might take it easy in the Red River cantonments, but never Shelby's. Old Jo had an itching foot and an inordinate craving for action, so although his men had plenty to swear about, they were never bored. Neither, for that matter, were Generals Blunt, Banks, Curtis, Pleasanton, and Shields of the Federal army. Those earnest gentlemen of blue uniform were kept in a constant unhappy suspense over what Shelby would be up to next—with the certainty only that it would be unpleasant, trying on the nerves, and conducive to saddle callouses on the posteriors.

Exasperation grew in Clay at the incuriosity or perversity of a mind like Janeicke's. Either he had not taken the trouble to inquire, or he was too stubborn to say what lay behind all this. Was there to be a last rendezvous of the grey armies in the south of Texas? No, the word was that all armies, save Shelby's only, had surrendered. Then what was Shelby doing? From Janeicke's telling, it sounded like an insane last-ditch stand against the whole combination of Federal military power. If so, it was suicidal. What right had Shelby to expect of his men that they go blindly to death on some whim of his?

The heat seemed suddenly more unbearable than before, and Clay, feeling reaction from the tension of the last half-hour, suddenly craved a seat—and a drink. The last was not obtainable at the moment, but he could at least get out from under the white glare of this sun, into the shade of the depot building. Slowly he walked to the door and entered. The place smelled mustily like a country general store. At either end of the room were high piles of bundled goods, all stamped "C.S.A." Clay had lived with this smell and with these familiar stacks of supplies for a fortnight, and he was mortally tired of them. He was the kind of an officer who shows to better advantage in action than on post duty, and he had hated this assignment from the first. Now that he was isolated and alone, he resented that he should be kept in ignorance of the cataclysmic events that must be going on.

But there was his unfinished duty. He put all other thoughts out of his mind and concentrated on it. First he must consider what was to be done. There were two parts to Shelby's order. "Distribute goods . . . to deserving Confederate families." How was Clay to know who were the deserving Confederates of the district? He had been in Tyler only two weeks, and had made little effort to acquaint himself with the townspeople.

The second part of the order was equally mandatory. "Join me by June 7 at Austin." That was only a week away—even if he started at once, it would take the hardest kind of marching.

The distribution of goods would have to be held this very afternoon. He called Catfish and had him set the men to work, bringing out empty barrels and laying across the tops of them planks to form a rough counter. As this activity began, the captain, on an inspiration, sent a trooper hurrying to find the “mayor” of the town—a pompous individual of extra-legal authority—reasoning that such a person would likely be acquainted with practically everyone in the country around. Let the mayor circulate among the people word of the free distribution of goods at the depot, and at the same time be responsible for selecting those entitled to receive them.

For the first time that day, Clay felt reasonably well satisfied with himself. He looked out at the bustling scene about him and realized suddenly that he must face the public that afternoon—and that he had not shaved in two days. For the honour of Shelby’s Brigade, if not from some slight personal vanity, he searched for and discovered the tin cup he used for shaving, with a splinter of soap at the bottom, and also the warped brush which lay on a window ledge with his razor. In the cracked mirror on the wall he contemplated the stubble on his chin; then, stropping his razor on the inside of his boot leg, where it had rubbed smooth against the side of his horse, he shaved carefully.

After that he self-consciously brushed the dust from his grey jacket with the intricate braid *galóns* on its sleeve, reflecting ruefully how very fine it had been when he bought it in Little Rock, shortly after his promotion—in contrast to its shabbiness now, with sleeves frayed at the wrist, braid tarnished, and the fabric threadbare at elbows and across the shoulders. Still, it was as good as most of the uniforms in Shelby’s Brigade—that self-centred unit of poverty, in which a new uniform would have been an object of curiosity, if not of criticism. Many of Shelby’s men did not even own regulation Confederate uniforms. They marched and fought in cast-off clothing captured from the Union army—like the blue coat worn by that fellow Major Gonder.

Gonder . . . a curious personality. Somehow, Clay mused, the man did not seem to belong with these bushwhackers. They were lean as half-starved coyotes, and as pitiless and bitter, while he was portly, rotund, and humorous. That boy, too. Where did he find a horse like that—and above all, why did the other cut-throats permit him to keep it? Clay guessed the youngster must be protected by Gonder. Then he remembered the sudden glint of something unexpressed in the boy’s eyes . . . was it recognition after all?

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The crowd still milled before the counter when, shortly before sunset, Clay straightened his back to ease it, not taking his ink-smearred hands off the account book before him. At his elbow stood the old mayor, a short, baldish man with a drooping moustache like an awning over his loose-lipped mouth. The mayor had to part that awning with his finger-tips when he expectorated tobacco juice, which he did frequently and with precision. About him hung the sickish-sweet smell of the tobacco, but his presence was valuable. He was there to identify or disqualify applicants who crowded in front of the counter to receive goods.

“Deserving Confederate families,” said Shelby’s note, and Clay was carrying it out to the letter. Behind the counter two troopers, superintended by Catfish, passed over bacon, flour, blankets and other articles to eager hands; the rest of the soldiers, shepherded by Janeicke, carried goods out of the depot buildings and stacked them behind the counter. Clay painstakingly wrote down the name of each family and what goods it received.

The bald mayor felt his importance, and after hours of use, his voice, though weary, was still pompous: “Miz Mabry Miller, captain. (How de do, Miz Miller?) One of ouah best people. Widder of young Mabry Miller of Hood’s Brigade, killed at the Second Manassas . . . That thar’s Bud Gilcrease. (Bud, did yo’ mammy come to town with yo’?) Only fo’teen, captain, but takin’ care of the ranch sense his pappy an’ two elder brothers went off to jine Albert Sidney Johnston. Pappy killed at Pittsburg Landing, along with Ole Johnston hisself, we was info’med. One brother somewhar in a No-thern prison-house. T’other was with Joseph Eggleston Johnston, last we heard . . .” The voice droned on and on. They had been at it nearly four hours. At first the people had come in a thin scurrying; but after the news circulated, the crowd thickened to a mob. Women and children and old men . . . there were no young men.

This damned war—what had it done to the young men of the South? Clay knew what it had done to him; four years of soldiering can change a man beyond any calculation. With the end at hand he wondered what he would do now. Return to Missouri? Perhaps. Take up again the study of law

where war had interrupted it? He was not ready to answer that. The humdrum of it appalled him just now.

The mayor's voice ceased abruptly and a groan came from the late-comers as it was announced that the supplies were all gone. One woman's voice cut stridently: "I'm a widder with four chillern. I got jest as much right as anybody. I want some blankets fo' my chillern——" And the old mayor, his face perspiring and weary, puffed through his stained moustache as he explained over and over: "That's all there is, friends. The warehouse is empty. Fust come, fust served. I'm right sorry yo'-all air disapp'inted, but thar ain't no mo' goods."

Clay rose and stretched his long legs, feeling the blood prickle through them. Four hours in one position is cramping. The mayor began nervously thanking him in round phrases.

"In behalf of the people of this community, seh . . . wish to convey . . . utmost gratitude . . ."

Almost with annoyance, Clay waved him away. The sun was setting and the captain walked around behind the depot buildings. All afternoon he had lived with the pungent odour of cured meat, the clothy smell of newly unfolded blankets, the sweet-sick scent of the mayor's tobacco juice, and the variety of redolences from the sweating crowd. Back here the odours were different. Horse-smells and man-smells intermingled—manure and urine from the corral, mixed with the pleasant scent of hay; smoke and frying bacon and strong pipe-tobacco from the fire where the troopers already were cooking their evening meal.

Momentarily the men grew silent as he approached, but the hum of talk commenced again when he squatted on the ground and took some of the thin crisped bacon strips on a tin plate. The voices were low, but Clay caught snatches which told him the conversations were of the usual camp variety—full of obscenity and vivid personal experience. It was healthy talk, and he was relieved, for he feared there might be restlessness following the news of the surrender. Once a distant pair cast furtive eyes towards him and he knew he was under discussion. But there was respect in the eyes; the incident of the guerrillas had increased his stature with these men.

Clay began to eat. The bacon was rancid and its odour offensive, but he had tasted worse, and quickly finished the twisted strips of frizzled meat, sopping up the grease with a piece of hoecake. Gradually the growl of the talk of his men faded into the background as he stared into the coals. He was wondering about Shelby, and fretting over his orders. Of one thing he was

certain—no man could predict the general's actions. In four years you can grow to know a man measurably well, and Clay had ridden with Shelby that long. He had seen the general wounded at Cape Girardeau—a ball through the right arm, entering at the wrist and passing out at the elbow, from which the member was still well-nigh useless. There was a sabre scar on Clay's left shoulder and the dimple left by a puncturing canister bullet in his right thigh—both gained by trying merely to stay somewhere near Shelby in a fight. Yet in those four years Clay had never been able to guess the general's next move—any more than could the Yankees, who devoted much futile effort to that end.

There was one thing, however, the captain did know—his detachment must be on its way to Austin at daylight next morning. Seven days was all too little time, and Shelby would brook no delay. Clay felt in his breast pocket for a cigar; remembered he had lit his last cheroot in the histrionics of the powder-keg, and wished he had not, in his petulance, tossed it away half-smoked when Major Gonder exposed the sham. He was hungry for a smoke. No need to keep watch over the men, especially since he now had with him a veteran sergeant. He resolved to walk uptown. Rising, he called over Janeicke, gave him some instructions, and strode away in the deepening darkness.

With the sinking of the sun, the evening coolness had come. Glimmering, nine-paned oblongs of light down the street were the windows of the tavern. Clay's spurs jingled as his boot heels crunched the dry earth. From the western horizon was fading the glorious afterglow—rose and gold changing to violet, then to grey, and finally to dark sapphire blue, spattered with the brilliant diamond dust of stars. The hotel loomed before him, and he started up the steps to the long, low gallery.

“Cap'n Bennett!”

No mistaking that voice, or the burly figure framed in the lighted doorway.

“Gonder!” exclaimed Clay, his fingers fumbling with the button of his holster flap. But the other chuckled.

“Keep your ha'dware in its wropping, cap'n. Cain't you even talk with a pusson, without hacklin' up an' sharpenin' your gaffs?”

Clay's hand dropped from the pistol-butt. “That all depends——” he said guardedly.

“I am accounted, seh, in some quattahs, as holdin’ sound views on the game of poker, an’ I may say that I appreciated from the bottom of my heart the way you pulled that moth-eaten powder-kaig dodge on us this mawnin’. May I be so bold, seh, as to add that I conceived a most cordial admiration fo’ yourself?”

“Gratified, I’m sure,” said Clay stiffly.

“Not at all. You held a pair of deuces an’ played them as if they was aces full. My lads was that jumpy, they almost stampeded.”

It was said with every appearance of sincerity. Perhaps, Clay thought, he could afford to relax a little.

“Why didn’t you expose me sooner?” he asked with a short laugh. “You almost let me succeed with it.”

“Because, seh, I am a philosopher. I wished to see how you’d carry the game through. Besides, I was diverted by the manner in which my own companions was takin’ it. I misjudged you greatly, seh. You are young—but you are a cold prop’sition, seh, meanin’ no offence. It wasn’t the powder-kaig trick—that, as I stated, is old. But it was the little refinement—that dustin’ the ash from your seegar on the powder train. It looked so devil-may-care it was plumb convincin’. Even made me wonder if I’d seen right. Not until I had time to experiment did I discover that in addition to bein’ cool an’ courageous, you are also observin’. By sedulous tests I found that ash from a cheroot, dropped to the ground, falls slow, an’ there’s not once in a hundred that any spark is left by the time it lands—especial when you’re careful to flick off only the tip of the ash.”

In spite of himself, Clay grinned.

“So,” continued Gonder, “I’m doubly happy to have the occasion to renew my invitation of the mawnin’. We’re on neutral ground, so to speak,” he added hastily at the hardening of suspicion in the other’s face. “None of my men is within miles, an’ yours is at your camp. Won’t you jest step inside, seh, an’ sample that Coahuila E’thquake, concernin’ which I was expatiatin’ to you?”

Clay glanced past Gonder into the lighted bar. One or two civilians lounged there, but no bushwhackers. He looked at the major and once more was struck by the cheerfulness that made the man’s knavery seem anything but sinister. A smell of liquor came through the door. On a reckless impulse, Clay entered.

Major Gonder proved lavish, buying the drinks and urging a second and third on the captain. Clay stuck to bourbon, that drink of all good Missourians, because he did not fully trust the “Coahuila Earthquake” so warmly recommended. The major’s red beard radiated hospitality and as they drank he discoursed—of war, of his ideas concerning war, and of himself. Ordinarily Clay found men who talked of themselves wearying, but the major’s summary was full of interest. He had been a whisky runner to the Indians in Texas, and had displayed boldness in that dangerous trade—“doubly dangerous, seh, by reason that you run the risk on the one hand of arrest an’ prosecution by the gov’ment, while on the other, you stand an excellent chance of bein’ fried alive by the Comanches if them enterprisin’ savages ever finds out that what you’re sellin’ ’em in the guise of licker is composed half of p’ison alcohol, an’ half of tobacco juice fo’ colourin’ an’ flavour.” Also he had been a land speculator in Kansas, with ready acumen in defrauding the unwary settlers who fell into his hands; and a jack-leg lawyer in Missouri who still loved the sound of his own voice. Finally, he had managed, for a time, a hemp plantation.

All this Gonder related with frankness and lack of reservations. His conscience was not tender—if he possessed such a superfluity. Both by experience and lack of hampering compunctions he seemed well fitted for his present occupation. But Clay was due for a surprise.

“It has come to my ears, seh,” said the major, “that you did not receive them reinfo’cements from Shelby after all.”

Clay set down his glass, his eyes narrowing.

“I’ve also heard that you are proposin’ to ride immediately to join Gen’ral Shelby, who did *not* surrender with Kirby Smith.”

Clay shoved back his chair, but Gonder raised a hand. “Be calm, seh. There’s no myst’ry. The whole town’s full of gossip—since the distribution this afternoon. Some of your soldiers, seh, are not as discreet as yourself. What I’m leadin’ up to is that I desire the priv’lege of joinin’ up with you, the object bein’ a hope to enter the command of Gen’ral Shelby, whom I have long admired.”

“But—what about——?” Clay was astounded.

“The Irreg’lar Texas Cavalry? The brave fellows have been so inspired by my leadership, seh, that they now feel able to get along without it. A mistake, seh, as they will learn to their cost. Not a man among them with a

haid fo' command. Ce'tainly not that polecat, Bench-laig Peters, who is without imagination or discretion!"

"You mean you've left the bushwhackers?"

"I do. I left at their pressin' invitation. Their decision, I might add, was due to a position I assumed, incomprehensible to them, with reference to a hoss. The hoss of a youth with the command——"

"That sorrel the boy was riding?"

"The same. It belongs to the boy, seh, but Bench-laig Peters took a fancy to the animal. I intervened, purely on impulse. I don't know why I do sech things. However, I did it—givin' the lad a chance to get away with his hoss. So they accepted my resignation an' I came away with some speed an' with these two bullet-holes in my hat. I was really ashamed of the men, seh, bein' unable to shoot any better. When a couple dozen revolvers an' rifles talk in your direction, they ought among them do somethin' more imposin' than drill a couple of ha'mless holes through a hat."

He regarded the punctures in his headgear sorrowfully and imbibed deeply from his glass, while Clay studied him with new interest.

"I have a couple of questions to ask," the captain said directly. "How long have you been with these guerrillas? And under what authority do you hold your rank?"

Gonder drank again before answering, gazing at Clay with his small eyes twinkling over the rim of his glass. He set down the glass with deliberation, wiped the moisture from his moustache, and leaned back in his chair.

"I hold the rank of major by courtesy, seh," he stated.

"Courtesy of whom?"

"Courtesy of—well, of myself. I assumed the rank when I assumed command of the Irreg'lar Texas Cavalry, seh."

"And that was when?"

"Ten days or sech a matter ago. I fell in with them jest after they had a most unhappy encounter with some Yankee hossmen near Van Buren, Arkansas. The Yanks bagged their leader, one Major Bowman—Three-fingered Bowman his men called him, on account of a hiatus among the digits of his left hand. My companion an' I, bein' also eager to avoid them same Yanks, rode south in haste an' in company with our new freebooter friends. I sort of let it be known around that I was a major—like their late

depa'ted commander. That, an' a air of author'ty I can assume at will, induced them to offer me the command."

All this was with the most bland and ingenuous frankness.

"Were you in the army before that?" Clay asked.

"In a manner of speakin', yes. Fo' a time I was in the quattah-master's depa'tment, out of Corinth. Civilian mule buyer. I know a mule, seh, an' I know a hoss. There was a slander circ'lated, seh, concernin' a margin between the prices I paid, an' the costs certified by me to the Confed'rit gov'ment. A vile canard. I hope some day to track down the scoundrel who circ'lated it, an' strip his leprous hide from his frame. But it created an unfo'tunate prejudice against me on the part of Gen'ral Sterling Price, who asse'ted that if he caught me, he would hang me. That was the second year of the war. Fo' discretionary reasons I went west to Missouri, an' did not pa'ticipate further in an active capac'ty."

The whisky Clay had drunk warmed him, and this man interested him. "The companion to whom you refer," he asked, "was it this boy?"

"Yes—a homeless lad I have befriended. Nuisance at times. Take the incident of the hoss today, fo' example. I could be occupyin' at this minute a position of prestige an' lucrative poss'ibilities, if it hadn't been—but I weary you, seh. By the way, the youth in question also wishes to go south with your command, to offer his se'vices to Shelby."

Clay did some rapid thinking. Shelby would be needing every man he could enrol, no matter what he proposed to do. Here were two recruits. There was, perhaps, a shadow on them, but not very many of Shelby's men could have commanded perfect letters of character. Clay rose to his feet, realizing that he was a shade unsteady, for they had been drinking two hours.

"I have no objection, Gonder, to your riding with us," he said. "Understand, though, I have to be in Austin in seven days. If you or your boy prefer a leisurely pace, better not try to stay with us. And there's another matter I want you to understand: I consider it my duty to make a full report of your activities to General Shelby."

"I will be glad to repo't them myself, seh, an' in your hearin' so you can check any omissions. If Shelby's the man I've heard he is, I have no concern over the result."

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The troopers were bedding down for the night when Clay returned to the depot. Even as he was spreading his own blankets, the horse guard challenged a rider on the road. It was Gonder.

Clay heard Janeicke's menacing growl as the newcomer came within the circle of firelight, and saw the men reach for their weapons.

"It's all right," he hastened to explain. "This man's no longer with the bushwhackers. He's asked to ride south with us to enlist with Shelby. Where's the other one?" The question was to Gonder.

"Stayin' at a house a piece up the road. Join us at sunup."

Grumbling, the troopers subsided into their blankets as the newcomer dismounted and turned his horse into the corral. Nobody offered to help him; but he cheerfully carried his blanket-roll to the fire and spread his bed.

"Dry weather we're havin'," he ventured politely. There were no replies. Gonder seemed destined for a thin time, but he was unabashed.

"I'm bound!" he said next. "So these is Shelby's Tigers! Boys, you sho'llly look like ordinary, two-laigged men to me."

"Mebbe we'd look different if we was comin' at ye," grimly suggested Janeicke.

"I'm bettin' you would!" agreed Gonder warmly. "You boys needn't be upholdin' your reputation around me. I heard too much about you. Everybody knows Shelby's men ride farther an' fight harder than any other outfit in the army."

This was handsome, and, secretly amused, Clay watched his men relax as they grew mollified. Esau Janeicke spoke, and some of the hostility had left his voice:

"Wall, now, I dunno. We never had nothin' much in the shape of military awdehs an' tactics, nohow. Leastwise I heard one o' them English off'cers, that come over to see the war, sayin' thar ain't a honest-to-jack sojer on Shelby's hull muster roll."

He said it with great pride. The Confederate soldier took pleasure in belittling himself, because it gave him a superior opportunity later for autopanegyrics. It was almost a ritual and Gonder knew his cue.

“I reckon mebbe you’re right,” he agreed. “If that Britisher said it, he must know. But it looks like you made some *real* soldiers mighty hard to ketch, one time or ’nother!”

This was exactly the right note, and satisfying to the listeners around the fire. “Wall,” said Esau, almost simpering, “as to that—I got to admit that some few times we done some fightin’. Some right *peart* fightin’. But how’d we do it? Scramblin’ through the bresh to git a pot-shot at a Yankee; ridin’ hell-fo’-leather without awdeh in the charge. What commands we got? ‘Let ’em have it,’ when we mean ‘Fire.’ ‘Up an’ at ’em,’ when we mean ‘Charge.’ ‘Skedaddle,’ when we mean ‘Retreat.’ What kind of a real army has tactics like them?”

Clay had heard self-disparagement of this type hundreds of times. It was the peculiar pride of the Southern soldier that he performed his prodigies in battle with little semblance of conventional military procedure. This gave him a feeling of superiority, because to his mind it proved that he possessed high qualities denied lesser men, who required deep grounding in close-order drill before they became satisfactory soldiers. The captain could not but admire the consummate tact of Gonder’s answer:

“Jest shows. A fightin’ man’s a fightin’ man, wherever you put him. Why, if somebody’d give you boys the guns an’ rations, you’d run the Yanks clear no’th into Canada. What I hear, Jo Shelby ain’t needin’ no commands, nohow. He jest says, ‘Follow me, boys,’ an’ the man that can stay in sight of him’s likely to see all the soldierin’ he’ll want!”

Clay’s respect for the red-beard grew, as under this insidious flattery the suspicious, hostile visages of the men melted into friendliness. Even Janeicke thawed. Grins appeared around the fire, and Catfish Carruthers offered the newcomer a chew of tobacco. Satisfied, the captain rolled in his blankets and tried to sleep. But through his mind kept twisting the endless query as to what was happening to the south. Shelby was riding down to Austin, if he was not already there. For what purpose? Were the old officers with him—the men with whom Clay had ridden and fought these four years? Or would it be a new group of officers and men? The voices of the troopers at the fire murmured on. The captain was with them but not of them, and he felt perhaps more keenly than usual the loneliness of command. He craved companionship. The windy conversation of Gonder would have been

welcome, or the obscenities of Janeicke. But he lay solitary and silent in his blankets while the men talked, drifting off to slumber at last with their voices still in his ears.

When the air chilled with the first presage of dawn, the camp was astir. A few minutes later Gonder's boy came through the grey morning, riding the sorrel hunter. The troopers studied the thoroughbred hungrily, while Clay looked over the rider. Mighty young for soldiering—young and weak-looking. The boy wore his hat crammed down awkwardly on his head, and the sleeves of his old uniform jacket were rolled back from too-slender wrists. He rode a warped and peeled army saddle, with a pair of extra-big, battered saddlebags. But for all his grotesque rig, he sat his fidgeting horse as if he knew something about riding.

"Tell the kid to get down and have some bacon," Clay told Gonder.

But the boy gave a surly shake of his head without bothering to reply. Ill-mannered young ruffian, Clay thought. The boy's small mouth was drawn tightly and his eyes were sullen under the floppy hat-brim. Aloof he remained, high in his saddle, the uniform hanging in shapeless folds on his thin body. The sorrel wanted to go, and the boy devoted his attention to quieting the animal, while the soldiers, still bleary-eyed with sleep, packed and saddled.

"What's the kid's name?" Clay asked Gonder.

"Call him Ned."

"Well, you and Ned fall in at the rear," the captain said curtly, and just as the sun broke over the woods to the east, he led his little column south out of Tyler.

Almost as soon as the sun was up, the coolness left the morning air. It was going to be another blistering day, with the heat squeezing all the moisture out of the atmosphere. Clay settled himself for it. His handful rode compactly. Gonder and the boy, however, were inclined to lag at times, and at mid-morning, during a rest halt, the captain rode back to them.

"Keep closed up, you two!" he ordered sharply. "You're not riding with 'irregulars' now."

He had no wish to be officious, but desired merely to safeguard the column. A shadow of resentment crossed the boy's face, but Gonder answered in quick agreement. "Yes, seh. We'll try to do better." Clay

glanced at the lad, thought he saw signs of weariness. “We had a long ride yestidd’y,” the red-beard explained. “Our hosses is mebbe a little laig-weary, but we’ll stay up from now on.”

Somewhat sorry for the two of them, Clay rode back to the head of the column. And the fact of his feeling sorry puzzled him, because there had been boys with the Brigade before, and he had never gone out of his way to make things easy for them.

There was nothing, however, that could be done for this pair. Clay had his orders, and the pace was a steady trot. That was the way Shelby’s men always went. Trot, trot. Trot, trot. Ten minutes every hour to rest. Commonly, their riding shook an unseasoned horseman out of the column in no time. Forty miles was an ordinary day’s march, and sixty or seventy—or a hundred—caused no astonishment. It was all in knowing how to ride; and of watching the horses. Shelby was the best horse-master in the army, and under him his men learned a world of little tricks.

Clay remembered the time they raided up to Boonville, Missouri, back in ’63—five hundred miles north of the Confederate lines and every Yankee cavalryman west of the Mississippi chasing them. It was just such a raid as John Hunt Morgan made a little later into Ohio, with this difference: Morgan lost his command; Shelby brought his back, intact. During the Boonville raid, with the pursuit thickening by the hour, the Brigade passed a field of oats where the grain had just been cut and stacked. Shelby ordered the men to dismount and gather armfuls of the ripe bundles. When the march was resumed, every trooper was leaning forward over the neck of his horse, holding out a handful of the long straw so the animal could chew off the rich heads of grain. In this process their riding pace was scarcely slowed down; and the horses were so accustomed to eccentricities on the part of their riders, that they did not expect to be permitted to slacken pace, and ate the oats held forth to them, with relish and humble gratitude.

But the Federal cavalymen coming along behind were not accustomed to such doings. Clay heard, long after, how, when the Yankees learned from unimpeachable eye-witnesses what had taken place, they simply quit; and a grey-whiskered colonel who had ridden his horse into the ground to get even this close to Shelby, sat down on a stump, and in sheer exhaustion and disappointment wept, the tears trickling down his nose and running into his beard like raindrops into a dirty snowbank. That was the way Shelby’s men were; and those who rode with them had to make the best of it. Yet even as he reminded himself of this, the captain felt a new wave of sympathy for the man and the boy behind. He knew the pain of long hours in the saddle.

Their road twisted through a tangle of small oaks and hackberries, a narrow track pouring across patches of dazzlement and shade with the green leafy wall almost touching their elbows. In the tree-tops the sun made a glistening medley of light, but below the shade was often close, although it seemed only to make greater the heat of the day. Clay watched those shadows sharply, for they were perfect lodgements for an ambush—by those bushwhackers of yesterday, for instance, should they attempt reprisal. Esau Janeicke, however, lumbered along, hunched on his horse's back like some huge hairy gargoyle, without a sign of apprehension. That removed some of the captain's tension, for the scout's ability to smell the presence of enemies was legendary. Twenty miles by noon their ceaseless trot took them, and Clay ordered a halt to permit the men to boil coffee.

A round grove of elms pushed themselves together in an elbow of the creek by which they dismounted. The boy, Ned, climbed down from his tall horse stiffly, and stretched his legs to ease his cramps. Then he seated himself under a tree some little distance from the troopers, who had gathered about Janeicke, the camp story-teller. Clay's eyes sought out the lad. Hat drawn low, narrow shoulders drooping, he seemed lonesome, weary, half asleep. Gonder was kindling a separate little blaze and was busy over a kettle, while the other men guffawed loudly around Esau. It occurred to Clay that this was a good time to question the boy and learn something about him.

"Ned!" he called. Gonder glanced up, quickly, almost anxiously, but the boy paid no attention. "You—Ned!" Clay's voice rose. The boy started, and scrambled awkwardly to his feet.

"Come over here, son, and get some coffee," the captain said kindly.

The lad hesitated, then walked over almost reluctantly. Now that Clay saw him standing and moving, he was not so sure about his age. Something in the boy's face belied the impression of extreme immaturity, in spite of his beardlessness and the smoothness of his skin. His gait puzzled Clay, too. About it was a baffling awkwardness, as if he carried his hips, rather than his shoulders, forward.

"Maybe he's been sick," Clay thought. Aloud, he said: "Sit down."

Ned seemed to debate that invitation mentally before accepting it. At last, with a tin cup of chicory coffee and a couple of crackers, he seated himself on a grass hummock, tucking one leg under himself, in an attitude that was most curious.

"Tell me," Clay began, "where are you from?"

“Missouri,” replied Ned briefly. His voice was smooth and boyish, and his eyes were satin blue, now that Clay saw them close at hand—the lashes on them curving blackly. His mouth was soft, the lips very red and delicately modelled. A mighty pretty boy, Clay thought—too pretty.

“That’s interesting,” the captain said. “I’m from Missouri, too.”

From the troopers near by came a roar of laughter, as Janeicke, his face lewd, completed an anecdote. Encouraged, the mountaineer embarked on another story. It was foul as soldier stories customarily are. Clay hardly heard, so accustomed was he to such recitals, but he saw the boy flush. Progressively more ruttish grew Esau’s tale. All at once Ned sprang to his feet and hurried away out of hearing to his former position under the tree.

For some reason the manner of the act nettled the captain—it seemed ridiculously prudish. Then suddenly something about the boy struck him—narrow shoulders and waist . . . a curious, knock-kneed gait . . .

He almost bounded to his feet. “*Halt!*” The boy turned. “You’re a *girl!*” Clay exclaimed with sudden overpowering conviction. Now he understood what had puzzled him. What a fool he was not to have seen before! He saw the craned necks of the men, Gonder’s tense bearded countenance, the strange, secret grin of Janeicke. Before him blue eyes widened in panic.

“Get your horses, men!” Clay ordered. He turned coldly towards Gonder and the girl. “You two——”

But for some reason he shrank from the indicated action, which was to leave the couple to make their own way as best they could. After all she *was* a woman—and this was bushwhacker country. Clay could not desert even a camp slut in such a place. They mounted and once more struck out on the road, while in the rear Gonder and the girl doggedly fell in.

After a time Clay’s anger cooled, and presently he found that a little canker of curiosity was gnawing at him. The fact that it indubitably was a girl riding in the rear, suddenly made more tantalizing his growing conviction that he had read recognition in her eyes when he first saw her. Of course, what difference did it make? But even as he asked himself that, his mind raced to list places in which he had been during the war—Wilson’s Creek, Springfield, Elkhorn Tavern, Corinth, Cape Girardeau, Lexington, Shreveport, Boonville, Westport—by scores they ran through his mind, the towns in which he had camped, foraged, fought or fled. And not one of them brought a recollection that dove-tailed with the boy-girl at the rear.

He began now to try to visualize her in woman's clothing. It was exasperating that since he had believed her a boy he had paid too little attention to her to know exactly how she looked. Over and over he tried to picture in his mind certain things about her—the things a man looks for in a woman. How, for instance, did she hide certain contours that are feminine and not easily concealed . . . ?

Intense coarseness took possession of his thinking. Women disguised in boy's clothing had been smuggled into army camps before. Lust was a concomitant of every army camp. . . . In another part of his mind, however, he already began to recognize complications. Shelby disapproved violently of anything of this kind because it was ruinous to discipline. The danger of women in camp was that the men could think of nothing else. Already Clay discerned a slackening of tautness in his own handful, as heads bent together for *sotto voce* comments and insinuating sniggers. He turned in his saddle.

“Attention!” he barked at them, and the column came instantly erect. Let them ride that way—stiff in the saddle and eyes front. Do them good.

Esau Janeicke, beside him, had an irritating hint of a grin on his homely features.

“What amuses you?” the captain snapped.

But Esau showed no discomfiture. “I was jest smilin’, cap’n, at how I misjudged ye,” he said, wagging his horsetail beard. “Didn’t ye tumble she was a gal befo’ jest back?”

Clay scowled but did not reply.

“I thought ye seen,” went on the scout serenely. “Hell, soon as I noticed her wiggle her bottom, I spotted her—plain as the nose on my face——”

Esau had an old soldier's privileges, but the implications of this were too impertinent to be borne. Clay told him so, but he was unabashed.

“What ye goin’ to do with ’em?” he asked.

Clay did not reply. To tell the truth he did not know, and this so nettled him that he set a pace for the rest of the day that occupied everybody's attention. Once or twice, when the road twisted, he caught glimpses of Gonder and the girl, following the column, eating dust, bone-weary—but keeping close up. It was sunset when they halted. They had done thirty miles since noon.

Camp made, Janeicke reported. “Pickets, seh?” he asked.

Clay shook his head. "The bushwhackers aren't going to bother us now," he told the sergeant. "Just tell off guard details and let the men get as much rest as possible."

The sergeant saluted and departed, and Clay glanced to where, fifty yards or so upstream, Gonder and the girl had built their separate bivouac. It was time he talked to that young woman. He sent a trooper for her and found himself a seat on a log, out of earshot of the soldiers, where the hackberry trees roofed out the sky overhead.

Perhaps, he thought, he was making too much out of a sordid border incident. After all the girl was unimportant, and so was Gonder; but he wanted to let them both understand fully where they stood.

She came through the shadowy grove, slim, awkwardly garbed, and stood before him. And now his resentment rose again, perhaps because in spite of himself excitement began beating at his temples. She was a woman; and a woman—even a camp wench—can be very disturbing to a man as long celibate as Clay had been. For a time he sat silent, attaining self-control; and while he did so, one of the questions he had been asking himself was answered for him—he saw that it was the very voluminousness of the ill-fitting uniform that concealed her figure. A silky promise of swelling breasts thrust under the wrinkled shirt, and the baggy trousers could not completely hide a slender waistline and softly rounded hips. The girl saw what his eyes were doing, and flushed, but said nothing. Only she removed from her head the flopping felt hat.

Clay blinked. The absence of the disfiguring headgear made all the difference in the girl. Her hair caught and held his gaze. It was soft and luxuriant, and gold, although not bright gold. Soft gold rather . . . faintly blurred as if a veil were drawn over it, removing anything metallic from its tints. She had bound it about her head in thick opulent braids, to permit her to draw down the old hat in the awkward manner she wore it. And her face was smudged with dirt. Heatedly in his brain stirred a question, and his senses echoed it . . .

"I wished to explain," she began, and then her voice trailed off.

"I'm listening."

She regarded him hopefully. "I'm only trying to get into Mexico—I thought Shelby——"

"I have no notion that General Shelby is going anywhere near Mexico. Even if he were he would permit no woman——"

“That’s why I’m wearing—this.” With the tips of her fingers she touched, the coarse uniform. “It’s so ugly and uncomfortable that only desperation put me into it—and it’s desperation that causes me to appeal to you——”

“Please listen to me,” Clay interrupted, striving for patience. “Aside from the fact that every man in my command knows you in this garb—and will mark you”—he let the implications of that dwell, and saw the widening of her eyes—“it is my duty to prevent women like you from going into the camp of my brigade.”

“Oh,” she said. Strangely, there was no humility or guilt in the way she said it. It was, he told himself, sheer brazen effrontery. A hard woman is hard to deal with, but he was determined to see the matter through now.

“Perhaps,” he suggested, with ironic politeness, “you might be interested in knowing what happened the last time someone smuggled a woman into Shelby’s camp?”

“Why—I suppose so. Yes.”

“He was a captain,” he said, maintaining his mock courtesy. “He kept the secret from the general—for a time. But a reckless devil of a lieutenant saw through the deception. Women aren’t made for men’s clothes, you know. They’re built differently——”

“I quite follow you,” she interrupted, unexpectedly prim.

“The captain caught the lieutenant—ah—in a compromising situation with the girl,” he continued, finding the story a little difficult in the telling even to this woman.

“Surely not one of *Shelby’s* officers!” she exclaimed, and now there was such mockery in her tone that he could have slapped her. It was as if she had for the first time caught his attitude and resolved to meet him on his own ground.

“Laugh if you like,” he continued, a little bitterly. “They fought a duel—dragoon pistols on horseback.”

“Men have such reasonable ways of settling difficulties,” she said wearily. “I suppose the end was as logical as the preliminaries?”

“It was at least definite. The lieutenant killed the captain.”

She was unimpressed. “And, I suppose, got the—spoils of war?”

“He did not!” snapped Clay, growing more irritated with each word. “Shelby heard of the duel and its cause. He cashiered the lieutenant. The girl was run out of camp.”

“Your general at least appears to have some sense.” Her attitude, perfectly maddening, was that of one who sits in judgment.

“He ordered that the next man guilty of the same offence should be shot!” he said, striving vainly to be as controlled as she was. “Perhaps that will give you an idea of what you’re proposing.”

She did not reply for a moment. Finally: “I quite understand, Captain Bennett, and I don’t blame you for your attitude.”

Beneath her words was a cool contempt, mingled with something else—it was as if she were laughing at him. His exasperation brought him to his feet. He seized her by the shoulders and shook her—shook her until her head sang. He wanted to box her ears, to vent his rage on her and her airs.

What happened next he never was able to explain. Perhaps it was the gathering dusk, which shrouded her masculine attire and so, curiously, made her femininity apparent. Perhaps it was the feel of her—the touch of a woman’s body. He saw her shrink back and his lips grew suddenly hot and dry. There was a twitch in his cheek. She was trying to free herself from the hands that gripped her arms just below the shoulders, but he pulled her roughly against him. She went still in a sort of frightened paralysis, and he heard her gasp as he bent back her head in a long, strangling kiss.

It was all unpremeditated, a thing done without volition or thought, born out of a moment’s madness and the evening shadows. He was ashamed and furious with himself almost before he had done it.

Backward she staggered as he released her, a hand over her mouth, poised as if to flee, her face twisted in fear and anger. He was accused by her attitude, and his anger returned—to have a camp wench take a line like that made him furious.

“What’s the matter?” he sneered. “You act as if you’d never been kissed before. That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it—the first move in your little campaign? Or did you want the cash on the barrel head before a move was made? Well, think this over, my lady, this is the end of the whole affair. And don’t try to presume on what happened!”

She had straightened as he spoke and dropped her hand to her side.

“Captain Bennet,” she said, “I have you to thank for one thing—you’ve revealed yourself very clearly.” Her next words cleared the heat out of his brain like ice-water: “It’s perhaps good to know one another fully at the outset. I came here to introduce myself. I still intend to do so. You have perhaps forgotten me, but long ago you knew me well enough. I am Merit Hampton, of Fairwood.”

She turned her back on him and walked rapidly towards her own camp-fire through the dimming grove. And as she pulled the old hat down over the soft nimbus of her bright hair, it was as if a candle had been snuffed.

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He stood, struck motionless, looking after her. In the backward arch of his brain came the picture of the town where he had grown up—Waverly, high on the bluffs of the lordly Missouri River. In the centre of the quaint village was Judge Cato Hampton's law office, where Clay had studied Blackstone, and in that office sat a little girl—this very girl who had just been talking to him—Judge Hampton's daughter.

But how was it possible? He remembered Merit Hampton as a pert and mischievous little thing; a gawky child, leggy and thin, with pale hair, and large, inquiring eyes. She must have been about fourteen when he'd seen her last. To her father he owed many obligations. Judge Hampton had given Clay, the son of an unprosperous country storekeeper, the opportunity to learn in his office the devious ways of the law. The judge had married late in life, and Merit was his entire family, his world. Her mother had been dead since the girl was a baby, and the judge never had remarried. Father and daughter lived three miles up the river from Waverly, on their hemp plantation, Fairwood, in a noble white house overlooking the valley. The judge's slaves tilled and broke hemp in the bottoms, and there was corn, and a tobacco patch where Judge Hampton grew his own leaf. On court days the judge drove to town in a carriage behind a team of matched bays with a liveried black coachman at the reins.

Of Merit, Clay had seen little save in the summers. She spent her winters in St. Louis, where she attended school. But during the summers she returned to Fairwood and it was good to see her shining joy at being with her father, and the judge's great content at having her with him. Clay remembered how, in the long summer days, she would idle down Waverly's elm-lined streets, or sometimes sit in the law office where he pored over heavy volumes, or copied legal documents—and there she fiddled with the curtains, or teased him, or asked aimless questions until he sighed to be rid of her.

But all that was years ago—four years ago, to be exact. Four years can perform strange miracles. They had changed Clay from a studious young law clerk into a weather-beaten cavalry captain. And four years had made Merit Hampton eighteen—with all the wonder and magic of that age.

Merit Hampton! What was she doing here—in men’s clothing—riding unchaperoned over the country with a rascal like that “Major” Gonder, who was no major at all? Clay’s mind and heart already had rejected his first ideas about her. Sudden consternation and misery overwhelmed him. What had he done? Laid violent hands on this girl, forced her to submit to a rude embrace, mortally insulted her on top of it all!

The feel of her lips still burned on his, but it was a fiery tingle of remorse now.

Clay fairly held his head. Well, the damage was done. The important thing now was what had brought her here. Where were her father and friends? There was deep mystery in all this, and Clay suddenly realized that he had a duty—a duty more heavily laid upon him now, since he had so affronted her. Whatever the cost or effort, he must aid Judge Hampton’s daughter.

He glanced over to where she was now bent over her fire, feeding it with small sticks, and knew that what was before him would not be pleasant. Nevertheless he squared his shoulders and walked over to her.

“Miss—Miss Hampton,” he said, hesitantly. She did not look up.

“Why did you not make yourself known to me sooner?” he asked.

“I had not thought it necessary.” Her face was still averted.

“You would have spared me——”

“I had assumed that you were a gentleman!” she flashed. “I beg of you, Captain Bennett, only to leave me alone.”

“But I came over to ask for your pardon,” he pleaded. “I—I don’t know why I did what I did. You must let me make amends. I owe your father the deepest of obligations.”

At the mention of the judge she raised her face. It was expressionless, but in the firelight he thought he saw traces of tears upon it—tears of indignation and humiliation. “Captain Bennett,” she said, “what is it you wish to say?”

“Consider the disadvantages under which I laboured! You were travelling with that man Gonder. Secretly. Attired in men’s clothes. How was I to know you were not . . .” He stopped, aghast at the way his words were trending.

“A fancy woman?” she finished for him, mercilessly. “To clear all doubts, let me tell you, Captain Bennett, that ‘that man Gonder’ as you call him, is a gentleman as you obviously do not know the term—in kindness, and loyalty, and courage. I could never have reached here save for that good friend.”

She rose beside the fire and put the back of her hand to her forehead in a weary gesture. “During those ten wild days with the bushwhackers, he fended for me, slept always between me and the others, and risked his life to get me away.” The girl shuddered. “As for declaring myself to you, I had planned to do that as soon as opportunity presented itself. I am responsible for our being with your detachment. I recognized you the first time I saw you—when the guerrillas tried to seize your army depot—and I may say that I admired the courage with which you defied us. It was I who suggested to Mr. Gonder that he try to get in touch with you and arrange for us to go with you to Austin. But the last time I had seen you was in Waverly—it seems thousands of years ago—and time has made . . . changes . . .”

Clay stood humbly gazing at her, and in spite of her anger, it gave him pleasure to watch the lift of her chin in the firelight, and the way her lashes opened, and the curve of her cheek.

“I bid you good night, Captain Bennett,” she said after a moment. “Here comes Mr. Gonder and I must busy myself and get our supper.”

Dismissed like the veriest schoolboy, he walked away towards where the glow of the camp-fire of his own soldiers lit the leaves of the arching branches above. He was dazed and bitter. He had committed one of the most awkward blunders of his life. Thinking back, however, he could not wholly blame himself. The error of judgment was natural—although to try to explain that to a girl like Merit Hampton would be impossible. In her eyes he stood convicted of unforgivable coarseness.

And she was Judge Hampton’s daughter. He must, in some manner, make up to the girl for what had happened—do something to redeem himself in her eyes.

That was a fruitless resolution, because in the following days he never had an opportunity to speak with Merit Hampton alone. She took care of that. Though they rode in the same close group as before, they might have been the width of Texas apart. When he looked at her, he received only the chilly profile of her face.

Clay knew that his men recognized the essence of the situation, and writhed in the knowledge of what they must be saying amongst themselves. And all the time he was treated by the girl with a studied contempt which more than once brought the blood to his ears.

With all this, a new worry was his. To meet Shelby by the designated date, it was necessary that he stretch his marches out daily, and he was apprehensive that Merit would be unable to stand the continual strain of the hard riding. If she gave out, what would he do? He could not desert her—not now. On the other hand, his orders were specific, and Shelby expected to have his orders obeyed. During those days Clay watched with painful anxiety to see how the girl fared. And from some miraculous inner source she derived strength so that night after night she came into camp, drooping from weariness, her cheeks thinning, but uttering no word of complaint. And when Clay saw how his own hardened troopers dismounted stiffly each evening, he gave ungrudging admiration to the girl's courage.

They were out of the woodlands of Texas at last, on the grand prairies, and shortly before noon of June 7th, as hot a day as they had known that year, they passed three army forage wagons toiling along to the slow jerk of their dusty tilts. A mile farther, Clay saw a squad of ragged cavalymen, and recognized the sergeant, one Hendy Tobias, a Westport, Missouri, man, who saluted and told the captain that Austin was just beyond, with Shelby camped south of the town on the far side of the Colorado River.

Quite suddenly the capitol building of Texas rose before them, a square stone structure, surmounted by a dome, with four Greek pillars on its southern portico, above which floated a Confederate flag. The capitol grounds appeared raw and unfinished, with two ugly stone retaining walls bracing up terraces before the building, and the grass uneven and burned off in places, while numerous small, sickly trees, planted on the terrace and about the esplanade, seemed determined not to grow. Clay and his detail skirted a white plank fence surrounding the grounds, until they trotted out into the main street of Austin, and found themselves in the heavier traffic of the business section—every man of them feeling the same mounting excitement to reach Shelby's camp and learn what all this meant.

Janeicke spoke unexpectedly: "Thar goes yore friends."

Clay glanced back. Merit and Gonder, without a word or a farewell, had turned abruptly off from the little column, and were dismounting in front of a large stone building on the corner, evidently a hotel, for it was distinguished by the bust, surmounting its front, of a benevolent-appearing

gentleman in side-whiskers; and a sign, DRISKILL HOUSE, ran above its entrance.

Clay said nothing as he watched them go. He had no authority over them, and what they did was no business of his. He reflected that they were relieving him of further responsibility and obligation, and he ought to be thankful. But as he turned and touched the spurs to his horse again, there was something in him that he could not quite express. After all, he had been to great trouble and concern for these two. They might . . . *she* might have said something . . .

He led his men on down the street. The low-water bridge across the river appeared before them, and Shelby's camp lay outspread beyond.

The camp looked like home to Clay and every man with him. It was, in fact, the only home they had known since this war began. Every detail of it was familiar and grateful to the eyes. Downstream stretched the dark masses of the horse-lines, and up the river the mess-fires smoked, their haze hanging in the air above the valley. Hundreds of soldiers clustered at the banks of the stream, washing clothing; their garments were spread fantastically on the grass, or hung on the bushes to dry. Beyond the camp where the ground rose, squads of horsemen drilled. It was all familiar—except one feature.

A group of tents stood on a knoll, a thing contrary to Shelby's habit. The general never permitted tents for his officers while his men slept in the weather—it was his principle that the officers should take the same discomforts as the rank and file. Those tents told Clay he was entering upon a new era in Shelby's Brigade.

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In spite of the annoyance of having to weight down the papers on the table, the sides of the tent were tied up to admit whatever vagrant puffs of breeze stirred in the belly of the sultry afternoon. Yet General Shelby suffered in the heat. His beard was damp with sweat, and the crawling drops of perspiration were like flies creeping down his back under his shirt. Shelby wondered when it would rain. He had seen a few clouds, low on the western horizon, when he entered the baking tent after mess, but he also had observed the same phenomenon each afternoon since he had been at Austin, and still the heat poured down from the pitiless sky.

The legs of a guard were visible where the tent wall was raised—just the legs, and nothing more. Legs of an indiscriminate colour having an affinity to the earth they slowly paced, because they were encased in faded breeches so patched and greasy that the hue they had been originally was not recognizable. Back and forth moved the legs—slow, measured tramp, disappearing as the sentry moved away on his beat, returning presently in the same leisurely, almost aimless cadence. The general knew that the legs had a torso above them, and a head, probably bearded, and that the owner of the legs, torso, and head, was carrying a loaded carbine on his shoulder. Yet the heat of the afternoon, his own weariness, and the curious disjointed movement had a hypnotic effect on him, so that he had almost to exert an effort of will to keep from regarding those slow, pacing legs as anything but disembodied . . . symbols of the inexorable round to which he was harnessed.

Shelby stopped writing to ease the dull ache in his arm. It was the arm which had been crippled by the Cape Girardeau bullet. He lifted his shrunken right hand and contemplated the ink stains on the fingers. Lucky he could grip a pen, even if he could not hold a sabre, now that he had this last-minute paper-work clamouring for completion. It was only recently that he had recovered use of the hand sufficiently to permit him to use it in writing.

The general placed the sheet of paper on which he had been working under the canteen that served as one of his paper-weights. "U.S." was stamped on the canteen. The same letters also were stamped on the general's

revolver holster, which lay with his sabre on the cot. "U.S.," he reflected wryly, was a stamp far more frequently seen in his camp than "C.S.A." What would the Confederate army have done without the Yankee quartermasters and commissaries?

Joseph Orville Shelby, in his thirty-fifth year, was a short, compact man, wearing high cavalry boots that failed to conceal the fact that his legs, from constant riding, were too bowed for elegance. His brown hair was slicked back from his high forehead like a bartender's; and his nose, slightly snub, gave him an ingenuous appearance altogether at variance with his true character. A sweeping brown moustache and a thin chestnut beard that curled at the ends, but was inclined to straggle, covered his lower face. It was his eyes that told you he was a leader. They were grey, uncommonly clear, and had in them the magnetism that made men love and follow him until they were killed for their infatuation.

Just now, however, the general was too jaded to be magnetic. He bit the end of his pen, and stared out through the open door of the tent, wondering what, after all, would be the end of the thing upon which he had embarked. It is one thing to fight in a war, where military precedents and grades of authority and rules of conduct are present to guide you; but it is another thing to launch off on seas utterly uncharted, especially when you take upon yourself the responsibility of the lives and fates of a thousand men who trust you. Not that Jo Shelby shrank from responsibility. It was only that the present type of responsibility on this hot afternoon seemed heavy, and the results of the project not a little dubious.

The general's eyes focused slowly on an approaching figure. Why, it's Bennett, he said to himself. His junior captain reminded him of something he had forgotten, almost. Shelby and Bennett both had lived in the same town before the war. The general thought with a touch of nostalgia of Waverly before the war. He had owned a rope walk—a long, low shed down by the steamboat landing, where his Negroes walked backward all day, skilfully twisting hemp fibre into ropes and cables, which he sold down the river to shipbuilders on the Gulf. But the rope business never occupied Shelby so that he could not do things to amuse himself—like attending barbecues and dances, or crossing over the border on election days, to make Holy Kansas bleed some more. He took part in politics, too, and when the war came, he had been offered a Federal commission by Francis Preston Blair, who was on the right side politically. That offer Shelby refused, and went to work organizing his own cavalry force for the Confederacy. He had

never permitted himself to speculate on whether or not he had made a mistake in so doing.

Young Captain Bennett came to a heel-clicking halt in the tent entrance and saluted. By an effort the general dragged himself back from his abstraction. Here was a new problem, a new need for putting forth strength. Shelby hated, at the moment, having to call upon any more of his reserves. But Captain Bennett was the kind of an officer he needed, so he mentally pulled himself together to begin the task of convincing the younger man—as he had convinced so many other officers and men before him. It was necessary that Clay Bennett understand the rightness of the proposal he was going to make, that the young captain's enthusiasm be enlisted for it.

Shelby rose. "God Almighty!" he said. "Captain Bennett! Almighty glad to see you!" He put out his left hand. The right twinged if he tried to shake hands with it.

Clay, flattered by the cordiality of his superior, grasped the hand. The general appeared a little haggard, he thought. On the cot lay Shelby's revolver and sabre, and beside them his cloak with its gaudy scarlet lining, and his wide black plumed hat. The general had his weaknesses, the captain reflected, such as a liking for a showy uniform, a leaning to fine language, and an eye for a pretty face. Nor did he look with scorn on liquor in any drinkable form. But these were the things that made Shelby human. Clay knew that the short, stocky man before him possessed a streak of devil's cunning and was as dangerous as a wild boar when his enemy was before him. To his men, Shelby was a constant marvel and puzzle, and they were extravagantly proud of him—although the pride was tempered somewhat by the fact that they were always about half apprehensive of what he was going to be up to next, since it followed that they would be along with him, helping him do it.

"You got my message," Shelby said. "I knew I could depend on you."

"Yes, sir," said Clay.

"We need every man, captain."

There was a gleam in Shelby's eyes—a gleam that Clay recognized somewhat uneasily. He had seen that gleam before. At Cape Girardeau, for instance, when the general led that forlorn hope in the teeth of the Yankee artillery. And when he rode out on the terrible Boonville raid of '63; and when he took on his own shoulders the responsibility of saving Price's ill-

led army at Westport, in '64—and in sundry other tight places. It was a gleam that boded no good for somebody.

“I beg to report my detail—and an extra recruit,” Clay said. He did not know how far to go about the girl, so for the present he did not mention her. Shelby grinned as he recounted the powder-keg incident and the “dust stratagem” of Janeicke, but he frowned over Gonder.

“I’m not so sure about him,” he growled. “Sounds as if he needs hanging mighty bad.” But he pondered. “Still, I’d be hard put to it at muster if I banned everybody with a shadow on his record. On second thought, have this Gonder report. I’ll talk with him.”

In spite of himself, Clay’s eyes continued to wander over the tent and its furnishings. Shelby caught the glance and although it irritated him it also made him apologetic. He knew what the captain was thinking, and he did not blame him. He hastened to explain, just as if Clay had a right to question him, which assuredly he did not.

“Our guests—they’re responsible for this, captain,” the general said. “We began getting the damnedest train of hangers-on, soon as they learned I was marching south. Generals, governors, congressmen—already here, or waiting for me at San Antonio. All afraid of what might happen to ’em if the Yankees catch ’em. They want to accompany us—and without exception they object to any discomfort while doing so. The baggage train, if you’ll believe me, is increased by half, what with their tents and paraphernalia. Devilish position for me, sir. I can’t very well sleep under a tree with these gentlemen occupying tents. It would look—well, damned pointed. So out of sheer courtesy, I sleep in a tent!”

He glanced sharply at Clay as if to catch him in disagreement, then abruptly switched the conversation.

“You’ve arrived just in time, captain,” he said, “to get into the hottest campaign of your life.”

Now it was coming, Clay thought. Aloud, he said he was ready for any campaign, but begged to ask what had happened to the rest of the army, and wasn’t the war over?

“What’s that?” Displeasure gathered on Shelby’s bearded face. “War over? No, by God!”

“But Lee——”

“Lee’s surrendered, yes. So’s Johnston. Kirby Smith’s given up, damn his skulking hide! Buckner’s failed. So’s Magruder. But, captain, as you’re a Missouri man, and as I am, Shelby’s not given up!”

“Am I to understand, general, that you intend an independent—a partisan—warfare——?” Clay was floundering. It seemed incredible. Shelby snorted.

“I have no such plan!” he snapped.

“Then—then—I do not follow, sir.” Clay said it a bit stiffly, with the uneasy feeling that the general was making a sport of him. A grin split Shelby’s whiskers. He liked this boy, and it gave him a tiny feeling of triumph to see Clay’s confusion. Now was the time to establish his ground.

“I’m not surprised,” said the general. “Nor, captain, are you by yourself in that. Tell me, sir, what you think of this plan: I propose,” he dropped his voice and spoke weightily, “to establish a new battle-front for the Confederacy, *a thousand miles south of this one.*”

“But—but”—Clay stammered, mentally computing—“that would be in Mexico!”

“Exactly.”

Open-mouthed, the captain simply stared.

From Shelby’s face the momentary elation faded, and the smile disappeared. His eyes grew sombre and a new tone came into his voice.

“Captain,” he asked, “how do you feel about surrendering to the Yanks?”

“I—well, as long as there was hope to continue the struggle successfully \_\_\_\_\_”

“That’s what I wished to hear from you!” Shelby cut in sharply. “About us are camped a thousand men—farmers, planters, lawyers, store-keepers, hunters, miners, even preachers—Missourians, mostly, like you and me. They’re all soldiers right now, stamped with the same mould. And there’s not one of them but feels the way you do. It’s a bleak prospect they face—and you and I face. To the best of my knowledge and belief, *this is the last organized armed force of any size in the entire South.* What would be the good of our attempting to fight, when the Federal forces swarming into Texas alone number fifty thousand?”

Clay, wordless, waited for what was coming.

For a moment Shelby was silent. When he spoke again, his voice was grave. “Hear me carefully, Captain Bennett, for you will be listening to history in the gestation. You say Mexico lies south—tell me, who is the ruler of Mexico?”

“Why—Maximilian,” Clay replied, wondering.

“Correct! The Emperor Maximilian, a foreigner—an Austrian prince placed on the throne by the bayonets of the Emperor Napoleon III of France. But, though he rules the larger cities with his French regiments, the provinces of Mexico are against this Maximilian. They fight for the outcast Indian president, Benito Juarez. It follows that there’s opportunity in Mexico—for fighting men willing to espouse a cause. I propose to help Juarez oust the usurper!”

“Against the French army, sir?”

“Maximilian has the French, true, but for how long? Louis Napoleon gave; Louis Napoleon will take away—the minute it becomes embarrassing or inconvenient for him longer to maintain his regiments in Mexico. And that will be soon—very soon! On any day now, the United States will invoke the Monroe Doctrine. Do you know, sir, what that means? Let’s not forget that there are a million armed men in blue uniforms to the north of us, and that they’re the finest fighters in the world—saving only our own poor fellows in grey . . . who were too few. Too few!”

Shelby broke off and sighed like a tragedian; but nothing could long deflect his thought when he was in possession of a mastering idea.

“Things are very different around here, captain,” he resumed, his voice deadly serious. “Most of the old Brigade is here, but the organization is on a new basis. When I learned Kirby Smith had turned the army over to Buckner to surrender it, I did not wait for the order. Instead, I paraded my troops and called for volunteers. Asked for no-surrender Confederates, and got a thousand. Then I marched at once, to avoid official orders to surrender. Those orders, sir, haven’t reached me yet—nor will they. No stigma for disobedience. Record clean. By the way, I have just been informed that Kirby Smith’s to join us at San Antonio. As a private citizen.”

A pulse of triumph momentarily lit the fierce bearded face. Then:

“This is the strangest army you’ve ever seen, captain. We have no government behind us now—we’re loose in the world, without footholds or any real authority for existence. I have nearly all my old officers. But remember that we’re going to Mexico practically as mercenaries—although,

please God, with something greater and better than the motives of ordinary mercenaries. Still, it was right and necessary to let the men who were jumping blind into such an adventure have some voice in deciding their own fate. So I proposed an organization somewhat like the old Free Companies of the Middle Ages—if you know your European history. At my suggestion, we drew up an agreement, and the men signed it, as did the officers and I. I'm in command, and the officers retain their rank and authority. But there's one proviso, that I put in myself—it's simple justice—on every matter of major policy after we reach Mexico, the men of the Brigade are to be given a chance to vote. What do you think of that, captain?"

Shelby shot a keen glance at Clay's face.

"It—rather takes my breath, sir," replied the latter.

"I know my men and what I can do with them," declared the general. "I proposed this march to Mexico—they voted for it without dissent. It's my plan to offer our sabres to Juarez, although I haven't yet announced that. Everything at its proper time and place. No use bringing up the question now. It would only create an endless wrangle. After we're aligned with Juarez, we'll advance on Mexico City. There'll be fighting, but we know a little something about that. All Mexico can't keep Shelby's Brigade from the capital! When we've put the rightful president in Chapultepec palace, we'll demand our reward—land for ourselves, and for colonists from Dixie. Word will go from Mexico that Shelby's Brigade has formed a rallying-ground for the Confederacy. Wives, children, sweethearts, families, friends will hurry thither. Others will follow. Mexico is vast, with millions of acres uncultivated—unowned even. The people of the South, scorning to live under the flag of oppression, will flock to us. A new commonwealth will spring up—but you catch the great picture! Tell me, sir, are you with us?"

The general stood with his beard thrust forward, his eyes blazing. Clay felt the tremendous magnetism of the man, felt his own eyes light with the contagious enthusiasm. History was in the making here, and Clay had imagination. He sensed mighty possibilities. Wild though the plan sounded he did not for one moment doubt the ability of the man standing before him to carry it through. To Clay came the vision of a new American nation—a second, larger, more varied, more fiercely independent Texas—to be born south of the Rio Grande. But his mind vaulted still farther. Who could foretell the complete end? A Mexico galvanized by American energy would dominate all Latin America. He conceived a new march southward, a reversal of history for a whole hemisphere. The Americas would be remade

—and the great honours, the great rewards, would be for those who undertook the great dangers—Shelby and his men!

Clay found himself exulting with the general; conceived himself as poised on the brink of great events. And he started to say the things expected of him, *clichés* of speech which came familiarly to his lips from many hearings . . . the duty of this great stroke for the South . . . the bright face of danger . . .

But before he was well into his little speech, the general's attention had wandered from him. Confused, Clay closed his mouth. Shelby was staring past him through the tent door. Behind Clay, an orderly announced throatily:

“Lady requests priv’lege of interviewin’ the commandin’ general!”

And Shelby's voice, low and almost reverent:

“Where, under heaven, did an angel like that drop from?”

Clay turned, foreknowing what he would see. She sat the tall sorrel horse there in the sun, clad no longer in the ragged, shapeless uniform, but in a riding habit of dark green trimmed with a tiny gold braid that made more vivid than other gold, her hair. On her young head sat a small green hat with a close-lying plume of yellow. The habit—where had she miraculously found it in this brief time?—embraced closely the lines of her curving slenderness to the waist, then flounced voluminously. In place of the warped army saddle was a dainty, varnished side-saddle, and where her knee embraced the horn it rounded beneath her dress, while the green skirt, rippling like a brave banner in the breeze, revealed one small foot in a dainty riding-boot, upon which was strapped the tiniest of silver spurs.

Merit Hampton—Clay hardly recognized her. The ever-recurring miracle of clothes and the woman held him. Fascinated, he gazed at her face—wide through the cheekbones, clear-cut, proud, and vivid. He had scarcely noticed her beauty when she wore man's garb; but it was a beauty that now caught at his heart, and he knew all at once what a prize she was—and overwhelmingly also he knew that he had lost his great chance with her.

Shelby brushed past him and strode to her horse's side.

“You are General Shelby,” Merit said, and from her lips it sounded like a caress and an accolade. “You do not know me——”

“My utter loss, ma'am——”

“But I know you—I knew you before the war.”

“Indeed? I am rarely honoured—but I—I cannot conceive that I could forget such a face as yours——” It was almost amusing, if Clay had been in a mood to be amused, to see his cocksure general floundering in the presence of this girl.

“Perhaps,” she suggested with the smallest smile, “the face has changed. I am Merit Hampton.” Her blue eyes were for the general alone, although by this time, in the informal manner of Shelby’s military establishment, a knot of respectful and admiring officers had gathered near.

“Hampton? Merit Hampton?” repeated Shelby. A light broke on him. “Judge Cato Hampton’s daughter!” Once more he was master of the situation. He beamed. “How stupid of me! I should have known from the first—you’re the image, ma’am, of your beautiful mother, whose untimely death saddened all of us who knew her. Dismount—please do—and come sit in my tent. Why, when last I saw you, you were a little girl. Now—now, ma’am, four years have wrought a miracle! You won’t mind, Miss Merit, for an old man to say that you’re the fairest sight that has gladdened his eyes since——”

“Old?” she cried. “Why, I do declare, general, you’re a young man!” Shelby almost blushed through his weather-beaten tan, and his gratified grin was broad as he lifted her from the saddle.

“And now,” he said, as the two of them started for the tent, “to what good fortune are we indebted for this delightful honour—your visit?”

Her laugh was pure silver. “I can make my purpose known quickly enough! Is it true that you’re going to Mexico?”

“Yes. Such is our purpose.”

“I wish to accompany you!”

Shelby halted almost in mid-stride and his expression changed ludicrously. At one moment he was beaming—the next he was sheepish and embarrassed. He cleared his throat.

“I—you *what?*”

“I wish to go along with you in your march into Mexico.”

Shelby stared at the girl, a curious, baffled expression in his eyes.

“But why? Why should a girl like you want to go to Mexico?”

“I can only say, general, that it is very important to me.”

Shelby cleared his throat, then began speaking, almost stammering:

“Miss Merit, I—please try to understand this—I’d do anything—anything possible, that is—for you. Not only because of your charming self, ma’am, but because you’re the daughter of an old and valued friend. But—I must be blunt—I can’t take you to Mexico with me.”

“May I ask why, General Shelby?” Merit’s face had become serious.

“There are—are reasons——”

“It’s my understanding that noncombatants are going with you. I would not be any bother. Somehow I *must* get into Mexico. And I find it most difficult to go alone. It would be the greatest possible favour if you could just find me a place to ride—in your baggage train even——”

“You don’t understand, Miss Merit! It’s perfectly true a large number of civilians are going with us. Some of ’em mighty high-toned gentlemen—like Governor Reynolds and Senator Trusten Polk, of our own beloved Missouri, ma’am. We’re to be honoured also, I’m informed, with the company of Governor Murrah of Texas—now winding up his affairs across the river in Austin. There are others also who want to go along. They’re welcome, mind, and we’re honoured to have them ornament our column with their distinguished persons—but between us, Miss Merit, it’s going to be a severe strain on our patience. Mighty little conception these gentlemen have of campaigning.”

He tugged nervously at his beard and looked sidewise at the girl.

“One thing, Miss Merit, I had to insist upon—simply had to, mind! There are to be no women. These guests of ours—many of them—wanted to take along their families. Imagine that—*their families!* Through that Mexican desert! They’ve no conception what it means—it would be murder to women and children. Men of the type we have attached to us will be a sufficient handicap; women would make the venture impossible, ma’am.”

Clay was watching her face, and he saw behind her smile a fading of hope in her eyes, and all at once he knew the stab in her heart—knew it as well as if her eyes had filled with tears; better, perhaps, from the very fact that there were no tears. He wished, vaguely and uncomfortably, that there was something he could do to help her.

But where Clay saw the hurt behind the smile, Shelby saw only the smile itself, and grinned with grateful relief. He had feared a scene, and been spared. Instantly he was bustling.

“Well, that’s settled!” he cried briskly. “Now to more pleasant matters. Because the army can’t extend its hospitality in one direction doesn’t mean it’s lacking in others. Miss Merit, ma’am, you shall be the guest of honour at officers’ mess to-night. And it will be an occasion, let me tell you. Because to-morrow we start our march south. Will you consent? Come, we won’t accept a refusal!”

Shelby glanced at his officers, and every hat was off instantly, every voice pleading. The girl hesitated, then smiled once more—a little pathetically, Clay thought.

“Why, I suppose I may,” she said. From Shelby’s shabby officers came a little cheer. They clustered about her, bowing and making compliments, as Shelby introduced them, one by one.

Unwillingly Clay was pushed forward at last. How should he treat her? What should he say?

Shelby was intoning: “And now, ma’am, a fellow citizen of our mutual home town. Captain Clay Bennett, ma’am, and Miss Merit Hampton, Captain Bennett!”

“Your servant,” Clay said, reddening and bowing.

“How do you do?” Merit replied, her gaze cool, her voice as if she never had seen him before. She turned to Shelby and took his arm.

“You mentioned your tent, general,” she said. “Let us go somewhere to escape this dreadful sun.”

She turned her back to Clay and walked away, chatting and laughing with Shelby.

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If Shelby's officers were attired like a crew of ragged scarecrows, there was the more reason why high spirits should make up for lack of gold braid and bright uniforms. And it is to be doubted if any glittering military banquet, however sumptuous, was ever gayer than mess that night under the sky beside the muddy Colorado.

The rough plank table was lighted with stable lanterns instead of silver candelabra, and it was not gold plate on which they ate, but tin. Yet Shelby's officers, starved for polite society, bethought themselves that they were from a land which loved to enthrone its women, and to them Merit that night represented all of Southern femininity, as she held court from a camp chair, with her back to a hackberry tree. In a posturing group which drew every breath in terms of gallantry, they presently escorted her to the table, which boasted not even a cloth to cover its bareness. There Colonel Slayback, his trousers rump-sprung as usual, appropriated one side of Merit, and young Captain Reid Rutledge, the Brigade elegant for all the patches on his faded elbows, the other. Clay found himself far down the board, and was content to be there; and though ordinarily his comrades would have peppered him with questions about his recent experiences, he was utterly forgotten in the excitement over the beauty at the head of the table.

The general, who sat opposite Merit, surprised the mess with some bottles of old wine sent across the river by Governor Murrah; and Major John Edwards, the adjutant, and wit of the staff, a small man with a high white forehead and great drooping moustaches, announced a ban on all serious talk. So everyone laughed and was exhilarated—except Clay. The spirits of the company rose because on the morrow would come the real start of the great adventure, but he was beginning suddenly to realize that he faced a problem—something far different from, less simple, and less pleasing than a military movement down into Mexico—which he must solve alone for himself.

Merit queened it at her end of the table. It was her moment of triumph, a moment no woman could have resisted, when she was the unrivalled focus of all these men. And such men. They turned their faces towards her, harsh faces, most of them villainously bearded, with hard, steel-grey eyes. She

read something in those eyes, something that sent a shiver through her. Hunger. Ravenous hunger, sharply controlled. These men were hungry for women, she knew. Hungry for her, because she was the nearest woman. The thought was daring, and strangely stimulating. She found herself wilfully making bright eyes at all those starved, bearded faces. And Shelby's officers felt the mysterious aura of provocation she shed upon them more than disturbing to their male tranquillity. She had removed her hat, and there was subtle witchery in the way she held her head and the golden shimmer of her softly knotted hair. She was a woman alone, and she coquetted with them, greatly daring, almost intoxicated with the tension, titillating them and stimulating them with smiles, and merry words, and pauses, and looks, knowing she was safe, but almost frightened by the ardour she felt about her.

Presently Captain Rutledge, a fine, handsome officer, who played the guitar and possessed a lush tenor voice that caressed every word that came from his full red lips, sang a sentimental song. It was followed by another. The compliments to Merit grew warmer, almost disconcerting at times, and pauses fell in the conversation.

Perhaps Edwards felt the dangerous tingle, because he suddenly precipitated the toasts, leaping up like a bantam rooster, and crying: "A pledge, gentlemen, to our guest, true exemplar of the loveliness of Southern womanhood!"

This was drunk with fervour, and Merit smiled thrillingly and responded with: "To the Bonnie Blue Flag." Whereat every cavalier drained his cup with vast approval. The tension had been broken. Minds were wrenched away from unspoken thoughts, and as if freeing themselves, almost everyone proposed a toast. They tumbled over one another—"To Old Jo Shelby," "Missouri, Mother of the West," "The Old Dominion," "Our Comrades in Grey," and so on.

Darkness came, earlier than usual, for so intent were they all on the excitement of the table, that none of them had noticed that the promise of the day's excessive sultriness was being fulfilled in a black, portentous cloud that crawled up from the west, obscuring the sun as it set. Upon the tables, lanterns shed an uncertain light, partly obscured by diving swarms of moths and small insects, but the speeches and jests continued. Finally Shelby himself arose, and hushed reverence replaced the noise. He raised his battered tin cup very solemnly and said: "Gentlemen, let us drink to Dixie, our country, beautiful in peace, terrible in war—and confusion to all her enemies!" And there was an edge of fanatical sincerity that was near to religious fervour in the way every man present drank to that pledge.

Almost as an afternote, a distant mutter of thunder came. Merit listened, her head gracefully to one side, then she cried: "Mercy! It's going to rain! And I must ride all the way back to the Driskill House."

A chorus of protests rose, but the logic of the situation was inescapable. Shelby sent for her horse and himself assisted her into the saddle. Silently and from a distance Clay watched the near-quarrel that arose as Rutledge squabbled with half a dozen junior officers for the right to escort her to her lodgings. Again Merit felt a moment of alarm—these men were so serious. They seemed fierce and dangerous as so many stallions. Then she laughed and invited them all to escort her, and this, to her relief, they agreed to do. So she rode away, with a flutter of her handkerchief to those left behind, and her half-dozen young gallants clustering about her.

When the girl was gone a strange lifelessness descended. The other officers dispersed to their tents or their duties, leaving Clay seated alone at the table from which the strikers already were hastening to remove the remnants of the dinner before the storm came. During the entire evening he had kept stiffly apart from the table banter, and now looking back on it he was forced to smile sourly at his own emotions, half angry, half jealous, as he watched Merit's skilful flirtation with Shelby's entire staff. She had been exquisite and brilliant—and that made all the more galling her adroit exclusion of himself from the circle that fluttered about her. He hitched his shoulders as if to shrug the thought away.

Why had she come along at this time? If she had only been content to go her way and let him go his, everything would have been all right for him. And yet, for some reason, he could not bring himself to wish that she had not told Gonder to seek him out that night in Tyler.

He found himself wondering once more what pressing necessity could drive a girl like Merit down through the perilous country of Texas and Mexico, made doubly hazardous by the anarchy of a war that was in its death throes. A slow determination was forming in his mind, almost without volition. He was going to do something for Merit Hampton—what he did not quite know. This was new thinking for him. A horse to grip between his knees and a pistol-butt for his hand—he understood these. And also how to endure hunger and weariness and danger. These things were simple and easy compared with the problem he now faced, for it was a problem, compounded out of emotions he did not yet even realize, and a code of conduct which was a welded part of him, that kept him seated at the now empty table under the trees, the black boughs of which already were being tossed overhead by the preliminary gusts of the coming tempest.

Hunched in the darkness he sat alone. A hundred yards away Shelby's tent seemed to glow incandescently from the lanterns within, for the general was labouring over the final details of his expedition. Up and down the river in the deepening blackness of the clouding night, hundreds of fires winked; a low murmur rose on the air that told of a bivouac in which, for the time being at least, things were going well. Occasionally some group would roar out with laughter, and there would resound the slappings of thighs and backs as a fireside *raconteur* got off the nub of his story. Over towards the bridge a mouth-harp twanged. The characteristic wood-smoke smell of the camp-fires was sharpened by a hint of dampness in the air.

But a louder grumble of thunder, and the flicker of lightning beneath the blackness of the overcast sky, argued for less comfort before long.

What would Merit do? Clay asked himself the question again. He surmised that by now she must have banished any thought of masquerading as a soldier, and Shelby had definitely refused to take her with him. When the Brigade marched on the morrow, she would be left alone in Austin, for even Gonder, her faithful retainer, was to go with Shelby. What would happen to a girl like her, alone in this sort of country? If she attempted to return to Missouri she would find herself in danger worse than she had met on her journey down, what with the armies broken up and desperate men wandering everywhere. Her very beauty was her greatest peril—the thought of that stung him so that he leaped to his feet.

In the range of his eye came Shelby's tent, and with that glance he arrived at a sudden decision. With a set face he stumbled through the darkness towards the general's tent.

Shelby looked up in surprise when the captain announced himself.

“General, may I have a word?” asked Clay.

“Why, certainly.”

“We had no time to complete the conversation in which we were engaged this—this afternoon——” He found it extremely difficult to say what he wanted to say.

Shelby looked faintly annoyed. “I'm very busy, captain. I believe we went over the ground fairly fully——”

“That's not it, sir,” said Clay. “I did not have a chance to tell you—that I do not feel that I can accompany you to Mexico.”

“*What?*” Shelby was all bristling attention now. “Your reasons, sir!”

His reasons! Even to Clay they seemed suddenly very flimsy. How could he explain motives which he did not fully understand himself? It would sound silly if he said he was giving up the Brigade because of a girl—particularly since his services might very likely be unappreciated by her. He heard his own voice:

“My reasons, general, are personal.”

“You gave me no inkling,” Shelby fairly sputtered. “Why, I could have sworn, Captain Bennett, that you were enthusiastic——”

“Your pardon if I unwittingly gave you the wrong impression, sir,” said Clay, still groping for words. “With all apologies, I do not see the profit in this expedition.”

“Profit!” snorted Shelby. “Great God in heaven!”

“I mean, sir,” said Clay, forced now to bolster his statement, “that this war’s over, whether we like it or not; and it’s the job of veterans of both armies to go to work now and rebuild the nation. I wish to be given my regular discharge as a part of the—Army of the Trans-Mississippi, sir.”

It was hard for him to go through the next minute or two. Shelby stood running his fingers through his beard, staring; and Clay felt like a traitor.

“Captain,” said the general at last, and his voice was quiet, “I can’t think of going to Mexico without you. Why, you’re the only Waverly man on my staff! Think what we’ve been through together . . . you were just a kid when I took you—hardly knew how to manage your horse, much less your weapons. We learned the war game together! Today you’re a cavalryman who is a credit to the country and army that produced him. There’s more between us, sir, than mere military comradeship. Think, man! You owe a special duty here!”

The general’s voice was gentle and persuasive and Clay knew the shame of conscious deception of a man who trusted him. Shelby—his general and his hero—Jo Shelby was begging him to remain with the Brigade. And Clay was going to refuse. He winced inwardly as he made his reply:

“I can only say, sir, that I am fixed in my decision.”

Shelby drew himself up. “In that case, Captain Bennett,” he said coldly, “I have the honour to bid you good night. I don’t pretend to understand this, but nobody goes with Shelby except of his free will. Good-bye, sir!”

Without another word the general dismissed the captain by the simple expedient of turning to his table and bending over his work.

Clay, walking away alone into the darkness, already began to wonder what kind of a fool he had made of himself. He had quit Shelby's expedition and mortally offended Shelby—on an impulse. And a not very well considered impulse. More keenly than ever he realized that he had not the slightest notion that the services he intended to offer would be desired or accepted by Judge Hampton's daughter. He found his way to the horse-lines, and called for his mount.

The night had grown intensely dark, the overcast blotting out every star. Lightning played vividly on the horizon, and closer every minute came the intermittent roll of thunder. The sound of his horse's hoofs on the bridge brought him to himself, and he straightened and took account of the situation. He realized he had been foolishly impulsive. An older man would have considered his steps carefully, but Clay had plunged in like a blind diver. Merit—she was five years younger than he—yet how much more poised. At the dinner she had handled the crowd of men with consummate ease. Those who were shy, she encouraged; those who were over-bold, she laughed away. With each she seemed instinctively to know the right note, so that each man had the pleased feeling that he had been singled for special attention—save Clay himself. And he did not count, in her scheme of things. He marvelled at the quality in women that enables them to know instinctively the arts of coquetry, but that did not make his own situation any easier.

The Driskill House. A blinding flash of lightning lit the dark streets as he dismounted before the inn and tied his horse at the hitch-rack. A few preliminary spatters of rain, sounding like hard pebbles dropping on the ground about him, followed the rattling boom of the thunder as he entered. Almost immediately on the roof came the hard beat of the downpour.

A grey-headed veteran with baggy pouches under his eyes, sickle-blade moustaches, and a wooden leg, leaned on the counter in the lobby, and listened without interest to Clay's inquiries.

"Yes, we are honahed by the presence of a Miss Hampton," he finally admitted with reluctance, "but she has requested not to be disturbed."

"I am an old friend. She would not know I am here," said Clay, shamefaced at his own mendacity.

"In that event, I p'esume, I should risk it," remarked the veteran with a sigh. "She is a very high-toned lady—but then yo', of co'se, are familiah with that fact—an' she's inclined to fire up. But if yo' are a friend . . ." He went into the hall unhappily. Merit's room seemed to be on the ground floor,

for after a moment Clay heard a knock and the clerk's voice: "Miss Hampton? Ma'am, it's the hotel clerk, an' I apologize most humbly fo' disturbin' yo'."

Her reply was low, fogged by the closed door.

"A gentleman is heah to see yo', ma'am." There was a hint of anxiety in the clerk's tone, as if he feared the result of this disclosure. From behind the door came an exclamation—Clay could not tell whether it was surprise or annoyance. Then the door evidently opened a crack, for he heard clearly as she asked who it was.

"A Captain Bennett, ma'am, of Shelby's Cavalry," the clerk said, and Clay could imagine his ingratiating smirk.

A long, strained silence. Then: "Where is he?"

"In the lobby, ma'am."

Again silence. "Will you show him into the parlour?" she asked at last.

The wooden leg came stumping down the hall. "She'll be heah terreckly," the veteran informed Clay. "Will yo' step in heah, seh?"

Clay seated himself in the small parlour, on an uncomfortable haircloth sofa with lace antimacassars, and contemplated without pleasure a mirror opposite with a frame of varnished oak from which two mammoth steer horns, polished and curved like scimitars, thrust forward to act as coat-hangers. Below the mirror was a small fireplace, its brass dogs idle on the swept fire-brick. The curtains of the room, he observed, were flowered chintz, and he had time to count two rockers and two hard-bottomed arm-chairs in the small room, before the click of her heels came and he rose to see her framed in the doorway.

In the presence of this girl he found difficulty in speaking. After the dowdy, homespun ranchers' wives, the only women he had seen for weeks, she seemed very lovely—for all the displeasure that was evident in her eyes. He knew that what he had to say must be said quickly, if he hoped to have her listen.

"I apologize for intruding," he began, "but after what happened this afternoon, I thought I should inquire if I might be of any service——" Her chin lifted ominously, and he trailed off lamely.

"After what has—happened, Captain Bennett, I should think——"

“I—permit me at least a question,” he begged. “Your father, the judge—I have not had the opportunity to inquire as to his health.”

She seemed to turn over in her mind the thought of whether she would reply at all; then decided to answer the question.

“It is months since I’ve seen him,” she said coldly. “When last I heard he was well.”

“I am rejoiced, believe me,” Clay responded eagerly. “Am I correct in assuming that he has left Fairwood?”

“Quite. He was forced to do so—Yankee provosts.”

She said it with a tinge of exasperation, as if she resented his asking. But the reply left him staring. Here was news indeed; but she made no further explanation. Wordlessly they gazed at one another, and he thought: What a mess I’ve made of things.

“Grant me this one indulgence,” he ventured. “Why are you here so far from home—what is your errand to Mexico?”

Her eyes veiled. “Must I be cross-examined . . . in addition to everything else?”

He looked down in confused silence.

“Miss Hampton,” he said at last, “believe me when I tell you I am profoundly sorry for that—that occurrence. And also this: if there were no other reason than my deep obligation to that kind gentleman, Judge Cato Hampton, I would wish to help you to the utmost of my ability. You *must* trust someone. Try to trust me!”

She drew back. “And why, may I ask, should I?”

The contempt in her voice made him blink, and the muscles of his jaw tightened. But after a moment he said, humbly as he knew how:

“I’m not appealing for your friendship, ma’am. I wish only to do you a service. It may help you to believe this if I tell you that I have resigned this night from Shelby’s staff to help you——”

“You *did*?” He had broken through her coldness, and her cry was sharp with surprise. “What made you do that?”

“You can’t go to Mexico. Your only course is to return home. I wished to see you safely back——”

“Oh,” she said, speaking as if to herself. “Missouri—safety——” Then: “Captain Bennett, please try to understand this: I have no slightest intention of returning to Missouri. Regardless of Shelby, or you, or anyone else, I am going on to Mexico.” She seemed small, and pathetic somehow, and very determined as she talked to him there. “Shelby, I will confess, was my greatest hope. But Shelby or no Shelby, in some way I will do it! I accepted the invitation to-night to dine with the officers’ mess for one reason only. A man’s gesture, that invitation! As if an occasion—a little flattery—would make up to a woman for something really vital. No matter—I remained because I wished to meet the officers of Shelby’s Brigade—to know them individually and collectively. Because I am going to Mexico—mark that well. And there is no telling when one or all of them might become useful.”

“But you heard,” he persisted stupidly, “what Shelby said——”

“Of course! You don’t compliment my intelligence, sir, if you think I have any delusions about accompanying Shelby’s column.” Her face clouded. “I tried the old uniform—it did not disguise me,” she went on as if to herself. “This dress—I brought it and my riding-boots all the way from Missouri in my saddlebags—it failed me in the frank guise of a woman. I must give up the thought of receiving the protection of the army——”

She stopped speaking and stood listening, her lips slightly open, her eyes wide.

A brazen clangour brutally shattered the night outside—a huge bell somewhere, ding-donging as if it would shiver itself to pieces in the wet blackness. Another bell took up the alarm, and others, until every bell in the city seemed to be lending itself to the splintering pulsation.

Merit turned to Clay, the hostility erased from her face by a question.

“What is it?” she cried. “What is it—a fire?”

He strode to the door at the end of the hall and peered out. Rain pounded the roof with a soft roar.

“I see no glare anywhere,” he said.

He knew that she had come up beside him, close to him in the doorway, and all at once her nearness almost suffocated him. He could feel the light touch of her skirt against his thigh. Other people crowded out on the porch. Down the street feet pounded, splashing and sucking in the mud. The peremptory report of a gun came from the north—the direction of the capitol building. Another shot followed—and another. Voices caught and tossed questions:

“What’s goin’ on?”

“Is it the gen’ral alarm?”

“Wasn’t them gun shots?”

Someone shouted, high above the clamour:

*“Thar’s a raid goin’ on at the treasury!”*

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A raid on the treasury! Why, there were three hundred thousand dollars in there—Shelby had said so. Who would the raiders be—Federal troops? Not likely, Clay thought. None were near enough. Who else? Destructives, likely. He thought of the bushwhackers at Tyler. Bench-leg Peters—wasn't that the man who had ousted Gonder from command? But what audacity to raid the sub-treasury when Shelby was camped within three miles . . .

Bells still clashed and clanged, hammering out a frenzied alarm in the dripping murk. The running steps sounded confused and without purpose.

“What is it—why are the bells ringing?” It was Merit, again asking her question.

He turned and found her eyes brilliant in the light of the hall.

“It's a raid,” he said, thinking out loud. “I'm sure of that. Very daring, too. They know no soldiers are stationed in town, the government's packing to leave, everything's disorganized. They probably figure that even if the bells are heard in Shelby's camp—and that's unlikely in this storm—the sound may not be correctly interpreted. The raiders evidently are overaweing the citizens—that's the meaning of the shooting. A quick break-in, a short and busy looting, and they can disappear into this ink-black night before Shelby can even be informed. Unless—I've got to see what can be done. If I only had a messenger——”

His quick deductions were based on experience. He was thinking what he would be doing if he were conducting this raid, and he hardly realized he was making deductions at all, so naturally did the details fall into their places. But the girl beside him had not taken her eyes from his face. Now she spoke:

“I can ride. My horse is in the barn just at the back of this hotel. If you need a messenger . . .”

Surprised, he looked at her. And his admiration leaped, she was so vital, so alive, so beautifully afire as she stood there, offering herself. But he instantly saw that he was not even figuring in her thoughts. This was

excitement. Evidently she lived on it. She was thinking only of the thrill of riding through the pelting night. His jaw snapped shut.

“I’ll take you at your word, Miss Hampton! Come on. You must get to Shelby as fast as you can. Tell him I believe the sub-treasury’s being sacked. I’m going to do what I can—but he’d better send help——”

They had jumped from the low gallery and were running towards the stable, the rain already soaking their clothing.

“He’s in—the fourth—stall,” she gasped.

He remembered that hard riding on slippery roads was risky, but it was Merit herself who led out the nervous, sidling colt. “Whoa, Ginger! Easy, boy!” she said, quieting him.

Clay threw on the saddle-blanket, and then the side-saddle on the horse’s back, and fastened the cinch. No time to hesitate now. The girl seemed confident, her cheeks bright in the light of the stable lantern. Her face was wet from the rain, her head bare, and the dampness had curled her hair in tiny charming tendrils at her temples.

“I’m ready,” she cried.

They led the horse out. While he held his hands together for her muddy little boot, she grasped the bridle reins. Then she was in the saddle, her hands busy for one instant, adjusting her dress as she hooked a knee over the horn. Ginger whinnied excitedly, slipped in the mud as he made a false start, swung clear around in the narrow alley on his hind legs; then lunged for the street, head low, clay spattering backward from his flying hoofs. As she swept around the corner and out of sight, Merit was leaning forward in her saddle, urging the flying animal to still greater speed.

Clay took a deep breath. For the last quarter of an hour he had been dealing with exciting but unaccustomed matters; now he faced something he understood better. Dropping his hand on the butt of his revolver, he ran to his horse in front of the hotel, mounted and splashed at a gallop up the street towards the capitol, the rain pelting his face, distant lights glimmering through his wet eyelashes. He knew where the treasury building was—it stood in the capitol grounds, a little to the north and east, hence towards the rear of the capitol itself. It was four or five blocks to the grounds, and he found the gate through the white plank fence was locked. A cavalry officer is lost without his mount, but Clay left his tied to the fence, clambered over, and ran up first one, then the second series of steps which led up the terraces, to the esplanade before the bluff limestone building. At the foot of

the final series of steps, which mounted to the portico, he halted. A muffled thudding puzzled him—like hammer-blows far beneath the surface of the ground.

“Better get over here by the wall, friend.” A tall, lean man, wearing a low-crowned, wide-brimmed hat, motioned him into the dark lee of the building.

“Two dead already for standing out where those fellows can see them,” said the man. His voice was unexcited and matter-of-fact, and Clay sidled over towards him. In the darkness the captain made out beneath that hat-brim a very thin and dark face.

“What’s that noise?” Clay asked.

“Hammering in the doors of the treasury vaults,” said the stranger.

“Who’s doing it?”

“Don’t know. Not Yanks—no uniforms. Bandits of some sort. Nobody to stop ’em, unless word’s got to the soldiers across the river.”

“I’ve sent a messenger,” said Clay, struck by the other’s coolness.

“You with Shelby?”

“Yes.” Clay deemed it unnecessary for the present to go into recent events. “Are you the only one about here?”

The stranger nodded. “Populace hereabouts discovered pressing business elsewhere—all but two. I happened to ride past on that road above the capitol when the raid began. The raiders are no amateurs. Picked to-night, of course, because it’s rainy and black as the inside of a gun-barrel. Rode in and began breaking down the outer door of the treasury. I’m a stranger here—just arrived. Saw a few men, hurrying home in the rain, who stopped out of curiosity to gawk. One fellow thought it was government doings, and walked across to ask what was going on. He was the first man shot. Until then nobody had any notion it was a raid—the whole thing was so all-fired bold and free. About the same time the inquisitive gent was beefed, a nigger boy sauntered around the corner, not knowing the raider’s trigger fingers were itching. If you wish to risk edging up to where you can peek around the corner, you can see the nigger lying next to the inquisitive citizen, in the rain. After that the crowd skedaddled.”

The man smiled thinly in the darkness.

“Why did *you* stay?”

The grin vanished. “Curiosity, mebbe. I’m not much of a hand to leave a place where excitement’s being committed.”

“You’re a soldier,” said Clay suddenly. “What command?”

“For reasons which I will explain to your superior officer,” the stranger replied levelly, “I shall not answer that question.”

“That’s good enough for me,” answered Clay. “Want to get in on this?”

“What’s your campaign?”

“Shelby will send cavalry, soon as he gets my message—but it will take time. I want to hold those men until the cavalry arrives.”

“I’ll go you one,” said the other at once. “My name’s Parridine—Captain Quinn Parridine, on my way to seek service with Shelby.”

“And I’m Captain Clay Bennett, of Shelby’s staff.”

In the darkness they measured one another for a moment; then Clay led the way to the corner of the capitol, where he stood studying the wetness of the rain-swept treasury a little farther up the hill. The dragged bodies of the outlaw victims first attracted his attention; next he saw the hitch-rack, and a long line of saddle-horses humping their backs against the cold downpour. A grove of trees cast a heavy blackness in front of the small, flat-roofed stone treasury building, but nobody was in sight. Hurrying shadows flitted back and forth against the light that streamed out of the open door and through the windows.

No sentries. The raiders must be badly organized. The first problem would be to get rid of those horses, and Parridine nodded with full understanding as Clay outlined his plan.

“After that,” Clay added, “it’s up to us to hold them in the building as long as possible.”

Again Parridine nodded.

“I want you to cover me while I release those horses,” Clay concluded.

“Nobody’s going to come out of that door alive,” said the thin stranger with a curious edge of deadliness in his voice. His hands slapped his flanks and the long fingers touched a sagging holster on each side, heavy with big Navy revolvers. Clay looked in some surprise. Shelby’s men were pistol fighters—long ago they had learned to depend on the nimble six-shooter rather than the sabre for close work. But few among them were two-pistol

men. The carrying of a revolver on each hip implies an ambidextrous shooter—and such are rare and always will be.

Out across the open space into the grove Clay slipped, feeling the heavier drip from the saturated tree-tops on his back, working resolutely from trunk to trunk towards the open treasury door, and proceeding as carefully as possible, although any amount of care would avail him little unless also he had great good fortune.

From the door, and the windows flanking it, light spread out over the soaked grass and lit up the front of the building almost as if it had been a stage, with the transparent lances of rain falling across. For a moment Clay halted behind the last tree-trunk, and felt the pounding of his own heart. The twenty yards from this shelter across the lighted area to the horse-rack seemed a long, long distance. And the hitch-rack, with its huddled horses, was appallingly close to the open door beyond. But there still was no sign of an outside lookout, so he sucked in his breath, bent almost double, and made a sudden run for it.

The hammering inside the building had ceased, and voices, snatches of conversation floated out through the door. The words Clay caught indicated the vaults at last had been broken open, the gold reached. Until now he had not fully realized how terribly exposed his position would be. If one bandit happened to step out of that treasury door, Clay would be a helpless target, so close that to miss him would be almost impossible. Yet he went to work methodically at one end of the rack, releasing the horses as he came to them.

Less than ten paces away the stone steps of the building gleamed wet in the light from the entrance. Clay could have tossed his hat on the nearest of the two soaked corpses—the boy, a mulatto, his yellow face twisted, the white teeth showing under the full upper lip as if he were grinning. Rain-drops glistened on his oily skin in the light from the windows. Twenty feet beyond, close by the steps, lay the dead white man. The drip from the eaves fell directly on his head, and the water had splashed a curious parting in his hair. The man lay on his back, his eyes open to the pelting drops.

The bridle leathers were slippery in the rain, and Clay struggled with the knots, breaking his finger-nails and cursing himself for not having brought a knife. The first horse was freed, and its splash and clatter made him pause—but apparently nobody in the building noticed it, so he worked swiftly on. Most of the animals were small and scrawny, and bore stock saddles, indicating the riders were from the cattle country. Hanging the reins of each horse over its saddle-horn, Clay slapped a flank, and sent the beast galloping

away into the dripping gloom. How long before those men in the building would hear? Horse after horse swung away into the night, shaking its head. Only two remained.

A man stepped out of the open treasury door on the narrow porch. He had evidently been stationed as a guard, and had deserted his post to go within, superintend things, grasp a few coins, and assure himself his friends were not cheating him. Now he remembered his duties, and came forth to take a look around. Although the rain was slackening, the night was still opaque. It took a moment for the outlaw's eyes to adjust themselves after the brightness within. Then he saw—first the nearly empty hitch-rack, then Clay's dim figure releasing the last of the horses.

“Hey, thar!” yelled the man. His slow mind seemed to have difficulty in immediately comprehending what he saw. “Hey, what in hell yo' doin'?”

Realization flashed over him. He swore luridly and jerked a pistol from his holster. In the shadows of the trees behind Clay an angry spurt of flame lit the darkness momentarily, accompanied by the solid report of a forty-five. On the porch the outlaw staggered, fell like a sack of meal, and rolled in a series of muffled thuds down the stone steps to the ground. Something clattered on the porch—the dead man's revolver.

Death was very close now, and Clay worked feverishly to release the last horse. Alarmed by the shot and the falling of the bandit, the animal had jerked back so that the knot in its rein was pulled into a wet, hard lump. Concentrating on undoing that knot, he thrust his face close to it, deliberately ignoring what was going on about him. In quick, hurried cadence he heard Parridine, among the trees, empty both his revolvers, and without looking Clay knew the other had fired his guns right into the doorway to stop a rush of the outlaws.

Still the knot defied all his efforts to loose it. Hoping the caps were in good condition, Clay drew his pistol, held the muzzle at the knot, and pulled the trigger. At the flash and report the now frantic horse reared backward. The leather rein, half severed by the bullet, snapped. Away into the blackness plunged the panic-stricken beast, while Clay, without even stopping to glance at the threatening open doorway, dived for the dark mass of some bushes to one side.

A clash of splintering glass came. Someone was smashing out a window in the building; gun-flashes began to flicker with a multiplied roar of explosions. On the damp air hung now the sharp tang of burnt powder, and Clay, for the first time, had a good look at the door. One man was curled up

on the porch, dead; half in and half out of the door, with his head twisted at an awkward angle, lay a second; still a third clung to the door-frame, shot through the lungs and coughing his life away as he sank slowly towards the floor. At the foot of the steps lay the first bandit killed, an outflung arm almost touching the slain citizen beneath the drip of the eaves; closer sprawled the dead mulatto boy.

Save for the stricken, no one was visible, but waspish sounds snicked past Clay's ears, and a severed leaf, floating downward, tickled his cheek as the pistols barked from the shattered windows.

A howl came: "They got the hawsses! Bench-laig, they got the hawsses!" The voice held despair coupled almost with disbelief of a fact just discovered and hardly understood. "Bench-laig"? Bench-leg Peters. Clay's guess at the identity of these bushwhackers had been right. Soaked as he was in the cold rain, and wallowing in soft mud under the dripping bushes, he almost chuckled at that howl, it revealed such abject amazement.

With the idea, in a general way, of discouraging its use as an exit, he fired a shot into the open doorway. That was a mistake. At the flash of his gun, half a dozen bullets bored into his screen of shrubbery and one slapped the hat from his head.

Cursing, he rolled a dozen yards to his right, further covering himself with muck. The lights in the treasury suddenly went out, but the outlaws' pistol-flashes continued to flicker. The men in the building had no idea how many were opposed to them, and Clay found time to wonder at Parridine's shooting. With the twelve shots in his two revolvers he had killed at least four men—perhaps more. Considering the light, and the necessary rapidity of the firing, that was unreasonable accuracy. It was accuracy, Clay knew, that had saved his life.

Another crash of breaking glass came. The bushwhackers had had enough. They were smashing out the windows in the rear of the building to escape. Nothing could be done to stop that, but with their horses gone they could not carry away much of the heavy metal in the vaults. Clay wondered what had become of Parridine. As he did so, the other slid up beside him. They grunted at each other; nothing more. And lay listening as the bushwhackers leaped from the windows on the far side and stampeded off into the blackness.

After a time, in a splashing thunder of hoofs, a company of Shelby's horsemen arrived, riding hard and led by young Reid Rutledge, leaning far

forward on the neck of his mount in the haste of his coming. But by then the bandits were gone.

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Shortly after dawn Clay awoke, stiff from sleeping in his wet clothing without a blanket on the treasury floor, and with a sense of abiding depression. Two Negroes, pop-eyed with horror, were scrubbing puddles of blood from the boards under the martinet eye of an armed soldier. In the first daylight the ornate interior of the treasury looked squalid and disordered. Splinters of window-glass lay about, furniture was overturned, and in places the walls had the appearance of having been attacked with a pick-axe, wood-work splintered, and plaster scarred by bullets. Captain Rutledge, during the night, had gathered the money and replaced it in the broken vaults. He told Clay that because of the loss of their horses, the bushwhackers had succeeded in carrying away only a few hundred dollars. Some of his own troops, dizzied by the sight of so much accessible wealth, may have filched a coin or two, but the reputation of Shelby was such that there was very little of this.

The bushwhackers had been Bench-leg Peters's crowd all right. Peters himself, a tangle-bearded ruffian, was one of the dead, being found within the building by the entering troops and identified by citizens who knew him, since he had formerly been a disreputable small rancher near Austin. It was generally agreed that after the shocking losses it had suffered this particular band of outlaws would be broken up for good.

Rutledge had set up headquarters in the treasury office, and before Clay went to talk with him after awaking, he accepted a cup of black chicory brought by a soldier, and sipping the hot, bitter liquid, stepped out on to the porch. The rain had ceased, although there still was an occasional drip from the eaves . . . Clay looked: the dead were gone. In the night Rutledge tidily had kept a burial detail at work.

Outside the building a gathering crowd was kept back from the steps by four carbine-carrying soldiers. About the guards themselves Clay sensed an unusual alertness—an aliveness, as if something was in the wind and expected at any moment. Presently a rider galloped up from the direction of the river, left his horse at the hitch-rack, and ran up the steps to Rutledge's office. A moment later an orderly emerged and spoke to the trooper who was supervising the Negroes in their scrubbing.

“How you comin’, Holcomb?”

“Slow,” said the man savagely. “These niggers needs a tech of gad.”

“Hurry it. Ole Jo jest sent word over that he’s comin’ to inspect—afore the march starts.”

The trooper began stridently to upbraid the Negroes, and Clay looked out of the door at the new blue sky, with its little woollen clouds, and whistled low to himself. The march—it was about to begin. That was what had been bothering him. He had had it in the back of his mind all the time—a vague uneasiness and unhappiness he could not place. Shelby’s Brigade was setting out for Mexico. And Clay Bennett was not a part of it.

Above everything he realized suddenly how powerful was the pull of the life he had lived these four years. He wanted to see Merit again—to finish the conversation that the alarm bells had interrupted at such a tantalizing moment. But more importantly just now, he wanted to take a last look at Shelby’s Brigade—to see the breaking of camp, the forming of the battalions, the familiar bustle and hurry—to fill his soul with it before he bade farewell to it for ever. It occurred to him that he had not discussed the expedition with any of his brother officers. They had been too busy entertaining Merit Hampton the previous evening, and at the end he had broken so abruptly with Shelby that he had not even said farewell to anyone. Clay did not know, actually, how they felt about it all, and very much he would have liked to exchange ideas with Major Edwards, or Colonel Slayback, or some of the other officers with whom he had gone through the long testing of the war.

At the present, however, he above all wished to avoid meeting Shelby—the circumstances under which they parted were too painful. So he went to Rutledge’s office to pay his final respects. Face drawn from sleeplessness, Rutledge looked up from the report he was writing, and grinned. Clay was struck as he had often been struck before by the pleasing contrast of the other’s white teeth against the smooth darkness of his skin.

“Get any sleep?” asked Rutledge.

“A little. I understand Shelby’s coming over.”

“I’ve just got word to that effect. By the way, Clay, speaking of the general, didn’t you come from the same town he did?”

“Yes, Waverly.”

“And that . . . girl. She’s from Waverly, too. You must know her.”

“She was only a child when I left for the war. But I did know her. In fact, I read law in her father’s office.”

“The hell you say! Damn it, man, I envy you. She makes most women look like a batch of flea-bitten mares.”

“She has that effect on some people,” Clay said. “Well, I’m leaving now.”

Rutledge rose, looking embarrassed. They had spoken briefly of the rift between the general and Clay, although the latter had not mentioned the reason behind it. Now it seemed to both of them that it was easier to face bullets than to manage to say something to each other in parting, perhaps for ever.

“Good luck—I hope you’ll have a safe journey——” Rutledge hesitated and flushed under his tan. He feared Clay might read something invidious into his word “safe.” “I mean,” he stammered, “well—Clay, hell, you know what I mean. We don’t need a lot of words to express it. Good luck, old horse.”

“Same to you,” Clay replied, equally awkward.

“Oh, I say. I was just putting your name in this report. I want to say, Clay, that your action here at the treasury—getting away with their horses and all—for cold-blooded nerve it——”

“Hell, I was scared to death,” Clay said, embarrassed but warmed by the praise.

Their hands met in a quick, hard grasp and Clay found himself walking down the outside steps of the building. Faces were about him. A blank wall of faces, shifting here and there, grouping, talking, staring. The crowd was chiefly of men, but here and there was a parasol, and in spite of himself Clay found his eyes picking out and searching the feminine faces. With relief he assured himself that Merit Hampton was not among them. He glanced down at his uniform, from which he had done his best to remove the dried mud, but saw that stains remained on it. His hat, with the bullet-hole in its brim, he had recovered. A silent aisle was opened for him to pass through by the crowd, which had no notion who he was or the part he had played in the previous evening’s drama.

Under the early morning sun the muddy streets barely showed signs of drying around the edges of the deep ruts, but planks laid across the worst mud-holes aided pedestrians. He found his horse—still standing by the capitol gate, his legs and belly splashed with mud from the pool of muck

worked up by his nervous trampling. Clay wished to feed him, but time was lacking, so he mounted and rode directly to the Driskill House.

The peg-legged clerk informed him that Miss Hampton had gone out some time before, seh, presumably to breakfast—although he wished to assure Clay that the hotel maintained an excellent dining-room in conjunction. The lady was accompanied by a gentleman, the clerk added as an afterthought.

A gentleman? Gonder, probably, Clay thought. The red-beard must have come for her. He went out and untied his horse.

“I know you’re hungry and muddy, old boy,” he said, “but we have to travel some before you eat.” He tightened the cinch after permitting the animal to drink at the watering-trough in front of the hotel. Then he swung into the saddle and headed for the river.

Down the street, at a distance, a group of mounted men was approaching. That would be Shelby and his staff on their way to inspection. Wondering what the general would do about the money left in the treasury, Clay swung around by a back street to avoid him. The horse was glad to be moving, even with an empty belly, and he blew his nostrils and pricked forward his ears as they approached the river and heard bugles. A trooper galloped past on his way to town, his mount splashed to the shoulders with mud, and as Clay crossed the bridge he saw the full eruption of activity beyond.

Camp already was broken. The area where the Brigade had bivouacked was vacant, save for one or two soldiers moving about in it, looking among the dead and blackened fires for trifles lost or left behind. Shelby must have sent his transport and guns on ahead, because no artillery or vehicles were now in view, though the ground was deeply cut with wheel-ruts. Knowing the general’s habits, Clay guessed that the guns and wagons, accompanied by a guard, had rolled out of camp while yet it was dark.

But the bulk of the Brigade still waited to march. Clay rode up on the knoll where formerly the tents had stood, and dismounted, holding his bridle reins in his hands. The horse at once began hungrily to crop the grass, taking it in crisp, short snatches, and Clay’s hand jerked as the rein jerked with the horse’s head. About him squares where the tents had stood were distinguishable by the grass, yellow and trampled down into dust, and the fact that these spots were dry, whereas all the rest of the ground was muddy after the rain. Blackened camp-fire ashes, and various discarded articles, including a litter of scribbled sheets of paper, broken accoutrements, and a

busted boot, marred the little hill, but from its summit he had a good view of the bottoms below.

Down by the river hundreds of troopers were watering their horses—the last act before setting out on a long march. Farther along, where the horse-lines had stood, a company or two of cavalry already was mounted, awaiting orders. Other units were scattered here and there, the men at their horses' heads, but not mounted.

Bugles sang suddenly, and in the distance Clay saw a clump of riders coming down to the bridge. On the flats there was a hasty mounting and the whole mass was weaving and moving. A roar hoisted itself up from the men as the riders crossed the river and passed along the Brigade front, and even from where he stood, Clay could distinguish the short, erect figure of Shelby, as the general raised his plumed hat. Companies began falling into column. Guidons snapped vividly in the breeze. The march was under way. On the little hill Clay watched achingly as the Brigade rode out of his life.

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The last of Shelby's companies grew small in the distance, and a swarm of ragged Negro urchins from Austin streamed across the bridge and began scrambling among the dead camp-fires, looking for anything they might pick up. Clay mounted and turned back towards town. Drearly he crossed the river and once more made his way to the Driskill House. This time, as he approached the hotel, he observed with relief a sorrel horse with a side-saddle at the hitch-rack. Beside it was tethered a strange animal—a buckskin with black mane and tail, of unusual quality if Clay was any judge.

He was studying the buckskin so closely that it was not until he had ridden right up to the hitch-rack that he saw on the hotel veranda a stained, disreputable, cheerful figure—Gideon Gonder.

"I thought you were going with Shelby," were Clay's first words.

"I wanted to wait an' see that Miss Merit was safe. I intend to follow the general later," Gonder replied.

"Where is Miss Hampton now?"

"I have not seen her, seh, since yestiddy," said Gonder.

"Then who—the hotel told me she had gone out with a gentleman——"

"If it's the gent who owns that buckskin hoss, I know him. That hoss belongs to Quinn Parridine."

"Captain Parridine?" Clay was instantly interested. "That was the man last night at the treasury. I never saw anyone handle a revolver like him \_\_\_\_\_"

"That's him all right. I've seen him hit a bull-bat on the wing. A mighty sudden gentleman, all the way around, an' mean to monkey with."

"But what connection has Miss Hampton with Captain Parridine?"

"Plenty," said Gonder. "He's a friend of the family. Fo' a time he resided at Fairwood. He did Jedge Hampton some kind of favour. I never ascertained the exact nature of it. But he also did the family ha'm—the

wustest kind, although mebbe he couldn't help it. Pussonally—an' at the risk of offending you—I do not share your admiration of him——”

“I don't particularly admire the man—except for the tricks he can do with a Navy revolver.”

“Pe'haps I'm unduly prejudiced because of early acquaintance, seh. I knew Parridine befo' the war. He was a gambler then—made the big packet boats from New Orl'ns to St. Louis. After the Yanks closed the Mississippi, he moved up on the Missouri. It was then he made the acquaintance of Jedge Hampton. The jedge took to him. He's mighty polished, an' mebbe he's all right—who am I to cast the fust stone?”

The last remark chimed with Clay's thought. Except for Merit's defence of the red-beard, the captain knew nothing about Gonder to recommend him. On the other hand, Parridine had acted like a man and a soldier in the treasury battle. He changed the line of conversation.

“I'm looking for Miss Hampton,” he said. “I suppose she's in the hotel.”

Gonder followed him into the lobby where two or three elderly citizens, sunk in deep leather chairs, spat unerringly into brass cuspidors and speculated gloomily on how long it would take the Yankees to arrive in Austin. Merit was not in view. Clay turned towards the dining-room—perhaps, after all, she had returned for breakfast.

“Wait here,” he told Gonder, and opened the door.

She was seated on the opposite side of the room, at a round table with a man. Two or three other breakfasters were in the room, but Clay had eyes for nobody but the girl. At the moment her face was animated and laughing beneath the distracting little green-and-gold hat, as she conversed with her companion. The back of the latter was towards Clay, but the gleaming blackness of his hair was arresting, and also the sleek fit of the coat across his shoulders. The whole attitude of the couple—their obvious acquaintance, the informal easiness of their talk—indicated a certain intimacy that jarred Clay.

Merit's eyes widened slightly as she saw Clay enter. Then she said something to her companion, and her face, losing its animation, became chiselled and icy. Straight over to their table walked Clay, and as he did so, the man rose and turned to face him.

It was Parridine. There was nothing of alarm or even of question in his action. It was unhurried and easy, something to be interpreted as a courtesy to the woman, rather than anything else, but Clay could not help observing

that for all its suavity, the movement placed the dark stranger in a position to deal with any sudden emergency.

Awkwardly Clay halted and bowed, trying to read Merit's eyes. Her face did not relax, but she spoke, indifferently: "How do you do, Captain Bennett? Have you met Captain Parridine?"

"I have had the pleasure," Clay replied. "Captain Parridine and I had a small share in the excitement of last night."

The thin mouth of the other split for a brief flash of teeth. "You are too good," he said. "I had the honour only of seconding Captain Bennett."

It had been too dark the night before to gain a clear impression of the man before him, but Clay grudgingly approved what he now saw. Here, by the look of him, was a cavalryman of cavalrymen—a strenuous, lean, sunburned figure, with a face that was keen, harsh and unforgettable. Hollow cheeks appeared more gaunt because of the hard, knobby jaw angles where the biting muscles bunched to keep the man's white teeth locked like a wolf's. His eyes were black and bitter, and over a mouth thin as a knife-blade and unrelieved by a single softening curve, was the sharp etching of a narrow black moustache.

Parridine was a fighting man—that was sure. A killer. Moreover, a polished gentleman. Clay judged that he was in his early thirties, and from his heart the younger man envied the other's ease of bearing, the grace of his slight bow, the half-amused assurance of his manner. Though Parridine lacked two inches of Clay's six feet of height, and his frame was thinner and narrower in the shoulders, he looked supple and dangerous as steel.

He made himself smile. "I have seen Captain Parridine in action, and I have heard of him—and his friendship with the Hamptons."

Parridine bowed again.

"Did you succeed, sir, in your plan of enlisting with Shelby?" Clay asked. "I believe the Brigade has marched."

"No," replied Parridine. "At the last moment I changed my plans—when I discovered, by the sheerest accident, that Miss Hampton was here. Miss Hampton has a plan and an ambition, Captain Bennett, both of which do credit to her courage and high sense of duty. As an old—and I hope trusted—friend of the family, I am making it my duty and privilege to accompany her and see that she is protected and cared for as much as is humanly possible on such a journey."

Clay's eyes were on Merit's face, and she did not hide the momentary flash of triumph in it. So Parridine knew what was taking her to Mexico—and approved of it. His assistance meant that Merit could never be convinced now that her best course was to return to Missouri. Clay, who had entered the dining-room full of arguments to persuade the girl to give up her wild project, was silenced in advance.

He glanced at Merit and back at Parridine, suddenly disliking the man. And then, without the slightest logic, he made one of the most abrupt changes of plans in his whole life. Exactly what impelled him he did not know how to explain, but between one moment and the next he overturned every idea and plan that had occupied him since his break with Shelby.

“I did not wish to interrupt your breakfast, Miss Hampton,” said a voice he scarcely recognized as his own, “but I made bold to come and tell you that I have decided to follow Shelby down into Mexico. Your friend, Gonder, I believe, intends to go with me. Might it not be good for all concerned to share company on this journey you are projecting?”

Clay could not read the look on the girl's face, but across the countenance of Parridine the tiniest flicker of annoyance passed. His voice, however, remained suave.

“I thank you, Captain Bennett, and I am sure Miss Hampton does also. But you need not trouble yourself. I am perfectly capable of seeing to the entire comfort and safety of Miss Hampton. You gentlemen undoubtedly will wish to travel much faster than we.”

In Clay leaped a flash of resentment—a mounting of a basic antipathy, which had no reason as yet for being, save that something within him bristled at Parridine's cool assurance.

“With every respect for the high quality of your abilities, sir,” he said stubbornly, “an extra weapon or so might not come amiss on Miss Hampton's journey.”

Parridine's eyes flicked to the girl's face, and back to Clay. “Captain Bennett,” he said, “I should think, sir, you would perceive that your presence is neither needed nor desired by Miss Hampton!”

The words were cutting, and Merit's face did not relax. Suddenly Clay felt awkward and embarrassed. He bowed again and started to withdraw. But before he left them he turned once more, fighting to control his anger.

“The roads are free in Texas,” said he slowly. “If my friend and I wish to travel them—at any speed we desire—nobody can prevent us. Or can they?”

He looked Parridine between the eyes, but the black eyes did not waver, nor the smooth voice change.

“Nobody can—or will—try to prevent you,” Parridine answered.

Utterly chagrined, Clay stalked from the room, and found Gonder lolling in the lobby.

“Find her?” asked the red-beard.

“I did, and I hardly know what to say. When I went in there I was planning to go back to Missouri. Now perhaps Mexico——”

“That’s the way that young lady affects you. I had no more notion than the man in the moon of comin’ to Texas. She talked to me about five minutes—an’ here I am. Well, I was jest thinkin’—I’d kind of like to visit the *tamalé* country myself,” said Gonder.

They looked each other in the eye, and for the first time Clay found much to like in what he saw. About Gideon Gonder, for all his disreputability, was a certain hardihood, and his quick agreement with Clay’s half-proposed plan warmed the captain’s heart.

At that moment the dining-room door opened and Parridine stepped out.

“Ah,” he said, nodding at Clay’s companion. “My old friend—is it Gonder this time——?”

The big man reddened. “How you, Parridine?” he muttered.

“Captain Bennett,” said Parridine, ignoring Gonder’s reply, “we have changed our opinions, Miss Hampton and I. On a second consideration, we feel it might be well—for all concerned—to go in company, as you suggested.”

He was distant, and something told Clay that this was not Parridine’s decision, but one made by the girl in there. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he did not know how to reply.

“In case you so decide,” Parridine continued after a moment, “Miss Hampton and I will be ready to ride by noon.”

He bowed, and without awaiting an answer, re-entered the dining-room. Clay turned to Gonder. The latter misread the question in his eyes.

“It’s true that I have, fo’ various excellent reasons, found it convenient from time to time to assume anonymity through temp’rarily borrowin’ another name,” he began to mumble defensively. “Durin’ that period, fo’

example, when the gov'ment was seekin' me in connection with my whisky-dispensin' activ'ties amongst them children of nature, the Comanche Injuns, I fo' a time rejoiced under the monicker of Eleazer Parkinson. Later, due to trouble which arose in connection with some land spec'lations in Kansas, an' while evadin' a group of settlers who had taken the law—an' a rope—into their own hands, I answered to Carmichael B. Bolderwood. An' still later, in them regrettable days when Gen'ral Price was huntin' for me in connection with them mule contracts, I bore, fo' practical reasons of safety, the fine old Virginia patronymic of Todhunter—Phineas J. Todhunter. You will obse've that when choosin' a title, no matter how ephem'ral, I invariably select one of distinction. But Gonder is the real name—Gideon Gonder, at your se'vice.”

“Gonder,” Clay assured him earnestly, “I don't give a damn if you have a million names. It looks as if the two of us are into something together. That's all right with me. Now let's see if we can figure something. There's every reason to think our company is not exactly to Captain Parridine's liking. Yet he comes very gracefully forward to invite us. What is the answer to that?”

But Gonder shook his head.

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Shelby hardly had slept. In the evening, immediately after the Brigade made camp at the conclusion of its three-day march down from Austin, the general had received visitors—officials of the City of San Antonio, and various notables without official capacity, who came on pretext of making formal calls of courtesy, but in reality out of curiosity to see the wild Missourians. There were refugees, too, some of them quite pathetic, shorn of all importance by the cataclysm of the South's defeat, but still clutching about them the pitiful rags of their past consequence. To these Shelby had been at excessive pains to deal with consideration and politeness.

Midnight passed before the last of the visitors departed from the general's tent. After that he worked for a long time in a perfect fury of concentration, poring over maps and checking over details. Then he wrote a letter. He was not facile with the pen and it required more than ordinary effort to compose the missive to his wife, who might or might not have arrived by this time at Lexington, Kentucky. The letter stood a better than even chance of never reaching her, although the San Antonio officials said they would do their best to send it north. Anyway, it would be the last letter Betty Shelby would get from him until he was in Mexico. Her face came to him momentarily, the smooth brow and the primly parted hair. And the straight line of little buttons running down the front of her tight basque dress. He did not let himself dwell on this, however. It was unhealthy for a soldier to be thinking about home matters.

Having finished the letter, he stepped outside the tent and walked down towards the creek. Dew from the bushes soaked his boots and his breeches to the thighs. The night was velvet black all about, and only a faint scattering of pin-points of light showed where San Antonio lay in the distance.

He returned to his tent, pulled off the wet boots, and without bothering to undress, stretched out on his cot and tried to sleep. In spite of the light mist in the creek bottom, the night was hot, and above and about him mosquitoes whined their wiry hymns. He longed for a breeze, but the air in the tent was stifling, and slowly, slowly the crawling minutes passed. Once or twice he almost cat-napped, but to his other distractions was now added the

recurrence of his depression. Repeatedly the growing sense of the immense gravity of his situation recalled him to unwilling consciousness. Eventually he sat up, and with some difficulty pulled on the still damp boots.

For a few minutes he sat staring blindly into the blackness of the tent's interior. Then he rose and felt his way around the table to the door. He could make out the dim row of officers' tents now. In irregular clumps over the low hill behind spread the bundled, sleeping forms of his men—long rows of swaddled lumps. Here and there small fires winked, with dark figures flitting before them. By this Shelby knew it was later than he had guessed—dawn was approaching. To the west the sky was still a deep, brooding sapphire blue, with the sharp points of stars clustering in it, and the Milky Way flourishing extravagantly across. But eastward a premonitory brightness stole up on the horizon.

Shelby rubbed his hand across his forehead and yawned a constricted yawn. He was mortally tired, but there would be no rest for him on this day. Only lately he had grown to comprehend what he had never comprehended before—the weight which responsibility requires when it must be carried alone. No one was to blame that this responsibility was on his shoulders. It was his own plan, and his only, to make the Mexican venture, and in the first enthusiasm over the expedition his notions about it had been lofty. Latterly, however, the continual wear of work was making it difficult to be buoyant and confident. Looking back, he found himself almost wistfully thinking of his former war-time existence as a man thinks of his unfettered youth. He had risked and endured much in those four years, but he always had Price or Holmes or Kirby Smith to look to for orders, and behind them were Jeff Davis and the Confederate States of America. He had been responsible only for his own detachment and the carrying out of the assignments given him.

Now his supremacy was utterly lonely. There was no superior officer, and no government, upon which to fall back now. He, Jo Shelby, must create and maintain his own authority; he alone must build a belief in his men and keep them strong in it. And this seemed at times so bafflingly difficult that he could scarcely conceive of an ability in himself sufficient to accomplish it. In the chill hour before dawn he shivered.

He turned back into the tent and lit the lantern on the table. As he did so the thought passed through his mind that he must have his orderly get a new candle in place of the dab of charred string and tallow which was all that remained in the lantern now. That set him to wondering how the Brigade's supply of candles was, and from this his mind raced to a consideration of the whole problem of supply.

He made a mental note: I'll have Slayback in after morning mess for a report on the quartermaster department.

Feeding a thousand men is an acute problem in a country where foraging must, perforce, be forbidden, unless your quartermaster has unlimited resources, like those the Yankees had.

From the feeding of his men, Shelby's thought passed to the men themselves, and he pondered the fact that in the last three days he seemed to have observed a change in their temper. Perhaps they were realizing for the first time what was happening to them. There had been precious little skylarking in camp. The general dismissed his half-formed worry. There had been nothing sullen in the demeanour of the soldiers, but they were a little less inclined to smile. Perhaps they were only becoming accustomed to some thoughts which might be appalling when they were new.

Shelby turned as the heavy tread of feet came to the tent door. His orderly stood there, flat-faced, purse-mouthed.

"Well?" asked the general.

"That lantern, seh. I saw it was lit, an' thought mebber——"

Shelby grunted. "You should not have got up," he said. "You got little enough sleep last night. I'm all right."

"Reveille's due in jest a few minutes, seh."

"Well," said the general at last, "I could stand some coffee."

The orderly disappeared.

By the time Shelby had his coffee, a cup of blackness, burning hot and bitter as gall, on his table, a bugle was etching its notes through the stillness. Almost immediately he heard the sergeants yelling at their sleeping men, and the strange, indescribable tumult with which a horde of human beings rises to greet a coming day—coughings, throat scrapings, nose snortings, spittings, a perfect chorus of objectionable sounds, as flues and pipes, clogged by a night of sleep, are cleared.

Major Edwards looked in on his way to stand the morning formation.

"A new contingent of volunteers last night, general," he said.

Between Shelby and Edwards had been the familiarity of long and intimate acquaintanceship, but now the major stood stiffly and spoke with formality. This behaviour on the part of his oldest friend in the command caused Shelby to recognize with a feeling of vague unhappiness that it was a

part of the new, more deferential attitude towards his presence, which his officers, and even civilians approaching him, had adopted of late. At first this had embarrassed him, although he kept that to himself. Then he received from it a slightly intoxicating pleasure. He perceived soon, however, that it was no question of added esteem. Something about this attitude of his officers was connected with his solitariness. It was as if an invisible force had lifted him out from among them and set him off at a distance, with an impalpable barrier through which he no longer could commune with them as one man of flesh and blood with another.

The attitude was almost akin to that respect rendered to the memory of one departed to another world. That was it. Another world. Shelby was in another world, a world of isolation, surrounded only by the single obsessing idea and driving force. No longer was he a friend or comrade to these men. The jovial and sometimes affectionate relationship between himself and them, of the old raiding and fighting days, was gone.

And all at once he perceived that this was the answer to his questions. It explained why his men, and his officers too, had been less prone to smile in his presence. It also showed him where and how he was to obtain the ascendancy that would keep his Brigade disciplined and fixed upon his will. Already he had been lifted out of the plane of the merely human. He was becoming something, a name . . . Authority. A legend, perhaps, in the creation. Something perilously near the god-head. All eyes turned to him, and from him everything was expected. This had its great strength, and its disadvantages too. The human weaknesses, the comforting human weaknesses, were to be his no longer. Whatever he suffered must be suffered alone and within himself. He therefore accepted Edwards's stiffly formal attitude.

“Very good, major,” he said. “Where are these volunteers from?”

“They say they're Texans, sir.”

“Have them brought up at ten o'clock.”

Edwards saluted and disappeared. Shortly the voices of the company officers came, uplifted in their morning reports, and after that there were the usual sharp commands, and the tinny notes of the trumpet sounding mess call. The orderly appeared with a tin bucket containing more coffee, and a pan filled with fried sowbelly and ashcake. He retired while Shelby ate moodily.

Colonel Slayback was Shelby's next officer, and among his other duties was oversight of the quartermaster department. In private life the colonel had been a lawyer, and he had the loquacity of the profession. It took him two hours to complete his report. Shelby hated figures, but Slayback inexorably kept him at them. From long lists he read the supplies of this and that, the tale of the rolling stock, the livestock, and other matters within his province. In spite of himself Shelby could not keep his mind, at times, from wandering. He knew this quartermaster business was most important, but the human aspects of the expedition were pressing too, and he was just a little impatient that Slayback insisted on consuming time with his dreary statistics, when he could have stated the kernel of the thing in twenty minutes.

Shelby began to wonder about those recruits Edwards had spoken about. Texans, didn't he say? Shelby's opinion of Texas soldiers was good. He remembered Fagan's Cavalry Brigade, mostly Texans, which campaigned with him under Price. Hard fighters, those Texans. And unmitigated night prowlers. A good quality the last, if you were in enemy country. Foraging has saved more than one army, and Shelby did not have much use for a soldier who couldn't steal all he needed to eat from right along his line of march—even though at present, in this wholly Confederate country, he had to put the sternest of bans on depredations by his command.

Slayback's voice checked in its reading of figures, and Shelby almost started, with a guilty sensation.

"I—ah—continue, colonel," he said. "I was listening."

"Thank you, sir," said Slayback stiffly, and with an accusing look. I have been at pains to get up this report, his look said, and you do not even listen to it. His voice, slightly reproachful, took up the reading again, and Shelby forced himself to concentrate.

"How about the arms and ammunition?" he queried, as much to convince Slayback of his interest as anything.

"For the artillery, six pieces, six hundred rounds of shell and canister to each gun, sir. The men in the Brigade have been provided with one Sharp's carbine for each man. Each carbine has, in addition to the forty rounds carried by every soldier, three hundred rounds in the wagon train. Every man has a Colt revolver, dragoon size, and there is a reserve supply in the wagons, with ten thousand rounds of revolver ammunition. In addition we have several hundred stand of Enfield rifles in the wagons, just landed from England, and with the Queen's arms still on them. Beside this, there is a

supply of powder, lead, and bullet-moulds. I think you'll find the munitions in good shape, sir."

"Very good. Continue."

Slayback's voice droned on. He took until nearly ten o'clock, but at the end of that time Shelby had been convinced that for the present his quartermaster supplies were in good condition. Where he could get additional supplies to replace these when they were gone was a matter already plaguing him as he thanked Slayback and watched the colonel tramp away.

Edwards appeared at the tent entrance. "Some gentlemen have just arrived in camp, sir, to interview you about accompanying the march in a private capacity. A Congressman Tweedie and two other gentlemen from Louisiana. But I thought before I sent them to you, that you might like to look over the new recruits——"

"Ah, yes. The recruits."

There were sixteen of them. Shelby, in front of his tent, studied each man from head to foot, as he walked down the ragged line. The appraisal disappointed him and he regarded the volunteers without pleasure. Ratty. That was his thought. Mighty little resemblance here to the kind of soldiers Fagan had taken into battle.

"Who's your leader?" he rasped.

A very tall and very thin man stepped forward and saluted awkwardly. His eyes, prominent and pale blue, fixed themselves watchfully on the general. He had a retreating chin, partly concealed by a scraggy growth of whiskers of an indeterminate colour, and above his high cowhide boots his homespun trousers bagged at the knees so that they gave him the appearance of standing with legs bent, as if to jump.

"Name?" snapped Shelby.

"Rufus Champion, seh."

"Rank?"

"Ah reckon yo' could call me about a cap'n, seh."

"*About* a captain? What in hell——"

"Wall, Ah'm boss of this yere outfit. It's all that's left of us, seh."

"What organization?"

“We was called Irreg’lar Texas Cav’lry, seh.”

Shelby’s brows knit. That name had some sort of an association in his mind. He could not place it just now, but he would bet he had heard that name before somewhere, and not in a very favourable light. He glowered at Champion and his fellows. Without exception they were hang-dog and slovenly. Ordinarily he would not give a crew like this a second look, but just now he desperately needed men. He thought of those extra Enfield rifles, “with the Queen’s arms still on them.” He needed hands for those rifles.

Once more he took refuge in the thought that the Brigade had assimilated some unlikely specimens before in its time, and made soldiers of them.

“Where have you been serving?” he abruptly asked Champion.

“In Arkansaw, seh, an’ in the Injun Nations——”

“Were you with Fagan?”

Champion hesitated. “No, seh,” he said at last.

“Who, then?”

“We was a—a independent command, seh.”

A light broke on Shelby. “Bushwhackers!” he exclaimed. Now he remembered. Captain Bennett had mentioned the Irregular Texas Cavalry as having tried to take over the Tyler depot. And there was some talk about that raid on the treasury at Austin . . .

The general’s eyes glittered dangerously. These men wanted to join his Brigade—very well, they’d get their wish.

“Major Edwards, see that these men sign,” he growled. “See that they are equipped. See that they are drilled. *And see that they are watched!*”

Uneasy glances were being exchanged among them as a sergeant marched the recruits away, and Shelby prepared himself to receive the congressman from Louisiana.

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The narrow road wriggled and twisted through the mesquite like an umber snake and the blazing afternoon beat stunningly down upon it. A pair of dusty road-runners took the trail ahead and paced the little party for several miles, teetering along a score or more yards in front, their tails tilted skyward, their wings half opened. After a time the birds darted off to one side for a lizard or some such prey and disappeared. Once or twice cattle with unbelievable horns were glimpsed in the mesquite. They stared red-eyed, then crashed off snorting through the tangle. All the long afternoon two buzzards floated on motionless wings high under the bland blue sky. Austin was three days in the dusty rear, and San Antonio should not be far ahead.

Clay's eyes wandered to the slender back of the girl riding in front of him, and resentment burned slowly in him like peat fire. Very high-headed she rode, oblivious of him and all his works, just as she had ridden ever since this journey began—talking airily to Parridine, as if they two were the only persons in all that expanse under the skies of Texas.

With one ear only Clay listened to the stream of personal reminiscence with which Gonder, who rode beside him, seemed to believe he was enlivening the journey. Gonder was full of reminiscence, a fountain of words which gushed forth at the slightest encouragement, like the rock smitten in the wilderness. Who was it struck that rock, thought Clay. Gideon? No, Gideon broke the pitchers. Well, it was Gideon this time, Gideon Gonder. Only what flowed forth was not water but conversation. The red-beard could not tell the simplest tale without endless circumlocution. A part of Clay's attention caught a snatch of his monologue:

“—an' he never wearied of tellin' how proud an' sens'tive he was. I never obse'ved a man more so than Nate Huddleston. Once, I recollect, he showed how that kind of a nature can prey on a man. We was loafin' down at Poke Beardsley's store on the Arrow Rock road, when a feller come up in a fine kerridge, with a nigger in the driver's seat. The man was a big, pompous gent, with long grey side-whiskers, a grey surtout, a bell-crown hat, an' a silk choker. He asked fo' a tavern, an' by his conversation we

could see he was from the East—out travellin' an' seein' what he called the frontier, fo' the purpose of writin' a book fo' them Boston people.

“He was laughin' about somethin' he'd seen, an' pretty soon he told us it was a woman in front of a house back up the road, choppin' wood. An ev'dence of the primitive civ'lization of Missouri, he said—jest like a squaw in a Injun village. Well, we all knew whose house he was talkin' about. When the stranger was gone, we looked at Nate an' felt sorry fo' him. He never said nothin', but you could see it was preyin' on his proud, sens'tive nature, an' pretty soon he asked a couple of us to go an' help him.”

“To chop up some wood for his wife, I suppose?” asked Clay, half interested in spite of himself.

“No, seh, nothin' like that,” replied Gonder. “He wanted us to help move the choppin'-block around the back of the house where it couldn't be seen from the road.”

Clay grunted, impatient with himself for having been trapped by the foolish yarn. Again his gaze wandered to the couple in front. Parridine had taken command of the march at its very inception, and Clay reflected that the sum of his knowledge of the man had not been increased by an atom in the three days of constant association. Parridine was polished and distantly polite. If Clay felt at times a bare hint of mockery in the man's attitude, he could not place a finger on enough of it to make a ground for open resentment. Although antagonism assuredly existed between them, of Parridine's words or bearing Clay could not complain.

It was the girl who aroused his exasperation. She had been at no pains to conceal her dislike for him, sharpened with contempt. And this puzzled him, because he was still certain in his own mind that it was she who caused Parridine to reverse himself and extend to Clay and Gonder an invitation to ride in company with them down to San Antonio. Often she went out of her way, it seemed, to humiliate Clay. Early in the journey, for example, during a halt, he would have tightened the cinch of her saddle, but she pulled aside her skirt lest he touch it, and so pointedly that it was an open slur. Later, when without presumption he had picked up her blankets to spread them for her at a night camp, she called sharply to Gonder to take them. The red-beard obeyed, his eyes impersonal. Clay walked silently away and seated himself on the other side of the fire. Thinking on it, he wondered if she had brought him along for the mere pleasure of working her little spite out on him. He had heard that some women had malice of that kind.

And yet she was beautiful. However grudgingly, he was forced to admit it to himself. Looking at her, swaying gracefully with the movements of her tall horse, Clay wondered how anyone who made a picture so undeniably charming could be so vindictive.

He swore softly at himself. It was likely that they would catch up with the Brigade. He knew he wasn't wanted here, and he could leave this party and rejoin his comrades—that is, if his impulsive action had not made an enemy out of Shelby. Moroseness settled over Clay's reckless young face, as he rode silently along to the ceaseless loquacity of Gonder at his side.

It had been a day of great heat; the birds were silent and all living things sought shade, where they lay panting, save only the lizards, which are born of the wrath itself. At last, however, the sun began dropping towards the horizon, and as the shadows lengthened the little cavalcade rode into the clutter of adobe houses, dusty plazas, and ancient churches, which was San Antonio. In the doorways of little *casas* lounged brown-skinned Mexican women with bare feet and gleaming blue-black hair. Lean Texas cowmen passed and repassed on little springy horses. And rumbling down the street, to an uproar of dogs and chickens disturbed by its passage, went an army forage wagon loaded with beef, followed by its small escort of grey-clad troopers.

Parridine pulled up his horse. "That means Shelby's still in town," he said.

This was apparent to all of them. For three days they had followed the broad weal of the Brigade's track across the mesquite country.

"I'm wonderin'," said Gonder, musingly, "if Old Jo's ever told his boys about the three hundred thousand dollars they didn't get."

The words, uttered suddenly, and apparently apropos of nothing at all, astonished them.

"What's that?" Clay asked. "I hadn't heard of that."

Parridine swung his face full around and fixed his black eyes on Gonder with riveted attention.

"You ain't heard?" Gonder was plainly surprised. "Everybody in Austin knew about it, I thought—so much so I never said nothin' about it. Why, listen, friends, if you ain't heard——" He hesitated, avid with the eagerness of the born gossip, who suddenly finds he has a choice morsel about which no one has heard. "Well, if you ain't heard—I saw him do it. The most

amazin' thing! With one wave of the hand he turned down the gift of three hundred thousand iron men. I saw Jo Shelby do that!"

"Just tell what happened, Gonder." The eyes of all of them were on the red-whiskered face, but it was Parridine who had spoken. His voice had become smooth and curiously quiet. Gonder expanded in the interest suddenly focused on him.

"There really ain't much to it," he began with a deprecating grin. But there was much to it. Gonder never told anything baldly. His was the epic style. He began by dilating on the lodgings he had occupied the night before, and recounted in detail the circumstances that impelled him to go down town in Austin that forenoon. He told of his progress through the streets, with a list of the streets, describing every store front and edifice as he went along. He diverged on an anecdote of which he was reminded, and of which he was the hero; and threw in, gratis, some Gonder theories and philosophical observations. And at last, it seemed ages to his listeners, he arrived at the scene where Shelby met Governor Murrah on the capitol steps, with Gonder pushing his way forward through the crowd to hear what was going on.

"The gov'nor—he looks might po'ly, I understand he has lung fever—asked Old Jo to take along the money that was in the treasury, that money the bushwhackers had tried to get the previous night." The red-beard paused for breath.

"What did Shelby say?" asked Parridine, the same intense quiet in his voice.

"He jest stood there, a-tuggin' of his whiskers. 'An' what shall I do with this money?' he asks. The gov'nor made a elegant bow." Gonder bowed in his saddle to demonstrate how it was done. "'Gen'ral,' says the gov'nor, 'this money is the prope'ty of the Confed'racy, fo' the suppo't of its armies. Yours, seh, is the last o'ganized body of Confedrit troops in Texas. If you can find no other use fo' it, why not divide it among your men? They have fought without pay—pe'haps with these funds the Confed'racy can in part make up the arrears it owes them.'"

An amazing windfall that would be to his beggarly comrades, Clay was thinking, when he caught the glitter in Parridine's eye.

"But Shelby didn't take that money," Gonder continued. "He jest shook his head. 'I went to war with clean hands,' he tells the gov'nor. 'An' by the gullet of God, I intend to go out of it with clean hands.'"

“Why, that was beautiful!” exclaimed Merit. It was the first time she had spoken and her face was alight.

But Parridine’s voice cut coldly across: “Very noble, indeed. But hardly practical.”

“What did the soldiers say when they found out?” Merit asked.

“That’s jest what I was wonderin’,” said Gonder.

“Perhaps,” slowly spoke Parridine, “they have never found out. I do not think Jo Shelby is an utter fool. If what I’ve heard of his merry men is true, they might become pretty ugly if they learned that they had been defrauded of what they might believe was their just due.” His eyes grew distant and speculative. “And so,” he mused, as if to himself, “Jo Shelby rides off and leaves all that treasure for the Yankees.”

“What will happen to it?” inquired Merit.

“The Federal gov’ment will confiscate it, without a doubt,” said Gonder.

Clay was silent, half smiling in affectionate contemplation of the general and the delight he must have taken in such an opportunity for the limelight. History would one day record this in his favour—and Shelby was never one to ignore history.

Parridine’s voice broke Clay’s reverie. “We’d better make arrangements for the night. What about a hotel for Miss Hampton? I understand the Menger House is superior. Would you care to go there for the night?”

The last words were addressed to the girl, and she answered gaily. “A comfortable bed? Really it seems part of another existence.”

“If I might suggest,” interrupted Gonder, “Shelby’s likely to pick the best hotel to o’ganize his march in. An’ when Shelby an’ his staff gets o’ganized, there’ll be mighty little sleepin’ around the premises.”

Parridine nodded. “Moreover,” he added, “it might be as well that Shelby doesn’t know we’re here at all.”

It surprised Clay. “May I ask why?” he queried.

Parridine’s thin lips smiled. “The reasons would appear to be obvious,” he said, with that slight condescension he sometimes affected. “Judgment would indicate that we should keep as far away from the enemy as possible. Where Shelby enters Mexico, there his enemies will gather thickest. A party like ours, following or preceding him, would find the chances very slim in a country swarming with foes. Our prospects, I think you’ll agree after you’ve

thought it over, will be far better if we make our effort to slip through a section of the border, away from which Shelby has attracted hostile forces to his own front. Moreover, there is a distinct possibility that Shelby might delay us. From what Miss Hampton has told me, he is in no sympathy with her projected journey. Knowing Shelby only by reputation, I consider it by no means out of the probabilities that he might put us all under arrest and send our charming companion back to Austin under guard, if he discovered our presence and knew our purpose. Does that line of reasoning sound logical to you, Captain Bennett?"

Clay was forced, on consideration, to concur. Like all Parridine's plans, this one was eminently logical.

"There are two places where Shelby might elect to cross the border," Parridine went on. "Leaving San Antonio, he might march to Laredo, which is almost straight south of here, or to Eagle Pass, which is more nearly west. Laredo, I should think, is the logical route. It's shorter and the roads are better. But we ought to make sure which one it is."

He hesitated for a moment. Then his black eyes turned directly on Clay. "If he wished to do so, Captain Bennett could obtain this information for us very easily," he finished.

"Why me?" Clay asked, startled and somewhat nettled. It sounded as if Parridine was coolly handing him an assignment to spy on his former comrades.

"Because of us all you alone know Shelby's officers and men. You have it in your power to perform a service of great value . . . to Miss Hampton, in particular. And there can be no harm to Shelby's plans or to the expedition in doing it."

Clay thought for a minute. Much as he disliked the prospect, he recognized the need of some kind of information as to Shelby's programme, because from here a divergence of paths was certainly indicated. He took into consideration the fact that to obtain the information was not, as Parridine had pointed out, any disloyalty to Shelby and the Brigade. He had been wishing to perform a service for Judge Hampton's daughter. Perhaps this was it. After that, if he desired, he might wash his hands of her.

"Very well," he decided.

"Thank you," said Parridine. "While you are gone, Gonder and I will seek a suitable lodging-place for Miss Hampton. We will await your return in this plaza."

The Menger House was a broad, hospitable, two-storey structure, at that period widely celebrated in Texas. Darkness was falling as Clay dismounted in front of it, feeling in spite of everything an uncomfortable sense of being an errand-boy. He loitered on the board walk outside for a minute, seeing nobody he knew; then glanced into the lobby. Several persons were lounging there, all strangers. Only one grey uniform was visible, and Clay did not recognize the wearer who was very solemnly and very stiffly drunk, braced in a corner. A strong puff of spilled liquor came to the nostrils from a pair of swinging doors. The hotel bar. If any of Shelby's men were about, Clay reflected, that would be a most likely place to find them.

Pushing open the swinging doors, Clay entered the tap-room. And saw immediately the very man he would have chosen to see at that moment—Major Edwards, the Brigade adjutant, standing at the end of the bar, obviously in what he termed “a mild state of bibacity.”

“Clay Bennett!” exclaimed the little major, advancing with his impressive moustachios and his poet's forehead. “I'm astonished, sir, to see you——” He had a half-empty glass in his hand, and he spoke thickly, though with a stateliness that increased with every increase of his mellowness.

“I'm in San Antonio only for the night,” Clay said. “Is the Brigade encamped near here?”

“Yes, south of the city. ‘How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel.’ Only the less said about tabernacles the better—with our ungodly crew.” Edwards was the Brigade poet, and quoted with great freedom from the classics and the Bible, particularly when drunk.

“How long are you likely to remain in San Antonio?” asked Clay.

“That I can't say. Day or two—perhaps a week. There's much to be done. City's crammed, Clay, with some of the most ornamental figures of the South. You can hardly turn around without bumping into a general, a governor, or maybe a senator. Observe these two gentlemen——”

They had just entered the bar room. One of the pair was in civilian clothes, the other wore the stars and wreath of a Confederate major-general.

“Governor Reynolds and General Magruder,” stated Edwards. “What a contrast! The one is a statesman and scholar. The other is a soldier—I believe him the handsomest man in the army. Look at him there, six feet tall and straight as Tecumseh. A bronzed Ajax, sir, mighty-thewed and ready for

fight or frolic. After Galveston—when he raised the blockade—he danced, with a wound upon his body and blood on his garments, at a ball celebrating the victory of his standards, and never stopped until daybreak of the following morning. From start of fight to end of frolic he was fifty-six hours without sleep—and he at the time in his sixtieth year!”

The tap-room was beginning to fill now. Edwards drank deeply from his tall glass, wrung the drops of liquor from his moustaches, and indicated with tipsy gravity a broad, somewhat pompous man, bearded and in a uniform resplendent with silver stars and gold lace. It was, he said, General Simon Bolivar Buckner. A man with the veritable form of the war god, he commented sadly, but unhappily notable chiefly for two surrenders—at Fort Donelson and at the Red River.

“General Buckner writes poetry,” confided the major. “Some of his sonnets have been set to music and make right pretty songs to float out of open casements. Unfortunately—and I, as a lover of the muse, deplore this—poetry and the profession of arms seem not to go together. The bard too often obscures the soldier. It was so with Byron. It is so with Buckner.”

With lively curiosity Clay gazed at the famous Kentuckian, and suggested that it seemed there were a good many generals in San Antonio.

“Indeed yes,” Edwards agreed. “The city’s full of dignitaries. At the table yonder, for example, sit Generals Hindman, Lyon, Leadbetter, and Wilcox, of Lee’s army.”

“And in the corner,” asked Clay, “is it not Governor Murrah of Texas, in the colonel’s uniform?”

“It is—and that is a gubernatorial conference apparently, my boy, for the men with him are Governors Morehead of Kentucky and Allen of Louisiana. Ah, Senator Trusten Polk’s silvery head—you recognize it? He has just entered from the lobby. It is, as I informed you, a brilliant assemblage. I understand General Edmund Kirby Smith himself is in the city, with the aim common to all these refugees—to escape from the Yankees into Mexico under the aegis of Shelby. Already there are some fifty-three governors, congressmen, diplomats, generals, and other high officials listed for the venture, and the list grows with every hour.”

“All going with Shelby?”

“All. And it’s making Jo Shelby an old man before his time. Most of these gentlemen understand their own eminence as well as anyone, and to allow such a collection of notable cattle to ready themselves for a pilgrimage

such as ours, requires much waiting. We have gentlemen here, I give you my word, who can't utter the syllable 'Yes' in anything less than a paragraph. How Shelby keeps his patience with all these pompous asses, and treats them as if they were favouring him instead of the other way around, surpasses my poor understanding. By the way, Shelby should be here at almost any minute."

That gave Clay a start. He twinged in his imagination of what might happen if the fiery general confronted him. One more hurried question he asked:

"Tell me, major—will the march be directed towards Laredo or Eagle Pass, when you leave San Antonio?"

Edwards gazed at him with drunken solemnity. "Laredo has been announced officially as our destination. It is the more direct route and perhaps less difficult. Why do you ask?"

"I—well, I wondered, for personal reasons."

"Personal reasons? Ahem. Well, Laredo is the officially announced direction of our march. But see here, my boy, take the advice of an older, if not a wiser man. You're young and you have prospects. You aim to be a lawyer, do you not? Well, I don't know why you want to know which way we're going, but I recommend that you forget about the road to Laredo and devote yourself to your Blackstone. Understand? Study Blackstone. In Blackstone is the beginning and end of everything. That is advice as sound as any you ever received. Now, shall we have another drink together?"

Liquor was the major's besetting vice, a habit which was destined to ruin a fine career. He stumbled to the bar without looking to see if Clay was following, and called loudly for another glass. Clay took shameless advantage of the turning of Edwards's back to sidle out through a side door. He had no desire to meet Shelby.

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Parridine and Gonder were waiting in the shadowy plaza.

“The march is by Laredo,” Clay told them.

“Then we go by Eagle Pass,” announced Parridine. “Come along. We have found a camping place.”

It was a stable, where the three men could give their horses a bait of hay, and where they could spread their blankets on a mattress of the fragrant yielding stuff. In spite of the unwonted comfort of it, however, Clay did not rest well that night. In part this was because of Gonder’s snoring, which had an impressive quality like almost everything the big man did. It was much more arresting in the confines of the stable than out in the open. Flat on his back he lay—his rotund belly bulking large under his blanket—and made cavernous rasping sounds. Parridine seemed not to be bothered by it, but Clay was tempted two or three times to waken the snorer, refraining only because he knew other things were keeping him awake.

He disliked greatly some of the aspects of his present situation. Over and over he pondered the question of Parridine. About the man there was much he could not fathom. He had tried questioning Gonder and found the red-beard actually did have one subject on which he was reticent—he refused to discuss, with a curious dog-like fidelity, anything having to do with the affairs of the Hamptons.

Clay remembered that Parridine had been a river gambler. Yet he seemed a gentleman. His career at the card tables, of course, could account for the polish of his manners—the courtiers of the goddess of luck found it expedient to acquire the niceties of deportment. But there must be more to Parridine than self-taught punctilio, to have won the confidence of so shrewd an appraiser of character as Judge Hampton. Or, for that matter, Judge Hampton’s daughter. There was, moreover, the fact that Parridine was obviously a soldier, yet refused to tell where he had served; that he seemed to know Merit’s plans, but was as secretive about them as she. His actions concerning Shelby, moreover, had been contradictory. First he had announced his plan to enlist in the Brigade, but every movement since had been to keep clear from it. His arguments to back his actions were

unassailable—but Clay had the feeling that something here needed a further explication. Exactly who was this man Parridine? And what was his interest in Merit? Was he—could he possibly be in love with her?

At the thought Clay found himself staring up at the blackness of the stable roof, suddenly more wide awake than he had been that night. Parridine and Merit . . .? But why should he care? And then, despairingly almost, why, oh, why in hell was he, Clay, mixed up in this?

The sky was barely greying in the east when they arose, fed the horses, and ate a meagre breakfast. Then they mounted, and with Gonder leading Merit's horse, they rode to a small inn. Almost immediately Merit appeared, looking rested and keen. She chattered in high spirits with Parridine as he helped her mount.

“Be glad you're not a woman!” Clay heard her tell him. “A man seems able to exist without a bath, for—well, in some cases it seems for ever. But to a woman, a tub, and soap, and scents are as necessary as the breath of life!”

“But I'm glad *you* are a woman,” he told her. “Those things you mentioned . . . or something . . . make you extremely charming this morning.”

She smiled gloriously, and they rode on out of San Antonio, leaving Shelby's camp so far to their left that although they could see the tents and the distant horse-lines, they could not themselves be recognized. That day they travelled through a country that grew more arid mile by mile, with a thorny brush growth which progressively became more dense. By next morning they were in the real *brasada*, where mesquite and black chaparral mingled with a tangle of other impenetrable spike growths, each of which was more formidable in appearance than the last. Gonder, who had been in the thorn country during his Indian trading expeditions, and who made some shift with the Mexican language, pointed out to them many different varieties—the *coma* with thorns like daggers, its fruit the delight of the Mexican doves; the green *brasil* with which the low hills were covered; and the slender *ratama*, which shrouds its snaky fangs under beautiful yellow flowers. The all-thorn displayed its dirk-like claws on limbs balefully naked of leaves, and cactus was everywhere—the universal prickly pear, the rat-tail cactus, the devil's head, the *cholla*, and countless others, all equally treacherous. Together they formed an interlocking, poison-tipped hedge on

either side of the narrow, twisting trail, along which in some places the four riders were forced to go in single file.

Surprisingly, they frequently saw cattle even in this country of myriad thorns and little water. The beasts seemed to traverse the labyrinths by secret passageways burrowed in the thickets, and differed greatly from the lumbering longhorns of farther north—smaller, furtive as deer, and almost as swift-footed. Most of these Clay saw were dark in colour, and he remembered hearing of the “black cattle” of southern Texas as dangerous—particularly after dark.

Once a streaking, spotted form flashed across the trail ahead, leaving all of them with a skin-prickling sensation. But though the horses snorted and trembled, the jaguar did not bother them. On another occasion there was a sudden grunting, squealing rush to one side of the trail, and they had reason to thank their luck, for it was a herd of ugly little peccaries or *javalinas*, which will charge even a man on horseback when enraged. This was a land of death. Buzzards, both the familiar turkey buzzards, and the huge Mexican *zipolotes*, floated and dipped constantly overhead. But the little cavalcade advanced without mishap, until, on the evening of the third day, it reached the Nueces River, a considerable stream, and Clay knew they were no more than a day’s ride from the Mexican border.

In a country where sudden floods occur, it is a sensible precaution to cross a stream before making camp. But on this night they found a good spot on the near side of the river, a place where the trees stood back from the water and left a shelving area of soft mesquite grass. Parridine glanced around, then called a halt.

Before they had time to dismount, however, there was a hail from the opposite shore, and although it was growing dusk, they could see a solitary man standing over there. He seemed to be wearing a long, brown robe, and he was holding by the bridle a small, mouse-coloured mule, while he gesticulated violently with a wide straw *sombrero*.

“*Andale!*” came his shout to them, accompanied by wide sweeps with his *sombrero* to indicate that he desired the party to cross. “*Es peligroso!*”

“Wonder what he’s after?” asked Parridine suspiciously. “These greasers are always up to something.”

“It looks like a priest,” Clay said.

“Be quiet a minute!” commanded Merit. She pointed to Gonder, who stood intently listening, his red beard thrust forward.

“He’s telling us to come across,” said the big man presently. “He says it’s dangerous over here—very dangerous. Because of the cattle.”

“What’s this?” Parridine exclaimed with sudden interest. “Do you talk this Spanish lingo?”

“Not very good,” replied Gonder half sheepishly, “but I can make *him* out.” He jerked a thumb at the figure across the river.

Again the priest’s hail came through the deepening gloom. “*Los ganados vacunos—los cogeran!*”

“I think mebbe we ought to go across,” said Gonder decidedly.

They all agreed, and with the last of the light from the sun which just had set, they made the deep fording, to be greeted on the other side by an old bald *padre*, who mopped his egg-smooth skull and lean jowls with a coloured handkerchief, while he greeted them in voluble Spanish.

“He says he’s Father Bartolomé of Piedras Negras, which lies in Mexico jest across the river from Eagle Pass,” Gonder told them. “He’s now returnin’ from a *visita*. It’s risky, he says, to camp on the left bank of the Nueces, on account of in the moonlight the wild cattle come down to drink, an’ the bulls will attack, at night, anyone they see.” He considered this for a moment. “Jest the same,” he grumbled, “I never expected to see the day when a bunch of moo-cows would run me off from camp. Jest fo’ the hell of it, I got a notion to go back.”

But he fell to, helping to make camp, and Father Bartolomé that evening shared their supper with great affability, although conversation with him was sparse, since even Gonder, whose Spanish was halting at best, had difficulty with the old man’s rapid jargon.

Night darkened, the fire burned out, and they rolled in their blankets. In the vast silence of the wilderness distant noises like the shrill yapping of a coyote, and the occasional harsh cry of a high-flying night hawk, were strangely accented. Once the distant trumpet of a tolling cow came to Clay. He lay thinking—of himself, and of Merit, marvelling at his own inexplicable action in following where he was disdained, to obey the unexplained wishes of a fragile girl. Yet he did obey her; and Parridine obeyed her, for his own secret reasons; and Gonder, a scapegrace if ever one existed, obeyed her—together they extended about her their protection.

Why? Each had his own motives. Clay, in spite of his resentment of her manner to him, could no longer deny to himself that every word and graceful action of Merit Hampton were growing day by day more important

to him. Gonder's strange loyalty was predicated on friendship and an odd sense of gratitude. But Parridine? Once again the thought that the dark captain might be in love with Merit pricked Clay like a needle. That might explain many things. But Parridine was so much older—thirty at least while she was only eighteen. It was not fitting that he should even think of her. Yet it had to be confessed that the girl showed every sign of enjoying his companionship. Clay lay on his elbow frowning in the dark, and jealousy, whether he liked to admit it or not, was beginning to fester in him.

Towards the east the night sky slowly brightened as the edge of a full moon appeared above the trees beyond the river. Presently the orb was in full splendour, its light so bright that Clay found himself able to distinguish objects on the opposite bank. Something stirred in the blackness of the grove, and he fancied he saw creatures moving along the banks. Then he made them out—five or six dark objects approaching the water. They stepped forth from the trees into the moonlight, small vicious cattle of the *brasada*.

Clay was glad the cattle had appeared, because it took him out of his bitter thinking. With deep interest he watched them come down to the bank of the river and drink. These animals were joined by others—cows, calves and yearlings. All at once a deep rumble, almost like distant thunder, resounded, and out of the brush stepped a new figure—a magnificent, coal-black bull, his head swinging low to the ground, his wicked horns gleaming. He rolled forth his challenge to all the world as he strode ponderously along; but only cows and calves were at the water and these made hasty room for the monarch.

As the bull began to slake his thirst, however, another deep mutter issued from the woods. With a jerk the black beast raised his massive head and answered in a voice of menace. Up the bank he heaved, pulling his forefeet from the mud, and at that moment the newcomer appeared, a red bull—in weight, clean reach of sabre horns, and vicious will for murder, the black bull's match.

Fascinated, Clay stared as both monsters roared and raked the dirt in jets upon their backs. Suddenly, as if by signal, they charged; and the shock of the meeting came clear across the Nueces, followed by the clash of fencing horns. This way and that they thrashed, their mighty bodies humped, their eyes starting, their trampling feet crushing the underbrush. Lesser cattle went flying.

All at once the red bull slipped. For an instant he tried to maintain the struggle, knees on the ground, horns fencing off his enemy. Then full into his side the black demon crashed, and a horn sank into the red one's belly. A startled, strangled *blatt* came from the stricken beast. Agonized he scrambled for the bushes, spouting blood and pursued by his furious foe. Together they disappeared.

Behind him Clay heard an exclamation and turned to find everyone in the camp awake, fascinated by the struggle across the water. Merit gasped.

“Ghastly—but not without its interest,” Parridine's low drawl came.

The priest smiled as Gonder asked him something with intense interest. “He says,” explained the red-beard, “that to the west are the *ranchos* an' the Rio Grande settlements. The wild cattle shun man, although they attack when provoked. They've learned that the Nueces bounds their range, an' stay always on the far side of it.”

He whistled and shook his head with a wry grin. “Let's thank our lucky stars them beasts ain't absent-minded,” he concluded.

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Father Bartolomé proved amusing. He perched his lean form on his little mule, elbows flapping whenever the animal trotted—which it did only under heavy belabouring with a stick—and ambled along, genial and loquacious, in spite of the fact that of them all only Gonder could understand a word he said. The priest wore a brown habit of coarse cloth, with a hood on the shoulders and a white rope girdle from which depended a huge fifteen-decade rosary. On his feet were straw sandals and on his bald head a straw *sombrero* fully a yard across its brim.

Through Gonder he informed his new friends that he had a church at Piedras Negras, and was a follower of St. Francis. Because of the latter circumstance he professed to be a lover of birds and beasts. “For,” he said to Gonder in earnest Spanish, “the blessed saint was wont to preach to the birds of the field, and when he had charged them to be grateful to the good God, their creator, they began all of them to open their beaks, and stretch their necks, and spread their wings, and reverently bend their heads down, and by their acts and songs to show that the holy father give them joy exceedingly great.”

He gazed up from his small mule, upon which all the time he beat a lusty tattoo with his stick, giving the impression that mules at least were excluded from the tender feelings of Franciscans. The mule, however, seemed no whit discomfited, and though the dust flew from its tough hide, it plodded at a dawdling pace, caring less than if a fly were biting it.

“Therefore,” continued Father Bartolomé, “we, his followers, include in our orisons the birds of the air and the beasts of the field, for these also are the children of God. And often they seem to have souls like human beings, as my *gallo de pelea*, Qué Guapo.”

“He says he thinks his *gallo de pelea*—that’s Spanish fo’ fightin’ cock—has a soul,” said Gonder to Merit.

“You mean to say he keeps game-cocks?” she cried.

“One only—but he is champion of this whole district,” the *padre* explained at Gonder’s question. “And you ought to see how he loves me,

and will come to my hand to eat the raw beef when I am readying him for the combat.”

“He *fights* them too?” Merit was horrified when this was translated to her. While there was plenty of cock-fighting in Missouri, the churches at least had never condoned it.

“To be sure,” returned Father Bartolomé, mildly surprised, when her query was made known to him. “And why not? Your *gallo de pelea* lives to fight—it is the goal of his existence. All the humdrum of his caged life disappears when he is placed in the pit before his foe. Then his eye is the brightest, his head proudest. If he is victorious, *esta bueno*. But if he dies—the end is happy anyway. Can this be so wrong?”

Merit struggled to adjust her viewpoint, as Gonder acquainted her with all this. Meantime the priest grew enthusiastic. “*Ai!* That Qué Guapo! For three years now he has beaten every bird that faced him. The *alcalde*”—he paused to chuckle—“how that fat *alcalde* would love to overcome my champion! But it will take a better *gallo* than he has ever pitted yet!”

The *padre* purred with satisfaction, and Gonder, of them all the most interested, translated to the shocked Merit. Then, seeing her expression, he expatiated.

“Chicken-fightin’,” he told the girl, “is Mexico’s national sport. Bull-fightin’—that takes money. Cock-fightin’ the poor man’s game. It satisfies them greasers right down to the ground—somethin’ they can watch without exertin’ themselves, with plenty of blood an’ death to gamble on. It’s jest a custom of the people.” And he turned eagerly in his saddle to ask the priest what he fed his bird while training it.

Like most Missourians, Gonder considered that he knew the fine points of the cockpit, and on his theories he was highly opinionated. So for the rest of the afternoon the brown-robed priest and the portly adventurer rode side by side, first making polite inquiries, then arguing, and finally wrangling loud and long in the free-masonry of their sport, over conditioning methods, “short-heel” gaffs against “slashers,” and the whole field of fighting breeds from Spanish Blues to English Pyles and back again.

In the midst of this loud-lunged and intermittently acrimonious debate, the party arrived in the evening at Eagle Pass, an ugly little mud town on the banks of the Rio Grande, facing the equally squalid Mexican village of Piedras Negras across the stream. The Rio Grande was too deep to ford. Numerous boats, most of them no more than crudely hollowed dugouts

made of cottonwood logs, were drawn up along the bank to prove that. There was a ferry of sorts—a flat-bottomed scow, which operated by means of a pulley on a cable stretched across the river, using the current against its oblique side for propulsion. This ugly, flat craft also lay at the shore, and thither Parridine led the way. In purring, liquid Spanish, Father Bartolomé conversed with the ferryman, a flat-nosed little Mexican, with a face much disfigured by smallpox, who replied respectfully. Dismay showed in the *padre's* countenance.

“What does he say?” demanded Parridine sharply.

Gonder had lost his cherubic cheerfulness. “It’s bad. Near as I can get it, he’s tellin’ the old man we can’t go across—*Americanos* are forbidden on the other side.”

“Why? Oh, *why?*” Surprise and sudden fear were in Merit’s cry. The priest’s gaunt shoulders thrust upward in a shrug at Gonder’s question. “*Quién sabe?*” was all the satisfaction they got from him, but on the opposite shore they saw a twinkle of steel weapons.

For two or three minutes Merit stood staring across, trying to digest this information, to adjust herself to the sudden shift. Try as she might there was nothing she could see in this but disaster to all her hopes. She was crushed. Abruptly she turned away, averting her face, and fighting the sudden tears which she despised, but which blurred her gaze as she looked longingly across the wide, muddy river. Above everything she wished to avoid showing weakness in front of these men . . . but it was hard not to release the pent emotions in her.

Father Bartolomé, regretfully making polite adieus to his new friends, understood what she was fighting, and spoke softly to her, then wisely turned quickly and walked down to the ferry, aboard which his long-suffering mule already had been led. Merit dimly watched it begin its slow journey across. Yonder, to where the old priest was going, lay Mexico—somewhere beyond that river and the desert of mesquite lay Mexico City. There were great perils in the mountains and the desert, but she had been willing to risk them all. Only to be denied even the chance to run the risks . . .

Clay observed the droop of the girl’s slim shoulders and all at once he saw something new in her—something he had never seen before, and which he did not like, because somehow it did not belong to her. Helplessness and uncertainty . . . a groping for aid, and a knowledge that for her there was no aid.

In his sudden understanding of her, the resentment he had felt faded, but he was helpless. They all were helpless. Gonder stared glumly at the ground. Parridine turned his back. Clay gazed wordlessly at the girl. She turned to them slowly.

“I want to thank you—all of you,” she said. Her lashes were wet, but her voice was steady. “It meant very much to me—going down into Mexico. But I’m beginning to see—very tardily, I’m afraid—that I tried to do the impossible. And, having put everyone to so much trouble, I can only do what a self-willed woman usually has to do—say I’m sorry . . . and try . . . to get back where I started . . .”

It came at last, breaking through her control, the sob. It tore at Clay’s heart, and unconsciously he took a step towards her. But Parridine was nearer. At the sob, as if he had been waiting for it, he turned to the girl and put an arm about her. “Come with me, dear,” he said. And all at once Merit buried her face in his shoulder and was sobbing unrestrainedly.

Parridine raised his head. For an instant he gazed across the river, chin high, nostrils flaring. Then his eyes met Clay’s. In that glance was a flash of vast triumph, an immense pride, the joy of some mighty consummation.

“He’s a cyard player all right—an’ he’s dealt us out,” said Gonder morosely.

He lounged at full length by the fire, and the red reflection of it splashed burning high-lights on his florid face and beard. He and Clay were camped like outcasts down by the Rio Grande. Night had closed about them. They could hear the swirl and suck of the waters, and Clay, sitting humped on a log, gazed drearily at the lights of the Mexican village across the stream, and at their reflections on the river.

Since the moment that Merit surrendered her purpose to cross into Mexico, their little party had been effectively broken up. Skilfully and completely Clay and Gonder were brushed aside. Without uttering a word, Parridine assumed full guardianship of and control over Merit—and she had acquiesced, it seemed gladly.

Like a restless, slouching bear, Gonder had wandered through the village, to learn how things went with the girl. His odd loyalty was such that if he was hurt by being so unceremoniously displaced, he gave no sign of it. Instead he brought back a report:

Merit was quartered with a family named Judnich, proprietors of a general store. “The old lady’s a holy caution,” said Gonder, after a judicious scouting of the enemy, “but Judnich acts white. They’re as respectable as anybody in this end of nowhere.”

Parridine had rented a sleeping room above the saloon across the street from the store, where he could keep an eye on the girl, “an’ where, seh, he is now engaged at poker, extractin’ what few dollars the cowboys has in their pockets.”

A cool little breeze, blowing over the water, stirred a tiny whirlwind in the camp-fire ashes, and Clay crushed out an ember with his boot.

“I suppose they’ll start back to San Antonio now?” he hazarded.

“Reckon so.”

They sat in moody silence for some minutes. But silence, even when he was gloomy, oppressed Gonder. He stirred uneasily at last.

“Piedras Negras,” he said, staring at the glimmering lights, and making conversation. “Wonder where it got that name—Black Rocks?”

Clay did not at first reply. Then something stirred in the back of his mind, and he straightened.

“What was that you said?” he asked. “The meaning of Piedras Negras?”

“Why—*piedras*, rocks; *negras*, black. Black Rocks, is the way I’d make it.”

“Or Black—*Stones*?”

“That’d do as well.” Gonder was staring, but Clay did not trouble to satisfy his evident curiosity. In his mind’s eye he saw the poet’s forehead and the long moustaches of Major Edwards. Wasn’t that what the adjutant had said? *Blackstone*?

Blackstone—the great basic treatise on law. But *Black Stones*—could it be merely coincidence?

The major had seemed quite drunk. Too drunk to deal in subtleties. Yet: *The beginning and end of everything is in Blackstone.*

Clay went to sleep with that sentence going over and over in his head.

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They were awake, shivering in the river mist, before sunrise. Together they pulled some driftwood into a heap, and the fire that sent its white smoke, like steam, perpendicularly upward, warmed the life back into their bones. Gonder had recovered his cheerfulness but Clay was silent.

After their scanty breakfast, he left Gonder and walked to Judnich's store. It was an old adobe building, with a platform running across the front. At one end of the platform a side door led to the living quarters. The rest of the front was devoted to merchandise. Clay knocked.

The door opened, and Mrs. Judnich, a greasy woman, broad and slatternly, regarded him with hostility. Could he speak with Miss Hampton? She supposed so, casting him a venomous glance. What did he want? He told her coldly that it was personal business, and she departed, flouncing and thwarted, into the interior.

For several minutes Clay paced the platform. It was built to serve the double purpose of a porch and loading dock. Therefore it was high as a wagon bed and ran the full length of the building, being mounted by plank steps at either end. A flimsy wooden canopy, supported by thin wooden posts, cast a stingy shade. Behind the store gurgled the river; on the other side of the dusty street was the saloon where Parridine had taken himself. Clay turned from the dreary scene, at a step from within, and Merit was there.

Her "Good morning" was a question as much as a greeting, but on this day she looked at him without hostility, and from that he took courage.

"Miss Hampton, could I ask a question? Are you going back to San Antonio today?"

"If I am, what?"

"It's just this, ma'am—and please, I'm not trying to run your business, only trying to help—couldn't you stay here just a little longer——?"

She hesitated, then looked at him with a sudden challenge. "I thought you disapproved of what I proposed . . . am I wrong in that?"

“I didn’t realize at first,” he pleaded, “how—well, how important this was to you.”

“And when did you realize this?”

“Last night—at the ferry landing,” he said simply.

Her face softened. “What were you going to suggest?”

It was Clay’s turn to hesitate. Could he tell her of the nebulous thing in his mind, a hope rather than a conviction? As he considered his answer, Parridine stepped out of the saloon across the street, and came striding towards them. It was what Clay needed. His jaw tightened.

“Let’s wait,” he said. “I want Captain Parridine to hear what I have to say.”

Over Merit’s face passed an expression fleeting and untranslatable as the lean figure of Parridine joined them. His black brows were bent, and his black eyes turned questingly from one to the other of them.

“Captain Bennett has just suggested that we remain in Eagle Pass a little longer,” the girl said, her voice impersonal.

Parridine glanced at Clay. “Your reasons?”

“I believe Shelby is coming to Eagle Pass.”

The effect of Clay’s sentence was electrical. Merit’s eyes flew wide, and instant concentration came over Parridine’s face.

“What makes you think that?” they said, almost together.

“When I talked to Major Edwards in San Antonio, I believe he dropped me a hint. He could not tell me the Brigade was coming this way, since it was officially announced as on its way to Laredo. But he is friendly towards me——”

“Perhaps,” said Parridine, “you will be good enough to explain why you kept this to yourself.”

His voice made Clay bristle. “Because I did not before divine his meaning. His words were ambiguous.”

“And they were——”

Clay, finding himself struggling with his control, turned and deliberately addressed himself to Merit. “The last thing he told me, Miss Hampton, was this: ‘Devote yourself to Blackstone. In Blackstone is the beginning and end

of everything.’ I thought he was advising me to return to Missouri and resume my study of law.”

There was more than a hint of a sneer on Parridine’s countenance. “And what mysterious other meaning did you read into that, may we inquire?”

“I read none at first.” Clay kept his eyes on Merit. “Last night something Gonder said set me to thinking. He told me the meaning of the name Piedras Negras.”

“And what is that?” the girl asked.

“Black Rocks—or Black Stones. Don’t you see? The beginning and the end of everything . . . might have referred to Shelby’s line of march. I believe Major Edwards was trying to tell me that Piedras Negras was the general’s true objective.”

“Most ingenious, Captain Bennett.” Parridine made no effort now to conceal the sneer. Clay’s face went dark.

“Parridine!” he exclaimed, his voice thick with wrath. “I warn you——”

Fear sprang into Merit’s eyes. “No! No!” she cried. “Captain Parridine, I forbid it. And Captain Bennett, I thank you for what you’ve said, and I’m going to consider it.”

Clay, who had mentally braced himself for her scorn, knowing how weak was his position, was grateful to her.

But Parridine suddenly changed in a way that was bewildering. “My apologies,” he said. “Stupid of me . . . your information, to be sure, is valuable.”

One moment deadly hate flared between them. The next Parridine smoothly was asking pardon. It left Clay dumb.

But already the dark captain seemed to have forgotten him. “This may be a new chance for us,” he said, turning eagerly to Merit. “We’ve gone all this time on the theory that Shelby’s men would mean additional hazards for us—and because of that we ran into this closed border. Why not take a chance on the other possibility? If one suit isn’t running lucky, change to another—that’s always been my motto. Don’t you see what I mean? Shelby’s coming at least ensures us a way to get across the river. Once in Mexico, there’s no telling what will happen, but it’s a gamble, Merit. Let’s wait and see what the developments are going to be. We haven’t anything to lose, have we? Maybe we stand to win on this deal!”

They seemed to be ignoring Clay. The whole attention of the girl was concentrated on Parridine, and Parridine's on her, as they talked eagerly of their plans. Clay stepped back and walked down the steps.

He had half crossed the dusty street before Merit noticed he had gone. When she called to him he pretended not to hear, and walked onward.

But Clay had committed himself to a new interest in the girl's project, and having done so, he could only bide his time and await the outcome. Those next two days seemed to stretch out endlessly. Merit remained indoors most of the time, having apparently made friends with fat, draggle-tailed Mrs. Judnich. Parridine also kept to himself. But with Gonder, who was always as friendly as a setter pup, Clay made the systematic acquaintance of almost every resident of Eagle Pass—Gonder from pure gregariousness, Clay to glean all possible information. More than half the villagers were Mexicans. The remainder were Texans, taciturn and non-committal with strangers. Yet Clay managed to gather the following facts:

All of Mexico lying between Piedras Negras and Monterrey was in the hands of the followers of the proscribed President Juarez. These operated in guerrilla bands, indistinguishable from outlaws, their commander being a mysterious personage known only as El Gato—an obvious soubriquet, meaning "The Cat"—who had a reputation of a sinister nature all the way up and down the border. Monterrey, the first large city to the south, was garrisoned by Maximilian's French troops, but it was death to attempt to reach that point from the Texas border, unless you had a safe-conduct from Juarez or El Gato. Both sides in this civil war murdered all prisoners they captured, unless the latter seemed valuable to them as potential ransom bait. Villages and *haciendas* throughout northern Mexico were in ruins. It was starvation country—a *jornada del muerto*.

The sum of this was discouraging. And when two days passed without rumour of Shelby, Clay began half to hope that he had been wrong, because now he had the most serious doubts of the feasibility of any further advance southward by Merit. And this in spite of the fact that he realized that by being wrong, he still further would be lowered in the girl's estimation.

Neither Parridine nor Merit made a move to leave on the third day, although Gonder reported he had seen them conversing at the store. But on the fourth morning, the red-beard returned from town to the squalid little camp on the river bank, with news. He found Clay sitting beside the whitening ashes of the fire, elbow on knee and chin in hand, staring, without seeing, out across the Rio Grande.

“They’re goin’,” Gonder said abruptly.

Clay allowed his gaze to turn to the speaker. The red-beard seemed downcast, so much so that even the flamboyant hue of his whiskers seemed subdued.

“Miss Merit’s leavin’ in the mawnin’—with Parridine,” Gonder concluded.

For a few minutes Clay did not stir. There was in him a feeling of failure, coupled with relief which nevertheless carried with it sharp disappointment. Presently he rose to his feet. Without a word he began walking towards the town, seeing but dimly its low-roofed adobes, or the unpainted, rickety clapboard shells. There was something, that now in the moment of parting from Merit Hampton, demanded to be said. He did not know how he would say it, but insistently it demanded utterance.

Once again, but slowly this time, he climbed the steps to Judnich’s platform, and told the inimical Mrs. Judnich he wished to see Merit. Once more, while that embattled Amazon was gone to summon the girl, he surveyed the street in front of the store. A group of loafers—cattlemen by their garb—lounged in the doorway of the saloon across the way. Stamping their hoofs and switching their tails before the hitch-rack, a collection of drowsing ponies fought the flies. All of the horses carried the huge, high-horned saddles of this country. Merit’s step on the porch turned him from contemplation of the lazy picture.

“Miss Hampton,” he began, being unable to summon the courage to meet her eyes, “I heard you were leaving. There’s something—before you go, I wanted you to know something. I’m no good at expressing myself, but there’s something——”

He stopped stammering and swallowed, not knowing how to proceed.

“Go on,” she said encouragingly, regarding him gravely.

“You do not like me,” he continued miserably. “We will let that pass. Your friend Captain Parridine doesn’t like me either.” Now his voice hardened. “In his case I can return the compliment.”

Striving to muster his ideas, he once more stopped. Merit was listening with a breathless interest, but he was too confused to notice it. She never took her blue eyes from his face.

“In spite of your—your poor impression of me,” he stumbled on, “I have wanted to prove to you . . . that I am your friend. Unfortunately it seems that

everything I've done has only made matters worse. This delay here, in Eagle Pass, for instance—I was almost sure, Miss Hampton, that Shelby was coming this way. I'll swear it. I had hoped . . . for something still to happen to favour your enterprise."

For the first time he looked directly at her, half apprehensively. Something amazing happened. Her face softened and she smiled. Actually smiled at him, a dimpled radiance. And then she spoke.

"Captain Bennett," she said gently, "I think I've been very ungrateful. There have been some . . . matters. We needn't go into them now. But I'm sorry—truly sorry—that you sacrificed your place on Shelby's staff because of me. I'm afraid I've used you badly. Now that you've said . . . what you did say . . . I want to say something too: I appreciate, and do not think I deserve, the kindnesses I've received from you. Truly I don't. I hated you for the advice you gave me at Austin, but I was a fool not to accept it. And as for my impressions of you, Captain Bennett . . . perhaps they are not as bad as you think . . ."

For a moment she was transformed. Gone was her coldness, and gone also was the brittle gaiety, the glittering challenge with which she usually met men, with which she had charmed the officers' mess and fenced with Parridine.

In that moment he would gladly have died for her.

And then the spell was broken. A cowboy galloped in a dusty cloud from the north and came to a jolting stop before the saloon. He swung out of his saddle, slapped the dust from his leather *chaparejos*, and replied with a tight grin to the chorus of greetings from the saloon loafers. Then he stumped into the building, the rowels whizzing on his spurs. As he passed through the door, he left one sentence quivering on the air behind him:

"Gen'ral Shelby's headed this way—the hull Confed'rit army'll be in Eagle Pass befo' noon to-morry!"

Open-mouthed, the loafers gazed after him. Merit sharply drew in her breath. Her startled face turned questioning to Clay.

"Shelby coming—after all?" she breathed, and it seemed almost a prayer.

Stupidly he replied: "That's what the cowboy said."

"It must be so . . . you were right after all then!" she cried.

Already the word was running through Eagle Pass. Women chattered in high-pitched voices from their doors, with an excitement half-fearful at the thought of so many soldiers—wild men, too. No telling what they might do . . . to women. Children shrilled jubilantly to each other. Men hurried to the saloons or gathered in knots on the streets.

For a moment Merit stood with Clay, watching the agitated village. Then she excused herself and was gone into the house, the door closing behind the flutter of her skirts. Of a sudden Clay saw Parridine come to the door of the saloon beyond the roadway. The man did not see Clay; his eyes were intent on other things. A long moment he stood in the door, staring out towards the north—gazing across the mesquite flats from which Shelby presently would come, with taut features and a corrosive bitterness in his eyes. Then he faded back into the dimness of the interior.

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By ten o'clock the following morning, watchers on the house-tops in Eagle Pass cried that they could make out a far-distant haze; and an hour later even those standing on the ground saw the long dust cloud, miles away, which marked the line of Shelby's steadily approaching march across the grey-green desert. That dust cloud was watched with a mixture of interests and emotions. Merit watched it with hope and with a desperate purpose, perhaps, which she did not reveal. Gonder watched it with gleeful speculation as to various entertaining possibilities in which the bearded scout, Esau Janeicke, largely figured. Clay watched it expectantly, wondering what it would mean for him—and for the girl. Parridine watched—but no man could tell what Parridine thought.

In a hysteria of excitement the residents of Eagle Pass shouted to one another the news of the approach, or the rumours that now were circulating dizzily. But across the river, Piedras Negras, the Mexican village, was in a fever, almost a panic.

Shortly before noon Shelby's advance party was seen—an officer with his escort. The horsemen rode into the town and halted before Judnich's store in the plaza, while a curious crowd milled about them. Through this mob Clay elbowed his way.

“Major Edwards!” he called.

The little adjutant, commanding the advance party, turned in his saddle and searched with his eyes every face about him until he caught sight of the speaker.

“Damn my soul—Clay Bennett!” he shouted. “Where in hell did you disappear to that night in San Antonio? I looked everywhere for you.”

“I thought you intended marching by way of Laredo,” Clay countered.

“Laredo? Oh.” The major grinned briefly. “You know Shelby—passion for the unexpected. He announced officially we were going to Laredo—because we were *not* going to Laredo. He came instead to Eagle Pass, and if a hostile Mexican surprise party has been prepared for him across the river

from Laredo—well, it’s going to have a damned long wait. By the way, what a coincidence that you should come this way instead of the other!”

“Yes, isn’t it?” Clay saw the major’s insinuating grin. It was coincidence that they had come to Eagle Pass in advance of Shelby—but only because of Clay’s own lack of subtlety. He hoped Major Edwards would not find out how long it had taken him to catch the hint dropped in the Menger House bar.

“How many Mexican soldiers would you say are in that village across the river?” Edwards was asking.

“No more than a company, I should say.”

“Shelby’s almost here. Has this town got a mayor? Or *alcalde*? Or whatever they call them? I’m acting quartermaster today, in addition to a million other things. Have to requisition forage for the horses . . . do my eyes deceive me, or is that a saloon yonder? Clay, your pardon. You’ve no idea the thirst this desert riding engenders—”

Before Major Edwards had fully satisfied that thirst, Shelby’s men, hard as the rimrock, came riding into Eagle Pass, their felt hats flapping, their faces drawn and dust-covered, carbines thrusting up from under saddle-flaps, holstered revolvers slapping lean thighs. The town was suddenly filled with them, a shifting panorama of sweating horses, and grim, sardonic faces, seen dimly through a haze of dust. Above the thudding of hoofs and the rattle of accoutrements, rose the cadenced shout of officers’ commands. To see better, Clay climbed once more on Judnich’s platform, and as he did so, almost as if she had been watching for him, Merit came out of the building and stood beside him. Soldiers near them came suddenly to attention, and . . . Shelby was there. Shelby, chestnut beard greyed by the dust that lay like fine flour in the folds of his garments, came riding through the opened ranks, down to the river’s bank.

Right to the ferry landing Shelby rode, and forced his horse forward until the water swirled about the animal’s front hoofs.

“This the Rio Grande?” the general demanded.

“Yes, sir.” “It is, sir.” Half a dozen voices gave eager assurance.

Shelby stared across the river, his head thrust forward on its short neck, a peculiar intentness in his squinted eyes. This was the Rio Grande. And yonder was Mexico. Across that muddy strip of water his great test began. The last few days had done much for Shelby. The uncertainty, the doubts, that had assailed him in the first period after he launched his project, had

dissolved, or at least moved into the background. Now he knew only a determination to win, a determination so colossal that it dwarfed everything before in his life. He tightened his bridle reins. This was the jumping-off place, the actual start of something which contained the great future of all ambition for him; and concerning which it was utterly impossible to predict what would happen.

His face tightened as he turned in his saddle.

“We have time to cross over yet today!” he barked. “Edwards, forget those requisitions. Tell the men we’ll sleep in Mexico.”

Backward up the bank he reined his horse, and spurred it to the plaza again. The dust was subsiding so that Clay began to recognize his old comrades of the hard-riding staff—Collins, Gordon, Slayback, Langhorne, Moreland, Thrailkill, Rutledge, and the rest. Some of these officers caught a glimpse of Merit, stared, recognized her and quickly doffed their hats. She gave them an all-inclusive smile.

Then Clay saw someone standing close to Shelby’s bridle rein, being questioned by the general. It was Parridine. Words reached Clay on the platform: “. . . take the liberty to inform you . . . Americans prohibited from crossing at this point . . .”

“Prohibited? How is this, sir? Who are you . . .?”

“. . . Mexican officials, sir . . . orders . . . Captain Quinn Parridine, late of . . .” The rest was swept away.

“That so?” Shelby regarded the dark, lean face with new interest. The next few sentences did not reach Clay. Then, from the general:

“Who controls that village—Juarez or Maximilian?”

“Juaristas, sir,” answered Parridine.

“Juaristas, hey?” neighed Shelby. “Bugler!” He rapped out an order and the air was shattered by the trumpet’s clangour. Horses reared and officers howled commands; the massed cavalry disintegrated, wheeled, thundered away at a gallop. Down the Texas bank of the Rio Grande a long line of mounted men—a line of battle—was extending itself.

“What are they doing?” Merit asked, thrilling at the fury and the movement.

“Deploying,” answered Clay, “but that river——”

Collins and his six brass cannon came stampeding up from the rear, the guns lurching and bounding over the rough ground. Hoofs and wheels tore the earth as they whirled, swept into position, gunners clinging like apes to the limbers. Men leaped, seized trails, slewed the ugly pieces around. In a time incredibly short, the black mouths of Collins's guns glowered sullenly across the Rio Grande at Piedras Negras.

Now Clay began to understand. Shelby was doing things up in style. The Brigade was formed in line of battle, colours flying, and the battery crouched in the centre. The general glared about him.

"Interpreter!" he roared. "Where's that damned interpreter?"

Two troopers spurred forward. They were whiskered, narrow-eyed, pin-pupilled, and both were chewing tobacco. Between them rode a frightened little Mexican, with pleading, deer-like eyes, and a *sombrero* so huge that it overspread him like a tent.

"You the interpreter?" snapped Shelby.

"Yes, seh. He is," one of the guards answered.

"I want a letter," the general said. "A letter, understand?"

"*Sí, sí, mi general,*" whined the little man.

Shelby glowered suspiciously. "You *can* write, I suppose?"

"*Sí, sí, señor!*" wailed the Mexican, and went off into a whirl of incomprehensible Spanish.

"Isn't this the fellow that rancher last night said could interpret for me?" demanded the general, his beard dangerously thrust forward.

"Yes, seh," replied the guard promptly and uneasily.

"Then why won't he answer a simple question?"

"He's been actin' like this ever sense we got him, seh. Won't talk. Sullen. Jabbers that monkey lingo of his, but we ain't got a word of English out of him. He knows what's goin' on all right, but he's jest mule-stubborn. If you say the word, seh, we know how to make him talk. A little man-handlin'——"

The guard turned threateningly towards the Mexican. "You better begin to talk!" he snarled. "If you ever want to see your family again——"

"Get what you can out of him," said Shelby, frowning, and turning his horse once more towards the river bank to discuss crossing methods with

Slayback and Moreland.

In a flash of vicious movement, the guards were on the ground and the prisoner was hauled headfirst off his horse. The Mexican whimpered like an animal as the sharp smack of a fist against flesh lashed through the air. He rolled in the dust, his giant *sombrero* tumbling to one side.

“Now, you saddle-coloured son-of-a-bitch!” rasped one of the guards. “Makin’ a fool of us befo’ the gen’ral. Speak up, you yellow swine, befo’ we tromp you to death!” He gave the sprawling figure a heavy kick, and the little Mexican, eyes pleading, sputtered another flood of Spanish in a high, wailing voice.

On the platform Merit seized Clay’s arm. “They’re hurting him!” she said.

“Just scaring him a little,” Clay replied. He was accustomed to the “third degree” methods employed sometimes to pry the truth out of prisoners. This did not seem to him particularly brutal, since he knew the capacity of the human body to absorb punishment. But to Merit the violence of it was terrifying and sickening.

“That poor little man doesn’t understand a word of English!” she cried with sudden intuitive conviction. “Oh—they mustn’t hurt him!”

Before Clay could answer, she gathered her skirts and ran down the steps into the street. Very tiny and fair she looked among the great, bearded troopers. In a moment she was threading her way through the mounted men, towards where the two guards scowled above the Mexican.

“Stop that!” she screamed almost hysterically. “Stop that this instant, you—animals!”

The big guards straightened and turned sweating, perplexed faces towards her. And on the other side of the plaza, Shelby, hearing a woman’s voice, twisted in his saddle, then, with his two officers behind him, spurred towards her.

“What in hell’s name’s going on——” he roared. In the middle of an objurgation, he paused and stared. Then he swept his hat from his head and bowed.

“Miss Hampton! Your servant, ma’am. What—what in thunderation are you doing here?”

“General Shelby, make these men stop hurting this poor Mexican!”

“Why, ma’am, they’re not hurting him—not very much at least. The little beast’s stubborn. He’s our interpreter, but for some reason he refuses to interpret. We’ve got to put the fear of God into him——”

“General, I’m sure this poor, half-hysterical creature doesn’t understand a word you say—any more than you understand him!” she replied, ignoring his explanation.

“He doesn’t, hey? Why doesn’t he say so then?”

She did not smile at the incongruity. “Before your—your ruffians beat this defenceless man any more, it would appear to me that mere decency would indicate that you have him questioned in his own language!”

“But, Miss Merit, I haven’t a man who talks Spanish. It’s what I’ve been up against ever since I left San Antonio. Nobody to interpret. What in hell would you have me do?” Almost apologetic, the general looked at the girl, his features worried and aggrieved. “I’m not responsible, ma’am, for the way I talk. I’ve got to have a note in Spanish to take across to Piedras Negras.” Balefully his eyes swung on the circle of loafers watching him. “Any of you write Spanish?” Their universally blank faces answered his question. Literacy was not high at that period in that part of Texas.

“Mr. Gonder speaks Spanish,” said Merit suddenly. “Have Mr. Gonder talk to this man.”

“Where is this Gonder?” asked Shelby.

“Hyar he is, seh!” Clay recognized the rumble, and his eyes sought out the speaker. He sat his horse with head jugged forward like a turtle’s, and a yard-long, black-and-grey beard dangling from his chin—Esau Janeicke, the mountaineer. Evidently there had been a reunion, for standing on the ground beside him was the red-whiskered and sinful figure of Gonder.

“Please, Mr. Gonder, come here,” implored the girl.

Half unwillingly, the portly figure permitted itself to be thrust forward by those around it. Gonder confronted the Mexican, who had been hoisted to his feet, and spoke slowly to the man in his own tongue. Over the prisoner’s frightened face relief flooded; and with relief came supplication. In a torrent his words poured forth.

“Miss Merit’s right. He doesn’t understand American,” Gonder explained to the general. “These gents took him by mistake. It was another man at the ranch that was pointed out as the interpreter.”

“Wait a minute—*you* can handle this language,” said Shelby, as if daring Gonder to deny it.

“After a fashion.”

“Can you write it?”

“Speakin’ an’ writin’ is two diff’rent matters.”

Shelby turned to Merit. “Miss Hampton, how reliable is this man?”

“I’ve trusted my life to him,” the girl replied.

“He’s loyal to you, that’s granted—it wouldn’t be difficult to be that, ma’am. But what about him on something less personal? Will you vouch for him?”

“Yes,” she said simply.

“Good! I won’t need the letter, then—if I’ve got somebody I can trust to interpret in my negotiations across the river. Men, release that Mexican!”

The prisoner picked up his *sombrero*, slunk like a catamount to his horse, leaped in the saddle, and rode out of the dusty circle.

“Who’s in authority across the river?” Shelby asked Merit.

“The *alcalde* of Piedras Negras is Señor Ignacio Anda,” she replied.

“You’ve met him?”

“No, but I’ve been here four days. I’ve heard about him.”

“By the gullet of God, ma’am, you’re magnificent! Edwards, I want you to take my message across.”

“And proud of the honour, sir,” said the major.

Shelby turned to the river. “Get me a boat!” he bawled.

Clay, on the platform, had been watching the confusion that was discernible across the Rio Grande in Piedras Negras. Here and there on the far bank darted tiny, panic-stricken figures, for the significance of Shelby’s warlike display with the Brigade had not been lost. The captain remembered the bitterness of his last words with Shelby, and also that Shelby did not easily forget a grudge. But he had observed something nobody else had seen, and he leaped down from his high place and worked his way towards where the general sat his horse in the midst of the milling staff.

“General Shelby!” Clay halted and came to a salute.

Very slowly Shelby's eyes seemed to focus on him.

"Captain Bennett," he said slowly. "So you came down here after all." His face hardened. "It wasn't Missouri, then."

"If I may make so bold, sir, the Mexicans have taken every boat on this part of the river to the opposite side."

"The hell you say!" Shelby momentarily forgot his resentment. "How deep is the river here?"

"Big swimming, sir."

"Swimming! Well, a boat I must have!"

His eyes swept fiercely about him, and fell on a dangling black beard. "Janeicke!" he shouted. "Can you get me a boat?"

The mountaineer took a long, slow look across the stream. "It could be done, seh," he said, "Pervidin' them Mexicanos didn't pot ye afore ye got to t'other side."

"How would you go about it?"

"A man could swim ovah on hossback."

"Sergeant, those guns are loaded with case," said Shelby, indicating Collins's battery. "If so much as a single shot's fired from that town at you, by God I'll make dust and rubble of Piedras Negras!"

"I'll try fo' a boat, seh, if I kin git one mo' man to go with me."

"An' here's the man!" Gonder broke in. "Havin' fo'med an attachment fo' your triflin' but divertin' carcass, Esau, I'll e'en accompany you in them aquatic pursuits you've jest discoursed about."

"Hold on! Not so fast!" interrupted Shelby decidedly. "You're my interpreter now, Gonder. I'm not risking you right when I need you!"

Gonder's grin at the general was almost impudent. "I'm a private citizen, seh, an' as sech I have my rights. If I was enlisted under your command, I would obey without question any order you gave. But I beg leave to call your attention to the fact that you have at present no authority over me. In my individual an' private capac'ty, therefore, I intend to swim that river with Esau. Been needin' a bath fo' some time, anyhow. So long, general."

"I'll be eternally God damned!" exploded the general. For a moment he scowled wrathfully, but Shelby, after all, was Shelby, and as the black-beard and the red-beard began to amble away, he suddenly roared with laughter.

“Go ahead and get killed, and be damned!” he shouted after them. “You’re a pair of rascals I can well spare! Likely target for the Mexicans, and no loss! Get going!”

Janeicke and Gonder grinned at each other, for though the general’s words were abusive, his voice reflected a lively good will. A vast shout of encouragement rose from the battle line along the bank, as the two men began stripping to their waists for their dangerous venture.

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It was a prospect sufficiently perilous that confronted the men who thus hardly were preparing to cross the Rio Grande. Troops undoubtedly lay in that village yonder, and in spite of Shelby's show of force, there was reason to believe that they might open fire on anyone attempting to reach the other side. Even if there had been no hostile rifles waiting, the muddy, treacherous current, which formed whirlpools and swept along its crooked course with deceptive swiftness, would have daunted most men who considered crossing without a boat. As if these dangers were not enough, there was the final problem of quicksand—the ever-present menace of western streams—death that might lurk in any shallow or along any sandbar through which the river cut its twisting channel.

Janeicke and Gonder knew these things, yet neither of them hesitated. Esau's long black beard whipped his naked, shaggy chest in the stiff breeze, and his companion's body appeared pink and distended with plumpness, below his flaming whiskers. With a wave of their bare arms, they rode down to the stream, and urged their horses into the oily water. Janeicke was in the lead, his eyes, hard as nail-heads hammered into the saddle leather of his face, searching the swirling surface ahead of him as if he could look through the yellow current and spy the quaking danger beneath. Almost at once they reached a sandbar, but the scout halted and began a cautious detour, with Gonder following. Once Esau's horse, belly deep in the water, began a frightened, labouring struggle, and Clay held his breath. But the quicksand released its clutch, and the men on the bank cheered again as the horse pulled free. Suddenly both animals floundered and only their straining heads were visible above the boiling flood.

The battle line was tensely silent. Then there was a shout: "Thar they is!" A dark dot bobbed beside each swimming horse—the heads of the riders, floating expertly beside their mounts, clinging to reins or manes.

Ominously silent lay the village across the river, and a thousand pairs of eyes in Shelby's array searched every visible foot of it for a sign of hostile movement. Now and then a flicker, like a glimmer of heat, told of steel among the houses, but Collins's brass battery, the gunners standing to their lanyards, was very clearly visible in Piedras Negras. Minute after minute

passed, and no shot was heard. Fifteen—twenty minutes. All at once Shelby's troopers yelled like a tribe of Sioux. The backs of the swimming horses broke the surface of the water, and the half-naked riders were seen climbing into their streaming saddles.

Yet the danger, even now, was by no means ended. Shelby fidgeted nervously up and down the bank, and in the distance Janeicke and Gonder seemed barely to crawl as their horses waded the shallows.

"They've made it!" said Edwards at last, almost incredulously.

Another yell broke from the Brigade. The volunteers had reached the boats drawn up under the steep bank, and still no shot was fired in Piedras Negras. It was evident that the Mexicans had correctly interpreted Shelby's grim flourish, for the village lay silent as Janeicke and Gonder, tiny in the distance, tethered their horses to some toy trees on the shingle, selected a boat, and shoved off for the American shore.

Shelby was grinning now, and rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "Nice. Very nicely executed," he beamed. But as he turned his eyes fell on Merit, who still stood behind him, and his face assumed once more its gravity.

"Now, Miss Merit, explain yourself," he began severely. "I expected to hear that you'd returned to Missouri, like a sensible young woman. I ride two hundred and fifty miles, and what do I find? *You*, at this outlandish place, and ahead of me! Cato Hampton would never approve of this, Miss Merit. What is the meaning of it?"

Her face suddenly dimpled. "You have admitted that I got here before you," she said. "You refused once to take me with you, chiefly on the ground that I'd be a handicap—you didn't believe I could keep up with the expedition. Observe! Ginger can out-travel any horse in your command!"

"That last I will very gladly admit. I envy you that horse, ma'am."

"Thank you. Now, general, since you've admitted I wouldn't be any drag—won't you let me accompany you on the rest of your journey? Nobody will have to do anything for me. I won't be one bit of trouble. Please! Please, general!"

Shelby studied a minute, tugging at his beard and looking down at the ground. Then slowly he raised his eyes to Merit.

"If it were possible in any way," he said slowly and very gently, "I would do this for you. But—there are other considerations. I must refuse."

Her face lost its brightness, and he leaned forward in his saddle, his eyes sympathetic. "Don't think badly of Jo Shelby, ma'am," he said earnestly. "Circumstances are beyond my control."

Clay had been hearing behind him the rumbling undertone of heavy wagons, as Shelby's transport, turning off the road, took up orderly military parking. Now, for the first time, he became conscious of lighter wheels. The difference in sound was so marked that he turned and saw that which seemed incredible at first—a long, trailing, irregular line containing the most heterogeneous and incongruous collection of vehicles he ever had beheld. It resembled a political parade, or an ostentatious spectacle at a steeple-chase or other grand function of fashion. There were, in that amazing procession, broughams, phaetons, a barouche that had seen better days, curricles with two wheels, and landaus. It appeared that the luxurious equipages of a score of the cities of Dixie had been levied on. Most numerous, however, were buggies—light pleasure vehicles with spidery wheels. This, it flashed over Clay, must be the noncombatant train—and then he observed that the riders were mostly pretentious gentlemen in broadcloth, with tall hats, silken chokers, and face hair of variegated styles, cuts, and luxuriance.

Light buggies! Did these fools expect such vehicles to last on a march through a country as rugged and roadless as Mexico? Clay remembered Shelby's complaint that the civilians going with him demanded every imaginable luxury, but this was beyond all bounds. General Price, it is true, had campaigned on occasion in a buggy, after he became heavy and old, but his men were kept constantly busy requisitioning new vehicles for him as the current ones broke down. There could be no requisitioning of new buggies in Mexico.

With Clay's amazement his disgust arose, because these buggies suddenly loomed very importantly—they were symbolic of a habit of thought, a type of mind, which seemed ludicrous at first, but became more dangerous the longer he thought about it, for the reason that it was something which would some day have to be met by Shelby and dealt with.

In the extraordinary assemblage there was no order. One conveyance crowded another, and Clay could see that the passengers, although striving to maintain the exaggerated, grandiose manners of the typical southern politician, were hot, uncomfortable, and filled with weariness and the irritation that comes from weariness. And that already they loathed the errand on which they had come, and were in a humour to place full blame for their discomfort on the man who led the expedition. So badly had they cluttered the road by now that it was impossible for Shelby's rear guard to

come up, unless it detoured out through the mesquite. Without regard for this circumstance, some of the civilians already had dismounted from the leading vehicles and were crowding up through the dust to the vantage place of the store platform. A group elbowed and pushed its way up about Clay while Shelby still conversed with Merit.

“. . . and permit me to add, Miss Merit,” the general was saying in his best high-gallant manner, “that we could do with a little beauty, such as you would lend to this expedition! Your pretty face, if you’ll pardon my saying so, ma’am, would be a most welcome relief after such a countenance as this old buzzard, Slayback’s, here—or John Edwards’s honest but unlovely phiz yonder. Therefore, I——”

From right behind Clay a voice—and it quite evidently was a voice long nurtured and cultured for speaking in public—boomed suddenly forth:

“What is this, seh? By what right do you take this action?”

In astonishment Shelby turned in his saddle to face the questioner.

“Perhaps yo’ do not recall me. I am Congressman Alexander P. Tweedie, of Loosyanna, seh. Accompanyin’ this march, seh, in a private capacity. I will remind yo’ of yo’ own statements, seh! Under the circumstances, this action constitutes an act of favouritism, and a breach of faith which I, fo’ one, denounce!”

The speaker was a bald, plump little man, with ripe apple cheeks from which mutton-chop whiskers of pepper-and-salt colour sprouted in profusion. He had a paunch, and a plug hat, and a long-tailed coat of grey, with velvet lapels and cuffs, while his trousers were fawn-coloured and very tight. It was a pompous, strutting, pouter-pigeon figure, and behind it stood closely massed several gentlemen, all bearing the unmistakable stamp of civilian officialdom, and all expressing disapproval in their faces.

“This is what Shelby’s been up against ever since we left Austin,” growled a wrathful voice in Clay’s ear—a voice borne on a breath richly flavoured with whisky. Major Edwards had climbed on the platform, and was surveying the civilians with notable absence of affection. Obviously, Shelby was a man deeply tired, and he was bewildered at this outburst.

“Gentlemen,” he said soothingly, “I fail to understand your vehemence \_\_\_\_\_”

“Vehemence!” snorted Congressman Tweedie, his short body swelling with indignation. Obviously he was trying to be very unpleasant. “Yo’ propose, seh, to set at naught the very rule yo’ swore would not be modified

in any instance! Here are a dozen gentlemen, and scores more behind, seh, who wish an immediate explanation!”

“Damned jackals!” growled Major Edwards to Clay. “I wish Jo Shelby would cut loose on ’em!”

Shelby still was at a loss. “In what have I erred, gentlemen?” he said, his voice conciliatory.

“I’ll tell yo’, General Shelby!” trumpeted Congressman Tweedie, stepping forward with an upraised hand as if to command silence. “I will remind yo’ of yo’ own statement that no woman, undeh any consideration, was to be taken on this expedition. I desiahed to take my own wife, seh, and so did othahs.”

A light was beginning to break on Shelby, but he remained silent with a growing grimness.

“Why, will yo’ be so good as to tell us, did yo’ ban all ouah wives, General Shelby, and even send yo’ own wife back to her home—and then extend to this—this—chance-met girl a privilege yo’ denied to honest women?”

Congressman Tweedie felt he had made a very pretty point. And so he might have considered had he been debating Shelby on the hustings of his own congressional district back in Louisiana, where an insult could be forgotten in a torrent of eloquence. Under such circumstances he might have been amply justified in the triumphant smirk with which he glanced back at his colleagues. But these were no hustings, and Tweedie, looking away from Shelby, suddenly saw something in the faces of his friends that wiped away his smirk. He whirled about in alarm and went white to his cravat.

Very slowly and deliberately Shelby climbed down from his horse and walked over to where Tweedie stood. The general was not tall, but he was broad, and he walked with the typical horseman’s waddle, which is akin to the gait of a sailor. Inexorably he climbed the steps of the platform, his eyes, very hard, never moving from the congressman’s, and every hair in his beard bristling. When he had thrust his face within six inches of the other’s, he spoke:

“The lady to whom you just referred, sir, is Miss Merit Hampton of Fairwood, near my old home. She is a very high-toned lady, the daughter of a gentleman, and my old friend. I want to hear you apologize to her, sir, and here and now!”

Congressman Tweedie went even more pale with horror at the look in the other's eyes. "I—I was mistaken," he babbled. "I see it now. Miss—Miss Hampton, most humbly I beg yo' pahdon."

Merit had hardly moved. She did not trouble to make any acknowledgment. Congressman Tweedie glanced apprehensively sidewise at Shelby. But the general's face still was thrust hard up into the other's.

"My hearing, sir, has been somewhat dulled by battle noises," he said, "but I believe I heard some mention of Betsey Shelby."

Congressman Tweedie shuddered, his fat cheeks wabbling with agitation. "I—perhaps did mention——" he stammered.

"She is my wife, sir, and her fair name means more to me than my life, sir. Or the life of any malingering hyena who might venture to cast a slur on it!"

"Yes—y-yes! I assure you, general, I——"

"You share my opinion?"

Shelby's eyes were like twin points of steel, and great beads of perspiration stood on the bald forehead of the little congressman.

"Yes—oh, yes, general——"

"You agree that my sending her away was a sacrifice which makes very clear the honourableness of my plans and intentions?"

"By all means, general! I beg of yo', seh, do not regard——"

"Very good," said Shelby, returning to his horse. "My ears often deceive me. I am relieved, sir, at your reassurance in this matter."

He mounted and turned again to the civilians on the platform and Congressman Tweedie. "For your information, and to avoid future misunderstandings," he said, "the conversation you overheard between Miss Hampton and myself was the end only of our talk. Miss Hampton is *not* accompanying this expedition."

He turned his horse and rode down to the water's edge to oversee the departure of Major Edwards and Gonder, with their escort.

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In less than an hour the boat was back, with Gonder impassively sitting in the stern sheets, while Major Edwards fidgeted beside him. In such haste was the latter that he upset his dignity on landing, by stepping mid-leg deep in soft mud; and he could hardly wait to salute before beginning his report to Shelby.

“We’ve something more important to deal with, sir, than a provincial *alcalde*,” the major said eagerly. “Governor Biesca, commander-in-chief of Coahuila, Tamaulipas, and Nueva Leon, has just entered Piedras Negras. He is a Juarista, and to him I delivered your message. I had no need of an interpreter—Biesca speaks English. As you ordered, I informed him that you asked safe passage across the river, and promised no danger unless he resists. Further, I told him—as you suggested—that you favour the cause of Juarez.”

Parridine stood near, his eyes expressionless, but listening intently.

“Biesca?” queried Shelby eagerly. “What kind of a man is he?”

“Half soldier, half civilian. Most polished and elegant. He quotes his smiles and italicizes his gestures.”

“A politician? And has real authority? This may be propitious!”

Already it was evident that commands had been issued on the opposite shore, for a dozen craft began to crawl across the river, oars or paddles flashing in the sun. At once Shelby began giving orders, and almost in a moment the tremendous activity of crossing a brigade, with its equipment, over an unbridged stream, was unleashed.

No body of men ever was more expert in river crossing without facilities than Shelby’s Brigade. Downstream hurried Colonel Slayback with his pouched elbows and goat’s beard, and presently to the accompaniment of high-pitched whoops and shouts, dark masses, breaking into smaller segments, appeared on the yellow water as the work of swimming across the horses and mules began. On the banks upstream, a corps of wood-choppers grew very busy under Major Moreland, and the sharp *clop, clop* of their axes rose on the air as they started to fell trees in a grove of large cottonwoods.

Logs went rolling down the bank, and in an incredibly brief time a raft of considerable proportions grew on the water.

Captain John Thraillkill, a dark-visaged ex-guerrilla, had ropes brought from the supply wagons and these a detail of men spliced into three long cables and fastened to the raft. One cable was carried across the river by boat, one was kept on the near shore, and a group of a score of men took stations like a tug-of-war team on a small island upstream with the third, which was to do service as a check rope. Meantime, Captain Rutledge supervised the cutting down of the bank to remove the sharp shoulder, followed by the building of a log ramp down which vehicles could be moved to the raft.

A thousand men, experienced and working efficiently together, can accomplish very much in little time. Within an hour Collins's battery was being carried across, the guns followed by the supply wagons, and these in turn by the vehicles of the civilians. Three or four teams of mules, hitched to the haul-cables on either bank, furnished the motive power, pulling the raft back and forth across the Rio Grande, while the check rope from the island, with its chain of sweating, struggling men, fought against the current.

To Edwards, watching from the high bank, this was a moment of intense stimulation. As usual, he racked his mind for grandiose historical precedents, because it made him feel good to identify himself with classical events. There was the crossing of the Rubicon, of course. He rejected it as too hackneyed. Anyway, Cæsar was going home then. This was different. Launching forth into new climes, to meet new adventures. More "like stout Cortez." Edwards repeated the Keats lines, and tried to convince himself that the sluggish raft and the clumsy little river boats had an affinity to the caravels of the great conquistador. For the moment he was in a world of imaginings and romantics. He realized this, and glanced somewhat guiltily at Shelby. The general sat his horse at some distance from the staff, deliberately drawing away from them, baffling them with silence. No, Shelby would not understand or sympathize with the Cortez conceit. Edwards, in truth, was morally certain that to Shelby this was not a climactic moment at all. His Rubicon had been crossed long before—back on the Red River, that night when he made his decision.

The little adjutant felt powerfully within him the swell of his loyalty to the short, bearded man on the horse. It was the strongest thing in Edwards's life; there was something mystical about it. Like all men born to be subordinates, Edwards was lost in wonder at the certitude with which his superior arrived at his decisions. The major never questioned those

decisions. He did not question them now. But sometimes he wished wistfully that there was more romance about Shelby's thinking. This, for instance. This consummating moment of crossing into a strange land, for undreamed experiences . . . it seemed a pity that it should be dismissed routinely.

Pasqual, the pock-scarred ferryman, was in an ecstasy. All the afternoon he had carried *gringos* across the river, because Shelby had reserved the ferry as a conveyance for the civilians. At a *peso* a trip, Pasqual had accumulated more *pesos* than in months of ordinary ferrying. He stood now at the prow of his flat-nosed scow, watching the pulley run along the greased sisal cable as the current of the Rio Grande, against the slanting side of the craft, drove the boat across.

The ferry had only two passengers this trip. Forward stood Merit Hampton, with her pretty chin defiantly raised. She was crossing the river against advice . . . practically against Shelby's orders.

Beside the rail in the stern, Quinn Parridine watched her trim back and the way the breeze whipped her green skirt about her. An almost imperceptible frown was between his black brows.

He turned his eyes back to the water and the frown deepened. Parridine hated a river. Sometimes, in spite of having ceased to admit any fantasy into a mind obsessed with the flinty facts of his existence, he stood for long minutes at a time, staring at the rushing water, fascinated by its power. The swirl of it about a sandbar, threatening greedily to lick up the small spit, stirred queer resentment in him.

A river is treacherous. It has quicksands and eddies. And it bursts into sudden floods, sweeping brimful, tearing with foaming waves at whatever it can reach. Presently it finds a place where the patient banks can hold it no longer, then out on the countryside it pours. Trees, animals, homes are torn loose and carried away, battered, engulfed, and destroyed. Nothing can placate the river's rage. Yet when its fury is spent, it drops back into its channel with a seeming surprise that anyone can think it destructive, spiteful, or wanton.

Parridine's hate for rivers lay in the fact that they reminded him of his father, Captain Ambrose Parridine, owner of the dirty little Mississippi river freighter on which Quinn was born. Captain Ambrose was very like the river. Their insane outbursts of passion and their irresponsibilities were similar.

Quinn did not remember his mother, but he knew she was a girl from Natchez—one of Mother Tappan's girls. Mother Tappan's place was down under the Natchez bluffs where the liquor shops and the gambling halls squatted squalidly. When Captain Ambrose visited Natchez, he always stopped under the bluffs; the respectable life above interested him not at all. Eventually he took one of the girls along with him. Her name was Dolly Shuman, and she was sick of her bargain in a week.

Liquor was Captain Ambrose's passion and curse. He was always half drunk when he wasn't roaring drunk. When he was half drunk he was malicious. When he was roaring drunk he was vicious—and cruel, to boot. Dolly Shuman would not have stayed with him after the first month, but she had to do so—because in spite of her hate for him, she had his child in her.

There was nothing much to recommend the Natchez girl. She was weak and cheaply pretty, with a mouth that was a painted smear of red. She was no good. But she was an angel beside the man who owned her. She would have done herself and her unborn child a big favour had she left him.

The night Quinn was born . . . Captain Ambrose grudgingly shoved the nose of his filthy little river boat into the levee and sent for a doctor. The doctor was no better than the captain. He was a levee rat, and everybody knew it. He was half drunk when he reached the boat and found the Natchez girl already far along in her ordeal. He was wholly drunk by the time the child came, owing to Captain Ambrose's misguided hospitality . . . and during the night while the captain and the physician slept off their debauch on the deck, the Natchez girl in the cabin first wailed feebly for help, and then died . . . of a hæmorrhage.

That was how Quinn Parridine came into the world. Son of a river drunkard and a Natchez harlot. He did not wince at the summation. The thought of his parentage had no power to shock or shame him, but it had put something into him—a desperate, flint-hard determination to retaliate upon the world for the evil it had done him. Almost as soon as he could think—even while, at a precocious age, he was coming to know with bitter intimacy his father's brutalities—he had that determination. As soon as he was old enough to steal and thus survive, he escaped from the river boat, and in the days of starvation that followed he was comparatively happy, because he was rid of Captain Ambrose.

Parridine disliked thinking of the year he wandered along the Mississippi, hungry all the time, living on scraps of food he begged or

filched. Petty thievery was integral in his furtive life. Occasionally he knew the inside of stinking jails. One of these opened a new chapter for him.

When he was seventeen, he was convicted of pilfering the overcoat of a St. Louis liquor drummer. That was in New Madrid, and it was six months the judge gave him. His cell-mate was a broken sot named Jack Crable. Crable had been on the river since the keel-boat days. He made young Quinn's eyes bulge with his stories—he had known dread John Murrell, the river pirate, and boasted that he had belonged to Murrell's strange underworld of crime that terrorized the valley in the roaring Forties. He even showed the youth how the clan made its sign—a wave of the hand, with the wrist oddly bent.

"I've been watching you, and you're of my own kidney," he said at last to Quinn. "When we get out of here, we'll go into something better than sharpening surtouts. Gambling—it's an easy life and small risk. Live off the fat of the land. I'll show you a trick or two that will be worth money to you, and when we get out . . ."

Crable didn't get out. He died in that jail, of cholera, and Parridine, sick with fear, had to lay out the corpse. But in the weeks before he took sick, the old man taught the boy many things, such as how to rig a deck of cards, and how to put the spin on dice which made them "set" just so, when they left his hand.

That was why, after his release from prison, Parridine was able to give up petty stealing. As he looked back, the thief days were distasteful. Gambling was a step up the social ladder. He started small and built his bank-roll on the wharves. After he was able to buy some decent clothes, he took to riding the packet boats and lining his pockets with the gold of rich planters and river merchants. He acquired social graces. Nobody could make a neater bow, or drink a more graceful toast. But the aura of disreputability clung to him. Knowing himself superior in wit, adroitness, and determination to the gentlemen from whom he took money, he yet felt his social inferiority to them.

From the very facts of his birth there grew in him a pathological passion to be recognized as a gentleman—to hold a serene and secure place in society. To be somebody. But it seemed that you had to be born to it . . .

There, for instance, was Merit Hampton. *She* had the birth. She had lived soft all her life, in luxury, with wealth and family. He had seen it when he lived those weeks with the Hamptons at Fairwood, after the affair at Lawrence. The Hamptons were what he never could hope to be—quality.

With the assurance, the bland confidence, which came from birth and education. At first he resented it. Then he began coveting it with soul-destroying envy.

And then came the war. Things changed. Now . . . fate had so ruled that it was within Quinn Parridine's grasp to become as the Hamptons were. War creates great upheavals. It was he, now, who was prepared to step upward—by walking right over Judge Hampton, if necessary. That stiff aristocrat would be a stepping-block. He might not like it, but he would not know it until it was too late.

Once—only once—Parridine had asked himself if he really would carry through to its ultimate conclusion the course he had planned. And his unhesitating answer was that there was nothing at which he would stop.

But that course might not now be necessary. Merit, within the last few days, had made the fulfilment of his ambition seem almost ridiculously easy. He was sure of her ultimate capitulation. After all, why shouldn't she turn to him? Why shouldn't she love him? He had known women—a lot of them. He "had a way" with them and he had savoured all classes of them, from the young wives of old planters, whose husbands he fleeced and then cuckolded, to frank prostitutes. Women admire elegance, and he had that. Merit Hampton admired it. If she did not, he was badly fooled.

There was one little disturbing thought. After her spontaneous coming to his arms, that day on the river bank, the girl had drawn away and treated him with an odd distantness. He made allowances, however. A girl must, after all, observe the conventions, particularly a girl reared as Merit had been. To appear forward was the unforgivable lapse. Women must be given time. She would come round, and he could afford to wait.

He had not yet spoken directly to her, but he felt sure she would marry him, if only for the need of protection in which she stood. He felt a mild surprise at himself for even considering matrimony. But it meant many things. He wanted this girl—wanted her with an absolute craving of the fibres of his body. But more than that, by marrying her he would assure his place as he could never assure it otherwise. He knew now he would eventually be master of Fairwood. But the bare position that would give him would be nothing compared to his acceptance by the stiff-necked Missouri aristocracy, as the husband of an authentic member of their own class.

In the meantime he had not forgotten that if all other things failed, he had always the last expedient. And if it became necessary, he knew he had the hard resolution to carry it through, Merit or no Merit.

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The westering sun had almost dropped below the horizon before Clay Bennett crossed over to Mexico. Wild doves were winging in to their night roosts in the cottonwoods by the river, and the evening was hazy with dust which still hung over the river valley from the day's tumult.

Clay was going over for no reason at all—he was at loose ends completely. Not since she had ferried over with Parridine had he seen Merit. Gonder was gone also—Shelby had taken him. Clay spat with discontent into the fawny water.

The ferry grated at the shingle and he climbed the shelving bank. Downstream lay the camp. It was growing dark and the parked wagons already were shadowy, and the angular rows of tents. Like hundreds of giant glow-worms, camp-fires twinkled all about.

The village was upstream. Only now was Piedras Negras beginning to recover from the terror that had gripped it. There had been a belief, almost universal, that *los gringos* in such numbers and with such warlike actions could mean only murder, robbery, and rape. Half the population bolted for the mesquite, and the ragged handful of soldiers in garrison was with difficulty kept from fleeing after the people. Biesca and his staff succeeded in inducing those soldiers to take boats across to Shelby, only when they were given a choice between the river on one hand, and the firing squad on the other.

War in northern Mexico was of unique savagery. Captured villages expected with certainty the worst at the hands of their captors. Looting and destruction were the mildest parts of it. Women prayed to the Virgin, but knew no prayers could save them from violation. As for the men—at best it was a quick death by rope or bullet; at worst a slow lingering one, buried in an ant hill.

Small wonder Piedras Negras was in panic. But it was to be seen shortly that the *Americanos* were breaking all precedent. Despite their ferocious appearance, they committed no destruction. Gradually through the afternoon the terror of Piedras Negras lifted, and the population straggled back from the thickets. Presently, with curiosity whetted to razor keenness by relief, the

people began to crowd and stare at the invaders. By scores, men in *sombreros* and women in *rebosos* gazed at the gaunt and hairy Confederates. The men marvelled at their own good fortune in escaping extremity at such hands. The women, viewing the tall and terrifying strangers, began to have half-unwilling thoughts . . . after all, there might be something to be said in favour of spoils going to the conquerors . . . now that rape was no longer a fear, there was much to admire, and something to desire, in these blonde northerners.

But eventually public curiosity became a nuisance to the Brigade. Shelby was forced to post guards to keep villagers out of camp. These sentries, by threatening motions with their carbines, and a determined shouting of “Vamoose!”—the Missouri rendering of *vamos*, which they took to mean “skedaddle”—managed to keep the crowd at a certain distance.

This was the situation when Clay walked over to the camp entrance. The sergeant in charge of the detail was an acquaintance, Hendy Tobias.

“Hands full?” Clay asked.

Sergeant Tobias replied that his hands were reasonably full and added with profanity that if his patience was tried much farther he would blow a hole through that fat Mex over there, big enough to push his hat through.

Clay, turning to the Mexican, was struck by the fact that it would require a very ample hole to accommodate the hat. It was an immense *sombrero*, with a black brim turned up a foot all around the yellow conical crown, and an edge tinkling with the silver *pesos* sewed to it. The rest of the costume was in keeping. The man was round and short—a build unusual in a people inclined to spareness. Under the grandiose headgear was an elaborate short jacket of black velveteen with many brass buttons, left open to reveal a shirt of white broadcloth, ruffled and somewhat soiled; a gaudy sash of bright rainbow stripes wound several times about his ample girth; and tan trousers, very tight in the thigh and flaring at the bottom, where they were slashed to display scarlet ruffles.

It was the man’s face, however, which really arrested Clay’s attention. The face was dark and oily, with large liquid eyes, and a tiny mouth ornamented by a small and exquisitely waxed moustache. Mouth and moustache were the only features that were not gross. He smiled ingratiatingly, and displayed two immense white teeth like the polished incisors of a rodent.

“Dam’!” the Mexican said. “*Mi capitán*. Leave me pass by!”

Speaks English, Clay thought with surprise. Aloud he said:

“No pass. *Americanos* only.” It seemed ridiculous to use pidgin English. As if he were trying to meet the Mexican in the no man’s land between languages.

“*¡Sí! Sí, mi capitán!*” The other’s voice was rich with eagerness. “I mus’ pass by. Me—I am Señor Ignacio Anda! *Alcalde* of thees city. *Ai chihuahua!*”

The last was a wail.

“Señor Anda?” exclaimed Clay. He remembered the name. The man might be important. “Who do you want to see?” he asked.

“El General Shell-by,” promptly replied Señor Anda, making difficulty with the name. “To give inveetation to *fiesta*. El General Biesca, he weel be there also an’ moreover. I suggest!”

Clay thought rapidly. If he knew Shelby, the chance to talk personally, cheek by jowl, with the governor, was a thing the general would welcome. It was none of his business, since he was no longer of the Brigade, but he took the initiative.

“I think you ought to pass him,” he said to Tobias.

“If the captain says so——” Tobias became very stiff. He disapproved, hated having that Mexican go over his head, and was going to put full responsibility on the captain.

Clay glanced at Señor Anda, clicked his heels and saluted.

“Señor,” he said, “forgive our rudeness. If you will permit, I myself will conduct you to General Shelby.”

The *alcalde* grinned joyfully. “*Mi capitán*, I weel be mos’ in your debt,” he purred.

They found Shelby standing outside his tent, squat and worried. He greeted Clay with an instantaneous scowl.

“Captain Bennett!” he exclaimed, without waiting for Clay to speak. “Where’s that girl, sir!”

“Miss Hampton?” asked Clay, astonished.

“Who else in the triple-plated hell could I mean?”

“I can’t say, sir—I’ve not seen her——”

“Captain Bennett,” interrupted Shelby with a deepening scowl, “I’ll thank you, sir, not to temporize with me. Your position, sir, is equivocal—damned equivocal, to put the very best face on it. You gave me to understand, sir, that you were for Missouri—‘rebuild the nation,’ and all that. Yet I find you here at the border. And if that girl isn’t at the bottom of this, sir, I will welcome your explanation.”

All this was in the high, strenuous voice that Shelby always used when he was irritated and going to be arbitrary. Clay knew better than to cross him when he was in this mood.

“General,” he began, trying to change the subject, “I’ve brought——”

“Jumping Moses, who gives a damn what you’ve brought!” shouted Shelby. “That girl! She’s crossed over, sir! In the face of my orders! She’s somewhere here, and I won’t have it, sir. I’ll not permit her, or you, or anybody else tagging after this army, trying to evade my instructions. A girl like that—why, damn it, she’d raise hell among my younger officers. Be a shooting over her in twenty-four hours, or my name’s not Shelby. I hold you responsible, sir! Get her back across that river before dark!”

Typically, Shelby did not even take into consideration the fact that Clay no longer was under his authority. He took it for granted that anyone within the sound of his voice would jump to obey him.

“General,” said Clay, facing Shelby’s obvious wrath, “I have nothing whatever to do with Miss Hampton’s plans——”

“You heard me, sir!”

Clay swallowed hard, but he did not answer back. After all the general was right. Merit Hampton had no business on this side of the river, for her own safety, if not that of the Brigade staff . . .

“Very well, sir,” he said. “Meantime, I have brought to you Señor Ignacio Anda, *alcalde* of Piedras Negras.”

“Anda? Señor Ignacio Anda?” exclaimed Shelby, his eyes shifting to the Mexican. “*Alcalde* . . . to be sure! Welcome, Señor Anda!”

The little *alcalde* grinned happily. His words, half English, half Spanish, tumbled forth. Shelby listened, at first puzzled, then as the sense of what the other was saying dawned on him, with sharp interest. It was as Clay had foreseen—the general was delighted at an invitation so propitious. The exchange of compliments between himself and Señor Anda required many

minutes. Eventually, with bows and smiles, the Mexican began to excuse himself, when his eye fell upon Clay.

“An’ El Capitán Ben-nett, also an’ moreover. I invite heem!” he said.

“I’m afraid I will not be able——” Clay began, embarrassed. But Señor Anda turned quickly to Shelby.

“No, thees I insist. He mus’ come. I suggest. I haff a like for heem!”

“I’ll see that he gets there,” said Shelby, slightly grim.

“ ‘*Sta bueno!*’ ”

“Now, captain, since you were good enough to conduct Señor Anda to me, please direct him to the gate of the camp. And remember what I said about that girl!”

By the time Señor Anda was out of the camp the sun was down, and only the brief afterglow hung in the western sky. Aimlessly, Clay struck out, wondering in which direction to find Merit.

Windows were lighting in Piedras Negras. Down by the ferry landing a lean figure stood in the gloaming. Parridine. Parridine would know where Merit was. Clay felt again the dull burn of hate. The hate was based on the very fact that Parridine certainly knew the whereabouts of Merit Hampton, while Clay did not.

An ugly thought came. Perhaps Parridine had followed Merit to Texas. How had he traced her? Perhaps he hadn’t traced her—perhaps they had met by collusion.

But suddenly he was shocked by the very suggestion which his own jealousy had prompted. He faced it, however, for now the suggestion was made in his mind, there were some matters needing consideration. They were both from Missouri, Parridine and Merit, and Missouri was a border state where Yankees and Confederates mingled, and loyalties were divided. Ostensibly both of these were Confederates—but the Federal Secret Service possessed a very long arm. Shelby’s movements, the entire plan of Mexico, might be of the greatest interest to Washington. If Parridine was a spy—why Shelby’s whole venture was imperilled. And if Merit was helping him . . .

Again Clay rejected his own thoughts—as far as Merit was concerned. She might be spoiled and headstrong, but she was Cato Hampton’s daughter. Perhaps she was aiding Parridine in some nefarious scheme of his; but if she was, Clay would go bail that it was innocently done, that she knew nothing

of its true nature. That would have to be the way it was. The only possible way . . . with Merit.

A new kind of anger flamed in him. If that man Parridine was using Merit, victimizing her, there was going to have to be a showdown. Admitting the man was a wizard with a pistol, Clay could handle a gun somewhat himself. If only he could be assured of some things in his own mind . . .

Calmly Parridine awaited him as he strode rapidly, almost wildly down the bank. Clay halted, recalled to himself by the other's calm.

"I was searching for Miss Hampton," he said.

"I regret to say she is not here," came Parridine's suave voice. "She has just returned to Eagle Pass."

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It was almost unbelievable, the change that had come over the troops. When Clay last had seen them at Austin, their camp was rollicking, with mouth-harps sawing, and laughter roaring about the bivouacs. But here it was different. Perhaps the difference had come in the long ride down through Texas. Or maybe it was just an aftermath of the crossing of the river that was the international boundary, with all the implications of that act.

The night after the crossing Clay slept in the tent of Captain Rutledge by invitation. Next morning, having no duties, he wandered down through the camp. Most of the men were sitting grouped around their cooking fires. They were rather more silent than normally. As he walked, their eyes followed him curiously, so that he felt himself the focus of a continual changing concentric ring of stares. He saw one or two men he knew—Catfish Caruthers, for one, and a private, Cass Wells, who had been with him on the Tyler detail. He nodded at them. The men rose and saluted, but did so unsmilingly.

One group brought him to a stop. He had seen those men before. He walked on, hardly believing his own eyes—if those men were not part of the gang of bushwhackers he had confronted that day in Tyler, he would never again trust his memory for faces. How had they become part of Shelby's Brigade?

At the lower end of the camp, near the horse-lines, Clay found two old friends—Janeicke and Gonder. The mountaineer rose from his fireside, his homely face quizzical, and Gonder grinned amiably.

“Are you regularly enlisted?” Clay asked the red-beard.

“No, seh,” Gonder said. “Ain't aimin' to until I find out what's goin' to happen to Miss Merit.”

“I saw some of your former friends, back there,” Clay informed him.

“The Irreg'lar Texas Cavalry, you mean? Seh, when you call them *former* friends, put the accent on that there adjective. Janeicke tells me they enlisted at San Antonio—sixteen of 'em. That's all that's left, what with the Austin fight, an' them that pulled out an' went home. This bunch is the

wussest of the lot. Every man in the crowd is scairt to stay in Texas, on account of crimes fo' which he'd shorely get hanged if the author'ties caught him. Rufe Champion's the head man. He's sneakin' an' no-count, but he wasn't even a patchin' when I had 'em. Even sech a rank blunderer as Bench-laig Peters was a Napoleon compared to him. But they're here now, an' Shelby's said he'll make soldiers out of 'em or kill 'em. It's likely to be the latter—I don't think the former's in 'em."

"Won't nobuddy have nawthin' to do with 'em," interjected Janeicke. "Except mebbe Cap'n Parridine."

"Parridine?"

"Yes, seh. He's thick as molasses with them bushwhackers—was down at their camp-fire last night ontill Taps."

"I wonder what he wants with them?" mused Clay.

With Parridine on his mind he returned to officers' row, and there learned that the dark captain also had been invited with the members of Shelby's staff to the *fiesta* at Señor Anda's, which was to be held the third night after the Brigade landed in Mexico. It was Edwards who gave Clay this information.

"Shelby asked Parridine out of courtesy—he's including all the commissioned ranks, even those in private capacity, such as desire to attend. There'll be a good few of us at Anda's and I hope the little beast has enough space to hold us. As to Parridine, Shelby's struck with him. Told me the fellow looked like a first-class soldier—he'd heard of him before."

Clay did not see Merit in those two days, although others in Shelby's camp did. Each evening Pasqual, the pocked ferryman, had reason to rejoice that the honey-haired *señorita* was resident in Eagle Pass, for he earned many *pesos* conducting ragged but polished young *Americano* officers across the Rio Grande in his ferry. Pasqual could hear them serenading the *señorita* from where he awaited them at the landing. Always a dozen or more took part in this strange *Americano* custom. There would be mournful singing, then the door would open and the *señorita* would come forth on the porch at Señor Judnich's *tienda*. After that there would be loud laughter and much talk and it would be long continued. In good time the *señorita* would return inside, and the young officers would come trooping back, to be ferried once more to the Mexican shore in time for the signal by the trumpet to put all lights out.

Pasqual said nothing but he considered all this as of a foolishness. In Mexico only one young man at a time gave a girl the serenade. Then there was opportunity after for whispering and perhaps more in the darkness. One cannot make love in a mob. Love is a matter between two people only, and more than two becomes surplussage. Had they been Mexicans who crowded and clamoured thus before the porch of Señor Judnich's *tienda*, Pasqual considered, there would have been more than one knife between ribs before the matter was ended. Still, who was he to pronounce on this strange *gringo* custom? It meant good *pesos* to him, and he was content.

Clay never took part in these pilgrimages to Eagle Pass. He tried to tell himself he did not care if he never saw Merit again, yet he was disappointed when the third evening fell, and the ferry tied up at the shore, signifying that it would not make another trip that night. Merit had not crossed over during the day, and this evening there would be no pilgrimage to her door, for it was the night of Señor Anda's *fiesta*, to which all officers were expected to go.

Already they were gathering in front of Shelby's tent, preparatory to riding over. Clay saw Parridine, silently standing to one side of the laughing, chatting group. Near the door, Shelby conversed with Buckner, Magruder, and Kirby Smith, all of whom were to be guests of Señor Anda.

The evening was gusty. A hat was snatched from someone in the crowd by a sudden whirl of wind, and swooped towards Clay. He snatched at it, caught it, and walked forward to return it to the owner, holding it upside down in his hands. Idly his eye fell upon it, then sharply focused. He lifted the hat closer to his eyes to make sure of what he saw in the dusk. Sewed inside the low, flat crown, was an oblong square of dead-black cloth.

Clay halted, his mind groping for something . . . something he had heard at some time in the past. That square of black—it had a meaning . . .

The bareheaded owner was coming towards him, and Clay raised his eyes as the other stood with his hand extended. It was Parridine.

Momentarily they stared at each other. Then Clay silently handed over the hat. As if answering a question, Parridine spoke: "The black flag—yes. I ride under it always."

The black flag! So that was it. Clay knew now what he had heard that bore on this. Up on the Missouri border throughout most of the war, a vicious outlaw gang of marauders had operated—the so-called guerrillas of William Clarke Quantrill. "Quantrill's Raiders"—the name was legendary

and carried a grisly thrill with it. The story was that these outlaws, the bloodiest on the border, rode always under the black flag, signifying no mercy to any person whom they captured. When at last the Federal forces scattered them and killed their leader, so went the tale, the survivors continued to wear the black flag as a square of black cloth sewed in the crowns of their hats, a symbol of their undying malice.

“Quantrill?” Clay uttered the single name under his breath, so that the other officers would not hear.

“Why not?” replied Parridine. Clay felt the ugly edge of his resentment. Now it was clear why the other had been so secretive.

“Why not indeed?” Clay countered. “Shelby has some other Quantrill men with him. Captain Thrailkill was with Quantrill early in the war. Know Thrailkill?”

“I have only recently met him. He must have left Quantrill before I joined.”

Clay was remembering something more about the Missouri bushwhackers. They were supposed to be Confederates, and at first they did good service for the South, but as the Rebel armies were driven into Arkansas in the first year of the war, the best of Quantrill’s men left him to join the regular fighting forces, and the remainder turned to indiscriminate robbery and murder, claiming allegiance to either side or none, as convenience dictated. Some of their unholy deeds Clay had heard recounted and there suddenly was a new meaning for him in Parridine’s narrow face. It was a face very meet for a guerrilla, and if what was reported of Quantrill was true, this man must be able to tell tales to make the flesh crawl, of the strange, secret warfare of the Kansas border.

Parridine’s teeth gleamed spitefully. “It may interest you,” he said, “to know that General Shelby is apprised of—everything.”

“And I assure you it is no affair of mine,” Clay replied shortly.

But as he walked to join the other officers, his mind was ridden by a new, bitter suspicion. The Quantrill connection made more plausible than ever the suspicion of a twisted design on the part of Parridine. And what did that mean for Merit Hampton? Clay was forced to remember that women of beauty and innocent appearance had before this acted as spies, some of them very devious and dangerous. In some manner women can cloak the darkest thoughts behind brows as clear as the morning. Assuredly Shelby’s adventure was within the realms of international affairs, its implications

great and far-reaching. Suddenly Clay remembered Merit's silence concerning her reasons for going to Mexico. She had been willing to use him as a guide and escort—but she told him nothing. Over him came a chilling bewilderment—it was as if something of great value had been taken out of his life.

He squared his shoulders. Matters now clouded would presently make themselves plain; in the meantime Clay began to realize that he had been in danger of allowing emotions natural in a young man, yet to be guarded against in a soldier, to blind him. Perhaps already things had occurred which he should have seen, and which he had failed to see, his vision being dimmed. There came a prickle of anger in his spine, and it was anger directed at himself. . . .

Horses were being brought and the noise and confusion of many riders mounting filled the night about him. An orderly put his bridle in his hand. Mechanically he swung into his saddle. Parridine was gone already, and Clay found himself riding with Colonel Slayback and Colonel Collins of the artillery. Those veteran officers attempted at first to jest with him about his recent adventures, but finding him inattentive they desisted, and fell into a conversation between themselves on lancer tactics, which had been discarded by the Confederate cavalry since the first days of the war, but which European armies still kept in vogue.

Presently they dismounted before a low, wide-spreading adobe structure, the windows of which were gay with lights. Servants took their horses and Señor Anda himself greeted them in the inner *patio*.

Governor Biesca already was on hand, a portly, greasy man, with an opaque black moustache falling down at the sides of his mouth, and a furtive, gleaming smile that he turned off and on at will, like a light. Biesca's staff was present also—in scarlets, and blues, and golds, somewhat soiled and ragged as to uniform, but ornate with decorations, and reeking with cheap perfumes. Compared with them, the ragged officers of Shelby's staff looked like beggars; but for all their gaudy uniforms the men of Biesca's entourage were notably deferential to the tall, fierce-eyed *Americano* soldiers.

Their host, Señor Anda, interested Clay most. Here, there, everywhere he was. In the whole company only he and Biesca understood both English and Spanish—and Biesca was engaged in high discourse with Shelby. So the fat little *alcalde* did the honours for the less distinguished officers. In and out among them he waddled almost at a run, interpreting for as many as

three conversations at once, his big buck teeth gleaming cordiality, his small black moustache quivering with excitement—host, entertainer, and servant to his guests at one and the same time.

Presently the visitors were summoned to the feast, where the Missourians sampled strange, hotly seasoned dishes. At the head of the long table sat Señor Anda, with Shelby on one side and Biesca at the other; and the *alcalde* kept the Confederate general's glass always full of *aguardiente*, or *tequila*, or wine, matching him drink for drink, so that by the end of the meal the plump little host was weaving in his seat, although to the end he maintained a devotion nothing less than heroic to his duties and to his guests.

Afterwards the tables were cleared for monte and roulette, and the dealers took their places. Shelby's officers prepared to try their luck with such small silver as they possessed. It was at this time that Clay suddenly thought to look around for Parridine. The man was not to be seen.

Clay considered this for a moment, then without asking any questions, he began a slow tour through the house and *patio*. In one room he came upon Shelby, Biesca, and Anda, sitting at a table, their heads close together, bottles thick on the floor. The Missourian's spine, Clay observed, was still erect and unbending, for which he was famous; but the two Mexicans swayed together, their eyelids heavy and their tongues thick. Parridine was not there. He was not in the *alcalde's* house—anywhere in it.

Clay found his hat and stepped out into the night. His head sang from much *tequila*, but not enough to dim his thought. Parridine was gone. To Clay that meant one thing . . . Merit. He was determined to follow.

Yet even as he reached this determination he confessed to himself that he did not know what he would do if he found them together. The action would depend on the event, he told himself. His legs seemed too long for him and the ground had strange inequalities. Surely he had not drunk so much *tequila* as to dizzy himself like this. He called for his horse, and a servant had to hold the animal while Clay pulled himself awkwardly up into the saddle. He said to himself, Clay Bennett, you're drunk. You've got to get hold of yourself. You had better go to your tent and not try to nose into something that is no part of your business.

But his horse carried him along, down to the ferry landing. And there he saw the ugly, awkward lines of the ferry boat, tied up at the shore just where it had been when he saw it last, with the little ferryman asleep on the deck in the stern. The ferry had not moved that evening, Clay felt sure.

He turned towards the camp. A sentinel challenged, then came to a salute, and he found himself before the dim row of officers' tents. Clay turned his horse over to an orderly and stumbled down officers' row, seeing no sign of the man he sought.

His mind, however, was beginning to clear somewhat. Parridine evidently was not in camp. There was one other place he could be. The village.

Unsteady still, Clay walked back towards Piedras Negras. A hulking figure crossed his path.

“Cap'n Bennett?”

“Yes.”

“It's Janeicke, seh.”

“Well, what do you want?”

“I heard ye was back, seh, an' I want to ask ye somep'n. If ye don't mind tellin', what's this yarn about Shelby diddlin' us out of a heap of money, an' then throwin' us in with them greaser rebels?”

“Who've you been talking to?” Gonder was bivouacking with this man, and Clay remembered that Gonder knew the story of Shelby's rejection of Governor Murrah's treasury offer. There might be harm in this.

“Nobody—the story's all ovah camp, seh,” Janeicke told him. “Spreadin' like a prairie fire. The boys is pretty confused, an' it don't set so good with them. I told some of 'em that story about the money was pure crazy. Shelby wouldn't do nawthin' like that to us. An' then who but Gid Gonder should tell me I was wrong—that the gen'ral did jest that!”

“Was it Gonder put out that story in camp?”

“No, seh. He jest talked about it to me, an' nobuddy else. He said that part of it he knowed was true, but the other part, about the rebels, he didn't know nawthin' about. If it is true, seh, the boys'll be almighty het up. We're supposed to have a vote, ye know. Gen'ral or no gen'ral, Ole Jo's got to consult with the Brigade, befo' he goes throwin' our chips in with one side or t'other. The story's havin' a mean effect. Who wants to fight for these hyar filthy greasers? Not me! Rev'lution? Hell, they're jest a set of bandits—every one of 'em afteh the main chance fo' hisself. I've heard the men talkin', seh. Ye kin see that some of 'em's pretty hot onder the collar. If it was white men, it'd be diff'rent. But these Juaristas is jest a bunch of saddle-coloured Mexicanos. Most everybuddy I've talked to says if we fight,

let's fight along with the whites—an' the whites in this war is all with that thar emp'ror, Maximilian. But the wussest part—if it's true—is we ain't been consulted. That was the agreement—we was to have a vote. I wish ye'd try to get to Major Edwards, or mebbe Ole Jo hisself, an' tell 'em how the boys is feelin'."

The anxiety in Janeicke's voice, and the stress of his news was rapidly completing the clearing of Clay's head. "Listen to me, Janeicke," he said, "you're not going back on General Shelby, are you?"

"I'd cut the gizzard out of the polecat that said I was!"

"Then keep your eyes open, and stop as much of this gossip in camp as you can. Tell them it's latrine rumour—not substantiated—anything to check it. I think there's something stinking and treacherous being hatched in this camp. Where's Gonder?"

"He went off to town. They was givin' passes to sech of the boys as wanted 'em, sort of a general jollification, since the officers is all celebratin' at Señor Anda's. Gonder took one an' said he was goin' off to commit vice."

Clay left the mountaineer, and began walking rapidly towards the main plaza of Piedras Negras. The town's central street was lined on either side by low mud buildings, some of them places of business, others dwellings. A few of the *tiendas*, and all the *cantinas*, with their coloured paper decorations over the doors, were brightly lighted. The street seemed full of Shelby's soldiers. For two days they had watched the women of Piedras Negras come and go, swinging their hips past the camp entrance, casting glances and smiles of enticement over their shoulders. Now they had come to find out what was to be made of those glances. Here and there ragged troopers slipped furtively through dark alleys which stank of urine and garbage, on the prowl, eyes alert for lighted windows. Bursts of loud laughter issued from drinking places, and American oaths. In shadowy doorways lurked Mexican men, frightened, raging, dangerous. The darkness behind the buildings was alive with whispers, the tittering of women, and hurrying feet.

Clay halted on a well-lighted corner, wondering where to turn, when a hyena's laugh resounded close, and a huge figure came down the street, each arm clasped around the waist of a giggling Mexican girl. Clay knew the guffaw even before the light from an open doorway gleamed on a bushy red beard.

"Gonder!" he shouted.

Instantly the big man flung the two women away from him and started across towards Clay. There was a wail from the deserted girls, a frustrated and disappointed wail, but it changed almost instantly to squeals and shrieks of half-frightened delight, as a passing group of roistering soldiers bore them off. No woman half good-looking and half-willing need fear neglect on this night.

“What you doin’ here, seh?” exclaimed Gonder. “I thought you was at Anda’s——”

“What do you know about this story going around concerning the general?”

“You mean the money? It wasn’t me started it. I got my notions, though.”

“And the deal with the Revolutionists. Have you heard that one?”

“Yes, seh. An’ I think both come from the same source. Parridine.”

“Parridine?” This agreed with Clay’s suspicions.

“Yes, seh. You know he’s been mighty thick with them stragglers from the Irreg’lar Texas Cavalry. Well, it’s them white trashes that’s been the busiest circ’lating them stories. Parridine may not have put them up to it, but he’s my candidate on the ev’dence now befo’ us.”

“Have you seen Parridine?”

“A few minutes ago, he was in the place called El Dorado. A combination drinkin’ an’ gamin’ house. He was playin’ cyards.”

“Gambling? Odd. He left the *alcalde*’s where everybody was doing that very thing.”

“Mebbe he figgered the pickin’s would be easier here. Parridine never gambles jest fo’ pleasure.”

“But an officer, riffling enlisted men——?” Clay was disgusted.

“You fo’get, seh, that he ain’t no longer a officer. He’s a private citizen—like you. It’s within his rights to set in with anybody he wants. Besides, mebbe, he’s playin’ fo’ more than money . . .”

Clay glanced at him sharply. “Where’s this El Dorado?” he asked.

“I’ll show you.”

Two blocks down the street an open door poured forth bright light and an overpowering stench of sour *pulque*. Gonder halted before it and glanced at Clay. They entered together. It was a typical Mexican drinking room, somewhat larger than the ordinary *pulque* shop. Along the back wall stood the bar, and before the bar was ranged a solid line of grey uniforms. The walls, illumined by many candles, displayed strange water-paint designs stencilled upon them—dolphins, volcanoes, and boats, all done in gilt on a background of faded blue. High shelves were covered with rows of crockery plates, jugs, and mugs, which had nothing to do with the dispensing of drinks, being for ornament only. At the end of the room farthest from the door by which the two had entered, stood several tables covered with green baize; and at one of these, with half a dozen tipsy soldiers, sat Parridine, his black hat tilted low over his eyes, shuffling a pack of cards. Other tables had their groups, the clink of coins sounded a metallic undertone to the conversation.

At the end of the wet bar, where it curved to the wall, Clay and Gonder slipped into a vacancy. They ordered *tequila*. Thus far Parridine apparently had not noticed them.

A voice lifted sharply, and necks craned. At the guerrilla's table a young trooper had leaped to his feet and Parridine was regarding him from beneath level black brows.

"Raised out?" he said. Not noisily, but so clearly that in the hush which had fallen, the words were clearly audible.

"God a'mighty!" said the youth, swaying on his feet. He did not speak angrily, but in a strained voice. "I hain't got a cent left."

"That's nothing to feel bad about, son. Nobody in this Brigade is any better off. Here—split the pot." Parridine shoved some coins across the table.

"Funny, too, about Shelby's men being broke," he went on, as if talking only to his immediate companions, though his words carried to every ear in the *cantina*. "Because every man in this outfit ought to have plenty of the ready. Right at this very minute. Know that? You'd all have three hundred dollars gold in your pockets now—every man here—if you had your just rights!"

He put indescribable emphasis in the last words.

"What d'you mean?" The voice came from one of the other tables, and it was as if the speaker's throat had grown suddenly dry.

“Just this: The governor of Texas offered three hundred thousand dollars in gold to this Brigade—to be divided equally among the men.” Parridine faced the room, now frankly speaking to all.

“An’ whut happened to it?” demanded the same questioner.

“What happened? Why, Shelby refused it! That’s what happened. It was at Austin. Do you mean to say he hasn’t informed you about it yet?”

Amazement filled the room with murmurs. Another voice spoke:

“Wait a minute! Keerful what ye say about Jo Shelby. He ain’t axed us yet, but until he doesn’t we ain’t hearin’ him blackguarded!”

Parridine’s face did not change, but it was evident he had not counted on this sort of interruption. He made the best of the situation, however.

“Good!” he said. “Forget it. Of course you can prove it for yourselves.”

“How?” “How?” Half a dozen voices clamoured the question.

Parridine was in for it now. His only chance was to win these men over completely, and he became more open.

“Why not ask Shelby?” he asked smoothly. “I’ll give you the facts—you verify them from his own lips. Remember the money in the treasury at Austin—the cash the bushwhackers tried to get? That was Confederate government money. I helped save it, so I was interested in what became of it. Governor Murrah, the morning after the raid, implored Shelby to take that money and divide it among all of you—said it was the government’s chance to partly repay the arrears it owed you. Boys, you were entitled to that money! You earned it. But what did Shelby do? He rejected it. Why? That’s something he hasn’t explained. Maybe it was not to his interests for you to have that much cash in your pockets. Maybe he was afraid that with it you might lose interest in his adventure down here in Mexico—you might want to go home and begin life over again instead of following him. You know it’s to Shelby’s interest to keep you in the ranks. If I were you, I believe I’d try finding out!”

This time it was a growl that arose in the room—a surly, threatening note, from men just beginning to understand that they had been deprived of what to them was riches.

“It seems Shelby hasn’t seen fit to say anything to you about it,” Parridine continued, with a short laugh. “Now perhaps you’ll be interested in something fully as important. What would you boys say if I told you that you’re not headed for Mexico City at all?”

“What do ye mean, Parridine?”

“This: If you’ve been whetting your appetite for seeing the capital, get over it. You’re staying right here on the Rio Grande—and you’re going to keep on wearing rags, and *fighting for the greasers against white men*. Have you been consulted about that?” He threw into their faces his sneering challenge.

“That’s bad talk, friend,” drawled a new voice from the bar. “Better be ready to back it up.”

It was the second interruption on which Parridine had not counted. But he spoke quickly and very earnestly, realizing that if he did not succeed in what he was attempting, he might be in a serious position.

“I’ll back it up! Now listen to me, and I’ll tell you the whole plan—because in spite of Shelby, you’re entitled to know it. You’re not going to Mexico City *because Jo Shelby’s been using you to buy a fat job for himself*—the governorship of a province, or some such office. The agreement is already made with Juarez. You’ll hear about it—maybe to-morrow.”

“How in bloody hell do you know all this?” demanded the last questioner. Clay saw the man’s face now. Sandy beard, white eyebrows—it was Sergeant Hendy Tobias, and Clay knew he was staunch.

“Never mind now,” Parridine answered hurriedly. “I’m telling you about it for one reason only. You’re free to do what you want, aren’t you? You’ve an agreement with Shelby, I’m told—you can vote on who you’re going to fight for or against. Well, I counsel you to demand a vote on this matter! Men, you’re being sold out. Where’s the coin to be had, and the pleasant living? At the capital! Out here on the desert all you’ll get is sandstorms, cactus, and death! Joining the emperor’s side is your only chance to get something for yourselves. You’ve got to decide whether you want to fight for beggarly rebels who haven’t a chance to win, or a rich government that can and will reward you. Think it over! If I haven’t told the truth, I’ll answer to-morrow. And if I have told the truth—just remember who warned you!”

Clay gasped. There was a colossal assumption behind the last sentence. Had he heard aright, or was Parridine actually making a bid for the leadership of the Brigade, or part of it at least—providing the Brigade threw Shelby out? This was treachery of the basest. Treason—except there was now no country to give authority. At the very least, Parridine’s arrogant ambition meant incitement to mutiny, the overthrow of the loyal officers, possibly death for many, including Shelby himself.

Speechless with the effrontery of it, Clay watched Parridine push himself up from his chair. The man's glance swept around the room; there were more than thirty soldiers in it—enough for the leaven he wished to introduce—and on those thirty faces were doubt and anger. He gathered up his money from the table and walked out of the *cantina*.

Instantly angry voices rose.

“I didn't come all the way from Arkansaw to fight no war fo' lazy greasers!” Clay recognized that speaker—he was the sunken-chested Rufe Champion, of the Texas “Irregulars.” Obviously he had been planted here, and knew his cue.

“It's our own folks, not Mexicans, we got to think about!” agreed one of Shelby's troopers.

“I don't take no stock in that fellow's rema'ks,” objected another.

“Why, he's makin' a skunk out of Ole Jo!”

“Take it easy! We kin mighty quick find out—an' if Parridine's lyin', he better talk fast!”

“But what if he ain't lyin'? Parridine's speakin' cold sense, looks like to me. There's mo' in this than ye kin see on the surface. Parridine's got the right notions. Mebbe this Brigade could stand a change in commanders \_\_\_\_\_”

Jerking his head at his companion, Clay slipped out of the room to the street, as the debate raged within.

Gonder was fuming. “That rattlesnake!” he snorted. “You goin' to repawt this matter, seh?”

“As soon as I can get back to camp,” Clay answered.

From the shadow of the alley at their elbows stepped a lean and deadly figure.

“I saw you, my friends, in that *cantina*,” said Parridine. “And so, Bennett, you've added spying to your other accomplishments. Well, just take this into account—I told those men the truth!”

“The truth?” Clay exclaimed. “Didn't you neglect, for some reason, to give them Shelby's motives? You heard Gonder, here, tell that story at the same time I did. Parridine, a half-truth's a lie!”

“Strange words from a sneak and an eavesdropper——”

Blinded by fury, Clay swung at the sneering mouth. Backwards staggered Parridine against the wall, groping savagely for a weapon, and Clay crouched forward waiting. But the guerrilla was unarmed. Suddenly he pulled himself erect and spoke in a voice hushed by passion:

“It will amuse me to kill you for that.”

And walked away into the night.

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His knuckles still tingling, Clay stood outside the *cantina* listening to the violent argument within.

“Gonder,” he said presently, “you saw what happened.”

“I did, seh,” Gonder nodded, his eyes glittering. “Parridine—he’s murder with a pistol. Dearest shot in the army with a Colt. He’ll ask fo’ Navy revolvers without doubt. If you ain’t made your will, cap’n, now’s a good time. Parridine’s p’ison with the short gun.”

Clay’s memory vividly supported this judgment . . . the wet black night in front of the treasury building at Austin, the rush of free-booters to the door, and the deadly staccato of Parridine’s revolvers. But Gonder’s attitude nettled him.

“I’ll take care of my own end,” he growled.

“Sorry, seh,” Gonder was instantly contrite. “I had no intention of injurin’ your feelin’s. The facts of the case jest overwhelmed me.”

“I tell you, there’ll be two sides to the argument if Parridine calls me out,” insisted Clay with irritation.

“Sure, seh. Sure.” Gonder spoke as one who reassures, when all experience is in the opposite direction.

Clay gave it up. “Let it go—it doesn’t bother me. Gonder, we’ve been through plenty together. Do me a favour. Represent me in this matter.”

Afterwards he was to ponder the strange turn which made him look now for one of the most intimate of services, to a man who, a short time before, had been regarded by him as a renegade.

“Me?” exclaimed the astonished Gonder. “Why—why—I’m greatly honoured, seh. But I’m no officer——”

“I regard you as a gentleman.”

“Why, thank you.” The big man flushed with pleasure. “I deem it a priv’lege to stand up fo’ you. If that’s the way it’s going to be, let’s look at this thing jest a minute. I told you I knew Parridine—river gambler befo’ the

war. That's a thing to bear in mind an' figger on. When the steamboat traffic went to hell, he jined Quantrill in '63."

"I know about Quantrill."

"I was living at Fairwood at the time," Gonder continued. "Employed by Jedge Hampton. In jail once—trumped-up cha'ges in connection with them mule-buyin' activ'ties at Corinth. The jedge got me out—that's one reason I'm bound to do my best fo' Miss Merit. Well, most Quantrill men was known, an' Parridine was one of 'em. A natural gambler, as I said. He'd take any chance. That's what made him a big man with Quantrill—he took chances an' gen'rally won. He'll bet on anything, an' a odd bet is a weakness with him. I've seen him, ridin' along behind a team, bet which hoss will void fust. Or anything like that. A bad actor an' shifty an' dangerous to boot."

"Regardless of that I've got him to meet," Clay remarked grimly.

"That wasn't what I was gettin' at, seh. I was only linin' up our man, an' figgerin' the best campaign. Say!" Gonder looked as if sudden inspiration had struck him. "Leave this to me an' Janeicke. No reason why you should be mixed up in it at all. We'll have Parridine bushwhacked befo' mawnin'—befo' he has a chance to challenge you—in a nice, quiet way, so nobody'll ever know what happened to him. It would be a real pleasure to Esau an' me. Let us take this off your hands."

Clay shook his head.

Gonder considered profoundly. "Why not the Missouri duel?" he suggested presently.

"What's that?"

"It elim'nates the pistols. Neatest thing you ever seen. Janeicke told me about it. Principals is armed with bowie knives—eight-inch blades. Hold a bandanna handkerchief in their teeth, each clampin' down on a opp'site corner. That puts their eyes eighteen inches apa't. At the signal they goes to work. Fust to leave go the bandanna loses the duel—he's gen'rally daid, an' if he ain't the other man can finish him off."

Again Clay shook his head. By this time over his hot anger, he was beginning to see how he had played into the hands of his enemy, yet there was with it a curious feeling of elation in knowing that at last the uncertainty, suspicion, and deeply-rooted mutual enmity was coming to a climax.

“No,” he said. “I will ask only one thing of you—that you arrange the details of this meeting in strictest accord with the code.”

Gonder straightened his portly form. “Very good, seh.” He bowed with dignity. “I see now that my suggestion of the Missouri duel was ha’dly to be considered in a fo’mal affair of honour. A device of our lusty, but unpolished backwoodsmen, seh.”

Fortunately Reid Rutledge, with whom Clay shared a tent, was officer of the day, so he was not present when the expected happened. Major Moreland, dignified, tall, with a lean intellectual face and greying hair, waited stiffly on Clay.

“I have the honour, sir, to place myself at your disposal. I represent Captain Parridine in the matter of which you know.”

“Thank you,” Clay replied. “I shall request my second to confer with you immediately.”

Gonder came at his summons, consulted with him briefly, and marched off to find Moreland, who had departed. “This matter shall be conducted under the strictest proprieties, depend on it,” were his parting words.

Clay watched the heavy figure disappear, and turned back towards his tent. Now that the time of decision was at hand, he had remaining two great worries—Merit and Shelby. He had been unable thus far to communicate with the general, who was not in camp. Shelby had spent the night as a guest at the *casa* of Señor Anda, nor had he returned from the *alcalde*’s house in the morning. It was reported that he had ridden off on some sort of inspection with Anda and Biesca, and might not come back until late in the day. Clay did not know how soon Parridine would want to meet him, but he was determined on one thing—he would delay this shooting until he had a chance to talk with the general. He must let Shelby know the truth of what was going on in the Brigade.

As for Merit, he was more than happy that she seemed to have decided against any further visits across the Rio Grande. Even if gossip should get loose and run through the camp, it might take a considerable time to cross the river and reach her in Eagle Pass. His thoughts of Merit were tinged with a kind of grieving despair.

She had come into his life against his wishes and she had meant to him nothing but trouble. She had overturned his whole plan and prospect for a career, broken the bond between himself and Shelby . . . and now she had

withdrawn from him as suddenly and completely as if all these things had not occurred.

This was ingratitude—but before the thought was even completed he was making excuses for her in his own mind. She had not asked him to break with Shelby. She had not asked him to go with her . . . she had told him not to, on the contrary—made it as strong as a girl could make it. Clay knew he had only himself to blame.

With that he remembered the way she thanked him, that day on Judnich's platform. His heart grew big at the thought of how gracefully she sat that big sorrel horse of hers, and how deliciously her lips formed the words she spoke, and the little, charming gestures she had, as when she deftly tucked up a wisp of her golden hair.

And then he raised his eyes . . . and Merit Hampton was there.

She was coming towards him, walking through a group of army wagons, head high like a princess, eyes wide and blue, green skirt fluttering gaily.

Good God, was his first panicky thought. She's here—why did she have to come this morning of all mornings? Why couldn't she have come yesterday? Or to-morrow . . . when things likely will be over? I mustn't tell her. I mustn't let her know, not even with the slightest expression on my face.

“Good morning!” Merit said. She was smiling at him, and it was a friendly smile. Then she must have meant what she said at Judnich's after all . . . *as for my impressions of you . . . perhaps they are not as bad as you think . . .* That was what she said. It was engraved on his inner consciousness. She wanted to be friends . . . and how he ached to be friends with her. But instead of meeting her mood, he took off his hat formally, and did not return her smile.

“I had hardly expected to see you. Is not this your first trip over since the day the Brigade crossed?” He spoke with a stiff politeness, as if they were strangers, meeting at a lawn party under the oaks of her own Fairwood, instead of being mutual outcasts on the sandy mesquite flats of Mexico. A stiff politeness that denied the offer of friendship in her eyes.

“Yes, my first,” she responded, the smile fading. A tiny hurt look, and something like disappointment came into her face. “The Brigade has been here three days. I thought perhaps you might have joined it again . . .”

“The Brigade is no nearer moving, apparently, than when it crossed. And I am still a man without occupation. I would not join it if I could—at

present. And I do not believe General Shelby would have me, now, if I wished it.” His face was unsmiling, but all the time he wanted to beg her to come sit in the shade of Reid Rutledge’s tent, and talk to him. And keep that friendly look that was dying out of her eyes.

But Gonder would be coming back. And Clay did not too much trust the big man’s discretion. He was desperately anxious, therefore, to have Merit go, before something happened and she discovered what was likely to occur before nightfall.

She lifted her eyes, blue and troubled, to his face, and gathered about her the fullness of her skirts, preparing to depart. “I am afraid I have been standing very much in your way, Captain Bennett,” she said, her voice chilling. “I’m sorry I seem to find you preoccupied with something now. We may . . . not see much more of each other. Good-bye.”

She was gone, her back straight and uncompromising. She did not look back. She went on through the parked wagons, and he did not follow.

Clay was still standing gazing when Gonder returned.

“It’s all arranged,” the red-beard announced importantly. “Moreland an’ Parridine is awaitin’ us down at the cottonwood grove. The prelim’naries is to be attended to there.”

“Preliminaries?” Clay asked dully.

“Yes. Pe’haps I should say, seh, that I have taken a liberty. Actin’ always within the definite limits of the code, I have arranged terms which on fust appraisal may seem somewhat whimsical. But on sober second consid’ration they will appear both sens’ble an’ honourable.”

“Please tell them.”

“I have felt a ce’tain responsibility in this matter, since I was involved in your clash with Parridine. I figgered your chances, gun against gun, could be reckoned slim, him bein’ a virtuoso, you might say, with a six-shooter. Therefore, knowin’ his mania fo’ a gamble, I suggested the followin’ prop’sition: Two revolvers, one loaded an’ the other empty, will be placed under a blanket. The principals tosses a coin fo’ fust choice, the winner to reach under the blanket an’ draw out a pistol. He’ll be gropin’ blind, unable to see the weapon, an’ may get either the loaded or the empty gun—he must abide by that choice. The man who obtains, in this here double lottery, the loaded weapon, meets his antag’nist with the empty one at sunset in the

grove down by the river. He will be allowed to fire all six shots in his revolver. If by any chance he fails to kill his opponent, both may reload, and the firin' be continued, until one or the other is disabled, or honour is considered satisfied."

Clay whistled. The terms sounded fantastic and barbarous.

"Consider this, seh. By these terms you have an even chance with Parridine——"

"Once and for all," exploded Clay, "I'm not afraid of that man, gun to gun or any other way!"

"That's as may be, seh. This is a perfectly blind lottery. If you lose—well, you lose. But I fear you would lose in any event. I think Parridine knew his advantage, but the very oddness of my prop'sition intrigued him. He could not resist the gamble. He seized upon it."

"He did, did he?" Clay's lips tightened. "If he's not afraid of it, neither am I! Let's go."

Formal and solemn, Moreland awaited them in the shaded coolness of the trees on the river bank below the camp. Parridine stood a little apart, keeping a bitter silence, his mouth like the thin scar of a healed knife-cut, a dark bruise on his left cheek-bone where Clay's fist had marked him. Moreland conferred briefly with Gonder.

"Everything, gentlemen, is in readiness," he announced. "The principals will retire a sufficient distance while the weapons are arranged under the blanket."

Clay did a precise about-face and marched off fifty paces into the still woods, where he waited, his back to the seconds, knowing that Parridine, equally correct, had gone in the opposite direction. In a moment Moreland called, and the antagonists returned. Between the seconds now lay an army blanket, smoothly spread on the ground, except for two sinister lumps that bulged it up in the middle.

"You, Captain Bennett, are the challenged party," said Moreland, producing a silver coin. "It is your right to call the toss."

"Heads!" said Clay as the quarter spun skyward. It fell on the blanket, bounded, and subsided.

"It is . . . tails!" announced Gonder, bending over it. "Cap'n Parridine, the fust choice of weapons is yours."

The guerrilla's still features had not changed, but his black eyes glittered at the blanket, as if by very intentness they might penetrate the thick fabric. One stride forward he took, slid a hand beneath the folds of the cloth, and straightened up with a revolver. His thumb spun the cylinder and for the first time his teeth gleamed. The pistol was loaded.

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Under the sentence of death, Clay knew he had behaved well. Men sometimes pale, or allow their faces to fall, when great misfortune overtakes them. He had done neither of these things. Perhaps events had moved too rapidly for full appreciation of their meaning to penetrate entirely into his inner consciousness. Or perhaps he had so steeled himself that even the sure prospect of death did not shake him. He wondered about this, and felt a sort of satisfaction that he could talk calmly with Gonder on the way back to camp. They parted at officers' row.

"May I say, seh, that I profoundly admire your bearing?" said Gonder.

Clay entered Rutledge's tent and seated himself on a cot. It was perhaps well that he was almost immediately interrupted, for brooding would not have helped him. He had scarcely seated himself when a short, nervous figure approached the opening and peered in. It was Major Edwards.

"I was looking for you," the major said. "Have you heard the outcome of Shelby's conversations with Biesca?"

"No. I had not heard the general had returned to camp."

"He has not. We don't expect him back before afternoon. I saw him briefly at Anda's just before he, with Slayback and Collins, left with Biesca and the *alcalde* to look at some defences upstream."

"Pray enter, major."

Edwards came in and seated himself on ahardtack box that served as a stool. "It isn't of general knowledge—yet," he said confidentially. "Shelby intends to call the men together, perhaps this evening, and make the announcement. He is, as you know, a Liberal, and his ideas are all of fighting. Governor Biesca exhibited his authority as commander of Coahuila, Tamaulipas, and Nueva Leon. Then he offered Shelby military control of those three states, retaining to himself only the civil. He required of the general only one thing—full, energetic support of Benito Juarez, the president. He suggested that Shelby remain several months at Piedras Negras, to recruit his Brigade up to a division, and when he feels sufficiently

strong, to move against Monterrey, which is held now by the Foreign Legion under General Jeanningros.”

Clay drew a long breath. How startlingly close to the truth Parridine had come, in his statements to the men in the *cantina*. He must have prowled about, overhearing the conversation between Biesca and Shelby at Señor Anda’s. When this was announced to the soldiers, who had, directly or even indirectly, heard the guerrilla’s account—and when, on top of that, the news became widespread that Shelby had withheld from his men the sub-treasury money—an ugly situation could hardly be averted. It could turn very easily into a bloody uprising, for the only thing holding the Brigade together now was its loyalty to Shelby. If that loyalty were destroyed . . . Clay’s alarm over the situation grew at his realization of the cunning with which Parridine had worked. He wondered if he should speak plainly to the major, without waiting to see the general.

“What if the Brigade should have other notions?” he suggested.

“Ridiculous!” Edwards scoffed. “The men will follow wherever Jo Shelby leads them. They idolize him. He’s going to ask them to vote on this, but it will be a formality. Why do you raise such a question?”

“Just an idle thought,” said Clay. He had decided, under the circumstances, to wait and tell his story directly to Shelby.

“It’s the kind of a chance that delights Shelby,” Edwards continued complacently. “By the way, how would you like to accompany me to the cock main this afternoon?”

“I had not heard of it.” Clay wished the self-important little man would take himself elsewhere.

But Edwards was not to be put off. “To be sure!” he exclaimed. “You left Anda’s early, didn’t you? It seems that during last night’s festivities, our plump friend and Biesca tried to drink Shelby under the table. A great mistake—as you and I could have told them. Jo Shelby may not be accustomed to *tequila*, but he was brought up on corn liquor, cut his teeth on the mouth of a demijohn, so to speak, and has a superior stomach for anything. Señor Anda wound up under one of his own tables, with the governor beside him. The *alcalde* awoke this morning with a terrific headache and an equally terrific admiration for the man who drank him down. To honour Shelby, he has announced that he will hold a cocking main this afternoon when they return from their inspection trip, although Biesca, who was very sad and weary-eyed when I saw him, will be unable to attend,

since he must continue his military tour. Do you fancy the chickens? All of Shelby's officers are invited."

"I suppose so," said Clay indifferently.

"Excellent! I'll pick you up after *siesta*—say about three o'clock."

The major departed, and Clay began the dreary process of killing time. Heavily the hours hung on his hands. He thought of how he had rebuffed Merit, and it seemed a senseless piece of discourtesy as he looked at it now. He wondered what Parridine was doing. At last he lay down on the cot and tried to doze, but the heat grew stifling and he could not sleep.

With the swirling Rio Grande at her feet, and the waiting ferry just behind her, Merit watched unwillingly the oncoming of Parridine. She had hoped to avoid him. Two or three things had happened . . . slight occurrences, but giving disturbing insight into what was going on within the man. Parridine let his eyes linger on her too long. He had tried to be possessive towards her. She remembered, also, with violent embarrassment now, how she had been in his arms, stunned, hardly realizing, yet indubitably in his arms, the evening of her great disappointment at the ferry landing. Did he think . . .? Surely any man, any *gentleman*, would make allowances for a girl under circumstances of that kind.

Her firm little chin went up, even though she would have turned and fled, if there had been anywhere to flee. Bitterly she was regretting that she had come over to the Mexican side this morning. First, there was her indignation at Clay Bennett. Indignation arising out of hurt. He need not have snubbed her so humiliatingly. If he had wished to put her in her place, he might at least have done it so that her whole being did not yet tremble with wounded pride and mystification.

If the ferry only had been on her side of the river when she came down to the landing, she might have avoided Parridine altogether. Unfortunately it was over on the American side, and so she had to wait at the landing, counting the minutes, glancing up and down the stream, trying to act unconcerned, yet ready to weep with exasperation when she saw that which she had tried not to think about, yet feared all the time—the approach of Quinn Parridine.

Obviously he had come seeking her. As he approached with his long, springy strides, there was some curious elation about him. Triumph seemed to imbue his face and his very walk.

“I was told you’d been to camp, and I hoped to find you here,” he began.

“Yes?”

“I have something to say to you, Merit. Something of the greatest importance to both of us . . .”

It was coming now, the thing she did not want to come. Desperately she fished around, seeking to divert him from the subject . . . whatever it was, that was on his mind.

“You seem in good spirits this morning,” she told him.

“Do I? Perhaps a reflection of a certain victory . . .” His voice shaded off into indifference, as if the matter were minor. But she would not let it drop.

“Tell me about it. Some contest? Soldiers’ sports are fascinating.”

“You might say it was a game—a contest, anyway. A sort of combination game and contest. Like chess in a way. His move. Then mine. His again. Mine—check.”

“So you—checked.”

“I did.”

“And won?”

“Not yet. We had to postpone the finish of it until later on. The checkmate will come to-night.”

She laughed self-consciously. “It sounds exciting. I suppose there were—stakes? You soldiers rarely play without stakes, do you?”

It was his turn to laugh. “The stakes, I can assure you, were worth winning.”

“How nice for you,” she said demurely, drawing back. “Now here is the ferry, and I must return to my lodgings across the river. General Shelby, you know, doesn’t approve of me. He dislikes having me in Mexico. You’d think that one girl was a menace to the efficiency of his entire army, to judge by his attitude.”

“In your case, he might not be so wrong,” said Parridine seriously. “Merit——”

“The ferry’s leaving. I must say good-bye——” She was aboard, Pasqual had switched the guide ropes of the pulley, and the current began pushing the scow across the river on its greasy cable.

“Wait! I tell you, this is something important——”

A yard of yellow water swirled between the boat and the shore. Six feet. Parridine’s mouth clipped shut and he leaped cleanly through the air, landing on the ferry’s deck.

Merit gasped. Men were so explosive.

Parridine laughed again, as Pasqual turned with astonishment and came back towards them, holding out his hand for a coin.

“Here,” he said. “Take it and get forward. Go! *Sabe?*”

The ferryman scuttled forward obediently, and Parridine turned to Merit so quickly that he almost caught the troubled look in her eyes. He was indeed in great good spirits. The highest spirits in which she had seen him since she had known him. Instinctively she fell back a step.

He did not seem to notice. “What are you planning to do now?” he asked.

“I—I hardly know.”

“You have not given up trying to go down into Mexico?”

“No. Certainly not.”

“I was sure of it! My lovely lady, there’s something about you that I take my hat off to. It’s something that doesn’t go with that beauty with which you charm me, or with your graces and manners, either. You have a streak of steel in you, my dear, and Quinn Parridine does homage to strength wherever he finds it.”

He took her hand and his eyes glowed with a compelling warmth that terrified her.

“You—you asked about Mexico,” she said desperately, trying to pull her hand away from him.

“Yes, I did. It is this: Merit, I know why you’re down here. Your father—I know about him. I offer you my protection to reach him——”

“But—they will not allow me—Shelby——” Somehow his mention of her father threw a panic into her.

“Never mind Shelby. I am not so sure he is going anywhere. Between you and me, I know a few things that may upset some plans. The men are half rebellious, and the whole expedition’s likely to break up here on the border. If it does, what a beautiful chance for a man with boldness and

imagination! One might gather a very fair nucleus of picked men out of that chaos—and then he could dictate his own terms down here on the border. It could mean untold wealth, Merit. But aside from that—there are you and I, Merit. I want that we should get married. We can do it right here in Eagle Pass this evening, if you'll only consent. There surely must be a preacher of some kind here——”

At last she had succeeded in pulling her hand away from his hot grasp, and she recoiled still farther from him. “No—I can't—I don't want to talk about it—now,” she pleaded.

His face darkened. “What do you mean, Merit?”

“I—oh, I only don't feel in a mood to be—serious about anything—this evening——”

She tried to make her tone light. But there was no sportiveness in those bottomless black eyes of his. Again he had clutched her unwilling hand, and she was unable to avert her face from him. Her cheeks burned and she felt faint.

Parridine correctly had assessed her. There was a hard little core of determination in Merit, and when she saw there could be no more evasion, she faced him resolutely.

“If I have done something that gave you a wrong impression of my—my feelings—I am very sorry,” she said. “You must make allowances for a girl under circumstances of this kind. I—I don't love you. I consider you a friend. A very dear friend. And I feel everlastingly obliged to you. But, Quinn, I can't marry you. You or anybody—now.”

His face grew carved in hard lines. “It's Clay Bennett!” he said, coldly accusing.

“No! Truly not! Captain Bennett and I are not even friends!”

The ferry was nearing the American shore.

“Your answer is no,” he said slowly. “Very well, I will accept that for now. But I'll be waiting. And I am supposing that you are telling me the truth when you say there is nothing between you and Bennett——”

“I do not like your imputation!” She attempted a rebellious flare, but he beat it down coldly.

“I'll be waiting. Remember that. And remember, too, that I offer you your only way of reaching your destination. The Brigade is out of the

question. But Quinn Parridine is going down into Mexico whether the Brigade goes or not.”

As the ferry fastened at the shore she half ran up the bank, not looking backward. Slowly the ferry carried Parridine back across the river. She saw him go, and a confusion of thoughts, ideas, and fears struggled in her mind.

Fear at first was uppermost. Fear of men—all the men in this country of savage men. And this was not natural for her. In all her life before, men always had been deferential and safe, full of compliments, and anxious to do little things to please her. And she was feminine enough to respond happily to masculine attention and masculine personalities. Merit liked men.

But in Texas, filled with fugitives, Yankee soldiers, provost guards, outlaws, and semi-barbaric Confederate troopers, she had a whole new view of masculine life—a rough, coarse, vicious life, frightening to a woman in its ferocious dedication to its central theme of destruction.

To her, suddenly, Quinn Parridine typified it all.

He knew what she was here for—the thought sent a new fear leaping through her and spurred her to frantic thinking. The half-formed plan she had in her mind that morning came back, and Parridine’s last words crystallized it. He had said: Quinn Parridine is going down into Mexico whether the Brigade goes or not. That meant that she must somehow go down into Mexico, too.

She must communicate her plan to nobody. Not even to Gideon Gonder. Because Gonder infallibly would communicate it to Clay Bennett. And of all people in the world at that moment, Merit wanted Clay Bennett least of all to know.

It would have to be done to-night. Not possibly could she longer delay it, for her courage would never last.

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Shortly after noon activity began in the Mexican village as some of the population drifted towards the cockpit. Later such of Shelby's soldiers as could secure leave, started thither also, and about three o'clock Major Edwards came for Clay, and the two of them mounted and rode over. Passing through Piedras Negras they caught a glimpse of an adobe church at the foot of the street, and before it a lean, brown-robed figure, conversing with a portly man with a great, burnished beard of red. Gonder, thought Clay, was renewing his acquaintance with Father Bartolomé. No doubt at this moment they two were wrangling over some point of cockpit finesse.

The scene of the afternoon's sport was an open space somewhat beyond the village. An area six or seven yards wide in diameter was fenced in by a three-foot hoarding and overlooked on two sides by ranged tiers of seats. The other sides, without seats, were for the commonalty, who sat or stood or even sprawled on the ground. Above the stands a canopy of bright cotton stripings was stretched, and there, somewhat to one side of the Confederate section, Clay and the major found seats. Already the crowd was considerable, the Mexican men in enormous *sombreros* and bright-coloured *serapes*, while the women displayed costumes equally gay.

Clay glanced about him. Close to the pit, in the centre, was a space fenced off for the *alcalde* and his party, which had not yet arrived. Two or three seats above Clay and to his left, were Major Moreland and Captain Thrailkill. Still farther beyond, with some of his lanky "Texas Irregulars" about him, was Parridine's dark face.

Clay became conscious that Major Edwards was discoursing, a favourite habit of his, like a professor in his class-room:

"Cock-fighting—what a history it has. Combat between God's gamest creatures. They fought cocks in ancient Egypt, Clay, and in Greece and Rome. The Latin *gallus*, meaning a fighting cock, is the very ancestor of our word *gallant*." At this parade of classical erudition, he turned towards Clay, his moustaches working like the antennae of some earnest insect. "Some of our greatest gentlemen have fought cocks—Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson among 'em. I understand that even Abe Lincoln was not above

pitting the birds. There are stories—I give you my word—of famous mains held right in the rooms of the national capitol! Yet in spite of this eminent precedent, our blue-noses deprecate the sport. Cruel? Cocks live to fight. I hold that man's interest in the sport is his classic ambition to dominate death—and therefore life. A pastime of the depraved, say they? If that be true, I thank God, sir, that I am a fellow of low tastes!"

From one of the lower seats in front of where Parridine sat, came a familiar rumble. "Jumpin' Jehosophat, Gonder, if they ain't usin' slashers!" Esau Janeicke, hunched forward so that his beard dangled down between his knees, had his eyes fixed on the handlers at the cages. He and Gonder had just arrived.

"Yep. Always use slashers in Mexico," the red-beard replied. "These *hombres* crave action. Fair heels is too slow."

To Clay the jargon was comprehensible. "Fair heels" in the cock-fighter's parlance, are gaffs which are round to the point, while "slashers" possess razor edges on their under sides, making them doubly murderous. Evidently the coming bouts were to be quickly decided. Excitement already was mounting in the crowd as the handlers walked about, displaying their birds.

A sudden yelp of welcome, and in a blue-and-orange costume, the gorgeousness of which eclipsed his previous vivid garb, Señor Anda, round and resplendent, advanced with General Shelby to his place in the stand, his two enormous front teeth shining in gratification at this greeting from his people. "Render unto Anda the things that are Anda's," said his whole attitude, and Clay, who had grown to like the harmless, strutting little man, smiled to himself at the *alcalde's* almost childish joy. With Shelby and Anda, the two colonels, Slayback and Collins, seated themselves. The arrival of this party meant that it was time to begin the main.

Now Clay caught sight of the brown-robed figure of Father Bartolomé, his old acquaintance of the Nueces. In his arms the priest was carrying a huge, rusty-black cock, which twisted its snaky head this way and that, as its master bore it to the arena. Something odd about the bird made Clay look again, and he heard the Missourians exclaiming around him.

"Damn me, if it ain't a blinker!"

"Sho'—left glim's plumb gone."

The priest's bird was blind in one eye. But this handicap did not seem to cool the populace. Voices rose joyously: "Qué Guapo! Qué Guapo!" And

Clay realized that this was the championship cock of which Father Bartolomé had boasted.

Señor Anda's teeth still gleamed and his eyes nearly disappeared in his fat cheeks as he radiated cordiality. He rose, bowed to Shelby, turned and made a brief, florid speech to his people, seated himself, and waved a fat hand.

Behind the grandstand were many cages woven of willow withes, stacked high, one on another, and in them cocks crowed shrilly and incessantly. Of these birds many were owned by the *alcalde*, who fancied Cuban Reds and was prepared to back his fighters against all comers for sport, cash, and prestige. At his wave, his handler, a small, swart Mexican with bandy legs, pulled from one of the cages a bird with flaming red and glossy black feathers. Immediately he was faced in the pit by a lean *peon* with a blue-white cock—said to be one of Santa Anna's own famous breed.

Betting was slow on this opening bout. The handlers billed their birds and the angry hackles flared about the serpentine heads. Then the crowd leaned forward with a long-drawn, ecstatic "Ah-h-h!" The two cocks had flown together with demoniac force, their necks arched, the ruffed hackles giving them the venomous appearance of angry cobras as they sought each other's lives with thin razor-edged swords on their heels. It was over almost immediately. The Santa Anna Blue was dead, the blood from his cut jugular splashing the hoarding. Unhurt, his adversary crowed in an ecstasy of vicious triumph.

The edge of passion had been sharpened and now the yells of the onlookers lifted in shrill tumult. Sharp and imperative rose the cries of the bettors. The Confederates joined, wagered their small coins, appraised the ruffled antagonists with narrow, expert eyes. Parridine watched, and the gambling fever burned in his black gaze.

"You bettin'?" Gonder turned and addressed his words squarely into the guerrilla's face. Parridine's mouth tightened.

"Perhaps *you'd* like to lay a little bet," he sneered. "Twenty-five dollars on the *alcalde's* bird!"

Clay's eyes were on Gonder's face, which grew oddly speculative as the big man watched the flame in the guerrilla's eyes.

"You're a little steep for a pore man, Parridine," said the red-beard. "I might rake together five dollahs——"

Contemptuously the guerrilla nodded.

The *alcalde's* second bird, magnificent in its red and black, was being pitted against a nondescript cock, the handler of which was an impassive Indian in dirty white cotton trousers and straw sandals. Awkwardly the fowls flung into the centre of the ring and lay there, a sprawl of fluttering feathers.

"They're hung!" yelled Janeicke, and the cry was echoed by a hundred voices in English and Spanish.

Deep in the red bird's side the Indian's cock had sunk a gaff. The *alcalde's* little handler drew out the spur and cradled the stricken bird in his arms, sucking the blood with his mouth and sluicing a red stream on the earth. As he did so the cock choked, flung up its head, and sprayed the man's shirt with blood spots. Anda's second entry was dead, and Parridine counted over five dollars to Gonder.

"Double on the next bout!" said the red-beard gloatingly, and something in his voice seemed to anger Parridine. The contestants in the third match already were being introduced.

"Nigger rich already, Gonder?" said the guerrilla. "All right. I'll go you. Ten on the red."

This time the *alcalde's* Cuban faced a white-and-black Spaniard, and from the first he was overmatched. With a vicious scientific, deadly attack, the Spaniard made mincemeat of the other. Parridine paid again.

"Easy money!" chortled Gonder. He seemed to intend to be offensive, and the guerrilla's face darkened.

"Think you know the chickens, do you?" His voice was ugly. "Pick the next winner—and double the bet again!"

"Done!" Gonder cried instantly. "I back the *alcalde* this time, for twenty simoleons."

It was the pock-marked Pasqual, the ferryman, who handled the challenger in this bout—another Santa Anna Blue. High in the air went the red Cuban, striking malignantly downward with his razor gaffs. A shower of feathers flew and the Blue was down. Once more Gonder had won.

Like a storm the betting cries arose from the crowd. Some of the Mexicans in their madness wagered all they possessed. Among the Americans, shrewd individuals like Thrailkill and Edwards, observing how luck was running against Parridine, laid their money against him, and for his prestige he could not refuse their bets.

Time and again the guerrilla lost. As one bout succeeded another, fought in a flurry of white, red, or black feathers splashed with blood, only once or twice did Parridine pick a winner. Gambler though he was, it was obvious that he knew little about game-cocks. He had a weakness for a beautiful, flashy bird, and in this particular main it seemed the dingy, battered fowls were doing most of the killing. Uglier and uglier became his expression, and his anger grew, driving him to bet, and bet again, until at last he sat silent and black, able to bet no longer.

It was late afternoon when the final battle was announced—the eighteenth of the day, and the climactic contest. As the *alcalde's* handler brought forth the prize bird of Señor Anda's lot, a scream of admiration and excitement arose. He was a magnificent red-and-black Cuban, imported especially for this match which long had been in the making. As was the custom, he was held aloft to be admired, and his name announced—El Gorrión. Haughtily the red bird carried his head, his eyes gleamed wickedly, and his crow was both a boast and a challenge.

Now at last Father Bartolomé advanced with his rusty, one-eyed bird in his arms. There was a roar of acclaim as the *padre* carried the cock to the pit. Directly before the *alcalde's* seat, Father Bartolomé stopped and bowed. Burning-eyed, Señor Anda returned the bow. This was a duel between the men as well as the cocks.

To a new peak for the day rose the betting, with opinion and backing evenly divided. Almost to a man and a *peso* the natives laid their money on the priest's black fighter. But the Missourians, experts at the pit, noted the brighter plumage and apparent better condition of the *alcalde's* bird and bet their bottom dollars against the one-eyed fowl.

Only Parridine sat motionless, his chin in his hand, taking no part in the wagering. Gonder leaned towards him, leering.

“Not betting?” he taunted.

“Not betting!” snapped Parridine.

“I've got your money,” Gonder grinned, and about him was a patronizing air that brought murder into Parridine's scowl. “Give you a chance to get it back. A bet where you don't need no money!”

The guerrilla was silent.

“I'm bettin' against them six shots in your pistol, Parridine. You know the ones I mean—*fifty dollars against each bullet.*”

It was the other's turn to sneer. "You couldn't pay me if I won!"

"Oh, I dunno." Gonder held up a fist filled with coins. "I done pretty well this afternoon. I'll put up the money all right!"

Parridine glanced about, savage and vengeful, and his eyes fell on Clay.

"I get it now," he said. "Trying to buy his way out, is he?"

"Nope. The cap'n ain't got a cent in this. I'm bettin' you your own money, Parridine. You're broke, an' here's a chance to come back. Take it or leave it!"

For a moment the guerrilla scowled. Just at this moment it was excessively embarrassing for him to be without funds—embarrassing and, it might be, even a little dangerous, depending on the events of the next few hours. A sudden idea seemed to come to him and he glanced craftily at Gonder. "Fifty dollars against each bullet?" he said.

The other nodded.

"Give me some witnesses," said Parridine. He turned to where Moreland and Thraikill sat behind him. "Did you gentlemen hear the terms of this wager?" he demanded. Moreland understood fully what was behind the strange bet. Thraikill did not know exactly—but he was wise and suspected much. They nodded together, as witnesses.

"I'll take that bet," Parridine exclaimed, satisfied. "*Five* cartridges against two hundred and fifty dollars!"

Gonder's expression was startled. "But my bet's on all six!"

"I'm keeping the sixth," said Parridine.

Gonder flushed angrily. "You're avoidin' the intent of my wager," he protested. "One cartridge——"

"Is as good as half a dozen——" finished Parridine. "Nothing—these gentlemen are witnesses—was said about all or none. I hold you to your own terms, Gideon Gonder!"

The red-beard's form swelled as he took a deep breath. "Very well, seh," he said at length. "If you choose to hold me to sech terms, I must even abide by them." To Thraikill as stake-holder, he counted over two hundred and fifty dollars. The conversation throughout, even Parridine's slurring reference to Clay, had been so carried on that nobody save those directly in on the secret of the duel could deduce what was behind the bet.

“Which cock?” asked Gonder, as he finished paying over the money.

Clay was listening, his ears sharpened by the sudden move which had made the outcome a matter of intense personal concern to him. Knowing all at once how directly he was affected, he thought the red-beard must have lost his wits. Surely he should at least have bargained in an effort to select his own bird. This seemed the sheerest foolishness.

But he should have known Gonder well enough to be sure the man was no fool. All day Parridine had been betting on the gaudy, bright-plumaged birds. And all day he had lost. Even now it was obvious that his heart went out to the *alcalde's* beautiful Cuban, but the unanimity with which the villagers laid their *pesos* on the *padre's* fighter had not escaped him. He must have remembered, moreover, what Father Bartolomé had said on the way down from the Nueces.

“I take the priest’s rooster,” said Parridine.

A twist of disappointment or regret seemed to pass Gonder’s face, but Parridine’s gratification was clearly visible. This was sure-thing gambling, very much to his liking. Clay, who now had become the real objective of the wager, sat helpless and silent. If Parridine lost, he was out no money, and the one shot he retained would be enough—the guerrilla was supremely confident in his marksmanship. If, on the other hand, he won, he had recouped his day’s losses—and had six shots with which to dispatch his enemy. No power on earth, Parridine felt, could save the man he hated in either event.

Gonder turned to the pit, raised his right hand and stroked his beard. Father Bartolomé’s eyes were on him, and the priest’s face seemed to freeze.

Very slowly the lean old *padre* took his beloved bird and began to bind the murderous gaffs to its heels. Carefully, very carefully, he sighted along each gleaming blade to set it at exactly the correct angle. Then he entered the pit and took his place opposite the bow-legged Mexican who clutched the *alcalde's* vivid Cuban. In the west the sun was now sinking, and its rays slanted under the edge of the canopy, bathing the bloody circle of the pit in a bright, hard light. Tense silence descended as, priest and parishioner normally, the two men faced each other in the ring, their usual friendship forgotten in the fierce partisanship of the living creatures in their hands.

A signal from the *alcalde* and they stepped forward, a yard apart, to permit the cocks to clash bills. Up flashed the gorgeous red hackles of the Cuban and the black ruff of Qué Guapo. Away the handlers swung them,

then crouched again. A second signal from the *alcalde*—the cocks were on the ground, facing one another, heads low and menacing, free at last to kill.

For one beautiful moment they poised, glinting in the sun, despising danger, the bloodthirsty knives glittering on their heels. Then both moved in, a slow step or two at first, followed by a sudden, squatting rush. Before they met they both sprang high in the air—the deadly instinct to get above the enemy. Up, up they went, as if climbing opposite sides of an invisible ladder, their powerful wings buffeting, their bills seeking a biting hold, their deadly blades flashing in and out, too swiftly for the eye to follow. Then they fell back, a few fluffy feathers settling with them. Each handler seized his bird and nursed it. Both cocks were bleeding, but neither was badly wounded, and the men sought out the cuts, sucked and spat the blood, and smoothed the ruffled feathers.

About the pit massed faces grew avid with excitement. Bearded American faces with furrowed brows and the line of passion from nostril to corner of mouth. Cruel Indian faces with narrow, slitted eyes. This was a fight of fights, a battle to stir the onlookers to their primitive depths.

A few seconds of rest and again the cocks were pitted. In a tornado of glossy red and rusty black they whirled and hammered, five feet up in the air. The Cuban was a fighter born and bred, but he had met his match that day, a shrewd, crafty antagonist, who bore upon his muscular body scars of many battles.

“He shuffles! The black shuffles!” came a high yell above the howl of the Mexicans. Clay recognized Thrailkill’s voice. There was reason for the yell, because, varying his attack, Qué Guapo had gone into his antagonist low, striding wide and quick, set to dodge or leap—and suddenly he closed with a superb, killing, sidewise kick.

“They’re hung!” roared the crowd in two languages.

From the Cuban came a weak tenor squawk. As the handlers disengaged the birds, Clay saw that the *padre’s* black had sunk a gaff to the hilt in the red cock’s side.

In a deafening crescendo that hung over all, the yelling of the Mexican villagers arose; but in the rows of Shelby’s soldiers there was silence. Only Parridine smiled. With that terrible wound upon him, what chance had the Cuban now against the black killer? The guerrilla already was counting in his mind his winnings.

Qué Guapo had a gash on his thigh and a cut in his breast, but his one good eye was as bright as ever and his breathing hardly more rapid than normal. This way and that his snaky head twisted, keeping everything within range of that one precious eye. The rest-period ended and the priest set him down again—released him to finish his foe.

But Qué Guapo did not finish the Cuban. He was down. From the crowd came a scream of surprise and consternation. The black had been placed on the ground so that momentarily his blind side was towards his enemy. A moment only. Already Qué Guapo was wheeling to see his foe; but in that moment the red cock struck. High in the air he flashed, his wings fanning so that the breeze was felt by spectators twenty feet away. Then he descended, the twin sickles at his heels stabbing murderously.

Had he seen it, Qué Guapo might have fended off the blow with beating pinions and leaping legs. But the split second in which he lost sight of his antagonist was the end for him. Down on the ground he sprawled, his skull cloven, his brains spattering the ground. Feathers flew as the red cock struck viciously again at the limp black body. But the *coup de grâce* was unnecessary. In a throaty, blood-choked voice, the *alcalde's* champion proclaimed his victory.

And out of the crowd that hung around the pit babbling incoherently or struck speechless with blood-lust and amazement, crept a crushed old man, red rust stains of blood on his brown robe. Tears ran down his leathery cheeks and in his arms he cradled the dusty body of a dead black cock.

“Little brother, forgive,” sobbed Father Bartolomé. “Like Judas I betrayed thee—but I did it to save a fellow man. Is it not our duty, enjoined by the dear *Cristo*, to give everything, even life, for our fellow man? . . . And yet he meant nothing to me, while I loved thee, little brother!”

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The sun, a glowing coal on the horizon, glared through the tree trunks, and Clay removed his jacket in the cottonwood grove, standing in his white shirt and holding in his hand the useless, empty pistol. Ten paces away stood Parridine, implacable and contemptuous of the last-minute efforts which both Moreland and Gonder had made to persuade him to give up his purpose.

During those arguments Clay stood wearily at one side. He wished they would stop it. Moreland and Gonder made themselves appear futile and undignified with their useless reasoning, and thereby detracted from his own dignity. He knew that he was going out of the world . . . they might at least let him go out with self-respect.

He had been unable to speak with Shelby after all. The general had been too occupied with Señor Anda and immediate concerns to see him, and Clay had to hurry to meet his appointment here under the trees by sunset. But he had made Gonder swear that in some manner he would see that the information reached Shelby . . . after.

The thought of Merit kept recurring, a sad and yet somehow a sweet thought. He resolutely drove it out. He must not permit himself to think of her . . . In a few minutes everything would be ended. He must keep his mind on the business of being killed.

Clay knew Parridine had been drinking, but not enough to unsteady him. He seemed, indeed, as sure of himself as if he could reach across the space intervening between them and place the muzzle of his weapon against Clay's forehead. Clay supposed that a man—even Parridine—would need a drink or two to steady him for the shooting down of another man in cold blood.

Their arguments ended, Moreland and Gonder took their places to one side. There was strong disapproval on the watchful face of the former, although he was Parridine's second; in the frown of the latter, as he kept his shrewd little eyes fixed on Parridine, there was bitterness and anger.

The black flag he wore in his hat was a symbol of something very real to Parridine. He had never been inclined, even under ordinary circumstances, to the weakness of mercy; but now several things combined with his own hatred to make him remorseless towards Clay.

“Are you ready, gentlemen?” asked Major Moreland, his face grey as he stood with his back to the setting sun.

“Ready,” said Parridine.

“Ready,” Clay answered, tight-lipped.

“Remember the conditions; I will count twenty. Within that count you must fire, Captain Parridine. Your fire is limited to one shot, due to the wager you made this afternoon.”

He paused and looked at both of them. “Gentlemen, ready. One . . . two . . . three——”

Now it was coming. To Clay it seemed hours between each slow count. Parridine’s hand remained by his side, then rose slowly, the barrel of the revolver foreshortening, until its round black hole fixed steadily between Clay’s eyes. The guerrilla held his aim, but Clay looked at him unblinking. Like a steel trap Parridine’s jaws closed, the biting muscles knotting hard to lock his long white teeth.

“—four . . . five . . . six——” went on Moreland’s voice.

*Crash!*

Clear across the space between them the flame from Parridine’s pistol seemed to spring at Clay. White smoke blotted out the guerrilla’s set features.

Clay half swayed, regained his balance, stood still and erect. White, tense, the faces of the seconds turned towards him. He knew he should collapse, fall on his face, permit the darkness to close over him. But he remained on his feet. An incredible truth was dawning. He was unwounded. *Parridine had missed.*

It might have been the liquor, or perhaps this way the vagary of the one chance out of a thousand, but the man who never missed had missed his great, climactic shot.

“*Christ!*” Amazement, disappointment, and rage were in Parridine’s gulping cry.

“Are you hit?” asked Gonder and Moreland together.

“No.” To Clay it seemed someone else who spoke . . . his words came as from a remote distance.

Across the thirty feet of grassy sward he saw Parridine’s face twisted with hate.

Suddenly, frantic with consternation, Gonder’s voice rose: “You have no second shot, Parridine!”

Clay, rooted motionless, saw the guerrilla’s long arm rise the second time.

“The condition,” Parridine told them coldly, “was that one shot was to be fired *at Bennett!* You fools! Anyone would know I did not fire at him. *I never miss.* I merely let him smell death. *This time I shoot to kill!*”

Clay stood there. The revolver steadied. He might have thrown himself to the ground; or run, dodging this way and that; or begged for mercy. And he felt a surge of pride that it did not occur to him to do any of these things. Knowing death was certain, he awaited it.

But something happened . . . the revolver suddenly spun from Parridine’s fist. Fifty yards away the solid shock of a Sharp’s rifle shook the leaves of the underbrush, and acrid white smoke curled and eddied. Clutching a sprained wrist the guerrilla staggered back, staring with unbelief at the weapon that had been driven from his grasp by an ounce of lead.

Gonder and Moreland, who, knowing they were too late, had sprung forward as Parridine raised his revolver the second time, now pounced upon the weapon. At the same moment a stark figure, gaunt, huge-footed, and black-bearded, stepped from the bushes, a rifle smoking in its hands.

“I got another ca’tridge hyar,” said Esau Janeicke. “One leettle move, Parridine, an’ I drill somethin’ mo’ impawtant than a six-gun.”

But Parridine made no effort to move. Major Moreland, having regained his breath, drew himself up, his face cold with contempt.

“In years of witnessing affairs between gentlemen, Captain Parridine, this is the first time it has been my misfortune to see anything like this,” he said harshly. “I take the liberty, sir, of denouncing you as a scoundrel and a cur, and it shall be my duty to inform every officer in the Brigade of your infamous conduct!”

“I did not violate the agreement,” Parridine insisted doggedly. “The first shot was purposely wide——”

“Sir, you lie! These gentlemen will bear me out that you lie! It will be well for you to get out of this vicinity as soon as possible. The men in Shelby’s command, of all ranks, have nothing but loathing for a cheat, a liar, and a would-be murderer!”

Blankly Parridine stared at them, his mouth drawn and bitten. Then, without another word, he turned his back and, nursing his wrist, tramped away into the gathering dusk.

Moreland turned to Janeicke. “That was a shrewd shot, sergeant.”

“It was Gonder’s notion—I jest held the sights,” said the mountaineer. “Gonder figgered Parridine was a snake, an’ jest to make things safe he axed me to lay back of them bushes an’ see nawthin’ onreg’lar happened. When Parridine come up fo’ the second shot, I raised easy with the ole Sharp’s. Figgered to shoot the gun outen his hand. Done so.”

Voices, calling and approaching, sounded in the dusk. The darkened wood seemed full of men, all talking, all questioning. The camp had been aroused by the two shots fired so close to it. Clay heard Moreland:

“An affair of honour. Nobody, fortunately, injured.”

The desire came suddenly to escape from the mob, and Clay slipped away through the trees. He found himself threading his way among the opaque black trunks, a hand held out to fend off the bushes. Then he was in the open, under the stars, the evening breeze rustling. The last of the afterglow was fading from the sky and the earth was a bowl of blackness around him, with the twinkling sparks of camp-fires ahead.

He stopped and filled his lungs with the sweet night air. He was alive. It was wonderful to be alive . . .

A bugle began singing in the camp. Another and another joined it. In quick succession they sounded “First Call,” then “Adjutant’s Call,” and finally “Assembly.”

Something was happening. Something big. Clay’s own great crisis had so dwarfed everything else during the last twenty-four hours, that he had difficulty now readjusting his outlook to the normal.

For a moment he stood listening to the distant tumult, the shouting of orders, and the hubbub made by many men.

Then suddenly he knew what it was for. Shelby was parading the Brigade. He was going to put his plan before the men. And he did not know about Parridine . . .

A row of leaping fires sprang up startlingly in the early darkness—fires previously built by order, and now ignited to illuminate a level area south of the camp, on which, in the red glare, the company commanders already were forming their men.

Clay leaped forward, heading at a hard run towards headquarters.

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General Shelby stepped outside his tent, buttoning his coat and feeling the wisp of cool night breeze on his forehead. The buttons were spread in threes, a nuisance to fasten when you were preoccupied with something else, but a mark of rank like the twisting *galóns* on the sleeve. Although the night was warm Shelby buttoned the coat snugly. He must face his men and he wished to look as smart as possible.

For some reason he was nervous. This he was determined to permit nobody to perceive. Within the tent the two lanterns had not been darkened and a broad path of light washed out from the entrance, warmly illumining the faces nearest Shelby. Edwards and Slayback were conversing in undertones, their eyes occasionally appraising their superior. Outside the focussed glow, other figures were less clear so that the general had difficulty distinguishing his staff members.

Shelby was accustomed now to the deferential aloofness of his officers. He stood alone. He must stand all by himself until this thing was over.

The thought, strangely, increased his confidence now. At one time he had distrusted himself heartily, but that was before it dawned upon him what an advantage he possessed because of the image of him his men were creating in their minds. An image wholly unlike reality, but valid because they believed it. The image could do things that flesh-and-blood could not. Shelby took care to live in that image these days, and found himself behaving in ways he never would have done in order to preserve the illusion. This he was willing to do, even at considerable cost in effort, because only one important thing existed in the wideness of the world to him—success in the campaign ahead.

Shelby finished buttoning his coat and pulled the front down tightly over his chest. He shifted his sabre belt and his chin rose, the beard pointing grotesquely through the dark, as he ran a finger around the inside of the collar. It was at that moment that he heard the voices.

“It’s Captain Bennett, sir. Something urgent . . .”

Edwards’s face was pallid in the lantern light.

Shelby's brows knit. He had not forgiven Bennett for that night in Austin. Especially after he found the captain at Eagle Pass.

Edwards, however, seemed insistent. "Bring him up," said Shelby grudgingly.

He saw in a moment, however, that there was something here to be got at. Young Bennett was breathing heavily, as if he had been running, and his face was wet with perspiration, and grimed on one cheek.

"General, may I speak—in private?"

The edge of excitement in the voice, obviously controlled by force of will, decided Shelby.

"I reckon," he said sourly. He stepped into the tent followed by the captain.

"General Shelby," the officer said with intense earnestness, "there's trouble in the Brigade, sir."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, sir, that you're sitting over a mutiny!"

It came out as suddenly as that. Without knowing any detail, or what was behind it, Shelby felt a sickening pulse of apprehension. Somehow he knew that Bennett was telling him the truth.

"Explain, sir!" His words cracked like pistol shots.

The captain explained. Insubordination, he said, had been bred among some of the men. How many he did not know. But he begged leave to suggest that there were so many that the situation was dangerous.

"When did you learn of this?" Shelby was tensely alert now. He knew of it the previous night, the captain said. But he had been unable to reach the general.

"I've been available this evening," Shelby snapped at him. "Why come now, when I am at the point of going before the men——"

"I could not come before, because of a matter of very personal business."

Shelby brushed that aside. He would never have brooked a reply so tinged with what sounded like impertinence, except that there was something here that needed immediate learning.

“How did you get this information?” the general demanded.

Captain Bennett paused as if to marshal his facts. “I heard him last night, sir, while you were at the *alcalde*’s——”

“Kindly be specific, sir. *Him?*”

“Your pardon, general. I refer to Captain Parridine. I heard him, as I say, talking to some of the men. He was asserting to them that you were doing nothing for them; that you’d bargained for a governorship by turning them over as chattels to Biesca and Juarez——”

“The hell you say!”

Captain Bennett nodded. Parridine, he asserted, had been helped by a dissident element in the Brigade. Bennett had reason to know that a certain group which had been enlisted at Austin, the remnants of a guerrilla organization——

“Ha! The ‘Irregular Texas Cavalry!’” Shelby had been watching to see what those outlaws would be doing. It was showing up now.

Bennett said, Yes, sir. He thought the guerrillas had helped Parridine spread his poison. But he wished to inform the general that what Parridine said about Biesca was not all.

“The thing that made the men listen, sir,” the captain stated, “and what caused some of them to show signs of becoming ugly, was the way he put it up to them about your refusal to let Governor Murrah divide among them the money in the Austin treasury.”

Shelby tugged at his beard, his brow furrowed now and his eyes glittering dangerously. This would tell against him. He wondered how far the dissension had spread and what he could do to stop it.

I can put Parridine under arrest, Shelby thought. No, I lack the real authority for that, he immediately amended. Parridine is not under my command, and I am not backed by the power of government. He has as big a voice as I have.

“Thank you,” he said to Captain Bennett. “This information, sir, may be very valuable. I am at this moment preparing to appear before the Brigade on the very issue of joining Juarez.”

Shelby remained in the tent momentarily, after Captain Bennett withdrew, staring at the ground. Well, he thought, I’m ham-strung perhaps.

But I'll see what the men say. He composed his features, and when he stepped out of the tent it was the confident, cocksure Shelby his officers saw.

The staff followed the general's stocky figure to a slight rise of ground which gave a commanding position, and there Shelby took his stand with his staff behind him. Officers of the line barked briskly as the Brigade marshalled itself in close ranks, with Edwards dressing the line from the left.

Shelby never forgot that scene. From twenty huge bonfires, flames leaped skyward, lighting rows on rows of rough, bearded faces. The general appraised those faces expertly. Allowing for the disreputability of their garb, which in the erratic firelight was not so very apparent, there stood before him as fine a fighting unit of its size as existed that day anywhere in the world, and he could not help exulting in the knowledge. Most of the men in the ranks were tall, inclined to gauntness, clear-eyed, and hard-featured. They had the assured bearing and promptness in obeying commands that marked them as experienced soldiers, and if their uniforms were shabby, their arms were bright, and their ranks very straight.

For the life of him, Shelby could not believe that any disloyalty to him existed in those men he was looking at.

"Attention!" he heard Edwards's voice. "The commanding general wishes to address the command!"

Shelby stepped forward, and every face in those ranks turned towards him, expressionlessly expectant.

For a moment something akin to stage-fright caught at Shelby's throat.

"Men of Shelby's Brigade!" he heard himself begin. His tone was high and rasping. He controlled his voice with difficulty, and got on with his speech, sawing at his sentences, fumbling with words. He never could speak well except when he was emotionally stirred. Just now he was not stirred . . . only apprehensive.

As he spoke he watched with growing concern to see the effect of his words. Far down at the far end of the line, barely hinted at by occasional high-leaping flames, he thought he saw a lurking, shadowy figure—Parridine. Was the guerrilla standing back in those shadows to watch the result of his scheming?

As he got into his speech Shelby felt more assurance. He outlined his proposal to join Juarez, very frankly, and with it the corollary plan to remain at Piedras Negras for recruiting. Nothing to hold back here. Yet even as he uttered the sentences he realized how closely they coincided with what

Bennett had reported as Parridine's utterances—so much so that the general was not surprised to observe, here and there, indications of restless stirring in the ranks. That restlessness was ominous, he knew, even as he talked on—for these were no new recruits from civilian life. They were bitter, outlawed men, perilous to deal with when they thought themselves unfairly treated. By the time Shelby approached the end of his address—and he purposely made it short—glances were being exchanged in the lines. The crisis was approaching.

“Men, you've heard my proposal,” the general said, his eyes running up and down the ranks. “I will not order you to do anything against your will. We're comrades and free men. In this moment of decision, let me hear from all who wish to speak!”

He stood looking at them. And slowly a scene began to form which rarely in all history had its duplicates—a military body holding debate with its commander. First the ranks buzzed. Here and there fierce arguments broke out. On his mound Shelby stood patiently waiting. At last a soldier—a private—was pushed forward and stood respectfully addressing the general:

“If it please ye, seh,” he said, “the boys wants to know what about jinin' Maximilian and the white folks in this country—what's wrong with them?”

This was the idea that had been implanted in the men's minds. Shelby replied instantly. “Men, if you're of my thought,” he said, “it will be Juarez and the Republic. For four years we've been fighting for freedom against the usurpation of the North, and, as I see it, Juarez is carrying on a similar struggle. We have here the nucleus of a fine army, and a way open to the French outposts. According to the faith in us will be the measure of our loss or victory. You're acquainted with Biesca's offer. What he fails to perform, I'll guarantee we'll perform for ourselves, so when this game's played out, there will be mighty little laughing, by God, over any Americans trapped or slain by treachery!”

But still the uneasy buzzing continued in the ranks. Another soldier presently stepped forward, a scarred and ragged veteran this time, with sun-bleached eyebrows and a sandy beard. Shelby recognized him and called him by name:

“Hendy Tobias! A better fighting man never forked a horse or drew a sabre. Let's hear from Sergeant Hendy!”

On the sergeant's freckled face was a look of embarrassment, but the men behind him encouraged him in stage whispers and undertones.

“Gen’ral Shelby,” said Tobias at last, “thar’s a story goin’ about. The boys would like to hear the straight of it. What I refer to, seh, is the repawt that when the gov’ment offered to give the Brigade back pay—three hundred dollahs apiece—yo’ wouldn’t let us have it.”

Clamour came from the ranks.

“Yeah!”

“Tell us about that!”

“What is thar to that story?”

“Why wasn’t we axed?”

Scores of voices took it up. They sounded threatening and hostile. Major Edwards and Colonel Slayback exchanged uneasy glances, but Shelby did not allow a muscle to alter as he faced his men smiling.

“Silence!” bawled the adjutant. “The commanding general!”

Immediately, obediently, quiet fell on the ranks.

And suddenly in Shelby was a great thankfulness. For all its implications, Tobias’s question had been asked without any evidence of disorder in the ranks beyond the mere stirring when the men took council with each other. The spokesman had stepped forward. There was, perhaps, a menacing sound in the voices raised to demand an answer to the query, but thus far at least the Brigade was anything but mutinous. The men awaited an answer—an explanation. In the meantime their ranks remained straight, and every face was turned towards the general.

Shelby’s smile faded. Here was his supreme test, and he knew it. If he failed now to convince these men, his Brigade was lost, all his great plan and adventure were blighted before their inception. There was, moreover, real peril in the situation. Shelby glanced down at the shadowy far end of the line. Yes, the dim figure still was there. The general drew a deep breath, summoned every bit of force within him, and took another step forward.

“Men of Shelby’s Brigade!” he said, his voice rising. “I have heard these tales spread, and I welcome the chance to reply to them! I want that there shall be perfect understanding among us. Every man in this Brigade, to the newest private, shall have his say.”

He paused. Then the lethargy that had gripped him fell from him. His voice became alive, appealing, and the words rushed easily to his lips. Almost, for all the danger of the moment, Jo Shelby began to enjoy himself.

“The agreement,” he continued, “was that every major question of policy, once we entered Mexico, was to be submitted to a vote. But until we reached Mexico, I was in command, my orders unquestioned. The incident at Austin was in the purlieu of my authority, and I acted—but I acted as I thought every man in this Brigade would have me act!”

Now was the great moment—both for Shelby and his Brigade. He felt that he knew these men better than Parridine did. The guerrilla had appealed to the sordid and selfish in them—Shelby would appeal to something different.

“It would have been easy to accept the money—three hundred thousand dollars it was. But there were certain overriding considerations. Men, you know what the world would say—is its malice worth the paltry sum we would have received? We are ragged, true; penniless, true; exiles, true. But we belong to as noble a race as ever trod this green earth—the soldiers of Dixie! Not for myself, nor for you, but for the sake of the land that we all love and fought for, I made the decision! We are the last of the race——” Here Shelby’s voice became low, and reverent. Then it rose like a trumpet: “*Shall we not be the best as well?*”

Not once had he appealed to the selfish instincts of his men. It was sheer, romantic idealism Shelby uttered—a practical politician would have scoffed at it as futile. But the appeal had been delivered skilfully, and Shelby did know his men better than did Parridine.

A hoarse voice cried: “Hooray fo’ Ole Jo!”

And all at once they were roaring, hats waving, the Rebel yell shrilling. The tumult rose and towered above the valley, the air seemed to rock. On his mound Shelby felt for one instant the great leap of pride and exultation. Then he stood, a smile on his face once more, waiting for the noise to spend itself. Gradually it subsided. He ventured another glance down the long line towards its shadowy limits. The dim figure that had been there had disappeared.

“Thank you, men!” said Shelby when at last he could be heard. “Your approval means much to me. But we must settle this other thing—we were discussing the matter of joining Juarez and the Mexican Republic. Are you still of the opinion expressed a while ago?”

In after years, Shelby was to look back on that as his major mistake. He should never have put the proposition in the form of a question. Had he swept them along on the crest of their enthusiasm he could have done with

them what he wished. But the question set them to thinking; and the thinking reminded them of the remarkable fact that they had a right to a voice in the matter; and that right, as is always the case when a right is suddenly realized, seemed more important at the moment than the issues involved. The men were Missourians chiefly, and Missourians are notoriously hard to convince in all forms of debate, demanding to “be shown”—although quick to rise to any appeal to honour, loyalty, or courage. Shelby knew as soon as he had done it, that he should not have set the matter before them in the form of a question. He could almost see the new mood in the faces of the men. After a moment of silence, a spokesman again was pushed forward.

“Gen’ral,” he said with great respect, but with stubbornness revealed in the very set of his shoulders, “if yo’ awdeh it, we’ll foller yo’ into the ocean. But afteh all, we ain’t interested in this hyar Mexican shindig. We done come down heah—most of us—hopin’ to find a place in Mexico whar ouah folks kin come an’ jine us. We’re willin’ to fight fo’ that foothold—but, gen’ral, we’re white folks. We done fit the race question all ovah America. If we got to fight, we druther fight alongside white folks—fo’ Maximilian, instid of Juarez an’ them Injuns of his!”

It was a statement worthy of attention, and a situation almost without precedent. A common soldier was challenging the judgment of his general in command. But grunts and nods in the ranks left Shelby in no doubt that the trooper had expressed a popular opinion. There was a suggestion of tenseness in the general’s hard cheek line, but otherwise no change in his expression. Nobody, looking at him, could possibly have known the struggle within him. And now he saw with vivid clarity the needful moves if he was to avert a new disaster.

“Is that your answer, men?” came Shelby’s voice.

“Aye!”

“It sho’ is!”

“Yippee fo’ Maximilian!”

As the shouts came from the Brigade, Shelby took a new iron hold on himself. There was now no trace of hesitation in him. In a single second he reversed his entire plan. The pill was a bitter one, but his smile again split his whiskers.

“Then it is my answer too!” he exclaimed. “The general takes his commands from his men!”

Once more the storm of cheering arose. The men whooped it up for Shelby because he was a good fellow. Not yet did they know what a capitulation he had made. Shelby understood how relieved was the Brigade over his agreement with it, as he listened to its voice buffet the air. But he was thinking with lightning speed—thinking ahead of his men. Unless he recaptured it now, the leadership had gone from him for ever. Henceforth Shelby would in truth take his commands from his Brigade—unless now, instantly, he re-established his ascendancy. He permitted the noise to subside before he spoke again:

“Henceforth, Men of Shelby’s Brigade, we fight for Maximilian—but it is really a continuation of our battle for Dixie. I want you to realize now, as you prepare to launch on it, that you have chosen the harder course. Between us and the outposts of the emperor’s nearest military force is much country—very savage, barren, and all but waterless country—peopled with the soldiers of Juarez who to-morrow will be our deadly enemies. As citizen soldiers we have settled this matter between us; but let every one of us remember that henceforth the discipline is restored. Never before have we stood in such need of common action and common purpose.”

He ceased speaking, and let the grim truth of what he said sink into them. After a moment he resumed:

“I shall expect every man to perform his duties as bravely, to obey orders as cheerfully and quickly, as if we were constantly in the heat of a major engagement. Now, men, let there be no complaining. You have chosen the Empire, and perhaps it is well; but well or ill, your fate and fortune are mine. We march for Monterrey. The road will be thorny and hard, but perhaps on it we may find a sprig or two of laurel!”

Once more the men cheered stormily, and Shelby saluted, then turned smartly on his heel. A moment later the line officers were dismissing their companies, and the staff was looking with a new vast respect at the man who had won that last cheer from his soldiers. The cheer was the Brigade’s endorsement of all the general had said; it restored him, by free consent of all the men, to the authority and power of military command. Perhaps few realized it, but within the five short minutes that had passed, Shelby’s Brigade had gone through a strange and perilous mutation. It had rebelled against the judgment of its commander; had asserted the right to determine its own action; had verged on mutiny and disintegration into a mob; and had been brought back once more, through the strength of its leader, into a disciplined fighting weapon.

But Shelby, in the privacy of his tent, was removing from his body garments soaked as wet as if he had been in a downpour—soaked with the sweat of his tremendous mental strain.

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Parridine was gone. He had slipped away when he heard the men voice their first roar for Shelby. A guard at the horse-lines, where the guerrilla had been allowed to keep his mount, said Parridine had come very quietly and called for his buckskin horse, and then ridden off somewhere into the darkness.

Shelby sent for Captain Thraikill.

“Take a detail,” he said. “Round up those sixteen ‘Irregular Texans.’ I want to have a talk with them.”

Thraikill saluted, departed, and thirty minutes later returned to report the men were under guard awaiting Shelby’s pleasure.

But first the general sent for Señor Anda. Consternation spread itself in exclamation points all over the fat face of the *alcalde* as the general explained the new developments. Shelby sympathized with the little Mexican, as he thought of the shock it must have been to be aroused from a dream of peace and preferment, to learn this disconcerting news.

“*Madre Dios!*” the *alcalde* wailed. “Biesca—what weel he say?”

He rolled his eyes, half in appeal and half in speculation, at Shelby—and something in the glance did not, somehow, go with the man’s flaccid character.

“I’m sensible of your position,” the general said, “so I’m going to give you something to show your friend Biesca. See that battery of brass cannon? I doubt if Juarez has guns like that anywhere in his army. I shall leave those guns here—in exchange for provisions you shall furnish me. *Sabe?*”

Señor Anda considered the proposal, his eyes on the ground. “An’ how mooch proveesions weel it need?” he asked cautiously.

Shelby began enumerating—so many sacks of *socorro*, or corn grist; so many *quintals* of salted beef; so many loads of *frijoles*, which are the red Mexican beans; and so many *arrobas* of onions. Shelby had known his men to fight the Yankees a major battle over the possession of a few bushels of onions, and he was going to see now that they were well supplied.

The general was asking only what was easily procurable. He wanted no more than he could transport, and it was immediately apparent to Señor Anda that he was being offered the artillery at a magnificent bargain—particularly inasmuch as Shelby, if he chose, had the power to commandeer the foodstuffs without paying anything for them. The *alcalde* showed his gratitude by frankly and gratefully acknowledging these facts.

“*Gracias! Mil gracias!*” he exclaimed. “*Esta generoso, mi general!*”

“I shall need these things quickly,” said Shelby.

“*’Sta bueno.*”

“In just a few days I march south.”

Concern clouded Señor Anda’s countenance. “Thees I am mos’ sorree to hear, *amigo*,” he protested. “Ees mos’ dangerous to go *jornada del muerto*. I suggest. Plenty bad mans. El Gato—*hombre malo!* El Gato own thees desert. Hide—shoot—keel. Ees mos’ deefficult to go to Monterrey, if El Gato say ‘*Alto!*’ Ees death! Ah, *amigo mio*, stay here in Piedras Negras. We weel haff more *fiestas*, more *riñas de gallos*.”

“My thanks for your concern,” replied Shelby, “but we’ll have to take our chances with your friend El Gato——”

“No, no! Ees not my *amigo!*” protested Señor Anda. “El General Shelby—he ees my *amigo*.”

“Very well. But we must go on.”

The *alcalde*’s chubby features assumed a tragic expression, he sighed deeply, and his shoulders rose almost to his ears in a shrug that expressed his despair and protest.

“Remember,” he said dolefully, “Señor Anda haff geev solemn warning.”

He clambered on his horse and trotted sorrowfully away through the night towards his village.

Shelby gazed out after him. “If that man wasn’t so fat and little,” he said after a time, “I’d pay close attention to him.” He thought a minute, while he combed his chestnut beard with his fingers, then chuckled. “Can’t help liking Señor Anda. Little man with big talk, hey? He’ll send a messenger to Biesca, of course. I could have avoided trouble by neglecting to tell him my plans. But he deserves a chance to justify himself. Let him go.”

Gideon Gonder was deadly serious. “I tell you, she’s gone. I searched Eagle Pass fo’ her. She disappeared last night.”

The words jolted Clay. Over the Rio Grande channel the night mists were shredding away and he could see in the morning sun the distant clutter of houses that were Eagle Pass.

“Have you talked to the ferryman?” he asked.

“Most ce’tainly. Pasqual never brought her over. But Parridine——”

“I realize she could have been transported across in another boat. But why Parridine?” Clay’s tone became ugly because he knew he was going to hear what he did not wish to hear—the reason why it must be Parridine.

“There’s somethin’ I ought to’ve told you long befo’ now, cap’n,” said Gonder. “A delicacy about discussin’ the pussonal affairs of the Hamptons kep’ me quiet. But now I’m shore Miss Merit’s gone off into the desert with Parridine. I’m going to tell you why.”

Sombrely he gazed out across the valley. “The thing goes back to when things popped wide open in Missouri at the start of the war. Jedge Hampton lost his law practice, because he was Secesh an’ the Yanks controlled the courts. He he’ped me out of trouble an’ I come to he’p run Fairwood. But the place was too near the Federal river garrisons. Fust, all the niggers run off. Then the Yanks commandeered our cawn an’ hay—without pay, because we was Secesh. Then Jennison’s Redlegs come over from Kansas an’ stole most of the hosses an’ mules. Ginger, that sorrel of Miss Merit’s was a little colt then. She saved him by hiding him down in the woods under the river bluffs.”

Gonder paused to gnaw off a chew of tobacco from the plug he carried. “No use goin’ over the harrowin’ details, seh. You know the usual formula. Quantrill was in the country, supposed to be a Confed’rit, but he did more harm than good. Whenever his gang made a raid, the Federals would take reprisals on the nearest Southern families. That’s how the jedge lost his cattle an’ hawgs—an’ the household silver.”

He harked back, counting his stubby fingers. “It was March—no April—two years back, that Quantrill burned the town of Lawrence, Kansas. Of co’se we didn’t have nothin’ to do with the massacre—the jedge denounced it as much as anybody. But when the raiders scattered to hide, one of Quantrill’s captains come to Fairwood, an’ the jedge felt obligated to he’p him. It was Parridine. The jedge concealed him on the premises. Pretty quick he made the acquaintance of Miss Merit. She didn’t like him at fust—told

me she thought him very thin an' sinister. I think she was scairt of him. But you know Parridine—them fine manners of his'n. An' the jedge considered him a gentleman. To make it short, befo' long him an' Miss Merit was pretty good friends."

Clay's jealousy leaped at that, but Gonder did not see it.

"The jedge an' Parridine would set together fo' hours," he said, "talkin' plans. The jedge never took me into his confidence like he done Parridine. Fo' instance, he told him about that gold mine in Mexico. Ever hear about it, seh?"

Clay nodded. It was the one fantastic, inconsistent thing about Judge Hampton—his belief in that "gold mine." As the judge's law clerk, Clay had handled papers and taken care of business details which familiarized him with many of the judge's affairs. The "mine" had been sold to the judge by a Kentuckian named Moulton Spooner, who acquired it as a grant from Santa Anna. But Spooner contracted an aggravated case of tropical dysentery and was on his way home to die when he stopped at Fairwood, where he sold the Mexican property. Judge Hampton had known Spooner for many years and had faith in him. Frequently thereafter the judge spoke of going to Mexico to inspect the "gold mining property," but travel was difficult and somehow he never went. To Clay the whole thing seemed unreal, chimerical, almost childish.

"Because of the Lawrence affair," Gonder continued, "Gen'ral Ewing, of the Federal fo'ces, ordered Quantrill's men hunted down. Over to the west of Waverly, the Yanks burned plenty of homes. I pe'sonally obse'ved the smoke from this arson fo' days. An' finally the Jayhawkers come to Fairwood. The jedge saw them in time to let Parridine get away; but his hoss was recognized, an' so was he. It was that buckskin of his—an' hoss an' rider was marked particular in that murderin' day at Lawrence. I thought the Yank captain was goin' crazy with rage. He arrested the jedge an' me. An' then they burned Fairwood down."

Clay gnawed his moustache and swore. He knew and loved Fairwood and almost as vividly as if it were happening before him, he saw the fine stately mansion in flames—the big white pillars, the hall with the polished floor and crystal chandeliers, and the beautiful curved stairway with its handsome hand-carved walnut balustrade, brought all the way from England.

"They threw me an' the jedge in jail at Lexington," Gonder was saying. "Fo' some reason they released me, but the jedge was tried by drum-head

court-martial. They'd been wantin' to get him fo' a long time. He didn't even have a lawyer to defend him. They was goin' to shoot him, but Miss Merit begged so hard fo' her pappy's life that the provost finally let the jedge off with a ten-year jail sentence, an' a fine of two thousand dollars, for harbourin' a enemy. Miss Merit an' I talked to the jedge befo' they took him back to his cell. He was sick an' old, but he thought if he paid his fine they'd free him, an' wanted us to get the money somewhere."

Gonder turned his earnest face to Clay. "Now here's where I don't know all the cyards. I couldn't raise no money—or mighty little, anyway. It was Miss Merit got it—an' from Parridine. I knew he had some brass. Carried it in a money belt—prob'ly looted a bank somewhere. Quantrill's headquattahs was at the little hamlet of Blue Springs, over in Jackson County. Cap'n Bennett, that gal had the nerve to ride over there—in among them drunks an' murderers—to find Parridine."

The big man mopped his brow with emotion, and Clay pictured the courage that sent a fragile and helpless girl on such an errand among Quantrill's violent and vicious men.

"But after all that trouble," Gonder said, "an' after the jedge paid his fine, they wouldn't let him go after all—he had to serve the ten-year prison sentence. He went back to his cell. That night he escaped. He had friends, you see."

His voice ceased, and Clay surmised that in this untold story there was at least one friend of the jedge who wore a great red beard.

"So Parridine saved her father," said the captain.

"Saved him, but got him into trouble in the fust place!" cried Gonder with the first show of indignation. "He didn't do no more than any decent gent would have done."

"Agreed."

"After the jedge was gone Miss Merit stayed in Lexington. An' as the months passed, Miss Merit got a feelin' that grew into a ce'tainty. She figgered her pappy would go south. He was too old to fight, an' it would be only nat'ral fo' him to go down to Mexico to look at his gold mine. She got absolutely shore the jedge would be somewhere in Mexico. One day she spilled this to me. I admit, seh, it don't sound logical, but she was so set on it I couldn't argy her out of it. So I had to come along to sort of take care of her. She got hold of a little money from friends of the family, an' that's how we come, her wearin' that old unifo'm you saw her in fust. How Parridine

got on to it I dunno, but he found her at Austin. You know the rest. Miss Merit's a mighty determined gal. She's goin' down where her father is—no matter what the hardship, an' the risk may be."

Clay did know the rest. Parridine was gone. And Merit was gone—on the same night. It was something he could not argue against.

Clay stood in the tent before General Shelby and saw the uncompromising coldness in the general's eyes. It was days since the disappearance of Merit and Parridine, and though every effort had been made to find in which direction they had gone there was no more information available now than when the effort began.

Of one thing there was a reasonable certainty—it was into Mexico they had fled. Gonder was convinced that nothing could turn Merit from her purpose to go on to where she expected to find her father. Only a promise to take her to the judge, he submitted, would have induced her to go with Parridine.

It was Major Edwards, who had always retained a friendly feeling for Clay, who had urged the general to take the captain back into the Brigade. And that was why Clay was before Shelby now.

Shelby had been convinced against his will and it made him bad-tempered. "I understand, sir, that you wish to rejoin the Brigade," he said sourly.

"I do, sir."

"I suppose you think you should be reinstated in your former position on my staff, now that you've so far condescended as to offer your distinguished services to this command?" Shelby was elaborately, heavily sarcastic.

"I had only hoped, sir——"

"Very well. I'll tell you what I'll do for you." The general leaned suddenly forward across his table, his eyes flickering under his heavy brows. "I'll give you the meanest, dirtiest, most dangerous job in the army. Want it?"

"What is it, general?"

"You see, Edwards?" Shelby threw himself back in his seat and turned scowling to the adjutant. "He begins to bargain already!"

“If it please you, sir, I had not intention of bargaining,” protested Clay respectfully. “I meant merely to ask for my orders.”

“Ha! A different tune! Very well, I’m going to put you with the scouting command.”

“Why—that would be fine, sir!”

“Don’t plume yourself, Captain Bennett. This is no gilded assignment you’re getting. Wait until you see the detail I’m giving you!” He turned to his orderly. “Have Thrailkill bring the scouts over!”

The man departed at the double, and Shelby sat silent, drumming the table with his fingers. Feet hammered outside, and there was a shouted command to halt.

“Here are your scouts, Captain Bennett. Let’s look at them.” Almost vindictively, Shelby led the way out of the tent.

It was Clay’s first thought that a joke was being played on him. Were these to be his scouts? Hang-dog, slack-chinned, slouching, they stood in an uneven row—the sixteen “Irregular Texans.”

Then he knew this was no joke, because of the four men who stood at file-closers’ positions behind them. Esau Janeicke. Hendy Tobias. Two of the staunchest sergeants in the brigade. Catfish Caruthers, the hard little corporal of the Tyler detail. And Gideon Gonder.

There was no joke about those four men. Clay knew what was expected of him now. The scouting detail was to be very dangerous. Shelby intended that these offscourings, driven by Clay and his four non-commissioned officers, should feel out the dangerous route of march for more honest men. Shelby was expecting him to whip those sixteen bushwhackers into useful shape as scouts. And the job looked all but impossible.

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Through the unending dust rode the Brigade, the men hunched in their saddles, a frieze of gaunt, ferocious riders on lean and weary horses, splashing a wild panorama across miles of Mexican desert. Two by two the troopers rode, beards greyed to a common dun hue by the stifling dust. It had been a long march and they had been without water—save what they carried in their canteens—since dawn.

Shelby's Brigade. Ishmaels of the world; an outcast ragged army without a country, or even a flag, for which to fight. Two days ago, before the command left the Rio Grande, the men had seen the battle banner of the Brigade ceremoniously buried under the waters of the river, so that no Yankee could ever boast he had taken it. Now, flagless and countryless, Shelby's men rode doggedly down into the unknown. It was habit that kept them together—habit and Jo Shelby. By all the world's standards they were lost men, broken men; yet jests continually ran up and down their column.

Their two days of marching had put them deep into Mexico. It had taken Señor Anda a week to fulfil his provision commitments to Shelby, and the first day's march, while hard and hot, had been through a country comparatively open and not dangerous. Clay had been given an opportunity to feel out his new command.

Of one thing he was already sure. As scouts and trail finders the men were apt enough. And most of them were fairly competent with their weapons. Courage they might lack, but Shelby had assured them grimly that the first one who failed at his duty would be shot, and that he, Shelby, would personally oversee the job.

The sixteen "Irregular Texans," Clay had discovered, were by no means all Texans. There were half a dozen Arkansawyers, and a Tennessee mountaineer or two, a bayou dweller from Louisiana, and a couple of half-breeds from the Indian Nations. The rest were Texans, but not to be mentioned in the same breath with the fighting men in such commands as Hood's or Fagan's Brigades. These were riff-raff.

And yet Clay was not altogether dissatisfied. He had two things in his favour. The "Irregular Texans," who had been arrested the night of

Parridine's escape, were so happy to evade a firing squad, that they were eager, at first at least, to obey commands. And Clay had four of the best non-coms in the Brigade. Gonder he made a corporal. With the two sergeants, and Catfish, he had subordinates whom he could trust to any extent. He was, moreover, beginning to think he was winning the respect of the "Irregular Texans." And some things about the men made him half believe that given a chance to rid themselves of some bad habits, these men might make good soldiers.

The Brigade was approaching a more broken country than it had hitherto traversed, a country of foothills and *arroyos*, where a lurking enemy might easily conceal himself. And the time was at hand for Clay to take up the position in advance of the line of march.

He had just sent Caruthers back to find Gonder and Janeicke who had lagged at the rear on some esoteric business of their own. Now he heard a roar of voices, and turned in his saddle to see the pair, followed by Catfish, riding forward along the column, a storm of hoots and calls following their passage, for by now these men were known by everyone in the Brigade. Esau was renowned as a singer and story-teller, with, like most of his mountaineering kind, a prodigious memory for the ballads of his native hills. Gonder also was amusing, full of wit, and with his harmonica he made up a musical team with Janeicke. Now, tired and thirsty from the long day on the march, Shelby's men craved diversion.

"Give us a stave, Esau!" called a soldier.

"Yeah! How about 'Ole Jo Shelby's Mule'?"

But Janeicke rode silent, wagging his dangling black beard, apparently deaf to importunities. Beside him, Gonder was equally indifferent.

"Wet his throistle, an' he'll obleege," someone suggested. The words were acclaimed.

"Who's got some licker?"

"A dram fo' Esau, to lubricate his pipes!"

From somewhere down the line a bottle was passed forward—a pint container in wicker, partly empty. Esau, who up to this moment had not uttered a word, accepted the bottle, "hefted" it in his hand to judge the contents, nodded as if in assent, tipped back his shaggy head, and drained half of it. Admiring howls greeted the act.

"Look at him!"

“Jest like pourin’ it down a rat hole!”

“Terrific, ain’ it?”

“Esau—the tank of onknown depth!”

The mountaineer accepted these tributes with a grin, and passed the bottle to Gonder who, in four giant gulps, drained it. Then Esau brushed a few drops from his horsetail beard and settled himself in his saddle, while Gonder fished forth his harmonica and made ready to accompany. A time or two the scout cleared his throat, and suddenly, in a most astounding bass, he roared out the first stanza of the song called “Old Jo Shelby’s Mule”:

The Union folks away up nawth was one time much afraid.  
’Bout somethin’ comin’ from the South—they said it was a raid;  
Now I will tell ye whut it was if ye will jest keep cool,  
It had long ears an’ a long slick tail, an’ was called Jo Shelby’s mule!

A cheer came from the column and the whole line of riders crashed full-voiced into the chorus:

Shout boys, an’ make a noise; the Yankees is afraid!  
Thar’s somethin’ up an’ hell’s to pay when Shelby’s on a raid!

Esau waited for the chorus to subside and took up other verses. They ran as follows, with the chorus at the end of each:

This mule, he ain’t so very big, but then he’s got the grit,  
An’ every time he gives a snort he makes them blue-coats git.  
Sometimes he’ll jump into their fields an’ eat both cawn an’ oats,  
An’ when he’s nawthin’ else to do, he’ll drive away their shoats.

The grinning brigade, gleeful in the knowledge that it possessed the most notorious foragers in the Confederate army, howled delightedly at the last line and sang the chorus over three times. Then Esau continued with his song:

Once this hyar mule went on a spree up clost to Lexington  
An’ every time he give a jump he’d make the Yankees run;  
An’ comin’ back through ole Saline he got into a trap,  
Kicked up his heels, scairt ole man Brown, an’ come back safe to Pap.

That was a reference to the now almost legendary Boonville raid of ’63, when Shelby eluded the encircling Federal forces under General Brown, and returned safely to the main Confederate body commanded by General Sterling Price, known to his men as “Pap.” Almost immediately followed a

stanza which commemorated the Westport raid of '64, and the bafflement of General Rosecrans of the Union army:

Ole Rosey got a long deespatch, which come from 'way down east,  
“Say, ye take thutty thousan' men an' try to ketch that beast.”  
To obey awdehs he was bound, but said Abe was a fool,  
An' hadn't halter strong enough to hold Jo Shelby's mule!

Now with a waggish tilt to his battered hat, Esau embarked on some new verses of his own composition. Each was tinged with lewd humour, and each was received with tumult growing in proportion to the unprintability of its concoction. This was the song of Shelby's Brigade. It belonged to the men—a heartfelt outburst of an unknown author, who made up for lack of quality in his verses by his intense partisanship. And here, at the end of a weary, heat-smitten day, when men and beasts were near to dropping from exhaustion, Shelby's troopers rode down into Mexico, forgetting their lank bellies and parched throats as they sang their ballad recklessly.

Young Lieutenant Kirtland galloped back with a grin, and saluted Clay. “The commanding general's compliments, captain, and will you be so good as to report with your men?”

As Clay rode up, Shelby glanced impatiently around. “See that canyon ahead?” he said. “Don't like the looks of it. Want it felt out. There's supposed to be water on the other side, or I'd never think of going through it to-night.”

Before them a deep gorge opened its throat, with two rugged, almost naked foothills flanking it on either side. Clay studied the threatening cleft for a moment, then trotted forward with his detachment. The Brigade at last was in hostile territory. Thus far it had met no opposition, but nobody, least of all Shelby, thought for a moment that Juarez and the guerrilla El Gato would permit the command to march much farther through the desert unopposed. This, therefore, was to be the initial test for Clay's newly formed scouting force.

The canyon had a dismal, eerie look. Three or four hundred feet high its steep walls soared on either side of the road, yellow and red, tufted with occasional clumps of dust-coloured sage, or yucca. Properly deployed in a rocky throat like that, a handful of resolute rifles might keep an army indefinitely at bay. An angle cut off the late afternoon sun, and Clay squared his jaw as he considered that an uglier place could hardly have been found for testing untried and undisciplined men such as he had under him.

Deeper into the shadows of the crooked trail he rode. He was most anxious to make a clean showing in this first functioning of his scouts. Shelby's cordiality had in no wise increased during the week at Piedras Negras during which Clay worked with the detail. Once or twice the general appeared suddenly, watched the drilling and listened to Clay's explanations of certain manœuvres, then rode away without a word of praise, criticism, or suggestion, leaving his captain of scouts chilled by his bearing.

Clay's horse shied from a boulder in the road—a boulder, he idly considered, which would have to be moved to one side before Shelby's wagons could come through. Then he noticed fresh earth clinging to the rock, and his gaze shot upward on the canyon walls. He could see it now—the scarred face of the cliff down which that boulder had very recently bounded; and he suddenly remembered that twice during the day he had seen distant, scurrying horsemen coasting the Brigade's line of march—enemy scouts, probably, since the country seemed to possess no peaceful inhabitants.

There was now no question of the immediate menace in this canyon, and Clay, anxiously glancing back, observed that his men, even that hardy pair Janeicke and Gonder, were looking uneasily at the heights and down the dark and narrow twisting throat. He held up his arm for a halt, and turned his horse so that he faced them.

“We're going through here,” he said with unsmiling grimness. “Twenty men and an officer ought to be plenty for a job like this. But if we aren't, we're not going to be coming back.” He paused to watch them as they digested his words.

“They ain't expectin' us to go in thar all alone, is they, cap'n?” whined a voice. Clay recognized it as belonging to Rufe Champion, to whom these “Irregular Texans” looked for a sort of extra-official leadership. Champion must be handled crisply.

“Sergeant Janeicke and Corporal Gonder—fall out and take position at the rear of the detail!” he ordered. “Now, men,” he said pleasantly, “if you follow me and obey orders, everything's going to be all right. But if any of you don't—make your wills. Sergeant Janeicke!”

“Yes, seh!”

“You and Corporal Gonder will shoot at sight any man who hangs back or fails to do his duty!”

“Yes, *seh!*” said Janeicke.

“Detail, forward—*trot!*” commanded Clay, leading the way once more down the canyon.

They came to a place where the bottom of the gorge dished out into a brief, flat valley. There, by the side of the road, huddled a group of small white crosses. Frequently on the road down from Piedras Negras they had seen them—the little crosses spiked into the barren soil by the wayside. In this treacherous country they seemed to grow of their own volition, like the organ cactus and the tree yucca. Always they marked spots where murders had been committed, and this group may have indicated the massacre in the gorge of a coach-load of passengers by bandits or guerrillas.

Clay wheeled his horse aside from the ghastly markers, and his men followed, glancing askance at the sinister cluster.

High on the canyon wall to the right, a rifle shot erupted, multiplied instantly a hundred times in sound by the shattering echoes it awoke. Towards the rear of the column a man spun out of his saddle. Smoke jutted out in a dozen new places above, and the shocking racket of the valley was made more hideous by the screaming of slugs ricocheting from the rocks about them.

“Dismount and take cover!” Clay shouted. On the face of the rock wall not a yard from his head a round splash of silver suddenly appeared.

“Jesus!” screamed a voice of panic. “They got us! Jesus, they’ll kill every man of us!”

It was Champion, and he was swinging his horse around, flogging it with his reins, trying to get it into motion and out of that canyon of death. Fifty yards back, Janeicke threw his rifle almost negligently to his shoulder. Smoke coughed from it with the report, and Champion’s horse dived headfirst at the ground, somersaulting, while the rider flew through the air, crashed, and lay still.

Janeicke’s shot seemed to have a tonic effect on the other troopers. Not one of them moved to follow their recent leader. To a man they were hurling themselves out of their saddles, and snuggling behind the loose rocks of the canyon floor. Carbines began to crackle.

“Ye fools!” snarled Esau, who had hurried up from the rear and dismounted. “Make them bullets count!”

His Sharp’s came up, steady as the boulder behind which he crouched, and the canyon echoed to the shot. A yell lifted from Clay’s men. High up on the wall, a dirty white figure was flopping and kicking on a ledge. It

rolled over and pitched off, hit the out-bulging face of the canyon wall, turned over in the air, and struck the bottom with a sickish thud.

More dirty white figures suddenly appeared, scrambling in ant-like panic towards the top of the high ridge. Again Esau fired, and swore when a distant puff of dust very close to one of the climbers showed his miss. Nor were any hits scored by the ragged volley from the other scouts. The fluttering figures tumbled over the crest and were gone.

“Injuns!” grunted Esau.

“Lipan Apaches?” Clay asked. Shelby had been warned of these desert marauders.

“I’ll take a look.” Leisurely the scout mounted and rode forward. Clay turned to Sergeant Tobias.

“Who was hit, Hendy?”

“A boy named Toad Hashinger, seh. From Arkansaw. Done fo’. Will yo’ take a look?”

Clay went back. They had turned over the stricken trooper, a bushy-headed, black-bearded youth, his whiskers investing him with a false appearance of middle age. Both hands still clutched at the ragged hole in his chest where the bullet had ripped through his lungs. His beard was a sticky mass of blood.

“Lay him aside, back of those boulders,” Clay directed. “Shelby will have him picked up and properly buried to-night.” Almost without thinking, he picked up Hashinger’s canteen. The man had been thrifty with his water. The container was half filled, and Clay hung it on the side of his saddle.

Esau came ambling back. “Yep. Must be Lipan Apaches,” he reported. “Britch clout an’ knee moccasins. Rag tied around his haid. Cotton shirt. Got him right through the ears,” he added complacently.

“What about that man who tried to run?” Clay asked.

“Him? He ought to be all right. I shot to kill the hoss. Champion’s jest stunned,” said Janeicke.

Two troopers ran back and between them lifted the prostrate man. Champion was recovering his senses, and though his head ached and he was deeply crestfallen, he received no serious injuries from his fall. His saddle and equipment were transferred to Hashinger’s horse which was unwounded, and Clay sent Catfish Caruthers back to report the skirmish to

Shelby. Then he ordered two or three men to scramble on foot up each side of the canyon, and advance along the ridge to unmask further possible ambushes.

“No need of that,” Esau said. “Thar won’t be no mo’ trouble with them Injuns today. Kill one an’ it plumb discourages the rest.”

In spite of that opinion, Clay worked his way through the canyon slowly. As Janeicke predicted, there were no further signs of the enemy. And now the captain began to observe some satisfactory symptoms among his men. They had been blooded, and the brush with the Apaches was what they needed. As they moved forward, a new confidence was apparent, they obeyed orders almost smartly, and showed a new cohesion. Champion had distinctly lost face. His erstwhile friends gibed at him, and he rode silent and morose.

A half-mile farther on, the defile opened up into the mesquite flats again, and almost at once, in the bottom of a shallow valley ahead, the scouts saw that which brought a yell from them—the glimmer of a pool of water. It was the desert “tank” Shelby had expected to find. Camp would be there, and Clay knew that there was not a man in the Brigade who would not welcome it.

Even his jaded horse quickened to a trot, its ears pointed eagerly forward. Behind, the men began to joke together. Their spirits had risen with the near prospect of water and with the memory of their own recent exploit. Some of them rode almost swaggeringly, and Clay did not mind that. A little confidence would not hurt these men.

All at once Clay threw up his head and sniffed the air. A taint was coming towards them as they approached the pool.

“Somethin’ dead,” muttered Tobias. “Cow mebbe.”

But within Clay an instinct warned that this something was far more malign than a stray dead cow. They were nearing the *laguna* now, and an indescribable odour washed over rock and thorn to them, so revolting and powerful that it was almost palpable to the touch. Involuntarily the detail halted and the men all stared.

“God! What’s them?” asked Gonder.

At first Clay could not make them out—dark, bulbous shapes in the water. Then he knew. *Dead animals.*

Horses, driven into the little lake and shot; purposely left there to bloat and undergo their dreadful chemistry of putrefaction, and spill their poison juices in the water. His stomach seemed to turn over within him as a new, stronger effluvium was swept towards them by the hot wind, and his heart sank. This was where Shelby had planned to camp and rest his men and horses. The Brigade had been without water for a day . . . who knew how far it was to the next drinking place?

It took a strong effort of will, but Clay forced himself to ride down to the stagnant pool, and he had to spur his horse cruelly to make the poor creature advance the last few yards. The scouts remained where he left them. As he came closer to the water, he saw it was a wide, shallow sheet of green slime left over from the spring rains. Around its edges for fifty yards the mud had dried and cracked, showing how the drought had diminished the pool; and there were the old pocks of countless hoof marks on its border—tracks of cattle and other beasts. Now, however, since man had polluted it, no animal came near. A dozen carcasses blotched the surface, each with its swirling swarm of black flies, some swelled to bursting with their internal gases until legs stuck out at ugly, awkward angles; others already burst open and spewing their awfulness into the pool.

Holding his breath, Clay forced his horse fetlock deep into the water; but though the animal was famished for a drink, he merely stood there trembling, as if a horror and sickness were upon him. Then Clay rode out of the *laguna* and dismounted, kneeling on the verge to scoop up a palmful of the nauseous liquid. It came up, oily and green, and thriving with animalculae. In spite of himself Clay retched violently at the stench, spilled back the water, climbed on his horse, and rode, white and gagging, back to where he could breathe air less polluted.

“Gonder,” he said, when he had mastered his pallid stomach, “go back to Shelby and tell him the condition of this water supply.”

Already the head of the Brigade was debouching from the gorge, a mile back. Gonder rode, glad to be away from the tainted air; and presently Shelby trotted up with his staff.

His face darkened as he listened to Clay; then he rode down to the edge of the *laguna*, tested its horrible waters as Clay had done, and came back hastily.

“Wilfully polluted, by God’s gullet!” he swore. “So that’s the way they intend to fight, is it? Hell’s fire! And no more water in twenty miles, as far as my maps show. Edwards, pass the word to march at least a mile beyond

this cesspool—to where we can breathe fresh air at least—and have the troops fall out. Let 'em sleep—if anybody can sleep.”

Weary and grumbling the column rode by, and the grumblings were changed to sharp and angry cursing when the condition of the lake was learned. They made camp on a level patch of sand and rocks, and the troopers routed out and killed no less than a dozen rattlesnakes before they could begin looking about for places clear of stones and cactus on which to spread their blankets.

But after that first outburst of heartfelt rage, the work was done quietly and without complaint. Shelby's men were accustomed to having the unreasonable happen to them. The only difference was that this particular kind of misfortune had never happened to them before.

Even while the camp was in process of being established, officers went about gathering all canteens that still had water in them, and piling them in a heap near the centre of the camp area, with a guard posted over them. Water was going to be at a premium soon.

Some of the men gave tired grins.

“Won't be no cookin' to-night, boys.”

“I ain't carin'. Not hongree, somehow, afteh a whiff of that lake.”

“Might try some of that hardtack dipped in the daid hoss juice down yondeh.”

“Gawd, Robinson! Shet yo' trap, afore I puke!”

But if the troopers did not complain another part of the contingent did. At a distance Clay saw a bustling delegation from the civilian train, shouting and waving indignant arms at Shelby, who was answering them with a patience at which Clay marvelled. After a time they went grumbling back to a bivouac which, it must be admitted, was cheerless enough to evoke grumbling from men more philosophical than they.

Clay thought of something: Poor Hashinger's canteen. His own was empty, so it had not been taken up, and he had forgotten about this other. He found it, shook it, and felt the swish of water within—there must be nearly a pint of it. Not much, surely, but enough to make a waterless night endurable . . . except that duty forced him to turn it over to the water patrol.

As he stood considering this, an orderly halted before him and saluted. “Cap'n Bennett, General Shelby's compliments, an' will you be so good as to repawt at once?”

Clay set the canteen down beside his saddle and walked over to where Shelby was pacing, in earnest conversation with Slayback and Edwards.

“The matter’s very serious,” he was saying, as Clay reported. “I can’t go back—it’s thirty miles that way to water, and besides it would mean giving up everything we’ve started out to do. We’d be defeated before we even began the campaign. But I can’t go on, either, without some assurance of water for my men and horses. The map shows a well twenty miles farther on. But a dead animal in that well . . .”

He looked at Clay. “Captain Bennett, I want you to get your scouts ready for immediate duty.”

“Duty *to-night*, sir?”

“Duty in five minutes! This tank—it may mean that we have water pollution to face all the way to Monterrey. There’s a well twenty miles from here—little settlement of two or three adobes. Water’s good, they say, but we can’t tell until we reach there. I want you to ride there *to-night* and take possession of that well, and hold it. They may not have fouled that water, since the people in the village are dependent on it. It’s a gamble, but I want you to get there as soon as possible and see no damage is done after you arrive.”

Clay stared at him. This was asking the impossible . . . to expect his detail, with scarcely any rest, to do twenty more miles that night . . .

“Well, what are you waiting for?” snarled Shelby.

Clay saluted and made a smart about-face. Then tramped off, his back stiff with indignation. Within a few paces he heard his name called. It was Major Edwards, and what he said took all the indignation out of Clay.

“In four years of war,” he said, his face blurred in the evening gloom and his voice lowered, “this Brigade’s never been in greater peril than it is at this instant. Shelby admits it. That well’s our only chance. We can just reach it—Shelby can get twenty miles more out of these horses and men, but damned few after that. He’s going to let the command rest four hours, and then we’ll be after you. Find that water, lad, and protect it. If you don’t—God help us all!”

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They were five miles out of camp into the night before Clay told them what kind of a mission they were on, and he was glad that it was too dark to see their faces. The sudden droop in them was apparent, as the realization came to them of what they faced.

“Our hosses—can they stand it, seh?” said one of the Texans, his voice scared and weak. He knew the fate of a man left horseless in this desert.

“They’ll have to stand it,” said Clay grimly. “I’ll promise you all this—no man’s going to be deserted. Stick together, and obey orders. We’ll make it all right.”

He spoke with a good deal more confidence than he felt, but he had taken the precaution once more to put two men he trusted at the rear of the column—Tobias and Caruthers, this time. He needed Janeicke and Gonder up ahead to help him find the trail.

In complete silence they rode under the star-spattered sky, with the shadowy mystery of the night-shrouded waste all about them. Fifteen miles yet to go, finding their way through this blackness, and their horses already weak and stumbling from thirst and weariness. No trotting on this march. Clay kept his column at a walk, checking every half-hour to breathe the mounts. Beside him rode the vast bulk of Gonder, while Janeicke ranged up front, his eyes catlike in the night.

Mile after mile passed and there was no conversation among the men. The horses’ hoofs were muffled by the deep powdery sand, so except for a creak now and then from a saddle leather, or the occasional clink of a bit, they seemed to be drifting cloud-like through the gloom. A wind came up and lifted the fine sand, making little cloudy puffs where the hoofs fell, discernible even by starlight. Clay hoped that wind did not grow strong enough to raise a sand storm. From the flat canteens at his flank came the indistinct gurgle of water to his parched senses, and he realized how thirst was catching at his throat. All the men were suffering—it was more than ordinary thirst now, for it had passed from the mouth and tongue and become a thirst of blood vessels and deeper tissues. Long continued, such thirst drives men mad. Unless luck was with them, many of Shelby’s

soldiers would know the craze of that mortal thirst before another sun set. Unconsciously Clay licked his lips at the liquid sound of Hashinger's canteen. But he made no move towards it. That water was sacred, for another purpose.

An hour passed. Two hours. A century of hours. Clay's horse stumbled once or twice, a certain sign that the animal was nearing the limit of its endurance. After a long time Janeicke halted and grunted.

“ ’Dobies, seh.”

He had seen them first—the bulking shapes of buildings in the gloom. There were no lights.

Clay sent Janeicke and Gonder forward to investigate. They were back almost at once.

“Nobody thar,” Esau announced. “Houses gutted.”

An electric impulse of fear shot through Clay. The well! *May not have fouled that water since the people in the village are dependent on it.* Shelby had said that. Hopefully. But there were no people in this village to be dependent on the water.

Might as well face the truth, though. In dead silence Clay led the way forward. Even in the darkness he could see now the violence that had twisted and torn at this place. Whole sides had fallen or been thrust out of the three small adobe huts, and the simple furniture within had been heaped together and burned.

“They must have been on the wrong side,” mused Gonder in a hushed voice.

One of the men called that he had found the well. Before he reached it—Clay knew. The stone curbing about its mouth had been broken and tumbled in, a rubble of spiteful destruction. Up through the rocks poured a deadly stench. Clay struck a sulphur match, waited until it was burning well, and dropped it down. Something was in there. Something dead . . . not a horse. He turned in horror towards the adobes. So *that* was what they did to those people . . .

Even Esau seemed pale under the desert stars. “What’ll we do now?” he said.

Clay shook his head mutely. Fifty miles from water, with the Brigade already feeling its way towards this place—he knew these things, but something within him resisted the full grasping of the frightfulness of the

situation. He felt numb, yet knew the ultimate agony of realization would not long be delayed.

“By God, a light!”

Gonder almost startled them with his croaking cry. Clay’s eyes followed the dim arm, pointing. In the distance, indistinct against the night sky, the outline of a mesa reared itself. They all saw what Gonder had seen first—a tiny needle-point of brightness against the crouching black mass.

“People!” Clay exclaimed. He thought for a moment. “A guerrilla camp, maybe,” he said to his men. “Or a sheepherder’s *casa*. Or maybe an Indian *jacal*. But it makes no difference which—there’s water where that camp-fire’s burning. How far is it to that mesa, Esau?”

“Hard to tell at night, seh, but mebbe five mile.”

Clay ordered the men to mount. Somehow they had to reach that light. It was almost pathetic to see the quickness with which they got to saddle, and how every man of them, even the stark Esau and the bumptious Gonder, turned to him for orders and leadership. He was the only hope they had now, and upon them was the sick terror of death by the most horrible of ways—thirst.

Of the next two hours he never after had a clear recollection. They were like souls mad with an obsession. Not only their own lives, but the lives of a thousand comrades and friends depended on their reaching the light—and finding water there. This was what Señor Anda had meant when he warned Shelby of El Gato.

Across the rough, thorny country they struggled; Janeicke, with his hound’s nose for a trail, in the lead. There was no trail, but by some kind of instinct he groped his way in the dark, leading his horse, avoiding the pitfalls of yawning *arroyos*, inching his way around *mogotes* bristling with a million tangled growths of spears, making detours when a climb was too steep for their staggering animals, but continuously working upward and towards the objective they sought.

Every man in the detail was on foot now. Gasping, stumbling, dragging their horses after them, they struggled after the scout. Sometimes the tiny light disappeared—and Clay’s heart would die, for he knew that without the beacon they never could hope in this darkness to find the spot. But then they would round some buttress on the side of the mesa, and the friendly pin-point would spring into view again.

At last Clay called a halt. "I have a little water here," he announced to the men. "Not enough to go around. A pint wouldn't be enough even for one of us—the way we are. But here's a handkerchief. I'll dip it in the water and let it soak. Each of us can at least wet his tongue and lips by sucking on it."

To the scouts even this, in their extremity, meant relief. They took turns, though the water gave out and the last men who sucked the cloth received little beyond the spittle of those who had preceded them. Even so the dampness did wonders for them, and it seemed to change their luck, too, for dawn began greying in the east, and suddenly Janeicke cried: "Trail!"

In their weariness some of the men laughed with weak joy, a dangerous hint of the near-hysteria they had reached. Up the last severe scramble they pulled and hauled their groaning horses, to the narrow little path that wound about the face of the mesa, skirting the base of the abrupt escarpment of caprock which topped it. Obviously the trail was well-used. Day began to brighten. They had mounted again, and now they rode around a shoulder of the mountain and saw before them a half-dozen beehive huts.

"*Jacales!*" yelled Esau. With a howl they spurred forward their horses at the best speed the animals could raise. Out of the thatched dwellings broke dark figures and plunged down the mountain into the underbrush. Riding in the lead, Janeicke swung low from his saddle and seized by the single scanty garment which clothed her, a little girl. She was the only person remaining in the village by the time the scouts reached it, and she was screaming with terror.

Gonder dismounted and took the child from Janeicke. He squatted on the ground and placed her on her feet. Slowly he began talking to her in his halting Spanish. After a time the child ceased to weep and answered timidly. Presently she laughed at some funny thing the huge, red-bearded stranger said to her. Then she talked freely, and at the end Gonder turned to Clay.

"The water's under an overhang, seh, at the head of the *arroyo* jest beyond," he said. "It fills up in the rainy seasons. This little *muchacha* says cattle an' hosses has watered there sense she can recollect, an' all the water fo' the village comes from it, an' fo' lots of folks passin' by—an' she can't remember that it ever was dry."

"Let her go, Gonder," said Clay.

The big man grinned. Presently he gave the child a small pat and allowed her to scuttle into the underbrush. They rode on a hundred yards or so, rounding another buttress, and saw a savage *arroyo* which gashed its

steep and crooked length down the side of the mesa, showing where, in times of heavy rainfall, some watershed above poured its stream. The steep face of the mesa here was covered with an ugly tangle of thorny brush, but the twisting bottom of the *arroyo* had been swept by freshets comparatively free from undergrowth. In places it pitched almost straight downward, and Clay thought of how it must look when a torrent roared down it.

But it was the head of the *arroyo* in which they were interested. They saw the overhang of the rock, and it was exactly like many another overhang they had seen. But for the information Gonder had obtained they might have passed it without knowing what it hid.

Now, however, with Clay leading, they scrambled up the detritus of broken rock and there—a wondrous sight to thirst-tortured men—found a cool, deep cavern containing a water hoard, fed by some fissure above during the heavy rains. It was a form of water tank not uncommon in the Mexican desert, but which seemed to them miraculous now.

Laughing and slapping shoulders with relief the men crowded eagerly, and plunged their heads into the water like horses to drink their fill. Clay waited until they were finished, then drank also and felt like a new man. The water was brown and about its edge were cattle hoof marks. Not only had the beasts drunk here, but they had waded in the pool and staled, for the water tasted and smelled powerfully of urine.

“Cow tea,” grunted Janeicke. But it was sweet and refreshing to their parched throats, and there was never a complaint. Afterwards the horses were allowed to fill their skins, and then Clay permitted his little troop to sit on the rocks and consume some food.

It was wonderful how quickly men and horses were strengthened and revived. The scouts began to take an interest in things outside of themselves. It was now broad daylight, and miles away on the grey-green desert, they marked for the first time a distant ribbon of dust—Shelby’s column. Nearer to them huddled the tiny broken squares of the ruined adobes they had visited last night, and in the intense clarity of the atmosphere they could almost make out the full picture of the destruction. It would take Shelby at least an hour to reach that point, Clay estimated, and it was time to get to horse and begin to work a way down the face of the mesa in order to intercept the Brigade. He ordered the men to mount.

Without any warning a sudden incarnation of peril loomed above their heads, and the light talk of the men died in their throats. A voice spoke from behind and above:

*“Put up your hands. You are prisoners!”*

Clay knew the voice, and knew that with the voice went the power to enforce the command. Slowly he raised his arms and his scouts followed his example.

“Keep facing that way,” came the next order. “You are covered by thirty rifles. I am sending a man down to take your weapons.”

“So, Parridine,” said Clay with slow contempt, “you’ve turned renegade!”

“Why not?” asked the guerrilla. “If Shelby was not above riding with the Juaristas—before he was otherwise convinced—why shouldn’t I?”

Defying the threat and command, Clay turned his head. More than ever like a wolf Parridine looked, standing twenty feet above the trail on the top of the rimrock. While Clay and his scouts were resting, the renegade and his men had stolen up across the roof of the mesa. Hard brown faces peered along the top of the cliff and there were the ugly muzzles of rifles. Clay’s men were at Parridine’s mercy.

“I ought to kill you, Bennett, for disobeying my order,” the guerrilla said. “But I have another use for you. Don’t make the mistake, however, of lowering your arms.”

Beside Clay, Gonder and Janeicke were swearing deeply and wholeheartedly under their breath, but not a scout dared to move.

“To forestall any foolishness,” said Parridine, “I’ll inform you that I have men posted on the trail in both directions. There’s no possible escape for you—even if you tried to go down the mountain, we’d kill you all in ten jumps.”

“Why not kill us now?” Clay asked.

“Not because of any lack of desire,” replied the renegade, smiling thinly. “I have orders. El Gato wants prisoners . . .”

Clay chilled. The Mexicans sometimes did dreadful things with prisoners. A sudden question within him drove the momentary shudder out. “Parridine,” he said, “now that you’ve got me, what did you do with Merit Hampton?”

“Merit Hampton?” The lean face lost its smile. “Maybe you’ll discover when I get you back to our camp.”

For minutes there was complete silence. Presently Parridine spoke again:

“I observe the dust of Shelby’s Brigade out there on the desert. The Brigade does not appear to be moving very fast. I suspect that at present our friend Shelby is vastly uncomfortable. He’ll be the more so when he discovers there’s no drinkable water at the *rancheria* yonder—whose inhabitants, unfortunately, the Lipans have erased. This water supply on the mesa we find it necessary to keep—for our own use—and since only we know of it, it can continue its usefulness.”

“I suppose there is no use even to hope that you might change your ideas about that.”

“None.”

“Parridine, there are a thousand men out there. You’ve eaten with them, and slept beside them. Those men you are condemning to die horribly in the desert. I wouldn’t want that on my conscience.”

“You’re more naïve than I had thought,” the other said. “We do not intend that Shelby shall learn of this water—not by any stretch of the imagination. He’s chosen his own fate. If he’s led his men to their doom, let him watch them die—and die with them!”

The man sent to disarm Clay’s detail was slow because the sheer wall of caprock made it necessary for him to go a considerable distance along the rim before finding a place to descend. Clay studied the face above him. It was, if anything, more bitter than when last he had seen it.

“It seems El Gato has seen fit to give you responsibilities,” he said at last.

“I am an officer, yes. El Capitán Parridine they call me, and sometimes El Gringo.”

“I hope you discharge your duties with more honour than you discharged your friendly obligations to Shelby!” Clay said bitterly.

“Take care,” Parridine warned, “I might find it necessary to violate El Gato’s instructions to bring you to him alive!”

At last the Mexican from above had found a break in the rimrock, down which he clambered, and was walking towards Clay, revolver in hand. In a few moments the scouts would be disarmed and helpless. And Shelby, out there in the desert, would never even know of it, for they were too far away to be seen. What a bitter ending to the danger and anguish the men had endured. Clay thought of Edwards, and gruff old Slayback, and handsome Reid Rutledge, and Moreland, and Shelby—the men and officers whom he

knew almost as brothers—and the thought of what was going to happen out there on the mesquite flats, the agony of the magnificent Brigade, the madness, the ravings before night came, turned him sick. But he kept this out of his face and his back remained superbly erect. His own men depended on him. Perhaps something might happen . . .

“Why not the *arroyo*?”

It was Gonder’s voice, pitched low. Clay glanced down the ugly gash which opened at their feet. It was jagged with rocks, and choked at places with thickets of mesquite and black chaparral. Moreover, it shot nearly straight down the steep declivity, then angled briefly, and finally pitched over a vicious slope that looked almost perpendicular. An impossible place to ride a horse, it appeared—and yet its ten-foot depth might be at least a partial protection from bullets. It was, Clay realized all at once, a way—a very dangerous way—but a possible way, if luck and great skill were with the riders.

“It’s our only chance!” Gonder whispered again.

Clay took another look. His lips set. The Mexican had reached them and now he was extending his hand to take Clay’s revolver belt. As the brown man did so, Gonder cut him across the face with his bridle rein, and at the instant, with a shout to his men, Clay struck spurs into his horse and bounded it over the steep bank into the *arroyo*, thundering ten feet downward to the bottom, and rolling the screaming Mexican over and over under the crushing hoofs.

He had made the decision. There was a yell from above and the thudding of gun shots, but behind him, in a torrent of dust and stones and tossing manes and flying hoofs, came his men.

In his four years as a cavalryman, Clay had done some riding, and had seen some riding done. But never anything like what took place in those next few minutes. Riding over rough ground is bad at any time. It becomes worse when the underfooting is the grooved, crooked bottom of a dry wash, and the situation is progressively complicated by jagged boulders, choking masses of thorny underbrush, and treacherous adobe-clay underfooting. When, finally, the way leads sharply down and you must ride blind half the time, while the circumstances make it necessary to travel as fast as your horse can hurl himself down the mountainside, riding becomes as dangerous an occupation as a reckless man could wish.

In the first few moments after he jumped his horse down the ten-foot crumbling bank of the *arroyo*, carrying the Mexican to his death, Clay was so occupied with sticking in his saddle, trying to guide his animal around the worst of the clutching thorn-bushes, avoiding the bigger boulders, and buck-jumping from one side to the other of the not inconsiderable little canyon, that he saw little of what was happening.

A bullet whined past his ear, and spiteful spurts of dirt sprang out of the side of the gulch. There was a scream and a crash, and he snatched one glance over his shoulder. The third man from the rear of his pounding avalanche had gone down, his horse shot out from under him—and Clay blinked in horror as the two scouts behind the fallen rider, unable to stop, piled on top of him. One of the horses, with legs broken, hurtled clear over the blood-spouting heap.

No use to try to help them. To escape and reach Shelby was the necessity. Clay led the way, and he showed his men that day how a captain of Shelby's should ride. Square shoulders and straight back, bending and swaying to the action of the straining beast under him, hands low, head high, as calm in all seeming as if he were not hurtling down a sixty-degree slope, whisking around desperate tangles of dagger thorns, leaping magnificently over barriers of cluttered boulders he went, and all to the accompaniment of bullets whining angrily about him.

Crashing, slipping, bounding and gathering impetus until one misstep would have meant bloody ruin, his men followed his audacious lead. It was incredible how quickly the danger was past. One moment they were under Parridine's guns. Almost the next they were beyond his reach—so much so that the firing ceased above and Clay began easing down his mount. He wondered what was the fate of the three men lost in the *arroyo* as, lifting his horse over a final rocky barricade, he led his men out on the flattening plain.

Time now to draw breath and glance up the mountain. It seemed impossible that they had come down that way—the twisting, shooting, rock-filled gash in the mountainside looked almost too difficult for wild goats, let alone horses at a dead run. High on the shoulder where the trail ran, Clay saw the tiny figures of Parridine and his Mexicans, like beads on a string . . .

Shelby was approaching the ruined *rancheria*—he had progressed faster than Clay expected. By the time the scouts covered the distance between the mesa and the shattered adobes, the head of the column already was at the well. Even from a distance, as he approached it, Clay saw how the soul of the Brigade had been broken. As his little troop coasted down the column,

men looked at it without recognition, the spirit gone from their eyes. Some seemed on the verge of collapsing in their saddles. Far back for miles over the desert straggled the noncombatant vehicles, some of them apparently halted.

Word had just been passed down the line that here, too, the water was not to be obtained. For leagues the troopers and civilians alike had kept their courage alive with the hope that after a time they might quench their thirst. The ghastly news they had just received destroyed the very manhood of some men. They were done—ready to quit.

Then Clay saw Shelby. The general had finished inspecting the well, not knowing what his advance column under Clay had found on the mesa, and now he turned to his men. He lifted his voice, and the greatness in him came forth. Above disaster, above incredible misfortune, above certainty of death he rose; and his voice, filled with confidence and calm, carried his courage to the command. Officers straightened in their saddles at that voice, and troopers came out of their collapse. Even the civilians took new grip on themselves.

The word was “Forward.” Not a man in the Brigade knew but that there were thirty-five miles of waterless devastation to cover, with death beating down on the skull from the merciless sun. Thirty-five miles impossible to traverse. Thirty-five miles that Shelby was asking of them—asking it with a face lit with the splendour of power and undying bravery.

The lines in the weary faces tightened. Back to the bearded countenances came the look of final, settled determination. Please God, Shelby’s Brigade would make this last supreme effort for Old Jo.

Clay’s detail was seen. A rider detached himself from the group of officers at the head of the column and came to meet them. Reid Rutledge—his handsome face not debonair now, but haggard. He heard Clay incredulously, and in a few minutes Shelby was listening with a great joy in his face.

He had thought his Brigade beyond any redemption. Clay and his scouts had given it a new life.

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Sun and sand, sun and wind, sun and rock and thorn. They were deep in Coahuila now, jaded and beaten by the heat which was like the blast from an open oven. Clay rode slack in the saddle, his being hugging every drop of moisture that was left within it, and kept an eye on his men, for they were far out in front of the column, and, because of their exhaustion from the pitiless blaze of the sun, he must guard doubly against any laxity among them.

His gaze towards his sun-smitten riders had in it a vestige of pride and something like affection. The crucible of the skirmish in the canyon and the test on the mesa had caused a metamorphosis in the scouts. They were different men from the slack handful Shelby first had given him. There was now no question as to loyalties or leadership. Rufe Champion, discredited greatly by his one exhibition of poltroonery, now rode at the rear of the column, saying little. But even he looked with an alert and respectful eye towards the captain who rode at their head.

Four of the "Irregular Texans" were gone—one killed in the canyon, and three dead in the *arroyo*. But the hound look had disappeared from the remaining twelve. They had been tried, and had shown courage and endurance in duty. To a degree they had become the heroes of the Brigade, and Shelby himself had seen fit to praise them. So these days they rode with a swagger, hats cocked low and a little to one side, backs straight, eyes level.

Since the skirmish in the canyon the Brigade had altered its order of march. The scouts now rode well out ahead of the advance of the main column. Clay could see the dust of the line extending clear back to the rearguard horizon.

On this day they did not have hanging over them a worry as to their next water supply, such as had previously oppressed them on several long marches. There was a stream up ahead somewhere, and running water cannot be tampered with successfully. By even-fall they had crossed seven hours of waterless desert, where the heat haze rose clear to the distant mountains. And at last they noticed that their horses were pricking ears forward and moving more eagerly, and presently were descending into a

canyon, where they found the little river they sought—a muddy desert stream, but unimpeachable water.

“Take watch stations while the command makes camp,” Clay ordered, and his scouts, well trained now, fanned out without further instructions, to post themselves on points of vantage from which the approach of any enemy could be marked.

Presently Shelby’s men, haggard, beards tangled, and all a common dusty hue, streamed down into the valley. Horses, greedily sucking up water, lined the banks of the stream. The wagons and vehicles of the noncombatants came creaking in and took stations assigned. With orderly efficiency the horse-lines were established, and tents rose, while hundreds scurried here and there to gather grease wood or mesquite for the evening fires.

Now was the time of relaxation for the scouts. As Shelby’s main body came in, Clay’s men were relieved of their outposts. They, of the strenuous all-day advance, were exempted from night sentry-go. Clay waited until all members of his detail reported and saw that their bivouac was established. Then, his duty done for the time being, he walked over to officers’ row.

Major Edwards hailed him:

“Bennett! Won’t you have supper with me? I can’t offer much. Hardtack à la Creole? Salt beef à la Maryland? Your imagination will have to furnish the sauce.”

Clay squatted on the ground, glad for companionship.

“How do you think we’re doing?” he asked.

“We’re making progress. That’s about as much as can be said now,” returned Edwards.

“We’re way behind schedule.”

“That’s correct. Days behind. Provisions running pretty low. But Shelby never starts out on anything he doesn’t finish. Sometimes it looks impossible, but he’s never yet failed to do what he set out to do. I think we’ll come out all right.”

It was the simple credo of the little major. His idol could make no mistake, do no wrong. Clay, moodily chewing the stale biscuit, agreed mentally that their predicament was no fault of Shelby’s. Conditions had conspired against them. Where a single rider, or even a dozen riders, should by this time have reached the mountains, the desert still stretched immensely

before the Brigade. And the situation was growing progressively more perilous. When they found good water they were forced to camp, in order to permit the gathering of whatever poor forage there was, including mesquite beans, to feed the horses. Halts to repair equipment grew more frequent, and this, as Clay had foreseen, was due more and more to the impractical vehicles of the noncombatants. Some sickness, due to the bad water, was beginning to appear, and grumbling grew louder in the ranks each day.

Edwards read his mind. "If we only could be certain of our water supply," he said, "we'd move faster. But there's no assurance. As you know we've found wells and water pools poisoned too often now to trust the maps any more. It's a perfectly devilish expedient the guerrillas are employing against us—and a damned effective one. If their object is to delay us while they gather their strength to meet us, they must be succeeding in it. I wonder if your friend Parridine might not be the brain behind it?"

"Parridine . . .? Possibly."

"By the way, speaking of Parridine, what about that girl—Miss Hampton?"

"I don't know!" exclaimed Clay, with too much violence.

"I speculated merely because I have a slight acquaintance with her father," Edwards said mildly.

"I ask your pardon." Clay was contrite. "I can't account for my rudeness, except that my responsibilities have been heavy, and I am worried."

But within him throbbed a dull and ceaseless hurt. He had seen Parridine, and after what the renegade had said his last doubt concerning Merit Hampton's treachery was gone. It nauseated him to think that she would have allowed herself to be led away by a reptile like Parridine . . .

"I wouldn't jump at conclusions," suggested the major, again with the appearance of reading his thoughts.

"Conclusions!" said Clay bitterly. Then his feelings got away with him. "From the first time I saw her, I thought she was a slut."

"I still suggest that until final proofs are in hand judgment should be withheld. And even if the final proofs are convincing, there is perhaps some reason for self-congratulation."

"What do you mean?"

“I yield to none, Clay, in my admiration of the female sex. But after all, and without being too cynical, the ladies have their weaknesses. Inconstancy is one of them. But the reverse is sometimes just as bad. It’s my experience that there’s nothing worse than the fickleness of the women we want, except the infernal faithfulness of those we don’t want. Wait until you’ve been dogged by some enduring female, my boy, before you go to thinking you’re miserable. Love is an agony——”

“God damn it, sir!” Clay rose furiously.

He stood for a moment, struggling with his own chaotic feelings. There was no sensible reason for his being worked up like this. He felt he was making a fool of himself. He half turned once more to crave the major’s pardon. And then further words for the time being were stricken from his mouth.

Out of the distant darkness where the stars shone in the velvet of the night sky, a rifle report came over the desert, and not thirty yards from where Clay stood confronting Edwards, a trooper pitched forward into his own camp-fire, his brains splashed out by an ounce slug of lead.

Clay leaped, followed by the major, towards where the comrades of the stricken man were dragging him from the blaze. One soldier, with a piece of burlap, was beating out the fire that smouldered in the dead trooper’s clothing. They had turned him over. His face was a black and crusted sear, for he had pitched headfirst into the mesquite coals. But he had not suffered. Instantly the life had been whipped out of him by the distant lead that almost tore off the top of his skull.

Clay glanced about him. Red light from the blaze gave a tinge of horror to the faces of the men who had seen their companion die. Then hurrying footsteps came, and a harsh question.

“It’s the general!” someone said. Shelby stepped into the circle of illumination. As he did so the far rifle slammed again, and another bullet whined over their heads.

“Douse those fires instantly!” shouted the general. “Moreland, push your guards farther out and strengthen their number! Here—some of you men there! Pick this man up and carry him over to one of the wagons. Move!”

His voice galvanized the whole camp into fevered activity. Here and there figures hurried, using water or sand to quench every gleam of flame. Knowing the necessity of the precautions ordered, the troopers worked with

quick efficiency. Even the civilians complied promptly and without a murmur. For once Shelby had united support in his camp.

Clay walked slowly back through the darkness of the fireless camp towards where Edwards's tent stood.

"Major," he said uncomfortably, "concerning our recent words, I desire to express my utmost apologies——"

"Nonsense, lad. I was at fault. I did not realize I was on ground so—delicate. The subject is closed. What do you think of this shooting?"

"If I were waging guerrilla warfare against a column such as this, I can't think of anything that would harass it more than just these very tactics," said Clay wearily. As he spoke the distant rifle sounded again. Somewhere in the darkness the bullet struck a rock and screamed away—an ugly sound, and disturbing.

"It looks as if they had set in for the night," said Edwards. "I guess we'll have to grin and bear it—but I don't like that shooting."

"Nor I," agreed Clay.

Their forebodings were justified.

In spite of Shelby's precautions the camp was much annoyed that night. Its general position had been located by the prowling enemy who continued to send over long-range shots at irregular intervals until dawn. Nobody was hit after the first casualty, but once a camp-kettle was punctured with a hollow *bong*, and in the whole night nobody slept very much.

Shelby was grim in the morning. "Permit no straggling—*no straggling whatever!*" he told his line officers. "We're going to feel the enemy at last. At our present rate it will be another fortnight before we reach Monterrey, and every step of the way we're likely to have snipers potting at us. Tell the men to do all their cooking by daylight. We'll halt the day marches in time to permit them to do so. Fires are to be extinguished as soon as darkness falls every evening."

In four years of fighting the Yankees, Shelby's Brigade had been harried by enemy outliers more than once. The blue cavalry of Steele and Banks had kept things from growing cold on the Red River. There had been some gentlemen from Colorado in Pleasonton's force of Northern Missouri, who did not lack assiduity. And the Kansas horse under Curtis displayed talent at inventing refinements in devilry to keep the outposts busy. To all these the

Brigade returned full measure in kind, with perhaps a slight margin of overpayment.

But never a man in Shelby's command had encountered a foe so wraith-like and malignant as was now with them every waking and sleeping hour. The night-shooting at the river camp was a beginning only, as the general predicted. By day Clay's scouts beat up the country ahead, and flankers rode far out on the sides where possible. But the length of the column and the nature of the country both conspired to aid the enemy.

This was the order of Shelby's march these days, the dispositions being of such nature as best to combat the lurking menace:

First there rode a point—two men, one of them invariably either Janeicke or Tobias, Clay's sergeants.

Then there was a fifty-yard interval before Clay's advance party came, the body of scouts, riding in column of twos.

Another interval, this time of two hundred and fifty yards, and the support, consisting of a full company, the various units of the Brigade taking this duty by rotation.

After that a space of perhaps a thousand yards before Shelby and the main body came, the men in column of fours now, and followed by the wagons and the crazy equipages of the civilians, the whole dragging out its length for a mile or more.

Finally there was a rear guard company.

Out on the flanks rode little Cossack patrols of four men each, scouting and nosing through the brush. From point to the last rear guard rider, the line of march stretched a full two miles.

In spite of the utmost watchfulness the unseen enemy repeatedly took toll in the following days, while the Brigade writhed and twisted through narrow *arroyos* and the first mountain *barrancas*. Tiny puffs of white smoke would spout from a cliff, followed by the smack or whistle of bullets. Or, in the night, as the men lay by dead fires, there would be distant splinters of orange flame, and more bullets. At first the Brigade was inclined to reply with carbine fire, but Shelby stopped that. It was a sheer waste of ammunition to blaze away into an empty landscape, which was all the troopers had to shoot at.

At last one night, when a distant sharpshooter had practised for an hour at long-range firing, and the whole camp sat tense, uncomfortable, and

swearing in the darkness, wondering when one of those bullets would find a mark, Esau Janeicke slipped away by himself into the gloom. After a long time the camp heard the single, chopped-off sound of a Sharp's rifle, and thereafter no more bullets arrived from the long-range marksman. Half an hour later the scout noiselessly reappeared in camp.

"See anything?" asked Gonder.

"Yep," said Esau. He probed in a pocket and handed something to his crony. From hand to hand it passed, bringing exclamations from each man who touched it. At last someone handed Clay two curious, ridged pieces of flesh, sticky with blood.

"Ears!" he cried, aghast. But Shelby, who had just come up, asked for the trophies, and swore that there existed no scout in the world the equal of Esau Janeicke.

The casualty list, in those days and nights, grew. After the first night-shooting when a soldier was killed, a sergeant in Langhorne's company was hit by a carefully calculated long-range bullet in the succeeding camp, and Bledsoe, one of the line captains, had a chip taken out of the side of his left hand by a slug while riding in the line of march the following morning. That same afternoon two men of the rear guard, who had fallen behind in spite of the orders against straggling, were cut off by a sudden rush of Lipan Apaches who evidently were working in close co-operation with the Mexicans. The shrieks of the two men were heard, but the rescue party arrived too late. They were gone—vanished utterly. Thereafter, straggling ceased.

Even the civilians, under the stimulus of fear, managed to keep well up—although not without their inevitable complaints. Concerning them a new worry now oppressed Shelby. The excessively rough road, the steep acclivities and declivities, and especially the dryness of the air, combined to weaken and shatter the wheels of many of the lighter vehicles. Axles broke, felloes snapped, and spokes splintered. Sometimes wagon tongues, even, were fairly twisted off in the struggles up the mountain paths. Once a supply wagon pitched right off the trail, carrying over its teams, and killing its driver.

But it was the countless breakdowns in the motley array of equipages of the politicians which became the serious matter, because they were for ever causing delays. Already the march was far behind its time-table. At first the overworked wagon-masters tried to repair the vehicles; but while the work was being done on the collapsed wheel of the carriage of some glittering

personage, the whole Brigade, perforce, waited. And whenever such a breakdown occurred, the noncombatants would dismount from their other vehicles, and gather about the sweating soldiers; and there pass judgment on the inefficiency of the army, complain of the lack of foresight which permitted all this to happen, and inveigh against the unkind fate that threw them in with a military expedition as wretchedly conducted—according to their verdict—as this of Shelby’s.

All of which Shelby took with the most amazing patience, and it was only after many such delays, which cut the progress of the Brigade by half, that he reached a conclusion as inevitable as it was unpleasant. He issued an order that all vehicles should be abandoned, unless they could be repaired within a quarter of an hour. And that brought a really magnificent howl of objection from the outraged politicians.

“What, seh, are we to do, who have been riding in the vehicles thus condemned?” demanded the orotund voice of Congressman Tweedie.

“If you cannot find accommodations with your friends,” Shelby explained, “you will have to ride horseback——”

“This is monstrous!” screeched the fat little Louisiana legislator. “Why weren’t we info’med of this? I submit, seh, that I, fo’ one, am physically unsuited fo’ the saddle. I am a man of weight, seh, not one of yo’ spindling cavalry bravoos. I get saddle-galls, seh, and fo’ a man built as I am, there is always danger of the onset of a hernia——”

“I should not presume to dictate to a gentleman who is, I am informed, an ornament to the congressional delegation of his state,” said the long-suffering Shelby, “but I beg of you to consider, sir—we have wounded men who willingly ride in spite of their hurts. I ask you to do nothing more than these.”

“But our rights, seh——”

And then Shelby finally lost his patience. “*Damn your rights, sir!*” he shouted in a voice that made the round congressman jump. And stamped snorting away.

The very next day the thing he had feared happened to Tweedie—his buggy, which for two days had been threatening imminent collapse, finally disintegrated under him. The gentleman from Louisiana sputtered for some minutes, but even to him it was apparent that the stove-in wheels were beyond repair. His necessary luggage was put into a wagon, and he resumed the journey on the back of a very slow and gentle quartermaster’s horse, his

plump legs sticking nearly straight out, his hands gripping the saddle-bow, his face a picture of martyrdom.

And before evening Congressman Tweedie had entered a new estate—the casualty list. It was an hour before halting for camp, when the far-distant, flat report of a rifle sounded, accompanied by a yell from Tweedie. He clapped a hand sharply to his round posterior as if a hornet had stung him there.

“I’m wounded! I’m wounded!” he cried, his voice given added volume by his anguish. “Great God, I’m *bleeding!*”

There was a halt while horse-faced, club-jointed Dr. John Tisdale, the Brigade surgeon, went hurrying back from the head of the column to make an examination. The congressman was indubitably wounded—a very slight scratch on the outside of his left buttock—nothing serious, but amply sufficient to afford Tweedie, if he desired it, additional cause for self-pity and complaint.

But a miracle happened. The congressman’s mood suddenly altered. Instead of insisting upon being hauled in a wagon, he mounted his horse again, and completed the day’s march. By the time they halted at night, the wound was sore and he required assistance to dismount. But even then he bore himself right manfully.

This behaviour astonished Shelby and everyone else, but there was a reason for it. Congressman Tweedie had seen his own blood. It occurred to him that he was a hero. In his life he had envisaged himself as many things, but never as a hero. The thought proved new and unexpectedly pleasant. He waved aside expressions of sympathy, but even as he did it, he savoured them and found them satisfying. Thereafter the fat legislator began to talk with pride of his wound wherever he could find a listening ear, referring to it in a carefully casual way as “my injury.” When they camped at night, he cornered Dr. Tisdale and conversed at length with that long-suffering man of science. Immediately afterwards he blossomed out as an authority on gunshot wounds, and torn wounds, and wounds that were fouled and in danger of infection.

As for his fellow civilians, he grew quite patronizing to them. “Afteh yo’ have been wounded, yo’ know, some of these petty annoyances don’t seem so impawtant,” he would say loftily. Or: “There’s nothing like a gunshot wound to give yo’ a sense of propawtion.”

This was gall and wormwood to his colleagues. But though he howled whenever he sat down, and particularly when three strong men united in hoisting him to his saddle—a fourth holding his horse—he became infinitely less of a nuisance than before he was wounded. In a word, having become a hero Congressman Tweedie ceased to be an obstacle. He acquired a fellow-feeling for the soldiers, now that he had shared their wounds, and nobody obeyed more cheerfully than he the commands of the general. That chance shot from the Mexican sharpshooter's gun proved an unexpected boon to the Brigade and to Shelby.

Day succeeded weary day in the treacherous desert. By the end of that week the men were savage from loss of sleep, the heat, and the knowledge that they were being constantly stalked by enemies against whom they could not retaliate. Fortunately they had reached an area where there were a few running streams, and the ever-present fear of water pollution was banished for the present at least.

But there was a new kind of trouble. An epidemic of dysentery broke out—so severe that sometimes twenty or thirty men at a time would be twisting and moaning in agony, in the wagons which had been emptied and converted into makeshift ambulances. Aided by one or two soldiers he had selected as hospital orderlies, Dr. Tisdale did what he could, but hardly a day's march ended now, without the digging of graves and the reading of the Order for the Burial of the Dead, by Major Edwards, from a worn prayer book which he carried for the purpose in his saddlebags.

In those days Shelby was the driving force that kept the Brigade moving forward. He joked, cursed, threatened, promised, or appealed as the occasion warranted. Usually, however, the general's mere presence was enough to make his weary, gaunt troopers sit a little straighter in their saddles and call upon a little more of their reserves.

Doggedly the Brigade wound its tortured way through thorny tangle and rocky defile, with death prowling about it; and presently to the other problems on Shelby's tired shoulders was added the long-expected shortage of food. In spite of every superhuman effort, the rate of march had been much slower than he had calculated. The time was at hand when the men would have to go on part rations.

But on the credit side of the ledger was the fact that the Brigade presently began to adapt itself to the new country and the nature of the foe, and to take a hand in affairs on its own account. Esau Janeicke had set the example the night he went out and "collected" the ears of the sniping Lipan.

After that Clay began the practice of sending out his scouts in pairs after dark when the pot-shooting began in the hills. They found that this night sniping was largely the work of the Lipan Apaches, and it surprised and delighted him to see the way his “Irregular Texans” took to this work. Very quickly results were obtained. Of course Janeicke was without a peer in this sort of thing. But, after the “Irregulars,” the big surprise was Gonder. Considering his weight, the red-beard showed an amazing ability at stealth, and he developed a fondness for lying in the head of some *arroyo* a quarter of a mile or so from camp on the darkest nights, awaiting the prowl of a cat-footed foe. Then he would rise up softly on his elbow with his rifle, and the Lipan tribe of Apaches would have one more cause for caterwauling at the time of mourning for departed warriors.

Others in the scout detail—notably Rufe Champion, the gangling Texan who had been discredited as leader of the “Irregulars”—became adept at counter-sniping, and Clay himself was the inventor of a stratagem that worked with surprisingly gratifying results.

One night he caused three fires to be kindled some distance from the Brigade camping place, allowing them to burn low so that their coals only glimmered in the ashes. When the Indians crept up on these dying embers under the misapprehension that about them men were sleeping, Clay’s scouts, posted above on a low ridge of country rock, dropped a couple of salutary volleys among them—although, because they carried away their wounded and dead, the exact losses of the Indians were never ascertained.

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For that ambushment the scouts received official commendation for the second time, although as before Shelby pointedly refrained from saying anything of a personal nature to Clay. Shelby was a man who did not forgive easily, a fact which Clay had known, but which he was finding out with greater force at present.

For two whole days after the night ambush, the enemy refrained from annoying the Brigade. And that brought the march up to a wide river valley, which indicated a considerable stream ahead to be forded.

But a large river also meant grass—and Shelby's horses were in pitiable state from lack of forage. Not an animal among them but showed every rib in its body. Nor were their riders in better case, for the rations had been cut, and cut again.

More and more frequently they came upon the sinister little murder crosses, standing here and there by the wayside, showing that this country, if barren, also was bloody. Commerce was dead, and the black scars of war were branded deeply in the rough hills, where every village stood ruined. Such adobe huts as had escaped destruction were empty when the column arrived in their vicinity—the *rotos*, ragged ones, who had inhabited them fled at the first glimpse of Shelby's advance party, and lurked deep in the mesquite and sagebrush, ready instantly to burrow still more deeply into hideaways which they alone knew in that thirst-tortured land. Yet in their way these fear-stricken *peones* were as dangerous as the Lipans and guerrillas, for they had suffered cruelly at the hands of both French and Juaristas, and took savage reprisals whenever chance put a victim in their hands. Wherefore it was more than ever necessary to keep the column closed up, and orders went down the line to that effect.

The morning that the Brigade reached the river valley, it passed through a half-ruined village. The column swung along the main thoroughfare, but Clay, with some of his scouts, turned aside to investigate. At first they saw no living soul. Then they turned a corner, and there sitting was a woman, her *reboso* pulled over her face, a patient pyramid of sorrow. Above her head hung a horror.

Four men dangled, suspended from the door facings of one of the shattered buildings—flayed while living. Like tattered garments, strips of skin hung from them. Their dead faces were twisted in such grimaces of frozen agony that at first Clay did not understand what it was that caused his men to halt, rigid with abhorrence, in a staring half-circle. Then he knew. The two grinning dead in the centre were their comrades—the two stragglers from Shelby’s column who had been captured a few days before. The others were Mexicans.

Nailed to the dead flesh of each of the Mexicans was a sign in Spanish: TRAIADOR.

The woman on the ground slowly lifted the *reboso* from her face. In all his life Clay had never seen such stunned anguish as was in those features. She was young, but her grief gave her the appearance of age. And this in spite of the fact that there was not a tear in her eyes.

“Take down those bodies and bury them,” Clay ordered. “Gonder, see what you can find out from this woman.”

While the other men struggled to lift down, one after another, the stiff, bloody dead, the red-beard dismounted and addressed her in slow, gentle Spanish. She replied.

“El Gato is hereabouts,” Gonder said, with a sudden tensing of his body. “She says he’s got plenty *soldados* with him.”

“That’s something Shelby must know as soon as possible,” said Clay.

“This thing here,” Gonder went on, indicating the bloody human ruins, now lying awkwardly on the ground beside the trench the scouts were digging, “she says it was the Lipans done it. The two Mexicans was men of this very village. This pore gal asse’ts that they was good Juaristas, only they didn’t have no hankerin’s to jine the army. Them other two—as you already know—was pris’ners. An’ heah’s the thing that sticks, seh. She claims it was El Gringo that turned them four pris’ners over to the Injuns.”

“El Gringo? That’s what Parridine calls himself!” exclaimed Clay.

“Yep.”

“Just a minute. It’s just a little hard to believe that a white man would order anything like what we’ve seen.”

Again the red-beard questioned the woman. She talked almost anxiously now.

“Nope. He didn’t awdeh the torture. He jest turned them over to the Lipans. But it amounted to the same thing. The Mexicans, she says, cried an’ begged, but them two boys of ourn, they didn’t know what was goin’ to happen to them . . . until it started happenin’. Mebbe Parridine didn’t neither. He rode away befo’ the Apaches went to work on them four, she says. One of ’em was this woman’s own husband. She couldn’t see what was happenin’—had to keep hid out. But she says she could hear the Injuns jabberin’ an’ laughin’, an’ one after another she could hear the pris’ners hollerin’. Her husband’s voice—she recognized it, seh. It fair makes you sick to listen to her tell it. He was the second one they worked on. The Americans was last. She says the fust Mexican lived longest. She could hear his voice, still hollerin’, after all the rest was still . . .”

“Release her,” was all Clay could say.

The burying detail, sick with the horror of what they had seen, tossed the last stones on the filled trench. He ordered them to horse, and led them in a canter to overtake Shelby.

They rode along the long dusty column of vehicles and riders, until they reached the general, who had halted beyond the village at the edge of the plateau where it shelved down steeply into the grey-green mesquite and cactus of the valley. Intently Shelby listened to Clay’s report.

“So this El Gringo rode away before the Indians began to torment the prisoners,” he commented. “I suppose that was too much for his delicate sensibilities.”

“Do you believe, sir, that a man like Parridine—an American and an officer—could be guilty of permitting a thing like this to happen if he knew it?” came a surprised interjection from Colonel Slayback who sat his horse beside Shelby’s.

“Unhappily I do,” replied the general slowly. “I believe this man Parridine capable of doing anything. He seems to have some kind of a grievance against the world, and he will go to all lengths. It is a fact, sombre but true, that Parridine has prototypes in history. There have been renegades of his breed before. The people of Kentucky will never forget that Simon Girty turned white prisoners over to the Wyandottes, and the people of New York will always remember that Walter Butler watched the Iroquois burning Americans at the stake. In my opinion, we’re dealing here with a human hyena. He allows brutality, because it builds him up with his Mexicans and Indians, in whom cruelty is abysmal. There’s a lesson in this episode for all

of us. We know now what will happen to us if we're ever captured. Gentlemen, it mustn't happen."

His officers listened in silence, some glancing at each other, and moistening their lips with their tongues.

"Bennett," Shelby said briskly, as if eager to leave the ghastly subject, "we've got a river ahead of us. It has only one ford at this point, according to my information. If I were in the shoes of this El Gato, I'd have my men posted somewhere about that ford. I want you to take your detachment and feel out that ford ahead."

"Yes, *sir!*" said Clay, saluting, glad to be on the move.

With his scouts behind him, he went down the trail at a trot.

Across the dusty plain wriggled the river, its course marked by a thick verdant screen of trees and bushes, wonderfully grateful to the eyes after the dry wilderness. From a long way off Clay heard the roar of the foam-streaked current, and as they rode down to the water's edge, the stream looked ominous. It seemed a hundred yards across here, although it really was less than that; and for most of its visible course it ran very deep and strong, with sleek eddies and occasional spoutings of foam where water surged over some midstream boulder. At the point where the road came down to it, however, the river was wider and shallower, its surface broken by great rocks, about which the water swirled in waves and leaping spume. Downstream it pitched suddenly over a shelf of stone, and the thunder of the falls boomed like a vast gong on the hot, stagnant air.

It was an ugly, dangerous ford, and not only Clay, but every man with him, studied anxiously the thick woods beyond.

"Hendy, take three men and scout up the river bank half a mile or so, keeping an eye on the other shore for indications of the enemy," the captain ordered. "Esau, do the same downstream. Move smart, now, and bring back your reports quick as possible."

During the time the side parties were gone, he strained his eyes for the flicker of a movement in the greenery beyond. But the woods were silent, and save for the shimmer of the distant foliage in the slight breeze, there was no motion. Janeicke returned first with his detail.

"The falls down below is mean an' high, seh," he reported. "Thar ain't no reason to be defendin' it, because nobuddy could git acrost nohow."

"Any sign of horses on the other bank?"

“No, seh. Not a thing.”

“Very good,” said Clay. Tobias was in view, and when he made his report it was no more illuminating than Janeicke’s. Again Clay asked:

“See any horses?”

Again the reply was negative. Horses would be the most difficult thing to hide if a considerable body of men lay across the stream. Any force large enough to threaten seriously Shelby would have a thousand or more horses to screen. It might be that no foe was over there after all.

But the order was to feel out the ford. Only one thing remained for Clay to do. He had to cross the river.

At this point, the current of the stream was stiff, but the ford was practicable. Where the road came down, the worst of the boulders in the channel had been pushed aside, so that there was a wide watery avenue over which wagons or coaches might cross without splintering their wheels. Clay turned to his men.

“Have a good look at your weapons,” he told them. “We’ve got to go over that ford. Probably there’s nothing over there. But we’re going to find out. Keep your eyes on me, and scatter out when we start. If I see a single *sombrero* in those woods, I’m falling back, because one rifle will likely mean hundreds.”

His eyes searched the faces about him. On Janeicke, Tobias, Gonder, and Caruthers, he knew he could count. But these others—the “Irregular Texans”—this was a final test for them. Would they hang back?

What he saw in the faces did not displease him. He turned his horse and splashed into the ford with a new kind of feeling towards these men. A kind of affection and pride. Three weeks ago they were riff-raff. Today they were—soldiers. That was his doing. He had put confidence and a new manhood into them. He felt almost tender towards them, because they were his. Therefore his voice was unwontedly gruff when he spoke:

“Let’s get at it!”

With a sensation very like plunging into an icy shower, he spurred into the river. The horse took daintily to the water, seeming to dislike wetting his hoofs. On either side, Janeicke and Gonder took their distances, and the others deployed in a scattering skirmish line. Clay’s chest tightened a little at the sight of that blank, threatening wall of green, but the alert faces behind him showed no lack of confidence. Guiding with his knees, a long-barrelled

revolver in his right hand, he splashed forward. The rushing water rose until the current ripped at the girths and his boots were wet. Still no sign from the other shore.

Now his horse began to brace against the current, and fight his way forward with an effort. A third of the width of the stream lay behind them—a half. Two-thirds. Clay began to breathe more freely.

Then events happened with deadly speed. Behind the jungle verdure a rifle cracked and a spout of white foam leaped beside Janeicke.

Another shot. The nervous chatter of a small volley.

Upstream one of the Texans clutched convulsively at his horse's mane, gave a weak, fading wail, and pitched into the water. They never saw him again; the falls took him.

“Forward! Gallop!” Clay yelled, with sudden frantic realization that their only chance was ahead. They had come too far to retreat. Their only hope was under the bank of the river. Obediently, the scouts drove through the water in a foaming rush.

All at once the bottom shelved. Clay's horse was reaching for the bar at the bank. Dry sand was just ahead.

And then the whole blank expanse of woods in front put forth curtains of grey powder smoke, and there came the long, spattering roll of a heavy volley. Ground and water were churned by bullets. Clay's horse stumbled and went full length over. Blackness closed over Clay.

About him swirled cold wetness and a strangling pain shot through his lungs. A vast avalanche of noise beat against his ears and dinned inside his skull. Light seeped between his eyelids and he knew powerful hands had gripped him beneath the armpits. Then the strangling passed and Clay was vomiting as he gulped for air.

Continuously, agonizingly, he coughed, retching after the paroxysms. All around was the splash and burble of water, but he was being dragged forward. Then dry, hot sand was under him, and consciousness beat back slowly to tell him that rifles were at work about him, and that the tumult of musketry came from the woods which now seemed almost on top of him. Clay opened his eyes. His lungs were easier now.

“Lay still, seh,” said a voice. “If you stick your haid above that bank, they'll shoot it plumb off.”

He looked up, blinking weakly. Gonder crouched above him, wet to the armpits, and Janeicke half-sprawled a yard or so away.

“Wh-what happened?” Clay asked feebly.

“Your hoss was shot an’ threw you. Your haid hit on a rock an’ it discombobulated you. Esau ketched a toe of your boot, or you’d of gone over them falls. Then we both got you by the body an’ dragged you here.”

Dizzily Clay looked about. He lay under a low, perpendicular clay bank on a flat sandy shingle, with the river washing by almost under his elbow. The bank was no more than three feet high, and against it, their muddy bodies pressed to the earth as if for protection, were his men. He counted. Six. And he had started across with sixteen . . .

“Where are the rest?” he asked, still shaken.

“Gone,” grunted Janeicke.

“Dead?”

“Yep. Falls got ’em.”

“Catfish?”

“He was one of the fust.”

“I am sorry. The horses?”

“Kilt or turned loosed when we got to this bank.”

Rifles were slamming in the woods and Clay listened, estimating the volume. “Sounds like a thousand guns,” he said.

“More like two thousand,” replied Gonder. “They ain’t all shootin’ now. Wish Shelby’d come.”

“He’ll be a-comin’,” promised Esau.

Gonder laughed mirthlessly. “Silly of us, wishin’ Shelby’d come, ain’t it?” he asked. “Because even if he does, it ain’t goin’ to do us no good. Shelby or the devil can’t cross that river in the teeth of them guns. We better hope fo’ night, instead.”

“It’s plain ye don’t know Ole Jo,” returned Esau severely. “Ole Jo will git us out of hyar. He’s a son-of-a-bitch on wheels!”

Clay’s head was clearing, although it ached horribly from the blow. He put his hand to the side of his skull and felt a bruise puffing up. Without

realizing that the movement brought the top of his head above the bank, he struggled to a sitting position. Instantly his hat was smitten from him.

“Close shootin’,” commented Esau critically, as Clay ducked.

Twenty feet away, one of the Texans fell thrashing on the mucky bar, biting at nothing and quickly convulsing in death.

“Five left,” said Gonder as if he were discussing the weather. “How you feelin’ now, seh?”

He sat hunched behind the bank with all that racket going on in the woods not fifty yards from him, and the slugs biting the edge of the earth above his head, and calmly stroked his red beard while he gazed at Clay with friendly concern. Compared with his colossal calm even the veteran Janeicke appeared nervous.

“Better, thanks,” said Clay. “Esau, order everyone to keep down, except one man at a time as a lookout. It won’t help any to shoot blind into those woods.”

He now recognized those still alive under the bank. In addition to Gonder, Janeicke and himself, they were Hendy Tobias and the cadaverous Texan, Rufe Champion. Hendy removed his hat, and the sun beat hot on his bleached eyebrows and thin sandy beard as he raised his head cautiously and snatched a glance over the rampart.

“See nawthin’, seh,” he said, ducking as a storm of bullets combed the top of the bank. “Listen to them devils shoot!”

“Hold your haid jest right an’ they’ll part your hair fo’ you,” suggested Gonder, and even in their peril the besieged men under the bank laughed.

“Dare yo’ to let ’em part them orange-coloured whiskers of yourn,” retorted Hendy.

Inch by inch, his hands flattened like a lizard’s against the bank, he raised up for another look. Something made a woody, rapping sound, and the sergeant pitched over sidewise, with a feeble thrashing of his feet.

“Four left,” said Gonder, not bothering to turn Tobias over. “Want me to look, seh?”

“Keep down!” Clay exclaimed. “Listen!”

It had been long coming, but they all heard it—the distant thin note of a bugle.

“Shelby,” said Gonder. “Wonder what he aims to do? He’s done lost sixteen men an’ a off’cer already. This crossing is goin’ to cost him plenty.”

With utmost detachment the red-beard was counting them all as already dead.

“Set still an’ git a lesson,” said Esau. “Ye ain’t never seen Jo Shelby make a cavalry crossin’. It’s jest bee-youtiful to watch.” He rubbed his hands together and grinned through the black mat of his whiskers. “I tell ye, he’s a son-of-a-bitch on wheels!”

Close together crouched Janeicke, Gonder and Clay. A dozen paces away, excluded by a sort of timidity from their close company, the only other survivor, Rufe Champion, squatted alone, gazing broodingly at the river.

“Cheer up, Rufe,” said Janeicke. “Think how lucky ye are that thar ain’t no yalligators in them waters.”

“Ah ain’t lucky.” Champion turned his lean face towards them and his eyes were haggard. “Ah’m jest thinkin’ how onlucky Ah am. They’re gone—all of ’em. Ah knew them boys. We rode together fo’ years. We got drunk together. Mos’ folks was too good fo’ us, but them boys was all jest alike. We—we was purty no-’count, Ah guess. But we all done things alike, an’ it was all right. A man kin go ’long when he’s got a friend that knows him right down to his heart. But mine is all gone. Gone fo’ good. Ah’m the only one left. Lovely Jesus, Ah ain’t lucky!”

At the pain in his voice even Gonder was silent. And then the fire from the woods lifted suddenly. The bullets no longer were nipping the edge of the bank—they were directed at some more distant target. Clay knew what it meant—the Brigade was in range.

From Shelby’s side of the river suddenly came a long, rippling volley, and the air above was filled with the whimper of bullets.

“Hope they keep it high,” said Esau, suddenly anxious.

As if in answer, a bullet skipped on the water near them and buried itself in the clay bank beside Gonder. Another sank by Clay’s elbow, and here and there, above and below, came the smack of other lead.

“God he’p us!” cried out Esau. “We’re gettin’ it from both sides!”

Rufe Champion turned suddenly over with a grunt. A slug had ripped a wet hole between his shoulder blades.

“An’ that’s the end of the Irreg’lar Texas Cavalry,” said Gonder, sombrelly gazing at the still quivering corpse. “I used to think they was yaller curs—trash. But at the end they did all any man could ask—their best. Cap’n, here’s my hat off to the Irregular Texans.”

Esau’s flopping hat was off too, and Clay removed his, nodding mutely. A clutch was at his throat. They had been his men, those Irregular Texans, in a measure he had made them. They partook of him. And all of them were gone.

A bullet splashed mud all over him, almost at his feet as he squatted. The spatter shook him out of his morbid mood.

“Dig!” he yelled. “Dig for God’s sake!”

Scratching at the sand with his sabre he set the example, and Gonder and Janicke began a frantic clawing with sticks, fingers, knives and flat stones. Low-flying bullets hissed about them, but they scooped eagerly at their shallow trenches, in spite of the fact that these excavations filled almost instantly with oozing muddy water. The wet sand they piled between themselves and Shelby’s rifles, wallowing gratefully in the muck as soon as the holes were deep enough.

Hardly had they completed this, when the Confederate fire slackened, although that from the woods was undiminished.

“What’s our side doin’?” asked Gonder.

Clay longed to see, but he lay low for his life. It was Esau who answered:

“Dunno—except that Ole Jo never quits. When ye think he’s slackenin’, that’s jest when he’s gettin’ ready to hit hardest.”

Bugles across the river sang a sudden high, excited fanfare.

“They’re blowin’ the charge!” exclaimed Esau, and raised his face to wipe a smear of muddy slime from his beard. “Ye don’t reckon Shelby’s sendin’ them acrost in the teeth of that fire?”

From the woods, the shooting, heavy as it was before, built suddenly to a new crescendo. Under the clay bank, the three men could not see Shelby’s movements, but to the Mexicans those movements apparently were clearly visible. The rifle fire evidently was being concentrated to break up an attack before it started.

But now began a sudden shrill howling, like the wail of the winter winds—and the sound came, not from behind Clay, but from somewhere deep within the woods ahead. He and Janeicke stared at each other, incredulous.

“The yell—the Rebel yell!” said Esau unbelievably. “Why, we’re acrost the river!” He gave a whoop. “By God, Shelby’s out-foxed ’em again!”

The roar of many rifles merged into a horrific tumult that hung on the heated air, and the atmosphere became rank with powder gases. But it seemed to Clay that fewer bullets were flying across the river, and he thought he even detected a movement in the tumult. As if the Confederate flank attack was driving the enemy already.

For the first time he saw across the river the grey troopers. They were coming hard, to aid the flankers in the wood—the first ranks of the cavalry rode over the bank into the water and the foam boiled white under their horses’ hoofs. Bullets kicked among them and here and there a saddle was emptied or a horse went down. But on they came with a rush.

“Didn’t I tell ye Ole Jo was a son-of-a-bitch on wheels?” crowed Esau in triumph to Gonder.

And then the first rush of the horsemen was across the river. An officer—Reid Rutledge—gave Clay a hand and a stirrup, and he vaulted up behind the rider. They plunged into the heavy tangle of green and their horse leaped over something, then half-stumbled on something else—something soft. Beneath them a high, splintered scream arrowed upward. Branches whipped Clay’s face. A bullet sang past his ear. Hoofs pounded, orders were bawled, and the noise of the guns was everywhere.

Quite suddenly the fight was over. The cavalry’s rush had carried it through the woods. Men had leaped from their horses and were kneeling, shooting at bobbing figures of distant running Mexicans, who were making for the barren mesquite hills beyond.

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Shelby said: "It's rye, but it was all I could get in San Antonio. In the absence of bourbon, drink up, captain."

Captain John Thraikill relaxed his stiffness, glanced at Major Edwards who sat with the general in the lantern-illuminated tent, and reached for the tin cup. Before he raised it to his lips, he spat copiously out of the tent door. Then, without bothering to wipe the trickle of dark slime which ran down his chin from the corner of his mouth and made a crooked rivulet before it lost itself in the forest of black beard on his jaw, he shifted the quid to the corner of his cheek and gulped down the fiery liquor.

Thraikill was the only man Shelby knew who could chew tobacco and drink whisky at the same time. It was said he even ate his food with a quid in his jaw. A farmer, with no pretensions to education, but a first-class soldier. His previous experience as one of Quantrill's guerrillas had not hurt him as a cavalryman under Shelby. But then, he had left Quantrill before the latter became such a stench in the nostrils.

Through the distance a far-away scream bored, containing an accumulation of human agony to set a man's teeth on edge, but Thraikill did not blink. He set down the empty cup, stiffened, and began his report:

"Near as we can figger, there's seventy-nine daid Mexicans an' Lipans. All the wounded must've escaped, seh—or the shootin' of our men was remarkable acc'rate."

He let the last words linger with inescapable implications. Shelby grunted testily. "Can't expect my men to act like angels in battle after the misery they've been undergoing," he growled.

Another voice, afar, lifted its agonized plaint. Shelby stirred uncomfortably. He knew the hospital tent was set close to the river bank a quarter of a mile downstream, and that in it Dr. Tisdale was making a horror and a shambles. There the screaming had begun soon after the battle ended, and the shattered bodies on the table leaped and fought, held down by stony-faced men, as the doctor cut, or probed, or sometimes sawed. Even now, after darkness, Tisdale worked desperately on by lantern light, dealing with

red gaping abominations, and inexorably deaf to the voices of the wounded, who prayed for mercy when the only mercy was mercilessness.

“Wish to God Tisdale would finish his butchering,” Shelby groaned.

Thraikill shifted his quid again. “Thar was five pris’ners, seh.”

“Prisoners!” Shelby rapped out. “Good! Have them brought up. Now by the gullet of God, I’ll shoot them if it’s the last thing I do—after what they did back in that village to my men!”

An orderly went hurrying at Edwards’s command, and Shelby turned once more to the captain. “How about . . . our own casualties, Thraikill?”

“Fo’ty daid, seh, includin’ them in Bennett’s detachment.” Thraikill spoke without emotion. “An’ about the same number wounded. The high propo’tion of fatalities is due to the fact that durin’ the crossin’ of the river, the men shot off’n their hosses, even if only slightly wounded, was mostly carried over the falls an’ drowned.”

“The wounded—how many has Tisdale got that can’t ride?”

“He done a number of amp’tations—mebbe ten—last time I checked,” replied Thraikill.

“God! The hospital’s the worst thing about an army. It’s hell—just plain hell.” Shelby sighed. Then he added an ingenuous sentence: “It’s the one thing I don’t like about a battle.” For a moment he thought. “Ten—or twenty—amputations are going to complicate matters. These men have to be transported. That means wagons—and getting wagons the rest of the way to Monterrey is going to be a sockdolager of a problem. Well, Thraikill, that’s all. Get some sleep.”

He returned the captain’s salute, which could never be anything but awkward, and as Thraikill departed, faced Edwards.

“That’s not bad—do you think, John?” Shelby asked the major. “Considering the difficulties—river to cross and all? Cheap, really, any way you look at it. Fine work by Bennett’s scouts—the way they developed the enemy and then held their positions on the bank. Permitted me to send Collins to swim the river above the ford and envelop the enemy by the flank. We rolled ’em up like a wet towel, didn’t we?”

He was talking fast. Talking too fast. Talking to hear himself talk. Edwards had been with the general before when he drank whisky and talked fast. That was in the early days of the war. It is hell to be a commanding officer when the wounded worry you. Funny how it acts. The dead don’t

seem to matter much. But the wounded—you're responsible, somehow, for the way they are shattered. And the way they suffer. Liquor is the one cure for the feeling. It doesn't make you forget, but it makes your ideas fuzzy and not sharp at the edges. It was going to take considerable liquor for Shelby this evening.

Curious, too. He thought he had got all over this squeamishness about his battle wounded. At the end of the war he had secretly been quite proud of his ability to walk through a hospital without a stomach flutter. And here, all of a sudden, it was back again as bad as ever.

A reason for it, of course. Shelby knew what was the matter. He could not fall back now for moral reinforcement on the thought that he sent these men to receive their wounds under orders of someone higher than he. He was solely responsible now. He had brought these men to Mexico, and there was no higher authority. No Pap Price. No Kirby Smith. No Jeff Davis. Orders for battle, orders for death, came from him, Jo Shelby. Him alone. His brain created the movements which resulted in those distant screams. He hoped Edwards would not see through his consciously assumed pose of indifference.

Shelby groped again for the bottle. He had been drinking now for two hours. So far his superb head for liquor refused to succumb, but the fumes were beginning to get in their work at last. Edwards gazed at him uncomfortably. He had seen Jo Shelby take to drink before, but it never failed to worry him.

Thraillkill had said five prisoners, and Shelby, remembering the flayed corpses back among the ruins, awaited the coming of the five. He wanted to talk with them while he could still think coherently. Gonder, huge and red-bearded, appeared at the door of the tent and saluted.

“You send fo' me, seh?”

“Yes, Gonder. I want you to do some interpreting. Stand aside there.”

The prisoners were being herded into the circle of firelight, a little knot of sullen, expressionless men, in dirty rags. Shelby looked at them, then leaned suddenly forward and stared at the last pair. Wasn't that Señor Anda? And Father Bartolomé, of Piedras Negras!

No mistaking them. Somewhat dustier, perhaps, but no leaner or less composed, the old priest had changed little from when Shelby last saw him. The fat little *alcalde*, however, looked worn and almost pathetic.

“Anda!” said Shelby. “What are you doing here?”

“I am *soldado*,” replied the *alcalde*.

“*Soldado* hell! You’re not soldiers—you are savages! Bandits, and murderers, and torturers of helpless prisoners! Yes, we found them back in the village—those men you left for us. With the hide torn off their bodies. I’m sorry I find you in this company, Anda, because I’ve sworn to shoot every guerrilla I lay my hands on!”

The little *alcalde* listened without speaking, his eyes seeming sunken in his face. When Shelby finished, he drew his short figure erect.

“You say we mus’ die, *mi general*,” he said. “‘*Sta bueno!* We die. Thees *hombres*—they know they weel die. I know it. But also, an’ moreover, ees one thing more mus’ be said—to you I weel say eet. You call us *bandidos*. Ees not true! We are *soldados* of the *república!* An’ we say, all of us, to you—*Viva la república!*”

The last words raised to a defiant shout. Momentarily the dull faces of the other prisoners lit. Señor Anda turned again to Shelby.

“Leesten, *mi general*,” he said. “In Mexico we do not ask *los gringos* to come to us. We haff no hate for *Americanos*, *Franceses*, *Austrianos*. We go not in your countree, rob, kill, make slave. We live in peace. I suggest. Ees thees not well?”

As if expecting an answer to his question, the little man paused, but Shelby remained grimly silent.

“But *los gringos*—they weel not leaf us alone!” Anda spoke more like a prosecuting attorney than one speaking in his own defence. “Here ees Mexico, they say. She ees weak. Ha! They swoop down—like the *zipolotes* from the sky. ‘Thees part, she ees for me!’ one cries. ‘*Mira!* That part, she ees mine,’ cries anozzer. They tear my so onhappee countree to pieces—they feed on eet. Ees not so?”

Señor Anda’s short, round frame had taken on strange dignity.

“You, *mi general*, in Los Estados Unidos, are a famous *soldado* yourself. Thees I well know. You fight for freedom, yes? When I see you, I say, ‘Thees man, he ees good. Ees brave. He love freedom. I weel haff heem for *amigo.*’

“But somet’ing happen. The *Americanos*, they leesten to strangers. Thees Juarez, who ees? they ask. Ees rich? No. Ees strong? No. Ees nozzing but poor damn-fool *Indio*, hunted weethout any countree. The *Americanos* say, thees Juarez, thees Anda—they are *rotos*, the ragged ones. We go to

Maximiliano von Hapsburg—ees *rico*, the rich one. He weel reward us. To hell weeth thees *Mexicanos!*”

Edwards glanced nervously at Shelby’s face. It was fixed and hard under the tirade. But Anda went on with his indictment:

“You who eat in my *casa*, you who are my guest—you say, we weel sell our arms to those rich Maximiliano!

“But me—what shall I do? Weel I sell my soul to *los Franceses*? Weel I geev up my countree? Why not? I am leetle. I am fat. I cannot swing the sabre like the great Shell-by. I haff not beeg *brigada* of so-fierce *soldados*. Why I no sell myself also an’ moreover?”

The little *alcalde*’s voice grew tense.

“I tell you why, *mi general!* Ees because I am a man! Ees because I do not lie. I love freedom—love too mooch to sell. Those poor Juarez, hiding in the desert—he is a man also. I suggest. Ees flesh an’ blood, *sí*. But ees not afraid to die for hees countree! *He* weel not sell. Ees more better man than you, El General Shell-by! An’ so ees it weeth me!”

Edwards, Gonder, Captain Rutledge of the guard detail, and the guards in charge of the prisoners, stared breathless at Shelby. Never in their military lives had they heard him so rated. They looked for a volcanic explosion, almost bracing themselves for its violence.

But Shelby made no reply to Señor Anda. Almost hypnotically his eyes remained fixed on the little Mexican, as he sat silent, a strange expression on his face. After what seemed a long time, he turned to Rutledge.

“Take the prisoners back, and guard them well.”

“They are not to be executed?”

“I said guard them—not shoot them.” Shelby’s voice did not rise. It seemed calm, almost tired.

Long after the guard marched away with the prisoners, the general sat staring. Edwards remained silent, not daring to break the stillness.

“John,” said Shelby after many minutes.

“Yes, general——”

“That fat little man was telling the truth.”

“Oh, now, general——”

“The truth, John! It is a true bill Señor Anda has returned.”

Edwards remained silent. Shelby spoke again.

“John?”

“Yes, general.”

“How do you feel?”

“I think, sir, that I’m beginning to get sober.”

“I too! A most sorry condition, John.” Shelby offered the bottle. Edwards reached for it. The red tip of his tongue came out to moisten his dry lips.

“Well—your excellent health,” he said.

“Thanks. Same,” replied Shelby. The liquor coursed with grateful warmth down his throat. Edwards could see the rise and fall of the general’s adam’s apple, and the sour odour of whisky spread about them.

Shelby leaned forward with the bottle, his face still unsmiling.

“H’ist another,” he said.

Eagerly Edwards seized it, poured a drink in his cup, and handed it back to the general. This time Shelby did not bother with a cup. He lifted the bottle to his mouth, his head thrown back. *Gulp-gulp-gulp*. The thin screaming from the distant hospital had died down . . . to Jo Shelby it had already become a part of the other noises . . . the gurgling of the sucking stream not far from the tent . . . the distant chorus of frogs . . . the nearer piping of mosquitoes. He felt an immensity of whirling space. All life was nothing in its pervasiveness. It grew in inconceivable whorls, then slowed down in ever-diminishing spirals until it was tiny spinning circles, of many colours . . .

In the morning Shelby held inspection early, speaking very little, and afterwards ordered all vehicles, save only enough to carry the sick and wounded, to be gathered in one place. With these were heaped the tents and other destructible equipment, saving only that which could be carried on horseback and was absolutely essential. Soldiers were ordered to cook up such food as was left, preparatory to carrying it on their saddles the rest of the march, and wagon-masters worked at improvising pack saddles to transport ammunition by mule-back.

Old Jo that morning was secretly fighting a black reaction from the debauch of the night before. An ache crushed his head. If the noncombatants had ventured to protest, the result would have stunned them with its violence. But if he had expected a protest from them, he was disappointed. Congressman Tweedie, the newly converted upholder of military necessity, bustled and argued among them, and with success. Perhaps their acquiescence was helped by the knowledge that it would do them no good whatever to debate the matter. The luxury vehicles were almost all gone anyway, and so with a minimum of trouble huge fires were made of the tents and the rolling stock, surplus powder and lead was dumped in the river, and the noncombatant train, which had launched on this expedition with considerable pomp, took to the road on horseback.

There was something both grotesque and ludicrous about the picture they made—long coat-tails flying, tall hats clutched to heads, swaying, hunched figures, and faces upon which anxiety was written large—and this in spite of the fact that they rode the safest, gentlest horses Shelby could allot. On the other hand, the air with which Congressman Tweedie, on his broad-backed wagon horse, led the procession of his colleagues, was magnificent. His figure was perhaps too rotund to be truly Napoleonic, but he had all the lofty bearing of the Corsican.

A sorrier sight was the group of prisoners, who rode with arms bound and legs hobbled, surrounded by guards. Shelby was taking no chances with them. He had spared them their lives, but the necessities of war are grim, and the general might need all those Mexicans for hostages. If any more of his men were captured he did not intend to let them be butchered like those in the village.

Of the rolling stock, four covered wagons, the best and stoutest of the lot, were preserved, and in these the wounded were conveyed. Yet in spite of everything Dr. Tisdale could do, three of the sufferers were dead before night of the first day, and the others in agony because of the roughness of the road. Shelby was forced to halt frequently to give these wounded rest, and thus the rate of march was necessarily slowed still farther—with the food supply, in spite of reduced rations, almost exhausted.

The punishment they had received at the river crossing seemed briefly to cow the guerrillas in the hills, for the whole next day they left the marching Brigade alone. But the following night the harrying tactics commenced again, with long-range shooting; and from there on the column was constantly stalked by day and night.

The wounded slowed the rate of march, but the condition of the roads did fully as much to cut the speed of progress. Hourly the way grew rougher, the grades steeper, the labour more incessant. Again dry camps were made because water wells and tanks were polluted. It all added up, with the constant interruption of sleep by sniping and the numerous other annoyances, to put the Brigade in a humour more sullen day by day, until there was ugly talk of reprisals against the natives—any natives—that were encountered. When he heard that, Shelby paraded the Brigade and made a brief speech:

“I hear complaints about the reception we’re getting in Mexico. Well, I expect that I know soldiers about as well as anyone. To ask them to quit grumbling is to ask the leopard to change his spots . . . I could remind you that this is all of your own choosing—that we’re marching through this hostile and barren country at your insistence. But that decision has been made; no need to argue its merits now. The need is to accept the consequences of it with some evidence of courage.”

He paused and swept their ranks with his grey gaze.

“Aside from other considerations, it would be a gravely dangerous matter to arouse any more opposition than we already are facing from the inhabitants of this country. At this moment we are at low ebb. We are handicapped with wounded and with noncombatants. We are short—tragically short on rations. We have been fighting constantly and we are weary. But our foes have been the organized guerrillas of the Juarez forces. It is not a general mass uprising of the people that we have had to face. Let me tell you, you have no conception of war at its most terrible aspects until you have faced a frantic people, men, women, and even children, bent upon your destruction. It is no part of my desire to court such an uprising. We are short of food, certainly. But we are also near to the French outposts. A day or two at most should get us there. Meantime we can draw our belts more tightly.”

Again the grim survey of his men. Abruptly he ended:

“So I say to you: Complain to your heart’s content—but never let me hear of any man’s lifting a hand against Mexican noncombatants! We’re invaders—not murderers and thieves!” His face relaxed and he spoke dryly: “If the conditions were reversed and the Mexicans were marching through Missouri, I reckon we’d be doing a lot worse to them than these people are to us. So mark this well: Any theft, insult to a woman, or violence to aged or unarmed, will be summarily dealt with! *Dismiss!*”

Jackdaw grins, somewhat self-conscious, were exchanged as the men fell out of ranks. They knew Old Joe—and that his orders were likely to be bristlingly enforced. But watching them, Shelby wondered. After all it takes more than a speech—even a resolute, uncompromising speech with a promise of penalties—to reform incorrigibles like these overnight. For years Shelby's men had subsisted on whatever country they were living in, stripping it smoothly and systematically as they passed through it. To expect a thousand wild men who were experts at thievery, enjoyed thievery, and prided themselves on their renown in thievery, to give over this thievery which they considered their right, was expecting over-much. And Shelby knew it.

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They had abandoned another of the hospital wagons. Only two were left now, because six of those seriously wounded who had begun the last leg of the journey from the river, were all that remained alive. The others had been buried back on the road; and the two remaining wagons, so bad was the trail, were more trouble than all the rest of the column put together. Sometimes Shelby's troopers had to dismount and struggle with inadequate tools to build short stretches of road around particularly difficult shoulders, and often sweating crews of dismounted cavalrymen swarmed along, bracing up with poles the careening wagons to prevent them from toppling over into some canyon.

The tortures the wounded in these wagons suffered during that terrible journey were sickening to contemplate, but now those who still survived were deemed by Dr. Tisdale to have a good chance for eventual recovery, on the ground that having stood what they had gone through, hardly anything that could happen would be able to kill them.

Clay had been relieved, temporarily at least, of his post with the advance, and with Gonder and Janeicke, the two survivors of his detachment, told to take it easy for a while in the column, letting someone else bear the brunt of labour and danger. What was more acceptable, there were at last the beginnings of an understanding between Shelby and his junior captain, and the general no longer looked at him, "like a bull at a bastard calf," to use Esau Janeicke's inelegant but apposite phrase. This is not to say that Shelby had become cordial. But he no longer bristled when Clay appeared in his vicinity.

As for Clay, he was finding it difficult to ride in leisurely fashion with the column. There had been days and nights during those weeks of strenuous service with the advance, when he had wished violently for just the sort of relief from tension he was now experiencing. But now that he had it, he found himself steadily wishing that Shelby would give him a new command and put him once more out in front. Life there, at least, was not tedious . . .

To occupy his time and mind, he took to riding with the Mexican prisoners. He had liked Señor Anda and Father Bartolomé since the Piedras

Negras days, and he had ambitions to learn the language. Therefore he sometimes rode for miles, talking with the *alcalde* in English, or learning new words and trying halting sentences in Spanish.

If any of Shelby's men ever held ill-feeling against the prisoners, it had long since been disarmed by the glittering buck-toothed smiles of plump little Señor Anda. The *alcalde* continued to be a puzzle to Clay. That he should be in his present predicament seemed utterly without logic or reason. He had none of the appearance of a fighting man, being soft, full of smiles, fond of creature comforts, ox-eyed, and altogether inclined to shrink from hardship of any kind. Yet it was noticeable that the other prisoners treated him with deep respect. As the *alcalde* of an important border town, his position among his fellow Mexicans would be high, but the fealty of these seemed to be to the *man*, not the position. About Father Bartolomé there was less to wonder. The priest's lean visage, in all truth, seemed better fitted for a soldier than a priest, and Clay well knew that in Mexico it was not unusual for a *padre* to go into battle with his flock.

Considering these matters the day following Shelby's announcement of a ban on all depredations against the countryside, Clay lounged in his saddle at a footpace down to a ford, where the general himself and some of his staff members were watering their horses as they watched the column toil past. At the moment of Clay's arrival, two riders broke without warning through the underbrush at the side of the trail, and came right out on the road, almost into the very group of officers surrounding Shelby.

Clay stared at them. The men pulled up their horses in evident consternation. They were alike in a sort of congenial disreputability; they were slightly intoxicated; and they were most chap-fallen at the sight of Shelby. One had a dangling horsetail beard; the other's whiskers were kinky and red.

After his first look of surprise, Shelby's brows lowered fearsomely.

"Janeicke and Gonder!" he said. "What in the name of hell are you doing here?"

The two attempted, ridiculously, to sidle their horses away.

"Nawthin', seh," said Esau hastily. "Jest comin' back from a scout."

But the general's eye fell on a bulging sack tied behind Gonder's saddle.

"You men have been relieved from scouting duty," he said sternly. "Did anyone tell you to go out independently?" Then he added suspiciously: "What's in that bag?"

Gonder gulped. “It’s—it’s—jest my washing, seh,” he mumbled.

Shelby’s mouth tightened forebodingly. “Better be careful,” he growled with heavy irony, “or your washing will bleed to death. Captain Bennett, put these men under arrest, sir, and bring them to me at the end of the march to-night!”

For the first time Clay observed that blood had soaked through Gonder’s sack, and his concern for the pair became real. As hastily as possible he herded the culprits out of sight of the angry general.

“What in hell’s name were you men doing?” he demanded when they were safe.

“We was—well, foragin’ by accident, seh,” replied Janeicke with strange meekness.

For all his worry Clay almost laughed. “Oh, you incorrigible prowlers of other people’s hen-roosts!” he said. “And this, right after Shelby issued strictest orders against molesting private property!”

“It wasn’t no hen-roost, seh,” corrected Gonder lugubriously. He added that he and his crony had been “squanderin’ around over the country, jest to see what it was like,” when they came upon a homeless shoat. He somehow gave the impression that it was a feeling of commiseration for the destitute condition of the pig that moved them in what followed. They could not, as it were, bear to see the animal rooting the ground in loneliness and sorrow. So they dismounted and Esau drew his sabre. The shoat, horrified by the fate approaching, uttered piercing screams, but Esau struck once and the animal was silent. The companions dressed and cut up the carcass, placing the pieces of pork in a sack which, “merely from habit, seh,” Gonder carried with him.

“All this, ye unnerstand, Cap’n Bennett,” broke in Janeicke eagerly, “was jest habit an’ not intentional. Aftah ye’ve foraged fo’ about everything ye’ve et fo’ so many years—an’ besides the meat rations is mighty sho’t, an’ me an’ Gonder was that hongree fo’ barbecued pig—the same bein’ a dish that if ye ain’t tasted it, ye’ve been denied a taste of the Sweet Bye-an’-Bye \_\_\_\_\_”

Clay nodded. “And you were so filled with anticipations that you blundered directly into General Shelby,” he finished for them. “And you call yourselves scouts! I don’t mind the foraging. It’s the walking right into the general, by two men who’re supposed to know how to move in the country

and keep their wits and eyes about them, that makes me sick. You'll certainly catch hell to-night—and you deserve it!"

The culprits looked at him beseechingly.

"That's what's worryin' us," said Gonder. "What do you suppose he'll do?"

"He'll break you both, for one thing. I don't know what else."

"Cap'n, will you do us a favour, seh?" asked Gonder suddenly. "A little bit of a favour?"

"That depends," Clay said suspiciously.

They made known their request, and he hesitated long, but after a time, partly because of their supplicating voices, and partly because he was genuinely fond of the scamps, and more particularly because they were all that was left of the command he once had led, he agreed. That evening he surreptitiously carried a package wrapped in sacking and left it at Shelby's bivouac.

Shortly after mess, an orderly summoned Clay to the general. The days of luxury were ended. There were no tents now, but a fire still burned because the sun had not yet set. Clay found Shelby seated on a rock, with a curious expression on his bearded face.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked, looking his captain squarely in the eye and indicating the burlap-wrapped package at his feet.

Not trusting himself to speak, Clay remained silent.

"It is a quarter of fresh pork," Shelby informed him without a smile. "I found it here when I returned a few minutes ago. I am mighty hungry for fresh pork, and the sight of it makes my mouth water. I have, you understand, no notion whence it came. But on consideration, I do not think it right to punish men severely for just having a little laundry. I refer to Janeicke and Gonder. Tell them to consider themselves under arrest and ride in the prisoners' train until I send for them. I'll decide in the meantime what to do."

The outstanding surprise of the expedition had been the noncombatant train, simply because its soft and fleshy conglomerate of governors, senators, and congressmen, had survived, in remarkable vigour and stentorian voice, the privations the Brigade had thus far experienced. To be

sure they were called upon for no work, their wants were supplied, their food even was prepared for them, and they faced no more danger than was inherent merely in riding anywhere in Shelby's column. Yet considering everything, their endurance was wonderful, as was their united lung-power, which was raised morning, noon, and night, in protest against fresh outrages put upon them—such as any further straitening of rations, or other necessary sacrifices.

To these Congressman Tweedie continued to form an outstanding exception. Still tenderly nursing his wound—although it by now had almost completely healed—he considered himself a man apart. He even made efforts to fraternize with Shelby, as fellow champions of a common cause. The general made shift at tolerating Tweedie, but he gave no longer any pretence of patience with the other civilians, swearing and stamping, and fiercely blowing out his beard, until the complainants retreated, leaving the air much cleared behind them.

Janeicke and Gonder, Clay soon saw, were far from downcast by their relegation to the prisoners' train. They found it vastly entertaining. Gonder was instructing Esau in Spanish, and here was a golden opportunity for practice. There were, moreover, some recondite questions of cock-fighting practice to be cleared with the *padre* and the *alcalde*. Finally, the swashbuckling Gonder, loving as ever the sound of his own voice, brought a rapt look to the face of Señor Anda, with his circumstantial narrative of the ritual of the "Missouri duel," where the antagonists grip opposite corners of a handkerchief between their teeth, and disembowel one another with bowie knives.

"*Ai!*" sighed the little *alcalde* wistfully. "Thees I would weesh to see. Ees mos' beautiful! *De ultima modo* . . . some time, if the dear *Dios* ees ver' good to me, perhaps I can hope to witness the Mizzou-ree *duelo*. Ees to be more prefer to the *corrida de toros*, the bull fight. I suggest!"

During this commentary, the Brigade had come to a halt. Up ahead an excitement most unusual had suddenly made itself manifest. Gonder and Janeicke craned their necks. Slowly the word worked itself back from mouth to mouth—Captain Rutledge, far forward with the advance, had just sent a galloper back to Shelby. He had seen two videttes in a notch of the hills. They must be French. The men discussed this gleefully. Presently the order came back to move forward again. With a new will the Brigade rode up the rocky road.

Far up front the distant videttes poised for a moment after the appearance of Shelby's main body; then they scurried out of sight. Before the Brigade reached the base of the escarpment, a small body of French cavalry appeared on its crest, and presently rode down towards Shelby's staff to parley, a white flag snapping from a lance at the head. The Brigade waited eagerly. It was high time the French were showing up. All those weeks during which the Brigade had dragged its way through the wilderness, starving and harried by enemies, approached culmination. Now, at last, civilization had been reached, and the men were almost on the point of cheering when the strangers rode up. The French looked smart enough in their blue coats and red trousers, and their leader, a young officer with a glossy black beard, after saluting, addressed Shelby in English:

"General Shelby? I have the honour to present Colonel de Saul's compliments. He knows of your approach and sends me to guide you to our camp."

"I'm delighted to hear someone in this country speaking our language," Shelby said, after expressing his thanks.

"Colonel de Saul speaks it. And you will find General Jeanningros, commandant at Monterrey, adept in it. Will you be so good as to follow me?"

Would they? The whole Brigade, weary of the barbarous wilderness, made ready eagerly to ride, as if to a haven. But Clay, back with the prisoners, saw that at the name of the French commandant, repeated back from the front by the men, the Mexicans seemed suddenly stricken with fear.

"De Saul?" they said one to another. "*Madre Dios!*"

"What ails them?" Clay asked Gonder. The red-beard shook his head. Every prisoner had turned towards Señor Anda, and in harsh, high voices they chattered together. The guard, alert at this unusual demonstration, rode closer to prevent any effort at a break.

But Clay's eyes fell on Señor Anda—and remained there. About the little *alcalde* his people huddled like sheep. He himself was helpless, trussed and surrounded by armed men, but there was nothing cowed about him. A swift change had come over him in this moment of crisis. Gone was the pompous, strutting, flabby manner. Señor Anda's eyes had narrowed and hardened; his lips drew tight beneath the little waxed moustache which now bristled with defiance. Of all the prisoners he alone seemed self-contained, alert, unfrightened. Over Clay it suddenly came that in all the time he had

known the *alcalde* this man had been playing a part. Instead of a fawning, ineffective clown, he was suddenly as purposeful as a steel chisel.

Hitherto Señor Anda had sat in silence, but his eyes suddenly fixed themselves on Clay's face, and he spoke very quickly and earnestly.

"*Mi capitán!*" he said. "You must know—thees de Saul, he ees no man. Ees a monster—*un demonio!* You mus' go, tell Shell-by I deemand protection as *prisionero de guerra*—for me an' for thees people. He mus' not geev us to de Saul! To do so—she weel be of the gr-reatest cruel! An act the dear *Dios* would hate . . ."

"Why?" Clay was impressed by the intensity of the other's manner, but he wanted some reasons also.

Señor Anda stared at him as if making up his mind what to say. "Señor, I weel tell you somet'ings. You call me Señor Ignacio Anda, the fat *alcalde* of Piedras Negras, *sí?* But all Coahuila, she know me by anoizzer name—I am call El Gato——"

"El Gato!" exclaimed Clay, thunderstruck.

"Ees true," the Mexican earnestly assured him. "Before *los extrangeros*—the eenvaders—come, I live in peace. I haff leetle *hacienda* in the *sierra*. I haff my *casa* in Piedras Negras, an' my people I love. I fight my *gallos de pelea*; I drenk my *aguardiente*; I take my *siesta*—*mira*, I am ver' happee! But when thees war come—thees Maximiliano von Hapsburg—I, also, fight for my countree. I am *jefe* of thees poor *hombres*. I wage the war against Shell-by all the way up from Texas. I plan the *emboscada*. I am your enemy. *Bien!* But you catch me, an' ees our plan to keep secret my name because I might get away if you do not guard me too close. But now we meet weeth thees de Saul. *Valgame Dios!* You haff not hear of him? Ees *jefe* of the *contre guerrillas* of Bazaine!"

He looked at Clay as if the mere mention of that name should stir him, but the captain did not understand.

"Leesten what I weel tell you," the little *jefe* continued almost desperately. "Thees de Saul ees cut-throat, robber, assassin! He was—thees I know from true source—he was *despidido*, what you call cashiered—from the French army for looting the Imperial *palacio* at Peking, when Louis Napoleon invade China—you remember? But when Maximiliano von Hapsburg come to my so onhappee countree, that Napoleon, he restore those decoration, those rank, to de Saul. *Por qué?* Because he need *un carnicero*—a butcher—for work in Mexico! De Saul ees mos' apt for that work. I

suggest! He raise up *regimentio* of bad mans—the worst in Europe—which he call *contre guerrillas*. Señor, thees ees hired assassins of helpless *peones*. Ah, señor, for the sweet sake of the Holy Mother, do not permit us to be geev to thees man!”

As if understanding in a dim way what their *jefe* was saying, the other prisoners echoed the last plea with a heart-breaking wail. Clay stared at El Gato, then at the others, hardly believing his ears.

“*Si—sí—señor*, you mus’ believe!” insisted the *alcalde*. “I am truly El Gato. No man would de Saul rather get into hees hands. Ees more cruel as a tarantula! He torment, he torture. He haff a saying: ‘When you keel a Mexican, *’sta bueno*, ees the end of heem. But when you cut off a arm or a leg, he ees thrown on the charity of hees friends—they mus’ support heem. Those who make corn cannot make *soldados*. Ees economy to operate.’ Hondreds, belief me, señor—hondreds haff pass onder the hands of hees ‘surgeons.’ One haff a hand lopped off; anoizzer a foot. Sometime the tongue or ears go weeth the limb. The mutilated ees in every city from Mier to Monterrey. Ask El General Shell-by, in the name of the *Madre*, do not place us in the mercy of thees scorpion!”

Clay was now wholly convinced. “I wish you’d told me of this sooner,” he said, “but I guess you had your reasons. I’ve got to get to Shelby at once.”

Out of the column he swung his horse and spurred hard up the hill, hoping to overtake the staff before it reached the crest. But the Brigade was now marching up an ugly rocky throat, and order was unavoidably lost as the ranks scrambled among the broken boulders, so that the troops fairly choked the passage. Vainly Clay tried to force a way through the mass.

“Open up! Open up, there!” he shouted until he was hoarse. “Staff business! Make a way!”

But though the nearest ranks heard and tried to give him the road, there was so much noise that he could not make the ranks in front understand, and his progress was tragically slow. By the time he finally forced his way through and overtook Shelby, the latter was at the top of the little pass, and had halted his horse to gaze downward. In full view was the French camp, which stood a quarter of a mile below the notch in a pleasant mountain valley—regular rows of white tents, very pleasing to the eye, with the red and blue cavalry drawn up before them. A group of mounted officers, advancing up the hill to meet the American general, had almost reached him.

“Your pardon, sir!” gasped Clay. “A matter of importance.”

“What is it?” asked Shelby, frowning.

“Those prisoners—the Mexicans, sir. They say they will be executed immediately if they are turned over to the French. They ask for protection as their right as prisoners of war.”

“Their *right*?” barked Shelby. “What right? They do not wage civilized war, so why should they expect us to?” But he tugged his beard and sat his horse scowling at the oncoming Frenchmen. “Yet if it’s true—why didn’t they say so before, anyway?” His scowl deepened. Then: “Probably exaggeration, though. These Mexicans can’t be kept from lying.”

“By your leave, sir, I believe them to be telling the truth. Señor Anda, sir, has just given me an amazing piece of information. He is actually El Gato, the guerrilla leader. We’ve had that *jefe* in our hands all this time, and didn’t know it!”

Shelby’s frown vanished and his face showed sudden intense interest. “What are you telling me, sir? That fat little *alcalde* is El Gato? It’s God damned hard to believe . . . yet thinking back, there were one or two occasions . . . Maybe he can give us some information on Parridine! I’ll talk with him. No, I won’t have a chance. Bennett, there’s nothing I can do at this late date if the French want those prisoners—there’s Colonel de Saul right in front of us. Even if Anda’s telling the truth I’m powerless to help him under the circumstances. Why in hell didn’t he speak up sooner? Remember that the French are, after all, the legal authority for the side for which we hope to fight.”

The French staff was within fifty yards, and now the commander drew up his horse and saluted, his officers following suit. Next the colonel rode forward and Shelby advanced to meet him. Colonel de Saul gave Clay a strange, chilling sensation. His face was tanned and brooding. Against the dark olive of his skin, his dazzlingly white hair, moustache, and imperial stood out sharply. Like his subordinate who had first greeted Shelby, he spoke English, but more brokenly. The use of English, Shelby’s men were to learn, was an accomplishment common in the French foreign service. As the two commanders sat their horses beside the road and conversed, the Brigade rode past, over the crest, and down the other side. All at once the Frenchman stirred. His cold eye had fallen on the captives, just then being herded by.

“Prisoners!” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” said Shelby. “I captured them in a fight at the river.”

A gleam of terrible joy illumined the brown countenance—momentary only, and instantly repressed. “Ah, brave *Americaines!*” cried de Saul. “You should be saluted wiz sloping standards. These men are outlaws—I take custody over them!”

Shelby shook his head. “I wish to deliver them personally to General Jeanningros,” he said.

Surprise chilled de Saul’s features. “As you weesh, monsieur,” he said indifferently. It was easy to see that he was deeply offended. Shelby was in a difficult position, one which might easily contain dangerous potentialities. Above all things he desired to avoid ill-feeling on the part of the French, particularly at this time. The very fate of the Brigade and every man in it depended on this. He glanced uncomfortably from de Saul to the prisoners, and back again to de Saul, indecision on his features—an expression most rare for him.

“If I turn these men over to you, colonel,” he asked at last, as if salving his conscience, “they will, of course, be well treated and justly dealt with?”

“*Mais certainement!*” De Saul looked him squarely in the eye.

“Then I agree,” Shelby said hesitantly.

The prisoners were halted and brought forward. Under de Saul’s deadly glare they were silent, their eyes, worried and preoccupied, turning hopelessly from one to another of the officers. El Gato alone stared expressionlessly straight ahead, and Clay wondered what thoughts were behind the mask of his face. A detachment of de Saul’s troops rode forward, to close about the little knot of Mexicans.

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Heads close together, so that the red beard almost mingled with the black, Gonder and Janeicke had watched the transaction of the prisoners. There was in their faces concern, particularly for El Gato, who, they considered, held sound views on certain esoteric aspects of chicken fighting, and showed signs, under their earnest evangelism, of being willing to recant on some of his other, more heretical, beliefs.

As the *contre guerrillas* herded the Mexicans away, the two scouts turned to Clay.

“What they goin’ to do with them pris’ners?” demanded Gonder.

“We had to turn them over. I think they’ll be all right,” said Clay. But he said it without conviction.

“That frawg colonel looks like a side-windin’ rattlesnake,” growled Janeicke. “But mebbe it’s all right. Them French is supposed to be white folks, ain’t they?”

Clay nodded.

Gonder, however, remained sceptical. “What do you think’s liable to happen?” he insisted.

“Shelby has de Saul’s promise,” replied Clay. “They’re to be well treated, and receive full justice.”

“It has a bad sound,” grumbled Gonder. “Jestice can be interpreted in so many ways—especially by a frawg.”

The column now was plunging downward from the notch, a long, undulating flood of mounted figures, eager to arrive at its destination:

“Thar’s somep’n spookin’ them hosses up front,” suddenly remarked Janeicke.

Clay had noticed it too—animals shying off to the right from some object that frightened them at the left side of the road, riders craning their necks. As he and the scouts, riding in the column, approached that point, he could hear each new file of men swearing.

Something huge and black flapped awkwardly, close overhead. A *zipolote*. The Mexican buzzard lifted its heavy body and soared over the tree tops.

In another moment Clay saw . . . why the *zipolote* had flown so sluggishly. A large mango tree stood within twenty yards of the highway, and from its branches hung strange, unnatural fruit . . . six corpses.

There is nothing pretty about a dead man hanging by his neck, especially when you are weary after a long march. And these had been dead unpleasantly for days. Their heads were twisted at awkward angles, and their faces were black and bloated. From two of the mouths black tongues protruded. The rest had no mouths. No faces. Every head was dreadfully ripped and gouged, eyeless, and with the skull pan torn open. . . . A score of *zipolotes*, artisans of this horror, swung in the sky, very low, just over the tops of the trees. They were larger than the Missouri turkey buzzards Shelby's men knew, and the tips of their wings were white.

The coming of the column had frightened them off and they soared, or slowly flapped their immense black wings irritably until they could resume their interrupted gorge. Below them the dead awaited patiently, dangling so straight downward from the ropes at their necks that they seemed stretched out of all normal length. And the smell of death hung heavy in the air.

Shelby's men did not like that mango tree or its burden, nor did Shelby like it. Gonder and Janeicke liked it least of all.

"That cinches it," Gonder growled. "El Gato knewed what was goin' to happen."

Fifteen minutes later, when they rode into camp, an orderly notified Clay to report to Shelby. The general was with Edwards, in the middle of the inevitable chaos of a camp in the process of being established, and he was giving final assignments for camping stations. Already a line of supply wagons from the French was discharging welcome food for the Americans.

Shelby turned on Clay. "Bennett," he said sharply, "I want to know more about these Mexicans."

"Nothing more, sir, that I can tell you. Señor Anda, or rather El Gato, told me——"

"You're certain in your mind that this El Gato business is no hoax?"

"General, if ever I saw a man telling the truth, Anda was."

Shelby removed his soiled hat and slapped it against his thigh to beat the dust off it. “I’m glad we didn’t give de Saul any inkling who we’d caught. You say El Gato was sure they’d be executed.”

“Yes, sir. He said de Saul was a butcher—said he practised mutilations \_\_\_\_\_”

“That’s enough.” Flat voice, pin-pupilled eyes. The general’s dander is up, thought Clay. Shelby’s having a battle with his conscience. He knows the tough logic of his position—the prisoners don’t belong to him and there’s danger in antagonizing the French. But he feels responsible—those prisoners are on his mind.

Shelby turned with sudden decision. “I’m God damned if I’ll let some slippery French devil think he’s pulled the wool over my eyes. ‘Justice,’ hell! I know what justice he means. I’ve got a right to protest. By the gullet of God, I’m *going* to protest!”

He replaced his hat on his head. Tapped it down firmly with his palm. “Edwards, you come along. You too, Bennett. And send for Slayback and Collins. Might as well make it a formal affair. ‘Justice!’ ”

Clay was the junior officer in the group that rode over to the French camp. Not since Austin had he been included in staff affairs, but he had little time now to consider if this meant any permanent change in his status. French guards halted them, saluted, and they were allowed to approach the headquarters of Colonel de Saul. The French commander stepped out of his tent as the Americans rode up.

“We are greatly honoured,” said the Frenchman, saluting.

But Shelby went straight to the point. “Colonel de Saul,” he said, “I just saw something up the road that I didn’t like. Those dead Mexicans.”

“*Oui?*” replied de Saul. “Then I am desolated.”

He gave them a fox grin.

“We do not do things so in my country,” Shelby continued sternly.

“Permit me, general, to remind you that you are not in *your* country.” There was cold emphasis on the last words.

Shelby ignored it. “I had your pledge. Justice for the men I handed over to you!”

“Justice they will get,” said de Saul, his voice suddenly thick with insolence. “A justice they richly deserve!”

“Colonel de Saul! You understand what I mean!”

The Frenchman bowed. He was not apprehensive, for he knew how helpless Shelby was. “I answer, *mon ami*, not to you, but to my superior!”

He spoke with enough impertinence to have caused him to be shot in Missouri, but Shelby, who never had possessed an easy temper, opened his mouth, grew dark in the face, then by a Herculean effort closed his mouth again. A quarrel was one thing he could not now afford.

But a quarrel, to judge by his action, was the very purpose of de Saul. His hard brown face turned and he rasped an order *in English*—to be understood by these Americans.

“Captain Radisson!”

The young officer with the black beard, who first had met the Brigade, stepped forward and saluted smartly in the French manner.

“The mango tree—see that it bears new fruit at sunset!”

The captain saluted again, and wheeled away. The Americans were speechless.

“You are in the tropics, General Shelby,” said de Saul, sneering. “This is July, but trees here bear fruit in most unexpected seasons.”

Without a word of reply, Shelby whirled his horse and led his officers at a trot out of camp. Silently they rode, and the general’s face was a spectacle to watch. His staff forebore speaking, because anyone could see that Jo Shelby was riding his wrath. Now it would buck up and nearly get away from him. Then his judgment would gain the upper hand and throttle his rage for awhile—only to have it come surging back again. It was awe-inspiring, almost, to see the general fighting to control his anger. He succeeded, but the effort left him more weary than a day’s hard ride.

In camp the Brigade was seething also. Those dead men dangling at the ends of their ropes had brought an ugly awakening. Shelby’s men had supposed themselves out of the reach of savagery when they met the French. They had been prepared to greet the emperor’s troops like brothers. Now they perceived that all they had done was to exchange the brutality of primitive Mexico for that of the *contre guerrillas*.

Clay was waylaid by Gonder.

“How about it?” asked the red-beard.

“You guessed right,” said Clay bitterly.

“Cap’n, we cain’t let it happen! We got to save those men. We’re honour bound, the way I look at it—the old *padre* particular.”

“So I feel. And so the general feels,” agreed Clay. “But Shelby could do nothing. I never expected him to take what he took off those Frenchmen anyway. Only the safety of the Brigade——”

“It ain’t Shelby an’ the Brigade I’m thinkin’ about,” broke in Gonder. “It’s me—an’ *you*, cap’n.”

“I fail to follow.”

“Listen, seh. I never told you this before, but Father Bartolomé saved your life in that trouble with Parridine at Piedras Negras.”

“The priest?” ejaculated Clay. “How in hell did he figure?”

“Remember my bet with Parridine—dollars against bullets?”

“I’m not likely to forget.”

“It was part of a scheme—I started it, the *padre* finished it!”

“In God’s name, man, quit talking riddles.”

“I knew Parridine was crazed on gamblin’. When I found he was goin’ to the chicken fight, I talked it over with Esau. We figgered we might get Parridine into some bettin’, us knowin’ more about the birds than ’most anybody around there. You saw it work out.” The last was said with complacency. It was one of Gonder’s great prides and boasts that he was an expert on the “chickens.”

“I saw it. And I gather you are not entirely ignorant on the subject,” said Clay drily.

“But we wasn’t leavin’ things to pure chance—not with a thimble-rigger like Parridine. We decided to make it a simon-pure cinch. So we hunted up Father Bartolomé——”

“I begin to comprehend . . .”

“We told him the story—he’s a full-growed man, seh, priest or no priest. He agreed, soon as he found out somebody’s life was up. Here was the plan: If I could get Parridine to fritter his money, I figgered to make a final bet on the last fight, countin’ on his gamblin’ fever to make him accept. The only thing I didn’t count on was that polecat trick of bettin’ only five instead of all six of his allotted shots. I could’ve stopped that, but I didn’t have my wits about me, an’ he had me in a hole before I knew what he was doin’.”

“Even so it saved my life.”

“So it developed, seh. But fo’ a time it looked bad. Anyway, to get back, Father Bartolomé was sure his bird, Qué Guapo, would beat Anda’s chicken. I hoped Parridine would bet on the *alcalde*’s rooster, but I wasn’t takin’ no chances. I was to let Father Bartolomé know which it was: If Anda’s, I’d pet my whiskers with my left hand. If Qué Guapo, the right. When Parridine decided on the *padre*’s bird—an’ the old priest lovin’ that fowl the way he done—I felt like a dog. But it was a man’s life against the rooster’s. So I give the signal——”

“You stroked your beard three times with your right hand.”

“You noticed, seh?”

“I had no idea what it meant.”

“Well, you know what Father Bartolomé did—let that red bird of Anda’s kill his chicken, by turnin’ its blind side towards the opp’osition. Fo’ him it was jest like condemnin’ a friend to death. An’ he done it, seh, because of you——”

Clay walked back and forth. “I had no idea of the priest’s part in this,” he said. “I must be pretty stupid. I see it now, though, and it’s pretty clear that I’ve got to do something to repay him.”

“When does this here execution happen?”

“Sunset.”

Gonder said abruptly: “You must not appear in this!”

“I’ll do my part.”

“Nope. It jest come over me. If anything went wrong an’ one of Shelby’s off’cers was mixed up in it, the consequences would be jest a little unhappy fo’ the whole expedition, I’m thinkin’. We got to figger some other way.” He paused. “Say, you got any whisky?”

“Whisky? No.”

“Any *tequila*, then?”

“Gonder, this is a poor time——”

“God knows, seh, I ain’t aimin’ to get drunk. But I got a friend I want in that there happy condition. Here’s what’s in my mind: We could bushwhack the execution party. But that would involve Shelby somethin’ terrible—armed attack by his sojers. Now what if some irrespons’ble pussons—

thoroughly an' demonstrably irrespons'ble—jest happened to blunder, like, into that execution? The French could ha'dly hold Shelby to blame fo' that, could they?"

"I suppose not," said Clay doubtfully.

"If I can get Esau Janeicke to he'p me, things might get accomplished," Gonder said. "Only Esau ain't no good at histrionics, or dissemblin'. Moreover, while he's stronger'n Adam's off ox, an' mean an' fierce to boot, he needs stim'latin' befo' he'll fly in the face of author'ty an' do the plumb reckless. An' plumb reckless this here's got to be. I got an idea, but I got to get Esau good an' drunk fust. An' it'll take *tequila*—an' a little gin——"

Clay looked him in the eye. "I'll get the *tequila*."

"An' gin?"

"And gin."

The French and American camps were pitched a quarter of a mile apart, and in view of the tense circumstances, Shelby had stationed a cordon of guards to keep his own troopers in bounds, and prevent possible trouble with the French. At one of these outposts Clay and Gonder discovered Esau. He was standing near a small grove of trees overlooking the road which led to the notch in the hills, and as they approached him, he swung his huge head around so that his beard whipped the breeze.

"Even from hyar the place fair stinks of them frawgs," he grumbled peevishly.

Gonder closed one of his shrewd little eyes at Clay. "Mebbe a snort of the O-Be-Joyful would he'p you bear that malod'rous effluvium you mention," he suggested.

"What ye got?" asked Esau, becoming instantly more cheerful. His face, however, clouded at the sight of the *tequila* bottle. "Ye shorely don't expect me to drink no mo' of *that*?" He expectorated tobacco juice disgustedly. "I'd give a arm fo' one good swig of cawn-licker," he mourned.

"My friend," said Gonder benignantly, "the single defect I obse've in your otherwise excellent char'cter, is a ce'tain lack of catholicity in your tastes——"

"Cath'licity!" exclaimed Esau. "I was doused by the Fo'ty Gallon Baptists, an' got convickshun of orig'nal sin with the Predestinatin' Presbyterians. Of course I done backslid from both of 'em, but I'm a Protestant whichever!"

“Tush,” soothed the red-beard. “Don’t hackle up an’ yell so quick. Not ontill you got occasion, leastwise. I aint talkin’ religion. What I referred to was a vestich of provincialism I detect in your feelin’ fo’ drinkin’ licker.”

“Licker? That ain’t no licker! It ain’t fitten to be mentioned along with Taney County moonshine. It’s a malignant concoction of the juice of the cactus, an’ onfit fo’ human consumption! I druther stay sober.”

“In that,” said Gonder loftily, “you do injustice to the cheer. Your trouble, Esau, is that you’ve never seen it prope’ly compounded. I have here ce’tain ingredients—gin, limes, sugar, an’ the like—with which I propose to introduce you to a decoction called—with some genius fo’ the descriptif—a Coahuila E’tquake.”

While Janeicke watched with deep suspicion written on his features, Gonder began his business with the ingredients. Esau accepted, almost with reluctance, the cup proffered him. But when he tasted the poisonous-looking preparation, his eye brightened. He tasted it freely, and grinned cavernously. He drained the cup.

“I reckon you’ll have another?” Gonder was saying, as Clay discreetly withdrew.

Very jovial and expansive, Gonder and Janeicke strolled right into the middle of the execution which was being prepared under the mango tree up the road. The five Mexican prisoners stood with arms bound and nooses about their necks beneath the branches from which the feet of their dead countrymen swayed less than a yard above their heads. Captain Radisson was supervising the adjusting of the nooses, and he was in a hurry to finish the job, for he was a fastidious man, and the stench from the rotting corpses above turned his stomach. He had no feeling whatever for the Mexicans who stood helpless and silent, seemingly paralysed by the fate that was now certain for them—with the exception of the priest who loudly intoned the absolution and the prayer for the dying, committing, as it were, his own soul, and those of his comrades, to heaven with a single wholesale gesture. Hanging Mexicans was only a routine task for Captain Radisson. He wished, however, that Colonel de Saul would at least permit the selection of a different tree each time. This business of working in the revolting smell of death, he would be sworn, was unhealthy. Get the job over and away as soon as possible, he thought.

Radisson frowned as two figures emerged from the bushes beside the road—a red-bearded figure and a black-bearded one.

“Howdy, cap’n,” said the red-beard, with a friendly wave that almost upset him, causing him to clasp his companion for support. The two stood weaving, and favoured Captain Radisson with broad and not very respectful grins.

“Mind if we watch them proceeding?” hiccupped Gonder.

Said Janeicke: “Been so long sense I seen a hangin I a’most fo’git how it’s done. We gen’rally shoot ’em in the States.” He was, Captain Radisson observed, chewing tobacco—a repulsive American custom—and the quid bulged his hairy cheek.

“Messieurs, you may watch,” the French captain said, without any cordiality, however. He disapproved the slack observance of rank that was apparent among these people, but he was not sure enough of his ground to be short and decisive with them, as he would have liked. So he turned his back on them, to watch the sergeant who was adjusting the noose.

“Beggin’ pardon, cap’n,” said the red-bearded American behind him. “That ain’t no way to hang a man. You want the knot under his left ear, not at the back of his neck. Unless you’re aimin’ to choke him slow. But I hate to see ’em kick, don’t you? Lemme show you.”

Had Radisson been facing the Americans he might possibly have averted what followed, but now, before he realized what was happening, Gonder had stepped around him, shouldered aside the surprised sergeant, and was handling the noose which was being adjusted about the neck of the short, fat Mexican, with the waxed moustache.

“Stop!” Radisson cried sharply. “Do not dare to touch those ropes. I shall have you under arrest——”

“Ye cain’t mean that, cap’n,” said Esau, deeply wounded in his inebriated feelings, “when all we wants to do is he’p ye——”

“Ignorant drunkards!” shouted Radisson, his patience gone.

Esau Janeicke stepped forward and spit expertly a stream of tobacco juice into the Frenchman’s eyes.

In the next few minutes many things happened, but Radisson did not see any of them. Blinded by the stinging liquid, the captain stumbled about, pawing at his eyes in the midst of a sudden melee. He heard a shout, then many shouts. A gun was discharged. Then he himself was lifted high in the

air by some prodigious strength, and hurled for what seemed a terrific distance, striking flesh—his own men—bearing them to the ground with the force of his propulsion. The sharp smack of fists impacting against jaws came to Captain Radisson's ears, as he lay there, shaken and moaning, on top of two or three of his groaning soldiers. There was also the pound and shuffle of struggling feet, the sick grunt of a man struck in the pit of his stomach, a heavy panting and swearing. And finally, subsidence of the noises. Radisson succeeded at last in clearing his eyes enough to see a little, although the pain of the tobacco juice was almost more than he could bear.

His blurred vision revealed that the Americans had at last been borne to the ground, where they lay battered, bleeding and bound. His own soldiers, a dozen of them, stood about nursing injuries, spitting out teeth and blood, furious, almost weeping with rage and humiliation.

The prisoners were gone. All of them.

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Shelby had the look of a man snake-bitten. This was the thing above all that he had wished to avoid—trouble with the French. This might mean the death of his hopes in Mexico.

“Janeicke and Gonder—those scoundrels again?” he groaned. “I ought to let them hang. By God, I’ve got a notion to let the swine hang!”

Yet he knew that regardless of everything he must prevent that hanging—it was a matter of prestige—of face. Should he allow summary execution of two of his men, without authority from himself, he might as well quit in Mexico. He would be finished, without any real authority over his own soldiers, or respect from the French.

To Colonel Slayback, therefore, he gave quick orders. The Brigade was to get to horse. Shelby was going with Thrailkill’s company to see about this hanging, taking with him a bugler.

“It’s only a quarter of a mile to the mango tree,” he told Slayback as he swung into his saddle. “If you hear that bugle, come a-running.”

Shelby’s men had been known to get to horse very quickly, but on this occasion they surpassed any former record. From the time the fat little Mexican, El Gato, appeared momentarily at the edge of camp, and called out his word of warning to Captain Bennett, to the moment when Shelby, with his escort, galloped out of camp, very few minutes elapsed. There was no joking in Thrailkill’s company which rode behind Shelby. The men loosened the carbines in their sheaths, and their faces were grim and set.

The thing that had thus far saved Janeicke and Gonder was that Captain Radisson had delayed hanging them until Colonel de Saul could arrive to take personal charge, and incidentally to give the requisite authority. Colonel de Saul, livid with his anger, was directing the preparations, when he heard the hoofs and whirled about.

Rank after rank, the angry bearded faces swept up. Beneath the mango tree with its forbidding “fruit,” Janeicke and Gonder stood surrounded by *contre guerrillas*, ropes already about their necks. Esau still was profoundly

drunk, teetering on his heels, and loudly insulting his captors. Gonder, however, seemed suddenly sober—and very serious.

Back on its haunches Shelby pulled his horse, and in the dust the two commanders eyed each other in a silence which crackled with tension. Then the Missourian spoke three words:

*“Release those men!”*

De Saul’s face stiffened savagely. “You still do not appear to realize, general, that you are no longer in your own country,” his deathly voice said. “These men have violated the law—interfered wiz a military execution, attacked the uniform of France, aided prisoners to escape. The penalty of any of these is death.”

His men never forgot Shelby’s bitter laugh. “These men are Americans—not *peones*! Give them back to me—or be prepared to take the consequences, Colonel de Saul!”

To the right and left de Saul glanced. Behind Shelby massed scores of granite visages, and clear across the quarter-mile distance intervening between the mango tree and the American camp, could be heard the voices of officers, bawling orders, as the Brigade formed. But it was Shelby’s face which told the Frenchman of his real peril. De Saul chose not to take up the gauntlet.

*“Laissez aller les prisonniers!”* his choking voice ordered.

Janeicke and Gonder grinned with relief as they were freed. For the last quarter hour they had been close to death and they felt vastly happier. But their grins faded when they confronted Shelby.

“Get out of my sight!” he roared.

The scamps shuffled hurriedly away, and de Saul stepped to Shelby’s horse. *“Monsieur le general!”* he said. “You shall answer to me for this!”

“It will be my pleasure!” snarled Shelby. For a moment they confronted each other, the Frenchman dark with fury, the American white and sneering. Then Shelby turned back to his own camp.

His officers looked at each other with foreboding. A duel—with Shelby’s crippled right arm to handicap him?

But Shelby himself did not seem concerned. He fumed for a while beside his fire, but Major Edwards later reported it was the incident of Esau and Gonder over which he was fuming.

“What will you do, sir, when de Saul challenges you?” ventured the adjutant at last.

“Kill him,” said Shelby.

“Your arm, general——”

“I’ll shoot—and kill—with my left!”

From reveille next morning, the Confederates went about their duties with angry eyes on the French camp. Everyone had heard of the threat to Shelby, and the men grew wrathful, so that there even was some talk of sallying over in a body, without any official orders, and extirpating once and for all this de Saul and all his thievish *contre guerrillas*.

Such talk, however, ravelled itself out to nothingness, as such talk always does. It was supposed that de Saul would send over a formal delegation with his challenge. But nine o’clock came and there was no sign. About that hour a courier from the south rode into the French camp.

Had they known de Saul as well as they were to come to know him, Shelby’s men might have spared themselves the worry of that night and morning. The *contre guerrilla* chief, they were to learn, would prefer to choose a way much more devious, and perhaps more certain, than a duel.

An important message was borne to de Saul that morning by the courier. General Jeanningros, commandant at Monterrey, had learned of Shelby’s coming, and he now ordered de Saul to bring the Americans in at once. Presently an officer rode over from the French camp with a stiffly worded message, to which Shelby replied in agreement equally stiff to the request that he should accompany the French in their march back to the city.

Thus, with bad blood between them, and a challenge hanging in the air, the two commands, French and American, rode over the mountains together that afternoon and the next day, until at last the Missourians saw a long valley in the mountains, and in it many flat-roofed houses, tinted yellow, blue, pink, or white, with green shutters which gave a feeling of deep coolness. They were looking upon Monterrey. And when they rode from the pine-clad hills they found themselves in the tropics, where mimosas, mangos and banana trees took the place of the pines, and shaded the houses.

At the entrance to the city, the French garrison had turned out to meet the Brigade, and as Shelby approached, a short, brusque man, who had grown

grey in the service of his country, rode forward to exchange salutes with the American leader.

Clay never forgot that strangely assorted pair—General Jeanningros and General Shelby—nor the picture they made as they sat their horses between the lines, the American bearded, square-set, and fierce; the Frenchman regarding him with a hard-lipped smile under his upturned grey moustache. About Jeanningros there was an impression of complete candour, and from the first he and Shelby seemed to understand each other.

“Barracks have been provided for your men, general,” said the Frenchman. “Pray make yourselves comfortable—they are yours as long as you decide to honour us here at Monterrey. Meantime, it would give me pleasure to have you call upon me at my home—whenever it is most convenient to yourself—for a mutual discussion of our affairs. I have assigned an attaché as your guide.”

Together the two generals rode down the lines of the Brigade and of the French garrison, in an inspection, and Jeanningros was intensely interested in the complete substitution of the revolver for the sabre in the Confederate equipment. The inspection finished, Shelby ordered Major Edwards to proceed with dispositions at the barracks, and he and Jeanningros conversed pleasantly for some time before the latter returned to his own quarters.

Soon after Shelby bade farewell to the French general, Clay was summoned to his office. The captain found his superior in wonderfully good spirits, and for the first time since the expedition began, the general relaxed his stiffness with Clay.

“I like that fellow Jeanningros!” he exclaimed. “I believe we can deal with him. A different proposition entirely from that reptile, de Saul.” He stroked his whiskers while Clay, at attention, regarded him with some astonishment, for it was not usual for Shelby to express opinions of this kind to junior captains.

“I sent for you because I’ve something to say to you,” Shelby continued. “I’m in hopes we’re through the worst of our march. You did a first-rate job as chief of scouts on the road up here, Bennett. Turned those Irregular Texas fellows into a not inefficient little corps, hey? No, don’t thank me. It’s not a compliment, sir, it’s a plain statement of fact. None of your command left now, I understand, except those rascallions, Janeicke and Gonder, who are more trouble to me than the rest of the Brigade put together! Well, I don’t think I’ll try to have another scout force formed. From now on, until we

reach the capital, we should be able to proceed with ordinary advance guards and screening patrols, line companies taking turns at the duty.”

He shot a keen glance out from under his eyebrows. “I’ll be frank, captain,” he said suddenly. “I had my doubts about you. But I believe I was wrong.”

Back stiff, Clay stood looking straight ahead, not knowing what to reply. He felt somewhat indignant, like a small boy being lectured, but it was politic to keep silent.

“So I’m relieving you permanently from your post of excessive risk as chief of scouts,” continued Shelby. “And I have one for you of even greater responsibility. The A.D.C. thing. In dealing with these French we’re going to have to put on more side than we’re accustomed to in our army. I need an aide-de-camp to accompany me, attend to courtesies for me, and I want somebody I can trust to do as I tell him, just as I tell him. Captain Bennett, will you accept this post?”

Aide-de-camp to Shelby—what could Clay say? It was the final proof that the general’s prejudices and distrust of him had vanished entirely, and that they were back on the old cordial footing. It meant opportunity and honour. All these things raced through Clay’s head, but he tried to sound as dignified, and reserved, and properly appreciative as possible.

“I only hope, sir, I can discharge the duties satisfactorily to you.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Meantime, your duty begins this minute. Be so good as to present my compliments to Major Edwards and notify him to prepare to accompany me to call on General Jeanningros. You will attend also. Both of you be here within the hour.”

The afternoon was lengthening when they were received by General Jeanningros, in the large stucco house which was his home and headquarters. The Frenchman came out of his study as a Mexican servant admitted them, and bowed.

“Be so kind as to enter my office, messieurs,” he said. He ushered them into a stiff military room, with maps on the walls, papers ranged in neat piles on the desk, one or two technical military books, and a portrait of the Emperor Napoleon III, framed in a draped tricolour.

“Now,” said Jeanningros, as soon as they were seated, with a directness remarkable in a Frenchman, “what is your purpose, general, in coming

here?”

The question was sudden, but Shelby replied to it as bluntly and as frankly as it was asked. “I come to seek service under Maximilian.”

“There are some things that need explaining.”

“As what?”

“A former officer of yours was here some weeks ago.”

“An officer of mine?”

“Tall, lean-faced, very dark——”

“Parridine!” cried Shelby.

“The same.”

“Parridine was no officer of mine, General Jeanningros,” Shelby said after a moment’s silence. “But what of him?”

“He mentioned a certain transaction of yours with the Juarist rebels on the border.”

“You refer to the guns,” said Shelby instantly. “I will explain that. It was impossible to transport them over the desert and I needed provisions. So I traded them—for food.”

“Nevertheless, it leaves the enemies of the emperor in possession of six brass guns. This will be a grave matter for you to overcome.”

“I do not fear it. The man you named—Parridine—would put the very worst possible face on this story to you.”

“I have not swallowed his story at full value.”

“Good!” Shelby returned Jeanningros’s dry grin. The two had reached a footing of clean-grained mutual respect and liking. Jeanningros said he did not know where Parridine had gone. It was some weeks before that the man had come to headquarters; been questioned; and disappeared.

“You do not know, then, that Parridine is now with the Juaristas?”

“*Mais non!*”

“He is an officer with El Gato——”

“*Sacré!* And I had the opportunity to hang him!”

“That, general, is a privilege others of us would enjoy,” grinned Shelby. Then he became serious. “I don’t know what you think of things here, sir,”

he said, coming crisply to the point, "but one thing is certain—you've acted towards me like a man and a soldier, and I'm not going to withhold the strictest truth from you. You should know therefore that the Federal government of the United States has no love for the occupation of Mexico by the French. If diplomacy can't get you out, you'll likely see blue uniforms south of the Rio Grande."

"Perhaps we will have something to say about that," said the Frenchman.

"Perhaps. But will France fight? I, for one, hope so; but it seems to me that if Louis Napoleon had meant to be serious in this thing, he would long ago have formed an alliance with Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy. Better battles could have been fought on the Potomac than on the Rio Grande, and surer results gained from a French landing at Mobile than Tampico or Vera Cruz. We come to join the army of Maximilian in the event of this very invasion from the north. We know the Yankees, and let no man underestimate them. They fight like wolves. What do you think Marshal Bazaine will say?"

"I cannot speak for Bazaine," said Jeanningros slowly, "but I do not think he will be averse to enlisting your Americans."

"And what about Maximilian?"

"Ah, the Austrian! You should see him to understand him." Jeanningros leaned forward with sudden interest, his eyes fixed on Shelby's face. "More of a scholar than a king, good at botany, a poet on occasions, a traveller who gathers curiosities and writes books, a saint over his wine, and a sinner among his cigars, in love with his wife, believing more in manifest destiny than drilled battalions, good Spaniard in all but deceit and treachery, honest, earnest, tender-hearted and sincere—his faith is too strong in the liars who surround him and his soul too pure for the deeds that must be done!"

He paused and took up a box of panatellas from the table, first offering them to each of his guests, and then lighting one himself.

"The emperor cannot kill as we Frenchmen do," he resumed through a cloud of cigar smoke. "He knows nothing of diplomacy. In a nation of thieves and cut-throats he goes devoutly to mass, endows hospitals, laughs a good man's laugh at the praises of the blanketed rabble, says his prayers, and sleeps the sleep of the gentleman and prince. Bah! His days are numbered; nor can all the power of France keep his crown upon his head—if indeed, it can keep that head on his shoulders!"

Jeanningros suddenly checked himself, as if he had gone too far. He looked from one to another of the Americans, then threw himself back in his chair, puffing rapidly at his cigar.

“Has he the confidence of Bazaine?” asked Shelby, attempting to renew the surprising flow of frank and penetrating information.

Jeanningros gave a shrug—one of the untranslatable shrugs of his race. “*Le maréchal*, you mean. Oh, *le maréchal* keeps his own secrets. Besides I have not seen *le maréchal* since coming north.”

And that was the end of the conversation. It was plain that General Jeanningros had vouchsafed all the information he was going to at this sitting.

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Jo Shelby sat on a boulder; his knees apart and his forearms resting on his thighs—the attitude of a weary man. Rain, persistently dripping from the trees above his head, made the cheerless night even more cheerless. Under the overhanging rock the fire sizzled and smouldered, and Shelby felt, rather than saw, the mountains thrusting upward their vast shoulders about him in the wet blackness. The overhanging rock was “headquarters”. Huddled under its scanty shelter were Major Edwards and Captain Bennett, enduring with Shelby the endless discomfort of the night.

In the darkness about him, the general heard the occasional noises made by men. Coughing. Moving about. Dreary cursing. His troopers had made their sodden bivouac in the centre of this valley, and they were tired and cold. And growing more and more discouraged.

No wonder, Shelby thought. It was a week and more since they left the comfort of the barracks at Monterrey, bidding farewell to General Jeanningros, and in its way the march up from Monterrey had been even more interminable than the march down from the border. For one thing, the hope that their troubles were over, and that they had at last reached a well-policed country, had early been disappointed. Before the Brigade reached Parras its advance guard had fought a skirmish with Mexican irregulars. A day later there was an affair of the outposts in which two men were wounded. Tough though they were, Shelby’s men felt aggrieved, as if they had been victims of a shoddy trick. They were beginning to weary of the threat by day and the constant peril that stalked by night—and Shelby did not blame them.

No rest in these mountains. Here and there they had passed French garrisons. The French were great on bright uniforms and decorations. Zouaves, voltigeurs, chasseurs, foot artillery—Shelby could not remember the catalogue of curious regimentals. Scarlets and blues and yellows. Baggy trousers and fezzes. Frogged jackets. Eye-filling, these French. And soldiers, too—if their European reputation could be accepted. Shelby knew the French had shown themselves able to fight—at Solferino, for instance. And Inkermann. And the Redan. Somehow, though, they didn’t seem to know how to deal with the Mexicans. The French seemed actually afraid to move

outside their posts, except in large force. Certainly they had been of no help to the Brigade.

Moreover, Shelby thought drearily, the weather had turned bad. If the men suffered from lack of water in the desert, they suffered from too much of it in the mountains. Night after night they had to sleep in soaked blankets under the incessant cold rain. Dr. Tisdale was battling new maladies—those coughs in the darkness were a danger sign. Pneumonia. Influenza. If the weather didn't change, the hospital list would be something to shudder over.

Then there was the same old problem—supplies. No co-operation from the French. Suspicion, instead—even hostility, except in the case of Jeanningros.

Shelby had been forced to reverse his policy. It had become absolutely necessary to let the men forage—either forage or starve. The Brigade was on the loose these days, but the pickings were not good. The camp was hungry right now.

Of course the inevitable occurred. Foraging meant skirmishes. The populace, as Shelby had foreseen, rose buzzing like swarms of angry bees in the Brigade's wake. Some regrettable things happened—regrettable but unavoidable. Shelby thought, with a twinge, of the occurrence of the night before. A half-dozen civilians, part of his own noncombatant train, had remained at Monterrey when he left, and then, belatedly, attempted to overtake him. They were waylaid in the darkness. To the Mexican peasant, the *machete*, a long, heavy knife, half-way between a sword and a meat cleaver, was the most natural weapon. When Shelby's rear guard found the civilians, there was not much left to identify the corpses; and the general had not been able to find it in his heart to blame his men when they wreaked bloody reprisals on the village near which the massacre occurred. But the people of the ruined village probably had nothing to do with the massacre of the Americans. And the aftermath left another of the mounting causes for hatred against the Brigade. All this added to his problems, which showed no prospect of easing.

Shelby could hear the voice of Major Edwards. Not even the discomfort of the cold rain could abate the major's endless flow of words. Just now he was discoursing, volubly, from a knowledge that had some claim to breadth and a full claim to romanticism:

“No other land, gentlemen, has had an awakening so storm-begirt, or a christening so bloody and remorseless as Mexico.” Edwards puffed out his damp moustache and gazed about him with lustrous eye, like a lecturer on a

platform. "First came the Spaniards under Cortez; and next the revolution, wherein no man died peacefully or under the shade of a roof."

He paused and looked suspiciously at Shelby, who sat hunched by the fire with the beads of water gathering on his hat brim.

The major cleared his throat. "Are you listening, general?"

"Yes, yes, John," replied Shelby, with resignation.

"Count the roll of Mexico's leaders," the major said sonorously, taking up the flow of his discourse instantly, when he was assured of his audience. "There was Hidalgo, the ferocious priest—shot. Morelos, with these words in his mouth, 'Lord, if I have done well, Thou knowest it; if ill, to Thy infinite mercy I commend my soul'—shot. Leonardo Bravo, scorning to fly—shot. Nicholas Bravo, his son, who offered a thousand captives for his father's life—shot. Matamoras—shot. Mina—shot. Guerrero—shot. Then came the republic, bloodier, bitterer, crueller. Victoria, its first president—shot. Mexia—shot. Pedraza—shot. Santmanet—shot by General Ampudia, who cut off his head, boiled it in oil, and stuck it up on a pole to blacken in the sun. Herrera—shot. Paredes—shot. All of them shot, these Mexican presidents, except Santa Anna, who sits today in Havana, among his gamecocks and his mistresses, an exile for ever from Mexico!"

"For God's sake, John, you do make a man's flesh crawl!" said Shelby. "What are you doing, making a collection of the horrors of this country?"

"I have merely delved a little," began Edwards in injured tones, "into its history——"

"There goes another president—shot," said Clay Bennett.

The flippancy had grim point. They all had heard the sound far up towards the head of the valley—a single, sharp report, echoing from the rocky walls. Shelby straightened up, his head cocked to one side. Edwards crouched forward intently. The silence remained absolute, save for the drip from the trees.

"A jumpy sentry," grunted Edwards at last, relaxing.

In direct refutation, came another shot, followed by a quick, nervous sputter of reports.

"Damn!" said Shelby. It was more a groan than a curse. He levered himself to his feet and stood listening. There were more shots, the rattle of a small volley.

“Just won’t let us rest,” he complained wearily. “The third straight night we’ve been attacked. John, hunt up Collins. God, I hate to get out in a night like this! Find Collins and tell him to support the upper picket at the head of the canyon. Bennett, accompany me. I’m going to take a look at the lower end. No telling which way the cat may jump.”

Cold rain pelted through the thin coat on Shelby’s back as he felt his way among the dripping rocks, followed by the captain, and he wetted himself to the crotch as he waded through some water-laden bushes. He was among the men before he knew it. Some were on their feet, shivering and restlessly moving about; most, however, wrapped in their soggy blankets, lay propped on elbows, listening to the shooting and swearing at the weather.

“What company’s this?”

Through the gloom a dozen faces peered at him.

“General Shelby! Why, we didn’t know, seh——”

“*Attention!*” barked a metal voice.

Men scrambled out of their blankets to their feet.

“Langhorne’s, seh.”

“You boys come along with me.”

Captain Bennett took charge of the detachment and got it into some sort of order. Followed by the dripping troopers, Shelby threaded his way along the edge of the valley towards the lower end conscious of the cliffs rising blackly at his right. The firing at the head of the valley seemed to be increasing.

“Sounds like them Mexicanos means business,” a soldier remarked.

“Afteh the hosses again,” conjectured another. “We’ve had to fight fo’ them crow-baits of ours more’n we evah had to fight fo’ glory——”

“Silence!” snapped the captain.

Shelby began to wonder if Collins and Edwards had reached the upper picket. It appeared that the men up there were being pretty roughly handled. More casualties for Tisdale, damn it all.

The lower picket challenged from a grove of black pines.

“What’s up?” asked the commanding officer, anxiously. “Oh, general—*tshun!*” He was Lieutenant Kirtley, scrawny and youthful, with a thin yellow

beard and bulbous blue eyes. He came to galvanized attention when he recognized Shelby.

“Don’t know,” said the general, answering his question. “Collins and Edwards have gone up. I came down here—just in case. Might be a feint.”

As he spoke a sudden swelling in the roar up the valley told of the arrival of reinforcements for the upper guard. The men about Shelby were grinning. No guerrillas would stand up to that for long. And suddenly Jo Shelby himself felt a great lift of spirits. He was here. At the very front of the Brigade. Perhaps there would be an attack here, after all. It was like old times. Like a holiday, to be away from the constant care of command.

“General, do you think you should be here?” he heard Kirtley’s scandalized voice. “What if there *was* a real assault?”

“How many men have you here?” Shelby disregarded the questions.

“Twenty, sir.”

At this point the canyon was quite narrow, its walls rising perpendicularly, with a few scrubby pines clinging to the sheer rocky ramparts. All vestiges of watch-fires had been beaten out by the storm, and the wind whistled ghoulishly through the canyon. Shelby moved forward. He intended to inspect the advance post.

“Wouldn’t it be better if I went, sir?” It was Bennett, this time, carefully respectful. He did not approve of the general’s gadding about this way, either. “Unnecessary risk, sir——”

To Shelby the solicitude of the young officers was irritating. It made him feel old . . . and useless, somehow. As if the real things of life and war were not for him. This was what he liked about soldiering. Being where things were going on. Where the action and danger were. Command—that was of the head, like mathematics. Fighting was of the body, like drinking liquor. Without replying to Clay Bennett he swung forward almost defiantly. And the mere movement brought again to him the feeling of relaxation, of stolen joy.

He was close to the outpost. The men up front were talking in undertones, and snatches of the conversations came back to him.

“I say nevah duck a bullet, it’s contrary to the Bible. Brotheh Joplin pounded that into me, at Bethseda meetin’ house . . .”

“. . . Hell, Cowie, I’m gonna pay you, shore. Don’t ding a man so. When could I git any money . . .?”

“. . . an’ I says to her, ‘How about a little?’ An’ she says to me, ‘A little of what?’ An’ I says to her, ‘A little of what yore a-settin’ on’ . . .”

From the cliff above, a dislodged rock clattered downward to the bottom of the gorge.

*“Look out!”*

Momentarily a yellow pencil of light flickered in their faces, and the report of a rifle fifty yards down the canyon echoed earsplittingly. Near the flash two other spurts of flame sprang out, then another. About Shelby sounded the thud of bodies as the men of the picket threw themselves on the muddy ground among the rocks. A ricocheting bullet howled like a lost soul across the valley behind them.

Light splashed vividly down the gorge for a flickering moment and the air-shaking clap of a volley sprang forward with the whine of bullets overhead. A penetrating pungency of powder smoke, blown up the rocky throat, tingled in Shelby’s nostrils.

“For God’s sake, general——” Bennett was alarmed and pleading.

But Shelby felt like laughing. His irritation had gone. This kind of thing always exhilarated him. Sometimes he was afraid of the way he lusted for danger. It was a gamble—the greatest gamble. Life against a thrill.

“Go back and bring that company of Langhorne’s up on the double,” he said to the captain. Then he acceded enough to the concern in the other’s voice, to go down on one knee just behind two prone figures in the darkness ahead of him.

“Keep low, boys,” he said. “Seems to be a lot of ’em, but we’ve got a company coming up in support. Let the smoke rise, and we may be able to see under it.”

A figure twisted on the ground to look at him. Awed voice: “God, it’s the gen’ral!”

Out of the left, flame made new vivid etching in the darkness, and somebody grunted.

“What is it?” “Somebody hit?” The questions tossed back and forth. And Kirtley said distinctly: “I caught one. No—there. Left arm. Feels paralysed—broke I guess. No, it don’t hurt—yet. The hurt’ll come after.”

Shelby’s attention was twisted back to the front by a shout: “*Christ! Hyar they come!*”

From opaqueness about him his own rifles were spitting their fiery tongues, and light stabbed up the gorge towards him from the enemy. Men hugged the ground as the bullets moaned above.

This cannot last, Shelby thought. Something's got to give. If these guerrillas are serious, we may have some fun . . . Odd how a gun makes twice as much racket in a canyon like this . . .

Feet pounded and a yell came from behind. The support. A white volley blasted out into the blackness. Another. The guerrillas were gone.

Shelby stood up. He realized suddenly that he was wet—God-awful cold and wet. And tired. But there was a curious lightness about him. Danger—a spanking of nettles.

He could hear Bennett, voicing his relief that nothing had happened to the general, and grunted in response. About him words, muted words.

General hissself . . . Him—out heah on post? . . . Yea, Shelby . . . God, the gen'ral!

The voices pleased Shelby, but he turned abruptly away, pretending not to hear. Already his mind was returning to its deadening worries. He wondered, sometimes, if he ever would reach Mexico City. And what was going to happen after he did. He was oppressed, for some reason, by a sense of ill-fortune.

All at once his thought veered to Señor Anda—El Gato, rather. I wish I'd followed my instinct and shot the little beast, Shelby thought. Then another thought: No, I couldn't have killed him. Something about Anda—idealism, maybe. It's no good putting an ideal before a firing squad, even if you do not agree with the ideal. Shelby savagely assured himself he did not agree with Anda's ideal. Man is made to be ruled—history shows it, he told himself. The need is for strong men to rule.

What about Juarez? He talked about liberty. But then he was a strong man. Shelby was beginning to admire that gloomy Indian. Juarez was tenacious, patient, ferocious. He had been starved, harried, and driven out of his country, but he kept on fighting. If he and Maximilian were left to themselves Juarez inevitably would win, because he was stronger and more elemental. That was apparent even from this distance.

Juarez had no money or resources, but he knew how to handle his guerrillas. War didn't kill them, nor malaria. It was virtually impossible to fight them decisively, Shelby conceded, and all nature was in league with them. The French—they were different. They had red tape. An officers'

caste. Ration issues. Paper work. Decorations. They might be superb in Europe, but they had not the flexibility to meet the Mexicans on equal footing in the mountains or the desert.

He had succeeded in shaking off the doubt that came to him when he thought of the speech little fat Señor Anda had made to him. Now he only thought with a thrill of pride that his Brigade had met the guerrillas, as the French had not, and fought and beaten them against odds on their chosen ground. This was likely to be a long war, but if Maximilian listened to him, it would eventually be a victorious war.

Shelby's spirits rose, and he almost smiled to himself. The savour of that powder tang reminiscently lingered in his nostrils. He stepped forward with a new elasticity. Now that he'd had his taste of action, he could last for quite a long time at planning strategy.

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The hour the hoofs of their horses clattered on the flagstones of the capital should have been an hour of achievement realized for Shelby's men. They had completed a march so perilous that as a military *tour de force* it should give them permanent celebrity. The last part of the journey, from Monterrey south, had been one long battle. They had captured and sacked a fortified *hacienda*—Encarnacion. At Metahuala they had defeated the Juaristas commanded by Colonel Escobedo, and relieved the French forces besieged there, under youthful Major Henri Pierron. General Felix Douay, of the Foreign Legion, handsome and urbane, had sought to detain them at San Luis Potosi, through which they passed, promising them action. It had been the Frenchman's devious plan to avert embarrassment to his superiors in the capital, by "expending" the Americans in a futile campaign against Mexican irregulars in the fever swamps of the Rio Panuco, where the *vómito* lurked, and where the French had lost more good troops than in any battle.

But a courier to Bazaine at the capital returned with the curt word to send the Americans on. And from this Shelby, for the first time, took strong hope. Their accomplishments had been in their favour, he thought. Perhaps the affair of the guns, and the matter of the mango tree had been overcome after all.

But now at last, with their journey's end in sight, all of the men in the Brigade, and particularly the general himself, rode with anxious faces.

"I wonder how it's going to turn out," Shelby said to Clay, who rode beside him. "For some damned reason I feel unlucky today—and it's not the first time."

"Why so, sir?" asked Clay. "Jeanningros is your friend—surely he will have paved the way for you. A guard of honour has been sent to meet us. That must indicate friendship. Why not hope for the best, sir?"

"It's too easy—this part of it," the general grumbled, fidgeting in his saddle. "The good things come hard. Besides, this morning a rabbit cut across our path. I turned up the sleeve on the left arm of my coat, but I don't feel safe."

His attempt to turn the thing off as a joke did not deceive Clay. There was something deeper than a superstition about rabbits to cause the general's worry. Clay also felt indefinably uneasy. Yet, glancing back at the hard, grey ranks behind, pure reason told him that the worst must be over. Ragged as they were, these troopers would be known as picked fighting men by the most inexperienced. They were all gamblers, ready to risk life at the instant, when the stakes were worth it. No paraders of gaudy uniforms, but common possessors of an essential discipline, bold, skilful, confident, and bound by a vast loyalty to the man who rode at their head.

In the final day's march to the capital, the beauties of the mountains and the terraced fields along the way had fascinated them, and the presence of numerous French garrisons removed the last apprehension of hostile attacks. Many of Shelby's men wore dirty bandages, stained brown with old blood; and the roll of the Brigade was far short of what it had been when they crossed the Rio Grande two months before. That was the result of their victorious thousand-mile battle, all the way from the Texas border.

The knowledge should have given them confidence, yet today as Shelby's men rode up the stone highway into the capital itself, a new feeling of insecurity occupied the minds of all of them.

They rode in the midst of silence; a silence the more strange in that they marched through great multitudes of people. In the City of Mexico it was easy always to raise a crowd. A squad of infantry, even, marching to its guard stations, could be assured of its spectators. The coming of the *Americanos*, therefore, widely heralded for days, had turned out virtually the entire population.

Yet of all the packed thousands who watched not one person uttered a sound. It was ominous, the silence. The clatter of their horses' hoofs was loud in the ears of Shelby's men, and always they saw faces—rank on rank of impassive Indian faces, of *sombreros* and *rebosos*, and still brown faces, expressionless faces, with never a cry from them, or so much as a murmur. Even Shelby's men were impressed and uncertain in that living silence. Flower garlands were visible in this flower-loving population, but there were none for the ragged soldiers in grey.

What was the reason for this ominous, mute reception? Perhaps the Mexicans remembered the last time *Americanos* marched through these streets—twenty years before, when Winfield Scott had led his conquering army there. Or perhaps it was the sullenness of a bitter, vengeful people who considered these new strangers as merely another foe to be added to the

forces already oppressing them—a sullenness and a resentment that might some day burst into a bloody spate of revolt against the alien emperor and his alien army.

“By God, I don’t like their silence,” said Edwards uneasily to Moreland.

“Nor I,” responded the other. “It would be a relief if someone even hooted at us.”

Yet the silence remained unbroken and they followed the glittering escort of French Chasseurs d’Afrique through interminable hostile streets, until at length they brought up before a group of long stone buildings with many windows, which they recognized for barracks.

Before the men had time to dismount, a group of officers, French, Austrian, and Mexican, rode up. Their leader, a baldish, greying man, with cold, hard features and a pair of eyes sharp as awls, saluted in the French manner—with the palm outward.

“General Shelby?” he asked in English.

“Yes.”

“I am Bazaine.”

Every officer in hearing stared when the famous soldier thus briefly identified himself. This was the man who, from a simple subaltern in an infantry regiment, had fought his way up until he held the baton of a marshal of France. This was the Tiger of the Tropics, the nemesis of the Carlists, the hero of the Crimea. This was the genius who had driven Juarez into Texas, the steel-hard promulgator of the dread “black laws,” under which hundreds of Mexicans of high and low degree perished before the firing squads merely because they resisted the uniform of France. And he was, every man of Shelby’s knew, the real power in this exotic country—the ruler behind the throne on which sat Maximilian.

“I have ridden down from Chapultepec to greet you,” the grizzled marshal continued. His face did not relax its harshness. “Before we proceed any farther, I must ask you a question: You have come amongst us for an object. Please state to me frankly and in few words what that object is.”

“I had thought,” answered Shelby, visibly disconcerted, “that the news of my object had reached you by message from General Jeanningros, to whom I communicated it fully.”

“I prefer, general, to hear it from your own lips.”

“Then, Marshal Bazaine, here it is: I come to take service under Maximilian.”

“*Vraiment?* And—I understand—without invitation from the emperor?” He paused, and his cutting words left a dead silence. After a moment he resumed, speaking as if his remarks had not been almost a slap in the face: “Tell me, General Shelby, what are your facilities for recruiting a corps of Americans for the imperial army?”

Shelby swallowed. Could he have been wrong about Bazaine’s meaning and tone? “So ample, sir,” he assured the marshal, attempting a smile, “that if authority is given me, I can pledge fifty thousand in six months.”

But Bazaine did not answer Shelby’s smile. In fact Bazaine seldom smiled at all, and when he did it was only a wry grimace, so wintry as to chill the beholder. After a moment, he extended his hand.

“These barracks are yours while you remain in the city,” he said. “Supplies will be sent. You will remain here until further orders.”

On Shelby’s face, as he watched the French marshal and his staff ride away, there grew a curious, baffled expression. *While you remain in the city.* Why those cryptic words? As the general turned to order the men to fall out of ranks and take possession of quarters, his face still was preoccupied. Presently, however, he shook himself out of the mood, and with Edwards and Clay, inspected the barracks. There were five of the stone buildings, together with stables and store houses. The quarters were good enough—bunks for the men, rooms for the officers; luxury to a Brigade which hardly knew anything more substantial than the sky as a roof.

But Shelby observed these things perfunctorily. His manner was still absent as he selected a room in the central building for his own and assigned the next to Edwards as adjutant’s office and quarters. To Clay fell a small cubicle at the opposite end of the structure, in which were a canvas cot, table, chair, and a candle stuck in the neck of a tallow-smearred bottle.

That afternoon and evening were filled with the business of settling into new quarters, disposing of stores, which arrived punctually by wagon according to Bazaine’s promise, and other routine.

But after that the Brigade settled down, Shelby, Clay, Edwards, all of them—to await the summons from Maximilian. The entire next day passed in anticipation, and no sign from Chapultepec. Clay borrowed Edwards’s dog-eared volume of *The Lady of the Lake* and tried vainly to read, but he

could not keep his mind on Scott's flamboyant verses. An immense uncertainty and discontent overwhelmed him. Given time to himself for the first time in weeks, his mind had a chance to pick up loose threads. Over and over a question returned to plague him, until the torque of it made his head ache. Merit Hampton, where was she? What had happened to her?

He tried viciously, by deliberately thinking the worst things possible of her, to free his mind of her. She was no good, he told himself, and attempted to convince himself that he could have possessed her easily and cheaply once. Why hadn't he gone through with it? The soldier's uniform she wore—it was as open an invitation as a woman could give. If he'd only taken advantage of it . . .

But it did not help. As soon as such a thought came to him, his mind rebelled. He cursed himself. What right had he to sit in judgment? Maybe her reasons for going with Parridine were innocent enough. Maybe Parridine really had taken her to wherever it was she wanted to go.

But that was hard to believe after what he knew of Parridine. And Merit Hampton, Clay told himself in a new reaction, must have known Parridine. If she went with him, it was with her eyes open, and you could put the worst possible construction on that, and not be far wrong . . .

Back and forth Clay's mind lashed itself, until he presently could stand it no longer, and went over to the supply depot, where he worked like a fiend checking over the ration stores. Night found him so weary that he slept—even asleep he was possessed by fitful dreams, in which Merit and Parridine, and de Saul's ugly *contre guerrillas*, were inextricably and terrifyingly mingled.

That first endless day was only the beginning. Shelby and his men were to grow well accustomed to waiting. The second day came and went, and then the days lengthened into a week. Still no summons arrived. The men occupied their time with card playing, throwing a knife at a mark, wrestling, braiding leather bridles—anything to pass the dreary hours. Or they wandered out into the city, and looked curiously upon the crowded houses, the magnificent churches, and the public buildings and monuments. At almost every corner a man might be accosted by rouged and painted little Mexican harlots—*putas* in the vernacular—who stood, barefoot and brightly garbed, making eyes, strongly scented with cheap perfumes, and ready to give themselves for a small coin or two—or just for the novelty of it, in some cases—to the tall *extrangeros*.

Above everything, Clay noticed in his wanderings about, the constant succession of bad odours in the great city of Mexicans. Every drain, of which there were thousands, had its own individual stench; and there were extraordinary sights in every corner. The smell of half-fermented *pulque* assailed his nostrils wherever he went; and the markets, particularly those dispensing meats, possessed a still different stink—in addition to great clouds of buzzing flies.

*Pulque* was the drink of the country, and the *pulque* shops or *cantinas* were far more numerous than the churches. Men and women—and even small children—bought the milky, sour liquid in the shops with the coloured paper fringes and the gaudy water-paint decorations. Esau Janeicke, who considered himself an authority on the subject, privately imparted to Clay that he had never, in his whole experience, seen men so drunk as the Mexicans became on *pulque*. But most of the troopers from the Brigade who tried it found it unpalatable, and Shelby had little trouble from drunkenness among his men, since other intoxicants were more costly than most could afford.

Outside the barracks themselves, activity was constant. Each morning the sleeping soldiers were awakened long before dawn by the cries of the street hawkers, vending *tortillas*, nuts, charcoal, *chile con carne*, flowers, or other articles; and all through the day natives of both sexes squatted in the shade of buildings across on the other side of the square, staring at the Americans with unblinking, spidery patience. Some of these were so timid that if one of the *Americanos* attempted to approach, they fled like wild animals. But a few bright-eyed little children grew bold enough to enter the barracks, and these the troopers made friends with, buying them small sweet-meats and little trinkets, until Shelby was forced to issue a prohibition on them all, because the urchins grew into a swarm of audacious little thieves and beggars.

And still there was no word from Chapultepec.

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The orderly opened the door of Shelby's office and ushered in a stranger in an impeccable white linen suit and a Panama hat as wide as a breakfast tray. By the insouciant grace with which he flourished his Malacca cane, it was clear he was a gentleman, and his hair was dazzling white like a new snowbank, while his eyes were of a singularly sparkling blue, like the shadows of a glacier.

"Jo Shelby, you infernal old Missouri rapsallion!" he said. "What particular brand of triple-distilled devilry are you up to in Mexico?"

Shelby, who had been discussing orders of the day with Clay, found his voice. "Cato Hampton!" he roared. "What in the name of all that's holy are you doing here?"

"Attending to my business, Jo Shelby. And peacefully, aside from minor annoyances like *bandidos* and a paucity of acceptable drinking liquor. I only just learned of your arrival a few days ago, and hurried to come and pay my respects. You are, sir, a sight good for my old eyes!"

"You were not, I take it, in this city, when you received news of our arrival?"

"No. I am at Guanajuato, two hundred miles north-west. An important mining centre. I'd have been here before, but travel between there and the capital is slow, although regular, by means of the diligence, and fairly safe also, since it is to the interest of the French to keep the road open in order to get the silver."

"Cato, don't tell me that you are mining!"

"That happens to be the *summula*," said the judge. "I have located the Spooner property, and have a small crew working on it." A new note came into his voice, and he looked almost eagerly at Shelby. "I think, Jo, that I'm going to accomplish something there," he continued, lowering his voice confidentially. "Guanajuato is silver country. But I am after the finer metal, gold." He leaned forward and spoke with almost feverish earnestness. "I think I'm going to get it, refuting the wiseacres who have said there is no

gold to be had there. We have not yet struck a paying vein, but the appearance is most promising . . .”

The judge stopped, and a sudden light of recognition came into his face. “If my eyes do not deceive me, sir, this is another old acquaintance.”

“You are right, Cato. Captain Clay Bennett, my aide.”

Clay had been looking on speechless. Then Merit *was* right—the judge had come down to Mexico. Perhaps she was here now, with the judge, safe. A great surge of hope leaped in him.

The judge’s eyes were sparkling with delight. “Why, Clay—my boy!” He clasped the captain’s hand. “I take oath I did not at first recognize you. So hard and brown and fierce—what’s become of my studious law clerk? But I like it, sir. Sue me if I don’t. When last I saw you, ’twas scarcely more than the schoolboy.”

The judge was in high fettle. Shelby’s amused eyes were on Clay, and the latter almost saw the words forming on the general’s lips, and prayed he would not mention Judge Hampton’s daughter. But the general did mention her, and in such a way that made Clay devoutly thankful.

“Your daughter,” he said. “I trust she is well and happy, Cato?”

Shelby’s grey eyes were intent on the judge’s face as he awaited the answer.

“I am unable to answer that,” Judge Hampton said. “I have not heard from her since I left Missouri.”

A shadow of regret seemed to flit across Shelby’s fierce features.

“Cato, have you seen a man named Parridine in this section?” he asked.

“Not *Quinn* Parridine?” exclaimed the judge.

“The same.”

For a moment Judge Hampton was silent, his gaze icy under snowy eyebrows. “I know him,” he said at last. “What is that scoundrel doing in Mexico?”

“I asked you,” Shelby was saying, “because he is in this country, in the service of the Mexican rebels—and because he is—well . . .”

Judge Hampton was no fool. He raised a thin, blue-veined hand. “Gentlemen,” he said, “you have something to say to me. I can tell it by your manner. Whatever it is, out with it!”

There was a moment's silence, then the general said: "Cato, where is your daughter?"

"Why—in Missouri. The last I heard." The judge paused and his keen glance went from face to face around the table. Fear leaped suddenly into his eyes. "Is it of her—is there bad news——?"

"Take it easy, Cato. We have no bad news. We've seen Miss Merit, that is all."

"And where did you see her?" demanded the judge.

"At Piedras Negras," the general said reluctantly. "She visited across the river from Eagle Pass—while the Brigade was encamped on the Mexican side——"

"How in God's name did she get down there?" cried the judge.

"Captain Bennett knows more about that than I do," said Shelby with shameless relief at passing this painful subject to someone else. "He brought her down from north Texas."

Clay found the judge's hard blue stare on him.

"My meeting her was fortuitous, purely," Clay said, fancying he read something more than mere inquiry in the question. "I was in command of a supply depot at Tyler, Texas. A band of bushwhackers came upon the post. We—ah—persuaded them to depart. Miss Hampton and Gonder were with this band." He related the facts of Merit's journey up to the night that she and Parridine had disappeared.

At the end of the story, the judge stood up, glaring about him at them, as if they were assailing him with invisible weapons, and he were defending himself. Shelby's voice came, almost beseeching:

"Cato, my friend. Don't hold this against me. I had no idea of an action so mad by the girl——"

"No, Jo. I do not hold you responsible. I understand military necessity—it has crossed my poor life before, and I always have lost to it."

The judge was still erect, but he looked now as if a score of years had been added to him. Shelby gazed down at his glass. Edwards sat silent for once. Clay alone summoned courage to speak:

"Perhaps Parridine found a place of safety for her," he suggested.

The judge slowly shook his white head. "It is quite useless to speculate on what may have happened to Merit. Gentlemen, I am her father. I have not seen her for more than two years. But I abide in my faith in her courage, and intelligence, and honour. To the limit of her ability and strength she will be worthy of her name. After that——"

"But Parridine," insisted Clay. "What are your conclusions about him \_\_\_\_\_"

"Let me tell you about Parridine," said the judge with a deadly calmness. "You say, Clay, that Gonder told you of my imprisonment and escape. That only begins the story. Merit obtained the money from Parridine, but she did not do the negotiating. She acted only as an intermediary. Two separate journeys she made to the camp where that man was idling with Quantrill's braves. The agreement which I signed she never saw, it being sealed in transit at her hand. Merit knows nothing of those terms and I have never told her. I am shamed because they involve the property she might have hoped some day to possess, and because the occasion found me so helpless."

"May I ask the terms?" inquired Shelby.

"He furnished me two thousand dollars to pay my fine. And I made him over the deed to Fairwood!"

"You sold Fairwood for two thousand dollars?" exclaimed Shelby. "The place is worthy fifty times that!"

"Do not forget," said the judge bitterly, "that Parridine knew the improvements all were burned off—they were burned because of him. He knew there was a shadow on the title because of my attainder—he was responsible for that, too. He, whom I had fed and sheltered and protected, and because of whom I had ruined myself and my daughter, took advantage of my necessity to dictate that infamous agreement!"

There was silence around the table, and the judge, looking down at his glass, turned it moodily around between his thumb and forefinger.

"I should perhaps add that he gave me in the agreement a three-year period to redeem the property by paying the debt. That was a gesture—he did not conceive it possible that I could obtain the money. Those three years are very nearly up, and when they end, if I have not paid, his title is absolute. But I had a bolt for my quiver he had not counted upon. I signed the agreement for two reasons—I had to get out of prison, and I dreamed of one thing only—to reach Mexico, find my mine, and develop it, to buy myself out of that scoundrel's power!" Again the note almost of exultation

as he uttered the words “my mine.” But the light in his eyes faded. “I fear, gentlemen, that all this is useless . . . if anything has happened to my daughter . . .”

Nobody spoke. After a time the judge arose.

“Cato,” said Shelby, “where are you lodging? I——”

Without replying, Judge Hampton walked out of the room. Shelby and the major stared at each other. Clay arose, excused himself, followed and overtook the judge before he crossed the square.

“I beg of you, sir,” he said, “do not blame the general too severely.”

Ice-blue eyes regarded him. “I do not. Jo Shelby is—what he is. An Angel of Battle. An angel with spurs—that is Jo Shelby. And he’s above and beyond warm human considerations. I do not blame him. It—it was my daughter’s misfortune that she came into contact with a military rule about as sympathetic and yielding as a bayonet.”

“Please, sir, if you return to Guanajuato, where is your residence?”

“What difference does it make?”

“Many things might happen,” urged Clay.

Suddenly the judge turned and extended his hand. “Thank you, my boy,” he said. “I recognize the kindness behind that. If you should come to Guanajuato at any time I am in the city, I will be honoured to have you call upon me. You will find me in residence at a small *fonda*, which is kept by a worthy woman named Señora Gertrudis Engorda.”

He squared his shoulders, lifted the broad-brimmed Panama hat jauntily, and walked away with a conscious flourish of the Malacca cane, leaving Clay standing alone in the white blaze of the sun on the square.

Still no summons came from the palace. Shelby devoted the day to taking voluminous notes concerning the country, the people, and everything else bearing on the military problem. Each evening religiously he inspected the Brigade. It kept the men on their mettle he felt. At night he often spent long hours conversing with visitors.

At first Clay tried to map the possible moves. It began to appear that autumn would be well advanced before Maximilian granted that audience—if he ever granted it. Nothing could be done before that, but after it, there was no telling what duties might be laid out for them.

Clay guessed that recruiting would come first. The general confirmed this opinion one day, with a statement that perhaps the best means of securing new soldiers, when the final word was given, would be via Vera Cruz by ship from New Orleans.

“I would have been in better case to have recruited on the Texas border as I arranged originally—with the other side,” Shelby said moodily. “But that is neither here nor there,” he added hastily. “When Shelby gives his allegiance everything goes with it—including regrets. It shall be my duty to build an army second to none for the emperor.”

His splendid grey eyes lit with the enthusiasm that they always held when he spoke of his dream army. “We’ll get some of those Louisiana Tigers that Bob Wheat used to lead, and the Alabama troops are very fine. I wouldn’t be surprised to receive plenty of applications from Lee’s old Virginia and Carolina regiments. And we’re certain to get Missourians—lots of Missourians.” He grinned almost boyishly. “What a fighting force, Bennett! Fifty thousand right out of the heart of the Confederate army as I know how to get ’em. Fifty thousand veterans, seasoned as no troops ever have been seasoned for modern war. Why, captain, it’s stupendous! With a force like that I can—mark these words—change the history of the world. Mexico in its present circumstances is the greatest opportunity in modern centuries for a soldier to build a great reputation with small forces. Look at Bolivar—his armies numbered hundreds only. If this Maximilian has the real fibre of kings, the new world is our nut to crack! And fifty thousand fighting fools to crack it with!”

As he sat there, face alight with the exaltation of his vision, Clay felt a mighty sympathy for the man. There was something close to sublimity in the squat, bearded cavalryman’s faith in himself, and in his vaulting ambitions for his men, for his country, and for himself, which he wove inextricably together. It would be criminal if anything happened to that dream . . . but why should it? Mexico and Maximilian needed Shelby too badly to permit anything to happen. Presently the summons would come, Shelby would be authorized to recruit, and after that there would be action. Juarez clung to his mountains and deserts still. He would have to be ousted, and that meant hard campaigning. Plenty of work assuredly was cut out for Shelby and his men.

More days passed, and the faint hope Clay had kindled began to fade. And one afternoon shortly after mess, Shelby sent for him.

“Captain,” he said, “I am to have a visitor this afternoon. You may have heard of Commodore Maury? He is coming to confer with me. It may be

interesting. Although he does not come with an offer from Maximilian himself, his visit possibly has significance. He is with the government—Imperial Commissioner of Immigration. I should like to have you on duty where I can summon you if necessary.”

Actually, Shelby himself was inclined to doubt any kind of good fortune in this visitation. After all his adversities, this might be a turn in his luck, but he had been disappointed so often that he was determined not to build up his hopes. Shelby had never seen Maury, but he had heard of him. A Virginian, and a perfect fountain of erudition. Frustrated during the hostilities, because he was a navy man and the South had no navy, he had turned his talents to other matters.

Shelby dismissed Clay and turned to his office, his mind on the impending event. He confessed to a lively curiosity. That book of Maury’s—*Physical Geography of the Sea*—Shelby had been told it was monumental, a treatise that revolutionized navigation. It had been translated into eleven foreign languages, and covered its author with medals, ribbons, and decorations from scientific societies and governments all over the world.

Shelby, who had no gift for expressing himself with the pen, had an awe of the felicity and facility with words that made such a book possible. The fact that it was on a subject which was of no interest to him did not diminish its stature as an achievement.

If Maury was bringing a feeler from Maximilian . . . well, it was high time. After all this time in Mexico City, Shelby was worn down with suspense and waiting. He was angered at the way the palace kept him alternately hot and cold. But—he shrugged—he was gambling for much, and he could abide unpleasantness for the sake of the goal in view.

It was three o’clock when Commodore Maury appeared. Shelby’s first impression was disappointment. The visitor was a greying, baldish man, with deep sea-bitten lines about his mouth, and he walked with an observable limp. He had a fine, large, open countenance, and a pair of sharp eyes twinkling beneath bushy grey eyebrows. A good type of sea-dog, surely, but not what Shelby had expected or what he had pictured as a scientist.

Commodore Maury was accompanied by his son, a young Confederate officer, and Shelby summoned Clay to attend him. They were seated, Maury dismissing formality and waving aside the cigar the general offered him.

“Let us get down to business,” he said. “You’re here for the purpose of making a home in Mexico, I take it, general?”

“I desire to serve the emperor,” said Shelby cautiously, not seeing the way the question was leading.

“Good. You know perhaps the position I hold? Imperial Commissioner of Immigration. It is no empty title. The emperor desires colonists in Mexico. Am I understood?”

Shelby studied the other. He did not yet know exactly what was in Maury’s mind, but it was beginning to dawn on him that this proposal was not what he had expected.

“Perhaps you’ve heard of the colonization project near Cordoba?” the commodore pursued. “It has quite a history. Cordoba is between here and Vera Cruz. There is near it a tract of a half-million acres of uncultivated land, which formerly belonged to the Church, and which was expropriated by Benito Juarez while he was president. Maximilian was supposed to return this land to the Church on his accession, but he has not done so. The why of his action is a long story of ecclesiastical and secular diplomacy, too long to go into here.”

Maury gazed shrewdly into Shelby’s eyes and leaned forward to emphasize his next words.

“General, I have personally looked over this land. It lies at the foot of the mountains, in a healthful climate, and, if I am any judge, is superb coffee, cotton, and sugar land. The present main highway from Vera Cruz goes northward towards Jalapa, but——” his voice dropped and became confidential, “—I will tell you privately that surveys for the new Mexican Imperial Railway carry it directly through this tract. Those surveys are secret yet, but a friendly tip . . .”

“Why do you tell me all this?” asked Shelby. In spite of himself, his voice became a little husky. He knew . . . in advance. And he thought the disappointment was going to crush him.

“I tell you to explain some of the attractions of this locality,” Maury hurried on smoothly. “You may not know it, but confidentially again, the empress believes in a *white* empire. Above all things she desires to attract to Mexico people of her own race. She has, therefore, induced the emperor to set aside this land for colonization. The terms are advantageous. Men having families will receive six hundred and forty acres of land, at the stipulated price of one dollar and a quarter an acre—the payments on which can be

arranged. Men without families will receive three hundred and twenty acres at the same price.”

Dead silence fell in the room. Maury played with his watch-chain, and Shelby stared at him as if not believing what he had heard.

“You are suggesting that I convert my Brigade from soldiers into colonists . . .?”

“But after all, general, we have no war here,” said Maury eagerly. “A slight rebellion, but nothing the regular forces do not have the power to handle. What Mexico needs is peaceful workers. Why, man, your Brigade can take this land over as an entire tract——”

Shelby had risen to his feet. “May I ask one question?” he asked.

“Why, assuredly,” said Maury, rising with him.

“Who sent you on this—this errand?”

The commodore studied the remark. “I think I shall not answer that question,” he said at last, stiffly. “I am actuated only by my sincere desire to be of service to you and your men, sir. I choose not to look into the implications of your words. Good day, sir.”

He was gone. And Shelby’s face was like a stone. It had been a feeler from the palace all right—and it turned out to be an attempt to buy him. What mind was behind it he did not know. But for the first time Jo Shelby realized that he was facing no ordinary bureaucratic delay. An enemy was somewhere arrayed against him.

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That must be Mexico City, there shining in the distance. Merit Hampton, bowling along in the rattling coach, from Vera Cruz, put down the somewhat intoxicating astonishment with which she arrived at this realization. Since that was the capital she must be very near the finish of this journey, and who would have thought, three months ago, that it would have been accomplished so simply.

What she had been through! If the things she had done in these last three months—the fears, perplexities, and anticipations, much less the actual incidents, had all come at once, Merit was quite sure she could never have survived them. No woman could—the sheer excitement had been enough to fray the stoutest nerves. Her lips curved again in a little, pleased smile. At least she was here—and she wished certain persons, certain gentlemen, could know it. They would have their words to eat. Merit permitted herself that brief, triumphant thought, but instantly became serious again. She could not afford even so much triviality for this moment.

Her mind went back to the night she stole out of Eagle Pass, one girl alone, in a world of men. The decision had cost her heavily, and yet it had come with a stunning suddenness. She wanted to get away from the army. Away from Quinn Parridine . . . and Clay Bennett. Nothing could exceed her helpless feeling there on the border of Mexico, as long as she was dependent on those men. Something Parridine said gave her the cue. *I offer you your one and only way of reaching your destination.* It was the way he said it, the assurance that she would have to come back to him in the end, that made her mind up. That . . . and something else. Clay Bennett. Clay Bennett meant nothing to her, could never mean anything. But that did not excuse him for the curtness and coldness with which he had treated her that final morning.

He had spoken to her like a stranger. And that, after she had been at some little trouble . . . she squirmed somewhat at this . . . to make the opportunity to see him that morning.

How carefully in her room at Eagle Pass that evening after she reached her decision, she had planned her adventure. She had decided that she must let nobody know, not even Mrs. Judnich, because if it was known where she

had gone, she would be followed by those men who conceived that they had the responsibility of her. Responsibility assumed without permission. She wanted to see none of them again, except for Gideon Gonder, and she dared not communicate with him, because she knew he would straightway inform Clay Bennett.

At times she wondered if Parridine had guessed . . . there were some bad moments, when she would half-start, thinking he was after her, just around a turn, or in the next room, depending on where she happened to be. The very night after he asked her to marry him, she slipped out into the dark from Judnich's and saddled Ginger.

And from that moment she reversed all probability. It was not into Mexico that she went. Instead she headed north, retracing her steps, going back on the old trail through the shadowy night *brasada*, with the stars winking in the velvet sky overhead. And yet, although she was heading for San Antonio instead of Monterrey, this did not mean that for a single moment she had surrendered her purpose, the purpose about which her life these days revolved. It meant only that the whole fabric of her plans had changed.

Vividly she remembered her first night, and her first great terror. Her heart was thumping as she left the last lights of the town and set out into the black wilderness of thorn. She believed that she had departed in such a way that nobody saw her . . . but one pair of eyes marked her.

An hour after she was on her way she saw the dark shadow slipping along the trail behind her, and quickened her horse. At first the dread clutched her that this after all might be Parridine. Then, when the pursuing rider did not seek to overtake her, a nameless fear succeeded the definite one. Mile after mile the shadowy horseman paced her in the night, until she was ready to scream with overwrought nerves. At last she acted with the sudden courage of desperation. No chance of breaking back towards Eagle Pass; her pursuer barred the way. She pulled Ginger around, and waited, white-faced, in the night.

The shadow halted for a moment, then came cautiously on.

"*Señorita.*" Soft voice. Pleading voice. She knew that voice—the little *vaquero* whom she had rescued from being man-handled by Shelby's calloused guards. His deer-like eyes were liquid in the starlight, and he smiled appealingly and spoke in queer, unintelligible snatches. At first his presence filled her with fear and horror. She supposed his motive was robbery . . . or worse. She wondered desperately what she could do. Then he

slipped off his belt and held it out to her. His revolver. With sudden relief she knew he was offering her his weapon as a proof of his honest intentions. She accepted the belt and strapped it about her own narrow waist, feeling the heavy sag of the holstered pistol on her thigh.

The little vaquero seemed to consider that by this act she accepted the man as well as the weapon, and after that, all the way to San Antonio, he rode beside her or in front of her. He seemed to know where she was going and several times he prevented her from becoming lost by taking a false trail in the *brasada*. He built her camp-fires, and cooked her food—food he brought in his own bundle, she having forgotten in her hurry this indispensable adjunct. He laid her bed. Presently she returned to him his revolver, and he watched over her like a faithful little dog.

Never before had she known a guide and escort like that Mexican *vaquero*. For one thing, she could not converse with him, and she did not even know his name. But he seemed to anticipate her every wish. This was his way of repaying her for her championing of him to Shelby, and she wondered how long he had watched her, unnoticed, from a distance, to be ready to serve her. And how rapidly, when she rode out of Eagle Pass, he had made up his mind and followed her. His devotion touched her, but she had not even the opportunity to thank him for it. When, after days, they reached a point from which San Antonio could be seen, her *vaquero*, without even a farewell, faded back into the mesquite like a wild animal. One flourish of his immense *sombrero*, and he was gone with a kick of his horse's heels.

At San Antonio she found the Yankees in possession. Blue coats. New blue coats and shiny new black boots. Newness and blueness everywhere. The Menger House was full of General Sheridan and his staff, but Merit knew where she could find the inn where she had stopped on her previous visit to this city. When the clerk recognized her and called her by name she was astonished; then she realized she had been there only two weeks before. It seemed like two years.

In her small room in this *fonda* she had time to think, and to count her small resources, and to formulate her programme. Her money was almost gone. Yet she made a quick decision and put half of it into a stagecoach ticket for Port La Vaca, on the Matagorda coast. She decided on the stage because it meant safety. Merit yielded to none in her dislike of a Yankee, but to give the devils their due, they had brought a sudden and amazing order out of the chaos of Texas. Considering it now, Merit was quite certain that what she had done would have been impossible in the days before the blue

soldiers arrived, and began policing the cities and patrolling the highways. She made her arrangements to ride, and Ginger trotted behind, his bridle rein tied to the rear of the vehicle.

In addition to the stiff blue escort of cavalrymen, there were men on the Port La Vaca coach—Union officers, going on leave to various destinations. Sitting next to her was a lean, baldish man in his fifties, very sniffish and stiff, who rode the day through without permitting his back to touch the cushions of the seat, leaning on his sabre which he held upright in its sheath between his booted knees. A sickly man with bristly brown whiskers and an arm in a sling sat opposite her, and his long legs seemed to be perpetually colliding with hers, no matter how primly she tucked her feet together and pulled her skirts about her. Opposite the baldish man was a younger officer, a youth with a blond moustache which he twisted violently, and who cast eyes over at her so that she could not help noticing it, although she kept her own gaze in her lap or out of the window.

None of the three officers seemed to know one another, although there were some growled exchanges of comment. Obviously the man at her side was a major, and rode facing forward by virtue of his seniority in rank. The black-bearded man was a captain and the young man was a lieutenant. A second lieutenant. She was ostentatious in paying him no attention.

Yet it was three and one-half days to Port La Vaca, and you cannot hold people at arms' length for ever. So in spite of herself, Merit found herself thawing, and by the second day, following the night spent in a roadside inn, she spoke to them, and after that they conversed with growing freedom. The major, she learned, was named Ashmore. Of Sheridan's staff. The black-bearded captain was called Baumgartner, and was being invalided to his home in St. Louis because of a sabre cut on his forearm which had not responded to medical treatment. Captain Baumgartner was irritable, and took little part in the conversation. The third officer was Lieutenant Hazelton—Wesley Hazelton. With a regiment of Wisconsin cavalry.

Merit was diverted to find that Major Ashmore had a variety of interesting ailments. The major, once his reserve broke down, dwelt at length upon these disabilities. He lived in hope of the day when, in God's good time, he should arrive at a place where a capable physician could be found. Army doctors, he confided to Merit, were quacks and charlatans. All of them. How they got their appointments was beyond him. Not one of them understood his case, even the most simple of his ailments, let alone the complicated total of them. He went into details, and rolled medical terms off his tongue. It was obvious the major had devoted time and a not

inconsiderable talent to the examination of his various fluxes and flatulences.

Merit encouraged the flow of hypochondriac reminiscence, because she had detected a certain moist glimmer in the china-blue eye of Lieutenant Hazelton which she interpreted instantly and unerringly. Merit had no desire to humiliate the lieutenant, but she had no time here for properly soothing a calf infatuation. So she kept the major in full cry upon his diseases all the final day, while the country changed from mesquite land to the great flat stretch of coastal plain which sweeps upward from Matagorda Bay to lose itself in the rolling country of the north.

She saw open blue water at Port La Vaca and bade farewell to her travelling companions, hoping Lieutenant Hazelton would recover his pulse and his sanity, and took Ginger and rode away without a backward glance, although the lieutenant's adam's apple fluttered up and down so rapidly that she almost feared for him.

Port La Vaca was a typical Gulf port town, with lazy Negroes loafing on the docks, yellow waters of the river merging quickly into the green of the bay, and old houses backing up from the battered wharfs and warehouses.

And at Port La Vaca Merit went into an endless period of waiting for a ship to Vera Cruz. She used up her small store of money, and, heartbreakingly, had to sell Ginger. But finally she managed to get passage.

At Vera Cruz her rate of travel was suddenly galvanized into a speed that astonished her. A day behind fast-running little mules, to Jalapa, sixty miles from the coast. A good eighteen hours from Vera Cruz it was, and hardly a stop of more than the few minutes needed to change the teams. Then to La Hoya, Perote, Puebla, and finally at the end of the fourth day the highway plunged downward into the vast, widespread Valley of Mexico. There, before her, was Mexico City with its thousands upon thousands of *casas* huddled like sheep about its great cathedrals and *palacios*.

Alone of all Shelby's command, Gideon Gonder seemed to derive enjoyment from the long idleness in the capital. Far from adversely affecting his spirits, a genuine opportunity to loaf appealed vastly to his sybaritic soul. Shelby might pull at his beard and gnaw his fingers, and his officers and men might fidget, complain querulously, or swear and ejaculate tobacco juice with sullen fury, but Gonder accepted all matters with calm philosophy.

He played poker, when and where opportunity presented itself, but his success was too great; presently, by mutual and indignant agreement, he was excluded from every game in the barracks. He therefore sought his diversion in the city, and daily grew more fluent with his Spanish, imbibing the drinks of the country, taking a turn at the monte tables, and whoring with gusto whenever he found a reasonably attractive little *puta*. Never had Gonder's individuality been overwhelmed by army restrictions, and given opportunity now, he burgeoned into quite a public figure. They grew to know him in the *cantinas* and markets of the city. His guffaw, his inimitable swagger, and his erubescence gave him celebrity, and he won a name for himself, "El Rubro"—"The Red," which indicates the degree of public favour he had achieved.

Well satisfied with himself, Gonder was making his impressive way down the street one evening, when his elbow was plucked, and he heard his name:

"Señor El Rubro?"

A slim Mexican youth in a yellow shirt stood beside him.

"*Qué hay?*" asked the American.

A note was handed to him by the youth. Gonder was in nowise astonished at this. He was the recipient these days of frequent notes from the fragile sex. Not ordinary, coarse *putas* either, he assured himself smugly, but higher grade *demimondaines* of the capital night life. He opened the folded paper, and stepped to where the light was good.

Suddenly he whirled like a huge red bull towards the youth.

"Where did you get this?" he roared.

The frightened Mexican staggered backward with Gonder's great hand at his throat.

"Señor! Señor El Rubro! *Madre Dios!*"

Gonder bethought him that in his excitement he was talking to the boy in English, and broke into sputtering Spanish. The terrified youth replied. Presently, clutching his prisoner, Gonder allowed himself to be led to where the writer of that note was. Past the garden of Tolsa, past the College of Mines on the Paseo Nuevo they hurried. They reached the entrance to the bull ring with its advertisements of the coming Sunday's programme, and hastened on. Crowds of pedestrians turned to stare at the big American and his prisoner. A squadron of lancers trotted by—Maximilian's guard, on the

way to Chapultepec. All at once Gonder found himself in front of a building of the Spanish type, with flat roof and grilled windows, and recognized it as the Hotel de Paris, a French *fonda* of some magnitude, celebrated as a gathering place for the foreign element in the city.

Led by the yellow-shirted boy he strode into the foyer and gazed keenly about, seeing the marble columns, the palms, and the tinkling fountain, but not what his eyes sought. Then they came to a stair and mounted it. Up one flight, then another they went. They reached the roof and Gonder halted, delight, almost disbelief in his homely face.

Merit Hampton stood smiling at him.

“Miss Merit! Now God be thanked!” he croaked fervently, and took in his big red paws the girl’s outstretched hands. “How—ma’am, how in the name of all that’s holy did you get here?” For once Gideon Gonder’s aplomb was knocked clear out of him.

“I arrived this morning,” she said. “Oh, Mr. Gonder, what an exquisite pleasure there is in being in civilization again! I’ve lived so long on *atole* porridge, meat embalmed in red pepper, black beans, and *tortillas* thin and tough as a drum-head, that the omelette I had this noon was like heaven, almost. But this is no time for personal history. I heard Shelby was here, so I bribed a boy to find you. Tell me, have you heard from my father?”

“Judge Hampton has been in the city,” said Gonder recovering his breath. “Mebbe he’s still here.”

“It couldn’t be! No, that would be too much like a direct answer to a prayer. After what I’ve gone through—working my way all across Texas and down the coast, then here——”

“Down the coast, ma’am? Then you didn’t ride south from the border through the desert?”

“No. I went back to San Antonio, and later took a ship at Port La Vaca.”

“Miss Merit, there’s something you got to know. There’s been misapprehensions—bad misapprehensions—an’ I’m afraid I’m to blame——” Concern and self-condemnation were in his beefy countenance.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t hardly know how to tell it, ma’am. The night you disappeared at Eagle Pass, Cap’n Quinn Parridine also dropped out of sight——”

“Quinn Parridine!” she cried. “And you—oh, surely nobody thought *that*?”

Her horror made Gonder completely miserable. He bumbled and puffed in his beard, and looked down at the hat which he revolved around and around in his hands. After a moment the girl put out a hand and arrested the hat.

“Mr. Gonder, please stop that fiddling,” she said. “My good friend, I know your heart too well to be angry with you.”

The red-beard raised his eyes gratefully. “If that’s the way you feel, Miss Merit, it shorely takes a weight off my mind. An’ there’s them that’s most ce’tainly goin’ to be glad to hear this——”

“I have not the slightest notion what you mean, and I’ve no desire that anybody know about it!” she cut in sharply. “If anybody . . . has had false ideas, I’m sure it’s no concern of mine.” She hesitated. “I only want to know about father!”

“I can only tell you, ma’am, that he visited Shelby.”

“How long ago?”

“A week or sech a matter.”

“Then I simply must talk to the general at once,” she said eagerly.

“I’ll carry him a message, ma’am.”

“No, that won’t do at all! Don’t you see it would only mean more delays? If father’s in Mexico City I want to find him *now*. Mr. Gonder, you must conduct me immediately to General Shelby. Please!”

She knew how to manage him as nobody else on earth could. Practically before he realized it, the burly red-beard was seated beside her in a carriage he had hired at her imperious command, and they were worming their way down the crowded street, headed across the city towards the barracks. Half an hour later Merit stood in the general’s office, and Shelby was staring at her as if he saw a ghost.

“Miss Merit!” he exclaimed. “Child, where did you come from?”

“The Hotel de Paris.”

“And your journey down here . . . we had a sufficiently difficult time. It seems almost miraculous that a lady could make her way through that desert \_\_\_\_\_”

“General Shelby,” she interrupted, “there’s a general idea around here that—that I went down through Mexico with Captain Parridine. It’s outrageous, sir, for a girl to find herself being slandered by people she thought were her friends——”

“There, there, child,” he soothed. “I—Orderly! Find Captain Bennett and give him my compliments——”

She said: “I do not wish to see or speak to Captain Bennett!”

He looked at her grimly. “I know nothing about your feelings towards Captain Bennett, Miss Merit, but now that I have you safe, I’m going to see that you’re delivered to Cato Hampton.”

“You’ve seen father!” she cried. “That’s what I want to talk to you about!”

“I have seen him. And he made me feel damnably like a dog about you. But this will make things right. Orderly, did you hear me?”

She was between panic and fury, but there was nothing she could do. She couldn’t run away . . . it would be too undignified. And besides it might make Clay think that he was important to her . . . as he certainly was not, and never would be. So she gazed at Shelby with a sort of desperate calmness, and told him about her journey down the coast. She hardly heard his exclamations of astonishment, because she was listening . . . for footsteps.

Presently the footsteps came, and the next minute she was looking into Clay Bennett’s eyes. Her heart jumped inside her, and no matter how she tried to scourge up her indignation she could not look upon him with hostility. She was afraid her cheeks were colouring, and she could not, in spite of every resolution, keep from taking joy in his tallness, the bony squareness of his shoulders, and his clean grey eyes. If Clay Bennett, at that moment, had held out his arms, Merit Hampton could never have kept from going to them. But he did not. Instead, he spoke to the general, very formally and in clipped military phrases, reporting himself for duty.

At that things fell back into their proper perspective, for which Merit was breathlessly thankful, and she had a chance to revive her indignation a little. Her chin went up.

“Captain,” Shelby was saying, “Miss Hampton is back with us.”

“Yes, sir.” Clay did not need to be told. He had not taken his eyes from her. His mind was a swirl of glowing confusion. This was Merit . . . but a

different Merit. The green riding habit, so much a part of his memory of her, was gone. Instead she was dressed in something exquisitely rosy, with what seemed a fountain of creamy lace at her throat, and a bonnet of yellow leghorn straw on her head, tied beneath her chin with wide flowing black ribbons.

General Shelby may perhaps have noticed the abstraction of his junior captain, but he went on in a matter-of-fact way:

“Am I correct in understanding that you know how to find Judge Hampton?”

“Yes, sir,” said Clay, his eyes still on the girl.

“Miss Hampton wishes to reach her father. Since you can locate him, I want you to be her escort. Start to-morrow. Cato Hampton will raise hell over every day’s delay. The stagecoach leaves here in the morning for Guanajuato. Perhaps you can make that. See that she’s safely delivered to Judge Hampton. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Miss Hampton?”

She hesitated, then gave in. One did not debate things with Shelby when he had set his head. “I suppose . . . there is no other way,” she said unwillingly.

“I’ll leave the details to you two to arrange,” said the general. He was not inept at reading the thoughts of others, and he rather enjoyed acting as *deus ex machina* here. “Captain, take Miss Hampton back to her lodgings. When you’ve delivered her to her father, get back here as soon as convenient. I don’t know when things are going to break, but it could be any day now. Good day, Miss Merit. Servant, ma’am.”

Clay followed the girl out of Shelby’s office, and his eyes could not help noticing the hostility of her uncompromising back.

That back remained uncompromising. It was five days before they reached Guanajuato, and in that time Miss Hampton did not speak five words to Clay, although she conversed frequently with Gonder, who accompanied them. The two men made the journey on horseback, while Merit rode in the diligence.

But she did not consider that she had to make any explanations to Clay Bennett. Moreover she forbade Gonder to make them. Her position, perfectly illogical, and perfectly feminine, was that he had no right to

believe anything wrong about her, and if he did so believe, it only proved that he was not worthy. She only knew that she was determined to put and keep Clay Bennett very firmly in his place.

As for Clay, he rode along hurt and puzzled. The curious thing about love is that it comes when it is not asked, and persists when it is not wanted. Clay had made every effort to get Merit Hampton out of his mind. And here, the minute she came again into his life, it was as if all that painful effort had never been.

He did not know where she had been or what she had done. What was more important, he did not care. He did know that he was both happy and miserable—happy because she was safe, and miserable because she treated him like something too low even to set her little feet upon. So he rode along behind the coach with Gonder, trying to efface himself as much as possible, but never missing a chance to catch a glimpse of her.

It was after sunset, late on the fifth day, that they saw ahead of them the scattered points of light against the black swell of the night-shrouded mountains, which meant Guanajuato. At the sight of those lights, the coach, with a crack of the whip and a howl from the driver, spun forward suddenly at increased speed, and Clay knew, although it was too dark to see her face, that Merit was at the window, peering eagerly ahead.

Half an hour later they passed the French guards at the city gates. The stage driver had contracted to deliver them at Señora Engorda's *fonda*, and very shortly he was whistling his horses up an extremely steep and narrow street. Seen after night, it appeared to Clay that this city must be built on a precipitous mountain side. The diligence strained and jolted for five minutes, then suddenly pulled to a halt. Lights gleamed from shuttered windows, servants came running, and Clay made out in the darkness a tile-roofed building, probably of adobe.

"*La Fonda Engorda*," said the driver. While the servants removed the luggage from the boot, Gonder dismounted and assisted the girl from the coach. The horses were led away, and Clay followed into the hotel.

At the door a buxom woman in a vastly hooped skirt of black silk came rustling towards them.

"*Soy Doña Gertrudis Engorda*," she said. Her voice, trilling and birdlike, was at odd variance with her appearance. There was nothing birdlike about Doña Gertrudis, except her voice. She was plump, dark and masterful. Her tiny feet were crammed into small high-heeled shoes which clicked

purposefully as she walked. Her plump white hands were covered with a dozen rings, and her face though small featured, had a cast of strength and determination further aided by a shadow of a moustache on her upper lip.

When Doña Gertrudis became emotional she quivered all over her plump frame. She was quivering now with excitement as she was made to understand that this was indubitably the daughter of Judge Hampton. She burst into a torrent of words, glaring suspiciously first at one man and then the other with her snapping, button-like black eyes. It was a scandal that Señorita Hampton should be forced to travel unchaperoned, she wailed. But now that she had reached Doña Gertrudis's poor *casa*, she should have proper oversight until her father returned. Señorita Hampton should lodge in Doña Gertrudis's own suite, where the latter could see that she was cared for. She shot at the two men a withering glance as she uttered this, giving them to understand that she would abide no tricks from them.

But her eye fell on Gonder, and for the first time she had a good view of his massive personage. Her voice changed in mid-sentence. Something about the swashbuckling airs of the man seemed to soften her, and her demeanour became at once less forbidding.

She almost cooed as she explained—speaking now strictly to the red-beard and ignoring Clay—that Judge Hampton was gone up into the sierra. She, however, would make his friends as comfortable as it lay in the power of a poor widow to do, until his return.

At this mention of her estate, Doña Gertrudis sighed, and after casting down her eyes, gave a speculative glance at Gonder. The latter, who alone understood all that she was saying, was visibly shaken by the impact of it. When Doña Gertrudis called a servant to show the men to their room, he lumbered off at a rate that hinted at panic.

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Their room was small and dark, but looking out of the window into the night, Clay caught the gleam of lights far below. For an instant he gazed down in astonishment. Then he realized that his window overlooked a precipice at least a hundred feet high. The topography of Guanajuato clearly was most eccentric, for the front of Señora Engorda's *fonda* stood level with the street in front, while the rear of it gave off on this sheer drop.

Gonder had thrown himself on the bed, while Clay washed himself and brushed from his uniform as much of the dust as possible.

“What we goin’ to do now, seh?” the red-beard asked presently.

“Wait,” replied Clay. “Shelby said to get back quick—but the judge isn’t here. Gonder, I wish with your Spanish, you’d have a talk with this Señora Engorda and find out if she has any notion when the judge will return.”

“Not me!” cried Gonder, hastily sitting up, as if the mere mention had stung him. “That Doña Gertrudis—she’s got me terrified, seh. Did you see them sheep’s eyes she was a-givin’ me? A widow, that-a-way, is always a perilous critter to be around, but when they begin lookin’ like a mule buyer sizin’ up a critter at the pound—well, look out.”

“You don’t think the lady has designs on *you*?” asked Clay in mock astonishment.

“Seh,” solemnly stated Gonder, “be glad you ain’t got no whiskers that’s red. Them chin locks of mine, as I have discovered, is plumb devastatin’ in these parts to what is erroneously known as the fair sex—seein’ they’re about as fair as a smoked ham. Whiskers in Mexico, you have no doubt obse’ved, is scanty, an’ inclined to be monotonous in colour, the same runnin’ mostly to black. A gent with luxuriant jowl foliage, partic’lar if it’s of vivid colouration, is a sensation with these here dusky females. In Mexico City, fo’ example, I will not deny that I have found the attractions of them pink face trellises of mine advantageous at times. A single man on the prowl, that-a-way, likes his little dalliances. But this here’s different, seh. Doña Gertrudis—hell, she chills me. *She* ain’t figgerin’ on no dalliance. Not

her! It's matrimony she has in mind if I ever seen a threatenin' look in a female's eye, an' I'm stayin' jest as clear of her as poss'ble."

Respecting the instinct of self-preservation, Clay allowed Gonder virtually to incarcerate himself in their room. In the next two days the red-beard made one or two ventures out, but each time the sight of a massive feminine figure looming in the offing, sent him bolting back to his refuge. He even had his meals brought to his room on the plea that he was indisposed.

Meantime Clay also was having difficulties. He desired to talk with Merit, but Merit kept to her quarters. In his official capacity as her escort charged with delivering her to her father, it became more and more necessary that there should be a conference with her. Once or twice he did get to see her—at a distance both times, and very much escorted by Doña Gertrudis, who seemed now to have constituted herself as a particularly formidable *duenna*. Each time he received from the girl a formal nod. The second time, however, it seemed to him that there was something more in her look. Perhaps she was becoming weary of the everlasting chatter of Doña Gertrudis, who despite the fact that her guest understood little of her Spanish, never stopped the flow of words which poured from her lips.

That look in Merit's eyes created new hope in Clay, and with it a sudden determination. It was late afternoon on the second day, but he repaired at once to the room where Gonder lay in a state of siege.

"I've got to see Miss Hampton," he said to the red-beard, "and I've decided on a military stratagem in the present impasse."

"Yes, seh?"

"It's an old artifice of war to feint at the enemy's front, while making the real onset at the rear."

"Yes, seh." Gonder sat up. For some indefinable reason the other's words alarmed him.

"I propose," said Clay sternly, "to use you for the frontal feint—you are to attract the attention of Doña Gertrudis, while I seize the chance to talk with Miss Hampton."

"Wait a minute, seh!" cried Gonder, clambering in his agitation to his feet. "The military tactics to which you refer have as their chief defect that the division assaultin' the enemy's front is usually decimated durin' the execution of the movement."

“That,” said Clay airily, “unfortunately cannot be helped. You can’t make an omelette without breaking some eggs——”

“But what about me?” pleaded Gonder. “You shorely won’t be so unspo’ting——” But Clay was adamant, and Gonder finally had to give in.

Having briefly rehearsed their manœuvre, the strategists stalked to the *patio* where Clay last had seen Merit and Doña Gertrudis. Luck was with them. The women still were sitting in the small garden, enjoying the afternoon sun of autumn. Merit was looking sadly bored.

At the sight, Gonder shrank back and only the stern visage of Clay made him go forward. That the red-beard’s fears were not unfounded was clear the instant Doña Gertrudis saw him. She rose from her seat beside Merit with determined quickness.

“*Ai!* Señor El Rubro!” she cried. While Gonder floundered in wonder at how she had obtained the title he bore in Mexico City, she advanced upon him with beaming cordiality. And had he been ill? She was, she assured him, desolated at his absence these two days—and Gonder was devastated also, by the simper she discharged at him. Perspiring freely, and with a last appealing look at Clay, he summoned the self-possession to express his thanks for her solicitude. He had, he admitted, been somewhat under the weather. At this she uttered a sharp cry of commiseration. That anything should happen to *this* one of all her guests! She gave him a look that caused him to reel.

But he must be seated. Holy Mother, it would not do to exert, this soon after an illness. She would have him made comfortable right here in the sun. She cried out for her servants and the *fonda* resounded to her clamour. *Mozos* flew here and there, bringing cushions, and a table, and bottles. Shame-faced, but grinning, Gonder found himself ensconced, with fruit and wines and cakes, while Doña Gertrudis bustled about, supervizing the arrangements.

When at last all satisfied her, and the red-beard, wringing out of the situation whatever good there might be in it, had filled and drained a goblet, she sat beside him and made inquiries as to his plans and how long he might remain here. She added, before he could answer, that she hoped his stay would be indefinite . . . she desired him to consider the place his.

She sighed like a bellows at this and gave him a coy look from the corners of her eyes. One grew so lonely, she said, living alone. And there was this *fonda*. It needed a man to manage and operate it properly, and the

proper man could have it . . . it could be his, in all truth, with all its appurtenances, the six and thirty beds, the tables, chairs, hangings, blankets, kitchen equipment, and servants . . . and perhaps the mistress also.

At the last she concocted an ogle that rocked him from stem to stern, and with it a titter that completed the wreckage.

Gonder gulped and gasped. Desperately he sought to change the subject from this threatening topic. Her late husband, he asked, what had been his occupation?

“Ah, the dear Enrique,” she exclaimed, and added that she could hardly think on her former spouse without emotional disturbances. It was so sympathetic of good, kind El Rubro to make this inquiry. Perhaps he had heard that Enrique had died a hero’s death? Ah, her late husband was a true hero—a *pegador*, being a man of high position and deeply respected, because of the dangers he ran. A *pegador*, she explained, is one who attends to the firing of the slow-matches when blasting is to be done in the nether bowels of a mine—a thing requiring the utmost skill, coolness, and courage, to the same degree that they are required in the bull ring.

Doña Gertrudis paused to sigh, then gave Gonder a sad smile somewhat marred by the moustache, and continued. Enrique, she said, had been employed in the immense Los Rayas silver mines, and this was the manner of his work: After each *barretero* or quarryman, had with pick and drill undermined that portion of the rock allotted to him, he was drawn to the surface in a bucket pulled up the shaft by means of a windlass to which horses were hitched. Then was time for the descent of the *pegador*. First he saw to it that all ropes were coiled and implements cleared from the galleries and shafts. Then he placed the powder, with a peculiar and exquisite skill, in the holes prepared for it, and arranged the slow-matches.

After the matches were lit, it became a matter of quick action, Doña Gertrudis explained, as to whether the *pegador* survived or died. Only a few minutes customarily elapsed before the explosion. Because his only hope for safety lay in his being pulled up the shaft with great rapidity beyond the reach of fragments of rock hurled in the air, the very lightest bucket was always prepared, and the two horses hitched to the windlass were chosen for their swiftness and obedience to commands. These were called the horses of the *pegador*. Having lit the slow-match, the *pegador* got into the bucket, and pulled a small rope he carried in his hand, the other end of which extended up the shaft to the overseer, who was at the mouth. That was the signal, and

instantly the bucket was hauled skyward by the swift horses, the *pegador* being carried up beyond the realm of danger before the explosion took place.

Hundreds of times Don Enrique had made this rapid escape from danger—as subtle, Doña Gertrudis said, as the twirl of the hips with which the *matador* evades the reach of the horns of the bull—but at last fortune went against him. On his fatal day Don Enrique had lit the slow-matches, and was making his way rapidly towards the bucket, when he stumbled, causing him accidentally to jerk the signal rope. The driver of the horses of the *pegador* that day was green and unseasoned. Instantly, when the false jerk came, he set his horses in motion. In vain did Don Enrique jerk again to show that all was not well. The bucket sped out of his reach. And in the explosion that followed Doña Gertrudis was made a widow so utterly that they did not find enough of her husband to hold a funeral with.

At this the lady gave way to tears and made as if to sob on Gonder's bosom, but the affrighted red-beard rose suddenly from his seat. Thereupon she wiped the moisture from her eyes and commented that fortunately her late spouse had made much money and they lived in a certain affluence. She had found herself substantially provided for, and all this—the *fonda*, together with other properties—she would find it the pleasure of her heart to bring as dowry to the man she loved . . .

As soon as Doña Gertrudis and Gonder became intent on their own little drama, Clay had crossed over to where Merit sat.

“Where shall we go?” he asked boldly.

“What do you mean?”

“I want to talk with you. We can't talk here—” He waved a hand towards where Gonder was unwillingly charming Doña Gertrudis.

Surprisingly, mirth sparkled in her eyes. “Was this planned?”

“It was.”

“Then let's not lose the advantage of it,” she said, rising. “Come this way, out of the *patio*——”

Her sudden acquiescence and the whole change in her attitude left him breathless, but he followed. She whisked through the door and around a corner. Then she stopped.

“Now. What was it you wished to say?” she asked.

Boldness had paid him well thus far. He summoned his courage to follow his advantage. "It is pleasant outside—would you consider taking a little stroll—in the sunlight?"

Almost aghast at his own presumption he paused and watched her anxiously as she thought that over. Then she nodded her bright head, and caused his heart to turn over by putting her small hand in the bend of his arm. "Let's do," she said. "I feel as if I'd been in jail these two days. Let's go and look at the city."

When they were out of the *fonda* and actually walking together down the steeply sloping street Clay for the first time began to realize what a surprising thing had occurred. He did not attempt to explain it, but even he realized that for some reason the tension between them was disappearing. Without knowing it they were thinking the same kind of thoughts—and thoughts of that variety do not hold people at swords' points. Down the street they went, she clinging to his arm with one hand while with the other she daintily held her wide-flowing skirts, aimless as to direction, hardly knowing where their footsteps turned.

They found the city of Guanajuato was built in a series of great *barrancas* or canyons, with strange results in its arrangement. For most of its length it appeared scarcely more than one street wide, yet they were to learn that it straggled for nearly five miles.

Every type of dwelling was to be seen, from primitive adobes to fine brick public theatres. In every direction long flights of stone steps, hewn out of the living rock, led upward from the main streets, and it was interesting to see how the overburdened little burros—which seemed to be the only cargo carriers in Guanajuato—climbed those stairs as if they had never been accustomed to anything else. Along the chief thoroughfare stood the shops. Most of these possessed no fronts, but had instead a canopy and a large opening under which even horsemen could ride, so that much of the buying of goods was done by customers from their saddles.

In these streets was a colourful and various assemblage. Miners were everywhere. There were water-carriers with enormous earthenware *ollas*; women in sweet shops who sat for endless hours fanning the flies from their merchandise; porters, beggars, the inevitable *putas*, and passing wayfarers. The fact that Guanajuato was a great mining centre was impressed on Clay and Merit by the caravans, sometimes containing a hundred or more burros, all laden with rawhide sacks of ore, which they were carrying down the mountain to the smelters in the valley. Many of the houses were built right

into the rock, hewn, as it were, into the basalt. Architectural oddities occurred. A house might be three or four stories high where it faced the street, yet its top storey might give forth directly behind on the ground, as the hill rose with the house.

All this variety and colour and interest drew Merit out of herself, and presently she was commenting on things, then chattering light-heartedly in a way she had never behaved with Clay, and which left him delighted and half-afraid it would not last.

At first her talk was of things concerning which girls love to speak—clothing, people they both knew, and reminiscences of their common hometown back in Missouri, Waverly. The windows of most of the houses they passed were barred with iron grilles, as is the custom in Mexico and also in most other countries that inherit from Spain. This circumstance at last drew a question from Merit.

“To keep out thieves?” she asked, laughing.

“No,” he smiled, “to keep away lovers.”

“To keep them away?” she cried. “Good luck—what girl would wish to do that? No girl I ever knew—except—unless——”

She grew suddenly confused and he hastened to carry the conversation to a safer ground.

“It isn’t the girls—it’s their parents who decree the bars,” he told her. “They keep their daughters surrounded by barriers of stone walls, iron grilles, and ferocious old *duennas*.”

“Like . . . Doña Gertrudis?” she asked gaily. And instantly the easy discourse between them had been restored.

They laughed much and happiness lifted Clay’s spirits to the sky. He still did not understand the transformation, but he encouraged her to talk and listened to her as if every word she uttered was a jewel of wisdom. Merit was keenly interested, and she kept exclaiming delightedly at each new sight. For every fine house in Guanajuato, she pointed out to him, there were a hundred that were mere huts—wretched dwellings, often so small that it was impossible for a man of ordinary height to stand erect in them. A thatch let in the rain if it stormed and the floor was Mother Earth. If the family owned a pig, the pig shared the accommodations on an equal footing with all the human occupants.

It was growing late in the afternoon, but though the sun was nearing the horizon Mexican women could be seen in most doorways, squatting on their heels and grinding corn in their small stone *metates*, or busy at other simple household tasks. Some of these smiled shyly at the passing strangers, and Clay observed that dirty, smoky, and uncomfortable though the huts might be, it was apparent that these people had a love for beauty. Each household possessed its two or three symmetrical and artistic pottery jars, and more often than not the little huts were covered with the magnificence of purple bougainvillea, or the blue of the climbing Mexican morning glory.

Occasionally the strollers paused to look, and once Merit, using a few halting words of Spanish and many signs, bargained for and purchased a small, lovely piece of pottery. It was an hour of quiet beauty that Clay never forgot, and even with the silent longing in his heart he was happy.

The sun began to drop behind the jagged, toothed horizon of the mountains. Long shadows from the trees made a striped pattern across the dusty road, and doves came whistling in to their home branches to roost, while in the tree-tops parakeets chattered in their last evening wrangle, and the first of the fruit bats began to skitter in the gloaming. Slowly Clay and Merit retraced their steps and the last of the sun's rays painted the walls of the adobe buildings as if with blood. They began the ascent to the hotel, and even before they reached the top it seemed that a gossamer veil of violet had been drawn across the sky. The sun was behind his mountain, and in the first quick coolness of twilight, the sharp tang of wood smoke prickled in the nostrils.

Merit had grown very silent. Now, beside the wall of the hotel *patio* they stopped as if by common consent.

“Why don't you ask it?” she demanded, and it seemed that she was suddenly defiant.

“Ask what?”

“Ask what I was doing on the way down to Mexico City—who I was with—how I got there!”

He looked at her solemnly. “It does not matter to me how you got here,” he said, “so long as you are here now.”

And in that instant, almost without knowing it, she was in his arms, and he held her with a fierceness compounded of the great pain of love that leaped in him, and his desire to defend her from all unhappiness. She nestled in his embrace, and there were tears on her cheeks, but in some way he knew

these were not tears of sorrow. Then his fierceness changed to tenderness, and she remained within the circle of his arms, as much for the comfort of his strength as for any other reason. The moment came when he deliriously tasted the poignant fire of her lips, and felt the thrilling potency of her body momentarily pressed against him.

She dragged her mouth away from his, and pushed him back. In a panic she glanced hurriedly about to see if they were observed. The darkening street was deserted.

Exalted beyond all dreaming, they walked hand in hand to the door of Doña Gertrudis's *fonda*.

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The first thing they saw was Gonder, standing near the entrance, his face flushed with excitement. Not far from him quaked Doña Gertrudis. Gazing past her, Clay beheld a small, bandy-legged Indian, naked to the waist, clad in white cotton trousers and straw sandals, a rag binding back from his forehead the coarse black hair, to reveal a nose bent as if it had been smashed by a sledge.

“Thank God, you’re back!” exclaimed Gonder.

“What has happened—is it about father?” cried Merit with quick intuition.

“Ma’am,” Gonder replied, “the jedge is ill—back in them hills. He sent this Injun down to see if he could get Doña Gertrudis to dispatch help——”

“Ill?” the girl faltered. “Ill—alone?”

“Yes. That’s what this man says. His name is Miguel. He says the jedge is weak an’ cain’t travel.”

“Can he take us to father?”

Gonder questioned the Indian who nodded.

“*Sí! Mañana,*” he said harshly.

“Not to-morrow! I must go at once. How can I get a horse?” Merit cried almost wildly.

Doña Gertrudis bustled forward as Gonder explained and shook her head in violent disapproval.

“She says nobody knows what’s in them hills,” translated the red-beard.

“Nevertheless,” said Clay with decision, “we have to do something.”

Gonder agreed to that, but once more met opposition from the owner of the *fonda*. It would be most dangerous to attempt to go into the mountains now, after dark, she insisted. It was bad enough by daylight. Even this Indian might get lost. She would not be doing her duty by Señor Judge Hampton if she permitted his daughter to do this foolish thing. Besides, there was no

way to get a horse for the *señorita* before morning. If the *señorita* would consent to wait until then, Doña Gertrudis knew where an excellent animal might be obtained, trained to the side-saddle, too, from a cousin of hers, across the city. . . .

The last argument was the clincher. They ate supper and went to their rooms early and tried to sleep. But Merit did no sleeping that night, and Clay very little. Even Gonder failed to snore pontifically through the night as was his wont. He, too, had a problem that kept him sleepless.

Doña Gertrudis was as good as her word. A *mozo* sent across the city brought a horse shortly after daylight, equipped with side-saddle, and tied him before the hotel. Merit appeared, and Clay was rewarded by her smile. She had changed to the old green riding habit, and it seemed that with her appearance in that beloved garment, she had softened once and for all towards him. Neither of them spoke of the evening before, but the way she turned to him and depended on him showed how things were with them.

A quick breakfast and within half an hour they were on their way. The two men and the girl were mounted, but before them went the Indian Miguel on foot, tirelessly trotting up the pathway which led into the wild mountains. Merit was silent on that ride, from worry. Gonder was morose. And Clay was deeply concerned. After a time he questioned the red-beard.

“Did you get out of this man the exact nature of the judge’s illness?”

“No. The Indian couldn’t tell me.”

“Did Miguel give you any sort of notion as to where the judge is?”

“He said he could lead us there, but he couldn’t tell us the way,” said Gonder, shaking his head. “I don’t like it much. Mebbe we ought to stop an’ talk things over.” He pulled up his horse. Both Merit and Clay did likewise. Miguel trotted forward fifty paces, then turned towards them inquiringly, and squatted—exactly like a dog.

“This might be some kind of a trap,” Gonder said.

Clay gazed up the trail at the squatting Indian and the looks of that battered face did not reassure him. But Merit spoke eagerly:

“I’m sure it’s all right. I feel certain that father needs me badly. When he sent that message to Doña Gertrudis he had no sort of notion *we* would be there, or he’d have explained more fully his illness and where he was. He didn’t indicate that he was apprehensive of anything. Anyway—if there was far less to reassure us I’d still feel that I had to go on. I’ve come all the way

down here to find him and I'm not going to let a few more miles stop me when he needs me!"

That settled it. They moved forward again, and Miguel, seeing them started, turned and trotted once more ahead of them. Upward in a steady, hard climb, led the mountain trail, and the Indian on foot seemed to travel it more easily than did the horses. The teeming city was left far behind, and they were in the primitive wilds now. At first the way led along the bottom of a great *barranca*, then branched off into a lesser canyon, and from there to one still smaller, each leading higher and higher into the rugged, pine-clad mountains. Past the meridian rode the sun, and then moved westward, sinking lower and lower in the sky as the day grew older.

All at once the Indian stopped. They had reached the mouth of a narrow gorge, and the guide was refusing to go farther. He pointed into the canyon and uttered a guttural stream of words to Gonder. The red-beard replied. At his query the Indian shook his head. "*Yo tengo miedo!*" he said, and with determination indicated that he intended to return the way he had come.

"He says," Gonder told them, "that the jedge's mine-workin' is up that canyon. He'll go no farther up, but he ain't sayin' why. There may be some superstition, or there's somethin' he's scairt of."

"I'll make him come along," said Clay grimly, drawing his revolver.

The broken-nosed Indian said nothing, but his eyes shifted dog-like from the menacing weapon to Merit's face. She could not resist that look.

"Oh, let him go!" she urged. "It can't be much farther. We're near the top of the ridge now. Let's continue without him."

"I don't like it," said Clay.

"Please," she begged. "Please."

He could not resist that double "please."

"As you say," he agreed, thrusting back his revolver in its holster, and they rode forward once more. This time Clay took the lead. The trail still led upward, and glancing back he saw the bow-legged little Indian turn and start trotting back in the direction from which they had come. There was about him no evidence of weariness.

Gonder pushed back his hat and scratched his red head as he turned in his saddle to watch the retreating figure. "God a'mighty," he said. "That *mozo* must have springs in his heels! I'd give plenty to know why he won't go no farther up this canyon."

For fifteen minutes the trail zigzagged up the new gulch they had entered. Then it came to a sheer granite wall, broken and fissured, but unclimbable. It brought them to a stop; the canyon separated into two rocky ravines, and the traces of a small path ran up each. But there was no clue to tell which branch was the proper one for them to take—if indeed the trail on which they were travelling was not altogether a false one.

“Here’s what I think,” Clay said, after studying the divergent paths for several minutes. “The day’s getting short and we haven’t much time. We’d better divide here. There’s no way to tell which path to take, and by splitting we’ll save hours perhaps. Suppose I take the right-hand ravine and follow it up until I’m satisfied there’s nothing up there—or I find the judge?”

“I think that’s good,” agreed Merit. “Then I’ll take the other branch.”

“I reckon I better accomp’ny Miss Merit,” said Gonder.

“Here goes,” Clay said. “If you two reach the head of your ravine, or the path stops without leading to anything in particular, return here. We’ll all meet and figure what to do next.”

Merit nodded her bright head. That brightness was the last thing Clay saw as he turned his horse to the right and passed around a huge boulder into the piney shade of the lonely canyon he had elected to explore.

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For some reason the trail followed a ledge which skirted a high shoulder. To Clay's right the ground pitched sharply away into a rocky gorge down the bottom of which brawled a turbulent little mountain creek. Above, at his left, the pine-clad mountain slope climbed steeply. The smell of fresh pine needles was in the air, and the whisper of a breeze in the branches made a soft, sighing sound. Evening was approaching, and already the air was becoming crisp and cool. Through the trees he caught glimpses of far ridges, touched with the brightness of the sun; and high above, a sombre speck against the azure sky, wheeled a solitary eagle.

From the first he found the going difficult, and it became more so rapidly. Once or twice he was forced to dismount and lead his horse up particularly rough or steep stretches of the trail, and at last a hard scramble loomed ahead, which caused him to abandon the animal entirely. Clay tied the horse in a pinyon grove, and clambered up the narrow pathway on foot. All at once, on the bank of the little stream below him, he noticed a tree stump. And then there were others—all of them cut so recently that the wood in them still showed new and yellow. Axemen had been busy here within the month . . . and mine-workings require timber for shorings, and buildings, and platforms. With new speed Clay hurried forward.

The canyon widened suddenly and he was out on a wide shoulder of the mountain. Before him rose tumbled heaps of rock and gravel—tailings from a mine. Then he saw a dark, square tunnel, shored up by hand-hewn timbers, which bored directly into the side of the mountain. The place showed abundant evidence of the work of men, but when he halted and gazed curiously about, he could see not a single sign of life. He hesitated a minute, then walked over towards the mouth of the shaft, wondering why the place was deserted. Could this be Judge Hampton's mine? Beside one of the heaps of rubble lay a conical basket of wicker—such a basket as the Indians of this country used to carry heavy burdens by means of a broad tump-band across the forehead. This particular basket quite evidently had been abandoned because it was worn out, for a jagged hole was torn through its bottom.

A vaguely uncomfortable feeling took possession of Clay. Something about this place seemed uncanny. Was it the square, soulless eye of the

shaft? It seemed to watch him unblinkingly, and his flesh crawled so that he turned quickly, half expecting to find someone behind him. But nobody was in sight.

Again he started towards the shaft, when a faint sound stopped him. Tensely, he listened. It came again—a queer, indescribable distant babbling. He knew that no beast had uttered the sound. The voice was human.

For the first time he noticed that the path he had been following continued on across the ledge, the footing narrowing until it led sharply around a corner formed by a bold cliff which stood like a sentinel at the upper end of the little vale. And through the narrow gap at the foot of the cliff ran the same foaming brooklet he had been following upward. He sprang forward on that path, half running up the ravine.

He had guessed correctly—the sound grew louder as he progressed. Where it skirted the cliff the path narrowed sharply, then suddenly turned the corner, and gave on a pretty little mountain meadow, surrounded by pine-covered slopes, with the brook gurgling down the middle. And there—something he might entirely have missed had not the voice attracted his attention—stood a small log cabin. A cabin with a low gabled roof of the type usually seen only north of the Rio Grande.

It was immediately apparent that the voice Clay had been following came from the cabin—a high, cracked voice, talking unceasingly. Talking insanely.

Clay began to run. In less than half a minute he crossed the meadow to the shack. The door hung open and he thrust his head within and stared into the darkened room—then stepped back, repelled by the foul odour that issued forth. In that one second's glance, however, he had seen something stir in the far corner of the cabin, and now, fortifying himself with a lungful of fresh air, he looked within again. Slowly his eyes became accustomed to the dark dimness. He stepped inside and beheld, on a pallet covered with ordure from many days of helplessness and neglect . . . a human figure. A wan, high-nosed face turned towards him, and blue eyes peered vacantly—eyes he instantly and in shocked understanding, recognized.

“Judge Hampton!”

“Water!” came a croaking cry.

In two strides Clay crossed to the side of the pallet, and in spite of the sickening smell he lifted the old white head. That head was burning with fever, and the eyes were unnaturally bright. So wasted were the old man's

shrunken limbs that Clay understood now why he could not move or take care of himself. And still Judge Hampton babbled, pleading despairingly for water.

Clay remembered later thinking to himself that Gonder and he had been most unjust in their suspicions of Miguel, the broken-nosed Indian. A gourd lay on a rough table by the bed, and this Clay seized, running down to the brook to bring back a cold draught. Greedily the sick man drank, taking the liquid in great gulps, so that he spilled some of it on the stinking bed-clothes. Then for a time he lay back, his sunken eyes wandering restlessly about the room. Contemplating him, Clay was shocked at the change that had come over Judge Hampton. Two weeks or such a matter ago this old man had been confident, alert, and full of fine vigour of both mind and body. His hair, of course, was white as snow—white as the tops of the sierras, and his cheeks were sunken and sprouted with a stubble of white beard. But the hooked nose and domed forehead were the same, and so were the firm mouth and jaw which had caused Judge Hampton to be compared in appearance with the great South Carolina statesman, John C. Calhoun.

It was a broken man who lay before Clay in his foulness. The latter hardly knew what to do; he feared to indicate that he observed the ruin that had overtaken the other, yet it was necessary that he should learn the cause of this disaster. Another thought came: If it was at all possible, Merit must be prevented from seeing her father in this state.

In the corner of the cabin was a wooden tub, and Clay filled it with water from the creek.

“Judge Hampton,” he said, “this is Clay Bennett! Remember me? Clay Bennett, who used to read law in your office. I want to help you, and first I must do some cleaning around here. Tell me what happened to you. I want you to tell me how you came to be in this condition.”

The old man’s watery eyes turned towards him.

“It’s all there,” he quavered. “Just a little farther and I might still strike the vein . . . but I’m out of money. My boy, money . . . ’tis what makes the world go round, the poet notwithstanding. As for its being the root of evil, that is not what the Holy Writ says. It’s the *love* of money that is the root . . . Root and branch, lock, stock and barrel. I’m done—ruined. This infernal gold mine . . . a chimera, a fantasy, a mirage. Never let yourself be lured by a mirage, my boy. He who is deceived thereby is not wise . . . But why shouldn’t there be gold? Who says there isn’t gold?” He tried to struggle up on his elbow, but his strength would not permit it and he sank back. “It is a

lie . . . there must be gold . . . must be . . . just a little deeper in the rock. Little more perseverance needed . . . Spooner assured me on his honour, and Spooner's word is not to be questioned . . . Kentucky gentleman . . .”

So he rambled weakly on, his voice rising and falling, his poor broken mind wandering without rationality, yet indicating its old precision by the fact that not once did it lapse in the purity of its language. Clay laboured to tidy up the cabin as much as possible. There were some spare blankets and these he exchanged for the horrors on the bed. The wasted body he bathed as well as he could, and dressed the judge in some old but clean clothes, which he found in a chest at the foot of the bed. The filthy bed-clothes and the judge's defiled garments, Clay carried out of doors and dumped into some bushes until he could dispose of them. When that was done the cabin was a little more presentable and the sick man seemed easier. Clay opened wide the doors and windows to air the place. Even so he felt that he must reach Merit before she saw the judge, must prepare her for the shock.

“I want you to lie still, sir,” he said to the old man. “You must try to rest, and I'll get you some more water. I want you to promise me that you'll lie still until I come back.”

Clay spoke as one speaks to a child, and like a child the judge obeyed him.

“Yes,” the thin voice agreed. “Lie still. Get water. Must lie still and consider some of the legal aspects . . . I have it: Breach of warranty . . . have a legal cause for action against Spooner, sue me if I haven't. He warranted gold . . . part of the consideration. I must proceed in the courts . . . but . . . but . . .” Judge Hampton paused and a look of bewilderment came over his face. “But Spooner's dead, isn't he? Dead these ten years . . . Poor Moulton Spooner, as high-toned a gentleman as ever drank bourbon or rode a horse at a five-bar gate . . . there's something more to this than meets the eye . . .”

Wearily he subsided on his pallet and closed his eyes. Clay watched him a moment, then stole away.

Gonder and Merit would be coming up the canyon to meet him. He ran down the little trail past the vacant mine shaft to head them off. All at once he saw them. Gonder was leading the way up the gulch, pointing out to Merit the stump of one of the recently cut trees. Clay saw the flare of the man's red beard as he turned in the late sun. Then both Gonder and Merit caught sight of Clay. As if sensing something, Merit ran ahead to meet him. As she neared him her wide eyes read his face.

“Where is he?” She spoke quietly but with terrible intensity. Then: “He is . . .?”

“No, he is alive. But he is very ill. Something has happened here that I do not understand. For some reason the judge was deserted by all who were with him—while he was helpless with fever. I could not find out what took place because he—well, he is delirious. If we can we must get him to a doctor at once——”

She began running. Leaving him behind she ran up the trail towards the mine and towards the little cabin concealed around the bend.

“Merit!” he called to her. “Merit—before you go up there——”

But she seemed not to hear him. He turned and hurried after her, and Gonder, breaking into the awkward trot of a fat man, caught up with him.

“What happened, seh?” asked the red-beard.

“Judge Hampton’s up there in a shack—mighty sick. The place is a mess. He hadn’t been moved or cared for for days. I cleaned things up a bit, but the cabin’s deplorable.”

“Bad business,” puffed Gonder.

“I should not have permitted her to go ahead.”

“You couldn’t have stopped her, seh. After all, she’s none of your milk-an’-water people. She loves her pappy. You watch—she’ll be all right.”

They had reached the shoulder of the mountain with its mine tailings, and Merit had disappeared around the corner of the cliff. Again Clay’s skin prickled at the baleful one-eyed stare of the tunnel. Gonder glanced at it.

“That the gold mine?” he asked.

“Yes, but there’s no gold in it. That much I got from the judge.”

Gonder halted. “Say,” he said, “didn’t you tell me the judge hadn’t been moved or took care of fo’ days, mebbe?”

“That’s the way it looked to me.”

“How’d he keep alive? Even sick men has to have food an’ water.”

Clay remembered suddenly that although the judge had seemed thirsty, his thirst was no more than the ordinary craving of fever for water. He *had* received water—and probably food—through his illness. Somebody had been, perhaps still was, in the vicinity of that lonely log hut . . .

With a simultaneous impulse both Clay and Gonder quickened their pace. Rounding the cliff together they saw before them the meadow, lying peaceful with its little brook and the darkness of the pines climbing upward from its edges. In its centre stood the cabin. The door was open, and Merit was not in view.

Quickly the two men crossed the meadow. Since the girl had preceded them, Clay wished to give her decent time to gather herself from the ugly surprise that the first sight of her wasted father and his wretched surroundings must have given her; but if there was some other person lurking in the vicinity it was well to keep close. They approached the door and stared incredulously within.

The cabin was empty.

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Gonder stared this way and that. The bed was there, empty, with its fresh blankets which Clay had just put on it, and the very body form where the sick man had been lying. The tub Clay had used stood by the door, where he placed it when he emptied it, and it was still wet from the water that had been in it. On the table was the drinking gourd with a small dark dampness beneath it where some of its contents had slopped over. But neither Judge Hampton nor his daughter were in the cabin.

“Where’d she go?” Gonder asked, his voice for the first time sounding dazed.

He opened his mouth to call, but Clay suddenly covered it with his hand.

“Don’t yell!” the captain commanded.

“But Miss Merit——”

“She’s gone. So’s the judge. You know the judge didn’t take himself away. *Neither did Merit!*”

“She wasn’t out of our sight two minutes!” Gonder protested, goggling.

Clay’s eyes ranged about. The cabin before which they stood was isolated in the open meadow. There was no cover within a hundred yards of it—where the forest edge began.

“You’re right,” he said, “they couldn’t have carried off the old man in two minutes, let alone the girl. That means that they took the judge just as soon as I left him—maybe they were watching me all the time I was here. Come to think of it, I remember having a queer feeling that eyes were on me . . . they’re probably around us this minute!”

“*They?* Who do you mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you thought of our friend Parridine?” Gonder asked after a minute.

Clay had been thinking of nothing else, but he wanted desperately to disbelieve his own fears. “How could they have disappeared so quickly with

the girl?" he demanded.

"Prob'ly watched her comin' up the canyon after they'd carted off the old man. Noticed how far ahead of us she was runnin'. May have grabbed her just as soon as she passed around that cliff. Handkerchief over her mouth \_\_\_\_\_"

"Good God!" cried Clay, sick with fury at the thought of this indignity.

"Mebbe they didn't hurt her—too easy to get her without. Question is, what did they do with her an' the jedge?"

"We'd better get back to the horses—if they weren't taken as soon as we left them." Clay turned and started to lead the way back down the trail. They did not take two steps. It was as if he had expected it when he heard the crack of the rifle among the trees above, and a bullet went *spang* off a rock ahead of him. Both men swung around. Down from the dark woods a voice shouted:

"*Alto!*"

"Jump fo' the cabin!" said Gonder. "We can fight 'em off, mebbe!"

But Clay stood still. Whoever was in those woods above knew where the judge was—and Merit. In a rapid instant he made his decision. He would not resist capture.

"We're caught," he said shortly. "They have us covered."

Again the voice hailed: "*Venga se! Venga aqui!*"

"That means 'Come hither,' " said Gonder. "What we goin' to do?"

"Obey," replied Clay.

"Okay. I feel as exposed down here as Lady Godiva."

Hands aloft they walked sullenly up the hill towards the unseen voice. When they were half-way to the pines, a score or more of men stepped suddenly from the woods, their rifles converging on the two advancing Americans. They were Indians and Mexicans—typical guerrillas, such as Shelby's Brigade had fought all the way down from Eagle Pass. Suddenly Clay's eyes picked out a face . . . face with hair bound back by a rag from a smashed nose. Miguel.

"So it was a trap after all," he said. In his tone was no passion, no fear. Just a quiet curiosity.

“Bad business,” remarked Gonder for the second time. Then his voice rose suddenly in strident protest. “Say! Take it easy, friends!”

With animal ferocity and suddenness a dozen little brown men bounded down the slope towards them. Hard, dirty paws snatched at Clay’s wrists, and clutching fingers ripped his shirt from neck to waist. He heard Gonder grunt as half a dozen rushing figures bore him over, then bellow from beneath the monkey-like heap. At the same time Clay was thrown violently to the ground on his face, felt his arms wrenched savagely back behind him.

Nothing was to be gained by fighting. Clay went limp and suffered the Mexicans to do their will upon him. Thongs bit into his wrists, and he heard an excited stream of talk as one of the guerrillas came running with a strong, six-foot stick. This they tied to Clay’s back, stretching his arms out along the pole and lashing his wrists securely at the full length of his arms, until he formed a sort of human cross. When at last they hauled him roughly to his feet, he was helpless, except that his legs were free. Gonder was standing similarly trussed, glowering at his captors, with dirt on his red beard.

From both prisoners the wiry little Indian with the broken nose had appropriated the revolvers. He now gave a command: “*Adelante!*”

A rifle barrel prodded jokingly into Clay’s back, and prisoners and captors, they began to climb a steep path which angled through the pines towards the top of the ridge above the now deserted cabin.

Gonder was sputtering with indignation. “Ain’t this one hell of a note?” he complained. “I’d like to know where that baboon Miguel is figgerin’ on takin’ us——” A blow from the butt of a gun beat him into silence.

As fast as they could climb the guerrillas herded the two Americans upward, and Clay could see the muscles knot with effort on the bare legs of the Indian just ahead of him. These people seemed filled with an energy as violent as their own fiery sun. Gonder and Clay both were gasping in five minutes, what with the steepness of the climb and the rarefied mountain air, but none of their captors showed any indication of shortness of breath. Panting, his face lacerated by the branches which he was unable to fend away, worried over the realization that Merit also must be in the hands of these savages, and wondering if he and Gonder were being conducted to the same place where she and her father were being held, Clay struggled upward. The unnatural position in which his arms were bound was not comfortable. He tried once to strain his wrists against the thongs that bound them to the transverse stick across his back, but that only caused the leather bonds to cut deeper into his flesh.

After what seemed hours they stumbled to the top of the ridge, but no rest was permitted them there. Across the hogback the guerrillas drove their prisoners, along a path faintly traced among the scattered trees on top, which twisted to avoid outcroppings of granite boulders, then plunged abruptly down the opposite side and slanted steeply into the vast *barranca* beyond. A last backward glance he snatched and caught a glimpse of the far valley wherein lay the city of Guanajuato, only a few miles away. The view was almost immediately cut off as he was hustled down the opposite slope, and for a moment he felt as if all hope had been cut off with it.

Only a few miles back there, as the gaunt mountain raven might fly, lay the pleasant city in its series of narrow valleys, its streets teeming with life, its markets, its hotels including La Fonda Engorda, its French garrison, its peaceful and orderly security. And Clay, dropping over the other side of the mountain, walked in the very midst of barbarism. Not one of the wiry little men who drove him along, but had in his face the bitter lines of the killer. Not one but was an archetype of savagery.

For an hour they travelled steadily downward, and by that time Clay had forgotten all about the ugliness of his captors, the steepness of the trail, or the black fate which might lie before him—had forgotten almost everything else, in fact, for his mind seemed to concentrate itself on the ache that ran all along his arms, and in particular centred between his shoulders, due to the intolerable position in which his arms were lashed. He endured the anguish, but it grew steadily worse. Pale circles surrounded his mouth. Behind him he heard Gonder stumble. Clay could not see him, but he knew the big man was suffering also, and it became a matter of pride that he should show no sign of his own misery before the red-beard did so. Sharper and more unceasing grew the agony. Clay weaved as he walked, because the red haze of pain in his head blinded him.

The sun had set at last—somehow Clay was aware of that—and darkness enfolded the mountains. Travel was more difficult now, because the path was dark, but still the march of torment went on, until his brain reeled and he bit his lips raw to keep from moaning. Once he stumbled and pitched headlong, scarring his face on the gravelly path, but even then he grimly held back any sound. And as he was being hauled, with blows and kicks, to his feet, he heard a single whimpering groan behind him. And at that Clay almost grinned in spite of his own pain, for Gideon Gonder had been the first to cry out.

They rounded, after seeming eternities, a shadowing buttress of the mountain, and winking camp-fires came suddenly into view. One of the

guerrillas laid his head back like a wild beast and gave a harsh, long cry. It was answered from the camp, and the party with Clay and Gonder began shouting and replying to shouted questions. A few minutes more, and the two prisoners were being pushed, stumbling, through the camp itself, with a half-hundred dirty, vicious-looking brigands crowding about them.

Strange is the power of habit. Although he was in excruciating pain, and overpowered by concern for the girl he loved, to say nothing of his own fate, Clay's eyes glanced about professionally, taking in the camp, and the way it was situated and laid out. His contempt rose immediately. From what he could see by the flickering fires, this was a most filthy and disordered camp. There were one or two ragged tents, but most of the shelters were wretched *ramadas*—temporary roofs of branches and grass, laid on a rough framework of poles upheld by four forked posts which were planted in the ground in a square. Horse furniture, cooking utensils, clothing, and camp offal were strewn promiscuously around.

Then another matter took Clay's attention completely away from the filth of the camp. Across the light of fires he saw a spot of brightness, and his heart leaped, then sank, for it was Merit's hair. She was seated on the ground, and in her lap she nursed the silvery head of the old judge, who lay helplessly outstretched on the earth.

And stalking towards Clay and Gonder, pushing the Mexicans roughly out of his way as he came, was Quinn Parridine.

Clay thought: This is all Parridine's work. Well, it is no surprise to me. He's got me now. He's been wanting me long enough. I suppose he will put an end to me. I must not show fear. Not ever . . .

So he turned a face of chiselled contempt towards the renegade, and Parridine's narrow features darkened when he saw it.

"Quite a surprise, Bennett—this," he said. "One which I, for one, hadn't counted on. Why my men were so awkward as to bring you in alive, instead of leaving you to rot, is past my comprehension."

He snapped a vicious question at the broken-nosed Miguel. The little Indian replied, at first eagerly, then apologetically.

"*Cabrón!*" snarled Parridine, and the man slunk away.

"I observe," commented Clay, "that you've added a facility of tongues—to your other talents."

“For the compliment which you did not mean, I thank you,” Parridine replied. “To acquire a similar talent, let me recommend the spending of three months exclusively among these animals—as I have done.”

“What might your intentions be—with regard to us?” Clay asked, striving to keep his face from contorting with the red agony that shot through his shoulders.

“Oh,” the renegade shrugged. “I am disposed to be merciful. What would you prefer? Firing squad? Noose? I don’t care how you die, so long as you die. Death’s the rule of these mountains for all strangers, you know. Particularly *gringos*.”

“And you are El Gringo!”

“So I am called.”

In Clay’s memory came again the horrible vision of men nailed, dead, to a door, with their skin hanging from them in great loose flaps. And a woman on the ground sobbing “El Gringo.” A cold hand seemed to lay itself on his back. Nobody could tell what Quinn Parridine might do.

But the voice of Shelby’s captain remained level and steady. “What about Judge Hampton—and Merit?” he asked.

“Don’t worry about them—you’ll not be around to worry. I have business with them . . . both of them. The judge owes me money——”

“If you’re thinking about that mine, Parridine, it’s abandoned. No gold there.”

“Is that so? And why need Captain Bennett rush in with this disclaimer? I happen to have heard otherwise. Men have been known to hide gold—even stiff-necked old aristocrats—and then deny it. I’ve had one talk with the old fool already. Next time I shall try a different method. As for the girl—she was too good for me once. It will be interesting to see how she takes the new status——”

His glance wandered over to Merit and Clay went hot with wrath.

“Parridine!” he choked. “If you harm her, by God, I will——”

“You’ll do what?” asked the renegade contemptuously, and Clay went silent, realizing his own futility. “By God, Bennett, I’ve a notion to let you live just long enough to see what I do to the Hamptons!”

For an instant his black eyes bored into Clay’s, and Clay read insanity in them—insanity of hate, and greed, and lust, combined with a terrible

frustration. In that instant Clay knew this man was bent on the ultimate evil. He had in his clutch the four persons he hated most, Clay, Gonder, and Judge Hampton—and Merit, whom he had loved with a furious craving, and who had rejected him. He would never stop now until he had consummated his desire on each of them. Death for the men. Something else—degradation, a long breaking of the spirit, for the girl.

As the renegade turned his back, Clay screamed after him.

“Parridine!” his voice rose to a hysterical edge as he lunged and struggled, with three guards clinging to him. “Maybe Juarez would like to know that you’re responsible for the fact that Shelby joined Maximilian! Maybe Juarez would like to know the story of that!”

“*Dele!*” Parridine rasped, and one of the guards struck Clay in the mouth so that he spat blood from a cut lip.

On the other side of the fire, Merit crouched, watching with frightened eyes this brutality. Now as Parridine strode towards her, she turned her face towards him and tried to rise. A Mexican shoved her roughly down with a musket butt, and the renegade stood gazing down at the prostrate judge.

“How is he?” he asked.

“A little better,” Merit replied, and Clay raged within, for her voice told him she was fighting a terror greater than any she would have felt for herself alone. “He’s not delirious now—only pitifully weak.”

“Wake up, old man!” Parridine raised his voice and stirred Judge Hampton’s body with his boot.

“Please, no! Please!” pleaded Merit.

“Prop him up. *Vosostros!*” Parridine indicated two of the guerrillas and spat out a terse sentence of command. They ran forward and jerked the judge to a sitting posture. The old man’s head lolled with weakness but he knew his persecutor.

“I have no gold, Parridine, as I told you . . . the mine is barren,” he quavered.

“You believed you had out-guessed Quinn Parridine, didn’t you, judge?” said the renegade slowly. “This gold mine was the ace in the hole. You were going to sneak away and get the money to take Fairwood back again? It’s too bad. I took that step into account from the first. Do you suppose that I’d permit you to work such an obvious piece of trickery? Quinn Parridine has use for Fairwood, Judge Hampton, and what Quinn Parridine takes hold of,

he doesn't give back. If you took any gold out of that shaft, I'm going to get it."

The old man looked up at him. "I solemnly assure you——"

"Yes, I know—'On the word of a gentleman.' You gentlemen of the South! For all your posturings, you lie as quick as anybody!"

The judge's blue eyes turned to ice. "Parridine!" he growled, anger giving him strength. "By now you should know you can't bully me. Think of those hours you spent trying to force me to write a letter to my daughter. I don't lie. But if I had gold, you'd never get it from me!"

"As for the letter—I wasn't ready yet for extreme measures with you, my friend. It was simple enough, after all, to send an oral message by Miguel. That brought the birds to the snare fast enough. But now we've arrived at something more fundamental. For the last time, where is that gold?"

"There is none!"

Parridine turned savagely, and rapped out an order. Merit, divining its meaning, screamed, and in the sheer violence of her terror, flung aside the two men who held the judge and wrapped her slender arms about him, crouching above him as if she would shield him with her own body.

"*Llevese esa mujer de aqui!*" shouted Parridine. Brown paws clutched and pulled at the girl. Weeping, she clung to her father, while Gonder and Clay struggled with their guards. Then the brown hands won. The girl was dragged away and the judge, half fainting, sank again to the ground. For one brief second Merit's face turned to Clay . . . face wet with tears and white with supplication. Prayer for aid in her eyes, when there was no aid to be given whatsoever.

Miguel came with something. A ramrod. He prodded it among the coals of one of the fires. Clay knew with horror what was coming as the Indian fished the red-hot rod out of the fire. The judge was to be seared with the iron. To be branded like a steer in a corral . . .

"*Alto!*"

Out of the blackness beyond the utmost light of the camp-fires, the single word rang like a pistol shot.

And with it came the multiplied click of many rifle hammers.

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Old Miguel, his broken nose distorted in the flickering firelight, dropped the heated ramrod and lifted his hands. Parridine made to reach for a revolver, but hesitated. Nobody knows what he might have done—had not the voice from the darkness spoken again, this time in English, with deadly inflection:

“Do not draw, *amigo!* I suggest.”

“El Gato!” exclaimed Parridine. Slowly, grudgingly, he raised his arms.

“Señor Anda!” Merit cried.

“*Sí.* El Gato. Also, an’ moreover, Señor Anda.” The little round figure stepped into the circle of light. Close behind him was the brown robe of Father Bartolomé. The darkness disgorged about them riflemen—scores of deadly little riflemen. Very clearly did Parridine’s outnumbered followers understand their situation, and made no difficulty as they were disarmed. Resplendent in blue velveteen and silver *conchas*, El Gato confronted Parridine, who now stood with a grim, brown-visaged guard at either elbow.

“So, *amigo!* You wander away from your countree—ver’ far, no?”

The *jefe*’s voice was like oiled steel. Parridine kept his mouth sullenly closed.

“You theenk, maybe, nobody find out?” suggested El Gato. “Theenk wrong, *amigo.* Ees known to Don Porfirio from at once. He ees ask El Gato come down, take thees *ladrones* out of his *territorio.* Why do you go away from Coahuila without permission, *amigo?* You haff no one here to help you; nobody weel be friends weeth you. You theenk El Gato, he ees not strong enough to command obedience, *quiza?*”

He waved a short arm about him.

“*Mira!* I haff two hondred *charros* here, El Gringo! Most they are of my own men. Some ees from Don Porfirio, who lend them to me. ‘Take thees wild man, thees *ladrón* away from my countree,’ Don Porfirio say to me. He say, ‘Shoot thees *cabrón.*’ What you say to that, Señor Parridine?”

Parridine had no reply. El Gato turned to where Merit, on her knees, bent over her father, wiping with her handkerchief the sick man's forehead.

"Señorita!" he cried, all bows and emotion. "My so great apologees for thees trouble. Thees man, he weel be mos' sorree. I suggest!"

"God a'mighty, friend, if you didn't come jest in time!" Gonder said suddenly beside Clay. "I cain't hardly believe it. One more minute an' they'd shorely have hurt the jedge. Say, El Gato, can't you get off this young ox-bow they've got me hitched up with? Them arms of mine has gone to sleep an' it seems fo' keeps!"

"There was no donger to the señor judge," smiled El Gato with the full refulgence of his ivory incisors. "My *charros* walk up on Parridine's sleepy *guardia*, an' not one see them. All the time we watch. We could haff move any time to keep the *viejo* from getting hurted." He paused. "Señor Gonder, to you I owe a debt. You weel go free. The *señorita* an' her father, they shall go free back to Guanajuato. But Capitán Bennett, I regret that I am not permit to unloose you. You are *soldado*, ees it not? You onderstan'—fortunes of war."

For a moment Clay tried to understand the implications behind that. Finally he asked:

"You mean . . . you are going to execute me?"

"*Sí*. I regret mos' deeply. But you are officer of Shell-by's army. The order for all such ees the firing squad——"

It was ridiculous, almost unbelievable, but this strutting little popinjay actually was going to march Clay out and shoot him—politely, regretfully, and very thoroughly.

The irony of it was almost amusing. Clay glanced over at Parridine's still face and caught in it a hint of triumph.

It made him think, as fast and hard as he ever had thought in his life before. He did not want to die. Life just at this time—with Merit to glorify it—was particularly attractive. But it seemed that he must die. If so, he desired tremendously to accomplish something by it. He could not leave Parridine to continue his criminal plan against Merit and her father. Moreover, there was Clay's own personal score to be settled with the renegade.

But this was something that required adroit handling. A plan came to him, the only one he could think of, and he clutched at it like a straw. It

offered a hope—there was in it the bait of a diversion to win for it the approval of El Gato . . .

“Since I must die,” Clay said to the *jefe*, “I ask from you a favour.”

El Gato considered. “Ees what?”

“Señor, I denounce this man Parridine. He is a liar and a traitor. I solemnly charge to you that it was he whose plotting was the cause for Shelby’s Brigade’s going over to the side of Maximilian!”

“What ees?” The little *jefe* looked at Clay very narrowly. This was hitting near to home, because it was he who had lost for Biesca the American brigade on which already they had counted so strongly. Perhaps here was the explanation. “Tell me more, *capitán*,” he said.

“It is a lie!” suddenly broke in Parridine. “This man, El Gato, is a spy!” They were his first words since the *jefe* had appeared. The man’s face was twisted with hate, perhaps also with fear.

“Be silence!” El Gato snapped. “Now, *capitán*, I listen.”

In short sentences Clay told of Parridine’s activities at Piedras Negras. He was seconded by Gonder. When he finished, El Gato turned forbiddingly on Parridine.

“What you say to thees?” he demanded.

The man did not answer, and the *jefe* turned again to Clay. “Thees favour—what ees, *capitán*?”

As cunningly as he knew how, Clay phrased his words. “Señor El Gato has, perhaps—a wish for sport?”

“Sí, perhaps.”

“You have heard of the Missouri duel?”

“Sí! The Mizzou-ree *duelo*! I haff hear——” The fat face shone with interest.

“El Gato, this man is my enemy. I wish to fight him. If you will consent I promise you sport—plenty of sport!” Every consideration faded beside his prayer that at last he might square accounts with Parridine. “Let me fight him—my life against his—the Missouri duel!”

Behind Clay, Gonder drew a long breath. El Gato’s eyes sparkled with a sudden new gleam, and beside him the leather-faced priest looked inquiringly. Rapidly El Gato explained in Spanish, and not only Father

Bartolomé, but all within hearing crowded suddenly closer, to gaze at the Americans with whetted interest. Word of the terrible Missouri combat had reached these people—it was a form of death chilling even to a race of knife wielders.

“But thees ees good,” purred El Gato with a smile. “Long time I haff weesh to see thees Mizzou-ree *duelo*. Why you not say thees before?” His glance shot to Parridine. “What *you* say, El Gringo?”

The renegade’s expression did not change. “If he wants to fight, let him stand up to me like a man with revolvers,” he said.

But El Gato’s mind was made up. “Ah, no, *amigo!*” he said. “Get ready for fight. I grant thees favour, Capitán Bennett. Long time I haff crave thees. Now am I mos’ happee!”

At his order one of his men stepped behind Gonder and Clay and slashed the rawhide that bound their wrists and arms to the poles across their backs. Clay felt a great lift of elation at El Gato’s decision, but the instant his arms were released, he had an equal surge of apprehension. His arms, falling at his sides, felt dead—sticks without sense or feeling, over which his will maintained no control. The blood began slowly pushing through them and the anguish of a thousand needle points shot through his wrists and hands as circulation forced its way along the capillaries long drained of their blood.

By sheer effort of will he made himself work the fingers of his hands, and felt the beginnings of life return to them. But when he raised them slightly and his eyes fell on them, he knew for the first time with a sickening sense of shock how he had been punished. The strong, supple, brown hands he knew so well were puffed and swollen, and even in the uncertain light of the camp-fires the purple discoloration of choked blood showed. Experimentally he closed his fingers. Sudden knowledge of their weakness sent a wave of fear through him. He was hardly able to exert pressure of any kind. With the strength of his grip gone, how could he hold a knife? Would it not fall spinning from his hand the first time his wrist was struck? There was real desperation now in the way he opened and closed his fingers, flexing the muscles, seeking to drive life and strength back into them by very determination.

By this time El Gato’s men had entered and taken full possession of the camp and the prisoners were surrounded by a dense crowd of the guerrillas, with whom Parridine’s disarmed followers freely mixed, word having been passed that something vastly to the taste of connoisseurs in death was toward. At the orders of Father Bartolomé, who seemed to be El Gato’s

chief lieutenant, men scurried back and forth, heaping up two high piles of dry wood at opposite ends of a level stretch of sandy soil, about fifty feet in extent. El Gato had been drawn aside by Merit, and the girl appeared to be arguing earnestly, almost tearfully with him. He shook his head, and presently came over to Clay.

“The *señorita*, she haff beg me not to let you fight,” he said with the humouring smile of a man of the world who discusses the foibles of the weaker sex. “She ees afraid El Gringo weel keel you. *Valgame Dios!* I tell her do not worry—you weel cut out of heem the guts. Thees women! They do not onderstan’ us men!”

But Clay was not so sure—he was beginning to fear that Merit understood only too well how things were with him. Gonder’s voice rose dolefully beside him:

“Things is serious, seh, if your wrists an’ hands feel anything like mine \_\_\_\_\_”

“Gonder!” exclaimed Clay eagerly. “Get Merit and her father away from here—out of sight if you can. I don’t want her to see this. Take her and the judge to one of the tents. Do this for me, friend!”

“Right, seh,” the big man answered, and his burly figure, still rubbing its wrists, shouldered a way through the mob. Presently, to his relief, Clay saw two Indians, under the red-beard’s direction, bearing the limp body of the judge to a far part of camp, while Gonder followed, leading the unwilling Merit. Clay caught her look, cast back over her shoulder, a pitiful mingle of dread and sickness of heart, her face as pale as the silvery trunk of an aspen.

The fires had been lit, and the flames, rapidly climbing in the dry heaps of brush, logs, and pine knots, leaped skyward with a roar, lighting vividly the impromptu duelling ground. Already the spectators were forming in two packed walls, facing inward on a narrow lane less than twenty feet wide, which stretched some fifty feet from one great fire to the other. Up and down those unbroken banks of faces Clay glanced, and found them avid with the cruelty that knows no bottom. Gonder came hurrying back and Clay was grateful for his homely countenance, the only friendly thing in view. Even El Gato and Father Bartolomé, now that the lists of battle were established, had the remote, withdrawn glitter of sadistic gluttony in their eyes.

Opposite Clay, Parridine was stripping his coat and shirt from him until he stood naked to the waist. The renegade looked unexpectedly potent thus

stripped for action. His arms were hard and knotted, uncovered by fat, so that the corded blue veins stood out under the white skin, and the elastic contours of the muscles were clearly defined. Parridine had not Clay's height or breadth of shoulder, but he possessed all the stringy, competent strength of the desert wolf he resembled.

He had seen Clay's face when the wrists of the latter were loosed, and cunningly interpreted what was behind the desperate flexing of his opponent's arms and fingers. Suddenly, he was all eagerness to begin.

"I'm ready!" he cried. "Let that spy of Shelby's stand forward!"

It had become his game to hurry the start of the fight as much as possible, so that he might take advantage of the weakness of Clay's swollen wrists. But the latter realized that his life depended now on delaying the duel every possible minute. So he moved with all deliberation. Slowly his jacket came off and was handed to a waiting Mexican. Then he flicked at the buttons of his torn shirt, finding them hard to manage with his numb and swollen fingers. On his wrists the raw striation of the thongs was deeply bitten, with the dried blood scabbing the open sores.

A great yell of mingled derision and fury came from the crowd as it sensed Clay's unwillingness—such a yell as a pack of wild dogs gives when its victim stumbles and falls, pleading for life with stricken eyes. By that yell Clay was stigmatized, and at the same time he was told by it that there was for him no mercy from any of these spectators.

Yet, defying the vengeful, hostile crowd, he continued unhurriedly to ready himself. He finished unbuttoning his shirt, peeled it off, handed it to the Mexican, but dropped it instead; stooped for it, picked it up and consumed another precious minute or two dusting it off, folding it, and once more handing it to the guerrilla, who stood waiting with a half-grin of understanding contempt on his ugly features. At last, having no further excuse to longer delay the evil event, Clay stepped forward into the lane of trampled earth, in token that he was ready.

Fat face expressionless, small mouth half open, revealing the shiny rat teeth beneath the spiky little moustache, El Gato had watched with slitted, calculating eyes. Clay wondered if the *jefe* was displeased by the delay. But El Gato said nothing. Instead he raised a hand as a signal for Father Bartolomé to come into the arena of combat with the weapons—two bowie knives with brass cross-guards and eleven-inch blades of gleaming, whetted steel; and an ordinary red bandanna handkerchief, eighteen inches square.

Still mechanically opening and closing his fingers, and now naked to the waist like his adversary, Clay walked forward to where the *padre* stood, seeing Parridine's dark face lit redly by the leaping radiance of the fires as the renegade also advanced. In that moment Clay struggled for the last time with a great doubt and dread. Had he chosen a course that meant certain death for himself, and a probable recovery in favour and prestige for his enemy? He had not considered that phase of it. Normally Clay would have accounted his own chances good in this kind of a battle with Parridine—but he had never been so abused, so mistreated. Weakness for a moment made him as impotent all over as were his numbed hands and wrists. About him stood massed hatred, an encircling trap from which there was no escape.

The *padre* was holding up the two knives and the time for hesitation was past. Parridine accepted one blade eagerly, testing its point and edge on the ball of his thumb, trying its balance and weight with swift, ugly slashes in the air. Expectantly, Father Bartolomé gazed at Clay, and the latter realized the second knife was being held forth to him. He took it, felt its weight in his palm. His fist closed upon the handle with a strength he had not expected, and for the first time since his bonds were cut, Clay experienced a slight surge of hope. The edge of the knife was razor keen, but he found that by shifting it in his grip so that the blade, instead of being held down, as for stabbing, issued from the thumb side of his fist, for cutting, he could hold it more firmly. The Mexicans, a knife people, saw that unorthodox grip and savoured its advantages and disadvantages. It did not seem to occur to them that Clay adopted it because of his weakness. They saw that it deprived him of the power of the downward stab, with the full force and weight of the arm behind it; but it gave him the advantage of a stroke coming up from below—and a greater slashing power with the edge of his weapon. These things, observed and commented upon, won for Clay new respect from the onlookers.

Now the *padre* lifted the handkerchief, two of its opposite corners knotted to give better biting holds. It was the moment of ultimate, desperate decision. Dimly sensing, rather than hearing, the great roar of blood-lust about him, Clay took his corner of the fabric well back in his jaws, and closed his teeth hard down on the knot, tasting the cheap dye and a hint of perspiration. This jaw-hold he must keep. While life remained in him he must never lose it, for to lose it was disgrace and dishonour, besides which it was the privilege of the opponent under such circumstance, to administer at his leisure the *coup de grâce*.

Two feet away from him now glared the eyes of Quinn Parridine who also had bitten strongly on his corner of the bandanna—black eyes of measureless hatred. Clay noticed how the knotted muscles at the angles of the renegade’s jaws bunched as he locked his strong white teeth on the knot in the gaudy handkerchief.

*“Adelante!”*

It was El Gato’s signal.

The priest stepped back, leaving Clay and his enemy facing each other, knives in right hands, left hands free, heads pulled far forward on extended necks, where the tightly stretched red calico bound them together, so that they had the appearance of giant game-cocks circling, bill to deadly bill. In that moment all the evil this man Parridine had done mushroomed blackly in Clay’s mind. If he could get his knife into those gaunt ribs only once—death would be happy . . .

He saw Parridine’s arm flash high and in a gleaming arc his blade came down, a vicious cutting sweep at Clay’s under armpit.

No time to escape that blow—instead of pulling back, Clay lunged forward so suddenly that the handkerchief between their teeth hung momentarily slack, and his eyes looked into the renegade’s not four inches away, while the hot breath of the latter was in Clay’s face. In that instant Parridine’s blade tasted first blood; but it did not find the life. Clay’s unexpected forward leap had thrown off the stroke and Parridine overreached. A searing slash across the back was the result—sharply painful but not disabling.

With his free hand Clay clutched desperately—and luck almost unbelievable was his. His fingers closed on the renegade’s knife-wrist even as the latter drew back for a second blow. Away to the full length of the bandanna Parridine jerked, almost tearing the fabric out of Clay’s clenched teeth. But though the lean, dark wrist turned and twisted in Clay’s grip, he held to it—how, he never afterward could explain.

In that same second Parridine struck with his own free hand—a sharp chopping blow with the heel of his open palm; a stinging, jarring blow, which caught Clay’s weak right fist off guard. Within him, Clay’s heart seemed to turn over. The hacking stroke had jarred open his lax grip, and the bowie knife fell tinkling to the gravel beneath their feet. Clay was disarmed—bound to a foe who already had wounded him, and whose locked white teeth momentarily were bared in a vicious grin of triumph.

But the watching Mexicans, greedily expecting to see the sandy-haired *gringo's* bowels spilled on the ground, had to delay their moment of ecstasy. Clay's solitary chance of continued life now lay in keeping his hold on Parridine's imprisoned wrist, and to that he turned every bit of his concentration and strength.

Minute by minute he could feel the power of his own hands returning, but even so it would take an almost superhuman effort to keep that knife from swinging—and at the same time regain his own weapon. To do the last, Clay had to shift the ground of the struggle backward, so that he could have a chance to see where his lost bowie lay. For one moment he measured strength with Parridine in a brief pushing contest—and for the first time he realized an advantage. He was the more powerful of the two, and he could force the renegade backward if he chose to throw his full strength into the doing of it.

But that was not now his plan. If he pushed Parridine away, his own back would be to the lost knife. So Clay, instead, permitted himself to be pushed. Back, back he staggered, and a gleam of new purpose was in the renegade's eyes. Heat like that from a blast furnace suddenly seared Clay's back and gave him his first intimation of the other's plan. He had almost been backed into the fire at his own end of the corridor of spectators—so close that Parridine, by a sudden rush, might hurl him into the vortex of flames.

Very necessity made Clay for the first time throw his full strength into the battle. He braced. For a moment they swayed and fought; then the greater might of Shelby's captain told. The renegade gave back—a half step, a step, then slowly a retrogression, broken by repeated trampling struggles as Clay pressed Parridine remorselessly across the fighting space. With every ounce of his strength Clay clung to the twisting, jerking wrist of the deadly knife-hand. His own free hand felt for Parridine's throat, while the other smashed his bloody fist again and again into Clay's face.

Those blows Clay hardly felt, so greatly had he concentrated on his single goal; but his fingers found the renegade's neck and he felt them sink into the cords of flesh, while Parridine's free hand ceased beating and wildly clawed to tear loose the strangling grip.

And now the close-packed lines of watchers lifted their blood-hungry scream to a still higher pitch. Something unbelievable was going on under their eyes—a man disarmed, weakened, wounded, not only was holding off

certain death, but seemed to be gaining a lethal grip on his enemy's windpipe.

That was the moment when Clay first saw his knife. It was partly hidden in the sand at about the half-way point of the stamped and scarred lane. Parridine knew it was there, discerned his enemy's purpose, and fought like a fiend to keep the struggle as far from it as possible. But the strength was returning apace to Clay's hands and arms. He had not, with his single hand, been able to close off the renegade's windpipe, but he kept inexorably his clutch with his right hand at the throat, and the muscles of his left arm at the same time stood knotted in their effort to maintain the hold on Parridine's knife-wrist.

Slowly, feet thudding the ground, the sweat streaming down their strained faces to their chests, the two combatants moved, locked together, towards the centre of the corridor of death. Clay's back was sheathed with blood from the long slash he had received early in the fight, but his strength was growing rather than waning; and never for one instant did his iron grasp relax, while his teeth clenched tight and ever tighter to the corner of the red rag that linked him to his foe.

They must be somewhere near where the lost bowie knife lay. Clay risked a quick glance; the blade was not visible. Putting forth a final great surge of effort, he pressed Parridine backward another struggling step, and glanced down again.

There lay the knife—at their feet, glittering, seeming unattainable.

Deep as he could force it, Clay drove his thumb into Parridine's sweating neck and saw a pain spasm flicker across the other's contorted features. Once, twice, the guerrilla's fist smashed at Clay's head, and sparks splashed out in the latter's jolted brain. Then Clay felt, rather than saw, a change in tactics; Quinn Parridine's face twisted as he made a sudden reach with his free hand for his knife-hand—to shift the imprisoned dirk.

Instantly Clay loosed the renegade's throat and flung himself desperately to seize that free hand. For an instant he felt Parridine's heel behind his own, and bent his body forward with a great muscle-cracking effort.

The guerrilla's feet went out from under him, and the two men struck the ground together in a crashing fall which brought the dust up chokingly about them.

Out shot Clay's hand, feeling blindly—passionately—hungrily—in that brief moment. Feeling for very life in the dust. A hard roundness bulged

under his fingers—the haft of the lost knife.

A moment only they twisted together on the ground, and Clay was first on his feet, the chewed handkerchief in his teeth fairly hauling the renegade erect. That two-foot stretch of gnawed red fabric still held them together, but Parridine had broken Clay's grip on his knife-wrist, and a slash on Clay's leg below the groin showed the new status. Another blow would be the finish

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Clay knew he could never avert that blow. Instead, for the first time, he struck—struck blindly, with every ounce of his accumulated rage and hatred—struck forward and up.

He felt the knife-point catch, felt the blade sink into something as it might into a soft cheese, saw the face of Parridine convulse in agony. Eyes looked into Clay's eyes—eyes of despair, detached from a suddenly stricken body, in them the end written, and also a prayer, a prayer to whatever God he believed in, that he might kill this man he hated before the final moment of oblivion.

Parridine swung his knife for the last time, but the blow never reached Clay. In mid-air the lean fingers relaxed and the blade flew away at a tangent. Blank went the eyes and their owner seemed to break at the knees. His jaws unlocked . . . from between his wolf teeth at last slipped the wet bandanna.

Sidewise to the ground pitched Quinn Parridine, the malice in him ended for ever.

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All things seemed hazy and unreal. There were no solid outlines to anything, and Clay felt as one walking in a dream. Loss of blood and sudden weakness dulled his perceptions. In a kind of trance he felt a blanket tenderly wrapped about his bleeding shoulders and submitted to a supporting hand on his elbow. Not until he had been led several wavering steps did he know it was Gonder who guided him.

Down a dim aisle of faces they walked—brown faces of deep and awed respect, faces that had seen the miracle happen, the impossible occur. Presently they stood before the stained, blocky outline of a ragged tent, and a breathless thing happened—Merit came flying to him. Fear-widened eyes of blue changed to glory when she knew that he was safe. Soft words, thrilling words were in his ear. Blood, dirt, sweat and all, her arms went around him and comforted him . . .

His tongue seemed locked, and although his throat ached with desire to express the things within him, his lips could not form the words.

A kind of irresponsibility had come with the dimness of his thinking. He permitted himself to be led within the tent and weakness swept over him again like a tidal wave. After that he found himself outstretched on a pallet, and heard Merit's clear, unflurried voice, telling someone to fetch water—and be quick about it.

His eyes were closed, but presently he felt the soft pressure of her fingers as she washed, and then carefully bandaged the cut on his back. The long knife' gash throbbed exquisitely, but he uttered no complaint, for the touch of her finger-tips was sheer luxury.

A cool, small palm on his hot forehead soothed him. To have her there, stroking back the rebellious hair from his forehead, that, he felt dimly, was satisfying. He desired to have her remain so. But presently forgetfulness came over him.

When he awoke it was bright day. Whispering voices awoke him . . . murmuring, one to another. He opened his eyes. His head felt light and the dirty tent roof seemed to revolve in slow, majestic circles. Merit was still

beside him, and Gonder was with her. Leaning over him was a stranger; a little, ratty man, with a bottle nose, spiked beard, and steel-rimmed glasses.

“Ah, our patient ees awake,” said the little man.

“It’s the doctor, Clay,” Merit said. “He wishes to examine your wounds.”

To Clay it made no difference what was done to him. He permitted himself to be turned over, gritting his teeth over the fiery flash of pain at the movement. The physician made a long examination, but after a time he was finished with his probing and rebandaging.

“My mos’ sincere congratulations, mam’selle,” said the dry voice. “No infection ees visible.”

The doctor, Merit and Gonder left the tent together. Clay heard voices for a few minutes, then Merit returned, her satin eyes seeking his, her smile curving her lips. She brought a bowl of broth, stood over him and saw that he ate it. After that he felt better, and slept again, awaking to find Gonder beside him instead of Merit.

“She’s gone to look after her father,” the red-beard explained. “How she does it, I cain’t figger. She ain’t had a wink of sleep in two nights, an’ she won’t let nobody else do for you, or the jedge. She’s got to rest up some, pretty quick, or she’s goin’ to drop in her tracks. Fo’tunately, we ain’t got to worry about you, seh. You’re goin’ to be all right. A little sore fo’ a few days, mebbe, but nothin’ to worry about, accordin’ to that doctor.”

“The doctor—how did they ever get him up here?” Clay asked.

Gonder chuckled. “I can see you’re really improvin’. That’s the fust curios’ty you’ve showed since you was cut up. The doctor is fo’ Jedge Hampton. You are only a side issue. El Gato has his own methods. He looked over the jedge last night. ‘Thees man weel die,’ he says to us. ‘He mus’ haff *medico*.’ I thought that was a death sentence, because there wasn’t no doctors that I could think of in this here wilderness. But El Gato didn’t even consider it a problem. He sent out some of his *charros*; after awhile they come back—befo’ mawnin’ it was—with that physician. Doctor LeCocque his name is. French gov’ment surgeon. El Gato had him kidnapped right out of Guanajuato, under the noses of the French garrison.”

The red-beard stepped to the door to expectorate tobacco juice, and returned, smoothing his whiskers.

“That frawg doctor is plenty scairt, an’ no wonder,” he continued. “El Gato had a grave dug, an’ showed it to him. Then he told the doc to cure you

an' the jedge *pronto*—or get ready to occupy that hole in the ground. It's wonderful, seh, to see the zeal with which that man of science has gone to work. An' though he's worried sick about hisself, he's gettin' his patients well. You're doin' fine. The jedge has a simple instance of tertian malaria. The cure is easy an' sure—decoctions of Peruvian bark. We'll be travellin' in a week or so."

Clay said nothing. That last few minutes another question had risen in his mind for which no answer had been supplied. He had his chance to ask that question later in the day.

A guard pulled open the tent curtains, and the head of El Gato was thrust in. The *jefe* gave a quick look, then entered and squatted on a stool beside Clay, while Father Bartolomé and the guard stood behind him. For a time the guerrilla stared at the wounded man in silence. It was Clay who spoke first:

"You have my thanks for getting the doctor—for Judge Hampton especially. I do not know, however, why you waste time patching me up, when you're going to shoot me anyway."

"*Amigo*," irrelevantly remarked the Mexican, "you lose me fifty *pesos*."

Clay, wondering what this had to do with the conversation, looked his surprise.

El Gato explained. He had made, he said, a wager with Father Bartolomé on the outcome of the duel with Parridine. Having appraised Clay's condition, he had laid his money on the renegade. At this point he rubbed his plump hands together as he smiled over the fight. A magnificent spectacle, he said, the Mizzou-ree *duelo*. He would not for anything have missed it. He had witnessed men losing their lives in many manners, but never like this of the bandanna handkerchiefs. The stroke Clay used, too, he begged leave to state, was *superbo*. He would remember that if he himself ever had to fight with knives—which the good *Dios* forbid, since it gave him a coldness in the spine just to think of it. He branched enthusiastically off in a discourse on knife techniques, and wound up by praising handsomely Clay's handling of the blade, from the front of the hand like a sword, instead of from the heel of the hand, like a dagger. There was, he had observed, a greater flexibility, and he wondered where the idea had come to the *capitán*.

But this was getting nowhere. Clay brought him back to what he had started to say.

"How does this affect me—and what of the fifty *pesos*?"

Ah, yes, El Gato had lost the fifty *pesos* to Father Bartolomé, which made the *padre* very happy. Behold, he was happy now.

Clay looked at the old priest, and found him grinning at the mention of his name in the conversation, although he did not understand English.

El Gato added that Father Bartolomé was filled with plans to buy and train a new *gallo de pelea* to replace the lamented Qué Guapo.

“But I theenk, even if you do lose me fifty *pesos*, you have make all theengs even,” El Gato continued, his front teeth now gleaming amiably. “You safe me much trouble . . . I do not haff to shoot Parridine.”

“You’d have executed him anyway?”

“Mos’ certainlee!” And El Gato explained further: Parridine had been guilty of the worst insubordination. Without permission he had suddenly gone off into territories where he did not belong and in which he was forbidden. What made it more unfortunate—and more reprehensible from El Gato’s standpoint—this was the hunting ground of one of the biggest of Juárez’s generals, a man very close to the *presidente*, Don José de la Cruz Porfirio Diaz. Don Porfirio had it in his power to make things very unpleasant for El Gato, because of the dereliction of the latter’s subordinate, but he had been gracious enough instead, to notify El Gato to get his *bandidos* out of the country, and even loaned him some soldiers to help do it.

So it was incumbent on El Gato to extirpate Parridine. This he was the more willing to do, since he considered the latter had acted with black ingratitude towards himself, who was responsible for Parridine’s rise. When the American escaped from Piedras Negras at the time he attempted to stir mutiny in Shelby’s Brigade, he was captured and brought before El Gato. Parridine pleaded so convincingly that he was fleeing from Shelby only because of his own love for the republic, that El Gato, needing accomplished soldiers, not only freed him, but secured for him rank and command.

At Don Porfirio’s summons, therefore, El Gato moved at once, and having captured Parridine, was prepared to invoke the unwritten law of the mountains, when Clay obligingly took the matter off his hands.

“So, *amigo*, you safe much trouble,” he wound up. “If I shoot thees Parridine, I might haff to shoot some of hees *hombres*. Because there might follow the feud—the vendetta. But now thees *hombres* haff no blood-feud. *Espera!* They join weeth me. You are good thing for El Gato! I suggest.”

Half angered, half amused by this effrontery, Clay lay looking at the fat, self-confident little man. But more was to come:

“*Mira!* To you El Gato owe somet’ings. Already to Señor Gonder he haff oblegations. Therefore ees no shooting for you. You shall, all of you, be permit to go back safe, *señorita* an’ all. *Adios, amigo.* For me ees always more work to be done. I mus’ be excuse to business.”

He strutted out of the tent like a plump bantam rooster, followed by the priest and the guard, leaving Clay staring at the ceiling of the tent. His personal problem seemed to be working out beyond all expectations.

Still one more disclosure came that morning, stemming directly out of his bitter victory over Parridine. Not long after El Gato’s departure, Gonder sidled in.

“There’s one trick in this game, seh, that you missed—implyin’ no criticism,” he began with an air full of portent. “You killed Parridine—an’ then fo’got about him. That was a mistake; the man was still dangerous after death.”

“What do you mean?” Clay was almost startled.

“It was me that took the trouble, seh, to go through Parridine’s pockets befo’ they planted the carcass. I found a matter of a few *pesos*—which I considered as bein’ on the public domain an’ therefo’ appropriated fo’ my own uses. But there was also a paper, signed by Jedge Hampton, an’ dated at Lexington, Missouri. What some unscrup’lous scoundrel might do with that paper, seh, makes me shudder.”

He shuddered a little, to prove it.

“To be frank, seh,” he continued with admirable candour, “I am somewhat of a unscrup’lous scoundrel myself. Jest now my integrity is rock-bound. But temptation’s temptation, an’ I’ve never been much of a hand to resist it. If I got cramped right hard fo’ money . . . well, in sho’t, to make all safe, I’m turnin’ the paper over to you, because I’ve obse’ved that you can be trusted in ways that at times seem downright foolha’dy.”

Silently Clay accepted the folded, worn, and discoloured paper. He examined it briefly. It was Judge Hampton’s conveyance of the plantation title. He put it in his wallet.

In even intervals, like the spaces between well-drilled ranks of troops, the days passed; and Clay’s wounds healed rapidly and his strength came

back apace. Those days were filled with perfection. Nature smiled in autumn beauty, and the soft, gentle sun poured down its beneficence. El Gato sat frequently and affably with Clay, and even discussed with him details of international affairs. He was in touch by courier with the north, and said the Yankee soldiers were now thick on the border; Juarez was gathering an army of importance in Chihuahua, and rumours continued to circulate that the United States was preparing to invoke the Monroe Doctrine against Napoleon III.

“Then, *capitán*, will we throw you, an’ your Maximiliano von Hapsburg, out from Mexico,” he said pleasantly.

Clay smiled, reflecting that if Shelby’s plans went forward well, that “throwing out” would be somewhat more difficult than El Gato supposed. But he said nothing.

At other times Gonder lolled near where Clay reclined, and told endless and outrageously exaggerated tales of his experiences as a vagabond, living by his wits on the frontier of America.

But the golden moments were those when Merit came, which was just as often as she could spare time from her father. Together they talked and laughed much, and made nebulous plans, and discovered with the delighted surprise of all lovers that their common interests were many, and, what is more important, their common prejudices. What they said in those moments would not sound profound, or even logical, repeated here, but it was satisfying to them.

Judge Hampton was convalescing satisfactorily, and soon was able to take some tottering steps. And at last the harried French physician, Dr. LeCocque, with his hands flapping like a fish’s fins, and his eyes glittering anxiously behind his steel-rimmed spectacles, told El Gato that the judge, if he travelled by easy stages, was strong enough to make the journey to Guanajuato, and perhaps later to Mexico City.

With that El Gato considered his obligations ended. Word went out that the camp would be broken the following morning. And Clay that evening, took advantage of a moment when he and the judge sat alone by the fire, to bring up a matter of importance to both of them.

“I have, sir, something here that may interest you,” he said, fishing from his pocket the wallet, and from it extracting the worn paper taken from the dead renegade. “After the demise of Captain Parridine, this was found on his body.”

The hawk features lit as the judge studied the paper by the crimson firelight. When he looked up his blue eyes were blazing with delight.

“Thank you indeed, sir,” he said. “It is the original instrument. You realize, of course, that with this, my daughter’s future is secured?”

“There is another matter,” said Clay, his throat suddenly constricting. “I have the honour, sir, to request the permission to address myself to your daughter. I—well, I love her very dearly, sir. I desire to marry her.”

A long silence fell. At length the judge cleared his throat.

“Does—is Merit apprized of your—purpose?” he asked.

“She is indeed, sir.”

Another long silence. At last: “I will not temporize. I have suspected this—nay, I have known it.”

“Then you do not forbid it, sir?”

“If Merit tells me her happiness is with you, she shall be free to follow her heart’s desire. I have for you, sir, the highest regard, aside from the fact that I am very deeply sensible of your services to me and my daughter——”

“I beg of you, sir, not to put it on that basis. It was my great privilege only.”

“Spoken like a gentleman, Clay. But before all things are settled, it would be well to consider the practical side of your marriage with Merit. I would not be a dutiful parent if I did not ask you, sir, that you set forth your plans and prospects.”

“My future, Judge Hampton, is at this moment somewhat clouded.”

“So I gather,” said the old man dryly. “My suggestion is that you return with us to Mexico City. Between us, Merit and I have enough money for ship and river boat passage to Waverly. We are going to Vera Cruz as soon as convenient, and ship there for New Orleans and thence up the Mississippi. Fairwood acres have now no house or even barn upon them, and no livestock or servants. But the good black soil is there. A certain amount of labour will put it into a profitable condition. I am old, you know, and I can use a strong man’s help.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And then there is the law. You will complete your reading and seek admission to the bar. Why, thunderation, man, I’ll take you into partnership!

Hampton & Bennett, Attorneys-at-Law. What do you think of that legend for a shingle?"

Clay did not join in the judge's enthusiasm. A sudden, cold depression had descended on him. This was the consent he wished, freely and generously given. It was his all that the judge was offering—but Clay must say something that might not be to his liking.

"This is more than my humble deserts, sir," he said gravely. "From the bottom of my heart I thank you. But something intervenes. I am a soldier, sir, and I am committed to General Shelby's mission here. I do not know what the outcome will be. If it is successful, the future should be most bright for all of us with Shelby—with due consideration for the inevitable risks of a soldier's life. Wedded to Merit, sir, I should even look forward to retirement from the army, after the initial demand for my services is over \_\_\_\_"

"Do I hear you correctly?" interrupted the judge, his eyes becoming frosty. "Are you suggesting, sir, a marriage under the chancy circumstances you are outlining?"

"I had hoped——"

"Let us speak frankly. At risk of wounding you, I must say that I have no sympathy with your position. The War Between the States, sir, was of such nature that service in the army did credit and honour to those who wore the uniform. But the war is over, sir. It is time to begin again cultivating the arts of peace. What you are suggesting is that I permit my daughter to marry a soldier of fortune—a military vagabond. And with the raising and breeding she has had!"

Clay's heart, which had been big with joy, became like lead. "I cannot help it, sir," he said doggedly. "I deserted Shelby once. He received me back under such circumstances that I cannot honourably go back on my promise \_\_\_\_"

"Is that your final word, sir?" Judge Hampton's eyes were almost hostile, and his white hair bristled.

Mutely, Clay nodded.

"In that case, sir, it is my duty to inform you that I must rescind my consent until you change your notions. I doubt that you have the slightest inkling of what you are proposing for my daughter. Neglect, loneliness, misery, perhaps poverty, danger, lack of any security—no, sir, do not interrupt me! The war's in your blood, and you cannot get it out. You had

the makings of a first-class lawyer. But soldiering, it seems, in your case as in many others, has been the ruination of dependability and steadiness. No, sir, I will not permit it. I'd be a scalawag to let Merit in for it!"

They stared at each other in the unsteady light from the fire, the fierce, determined old man, and the dogged young soldier. To have his happiness already within his grasp, and to have it snatched away like this all in a single moment—it stunned Clay and left him without words.

Silently he rose and walked away through the dark pine woods, aimlessly, his soul tortured within him. And a shadow stepped out into his path, a lissome, anxious shadow.

"What did he say?" Merit asked. "I was coming up . . . I saw you talking, and I knew . . ."

"He forbade it."

"He didn't!" Her cry was sharp with surprise and pain. "Why? Why?"

"I am a soldier and he will not let you be a soldier's wife."

"But I—I would be proud to be a soldier's wife!"

"It's impossible." He tried to walk on, but she seized his arm and came running along with him.

"Clay," she said passionately, "I'm eighteen. I'm old enough to wed . . . or do anything else, without his permission. If you want me, dear, I'll go with you . . ."

When he continued walking, she suddenly seized his shoulders and swung him around. Then she clung to him, so that he had to stop, and the beauty and fire of her caused his mind to swirl. For a moment he stood, his arms still hanging by his sides, his heart beating heavily. They were distant from the camp, and only faintly the flicker of the light from the bivouac blazes flickered through the openings in the foliage. He crushed her lips with his, the force of it bending her far back in his arms. She lay there, and he saw the slender wonder of her throat and felt the miracle of out-thrusting breasts, narrow waist, tender limbs—not shrinking but pressing to him hotly. In that moment everything was transformed. He heard her gasp, half whimper, as she sank in his arms to the soft pine needles. It was what they both wished. He found in her no resistance, only flaming sobbing passion, answering to the utmost his passion . . .

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Everything had been changed with a suddenness so complete that Clay's mind had not yet adjusted itself to what had occurred. At one moment he had stalked in despair and black frustration through the forest on the mountain. At the next he had possessed her . . . possessed all of her, fully, completely, almost terribly.

Looking back on it he could hardly believe his memory that it had happened. The girl, so remote, so unreachable, at times almost of another world it had seemed, had succumbed to him all in a single, furious moment, without any reservations whatsoever.

Afterwards there had been words—trembling sentences in the darkness. She cried a little, and he kissed her wet face, reassuring her. He felt like a criminal, and his hatred and loathing of himself at that minute were beyond bounds. But it was she who restored things. He blamed himself hoarsely to her, and she said:

“It was I, as much as you, dear. You must not talk like that. If it was wrong we are both . . . equally guilty. But I loved you . . . I was yours anyway. We have only pledged ourselves to each other . . . for evermore . . .”

And eventually he had taken assurance from that. He marvelled at how this girl, used to avoiding all direct contact with raw life, was far more frank than he. He respected her elemental understanding, and more than ever before he loved her.

After a time he helped her to her feet, and as well as they could in the darkness they brushed the pine needles from their garments. She even had them in her hair . . .

She giggled and that heartened him tremendously. When all was in order, she said:

“Now I must go one way. You must go another.”

They clung together, lips to lips, for a long, breathless moment.

“I must go now,” she whispered. But he kissed her once more, this time softly. And she said: “Remember, no matter what happens—I can never be

my own again . . . never.”

He let her go and watched her figure receding towards the fires, until it was lost in the trees. After that he turned and strode away. In his heart was a colossal exultation, and with it a wondering feeling of reverence and profound responsibility. He was gone two hours, driving himself, forcing himself to effort in spite of the limp in his still half-healed leg. When he returned and was challenged by a sentry, the camp was asleep.

In the days following he marvelled again and again at the brightness of her face. If doubts oppressed her, she showed no sign of it. Her smile to him was as vivid, her voice as gay, as it ever had been. In the presence of Judge Hampton, Clay at first felt constraint and a guilt he could not down. To him it seemed hardly possible that Merit's father could be in ignorance of what had taken place. So cataclysmic had it been, that at first it was to Clay as if the whole world must know. But the judge, while cool, was urbane. The subject they had discussed was not again referred to by either of them, and in the slow journey down to Guanajuato, Clay had the opportunity to regain control over his feelings.

With a great yell of farewell, El Gato and his guerrillas saw them off, and rode away across the mountains. Their horses restored, the Americans made the ride down the mountain without difficulty, and they stayed that night at La Fonda Engorda, while the good Doña Gertrudis waddled and shrieked and carried her tumult to the far reaches of her house, in seeing to it that all possible comforts were provided them.

Clay had no opportunities to be alone with Merit during those next days. The judge demanded much attention, and on the ride down to Mexico City she and her father occupied the diligence, while Clay and Gonder followed a-horse. The red-beard seemed unwontedly taciturn during the whole ride, and Clay was glad of his comparative silence, for it gave him a chance to consider his own outlook. He had come to realize that he had placed himself in a position where his strongest loyalties conflicted sharply. To Shelby he owed a debt of honour. To Merit . . . much more.

The opportunity to talk with her alone came at the last minute almost, when they arrived at the Hotel de Paris in the capital, and Clay was saying farewell.

“Good luck, my boy,” said the judge with unexpected kindness. “It is my hope that things may—work themselves out, after all——”

And with excellent tact he withdrew, to leave Merit and Clay alone.

“Darling,” she said, and clung to him.

“I have wanted to tell you something,” he said. “It is going to be all right for us. It’s bothered me, but I see my way clearly now. It’s not to Shelby but to you I’m giving my life. I go to Shelby now to offer my resignation.”

But she was suddenly rebellious, almost angry. “You’ll do nothing of the sort! Already you sacrificed your rank and almost lost Shelby’s regard—on my account. I didn’t have the sense to appreciate it then. You can’t make that mistake again. You believe in Shelby’s adventure and so do I. And, darling, you owe an obligation to that great man. I won’t permit you to destroy your chances. Your duty is very plain, Clay. It isn’t to me—not this way, it isn’t. What happened . . . up there in the mountain . . . it only made it certain that we are for each other. No, I’ll wait for you, Clay. And when you’ve finished your obligation to Shelby’s Brigade, you come for me.”

She uttered that last sentence and was gone within before Clay could speak or move. His whole being rebelled, and yet he knew the truth of what she said. He must go back to Shelby. The Hamptons would be leaving in the morning. He had told them already he would be down to see them off.

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It was very early in the morning that the knock came at Clay's door. He was instantly awake, but sat up in his bed and permitted himself the luxury of a stretch and a yawn before swinging his long legs over the side and answering. The movement brought a twinge to his newly healed wounds and reminded him of events just past.

“Orderly, seh,” came a voice through the door. “Gen’ral Shelby presents his compliments, an’ will Cap’n Bennett be so good as to repawt immediately?”

Clay heard the man wheel and tramp away. Then he scratched a sulphur match, a tiny radiance at his finger-tips, which blossomed suddenly into a brighter light as he touched it to the wick of his candle. On the table lay his canteen and revolver, his battered hat, an empty wine bottle, some rumpled sheets of paper.

What could Shelby want this early in the morning? Clay had found things much the same at the barracks when he reported the previous day—the men idle and grumbling, the officers full of profanity at the endless delays of the Mexican imperial government, and the general himself on the ragged edge of impatience. Shelby listened to Clay's report, and unlimbered enough to growl commendation. About the one subject of paramount interest to every man in the Brigade, not one word was said.

Clay drew on his trousers, gingerly careful about the red scar on his thigh, and then put on with equal care the frayed grey jacket. In startling high lights some details of his little cell were pricked out by the candle's unsteady flicker, while others were shrouded just as unexpectedly in dimness. In the broken piece of mirror propped up on the table to shave by, he caught a glimpse of his features—touselled hair, gaunt cheekbones, and slight moustache.

Crossing the room, he washed in a small camp basin and set his hair a little straighter with a broken comb before he emerged from his room and walked through the sleeping barracks. Row after row of double-deck bunks stretched on either side, and Clay knew on the floor above were other long rows. The stale air of the room was heavy with an indoor mingle of man and

beast—the sour smell of many bodies not too well bathed, and of horse sweat and manure. Puffs and snores from the sleepers came to him as he walked down the long row, knocked at the general’s door, and entered at the summons.

Edwards was there already—seated by the candle-lighted table at which the general was working. Shelby looked up and his grey eyes gleamed at Clay.

“It’s come!” he said, his nostrils flaring. “I’ve been discussing it with John, here. Captain, the emperor will give us an audience today—and just when I’d given up hope. The visit a couple of weeks ago from Commodore Maury—I was afraid that it meant the end for our plans. He wanted us to quit soldiering and turn to farming, for the convenience of somebody whom he didn’t mention. But now comes this summons, and it’s all because of that little cock-a-hoop congressman from Louisiana—what’s his name?”

“Congressman Tweedie, sir.”

“Tweedie. That’s it. I’m eating my words about those politicians of ours. Many’s the time I’ve consigned them all to perdition. But I find that there’s a place for politicians after all. They know how to pull wires. That’s what Tweedie did. He was a nuisance on the march, but he’s more than made up for it now, hey?”

Shelby paused and grinned at his two officers, tugging at his moustache. “It seems Tweedie knows a certain Count de Noue, a man highly placed at Maximilian’s court. De Noue formerly was in the French diplomatic service at Washington, before the war, when Tweedie was a member of Congress. It was through the Frenchman that Tweedie obtained the audience.”

“Maximilian is going to accept us in his army?” asked Clay.

“It’s not as smooth as that. He’s merely going to talk with us. But that’s all I ask. I’ve spent my time since we’ve been here, getting information on the condition of affairs in Mexico—and I’ve concluded that Maximilian’s in worse shape than he realizes. I’ll tell him so! He’s been reigning more than a year; his troops hold the large cities, mines, and seaports; but Juarez and his guerrillas hold all the intervening territory in Mexico.”

“I can’t understand why Bazaine hasn’t cleaned them out,” said Edwards.

“Hasn’t the force,” answered the general. “The Juaristas are growing stronger if anything. The emperor’s army is not near big enough. He has his French battalions—which are excellent, I’ll not deny—and a corps of

‘Imperial Mexicans’ which are worthless trash, and some Austrian and Belgian auxiliaries. But what does it all amount to? The Mexicans are unreliable and will desert any moment they think the other side’s likely to win—between ourselves, I think damned near every Mexican that’s got manhood is on the side with Juarez. The European troops? They may be withdrawn any day. What’s more, Maximilian’s treasury is empty. He’s been paying out such huge sums to Louis Napoleon that he’s nothing left to run his own government. Brigandage reigns everywhere. Your recent experience, Bennett, gives you an insight into that. And the poor emperor not only does not know how to solve his problems, but hardly realizes that they exist. It shall be mine to offer him the solution—and he’ll have to listen to me, and accept my offer. Gentlemen, we’re as good as in!”

Their spirits rose to his exultation and for once they felt with him his great confidence in his future. “What’s the hour of the audience?” Edwards asked.

“Ten o’clock this morning. That’s why I called you up early. It’s quite a ride to Chapultepec, and there’s some detail to be got out of the way. I want the staff to accompany me. Particularly you two. Have things ready for a start immediately after morning mess.”

They were on the way by eight o’clock, and on the ride to Chapultepec Shelby, for the first time since his arrival in the city, was gay. It took danger, or the prospect of action, or both, to bring out his light spirits, and now he joked with his officers, skylarking like a schoolboy. Their route led up the Paseo Nuevo, where Mexican gentlemen on richly caparisoned horses trotted jingling by, with stares and salutes, amid carriages and crowds of foot passengers. Past the bull ring and the bronze equestrian statue of Carlos IV they trotted, and heard the music of Tolsa’s fountain. The Hotel de Paris loomed before them. Clay looked with all his eyes, but there was no sign of a familiar figure. The Hamptons would be leaving within the hour, and he had promised to say farewell to them, not having counted on this development. But he would not see Merit again . . . not for a time he hardly dared compute even to himself. He wondered what she would think when he failed to appear as he had promised.

On one side of the street now rose the grim prison of Acordado, and shortly they passed out through the open gate of Belin and were riding along at the side of the aqueduct to the rock of Chapultepec. Merit would be gone by now. The thought ached in his heart.

The imposing, cypress-girt stone castle of Chapultepec sobered Shelby and his officers, and the general stared as hard as any at its forbidding stateliness. They dismounted at the palace entrance where uniformed grooms took their horses, and trooped in a body up the wide stone steps, past helmeted sentries. In the open doorway of the palace stood Congressman Tweedie, awaiting with a smile of deep self-satisfaction on his plump pink features, his grey side-whiskers quivering with joy.

“The audience will be in the throne room,” he announced, pumping Shelby’s arm. “Yo’ and yo’ gentlemen will follow me.”

Hushed with suppressed excitement, they found themselves walking in a great, polished hall behind the strutting little congressman. Many doors opened into the hall and at each stood two guards. Officers in vivid uniforms, frock-coated civilians, and wide-skirted ladies conversed in groups as they passed, and turned to stare at the quick-striding, shabby newcomers.

At the farther end of the great hall loomed a large door, and on either side of it cuirassiers stood stiffly, their high, black Wellington boots and steel breastplates gleaming, and their sabres drawn. Congressman Tweedie gave a nod and a footman opened the door. Looking through the portal, Clay received the impression of great distances of polished floors; a long, bright carpet of scarlet, stretching towards a remote dais; and on the dais two richly dressed persons, sitting on very elaborately carved and ornamented high-backed chairs, with above them a be-starred silken canopy, worked with the eagle-and-serpent insignia of Mexico.

Hats in right hands, left hands on sabre hilts, the Confederates entered and walked straight down that broad carpet leading to the throne. Out of the corners of his eyes, Clay observed that many persons stood on either side of the dais—richly dressed Mexican, French, and Austrian women, who, he guessed, were ladies of the court; and many gaudily uniformed officers. A humming undertone of conversation broke out and fans went before faces as ladies leaned to whisper to one another. Clay fancied he heard a titter and burned with embarrassment at the shabbiness of his comrades and himself.

But he forgot everything else when he focused his attention on the occupants of the twin thrones. At the left sat a woman arrayed in a hugely hooped gown of white brocaded silk, sprigged with coloured blossoms in some kind of embroidery. Her bare shoulders gleamed like ivory, and rich ivory lace covered her high bosom, while the sleeves of her gown were delicately puffed. Her throat was smooth and graceful, ornamented by a

double strand of large pearls that were scarcely more lustrous than the skin upon which they rested. But the face of the woman thus magnificently arrayed, was serious, almost sad. It was a handsome, even a beautiful face, framed by thick dark hair beautifully coiled at the nape of her neck, with a jewelled coronet on her brow. Her nose was straight and delicately modelled, but her small mouth was petulant. Above everything else, her eyes were what held Clay. They were dark, mysterious, brooding. This was the famous Empress Carlota, and on that day she seemed already to have some premonition of the tragedy that would eventually bring her royal consort to the firing squad, and herself to the madhouse.

The emperor was different. Clay saw a tall, well-knit man with a magnificent blond beard growing to two points in the style known as bifurcated. He was dressed in a dark blue uniform, made brilliant by red-and-gold facings, and a plentiful sprinkling of gorgeous decorations. The Emperor Maximilian's brow was broad and unlined. His eyes were widely spaced and good-humoured, and the full red lips beneath his fine silken moustache had never been bitten thin by the necessities of danger and indomitable resolution. There was no shadow in him of the worry that clouded the face of his wife.

All at once two other figures caught Clay's attention. Close to Maximilian, beside the dais, stood Bazaine, slightly bald, grizzled, deeply lined as to face, cynical and devious as to expression. With surprise Clay now perceived the man was short in stature. Sitting his horse the marshal had seemed of more than ordinary height, because his body from the waist up was long, strong, and erect. But his legs were ridiculously short and bowed, so that he stood no taller than Shelby himself.

But capping the sinister picture was the man who stood a little to the rear of Bazaine. Clay thought Shelby almost broke stride when first he saw that face. There could be no other countenance like it—deep-tanned olive skin, which made more white by contrast the snowy tufts of moustache, imperial, and eyebrows. It was Colonel de Saul, Shelby's enemy.

If Shelby hesitated, it was for an instant only. Straight to the foot of the dais he strode, and there halted. His staff stopped in a close, knotted group behind him. The smiles—covert and insinuating—grew more broad on the faces of the courtiers. The ragged garb of the Confederates was against them. On the faces of the royal couple were curiosity, and, perhaps, interest. But on one countenance in that room was neither mirth nor mere curiosity. Instead it bore deep respect, although no friendliness. Marshal Bazaine knew soldiers when he saw them.

For a moment Shelby and the emperor confronted each other. Then the golden beard stirred and Maximilian spoke in a rich, sleepy voice, and smiled. The words were in French, and a quick little man with liquid eyes which rolled continually, stepped forward.

“I am Count de Noue,” he said to Shelby. “I am—what you say—well acquaint with your so-great United States. Not only have I the honour of the friendship of your Congressman Tweedie, but my wife, she is the daughter of the General Harney of the American army—unfortunately not of your side.” He flashed a conciliatory smile at the grey-clad soldiers. “I am chief of Marshal Bazaine’s civil staff, and the emperor, while able to understand English, prefers to converse in French and has asked me to act as interpreter.” He smiled again.

“I thank you,” said Shelby. But he turned directly to Maximilian when he addressed his words. Over Clay came the feeling that he was watching here something of importance to the whole world and all its peoples. All the long struggle across the desert and mountains, the battles, starvation and thirst, the deaths, sufferings, dangers and labour—all the great dreams and visions, the plans and hopes, for themselves and for the South they loved, were at the test and climax at last. They would come to fruition or not, according to the nod of the golden-bearded man sitting on that dais. The fate of a hemisphere hung on this interview. It was statesmanship, nothing less, that Shelby had come to discuss—a bold, sincere plan that might make of Maximilian a great historic figure if he seized it as boldly as it was offered.

Shelby began to speak slowly, his eyes fixed directly on the emperor, his head thrust slightly forward, in the earnest, intense way he always talked when seeking to convince someone. After each sentence he paused to permit de Noue to translate. The Missourian minced no words. In a few simple, direct statements, he went directly to the heart of the matter, laid the framework of his plan before Maximilian. Familiar as Clay was with that plan, his imagination leaped again as he listened to it, with appreciation of how big, and adventurous—yet truly feasible—was Shelby’s dream.

Talking as one equal to another, yet with a certain deference also, Shelby proposed to Maximilian that his Americans be taken immediately into the service of the empire, and that authority be given to recruit a corps of fifty thousand soldiers from the ranks of the hard-fighting Southern armies which had just laid down their weapons. With these troops the native soldiers in Mexico were to be superseded as far as possible, the government was to be consolidated against the time of the withdrawal of the French, emigration was to be encouraged from the United States for colonizing and developing

the resources of the country, and the army was to be maintained to hold the country until the people became reconciled to the change.

It was a bold speech, an outspoken speech. Once or twice Maximilian's fine brows knitted slightly at statements particularly blunt; but he heard the Missourian out. At the end he merely inclined his head.

Shelby continued: "It is a question of months, your imperial highness, until the French soldiers are withdrawn from Mexico."

A gasp went about the room at the boldness of that statement, and even Maximilian's lazy blue eyes involuntarily sought Bazaine's face. The marshal smiled very slightly and very frigidly, but was silent.

"Why do you think so?" asked the emperor.

"Because the war north of the Rio Grande is at an end. Secretary Seward has a free hand and he will insist on the rigorous enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine. France desires no conflict with the United States, your majesty. It would be neither popular nor profitable. I left behind me more than a million veteran soldiers under arms, not one of them yet discharged from the United States service. The American nation, believe me, is sore over this occupation by the French, and it considers their presence a perpetual menace. I hope your imperial highness will pardon me, but in order to speak the truth it is necessary to speak plainly——"

The general hesitated.

"Continue," said Maximilian, his eyes flicking again to Bazaine's chill countenance. He leaned forward in his throne, his fingers running through his heavy cornsilk beard, his face intent.

"The matter whereof I speak to you is perfectly feasible," said Shelby. "I have reason to believe the American government will not be averse to the enlistment of as many soldiers in your army as might wish to take service—and the number need be limited only by the exigencies of the empire. Thrown upon your own resources, you will find no difficulty, I think, in establishing the most friendly relationships with the United States. In order to do this, and in order to sustain yourself sufficiently long to consolidate your occupation of Mexico and make your government a strong one, I think it absolutely essential that you should have a corps of non-native soldiers, devoted to you personally, and reliable in any emergency."

He turned to where Congressman Tweedie and General Magruder stood together, and asked their opinion. Together they agreed earnestly with his view. Then he once more faced the throne, and the courtiers grew silent, the

supercilious smiles stricken from their faces, as they stood spellbound under the force of personality of the squat, blunt soldier from the north.

“At this present,” said Shelby, “I have under my command about one thousand experienced and tried troops. All of them have seen much severe and active service, and all are eager to enlist in support of your empire. Authorized in your name to increase my forces, in a few months I will make good all the promises given here today.”

Dead silence reigned in the great room after Shelby had finished. So deep was the quiet that Clay heard the breathing of Colonel Slayback next to him, the rustle of a woman’s fan, the whisper of a silken gown, and the slight creak of an officer’s boot leather. Maximilian spoke not, and no one presumed to speak before him. Long he sat motionless, apparently studying the man before him. What manner of person was this Shelby? An honest man, or an adventurer? Would he perform his promises, or might he in the end attempt to seize the power he had sworn to uphold? These seemed to be the emperor’s thoughts. Confused, he glanced from Shelby, to Bazaine, to de Noue, and back to Shelby again.

It was Bazaine who finally broke the silence. The marshal knew the keen truth of Shelby’s words, but it was by no means to his interest to encourage the division of Maximilian from the Emperor Napoleon—at this time. France still nursed the hope of controlling the Mexican empire, and Bazaine had his orders from his own master. He whispered to Colonel de Saul a moment, then stepped forward.

“Did you bring only one thousand men into Mexico?” His harsh voice cut into the stillness so suddenly that it startled his auditors.

“Yes,” said Shelby, not thinking of a trap.

“And with these men, not a single piece of artillery?”

The American stared into the face of the Frenchman.

“Just what do you mean, marshal?” he fenced.

“I think you know what I mean, general,” said Bazaine with that same icy smile. “I have reports—of certain transactions on the border . . .”

Quickly Shelby turned to Maximilian, knowing now the groundwork of treachery that had been laid under him. Here was the hand of de Saul. But the emperor already had risen. With him rose Carlota and laid a white hand on his arm. For several minutes they conversed earnestly in low tones, she seeming to protest and argue. Then he patted her hand and shook his head.

He beckoned to de Noue, and spoke with him a few sentences. After that, offering his arm to the empress, and bowing to the people, Maximilian withdrew, without further word, from the throne room.

Slowly and apologetically de Noue came forward to Shelby. The shabby, grey-clad staff listened almost as if a sentence of execution was being pronounced upon it. "I greatly regret," said the little Frenchman, "but it is of no use. The emperor will not use you or your troops. He places his trust in diplomacy, and hopes to try negotiations and correspondence with the United States. He thinks Mr. Secretary Seward is favourably disposed towards him, and that the spirit of the dominant party in the United States will not frown upon his experiment with the Mexicans. His majesty's sole desire, he wishes me to say to you, is to give the Mexican people a good government, lenient yet restraining law, and to develop the country and educate the people. He believes he can do this with his native troops even if the French are withdrawn, and he feels it will be greatly to the interest of the American nation to recognize him."

Then de Noue lowered his voice. "Between ourselves, general, his majesty is an enthusiast, and you know that an enthusiast reasons from the heart instead of the head. My knowledge of your country teaches me that he will not succeed. He is being badly advised—and there are other considerations, considerations arising from across the water, with which I cannot go into details, that hamper him. He does not, moreover, understand the people over whom he rules, or any of the dangers that beset him. But it is no use, I say again. General, the emperor will not give you employment."

In numbed silence the little knot of ragged officers listened to the interpreter. Worn, war-stained, they looked almost pathetic in the midst of the gorgeousness and luxury that surrounded them. Clay reeled with the others at the implications of this terrific reverse. Ended, completely ended, was Shelby's epic. The great march was wasted. The sacrifices, the enthusiasm, the lives which had been spent, were to no avail. Only darkness lay ahead for all of them.

Out of the silence came Shelby's voice, and Clay marvelled, for it was as cool and unruffled as if the doom of his life's great dream had not just been pronounced.

"I knew it," said the general.

"How?" Count de Noue shrugged his shoulders.

“From his face.” Shelby still spoke quietly as if discussing a casual incident of the day. “Not once could I bring the colour to it. He has faith, but no enthusiasm, and enthusiasm such as he needs would be but another name for audacity. Maximilian will fail in his diplomacy.”

He saluted de Noue, and led his officers from the glittering room. The last thing Clay saw, as he passed through the great door, was Bazaine’s lingering, bitter smile.

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On the ride back to the barracks, Shelby seemed serene, almost light-hearted; and the staff strove, with indifferent results, to meet his mood. They marvelled at his power to surmount so devastating a blow, but when at last they reached the barracks and the general called Clay to his quarters alone, it was a new Shelby the captain saw—a shaken, haggard, almost pathetic Shelby.

“What shall I tell them?”

That was his question, over and over again, as he walked the narrow limits of his room, with heavy, ceaseless tread. Four steps one way. Four steps back. Over and over. Tugging at his beard, eyes filled with pain, a face of torment. Clay had never seen Shelby like this. For once the general’s soul was bare; the man had submerged the soldier. Gone was the armour of assertiveness, self-confidence, and assurance. This new Shelby seemed almost feeble. It is ill to witness the moment of weakness of a great nature, and Clay stood at silent attention, shocked and grieved. At last Shelby halted.

“I’ve failed them,” he said, agony in his voice.

“Through no fault of yours, sir,” Clay replied, moved to say something, but even as he spoke cursing his own banality.

“If I’d left them alone,” the general continued, ignoring the interjection, “they’d have surrendered in Texas, and been well on their way home by now. I talked them into this. I brought them here, to this benighted country, following a will-o’-the-wisp—a mirage conjured by my own fevered brain. Bennett—tell me what to do! How can I face my men?”

His voice almost broke, and Clay did not reply—he could not, because nothing suggested itself to him to say. Here was epic tragedy—a mighty vision shattered by the negative shake of a weakling puppet monarch’s head.

“We never had a chance,” Shelby resumed in his hoarse voice of anguish. “I know it now. From the moment we crossed the Rio Grande, fate conspired against us——”

He broke off and looked strangely at Clay, as if for the first time seeing something with clarity.

“Maybe we didn’t deserve to succeed. There was that episode at the border when that man Parridine stirred the men to reject Biesca’s offer—our sure chance of success. I bowed to their clamour. If I’d only held out . . . And it was Parridine who carried the story of my unfortunate transaction of the guns at Piedras Negras. That was a blunder—but how was I to know? I could not take the guns—so I made a virtue out of leaving them. But those miserable guns have dogged me every foot of the way through Mexico—the story of them always before me, a seeming advertisement of our treachery, our double-dealing, our lack of trustworthiness. If I’d only had the courage to face the Brigade down that night—I remember that little fat bandit El Gato, after I’d caught him, standing up to me and saying, ‘Why I no sell myself an’ my countrie? Ees because I am a man! Ees because I do not lie. I love freedom—love too much to sell. Those poor Juarez, hiding in the desert—he is a man also. But ees not afraid to die for hees countrie. He will not sell. Ees more better man than you, El General Shell-by!’ I’ve known it was true. It’s my failure. And the men—the loyal boys from Missouri who’ve followed me. Now, somehow, I must find the strength to go before them and tell them what I’ve done to them . . .”

He looked old and almost broken. Clay stiffened. What he was going to say he did not know, but he must say something. Something to comfort this man. Something not as subordinate to superior, but as friend to friend.

“Whatever has happened, sir,” he said stumbingly, “we’ve had an adventure—a memorable adventure—together. Nobody can take that away from us.”

Shelby halted his restless striding and his face changed swiftly. Then he turned to Clay, and an expression of odd gratitude was on his features.

“Thank you,” he said.

They both knew what was behind that thanks. Some natures react to music; others to colours in magnificent combination. Shelby reacted to an idea—to a fine phrase. It gave him something to hold, to support himself by. Through four years of war he had fought on ideas and phrases, and Clay had given him one now, just at the right time.

“Memorable adventure—nobody can take that away from us,” he muttered. Then: “Captain, ask Major Edwards to come here. I’ll have some

general orders—the last general orders.” The old, brisk manner already was back.

Walking through the barracks to his own quarters after calling Edwards, Clay could hear the talk, and it was apparent that news of Shelby’s failure already had spread through the Brigade. In little, tense groups the men discussed it. Phrases and sentences reached Clay:

“. . . fought our way here. Why not fight our way out an’ jine up with Juarez, like Ole Jo wanted to in the fust place . . .?”

“. . . goin’ to happen to us? Thar’s allus the Foreign Legion . . .”

“. . . ports on the coast—Vera Cruz, say? I wouldn’t mind tryin’ the sea fo’ a spell . . .”

“. . . hear thar’s gold to be found over in the Sierra Madres——”

“Yeah. An’ Injuns—Apache Injuns. The wussest in the world . . .”

Waiting beside Clay’s door was Gonder.

“Is it true, seh?” the big man asked in the tone of one who asks only official confirmation of a fact already fully established.

“That the Brigade is to be disbanded? Yes.”

“What are you goin’ to do, seh?”

“I will remain with Shelby as long as he needs me. And you?”

The big man studied a minute. “I had thought,” he said at last, “of returnin’ to the States. But now, fo’ several reasons, I figger I’ll remain in this here benighted land.”

He added that there was Esau, who intended to remain, a diverting character but one who needed looking after.

“Gonder,” said Clay, “there’s something more than Esau Janeicke holding you in Mexico.”

The other shuffled his feet uneasily. Perhaps the captain was in a measure correct, he admitted, and mentioned that he had observed in Mexico “some surpassin’ business opportunities.” He granted that the people seemed over ready to take violent action on occasion, but had he not averted the vengeance of the Kansas land holders, the government Indian agents, and

General Sterling Price? He submitted that he should be able likewise to handle the Mexicans, no matter how uppity.

Clay looked him directly in the eye. “Doña Gertrudis wouldn’t by any chance be mixed up in this?” he asked.

For almost the first time in Clay’s observation of him, Gonder appeared flustered. His face flushed, and his eyes looked down. Finally he nodded slightly.

“Mebbe she is, a little,” he said.

“My congratulations. When did this occur?”

“You remember, seh, the ‘old artifice of war to feint at the enemy’s front, while makin’ the real onset at the rear’? Well, the detachment makin’ the feint was captured, seh, unanimous. While you was out viewin’ the sights of Guanajuato with Miss Merit, I was fo’ced to surrender at discretion. It worried me some at fust, seh, but now I am convinced it is a good idea. Doña Gertrudis is a fine, substantial woman, an’ a perseverin’ one. Moreover”—he hesitated, then looked frankly at Clay—“she has too much prope’ty to be fo’ced to watch after it herself. An’ I, seh, have never believed in givin’ myself the worst of anything——”

The disclosure was interrupted. A bugler stepped out at the end of the hall and the raucous voice of his trumpet sounded “Assembly.” Men leaped for their equipment, began crowding through the doors to take their places in formation.

By the time Clay had obtained and belted on his side-arms and emerged from the building the Brigade already was forming. He crossed the parade ground and took his post two paces to the rear and a pace to the left of General Shelby, who stood facing his men at the conventional fifty paces in front of the centre. Far down at the extreme right of the Brigade front, Major Edwards, as adjutant, was fussing about, taking unusual care in his dressing of the lines. Even after the general was in position, Edwards continued to sight down the long ranks, waving this or that irregularity out of the alignment. He was thinking of Shelby up there, and was giving him time to prepare for his ordeal. At last he was satisfied with the dressing, marched stiffly down the row of set, bearded faces, and faced the troops in front of Shelby.

“Report!” he barked.

One after another Clay heard the line company commanders, Thraillkill, Langhorne, Rutledge, and the rest, sing out the familiar:

“. . . all present or accounted for!”

With the last cry, Edwards about-faced and gravely saluted Shelby.

“Sir,” he said, “the Brigade is formed.”

“Very well, sir,” responded the general, “prepare for inspection.”

This was going to be difficult to do, but Shelby felt that he owed it to the men, and he was going through with it. From one end of the line to the other, Clay heard the quick commands: “Open ranks, *march!*”

With well-oiled precision, the rear rank fell back two paces. Shelby took Edwards’s salute, and followed by the major and Clay, began his last inspection of his men.

The procedure was familiar, an every-day ritual, but about it there seemed to be an atmosphere of unreality. Face expressionless, Shelby strode down to the end of the line, turned sharply, and halted before the first man. It was Esau Janeicke, who as scout sergeant, was stationed at this extremity. The black-bearded giant brought his rifle to “port,” eyes straight ahead. But instead of taking the piece for examination, Shelby simply thrust out his hand—his left hand, the good one.

“I’d like to shake hands with you, old friend,” he said.

Janeicke grounded his gun and wrung his general’s hand. His face was working, and Clay, with strong surprise, saw tears in his nail-hard eyes. As well expect a wooden Indian to show emotion as Janeicke, yet here he was, almost ready to sob. Shelby passed on down the line and Clay followed.

With every man in the ranks, the general shook hands and spoke a personal word. Some of his hardened troopers wept openly as he said good-bye to them. The eyes which gazed after him had in them an almost aching sorrow and longing, and Clay’s own throat throbbed with his choking feeling. That inspection seemed hours long to Clay, but at last it was finished, and Shelby led the inspection party back to the front of the Brigade.

“Close ranks!” ordered the general, and as the company commanders echoed him, the rear rank stepped forward and closed the interval.

Then for a long time Shelby stood looking at his men. No man could tell what was in his heart, but to Clay came the queer impression that the general was drinking them in with his eyes—filling his memory with his beloved Brigade before its dissolution. At last he drew a deep breath and locked his hands behind his back.

“Stand at ease!” he said. Then: “Men . . . Men . . .” His voice faltered, but he took hold of himself and it again rose strongly.

“Men of Shelby’s Brigade—for you’ve been good enough to permit it to be called Shelby’s Brigade——”

Startlingly in the silence, a voice lifted from the rear rank: “An’ a better name, by God, a brigade never had!”

And then a strange and moving thing happened. Those men, those ragged, beggared men, set up such a storm of cheering that Shelby was unable to speak. Shrill above the din of men roaring out their lungs sounded the Rebel yell. Individual cries came to Clay:

*“Shelby for ever!”*

*“Hooray fo’ Ole Jo!”*

*“We’d do it all ovah again, seh!”*

*“Jest try us, gen’ral!”*

*“Yip-yip-yippay!”*

It was unmilitary and contrary to the regulations, but usually stern-faced sergeants made no effort to stop it; indeed they howled the loudest in it. Spontaneous and heartfelt, the cheering lasted for minutes.

“Thank you, men,” the general said, when he could at last make himself heard, and his voice trembled. “This is more than I have deserved. What I have to say to you is short. You’ve been loyal. You’ve been brave. You are the finest body of horse any commander ever took to battle! In four years together we were never defeated by an enemy who did not greatly outnumber us——”

“That’s the God’s truth!” shouted some enthusiast, and at first Clay thought they were going off into another demonstration, but this time the officers were quick to turn and admonish the ranks. Shelby resumed:

“You’ve followed me to the end, men. We dreamed a great dream together, and you’ve heard this afternoon how that dream was brought to failure. There is no room for us here. As a military unit we must cease to exist, and as your leader it is harder for me to say the words than it would have been for any other. I have been proud of you; have put you to the hardest tests and found you as flawless as a piece of tempered steel. Men of Shelby’s Brigade, I salute you!”

Shelby paused, and to Clay it seemed almost that the Brigade shrank back from what it knew was coming next. Presently, in a voice that shook with emotion, the general went on:

“It is with a feeling of infinite sadness that I tell you we cannot take service in the army of the Emperor of Mexico—as a unit. Those of you who so desire may enlist as individuals in the French battalions. There will be occupations of various kinds for others. I pledge myself that I will devote my energies to obtaining employment for every man who desires to remain in this country. Now, men, that is about all. But I would ask you, not as your general, but as your comrade, to try always to remember this with me.”

He looked the ranks up and down, and Clay knew what was coming next.

*“We have had an adventure—a memorable adventure—together. Nobody can take that away from us!”*

He stopped and fought for control, and Clay Bennett behind him felt his own throat closing with the sob he suppressed, and from the hard ranks in front of him the tears ran down unashamed faces at last, which had not known tears in four long years. Presently Shelby said simply:

“And now I say to you that Shelby’s Brigade is hereby officially disbanded. *Dismiss!*”

It was the requiem for Shelby’s Brigade.

For a moment the ragged veterans stood hesitant, as though they could not quite realize what had happened to them. Then they began breaking ranks, straggling slowly, silently, dejectedly back to their quarters.

There is more to a good military body than a mere collection of disciplined fighters. There are its traditions, its proud record, its character, and a thousand indefinable things that make up the subtle thing which is its soul, just as much as the human body has a soul. To Clay it was a dreadful thing to see the soul depart from the Brigade. Where one moment the disciplined, clean-cut ranks had stood, there was now a confusion of individuals and groups, seemingly without object, certainly with no unified purpose. It was the dissolution of a beloved personality and at last Clay found he could not keep the sharp prickle of tears from his eyes. Silently he followed the general and Edwards back to the barracks.

In Shelby’s office tragedy hung thickly. One after another the officers, those splendid leaders of Shelby’s peerless Horse, came to the door and

brokenly stammered out their love and sorrow. The general received them all with a kindly word and a warm hand-clasp.

They were all gone at last, except Clay, who as aide lingered to see if there was any further service he could perform. Shelby walked slowly across the room, and seated himself on his cot.

“Clay, take that chair,” he said.

In all Clay’s military experience this was the first time the general had used his first name. It symbolized something . . .

Now that the crowd was gone, Shelby seemed to droop. For a time neither spoke, but at last the general looked up.

“No use sitting here as if we were at a wake,” he grinned wryly.

“No, sir.”

The grin disappeared. “It was worth the gamble, Clay.”

“I think so too, sir. If I may ask—what are your plans?”

“I don’t know. Hadn’t thought of it. I’ll see, first of all, to the best of my ability that my men are taken care of. After that—who knows? Farming, perhaps. Maury was here with his offers—he must have come from Bazaine and knew in advance what would happen. Well, it’s a transition—from general to ploughman. But I can make it. Don’t worry about Shelby, Clay.”

This, thought Clay, was the death of greatness. The words signified a vast fall, not only in estate but in hope and vision. It was the inevitable descent into mediocrity that Shelby had dreaded—the mediocrity he had feared as he never had feared death. For a time this man stood on a vast pinnacle and saw horizons given to few to behold. He could have been a giant in history . . . except for the vagaries of fortune.

But that was ended. Nobody would come after Shelby. The great builders of empire all had gone before. From this time forth the world would never again offer the opportunity that had almost come true for Shelby.

Clay looked at the general. His eyes were fixed on vacancy and in his face was etched his great bitterness.

“If it could have been—if it only could have been,” Shelby said in a voice as low as if he were speaking to himself alone, “we would have altered the destiny of the western world. But now . . . I do not go to my ruin alone. I was right, and time will demonstrate it. Maximilian—he has guessed wrong again. He has a talent for wrong guesses, this parvenu emperor; of this I am

certain since I have studied his history. And the worst guess of all was when he accepted the ‘call’ of the spurious *junta* to become Emperor of Mexico in the first place. Since then he has made error after error. He is ruled by good impulse one time, by caprice another, and by bad advice the next. The day will come when he will wish bitterly that he had accepted the offer I made him. This I prophesy.”

He seemed to have forgotten that Clay was in the room. It was as if he communed with himself, thinking out loud.

“The emperor is under the thumb of Bazaine—and Bazaine, I suppose, has his orders,” he continued, his eyes on the floor. “Louis Napoleon hopes to the last to keep control over Mexico—particularly over its revenue. I offered Maximilian troops. Because of Bazaine he refused. That, some day, Maximilian will remember as the moment of his greatest opportunity. Now, today, when the soldiers of the Confederacy are in a state of fluidity—when they have not yet come to decision on their future plans—an offer to re-enter the profession of arms would have a powerful appeal. In six months it will be too late to interest them—in a year, out of the question. A day may come when Maximilian will appeal to Shelby. On that day Shelby will not be able to help him, no matter how much he desires to do so.”

Thus Joseph Orville Shelby, sometime general of division in the Provisional Army of the Confederate States of America, sitting in his bare barracks room at Mexico City, accurately foretold happenings which would not take place for many months in the future. Those words Clay was to remember long after, when the poor, handsome, weak emperor, hunted by the wolf packs of Juarez, faced his tragic doom.

The general ceased speaking. Slowly the minutes passed in silence—silence so complete that Clay could hear the slight humming of a soaring fly, voices from without muffled by the walls, even the slow breathing of the man on the other side of the room. He cleared his throat.

“Is there anything more I can do, general?”

Shelby stared vaguely at him. Then, as with an effort, his eyes focused and he shook his head.

“Nothing. Nobody can ever do anything for Jo Shelby . . . any more.”

Clay rose. He could not bear it in here. Groping his way, almost, he stumbled from the room, and closed the door behind him as softly and reverently as if he had closed it on the presence of death. For in that room

there lay dead something more absolute than flesh—an ambition, and a dream.

For a moment he stood still and looked at the empty barracks. Then he crossed to the door and stepped out into the late sunlight. The diamond brightness of the Mexican atmosphere was about him. Soldiers crossed and recrossed the parade ground, some with bundles, others in groups, talking together in low voices. Beyond the parade ground were the stables.

Clay started with sudden decision towards the stables. His horse was there. By riding fast he might overtake the stage on which Merit and her father already were on their way to Vera Cruz.

A longing like sickness suddenly possessed him as he thought of Missouri and home. Waverly, white-walled on the river bluffs. The steamboat landing below and the wide river bottom chequered with its fields. Wooded hills, brushed on the horizons with softest blue. Stately brick plantation homes on the turnpike, each with its Greek portico of white pillars. Bluegrass pastures and pretty creeks. Nothing could ever be so beautiful as Missouri. Missouri . . . and Merit . . .

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Angel with Spurs* by Paul Iselin Wellman]