

*The*  
Beloved  
Brute

Kenneth  
Perkins

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# THE BELOVED BRUTE

BY  
KENNETH PERKINS

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TO GRACE

“A VERY PRESENT HELP”



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# The Beloved Brute

## CHAPTER I

### THE BLESSING

The first storm of winter marked the end of what the Indians called the Time of Ripe Acorns. Peter Hinges, gaunt heroic frontiersman that he was, knew that it also marked the end of his allotted threescore years and ten in this world. A crisp day came and a strong wind, purified of heat, swept up the mountainside toward Peter's cabin, bringing with it the fragrance of mesquite and sage. Peter lay upon his bunk in one corner of the dark hut, and when the wind swept to the door it came in and touched his forehead and his silken, white hair.

"That wind is from the southern ranges," Peter said. "I can smell the sage of the cañons. My son will find happiness down there—that's the promise the wind brings."

These words were addressed to Swink Tuckson, a wizened, pale-eyed little man who was preparing coffee on the stove at the opposite corner of the room. Swink was not particularly interested in the old man's remarks. If he had been he could not have understood. Peter Hinges spoke—almost literally—a different language; his deeds as well as his words, were unintelligible to Swink. Swink knew that the white-haired giant had held sway over the country for half a century—not as a sheriff, not as an outlaw, not even as a gunfighter, but in a curious, incomprehensible rôle which Swink understood was a combination of shepherd and sky pilot.

"It is for my son!" the venerable old man was saying. "For me there is no promise in that wind from the valleys. I am like Moses who was shown the promised land from the mountain of Pisgah—but who could not go down into it!"

Swink busied himself opening a can of beans. He knew that the old sky pilot must be taken care of and watched, but on the other hand, there was no particular necessity of listening to him.

“My son will come to his inheritance!” Peter went on, his yellow, deeply wrinkled face lighting up in a mild smile as he took great breaths of the wind. “Life! That’s inheritance. The life of a youth whose strength shall exceed all men’s!”

Swink turned around, thinking that the old man was gasping. “What’s the trouble, pard?” he asked. “Is the wind gettin’ you? Then lie down and don’t be throwin’ a fit.”

“Look here!” old Hinges said angrily. “Who are you?”

“I am Swink Tuckson—was sent up here by your congregation for to see if you was in need.”

“Then listen to my voice,” the big, white-haired man went on. “Never you mind my supper. You go and get my son David. You get him! I’m goin’ to send him down to the valley so he won’t be spending another winter up here.”

Swink was at first inclined to ignore the old man’s command as part of his usual drivel, but this time there was a note in his voice which could not be denied. “I don’t reckon you could stand the journey there, pard,” the little fellow said.

“I’m not going down. I couldn’t stir from this bed—save only by the grace of God! My son must go down there alone. You bring him here. And don’t let him know how sick I am.”

“If he leaves you, who in Sam Hill’s goin’ to take care of you when you git snowbound?”

“The angel of the Lord!”

“Look here, pard, I ain’t goin’ to be messin’ around here all winter. You’d orter to know that afore you go sendin’ your boy south. I was jess sent up here from Red Dog by some of your ole cronies to— —”

“God will take care of me!” The man raised his huge, trembling fist. “Whoever you are, don’t you cross me! Bring me my son so my soul can bless him before the Lord at the hour of my death!”

“Well, for the love of— —”

“Yes, for the love of God, bring him!” The old man sank back to his musty blankets, coughing and beating his chest.

Although Swink Tuckson attached little importance to anything the aged sky pilot said, one word in the conversation held a peculiar significance. This was the word “David.” Old Peter Hinges had two sons, one about fifteen, another ten years older. It was for the fifteen-year-old boy that the father called and not for Swink’s friend Charles, the elder son.

“Poor ole Charlie!” he laughed to himself as he fell to eating the beans out of a frying pan. “Charlie don’t come in for nothin’—not even when his ole man’s kickin’ off!”

Swink finished his supper—which he ate alone—saddled his horse, and rode down the mountain trail to the cañon and Red Dog.

“He wants David, the younger, and poor ole Charlie gets the laugh!”

But Swink did not seem to regard this peculiar discrimination in a very tragical vein. In the first place it was a simple matter to find the younger son, whereas if he had been sent to fetch Charlie, that would have been a different matter.

Late that afternoon when Swink brought David up to the mountain fastness where the old preacher had secluded himself, he thought that it was natural the father should desire to have this boy at his bedside. David Hinges was a paragon of youth and strength. He was tall for his age without being gawky. His eyes were sharp, clear blue; his face tanned, with clean-cut features; his throat, displayed by the open blue flannel shirt, was like one of a Greek statue.

Dave sensed the seriousness of his summons, for he took his hat off when he went into the presence of his father. It being at about sunset, his light-brown hair was turned into the color of gold. The little hovel, which was to be a death place, fairly blossomed into life because of the boy’s entrance.

Swink Tuckson, cringing into the background, felt the tension of this meeting and began to roll a cigarette. As for the boy, Dave became bashful under the fierce gaze of his father, and wished that he, too, could roll some tobacco so that the crackling of the paper and the rubbing of his fingers would fill up the silence. Instead Dave twirled his big, lop-brimmed sombrero, and finally stammered out: “What do you want of me, father?”

“My boy,” old Peter said, “I’m going to send you away. I’m going to send you down to my brother’s ranch in the Big Horn Basin. Your

inheritance, which you're coming into now, is this: youth, life, unsurpassed strength—the strength of a giant which you inherit from the loins of your earthly father, and the strength of spirit which you inherit from your Father in heaven!”

Dave shuffled his feet, and feeling the seriousness of the ritual, picked out a knot in the pine floor at which he kicked with the toe of his boot. “All right, father,” he finally said. “I’ll get all that. But what’re you sendin’ me away for? I ain’t done nothin’.”

“Shut up, Dave,” Swink whispered hoarsely. “Can’t you see the old un’s started on one of his tantrums. Don’t cross him.”

The white-haired preacher regained his strength, sat up, and the same light which had illumined the fair features of the boy lent a benign power to the great head of Peter Hinges, to the wrinkled, waxlike face and to the mild, white forehead. “Son,” he said, “my beloved son, what else I have to give you besides this strength is pitifully small—an old horse—a few dollars. You are to take my horse and the money I give you and ride southward out of the mountains, out of the Buzzard Cañon, across the Hot Creek Range and the Red Mesa until you come to Big Horn Basin, and there you will ask for your uncle, who will give you work on the winter ranges— —”

“The winter ranges? But look here, father, if I’m to go before winter who’s going to look after you?”

“You will go before winter. You will go before to-night,” Peter Hinges decreed.

“But, I say, father— —”

“Don’t crost him, you poor seedwart!” Swink Tuckson interposed. “You crost him and he’ll throw a fit!”

“Who’s goin’ to take care of you?” the boy blurted out again.

Peter Hinges raised his fist. “The Lord who is plenteous in mercy! The Lord of hosts, who is my rock and my strength! He will take care of me!”

“I’ll see that he gets took care of,” Swink muttered, condescendingly. “Now you get the hell along as he says!”

Young David had never crossed the will of his father in his life. And now that he saw the pale, trembling zeal of the old man the boy had no desire—in fact, no power—to go against him.

“Take my old calico horse and the money,” the father said. “It is nothing —the gift that I give you is your body, which will grow and be blessed of the Lord until it is like the body of Samson, against whom no man could prevail.” As old Peter struggled up and sat at the edge of the bed Swink put an arm about him and held him, cautioning, “Careful there now, pard, you can’t be sashayin’ around here like a toe dancer!”

Old Peter preserved the dignity of his blessing by straightening to his full height and putting out his hand so that it rested on the shoulder of the boy.

“God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth,” were the words of the old preacher’s blessing. “Let the spirit of the Lord come upon you and bless you from this day on!”

“Now, beat it, kid,” little Swink whispered out of his yellow teeth. “There’s a reason, and it ain’t for you to stay here and argufy with him!”

Dave Hinges, bewildered by the commanding, almost hypnotic eye of his father, went about packing a bundle of his personal effects: a hunting knife, a six-gun, some grub. He turned to Swink, who was helping him: “Say, look here, Swink, you don’t think the ole ’un figures he’s goin’ to keel over, do you?”

“Shore not! Where do you get that?”

“He’s been actin’ queer for several weeks, and bein’ packed away in bed with what he calls the rheumatism sounds like he was gypin’ me. Rheumatism don’t generally get a guy in the bean, does it now?”

“You think he’s locoed?” Swink asked, surprised that the boy had not noticed this before.

“Not locoed—fanatical, that’s what I call it—quotin’ Scripture and all — —”

“Now, shut up,” Swink said. “He’ll get started agin. You pack up and mount your ole calico and get the hell on the trail!”

A last embrace between the father and son and Dave Hinges hurried off. The boy was as anxious to avoid another mysterious tirade on the part of the old man as little bald-headed, yellow-toothed Swink himself. The latter stood in the door of the jacal, watching the youth riding down into the purple depths of the cañon.

“He’s down to the Coyote Rock now,” Swink said in answer to the old man’s eager question. “He sure is a good rider—that kid—even ridin’ down

hill on that spavined ole calico of yourn.”

“The spirit of the Lord is upon him!” the father said, his cracked voice steadying so that there was again the ring of old preaching days. “He will walk with the Lord and his strength will be the strength of ten men. He will be mightiest among a race of mighty men! He is my son in whom I am well pleased!”

“He’s gallopin’ acrost the sage plain now,” Swink said. “Just like he was one of these here—say, pard, what do you-all call them men who was half men and half horse?”

“A prince with God!”

“Well, that’s what he’s like.”

Swink, as he watched the huge, white horse and its rider disappearing in the thick chaparral of the lower cañons, started reflectively to roll a cigarette. Having poured the tobacco into the paper he tipped the latter up to his mouth after the manner of a doctor giving a patient some powder. He rolled the tobacco into a cud and tucked it away in his cheek. Finally the little fellow turned into the shack, which was now dark. “Say, pard, do you mind tellin’ me just why it was you-all was so anxious to get that kid outen the way?”

The old preacher did not answer.

Swink struck a match, lit the jacklantern on the pine table and then asked again with raised voice: “Why at a time like this, pard, when fathers wants their folk stickin’ around by their bedside—why— —”

The hunched little man paused as he adjusted the wick of the lantern. “God!” he whispered. “I didn’t know you was so far gone—pard—what’s the matter?”

The old preacher had sunk back again into his nest of musty brown blankets. His face, drawn, white, was still benign with the dignity of great spiritual power.

“Bring me my other son—and quickly,” he murmured. “My first-born—bring him. It must be before the morning comes.”

## CHAPTER II

### THE FIRST-BORN

It occurred to Swink Tuckson, riding down to Red Dog in the dusk that evening, that it was certainly high time the old minister called for his first-born.

“If I know anythin’,” Swink said to himself as he jolted in a hard trot down the mountain trail, “the old bird’s goin’ to croak afore mornin’, and it’s up to me to find the first-born pronto. Funny the ole sky pilot was so anxious to get his kid outen the way afore callin’ for the big brother. Well, I’ll be damned!” This last exclamation was uttered as Swink saw a flash of illuminating truth. “That’s the reason right there!” He chuckled proudly at his own cleverness. “The sky pilot didn’t want the kid to meet his brother! I’ll be dinged if that ain’t it!” He dug into the ribs of his mount. “All right, get up thar, you ole one-lunged jackass! We got to get the first-born! The first-born, Mr. Hoss, is got to get his blessin’, so shake them ole hoofs of yourn!”

It was apparent that part of the ferocious religious zeal of old Peter Hinges had been imparted to the booze-sodden mind of Swink Tuckson, for he applied himself to the quest with the sincere understanding that his ride was a matter of life or death.

At Red Town he stopped before Doc Bradley’s shack, leaving the news that the sky pilot on Buzzard Mountain was dying. Having witnessed the departure a short while later of old Doc Bradley for the mountain trail, Swink galloped down the main street of the town and drew rein in front of the San Gabriel Saloon.

The San Gabriel lacked the spirit, if not the outward aspects, of the usual cow town dance hall and gaming house. It had the limitless sawdust-covered floor space, the gaming tables, the deafening hit-or-miss mechanical piano and an interminable bar of unpainted pine. But the place was decayed from want of use; the sawdust was never changed. Swink found himself walking over a damp, offensive carpet of ancient, mildewed free lunch bits, tobacco cuds, and cigar stubs. The only sign of life was a huge yellow dog and the man behind the bar. The latter was a sorrowful figure, with big jaw and close-set, black eyes.

“You’re the man I’m lookin’ for, Scaly,” Swink said.

“How are you, Swink, and what’s your pleasure?”

“A good shot of liquor and you better take a couple yourself. We got a long ride ahead of us.”

“We got a long ride? That’s a funny way of greetin’ a poor ole barkeep like me who’s faithful to his post year in and year out.”

“A lot of cause you got to be faithful!” Swink laughed. “You might as well open a barber shop in here for all the business you do! But, look here, Scaly, get what I’m tellin’ you: from now on your business is goin’ to pick up.”

“Where do you get that?” The barkeep joined his guest in a small drink.

“Here’s where I get it. You know the reason why all this here countryside is so dinged sweet and pure? You know the reason why our citizens hang around the barber shop and Joe’s lunch counter instead of fightin’ each other like real men in a respectable saloon? Peter Hinges—the sky pilot! That’s the reason.”

“I know that—but what’s all the prophesyin’ about my business?”

“Peter Hinges rules this place like he was a sheriff—you know it. He holds sway worse’n any road agent or bandit chief that ever tore up a county. And why? I asks yer that—why?”

“Because of his looks,” the barkeep snorted disgustedly. “Every herder and puncher-boy ’round here is afeared of him—him bein’ nigh on to seven feet high. But *I* ain’t afeared of him. He ain’t scairt me out—has he?”

“It ain’t his looks. It’s his line. You stick around and hear him throw a fit about God and that kid son of hisn— —”

The barkeep answered this with a long laugh.

“What’s so funny about it? Look here, Scaly, that ole man— —”

“I’ll tell you why I’m laffin’. Ole Peter Hinges has held sway over this county for fifty years—and he’s got every one loony over matters relatin’ to the soul and hell, and every one from the sheriff down to the rottenest cholo sheepman has got religion—*except*—mark this now, Swink—except his oldest son! Yah! Ain’t that somethin’ to laff about?”

“Now, we’re gettin’ to the point of my visit, Mr. Barkeep,” Swink said diplomatically. “This ole preacher’s about to croak. Yes, I’m tellin’ you



straight. Get me now! he's up thar on his peak at Buzzard's Mountain, where they say he retires for forty days and nights every time he hears voices a-callin' to him. And he's up thar now swearin' that he don't expect to see the sun-up agin."

"Well, I will say he was a great ole bird," the barkeep vouchsafed. "Now that he's stretchin' out, I'll grant that."

"And here's the point, Scaly. It's a sort of a way these here religious birds have—ever since the beginning of time—which is they want to give their blessin' to their eldest son. The ole sky pilot's always talkin' of some cattle king in the Bible who had two ornery sons, and they was a big hullabaloo about which was to git the blessin'. The eldest son was Esau, but he didn't get it, y'understand. The name of the bird that got it was Jones—I can always remember because it was the same name as Jacob Jones, the harnessmaker."

"Well, what in Sam Hill has all this got to do with —"

"Hold your horses and let me finish, Scaly. I'm comin' to it. Now the ole man has sent his boy, Dave Hinges, down to punch cattle for his uncle, and now that he's outen the way he sent me for to get the oldest son, which it is known, in religious circles, as the first-born. Bein' as you're the best friend of Charlie Hinges —"

The barkeep let out a long, low whistle, and the seriousness of the matter came upon him in a sudden revelation. "Have a drink on the house this time, Swink," he said quickly. "We got to do some tall thinkin'. I never figured that me and ole Peter Hinges was goin' to have dealin's with each other. But the time has come for a showdown. My ole pal Charlie Hinges is in line for a showdown. Haw! haw! haw! No! It ain't a laffin' matter, I admit. It's a matter, as the sayin' goes, of life and death—eh, Swink?"

"It is that, Scaly. And it's up to you now to tell me where we can find this hellbender who's to get blessed."

"Now you've axed me somethin'!" the barkeep said significantly. "When a dyin' man requests for to see his son, it ain't right for no one—not even a barkeep—to refuse. Apart from religious matters, Swink, it's in duty bound I am for to get this hellbender, who is my chum, and take him to the bedside of the man whose flesh and blood he is. Now that's right, ain't it, Swink?"

"It's a holy duty, Scaly, and as you say—apart from whether you've got religion or not—you'll accept the duty as a man. And bein' as I ain't big

enough to call that last point into question I'll say you're a man and it's up to you to get Charlie Hinges and bring him to the bedside of his dyin' dad."

The barkeep leaned both elbows on the wet pine board, reaching over after the manner of a preacher about to pronounce a truth to an intimate circle of front pews. "Swink," he began, coughing and scratching his huge, bristly jaw. "I got somethin' for to tell you. Concernin' this here duty of mine which it's to be performed I find a very ornery little objection: How, I asks you, man to man, can Charlie Hinges be took to the bedside of the sky pilot, his father, for to get a blessin' when this same Charlie Hinges is in *jail*?"

Scaly set his brown jaw and held up the dirty palm of his hand, which was his signal to Swink for silence. The barkeep then whisked off his apron, mopped up the pine board, hurriedly dipped the little whisky glasses in a tub of water, and set them on the shelf beneath the speckled mirror. "I'll saddle my ole skate and be with you in five minutes."

Swink, satisfied but puzzled, watched the barkeep transfer a handful of silver from his cash register to a little safe which was placed, with a pile of empty beer cases and kegs, in a closet. When Scaly disappeared in the rear of the saloon Swink went out to the watering trough, where he had snubbed his mount.

A little later the two clattered down the main street of the town, Scaly on his raw-boned, ancient barn horse, with Swink following submissively. They galloped to the northern end of the town, passed corrals, dipping vats, the outer saloons, and then reached the open prairie, continuing their gallop along the county road, now awash with starlight.

It took them two hours to cross the series of mesas that separated Red Dog and the stage stop, which is called Volcano. Late that night when Los Gatos, the county seat, was alive with the riot of its dance halls, they reached their destination.

"Are you going to break into the jail, Scaly?" Swink asked.

"Me? Not me! You can't break into this jail. Sheriff Hawn knows he's got a good prisoner—and he's watchin' out for a lynchin'."

"Just what did this here chum of yours do, Scaly?"

"He's done about everything which the statute books of this here county says you ain't expected to do. I can tell you in the short time we got between here and the county jail what he *didn't* do. He— —" Scaly fell to clicking to his horse and thinking. Then: "He didn't—he—well, I'll be cussed if I can

think of a single thing he didn't do, either! He got drunk, but that ain't illegal hereabouts. He drew on the sheriff, which is illegal. He got into a fist fight with three men at the Jackdog, which there ain't any laws against. He laid a Mex cold, which the doctor said broke his jaw—but that ain't objectionable, bein' it was a Mex. He blew out the lights down to Moki's dance parlors and smashed the windows and the mirrors of the Last Chanst Saloon, and the charge ag'in' him is hoss-stealin'!"

"If it's hoss-stealin' I don't reckon we can get him out, eh, Scaly?"

"They seems to be some question about the hoss-stealin', so he gits a trial. Lucky they ain't tryin' him for beatin' up them card players down to the Jackdog—there waren't no question about that!"

The jail was in the center of town near a long, low wooden structure designated as the county seat. The little adobe jail, battered, decayed, was a landmark of the frontier days when it had served as a military outpost. Its keeper, a deputy by the name of Corcovan, was a fat, garrulous man with a rim of gray hair about a beet-red head.

"Sheriff Hawn is down to the Jackdog," Corcovan said. "But mebbe I can answer your questions."

Swink Tuckson and the barkeep dismounted, and the latter took a wallet from his vest and stepped up to the deputy. "Mr. Corcovan," he said, "I got a little pile of scratch here which, it is my opinion, can cover whatever bail the judge set on my pardner, Charlie Hinges, which, I am told, he is sojournin' in this here band house."

The deputy puffed up his pipe so that it glowed, reflecting a twinkle at the corner of his mouth. "How much you got thar?" he asked.

Scaly handed him the roll. "Count it."

The deputy wet his pudgy thumb and ran it across the green bills. "You think Charlie Hinges is worth this much?"

"I ain't doin' it for Charlie Hinges," the barkeep snapped back.

"Look here, Scaly," Swink interposed seriously. "Do you reckon Charlie Hinges's word is good enough for fall money? From what I hear he—"

"Swink, a little runt like you couldn't lift the amount of paper money I'd stake on Charlie Hinges's word. He told me wunst—ten year ago—that he would lick me. Year after year I was wonderin' if he'd keep his word. He kept growin' like a Clydesdale colt till I quit wonderin' and began hopin'. And then when he was twenty-one he said, 'Well, Scaly, here's where I

prove to you what my word's worth'—and in ten minutes he mashed all the hell outen me that had been festerin' for thirty-five years. He'll keep his word, all righto! Don't worry about that."

"But then you said you warden't doin' it for Charlie—you don't mean to say you're offerin' bail for the sake of the ole man? The ole man was your enemy, warden't he?"

"In order to cut this argufyin' short," the deputy said, eager to enact his own little climax to this situation, "I'm goin' to let you birds go in and have a talk with the prisoner. This here money looks like good money. And it's a good heap to offer for a coyote such as Charlie Hinges. It's so cussed good that I wisht I could take it right here and now without lettin' Charlie go free." Again the fat little prison keeper ran his clumsy fingers across the roll. "Therefore, seein' you're presentin' such good credentials, so to speak, I'm axin' you two gents as my guests to step inside of this here lodgin' house so's you kin judge for yourself just what sort of a man you-all are tryin' to bail out. He ain't been too friendly, I'll tell you that. He sulks like a coyote in a trap, and it's all I can do to get him to answer a civil question." Then, pompously: "Gents, follow me."

Swinging his lantern before him he led the way into the depths of the prison.

"Well, Mr. Hinges," he called out before reaching the end of the hall. "I got two visitors for you, two visitors with the calling cards of real gentlemen." The deputy turned around, winking at Swink and the barkeep, and as Charlie Hinges gave no answer, he whispered: "See! Wot did I tell you? He won't talk. Sulky ole mule—puttin' on airs and pretendin' he don't care about visitors!" The fat little dignitary strutted to the door of the cell. "Halloa, there, Mr. Hinges! Nice evenin' for a little friendly chat?"

Still there was no answer.

The deputy, desiring to be the leading man in his own little drama, whispered confidentially: "He's pretendin' he's asleep—like as not because he wants me to go in and wake him up for which he'll give me a nice, soothing bash in the jaw."

"We'll talk to him through the bars," Scaly said, condescendingly. "Come on there, you moth-eaten ole booze-hound. Come on and talk to me! I'm Scaly." He turned to Corcovan. "Let's have the lantern, Mr. Deputy."

The fat little man still wanted to parade his power. "Look, here, gents, I know how to treat my prisoners—I humor 'em. Since Charlie won't talk till

the door's unlocked, I'm going to do him and you two gents a favor. The roll you're puttin' up on him is a good roll, and just because it's so good I'm goin' to break a custom and let you gents go right in and talk to Charlie yourself."

It was Swink who walked to the opening and peered in. He held the lantern up in one corner of the cell. "Where does he hang out?" Swink asked.

"Look over to the bed," the jailer answered. "Come on, Hinges! Talk to your ole friends."

"He ain't in the bed," Swink said.

"*What!* Look under it!"

Swink and the barkeep both looked under the little army cot and then stood up and looked at each other. The jailer rushed into the room.

*The wagging beams of Swink's lantern swept an empty cell!*

"Look over here," Scaly said with a touch of humor in his voice. Both the others turned to the window. The sill had been broken, as was evidenced by a pile of huge chunks of mortar and adobe on the floor. "And look at this," Scaly laughed. "Gents, let me introduce you to my ole friend, Mr. Charlie Hinges!"

The others looked up at the window. Two iron bars had been bent apart to the shape of angular bows.

"You've introduced us to Charlie Hinges all right, all right!" Swink said. "They ain't no mistake about the name. It's Charlie Hinges for fair!"

The fat little deputy, sweating like a pig, mopped his shining head, scratched his jowls rapidly with his knuckles and stared at the bars and the chunks of mortar, and then looked around with a stupid appraisal of the whole room.

Scaly chuckled incontinently. "Some jail!" he said. "And look at this here wall, gents. I'm axing you to look at this here wall."

The deputy and Swink followed his gnarled finger, and on the whitewash of the adobe they saw scrawled the following words:

I've gone to see my dad.

CHARLES HINGES.

P.S.—I'll be back.

“Gents,” the corpulent deputy said, changing his tone to a serious and confidential huskiness, “I knew this all along.”

“And if I’d stopped to think of me old friend,” the barkeep laughed, “I’d orter knowed it myself!”

The deputy held up the roll of bills. “Mr. Barkeep,” he said, “I told you that roll looked good to me. And I’d have took it in a minute. But I knew I couldn’t! There you are. Keep it.”

Scaly put the roll into his pocket. He had stopped his chuckling and a queer look had come across his face. “Say, Swink,” he said seriously, “do you mind what’s really happened? Charlie’s dad was dyin’ and this ole Charlie Hinges, booze-hound that he is, suddenly flies the coop for to see his dad—who he ain’t worried about for years. How’d you gents explain that?”

“The ole man on the hill must ha’ been callin’ for him,” Swink muttered.

“There ain’t no one brought no messages to Charlie,” the deputy added, “or else I’d have knowed about it. Nothin’ happens here without I knows about it.”

“I don’t mean that kind of a message,” Swink said, emphasizing the seriousness of his words by widening his red eyelids. “I mean—well, I mean something like—well, you know—I—”

“I always said they was something queer about that ole man on the mountain,” the barkeep broke in.

“*That’s* what I mean!” Swink’s face lighted up. “That’s what I was tryin’ to say—somethin’ strange. His son must have heard him—a-callin’—”

The barkeep interrupted disgustedly: “Now, shut up, you little seedwart. What the Sam Hill do you think *you* know about religion?”

The deputy, with a puzzled frown, watched his two guests hurry out into the street.

Something had complicated and belittled the climax of the act he had so ceremoniously staged—something that glowed and glittered with the pulsing of a splendid star hung far beyond the reaches of his understanding.

## CHAPTER III

### THE JUDGMENT OF PETER

When Buzzard Mountain was still a silhouette against the pale green of the desert sunrise, a big hulk of a man, riding a black horse, was picking out the darker approaches in the cañons which led up to the crest. For a long time the most practiced eye could not have detected this rider, so skillful was he at keeping a background of black sage or chaparral for himself and his horse; but as he approached the peak he came into the first rays of the dawn, and at the same moment the sunlight touched the little cabin where old Peter Hinges lived.

Doc Bardley, who had been at the preacher's bedside all night, stepped out to see who this rider was—coming in startling fashion out of the night, looming like an ancient centaur on the rim of the mountain. Big as the black gelding was it seemed like a cowhorse because of the size of its rider. Doc Bardley immediately recognized the square, bronzed face, the massive shoulders, the giant torso of the preacher's eldest son Charlie Hinges.

But there was no little surprise on the long, sun-faded face of the old doctor. "I thought they had you in the hoose-gow, Charlie!" was the greeting.

"You're right, except that it wasn't a hoose-gow," Charlie replied. "It was a chicken coop. I smashed the wall with this fist of mine, and lucky I was the whole place didn't clatter down about my ears." Charlie held up his fist, which was like a chunk of iron. "And what are you hanging around here for, doc, at this time of the mornin'?"

"I been setting up all night with the preacher, and if you'll take me serious, Charlie, and not meaning to cause you too great a hurt, I'll say this: your venerable old father will never come out of that hut to breathe this morning wind. He's about to die!"

Charlie was slow to react to the news, but when the reaction came it attacked him, naturally, at his weakest spot—his propensity to fight. "What do you think you're handin' me, Doc Bardley? You're only a vet at best. And get this: I would not trust you with a goose-rumped horse for anything worse than corns."

“There’s no time for me to throw back your insults, Hinges, being that your father is on his deathbed. And I’ll say this before you pick any further quarrel: your father would have died to-night if— —”

“If it weren’t for your medical miracles, I suppose.”

“A miracle it was, all righto—and it was the old man himself performed it. He kept himself alive this past night through the power of his will for no other reason than that he could *see you once again*—brawlin’ hellbender that you are! Before I’d give you my blessing I’d use the last ounce of my strength whaling your rotten hide!”

Charlie Hinges opened his mouth and stared. He had not heard the latter part of Bardley’s speech. “You say the old man kept himself alive through the power of his will—and he’s that sick—eh? And he clung on just to see—*me?*”

As the huge, lumbering man dismounted and came toward the door of the hut, Doc Bardley regretted for a moment that he had crossed him. But Charlie took no notice of the lanky old doctor, except to brush him aside as if he had been a stalk of corn. The renegade thumped into the musty cabin and squinted into the darkness of the corner, from which direction he heard the voice of his father praying. Scarcely anything the stricken old man was saying was intelligible, except for a word or two: “When the dawn comes and the shadows flee away.”

The voice stopped. There was a stir in the bed, and Charlie Hinges saw that his father had turned to him. Young Hinges stood, a mass of muscle and power, shutting out what little the door admitted of the morning light.

He did not remove his hat, as his younger brother had done the evening before. Obviously the expected blessing of his father did not inspire the solemn awe that had been evinced by the boy David. Charlie stood, his thumbs in his calfskin vest, his cigar like a wart in the corner of his big, half-smiling mouth, his great jackboots wide apart, and his whole attitude suggesting the uttermost limits of audacity. The renegade did not look upon the situation as a ritual; it was merely a matter of a sick old man who might be cheered by a word or two.

“Well, chief, here I am!”

The father looked up. He could not see the battered and bruised jaw of the man before him. And he could not smell the breath of Charles Hinges’s long period of drunkenness. But even the blurred outline of the hulking figure showed that there was a different spirit in this man than there had



been in the body of the younger son. There was no mark of humiliation on the body of Charles Hinges; he looked like the shadow of a half brute.

“Are you my son?” the old preacher asked. “If you are my son, how is it you are here on the mountain top in the light of morning and in the presence of a man of God?”

“If you want to know, chief, just how I got here, I’ll tell you, as man to man. I broke from the jail down at Los Gatos.”

“You—you—broke out of a jail! Then that is where my eldest son is at the time of my death?”

“Where do you get this stuff about death, chief? Cheer up! What’s got you?”

Doc Bardley, who had crept back to the door, was listening to this conversation, and he thought it time now to put in a word of his own.

“I’m tellin’ you, Hinges, your dad hasn’t another hour to live. Keep mum, if you have a spark of reverence in your black heart.” He raised his voice as he stepped into the shack, addressing the man on the bed. “Your son’s come for your blessing, pard. You know—it’s Charlie, who you’ve been callin’ for all night. He’s come to you.”

“I want to talk to him alone,” the sick man said. He struggled up, resting his weight on a straightened arm. With the other arm he pointed to his son. “You’ve come for my blessing?”

A feeling of helplessness came over Charlie Hinges when the doctor left him to face his father alone. A new and curious conflict seemed imminent in the close air of that dim shack—a conflict that Charlie Hinges had never faced before. Never in his life had this huge brute been frightened by a man. But now, for some unaccountable reason, the white-haired wreck of a man in that bed before him seemed possessed of an infinitely great *power*.

Charlie stammered something to break the tension. “Chief, I don’t know much about this business of blessing— —”

“*You’ve* come, have you?” the old man went on, his cracked voice steadying. “You, who are the one man in this whole range who has defied me—you, who have revolted from my kingdom as Absalom revolted from his father! And now you think with my last breath I will give you my blessing! And even after I have blessed the soul of my young son whom I love!”

“I came here to sort of straighten up our accounts, chief. I wanted to tell you I never held anythin’ against you; that I always thought your ways were the ways of a good man. If you want to say I’m a rotten stew and gunman, all right. I won’t hold it against you, because when all is said and done, you’re most probably right. But don’t go sticking up that tenderfoot David as an example of my horrible wickedness, because he and I have nothing in common, chief.”

“Nothing in common!” The old man summoned up a burst of his waning strength. “You both came from the same woman; you both are flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood. The strength that is in both of your arms was the strength that was in this!” He held up his withered, shaking palm.

Charlie looked at it, fascinated.

He realized he was afraid of that hand—scrawny, blue-veined, waxlike. No hand of pope in misty cathedral damning the soul of a trembling heretic could have held greater power than that palsied, white hand shaking in the dimness before the eyes of Charlie Hinges. Then suddenly the hand steadied, and Hinges recoiled as if the scrawny finger were poised to plunge into his very heart.

“I gave you both the prowess of mighty men,” the preacher shouted, “and how have you used it? My younger son has waxed strong with the spirit of God, while you have wasted the substance I gave you in riotous living! At my deathbed my first-born comes to me from prison, where he has dragged my name! He comes to me debauched, drunken. And it is with the vision of this man, my son, that I go down to the grave.”

The preacher struggled to his feet, and his tottering, feverstricken body straightened itself suddenly to majestic height. A miracle seemed to have happened in that morning twilight. *The aged man had become a pillar of strength, while the hulking giant before him crumbled, his face turned ashen, and his huge body began to quiver!*

The patriarch burst out in flaming anger: “What good will words do to this man who has disgraced the name he bears? Words are without meaning to the drunkard, and why should he listen to my curse when he fears not the wrath of God?” Charlie Hinges put his arm across his moist face, as if fearing a terrific blow. “But chastisement will come,” his father went on. “It will come, even though my curse is nothing! The way of the ungodly shall perish! He that sitteth on the Most High shall laugh and have you in derision! If my words will not smite you, and if the fear of God is not in your heart, there will come one who will bring you to righteousness! There

will come one who will smite you hip and thigh, as Samson smote the Philistines! When you meet this one you will be like the chaff which the wind driveth away!”

Charlie Hinges, already broken, unnerved, trembling, tried to pull himself together by giving the old man an answer.

“Maybe so—father—I—” He wiped his forehead with the palm of his hand, and a feeling of pride and anger helped him to stammer on: “I haven’t been beaten yet by any man! You know that! Who are you going to set on me to do this smiting?” He lifted his ashen face and peered anxiously into the set, white features of the old man. A new thought had come to the fear-ridden brute. “Look here, father, will it be a man *of this world* that I will have to meet, or will it be — —”

“My younger son!” the minister thundered in answer. “David, my beloved son, is the one who will bring you to repentance. I am a broken man, as the bows of the mighty are broken. But out of my complaint has come a son—blessed with my strength as you are cursed with it! He is the one who will punish you. For he will be like the sheaf of Joseph, to which the sheaves of his brothers bowed down. When he is grown you will bow down to him—but until he is grown you shall not look upon his face!”

Charles Hinges in his normal state would have burst out into a guffaw of derision at this thought. Perhaps there might have been some “angel of the Lord” powerful enough to throw him, but certainly it would seem that no human being could have had the power to smite this image of gray iron.

It was not so now. The image had been shattered as if by a lightning shaft in a great storm. Charlie Hinges did not laugh. He paled, partly with fear, partly with rage and humiliation. Before he could reply his father stepped toward him, straightening up again so that the white hair brushed the cobwebs of the cabin roof. The morning sun began to flood the little hovel, shining on the pallid deathlike rage of the preacher.

It seemed to Charlie that, if the old man had willed it, he could have smitten him easily then and there. And the father, with clenched fists and upraised hands, appeared at that moment about to do so.

“I myself should punish you with these arms and beat out the devils that have possessed you, but my strength is shorn from me!” He fell back, choking. “And the strength that has gone from these arms has gone into the sinews of my boy David. He will have the strength of ten mighty men. In him God will take away my reproach—as the birth of Joseph took away the

reproach of Rachel. God will use him, for he has your strength and one thing else—the spirit of the Lord of Hosts!”

Charles Hinges had no answer to this fierce denunciation. One last look into the bleary eyes of his father, where he saw a terrific, soul-scorching fire, and then the trembling, broken youth turned upon his heels.

When he turned he seemed to reel—as if some one had given him a blow on the face—a blow that he could not return. As he slunk out past the doctor, and into the crisp open air of the mountain dawn, the last peals of his father’s voice came out to him: “The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces! Out of heaven shall He thunder upon them; and He shall give strength unto His king and exalt the horn of His anointed!”

Doctor Bardley saw the moist, trembling, face, the ashen lips, the hunted eyes of the son as he slunk toward his horse. Then he watched him mount and ride away—a huge horseman with drooping shoulders, head hanging, and eyes glancing neither to one side nor the other, but studying the pommel of his saddle. The doctor, shaking his head in bewilderment, turned into the hut. When he saw Peter Hinges, fallen across the bed, he knew that for the old, patriarch the end had come. The wrinkled face was drawn; the blue-veined lids drooped over eyes from which all fire had gone. But the gray lips still moved, and the doctor thought he could hear a sob and a suggestion of the words, “My son—Absalom— —”

“Yes, that is a good name for him,” the doctor said sympathetically. “For, as I remember, pard, Absalom was the man who revolted against his father—eh, pard?”

The preacher did not answer. He had heard nothing. The tight gray lips went on murmuring: “Would God I had died for thee!”

And then death came.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BAD MAN AND THE PALMIST

In the worst part of the Bad Lands to the southwest of Buzzard Mountain there still remained a landmark of frontier days called Jacktown. Little remained of the old mining community except a disagreeable residue of thieves, harlots, saloon men and gamblers. The first view of the glaring, gutted streets and warped shacks of Jacktown gave the impression that there could be no strata of mankind lower or more benighted than that of its inhabitants.

This was conceded by everybody except, in a measure, the inhabitants themselves. And they conceded it also—but with a small exception: Jacktown had a suburb called Little Hell. No one could argue that Jacktown was the worst place on earth, for all that was needed to refute the argument was a casual survey of the few shacks of Little Hell in the box cañon to the south.

There was no lid on Jacktown of any sort.

The sky was the limit in fighting as well as faro. But, as in all communities and civilizations which are going through a period of decadence, there was a strong sense of caste. Social prestige was accentuated, and it might be said that its observance was practically the only honor among Jacktown thieves.

Gunfighters, for instance, were looked up to with much the same veneration as the Robber Caste is looked up to in India. A lower strata consisted of property owners and cardplayers-in-luck. Squaw men and men who had been known at some time in their lives to have herded sheep were lower. And the pariahs of the social ladder were Indians and the rare and unfortunate Chinese and negroes.

The three latter types were prohibited from entering the bars of Jacktown, and it was for this reason that Little Hell thrived. The leading citizen of Little Hell was the saloon-keeper—a tall, deeply scarred, half-breed Oriental by the name of China Jones. Choctaws were welcome to get drunk at China Jones's bars. A quip courteous between a Mexican with a knife and a black with a piano stool was considered an agreeable prelude to the night's drama at China Jones's.

There was one other character, who was neither Choctaw nor Chinaman, black nor Mex, who had beaten about the towns of the desert for five years, and who had at last found shelter across the bar of Little Hell. He was a huge man, with fists like the head of a spalling hammer and shoulders like a Galloway bull. His general appearance was all that was necessary to explain why he preferred Little Hell to the saloons of aristocratic Jacktown. He was a human illustration of the law which makes water seek its own level. He belonged there.

In the worst part of the desert, and in the most notorious town of that part, and in the most lawless saloon of that town—further, in the worst room of that saloon—the room where murders were committed—the gaming room—this man belonged. And he himself knew he belonged there. He had been told so more than once in the houses of Jacktown. In fact, one of the more cultured dance halls had placed a placard on its door which read:

**We ask the following named gents to stay out:  
Yaquis, Chinks, Mexes, and Mr. Charlie Hinges.**

The saloon which had flaunted this legend was at the present time closed for extensive repairs, and its owner had left town for Mesquite, where he had arranged to meet an itinerant dentist. Charlie Hinges, meanwhile, without feeling the finer stings of the rebuke, consorted in Little Hell with the men who had been classed as his kith and kin.

Sitting at a gaming table, which was cleared of everything but ashes, beer suds and a scrambled heap of worn cards, Charlie Hinges, the eldest son of old Peter Hinges, was the picture of dejection, to say nothing of degeneration. He had been sitting practically motionless except for periodic swigs at a bottle of jackass brandy. A blowfly buzzed against a web-covered window, and a host of smaller flies crawled over the cards.

An oil lantern hung from the roof and cast the shadow of a dragon through a paper shade—a novelty of China Jones's. The dragon moved continually around the walls of the room as the shade turned about the light. Its effect, Charlie observed as he reached the lower parts of his brandy bottle, was curious and amusing; the dragon, its mouth gaping, seemed to be devouring the chorus girls, dancers, and bathing beauties whose photographs were tacked about the wall.

The reverie of Charlie Hinges was interrupted by the entrance of a tall, sinister Spanish woman.

Uninvited, she sat down directly opposite to Charlie at his own table. This woman was one of China Jones's most lucrative attractions—a palmist.

For the first time, seeing her at such close range, Charlie reflected that she did not seem like the fortune tellers of other cow town bars. Those who had crossed his path in other days had been fat, motherly-looking articles of middle age who had changed to gypsy costume from Mother Hubbards. This one, there could be no denying, was a palmist of the true blood.

It seemed, as Charlie looked into her face, that the woman had had a great fire in her life which had burned her cheeks to the color of gray ashes and shriveled her mouth to a mass of puckering wrinkles. And judging from her eyes—dry, glittering—the fire had not yet gone out. She was a trickster—any one in Little Hell would admit that—but mingled in with her spell-casting, her incantations, her money grubbing, her cursing, there was a religion, a hot-blooded Castilian passion that had burned her, destroyed her, and never gone out.

The spirit of wizardry was not her trick. It was the worship of the passion of men for women. She doted on making matches between sheep herders and the daughters of cattlemen. No one in Little Hell understood this hobby of hers—much less Charlie Hinges.

“Now, look here, sister,” he said confidentially, “you beat it. I don’t want you hangin’ around here, because you’ll be disappointed. I been playin’ monte since midnight last night, twelve hours, and I— —”

“Give me your hand, Charlie Hinges. I’m going to tell you the road you’re taking to damnation.”

The renegade looked up sharply, and the fire in the old woman’s eyes brought a remembrance to him—something he had been trying for a long time to forget.

“Sister,” he said with quiet finality, “I said you’d be disappointed. I was cleaned out playin’ monte— —”

“This is a free reading, because I see in your body the strength as great as of a band of men. All womankind worship a man like you! I worship you. Just so I can sit by you I will show you the road into the coming years.”

“I don’t want you to show me the road to nowhere!” Charlie barked out. “This fortune tellin’ gets my goat. I had my fortune told once, and I’d sooner fight twenty Yaquis barehanded than go through it again!”

“Others may have read your palm and concocted lies. I will speak the truth. It is only to a chosen few that the vision is given. Not many women have the gift that has been granted me—*me*—Augustina, the witch of Pimas!”

“This fortune teller wasn’t no woman; it was a man—an old man. And I’ll be cussed if he didn’t have eyes just like yours, too! It was my father—that’s who it was!”

“And what did he tell you?”

“What didn’t he tell me! I’ve been tryin’ to get that speech of his outen my system ever since. And his prophecy never came true, at that!”

“How long did he say it would take his prophecy to be fulfilled?” the woman asked, eager to prove the fallacy of rival fortune tellers.

“Eh? Say, look here!” Hinges leaned across the table, scowling. Under the terrific stare of the dry, black eyes he winced and confusedly poured himself another mouthful of brandy. “How long, you ask? Well, how long does it generally take for an ordinary prophecy to get fulfilled?”

Señora Augustina thought for a moment. One of her favorite tricks was to make her subject reveal two truths to every one of hers. “That depends on many things,” she said at last. “First, tell me this: when was it that your father made this augury?”

“When? Oh, years ago. That’s why I’ve been figurin’ I ought to forget it. Let me see. After he died I spent a year in the coop. Then I smashed up the sheriff at Los Gatos, and had to vacate toward the south—Red Dog. My old pal, Swink Tuckson, and me hit the road for a while as a poker team, and this kept us on the jump so to speak, for over a year; and then a year as a barkeep down to Phoenix, and a few shorts in jail for— — Oh, well, I forget most of the history of my life and works. Make it all told about five years ago that the old man died. Five years ago it was that he gave me his parting words to the general effect that I was already in a loadin’ pen ready to be consigned to hell’s fire.”

“Give me your palm, Charlie Hinges,” the woman commanded. “My divination will not be a curse.”

Hinges poured out a drink of brandy and shoved it across the wet table to the woman. “The main point of the old man’s lecture I never did tell to nobody,” Hinges said, breaking slowly into a chuckle. “It’s too damned ridiculous. I thought people on their deathbeds generally get things straight. Leastwise that’s the understandin’ ’most everywhere. But my old dad actually made a prophecy concernin’ how some one was goin’ to meet me and make me change my life, and that some one was goin’ to be— — No, it’s too all-fired ridiculous!



“I wouldn’t so much as repeat the name of the bird he said was goin’ to reshape my life. It ain’t fair to the ole man. It makes him too slab-sided fool crazy!” Hinges thrust out his hand. “Maybe you can be more reasonable.”

The old woman took the great fist, shoving back the leather gauntlet. The back of the hand was covered with coarse, jet black hair up to the slit knuckles. Across the palm, which the woman turned upward with her dark, wiry fingers, a big gash still showed pinkish white under dirt. As she held the paw up to her face Hinges could feel her cold breath upon it.

“Your father’s prophecy is about to be fulfilled!” the crone screamed. “There is some one coming into your life *who will change it!* The lines which betray you as drunkard and sinner vanish—are destroyed—they are cut off as if a nail had been driven into where they are—as if a knife had cut them, just as this knife which, but a little while before, has cloven your palm!”

“When do you reckon this here act is goin’ to take place?” the renegade asked.

“The time has come,” the old Spanish duenna said, laying the palm down and leaning back. She wrapped her black *zarape* about her head so that her wrinkled, downy lips were muffled, and her eyes alone blazed with the light that had suddenly kindled to a flame.

Hinges took a deep swig from the bottle. He shuddered slightly at that green fire. He saw no longer the old crone, but, instead, *his own father damning him with his sorrowful, damning eyes.*

“Shut up, sister, and let’s forget it!” he muttered uncomfortably. “You smoke, don’t you? Here, try this cigarillo.”

“The time has come when you will meet this one!” the clairvoyant, refusing to be stopped, went on oracularly. “Your two souls will meet now—this very hour. I feel the presence of this being here—in this very room.”

She turned with a somewhat exaggerated automatism and pointed to a booth at the lower end of the hall. “Down there in that booth from which China Jones is now coming there is another being, whom China Jones has brought here and whom destiny has led to you.”

“What booth?” Hinges asked, with a tremor that this time defied modulation.

“Where the shadow dragon is now crawling!” hissed the crone, with the supreme dramatic effect for which she and her kind have so great an

understanding.

“Well, old lady,” Hinges cried, shoving back his chair with a clatter and rising to his feet, “if it’s now that I can meet my kid brother David, who is supposed to break me, let’s have it out. I’ll go to him and tell him, ‘Now is the time I square myself and throw off this curse that our father planted on me!’”

As he thumped across the floor, shuffling up the sawdust like an angry bull, the old palmist went to him and clung to his arm. “Wait till China Jones goes out before this meeting!” she implored.

“What has China Jones got to do with this?” Hinges asked.

“Everything! Wait!”

Hinges paused just before he reached the booth. Then, as the saloon owner was heard walking down the outer hall which led from the gambling den to the streets, the old crone released Hinges’s arm, and he stepped up.

Over the booth hung a curtain of burlap, on which was painted a sign—a crudely drawn dancing girl, with the legend: “Buy Her a Drink or Git!”

Hinges saw his own hulking, apelike shadow cast across this, while above the tail of the dragon passed. These details, for some unaccountable reason, he noticed—partially because at the last moment he had had a certain fear: perhaps his brother had grown in the last five years to be a great fighter? But Hinges’s own shadow reassured him—he stepped up to the burlap curtain and ripped it aside.

It was not the picture he had anticipated of a brute fighter that met his astounded gaze.

He saw a frail young girl seated at the table, her darkly fringed eyes widened with fright at this sudden entrance, her lips parted, and a slender pale hand upraised to ward off Hinges’s doubled fist.

The man flushed hotly to the roots of his black hair. His mouth smirked and stammered:

“Damme, I didn’t—I— Look here, you old witch! Is it this girl you been talkin’ of all along?”

“She is the one,” Señora Augustina announced triumphantly. “There is only one force in the lives of men which soothsayers recognize as being potent as the stars of destiny—only one force that can change a man’s life so that he will conquer the stars. It is the *love of a man for a good woman.*”

During these words the cumbersome, half-drunken renegade was staring at the oval face and the frightened eyes of the little girl before him. When he realized that the palmist had finished her speech he turned red again and laughed softly.

“Old lady,” he said, “I thought you were out and out a fraud, but I’ll swear you got something. I’ll hand it to you as bein’ the greatest palmist since Cleopatra! How about the three of us having a— —” Hinges checked himself precipitously. He had no money to treat, but this was not the reason. He turned again, his big, muscular face fiery red, and looked at the girl’s blue eyes and at her lips which had trembled to a smile. “I don’t reckon you’re the kind of lady who— —”

The palmist, with almost miraculous prescience, solved the trouble. “The three of us will have a drink—on me.” Then she hinted darkly: “There is much that we have to say to each other. *Come!*”

## CHAPTER V

### THE INVOCATION TO JACINTA

Charlie Hinges believed in the bottom of his soul that Señora Augustina, the clairvoyant, had revealed a great truth. To Hinges there was little difference between the religion of a palmist and the religion of the preacher, his father. Revelations were common to both; so, also, were conversions. Charlie Hinges felt, as he sat in the presence of the dance-hall girl in China Jones's den, that his career of brutality had ceased to exist.

"The name of this dancing girl is Jacinta," Señora Augustina said.

She turned to the girl and put her head close. The skin of the one was like wrinkled parchment, and of the other like the white cactus flower of spring. One was a cold witch—the other a slender statue that had taken on the miraculous and burning life of youth.

"This man," the old crone explained, "is a great fighter and invincible." Eagerly the palmist fanned the flame which she had kindled in the renegade's heart. "His spirit is the spirit of all heroes who come to the aid of womenkind in distress."

"Well," the girl said, speaking for the first time, "I'm glad to know you, Charlie."

Hinges, having existed for many years in the back rooms of bars, was used to the particular construction of the girl's speech. It did not jar. Being in an emotional state at that moment, he only noticed that her voice had the effect, at once soothing and exciting, of music set weirdly in a minor key.

"A woman in distress?" Charlie repeated enthusiastically. "As the old dame here says, I'm a fighter. I can lick any man on this range with one hand—if you don't mind my patten' myself a bit on the back, miss. Further and more, it's been my custom in the past to break the jaw of any man as will take his coat off to me."

"We know that, Charlie; and we're handing it to you," the girl said, her voice ringing gladly. "You're great. And your saying it isn't conceit, because it's the truth. And it's for that reason I wanted to meet you."

"You wanted—to meet—*me*?" Charlie asked, puzzled, and then, greatly elated: "You—a beautiful girl that ought to be sittin' in a *patio* like the nuns

down at Santa Barbara's—you say you—"

"Yes; but don't feel so flattered about it. There is," she added, "a reason."

"Let me tell you this, little sage hen"—Charlie Hinges grew fervent—"there's not a woman in the world that ever gave me a second look, and those bar women up to Jacktown wouldn't so much as sashay out on a floor with me for the sake of booze money. In other words, my name's plain adobe mud all the way from Los Gatos to Mexico. And yet for all that—a girl like you—comes to me and says she—"

"Wants a man like you?" Jacinta prompted, laughing.

"Sure, and how come you'd be huntin' for a man in a hole like this that ain't fit to be a stable to the horse you ride on?"

"You're right, Charlie Hinges!" This time it was the old palmist who answered. "The place is not fit as a stable to her mount. She is a good woman—this Jacinta, this dancing girl, this daughter of destiny who has come to light your path—"

"Look here, señora," the girl laughed, "let me tell him a thing or two. He's not a fool." She leaned back in her chair, putting one hand high up on her hip so that her crimson mantilla was drawn tight, revealing the gleam of a shoulder. "Get this straight first, Charlie. The old lady played a sort of a trick on you. She wasn't telling your fortune; she was really inviting you here into this booth. I wanted you."

"If you wanted me it makes no difference about the old jane's tricks," Hinges rejoined. "And what she said about my meeting some one who would change my life is true. The reason I'm an outcast on this range is that I'm marked as a brute. Cattlemen, muckers, prospectors, barkeeps and all, have my number. And I'm thinking maybe they were right."

"I am a brute—as anxious to break a man's teeth as any fightin' jackdog which crosses the trail of another. Then here an old tricky palmist, with wrinkled face and yellow lips, tells me I'm to meet somebody who's to ball up my scheme of life. And if that ain't just what's happened, too! Beggin' your pardon, miss, and assurin you that I ain't drunk, I'll swear here and now that lookin' into your face makes me feel like a man on New Year's makin' resolutions."

"I've been puttin' a few slugs under the belt, I admit—but I'm a long way from drunk. In fact, I'm only at the preliminary stage when I generally feel like breakin' up some cook's jaw. And damn strange as it may seem,

sittin' in your presence, miss, I feel for the first time in my life that a fight would be abhorrent to me."

"Well, that kind of changes things," the girl said with an obvious note of disappointment.

"Changes things? What things?"

Jacinta believed in candor. Lying was not second nature to her, as it was to the old palmist.

She hesitated a moment and then said bluntly:

"You say that you're reformed—you are a brute no more? Fighting's brutal, abhorrent?"

"From this minute on!"

"Well, I am sorry."

"Sorry?" Hinges asked, puzzled. "Sorry you've changed my life?"

"The reason I wanted you was—I need you for a fight."

This unforeseen turn complicated the conversion of Charlie.

His emotions were immediately plunged into a racking conflict. One thing could not be denied: into his life of brutality and crime one good impulse had finally found its way. It had passed barriers which had been impregnable even at the bedside of a dying father.

This woman embodied some immaculate sort of virtue of which Hinges, rascal and inebriate that he was, had a faint subconscious intimation—an echo from the old tales his father had told—tales which formed the background of old Peter Hinges's great religion. And upon the moment of Charles Hinges's conversion from the brute this woman whom his soul had sanctified called upon him to revert to type and fight!

"You see, it's like this," Jacinta went on. "I am a sort of prisoner here — I don't mean actually behind bars—in the jug—that stuff. I mean because of several good reasons a man is keeping me prisoner. You laugh at that; no man can keep a woman prisoner, you'll say. You are right.

"But a man and a few circumstances can. Isn't that so? Money! There's a circumstance. No, I'm not asking you for money. You got trimmed in the game last night—I know all about it. I'm asking you only"—she paused a moment, then got it out—"for your God-given brawn."

“His strength is yours,” old Augustina cried jubilantly. “You have this man in the palm of your hand—as every woman has the soul of one man!”

“Now, listen to this, Charlie,” Jacinta went on. “You see, I’m not moping about the fix I’m in. That’s not my way. I like to look on the bright side of things. And the bright side to my life is— Well, it’s you. I’m not kidding. It’s you. The moment I saw you I said to myself: ‘There’s a prince! There’s a giant! There’s a man who’s laughing at—at the stars!’”

“Those words are new to me, miss,” Charlie said. “No one ever said those words to me. Sure not my father—he cursed me. You’re the first one! Tell me what you want me to do for you. I’m ready.”

“When I say I’m a prisoner here, I mean this. A girl can be held by a man in an out-of-the-way town—especially a town like this, where there isn’t a sheriff man enough to ride through it. She could run away, perhaps—you’ll say. But where? Into the desert?”

“Yes, that would be all right as the last resort. A real girl will do that—many girls. I swear I would have gone out there into the quicksand and mirages below Devil’s Cañon if it hadn’t been for me seeing you—and the size of you—the size of your shoulders—your fists, your power, your height, and all that.

“When a girl is taken into a lawless town, where there’s no one but thieves, gamblers, barkeeps, and the man who is holding her prisoner figures that no one in the town will allow her to get out, then what will she do? There is one thing: she looks around on the face of every man she sees, and she picks a man as champion. You know what I mean—like they did in the old days. Somebody in distress always had the right to choose a champion—and there was a mix-up called, as I remember, the trial by gunshooting, or combat, or something like that.”

“Look here, girl,” Hinges cried, jumping to his feet, “you forget what I said about my being converted. I’m still a brute. Put that in your head, and don’t forget it. I’m back again to where I was before I met you. I’m the damnedest brute that ever broke a man’s bones. You tell me who this bird is that thinks he can hold you prisoner. Show me the skunk, and I’ll mash him to such a pulp that the coyotes will smell him as far as Mexico!”

“Wait!” Augustina interposed. “Have patience till she tells you everything. Tell him, child, how you lived in San Francisco and wanted to become a dancer on the stage.”

“I guess that was the start of it,” Jacinta admitted, “and you might as well know, else you’ll be asking yourself whenever you think of me, just how I happened to land in a dump like this. A man back there in Frisco said he’d get me on the stage, but I’d have to have experience doing specialties—vaudeville stuff. Said he would take me East. I said I’d take myself East—he being a tough-looking bird—but as I was broke he paid my way as far east, he said, as it’d be necessary for me to get my beginning of experience.

“Well, this is as far east as I got on the first lap—Arizona! And it’s experience I’m getting, all right, all right. There’s no doubt about that. He said I could do a little dance act in this dump here—said it was like the music halls in London, where they sit around and guzzle ale while the show goes on. But I didn’t look on it that way. I never been in London, so I could not call his bluff; but I know there’s about as much difference between this Chink den and a music hall or a vaudeville as there is between heaven and hell. In plain terms, I’ve been sage-brushed, and the old guy thinks he’s got me—but he hasn’t.

“It’s a long way I am from being down, I’ll tell you that. First, this old lady here comes to my assistance, and says what I need is an Arizona two-gun man to fall in love with me. Then, she says, everything goes well because of love that makes the world go round. I reckoned she was right, and I elected you.”

“Look here, miss,” Charlie cried jubilantly, “I’m not goin’ to brag. Don’t get me wrong—I don’t want to spoil anything by braggin’—but all I want to say is *this*: I wish it was ten men you wanted me to save you from—instead of one poor, measly little four-flusher. I’m afraid, with only one man to beat up, it’ll be over too quick. When I see him I’ll be afraid to touch him—actually, ma’am, I’ll be afraid to touch him, for fear I won’t enjoy myself. I’ll be like the kid who had a pie, and wouldn’t eat it because he wanted to keep it. I’ll keep him for a while, miss, and then, damn it, I’ll start in—and I’ll eat him up *alive*, that’s what!”

Both the women stared, open-eyed, and a flame came into the blue eyes of the young girl.

Hinges stepped to the wall of the booth and with his fist gave it such a blow that a board splintered at its nails and slammed to the floor. “That’s what I’ll do with him first, miss. I’ll push his head through that tar wall. And then—you see the corner over there on the other side of the floor? Well, I’ll throw him from here so’s he’ll land and break that faro table over across



the way. Then what? Well, they'll be a crowd over behind the bar down to the other end of the hall lookin' for scattered teeth."

"Tell him who the man is," old Augustina prompted with a fine sense of the psychological moment—a sense which her vocation had sharpened.

"Yes, who is this man?" Hinges cried loudly.

"Keep your voice down, Charlie," the girl laughed, "and don't shout his name out loud when I tell you. It's the bird who owns this joint—*that half-breed, China Jones!*"

"China Jones!" Hinges yelled, despite the warning from Jacinta. "How did you—"

"Now, shut up, and let me tell you. In Frisco he got away as a sport, and no one called his bluff about being a high-class Carlyle gent with a small strain of Indian chief. Girls were crazy about him because of his looks—and his line. They could see he was fairly well educated. He took a fancy to me—but treated me like a lady, saying to himself, no doubt, 'Wait till I get this little jane down to my joint in Arizona, where every one's under my thumb!'"

"Hell! China Jones won't fight!" Hinges sneered disappointedly. "He uses a gat!"

"Then, you, too, use a gat," the palmist counseled huskily. "Kill him. Save her. She is your woman. You are a brute man fighting for your mate!"

The words appealed to Hinges. "Mate" was a good term. He felt a thrill through every muscle of his body, like a ship which swerves to a new current.

"No, don't kill him," Jacinta said calmly. "Don't kill him. That's all right for weak men. Beat him."

"And that's the hankering I got, miss—to beat him. I'm going to do what I said—play with him. Shooting's too quick."

"Not for him," the old palmist cried. "He will not fight you like a man."

"There's one thing I will say, Charlie," Jacinta put in. "I don't want to see you stretched at my feet. He'll use a gat, all right. There's little doubt about that. But you can handle him—with your bare hands." She reached across the table and took Hinges's great hand in both of her delicate white palms. Hinges's fist was doubled. "You said you could handle ten men, and I believe it when I feel this iron chunk. And what is more, it'll be ten men

you'll have to fight. China Jones has his gang. When you go to Jones he'll sick them on you."

Hinges drew his hand away and stepped to the door.

"Thank God for giving me this chance!" he cried. "After to-night there won't be a barkeep or a cholo in Arizona that won't tremble when he so much as hears the name of Charlie Hinges!"

"Where you going now, Charlie?" Jacinta inquired.

"Going?" Hinges shouted. "I'm headin' for the bar *to kill China Jones!*"

## CHAPTER VI

### THE MONARCH OF LITTLE HELL

Charlie Hinges found his man in the private office of the China Jones establishment.

The only entrance to the little room was behind the bar, and Mr. Milligan, the bartender, served also as the office boy, who introduced callers into China's *sanctum-sanctorum*.

"This old stew, Charlie Hinges, wants for to see you personal," were his words.

The room expressed, to some degree, the character of China Jones as well as of his saloon. Besides the usual safe and the case or two of choicer liquors, the den was decorated with vividly painted nudes and photographs of burlesque queens. The whole was softened by Jones's favorite mode of illumination—the Chinese lantern. On the desk of mission oak was a pile of papers—receipts, bills, ledgers.

An opium pipe and a thirty-six Colt completed the "atmosphere."

The proprietor, China Jones, was a large framed man with a long neck and small head. A knotting of the brown neck muscles, as well as the abnormally long arms and legs, gave him the aspect of an animal. This was enhanced by the slanting eyes which, under the light of his paper lanterns, took on the semblance of jade, and in his rare moments of intoxication, of cat's eyes.

Jones was proud. He affected velvet vests, imported from the City of Mexico. An emerald ring and a green beryl in his beaded Indian tie touched up an otherwise somber costume of khaki, jackboots and a small sombrero. He rarely removed the latter from his little head where he wore it on the side and tilted slightly to the right. Jones smoked big cigars of the claro type with bright bands, and the left corner of his mouth was shaped to holding stubs—a contrast to the large, clean teeth.

Charlie Hinges looked at Jones and then about the room with an obvious air of disappointment. It was too small a room. There was entirely too small an amount of floor space for the business he had at hand.

“Now, then, Mr. Hinges,” Jones said suavely, “I’m glad to see you. Have a seat and we’ll talk over this business of yours—whatever it is—and if there’s anything I can do to— —”

“I’m not going to have a seat,” Charlie rejoined calmly. “My business don’t call for sitting down. It calls for standing up—man to man.”

The proprietor did not evince any surprise at this. His visitor had some petty grudge, perhaps, about the game of the preceding night. Jones regarded these troubles with a fatherly compassion.

“I hear how you got cleaned last night, Mr. Hinges,” the man at the desk said, twisting his chair about. Hinges took the chair which had been designated for him and threw it aside, thus clearing the three feet of floor space between him and his intended victim.

“It has nothing to do with last night, China Jones, and I didn’t get cleaned—as you say. No man that has two fists can be called cleaned.”

“I’m glad you bear no grudge about the game,” Jones laughed. “As I’ve announced many times before, the management doesn’t assume responsibility for— —”

“Look here, China Jones, you listen to me— —”

The proprietor held up his hand—a long, olive-colored hand with tapering fingers, on one of which was a well-polished ring. “No, Mr. Hinges, it is not my policy to listen to anybody without having my say first. You’ll learn my ways—the more you come into this office of mine hankering for trouble. What I’m to tell you first is this: I reckon you came here to ask me for a loan. Your method of asking for loans, I have heard before this, is to frighten a man stiff first, so he can’t refuse.”

Hinges’s mouth widened so that something almost approaching a smirk of derision flickered across his face. “If ever a bonehead got me wrong, China, it sure is you!”

China Jones, whose attitude until now had been one of impatient condescension, collected himself. He settled down to a mood of calm and implacable waiting. But while waiting his custom was at all times and in all situations to carry on a smooth flow of conversation.

“Being as you taunt me into a fight by calling me a bonehead, I come naturally to the conclusion that you have some grievance or other against me. Am I right?”

“Are you right!” Hinges repeated, raising his voice. “I’ll say you’re right! And the first sensible remark it is that you’ve made since I came into this stinking den!”

“And what have I done, Mr. Hinges, that you think is wrong?”

“I reckon you’re so pure and white that it surprises you to have a man come and call your actions to question?”

“Not at all, Mr. Hinges,” the proprietor said, raising his thin, black eyebrows. “On the contrary, I might say, when you ask me to guess what I’ve done that ain’t exactly to your liking, I say to myself, I’ve committed so many crimes I’m unable to put my fingers on just the one you take objection to.”

“Well, that’s talking now, Mr. Saloonman, and if you can’t guess, I’ll tell you. It concerns a woman.”

“Ah, yes! They give me lots of trouble. Those women! Or I should say my dealings with them bring me lots of trouble. Now what particular offense against womenkind do you reckon you’ll punish me for, Mr. Hinges?”

Hinges swore an oath and then blurted out the speech he had intended to make when he first met this sleek, suave enemy: “China Jones! It’s your girl — she’s the one I’ll bring you to account for. I want her. Get that? I want her — and she’s mine. Whatever you say one way or the other makes no difference. I want her and I’ll take her now, and if you — —”

Again the tapering finger with the green ring waved distractingly. Hinges finished a broken speech. “If you think you’ll object I’ll—I’ll break your neck with my bare hands!”

The thin-featured face of the half-breed remained still passive, still unperturbed. Surely he would fight at this, Hinges thought. Even if his face betrayed no excitement, he would spring from his chair and leap for the throat of the man standing above him.

But Hinges was mistaken.

China Jones said with a surprising, almost shocking, equanimity: “Just which girl is it that you want?”

Hinges—aghast—at this reception of his challenge—a challenge that he had thought would most surely mean a fight—stepped back, recoiling. He gained the balance of his feet, his left foot forward, his fists doubled. But for all this posture he could only evoke a complacent smile on the bronzed face of China Jones.

Before Hinges mentioned the name of the girl Jones said quickly: "I reckon it'd be best for us to have the girl brought here. Suppose I send Milligan for her?" He struck a little gong which was hanging from the edge of his table—a signal to his office boy, the bald-headed and black-mustached barkeep.

"I'll tell you which girl—and the name of her makes little difference. She's mine, anyhow," Hinges shouted. "It's this girl called Jacinta—the one you abducted from Frisco. Let it be understood that *she's mine from this day on!*"

At this revelation there was the first perceptible change on the face of China Jones. It was a deepening of the color of his eyes, so that a green sheen came—like the peculiar sheen of a dog's eyes when seen in the dark. His voice, however, was still oily. "Jacinta? H-m! That makes a slight difference. But there is no reason why we can't settle the matter without the death of one or the other of us."

Hinges—aghast at this man who had refused to throw off these insults in the accepted way—looked at China Jones from head to foot with a glance of enraged and withering scorn. As his eye measured the height of his uncanny enemy it lighted again on the thin, tapering, olive-colored hand. There was the ring, and one thing else which glittered with the pale red light of the Chinese lantern—a thirty-six Colt with the barrel pointing directly at Hinges's chest.

At the door, blocking the exit, Milligan, the barkeep, stood. He had understood the language of China Jones's gong, *for he also held a six-gun in the palm of his fat, pudgy hand!*

## CHAPTER VII

### HOW JONES HANDLED THE LOVE-LORN

There was the normal amount of discretion in the valor of Charles Hinges.

Although he had no intention of giving up the fight he knew that for the moment at least he must come to terms—terms which, of course, would be dictated by China Jones.

“I had a hunch, Mr. Saloonman,” he said in a completely changed voice—a voice softened at once by disappointment, condescension and a necessary respect for the two guns that were bearing upon him—“I had a hunch that when one man goes to another and demands what I demanded of you there’d be a grand and glorious fight. Not this kind of a fight when all of a sudden I find myself covered by two men—but a real life-and-death combat with fists, chairs, teeth, and such. That’s the kind of a fight that generally gets pulled off when one man comes after another man’s—well, after the dame he has picked out for his mate.” Charles Hinges used the thrilling word suggested to him by Augustina, the palmist. “Since you won’t fight, but prefer to bargain—and force me into doing the same, I have little way out but to accept. And I hear, Mr. Saloonman,” Charles added with a slight crispness of enunciation, “that Chinamen are noted for sticking to their bargains.”

China Jones covered this reference to his blood with a suave smile. “I’m glad you have a little sense, Charles Hinges. I thought at first you were too fighting drunk to be reasoned with. But I see ye can get down to business. It will be,” he concluded, “a mere matter of barter.”

“Shoot and I’ll listen, Mr. Saloonman.”

China Jones began carefully. “No one in Little Hell—in fact, no one in Jacktown itself—has questioned the fact that I own this dame you refer to. Keep your shirt on now! Keep your shirt on!” China added hurriedly as he saw the huge giant tense every muscle as if about to spring. “By using the word ‘own’ I naturally throw a scare into you. I shouldn’t say own. No man, as far as I can judge—and I’m a good judge in this business—has ever owned the dame—and never will own her without he gets a sky pilot and says to the girl ‘With this ring I thee wed.’”

“You’re right there!” Hinges said. “And if you or any man ever says the contrary I’ll kill him no matter if he plugs me with lead while I’m doing it—I’ll kill him with one blow on the jaw.”

“You hear that, Milligan?” Jones laughed, looking over Hinges shoulder to his barkeep. “Never say any thing against Jacinta, the dancing girl, for if you do, it’ll do you no good even with that gat of yours.”

“He ain’t goin’ to kill nobody,” said Milligan. “I got this pointin’ to his lung.”

“Then maybe I can go on with what I have to say.” China Jones rubbed his hands sleekly. “We can agree that the dame in question is a good dame—good to an extent which is extraordinary in these parts.”

“She’s too good to even be mentioned by a skunk like you,” Hinges said, losing a part of his discretion. “When I try to think of you and her in the same thought it gives me a headache. It’s like a dirty beggar groveling at the foot of some Madonna—like the Madonnas you see in the missions down at Puerto Gato and Gomez.”

“That’s putting it kind of strong,” China Jones objected. “In fact, so strong that I want you, Milligan, to stand a bit closer when I say this next sentence.”

Milligan obeyed, and Hinges felt a touch of cold steel on the back of his tough neck.

“I get the idea,” China went on, “that you’ve spoken with the dame and that you think you have some claim on her affections. Like as not she’s favored you—as women will favor men of the tremendous strength which is yours. Now, then, let me say this: she is no use to me—in her present state of mind. No women are any use to me as dance girls when they’re scared to death at the very touch of a drunk cholo. I don’t want to lose the reputation I’ve built up about this saloon and dance hall of mine. It’s supposed to be the lowest dive on this side of the Rio Grande, and I capitalize on that very name it’s got.

“It’s necessary that I have girls of experience—not bad ones, don’t get me wrong again. I mean dames that are a bit flossy when it’s necessary—especially when some mucker comes in, shouting rich with gold-dust and turning himself into a pig with hootch. This being the case I want girls—pretty girls, who know a thing or two. F’r-instance, how to handle drunks who have found pay dirt. In plain terms, Hinges, I want married women. Of



course, my clientele don't have to know my girls are married. But in the long run it's best for business.

"These little stage-struck flappers will drink and swear and smoke and all that, but when the right time comes for them to make a big killing and get a claim on a mine, they throw a fit and get religious instead! Unless, mind you, they're married. Then—zip!"

"Look here, Mr. Chinaman." Hinges spoke softly. "You're getting powerful far off from the point, and I'm getting rheumatism in the back of my neck because of Milligan."

"It's necessary for you to get all this straight before I come to my point. Now, then, I'm ready. It appears to me that you're stuck on this dame—and will do anything to get her. You come to me trying to pick a fight about her, and I refuse to fight. Why? Just because *I'm going to give her to you!*"

"Give her to me!" Hinges yelled, incredulously. "Then you'll say here and now that the girl's mine and you withdraw?"

"I won't go quite as far as to say that. I'm going to give her to you, but I'm not going to withdraw. You are to marry her. What can be better than that? But I'm still to have my claim. She is to work here—in my place as a dancer. I can use her then as my bait—for such suckers as come into town from their diggings in the desert. And in return for this favor you are doing me, I will give you a certain amount of money."

Hinges, livid with a new spasm of anger, stepped forward, balanced to deliver the blow that he had promised would kill. But the cold barrel of Milligan's revolver struck him again in the back of the neck. A string of foul oaths, as well as the foulest of names hurled at the saloonman was all that came of Hinges's anger.

He was powerless—at least, in that one situation.

"You've got me strapped here, Mr. Skunk!" he bellowed. "And lucky it is for you that you covered me with two guns before you made such a proposition to a fighting man. And let me tell you this: *you're going to pay!* You'll pay for every word you've said! It'll be best for you to plug me here and now, and let me die at your feet hearing the things you've dirtied your mouth with. Otherwise I'll be back and finish this fight when you stand up to me like a man."

"Yes, it might be best for me to plug you, Mr. Hinges," China Jones rejoined, "except that it is not my usual habit to get an enemy into my office and then kill him. It would be, shall we say, too embarrassing. There are

other ways. If you want the fight to go on, all right. But first let me break you and announce that I'll let you refuse this bargain I've offered, and go away free. But it'll be the last time. If you come to me again I will not let you go away unharmed with that threat against my life. Milligan—take his gun; send him out!”

The barkeep obeyed, and Hinges followed him out of the room. “This house, Mr. Hinges,” Jones called out, “is one more establishment which is closed to you. Of course you can come in. But you'll find difficulty in—going out.”

Milligan, feeling the thrill of power which his six-gun gave him, could not resist his own personal parting shot: “You can come in, but you'll find difficulty in comin' out!”

Hinges did not seem to consider this worthy of a reply. He did, however, glance at the flabby face of his ejector, and the glance was fraught with meaning.

“And your nasty looks don't scare me neither!” Fat concluded. “You and your great muscles don't amount to much when I hold this gun—eh, Mr. Hinges? One little touch of this trigger will do more than all the brawn and strength and fight in your body. One little hole dug in you with this and your brawn will ooze out all over the sawdust. Haw! Haw! Haw!”

Hinges stood out in the road and looked at Fat Milligan. The latter felt it indiscreet to taunt the giant further. In fact, Hinges's last look—a slight lowering of the lids—persuaded the barkeep that having obeyed his master's injunction in escorting the giant to the street, he would best return to the inner, safer seclusion of the bar.

He brooded over the look for a few minutes, took a drink, and then knocked at China Jones's office door. Milligan's fat, red face had assumed a gloomy pallor. “You hadn't orter have let him go, chief,” he said to China Jones. “We had him under our thumb, but now there's no telling what he'll do. I'm scairt to death of meetin' him hereafter. What if I was on the street with him on my way home from work? B-r-r-r!”

“It appears to me, Milligan, that you don't know how to handle men who are in love. If you think I let this man go, you're mistaken. He's in love and he'll be back. When he comes back we can finish him with better grace. I don't like to kill men in my office. Too many questions are asked. But if I get this girl he's so loony about, and have supper with her in a booth to-night, and then some one goes and tells him about it, and then if he comes to

me in front of a crowded dance hall and sees me in the booth and picks a fight— —”

“You don’t mean to say you’ll fight him, chief?” the barkeep said with wide open eyes.

“Not exactly. But you can see the outcome of the meeting would be simpler to explain—a jealous lover and all that. I fight to protect myself. Somebody else helps me, of course. Hinges gets killed, and we have a hundred—two hundred—witnesses to prove that I am without blame.”

“A good game, chief, but— —”

“Go and get Jacinta, the girl,” China Jones decreed, turning to his desk and his bills. “I want to see which side she’s on first. If she’s for the hellbender, the fight will be a little complicated. If not—then, ‘On with the dance’!”

## CHAPTER VIII

### JACINTA PRETENDS

Milligan found Jacinta in the gaming room in company with the palmist. The two women were awaiting the return of their champion. Hinges, as the barkeep hastened to explain, was busted good and proper, and the chief had taken his gat. The girl glanced at the old *señora*, but took the latter's cue to assume a mask of indifference.

"Did you know you'd made a hit on that fist-fighter?" Milligan asked curiously.

"I noticed it," Jacinta replied calmly.

"Well, it's about that I come to see you. The chief wants you to report to him—pronto. He's wild. From what I could make out from the conversation of them two birds the chief's in love with you—as much as the hellbender himself. So watch your step. He's a bad *hombre* with any woman—and if he happens to be in love with 'em—good night!"

Jacinta scarcely needed this hint. She wrapped her shawl about her white shoulders, shrugging them to accentuate her indifference to the summons of her master. Without any more words to either the palmist or Milligan, she got up from her table, left the booth, crossed the dance floor and entered the saloon. Milligan followed and saw her go into the little den of China Jones behind the bar.

The scene was not new to the girl, but there was an atmosphere of tense conflict there which her peculiar intuition recognized. It was an atmosphere which transformed the details—the safe, the painted nudes, the dirty window pane, the Chinese lantern and the man working at the table—into a picture that reminded the girl somehow of the dark, comfortable apartment of a trapdoor spider.

China Jones motioned his visitor to a seat and for a few minutes continued scribbling at his papers. Finally he turned around.

"Have a cigarette?" he said, his lips tightening slightly in a smile as Jacinta reached for his monogrammed case. "I don't want you to feel like a little school-girl coming into the presence of a principal or something like that—do I now?"

“Darned if I know. It’s not what I felt like, anyway, if you want to know my opinion.”

“Good! I always think first of the personal feelings of my ladies—you know that.”

“Yes, you do. Sure. Huh!” Jacinta’s voice turned into a mocking little laugh as she took the first inhalation of smoke. “What did you want to see me for? Are you going to bawl me out about something?”

“I guess you know. I didn’t tell Milligan to keep it a secret. It’s about that Charlie Hinges.”

“Oh!” She puffed again—not without enjoyment. “What about him?”

“I’m glad to see you’re getting onto your job and making my guests feel at home. You’re the best little gold-digger I’ve got.”

“Is that what you wanted to tell me?”

“Yes, you’re on the right track, but this time you picked a loser. Charlie Hinges is busted. I thought you knew that. He was cleaned last night at monte. Why waste your time on him?”

“If he’s busted,” the girl said quickly, “I don’t suppose there’s anything else about him that would appeal to a woman—like me—is there?”

“Well, *is* there? I like to study women. Is there anything about that brute who goes about beating up any man that so much as laughs at his big mouth or red nose— —”

“Yes, it is a red nose, isn’t it? I didn’t notice it before.”

“Oh, you didn’t? Well, come to think of it, it isn’t red.” Jones paused a minute and then added—carefully: “It’s big, though.”

“Yes. And so are his fists, and his shoulders—and everything else.”

“Are you warning me to keep away from him?”

“I don’t suppose you’d be any too quick to pick a fight with him.”

China Jones leaped to his feet, shoved back his chair and faced the girl. He looked down at her startled, upturned face and began to nod. “That’s all, girl,” he said incisively. “I’ve got your number now. And there’s not much use going on any further with this conversation. I asked you in here to find out whether there was anything between you and this bully Hinges, and I find out that you’re in love with him. Now don’t lie to me about it and say you aren’t. I know.”

“You know lots, Jones!” the girl shot back, scoffingly. “You know too much. If you want me to speak my mind straight, all I know about Charlie Hinges is that he’s a fighter and could tie you up in a knot and throw you through the ceiling. I know that—and that’s all I care about him. As for falling in love with him—I wouldn’t do it on a bet. I like strength in a man, but not his kind of strength. All women like strength, and you asinine men think that means they like brutes. Well, it don’t mean anything of the kind. If you want to know my real number I’ll tell you. I’m looking for a man with strength, yes, but a man with a bean, too, and a man with looks. You yourself, Jones, come nearer to the man I want. No, I’m not trying to get around you. If you think I’m in love with Charlie Hinges, put me to the test and I’ll show you.”

China Jones studied her face for a moment, and finally answered doubtfully: “Maybe it’s not love exactly. I was hasty there, I’ll admit. But you’ve been telling that bird something. Don’t deny that! And if I know anything at all—thinking it over carefully this time—I’m partly of the mind that you’ve been roping that bird into fighting for you. You don’t love him—all right, I’ll admit that. But you’re going to use him. You want him to fight me, so you can be free—of me.”

“You lie!”

China Jones smiled his usual defensive smile. “If I’m right”—he said with a cool, incisive air of finality—“if I catch you trying to get away from me by picking a champion for yourself I’ll make you pay as no woman ever paid a score before in her life.”

“I said you lie. I’m not going to stand here having you bully me into dropping before you on my knees. I say I hate Charlie Hinges. I hate brutes like him!”

China Jones had regained part of his compelling calm. “I have seen women tear themselves into a passion and I have seen men believe them sincere. It’s very common. But I myself am going to put you to a test to find out whether you’re on Charlie Hinges’s side or on mine. I am going to have Charlie Hinges beat up to-night. There’ll be ten men out there in the barroom slugging him. You and I are going to watch. By that I mean *you* will watch and I will watch you. If you can look on the spectacle laughing and joking with the rest of us, then I will be more apt to believe what you say is true.”

“I will do more than that,” the girl added enthusiastically. “I will put on a dancing costume—anything you wish—and celebrate his fall as the chorus

ladies in Egypt and Babylon and other high-stepping burghs of the old days used to celebrate the fall of their enemies!”

China Jones looked at the girl, and as he looked, he thrust his tongue into his cheek. He was far from convinced. But the prospect of an exciting night in his “place”—a memorable fight, an Oriental dance, a broken enemy—appealed to China Jones. He stepped to the door and called Milligan. “Bring in a split of champagne, Fat. We got a little plotting to do.”

When the barkeep brought in the drinks, and the three had drawn their chairs about the office table, China Jones outlined his plan:

“To-night, folks, we’re goin’ to see the biggest jamboree ever pulled off in Little Hell. You remember that Little Egypt costume which Jude Silent did a term in jail for letting one of his women dance in it down at the Dead Cow Saloon at Lava?”

“Remember!” Milligan chuckled. “How could any man forget?”

“Well, that’s the costume this little lady is going to dance in to-night.”

“Wow!”

“Before the dance we’re going to have a preliminary which is to be a fight between Charles Hinges and—well, and everybody.”

“Not me. I ain’t goin’ to do no fightin’, chief. Not if you’re goin’ to let that Charles Hinges in here agin. *Count me out!*”

“You don’t have to do any fighting yourself,” Jones explained. “But you’ll act as a sort of foreman. I want you to get ten men—the best fighters we have—Black Jefferson, he can use his banjo as a weapon, maybe; then you can get the bouncer, and Beefy Muggins. The whole gang is to do just as you say. Now this lady is going to have dinner with me in the booth nearest the faro table. Then, when Charles Hinges walks in—”

“He’s goin’ to walk in, is he, chief?”

“He’ll come all right, mark my words. There’s no doubt about that. Any man who has a girl comes back, and it’ll be up to the bouncer to keep him out—at the point of a gat if necessary until the proper time. Then when he comes in he’ll see this lady here eating supper with me in the booth. This lady is going to taunt him, so that he’ll pick a fight with me before the dinner’s over. You get that, too, do you, girl?”

“Sure; I’ll taunt him. I know ‘taunt’!”

“She’ll taunt him so much that he won’t be able to wait until he gets me alone. Then as soon as he starts in to fight, it’ll be your cue to get ten men to hop on him and beat him up.”

“What if we can’t beat him up? What if he beats us?”

“Ten men?” China Jones elevated a set of politely scornful eyebrows.

“I’ve heard he can handle a bunch pretty slick, chief.”

“All the better! It’ll look to the crowd in the saloon as if he’s determined to get me—and it’ll be enough of an excuse for me to pot him.”

“You’re goin’ to pot him, chief?” the barkeep asked, blandly delighted at hearing this.

“Why not?”

“Well, that’s the first sensible word you’ve spoke yet.” Milligan vented a long sigh of relief.

“Now, then, girl”—Jones turned to Jacinta—“you get into that dressing room across the hall, and for reasons which you may understand I don’t want you to come out until it’s time for supper. That’ll give you just time enough to get into your dancing costume and get dolled up.”

China Jones got up from the table, and inviting the other two to follow, led the way into the dance hall, at one end of which was a small closet used by the dancing girls as a make-up room.

“I’ll have old Augustina bring the Little Egypt costume,” Jones said. “She’s used it before for part of her palmist act. She’ll put it on you and paint you.”

When the girl had entered the dressing room China Jones turned to his aid. “I didn’t tell you everything, Fat, but get this: I’m pulling off this show to punish that girl. She’s not on our side. I’ll swear to it that she’s trying to get Hinges to fight me. She thinks I’m not hep, but I am. Now it’s up to you to watch her. She’s not to get out of that room, you understand?”

“That’s easy, chief,” the barkeep rejoined.

“And when the old palmist comes with her outfit, you watch the old bird, too, see? She’s as crooked as any snake-haired Medusa that ever traveled west of Cairo!”

Fat Milligan winked. “I’ll watch ’em both, chief. I know women!”



## CHAPTER IX

### THE DANCE GIRL IS PAINTED

Señora Augustina lived in one corner of a sand lot at the end of the small group of saloons and styled her shack the Gateway to Little Hell. She had transformed the shake-barn into a bower which, to those gifted with imagination, savored something of the mysterious. It was the tawdriness of the circus palmist—paper poppies, brilliantly colored horoscopes, and red lanterns, mingled with the sincerer atmosphere of a Mexican bazaar—chile-colorado garlands, burnt peas, bronze scales, and jewelry of jet.

Charlie Hinges, returning from his temporary and, more or less, technical defeat at the hands of China Jones, sought out the Witch of Pimas with the intention of planning a more definite attack in his campaign for the deliverance of the dancing girl. He entered the cabin, stooping low as he passed the draped threshold.

The scene that met his gaze was calculated to inspire confidence in the peculiar witchcraft of Señora Augustina. An odor of *ghoor* and *saffron* was mingled with recently fried bacon. Draperies of silk mull covered the bare pine boards. Dirty cards and paw-paw seeds, used by Indians as dice, were strewn about the table. Figs and dates in a tin cup, a cheap brand of incense-musk from a San Francisco firm, and a discolored skull preserved the atmosphere of a necromancer's booth.

The woman greeted her giant visitor. "I know all!" she said hastily before Charles could explain his recent, humiliating adventure. "And I have consulted my books of divination. The time is not yet auspicious. But to-night—"

"To-night—I kill!"

"No! I have thought these things out and studied them, and I have discovered the ascendancy of your star—and of his—and"—she added—"of hers!"

"The stars have nothing to do with breaking a man's bones!" Hinges interrupted. "Where is the girl? That's why I came here. You go and find the girl. Tell her to come to me! I'll ride with her into the desert, and any man that pursues me I'll bury alive out in the dunes."

“The girl will come,” the palmist assented, soothingly. “You will save her, but many things will come to pass first. There must be no law hounding you two to your death. And—*there is a way!*”

“Get the girl now!” Hinges insisted. “You go in there to China Jones’s place and get her. They’ll pot me if I go in. And even at that I’ll swear to you, I’ll go in there and get her if you don’t.”

“It must not be! Not *yet!*”

The old woman had been rummaging in one of her boxes when Charles came in, and at this point she extracted a flimsy pair of trousers of striped silk. “This *serroual* of the Turks is for the girl to wear at the dance to-night. China Jones has ordered that she put it on, and I am to take it into her. When I go to her and paint her face with *sindur* and her feet with powders, then I will tell her that you are coming. You will go in to the dance hall and claim her before all the citizens of Little Hell!”

“That sounds all righto!” Charlie Hinges admitted. “But how are you going to fix it so’s I can fight without some one pumping lead into me every time I double my fist?”

“There will be a fight—a glorious fight!” the fortune teller promised. “You will be like Samson. Your strength will come to you in the temple of the Philistines and you will fell them all—and smite them! ‘Out of the eater shall come forth meat!’ so went the ancient riddle of Samson! ‘And out of the strong shall come forth sweetness!’ The girl will be yours forever!”

“Let me get this straight,” Hinges said with gathering fervor. “I’ve been looking for you for an hour and during that time you seem to have heard a thing or two. You say the girl is to dance—and in that one-piece suit you’ve got there. Then during the dance I’m to horn in and before the citizens who will flock to China Jones’s place to see the dance—I will proclaim that she is mine. Now that’s all very well as long as China’s army don’t start in snipin’ at me from behind every booth in the hall.”

“It will be a fight of brawn—not of lead. It will be as primitive men fought. You will be like Samson who pulled the pillars of the temple so that all the lords of the Philistines—which will be the men of Little Hell and Jacktown—were slain!”

“Fine!” Hinges shouted. “And I take it you’ve got all this dope by overhearing some frame-up. Eh, what? Now confess, old lady!”

The wrinkled soothsayer pointed to a large sheet which hung on one wall of the shack. Geometrical designs of a most complex order proclaimed the

relationship of the mind, the soul, the body and the stars.

“It looks like a map of some settler’s claim,” Hinges observed.

“The planets which govern us are now in superior conjunction,” the old faker said, with the proper intonation. “And I have found in the horoscope the degree of the ecliptic which rises above the horizon at eight to-night. It is then that you will fight. The dancing girl and her captor will be at supper together in a booth—so say the stars.”

“Who else says it?” Charles asked.

“Enough—that you hear it from me. You will be admitted to the dance hall because China Jones will station his men to waylay and beat you. They will not shoot—they will fight with bare hands. You will have a chance to fight ten men and win the love of the girl you are saving.”

“Zowie! If that don’t suit me like a shot of scat to a Hopi! Your words are music to my ears, sister! I’ll bowl the whole crew of ’em round the floor till their heads crack together like dice. I’ll make their mouths bleed like a Jesako’s been after ’em with a cupping horn! I’ll—but say”—Hinges paused again incredulously—“is this the real dope you’re handing me? Did you get it from Jones or his gang? Or are you just dreaming something about this road map of the stars you got up there on the wall?”

“The stars incline!” the palmist rejoined cryptically. “It is you who are to shape this climax of your life so that it will satisfy your soul!”

“I’ll shape it all righto! Leave it to me. And a few other souls will get shaped, too.” He held up his doubled fist—the one reassuring undeniable symbol. “The shaping’s going to be done with this, and the souls to be shaped will be skulls and bones!”

“When the conflict is over you are to take the woman who is your mate, and you are to walk through the crowd in the saloon, which will bow down before you like a field of grain before a storm. You will take the girl in your arms and then you will come out here as swiftly as your feet will bring you to this booth. There will be horses saddled and ready. Your own horse and my two pintos which are born to the desert.”

“And a grubstake, sister? Don’t forget that. We’ll be gone a few days without crossing any of the regular trails.”

“I will have everything prepared,” the palmist said. “Your mate will be with you for many days and nights hereafter.”

“You mention a point there,” Hinges said seriously. “This jane, from what I’ve been able to figure out, is a good jane and young and afraid of men. Do you reckon she’ll consent to go into the desert and live with me—Charles Hinges—who’s been a drunk and renegade for so many years?”

“There is no freedom for her from China Jones, excepting only the sanctuary of the desert.”

“I didn’t think of that part of it, sister. Say, look here, when a jane like this little dancing girl who’s like the pure and sacred nuns we hear about down at Santa Barbara’s—I say when a jane like that goes off on a honeymoon with a drunk like me—and without being married, don’t you reckon the right thing is for her to have what is in some countries known as a chaperon? I recollect now from my boyhood days that my father being a preacher maintained it was good to have an old lady along when certain kinds of parties are being pulled off. Much as I thought the old boy’s ideas were phony at best, it appears that this is a circumstance which calls for the presence of your crooked, wrinkled, but respectable old carcass.”

“There will be three mustangs—it is written in the infinite page: the sky, with its infallible script—the stars!” the old woman answered, cloaking her delight with the somber tones of soothsaying.

Having come to this agreement, Charlie was ordered to wait in the booth, hiding himself until the hour designated by the algebraic computations of Augustina. This hour was eight o’clock—the time when Charles must make his entrance into the riotous company of China Jones’s saloon. Until then, so the astrologer explained, it would be impossible to see Jacinta, who was at that moment held prisoner in a dressing room of China’s dance hall.

Having given Hinges these orders the palmist hurried to Jacinta, taking with her the outfit prescribed by Jones. She found Jacinta waiting in the unventilated closet which served as the make-up room.

The girl was already employed in thinning her eyebrows by the means of a pair of tweezers.

It was obvious that Jacinta realized she was to play the leading lady in a memorable drama, and to this end she wanted to make use of all of her charms in the difficult rôle assigned to her. A beautiful girl can do more, she observed, than one who is unkempt—no matter what the situation.

Señora Augustina, the palmist, did not fail to emphasize this truth herself when Milligan the barkeep, who had stationed himself as a guard outside the

dressing room, had let her pass through the door.

The odor of grease paint, stifling in this little cubbyhole, was relieved only by the less agreeable smell of cheap colognes. A sideboard of unplanned pine was littered with towels, soiled and smirched with many colors; hairpins and combed-out hair were strewn everywhere on the floor, the bench and the board.

A cracked mirror reflected the light of two candles perched on the top of cones of grease which resembled miniature white Christmas trees. A tin box lay open, revealing a hodgepodge of lipsticks, powder puffs, mascara, safety-pins and talcum. Beside this box stood a bottle of freckle lotion—a necessary cosmetic for the dance girl of a desert town.

The palmist, upon entering, put her long, dark finger to her lips whispering that Fat Milligan was outside smoking a black, evil-smelling cigar, and that he was eavesdropping. Señora Augustina immediately fell to the business at hand, silently, energetically and with a consummate skill.

She ordered her charge to divest herself of her shoes and the torn pink stockings, together with her skirt, jacket and blouse. The duenna then commenced to beautify the dancing girl with a skill which would have satisfied the soul of any slave appointed to delight Belshazzar or Darius of Babylon.

First she plastered cold cream upon the knees and feet and the slender arms, massaging it in until a faint fire glowed under the white skin. "It is like the hue that gleams in embers flaked with ash," the old woman remarked, purring with satisfaction.

These words Fat Milligan heard distinctly, but he could make nothing of importance out of them.

He puffed away at his black cigar, watching the dance hall, which was already beginning to fill with the night's revelers. Black Jefferson took his place on the stage and started his plunking ragtime. "Lots will be expected of Black Jefferson!" Milligan thought to himself.

As the rhythm of the banjo drifted into the closet Augustina worked more and more enthusiastically. She undid Jacinta's hair, letting the silken ringlets fall rippling over the delicate shoulders and the snow-white back. Braiding these into two long braids she tied them about the girl's head preparatory to making up her face, neck and shoulders. Blue paint about the eyes, with vermilion in the corner for the sake of brilliancy, black grease paint, melted over the candle flame for eyelid beads—these effects the old

palmist worked out with a miracle of enthusiasm and experience. Then the neck and shoulders and arms were powdered—though thinly—so that they seemed snow-white with still that gleam of youthful fire beneath. Finally the hair was combed out—a rich, silken gold in the candlelight and encircled with beads of jet from Augustina’s property box—a “coiffure like the gold of Hellas maiden,” the old duenna croaked joyfully; “like fair-haired Hellan going into the presence of Egyptian God.”

“If you call China Jones an Egyptian God you’re going some,” was Jacinta’s comment. “I don’t quite agree with you there, *señora*, but I will say that as a make-up artist you’re no slouch!” The dancing girl surveyed the beautiful, though somewhat lopsided, shadow which peered through the cobwebs of the mirror.

Augustina had done her work well.

“And now for the *serroual*—silken, crimson from a bazaar in Afghanistan— —”

“Is that my costume?” the girl asked.

“This and this vest of muslin with gold buttons.”

“Is that—all?”

“You will be like the dancers of Cairo— —” the palmist hurried on, “and I have seen such at Madrid—and at Coney Island. Men lose their minds over these dancers.”

“Well, I should think they would—and it must be pretty warm climates where they wear diving suits of this make. It’s lucky for us this isn’t Frisco or I’d feel like I was having a shower bath out in the fog.”

The girl slipped nimbly into the striped silken trousers. Augustina buttoned the tight little vest about her shoulders.

Jacinta stood transformed into a ravishing figure evoked out of the mustiness of that wretched make-up closet, as one might find a jewel flashing in some dust heap. Or, as Augustina expressed it, “like a cloud of incense taking form in some den of Chinatown.”

“And now these bangles of *redeefs* pierced and strung like emeralds for your ankles,” the duenna said triumphantly, “and you are ready.”

Jacinta looked down as the old crone hooked the anklets about her bare feet. “Say, look here, *señora*,” she said, “don’t you figure you’d ought to show me something in the line of footwear besides that jewelry?”

“Are you ashamed of your feet, child? With these bangles about them they are like white lilies surrounded by green water!”

“No, you don’t get me.” Shame of her bare feet was the last thing of which to accuse Jacinta. “China Jones doesn’t plane his floor down any too slick. I’ll be getting splinters.”

The duenna chuckled, shaking her gray-haired head and assuring the girl that she’d order Milligan to scatter an extra bucketful of sawdust on the floor.

“And one thing more—the crowning touch. With your beauty as I have decked you out there is wanting nothing to make you the master of many men. They will bow down to you; they will worship you—when they are drunk they will grovel before you as the swine of Circe groveled before her. And yet there is one thing more—which will make you master of all—of man and woman alike, of enemy and friend. It is an ornament more seductive than the bracelet about your wrist or the bangles about your ankles. It is like a necklace that you will wear—a necklace with six precious jewels—and any one of these jewels is of such power that should you present it to a man it will not profit him to own all the other jewels in the world. You will wear it as a pendant—here—close to your breast—underneath the muslin and the gold buttons. Do not take it out. Do not let any man see it—not even China Jones himself. For it is China Jones you must overpower with this last touch to your loveliness.”

Augustina glanced swiftly at the closed door. Her lips signaled silence. A sudden motion on the part of her duenna and Jacinta felt, nestling against the flesh beneath her vest, *the chill steel of a revolver!*

## CHAPTER X

### HINGES WALKS IN

The gambling room was the largest hall in the establishment of China Jones. At one end was the little stage where Black Jefferson enacted the dual rôle of entertainer and sergeant-at-arms. From his platform he could look down upon the roulette wheel and the surrounding poker tables, and across the floor to the *buffet* and observe the general trend that events were taking.

He was a good man for the post because guests and gamblers ignored him. He was supposed to be the entertainer only, and beyond his clog-dancing, banjo-playing and coon-shouting, he was not counted on in free-for-all fights. In fact, if the place were held up—as had been the case more than once—Black Jefferson was generally overlooked.

There was a general impression throughout Little Hell that the big negro was harmless—perhaps slightly deficient. This rumor was substantiated by the peculiar shape of his head.

It resembled an egg.

He had a huge mouth, round features, with a buried sort of a nose that sniffed after the fashion of a pug dog. There was, apparently, no forehead.

The current estimation of Black Jefferson did not mean that the citizens of Little Hell, or Jacktown, did not respect his potential powers. This was evidenced by the fact that no one made fun of him. True, certain visiting gunmen when in liquor had thrown peanuts at him—as if he were an orangutan in a cage, but these were rare instances, and the negro did not regard them as provocative. Quite the contrary, he seemed to be particularly slow to fight, and for that very reason the wiser inhabitants had a secret impression that he might be something like a suppressed volcano.

He was one of China Jones's henchmen—and that meant something.

China Jones believed in bodyguards who would inspire fear and magnify his name. China Jones inspired fear in a good part of the country and it was only the benighted among bandits who cared to meddle with him. He knew how to rule a country by fear—and the choice of such men as Black Jefferson—enigmatic, suppressed, silent—helped him maintain his sway.



At the opposite end of the hall was another henchman, at whom every one laughed without fear. Squatted at the side of the door which led to the saloon and thence to the street, sat Hump Domingo.

This little rat of a Mexican was engaged by China Jones to lend atmosphere to his Palace of Fortune. Superstition and savage fetishes found good soil in a community like Little Hell, and China Jones played up to them. He knew that the rubbing of Domingo's humpback was an inviting privilege for the losing gamblers at the tables. "I never opened a wheel yet—this side of Frisco," China said, "but that I found a humpback made the betting soar."

Hump Domingo hated the world, and his delight was in watching men get beaten either in brawls or at cards. The prospect of seeing a big man like Charles Hinges battered to a pulp that night pleased him.

"I will grab him about the legs as I have been commanded," Domingo said to himself. "With these long arms of mine in which is all the strength that I possess I will encircle his huge calves and hog-tie him like a bull that's roped with a lariat. Then Jefferson, over there, will hurl his great black fists into Hinges's mouth, and Fat Milligan standing there behind the *buffet* and waiting—he will stop wiping his whisky glasses and come over and kick Hinges in the ribs. And all the time the bouncer and croupier will pommel him! It will be good for my soul—this fight!"

The sinister thoughts of the Mexican were interrupted by the appearance of some one who seemed as far removed from fighting as night from day.

The frail, laughing dancing girl, ushered to her seat in one of the booths, must have softened the fighting thoughts of every man there—from Black Jefferson down to the slinking, squat Mexican. She entered like a child into a den of brutes, like a ray of light into a cave. There could be no fighting, one would think, with this lovely, delicate thing in their midst.

And yet, curiously enough, the henchmen of China Jones when they looked at her were fired with a still hotter zeal: she was worth fighting for—that was the chord Jacinta struck in their hearts! The whole scene, every man's eyes, even the lights seemed focused on the booth where Jacinta was.

"I will fight the hardest of any," said the barkeep to himself, "and then she will see that I am the best of the chief's gang."

"I would steal diamonds for her," said the croupier.

"I will protect her," said the bouncer. "I am the biggest man here. She cannot help but see that."

“I would kill a man for her,” said the negro.

“She is thickly painted, but a beauty at that,” said the dance hall women.

“I could crush her with my arms,” said Hump Domingo.

From then, until the entrance of Charles Hinges, every one watched China Jones and his partner. Domingo acted as waiter, setting before them an elaborately served feast of fresh, tough roast, canned goods, *tamales*, *enchiladas* and California champagne.

Of the latter China Jones seemed to have an unlimited stock. Observing that his dinner was already causing a sensation, he ordered the big crowd of cholos, prospectors, gamblers and muckers to drink on the house. All Jacktown and Little Hell, having got wind of the drama that was to be enacted in China Jones’s place that night, had crowded in. Every booth was occupied with a company that grew more boisterous as the time went on.

Finally, when the shouting and laughing, the sharp *plunk-plunk* of the banjo and the insistent rhythmic pounding of the mechanical piano approached a glorious climax, a sudden hush—more nerve-racking than the loudest noise—fell upon the whole assembly.

Charlie Hinges had arrived.

Samson had entered the temple of the Philistines.

Every one there seemed to dwindle into insignificance at the appearance of Charles Hinges. Black Jefferson was as tall, but now he was lanky; Fat Milligan was flabby; the bouncer, chunky, slow, bull-like. These points had not been noticed before. But as Hinges looked from one to another, China Jones felt that his power would, that night, be taken from him. His men would no longer be thought invincible. But the game was started and it must be finished.

China Jones, eager to appear a magnanimous host, let Hinges pick the fight—as had been arranged.

Accordingly the bouncer, having been instructed in his duties by his employer, stepped up to Hinges. Softly as he spoke, his words could be heard in the innermost recess of the farthest booth.

“Howdy, Mr. Hinges? I’m right glad to see you.”

“Howdy, Mr. Bouncer,” Charles rejoined. “I reckon you’ve been given instructions to throw me out? Which is unpleasant, as I don’t like to hit a man smaller than me.”

The bouncer, with the embarrassment of his mission, reddened from his swollen neck to his flat forehead and to the roots of his bristly hair. "I ain't been ordered to throw you out, Mr. Hinges. That is, not exactly in them words," he said carefully. "I know China Jones requested you not to come into his place agin—after the little talk you-all had this afternoon. But bein' as this is a sort of celebration to-night—and everybody's invited—from Jacktown, Little Hell, and the whole county, I figure it's all right for you-all to come, too. There being only one little objection: you can't come in heeled, as we figure they's a big chanst of your startin' to shoot the place up in about twenty-five minutes from now, when we're goin' to have a little dance ack pulled off out here in the center of the floor."

"I reckoned on that before I came into this room," Hinges replied calmly. "If I'd come heeled every one in Little Hell and in Jacktown, too, would swear that I came to commit murder. I left my gat in custody of China Jones himself, as you may know. I've come here without it—and without any other gat, and if things don't go the way I like them to go in here I'll have to rely on my bare hands."

"That sounds fair enough to me," the bouncer said. "And China Jones requested me to announce that being as he's a fair man, he promises he won't do nothin' if you won't do nothin'." He raised his voice to the pitch of a formal announcement. "They's to be no scrap here to-night without you start it."

"That sounds all righto," Charlie answered. "If there's to be no scrap without my starting it I sure can't kick, can I?"

"Not so fur's I can see. Now, then, have a bottle of champagne on the house."

"I sure will."

There was a general murmur of disappointment throughout the crowd when this bargain had been struck, although most of them understood that the ultimate intent of the bouncer had been merely to admit Charlie to the room and to prepare him for the next event by ascertaining that he was disarmed.

Charlie took a seat at one of the gaming tables at the end of the hall opposite the booth where China Jones and Jacinta were seated. On one side of him was the *buffet*, behind which stood Milligan. In front of his table was the little stage with Black Jefferson, who had resumed his banjo song. Behind him, at the door which he had just entered, was squatted Hump Domingo, like a toad.

But Charlie was not interested in these surroundings nor in the guests who were observing him so intently. He was watching the ravishing figure seated at the table opposite to China Jones.

Few men could have been blessed in a lifetime with such a picture—and most certainly no man like Charlie Hinges. Jacinta had thrown a long, shimmering *zarape* about herself, but it only partially covered her. The little gold pompoms of her vest flashed like bubbles about the ethereal, almost transparent, body of a fairy.

The shadow of the lantern passed over her white back—now like a fantastic tattooed picture—now like a dragonfly floating across a pool of light tinged by sunrise. Atlas regaining strength from the earth, his mother, could not have been prepared more adequately for a terrific combat than Hinges worshiping at this shrine.

China Jones watched his enemy out of the corners of sleek, tight eyes. He knew that little would be needed to provoke the big renegade to fight. The defeat of so notorious a scrapper as Charles Hinges on the floor of China Jones's gambling den would add not a little to the fear-sway of the monarch of Little Hell. From that time on, Jones thought to himself, men would say: "Leave the half-breed Chink alone. Look what he did to Charles Hinges, the invincible! If you tamper with China Jones he will have ten men jump out of the shadows of the room and beat you to death, like men who stone a mad dog." Jones was satisfied with this thought and he considered the time propitious to taunt his enemy into fighting.

He turned to the dancing girl and said in a loud voice: "Get up now and show us how the Egyptian dames entertain their masters in Cairo! What d'you say? *'I'm not your master?'*"

The girl had said nothing of the kind. In fact, if the truth must be told, little Jacinta was eager to get out on the floor and let rhythm and music set off her beauty as it is necessary for a Spanish turquoise to have a setting. Contrary to the plan of China Jones, she jumped nimbly from her seat, saying: "Why, sure I'll dance, Jones. Who said I wouldn't? Just watch me!"

But China held her hand, and at the end of the clapping that had drowned the girl's speech, he shouted: "When I say you'll dance, it's settled. You dance! Every one here understands that and so do you. You are mine and if there's any one here man enough to deny it——" he cried dramatically as he whirled the girl down from the booth so that she pirouetted on the sawdust-covered floor. "If there is any man who will deny it let him stand up to me, face to face!"

Now Charles Hinges did not answer this taunt for a definite reason. Although China Jones had made use of a lull in the cheering to hurl it at him, it had failed as signally as if he had been stone deaf. For at that very moment Jacinta, with an uncanny prescience that told her it was not yet the time for the fight, threw off the *zarape* and stood in the middle of the floor like a marble Galatea before her astounded creator.

The foul tobacco smoke and tawdry Chinese lights of the den dissolved into incense mists and into the flush of dawn on Olympus as far as Charlie Hinges was concerned. No bickering taunt of saloonman could have awakened him from that spell. It might be said that every gambler and barkeep and gunman was reacting to this climax in much the same manner.

China Jones himself forgot the fight as Jacinta danced.

The slow, broken rhythm of the mechanical piano was all the girl needed as inspiration. For her it was a vital moment. Every muscle in her responded to the terrific new enthusiasm. She felt that the ages of civilization had crumbled; that she was a slave before some barbaric king, dancing to delay an execution! She was *Salome* eager to ensnare the hearts of Herod's counselors and guests, and she knew by the grim, silent faces of the ape men swirling about her that she was succeeding. She could ensnare their hearts—these subjects of her master. They would all fight for China Jones, yes—but against her—*no!*

As Charles Hinges watched her dancing in the pool of light he, too, felt the ages vanish; again the suggestion of old Augustina, the witch, that this was his mate thrilled him. She was dancing in that circle of brutes like the only human being among baboons. Charles watched her shoulders and arms flashing, writhing with a snake-like witchery.

Charmed as the big savage renegade was he suddenly saw the smoke efface all other details of the scene—the grinning red faces, the negro, the cholos, the stern mouths under sombreros, the crowded booths, the tinsel-skirted women—and he felt himself alone in an ancient cave with this woman dancing before a fire. And outside the cave there was a dragon, which, when the dance was over, *must be slain!*

The dragon?

Seeing the shadow of the Chinese lantern moving about the hall like a giant serpent on a horizon of clouds, Charles came suddenly to himself. It was now that he recalled that China Jones had said something about “standing up and meeting him face to face.” Subconsciously these words had drifted to him, and as the girl danced, he realized for the first time that

they had been said. “If there is any man who will deny that this girl is mine!”

Hinges sprang to his feet.

The scene whirled about him in a purple mist. Rage blotted out everything but the leering face of China Jones on the opposite side of the floor.

All else was blackness—and with it a sudden quiet.

The piano was silenced with a thumping discord. Jacinta sank to her feet and the ripples that had crossed her body vanished like ripples that die widening on a pool of water. She lay exhausted and motionless at the feet of Charles Hinges, while on the other side of her stood China Jones.

“Mr. Chinaman, I’m standin’ up!” Hinges cried. “Those are your words! Face to face! You said ‘Face to face!’ And here I am. When you say this girl is yours *you’re the dirtiest liar this side of hell!*”

## CHAPTER XI

### THE CLEAN-UP OF TOPHET

As Fat Milligan, backed by the bouncer and Hump Domingo, leaped across the open space of the floor, Jacinta sprang suddenly to her feet. It was Jacinta more than any one else in that hall who knew just exactly how the fight was to be staged. China Jones and his gang planned to lead it up to their own climax, but Jacinta planned a step further.

China Jones had resolved to let his gang give Hinges a sound thrashing before the eyes of Little Hell, and then in case Hinges proved too great a fighter, there would be ample time and ample excuse for China to protect the peace of his establishment by using a six-gun. This was as far as it was necessary for any man to plan. And his plan would have succeeded if it had not been for Jacinta.

The dancing girl played with the situation as a child will play with ninepins. Her one great aim was to break the power of China Jones—and she could do this, she knew, with the aid of Charles Hinges. The crowd—exclusive of Jones's own henchmen—was on her side. She had won them. She decided that if ever there was a chance to divest this monarch of his power—it was now, in the presence of all his subjects, while they were still drunk with the beauty of her dance. And to accomplish this her first step was to fly into the arms of China Jones himself!

It was her master stroke.

It virtually disarmed Jones, who was at that point only too eager to believe that she was not in love with Hinges. Furthermore, it permitted Hinges to whirl about on his feet and meet the attack of the bouncer, who was the first of the gang to reach him.

The bouncer was thick, bull-like, heavy-set. He had never before found it necessary to swing his head back to relieve the shock of a blow. Hinges met his onslaught with a smash on the chin that sent him hurtling, senseless, to the side of the room.

This first step in the fight brought screams from the women in the booths, gasps from the men, who had pressed themselves against the walls, and an inarticulate cry from Jacinta. China Jones sprang back to his booth

ready to end the fight at his preordained time. And Jacinta fled with him. To her, at least, the outcome of the fight was known.

The girl watched Hinges as he swung terrific crashes at the circle of men that had closed in upon him. She saw one drop senseless at his feet. She saw Hump Domingo tackle him with his viselike arms, only to have the hold pried like a wedge bending iron bars outward. She saw the giant negro leap down from the stage and time a shattering blow on the side of Hinges's jaw which sent him reeling to the ground. She would kill that black, Jacinta swore to herself, if Hinges lost!

But there was no indication yet of his losing. He jumped to his feet and met the rush of Fat Milligan with a swing which brought the huge barkeep crumpling to the sawdust where he rolled over like a dead horse. Again the ring closed in on him and he swung wildly on every side and again Jacinta saw the negro biding his time, until, when Hinges lost his balance with his frantic swings, the black caught him again on the side of the jaw. Hinges staggered, sank, and for a fraction of a second sat half prostrate on the sawdust, staring blankly at the huge leering form above him.

Shouts stabbed the girl's ears. But then she felt that they were not shouts of victory over the fall of Hinges. They were excited yelps for him to pick himself up. "Get up and kill him!" she heard them howl. "Kick him! Break him in half! Kill the black! You can do it!"

Hinges struggled to his feet, and Jacinta lost sight of him as he was covered by the gang. This time Beefy Muggins fell, sprawling senseless, and two others staggered back circling behind and swinging cautiously at Hinges's neck. Hinges ducked and the negro for the third time stepped in, gained the balance of his feet and swung.

Jacinta's hand went intuitively to her breast, but she saw that this time Hinges had been waiting for the move. He threw up his right in an attempt to guard his face, and the negro's blow glanced off. From behind a smash caught Hinges, sending him reeling forward in a white light of pain. Yells trumpeted out: "Get the black! Bite him! He's swinging again!"

Blindly Hinges swung. He felt his fist crash into the big jaw, into the soft flesh, into the teeth. A roar of triumph went up from the crowd of howling men as they saw the negro stumble backward and then drop before Hinges's well-timed sledge hammer blow on the thick mouth.

Black Jefferson resigned. He had stepped back into the velvet comfort of sleep.



China Jones did not join in that glorious cry. He knew that now the time had indisputably come for him to play his one high card. And the girl beside him knew that it was his time to play and that he was going to play. And then the long, yellow fingers of China Jones crept slowly to his holster.

As China Jones's hand crept to his holster Jacinta's hand dove to her muslin vest. Both drew, but as China Jones threw up his gun to fire the girl slipped out upon the floor and confronted him.

The howling gang did not at first notice the little drama that was going on at China Jones's booth. The men were watching the swaying figure of their newly found hero, Charlie Hinges, who stood in the middle of the room, towering above the men he had felled, holding his huge, bleeding fists before him, preparatory to any further attack.

Fat Milligan had crawled to the feet of the gamblers at one end of the hall. The black still lay motionless. Beefy Muggins was struggling to his knees. Hump Domingo and the rest had melted away into the receptive jackboots and chaps of the crowd.

Hinges was alone unchallenged—dazed—waiting—puzzled by the shouting until the truth slowly dawned upon him: they were shouting his name! They were proclaiming him the victor!

And then he saw China Jones.

When his gaze paused at that booth the crowd watched him steady himself as if some one had revived him with a sponge of cold water. The shouting stopped abruptly, and the clear, calm voice of the dancing girl rang out in the sudden silence:

“Now, then, China Jones, you started it! So you finish it! Give me that little gat—and we'll watch you finish it! Go on! Get out there on the floor, Mr. Chin Chin, and finish it!”

Hinges's brain cleared. Yes, he had been fighting for the girl! A grim smile came over him. The fight was won. And his reward—she herself was seeing to it—would be a fight with China Jones.

His grin widened and broke to a chuckle. “Yes, you finish it!” he echoed, laughing. “Mr. Chin Chin!”

“It's been a fight for me,” the girl went on. “It must be a fair fight. And I'm to be the referee—that's fair enough, isn't it, now? I ought to have something to say—I being the prize? Well, what I say will be this: I'll stand here with this gat in my hand, and if any man interrupts this fight I'll bore

him! Get out there now, and meet your man ‘face to face’—your own words—‘face to face!’”

China Jones’s eyes yellowed, and a yellow pallor came over his skin. Could it be possible that his whole gang had bowed down to this girl? Was there no one who would save him from this ignominy—a defeat at the hands of the drunkard, the renegade, Charlie Hinges?

“Come on, China!” some unknown voice brayed out from the seclusion of the farthest booth. “It’s your turn for to have your jaw broke!”

“Come on out and take your medicine, China!” others roared. “The fight’s yourn! The gal’s yourn!”

“Come on out, old Celestial! You’re elected!”

China Jones, dazed at this turn, looked into the girl’s mocking face and then at her hands. One slender hand held a little revolver—the palmist’s well-oiled, well-shined six-gun. His own gun was in her other hand—the gun metal flashing black against the soft-powdered whiteness of her arm.

Then China Jones looked up into the grim, blood-smeared face of the man who had shorn him of his power. Hinges was grinning, but his eyes were still dazed. China Jones saw this, and with a final frantic hope—a straw to a drowning man—he decided to go out and meet him.

“I am like a puma,” the half-breed thought to himself. “I will meet this tottering giant—I will spring at his throat, and bury my teeth there! Then the house will know that I am still a man to be feared!”

That afternoon Charlie had made a boast before the palmist and the dancing girl—a boast that he would splinter the faro table with China Jones’s head; that he would hurl him crashing through the wall of the den; that he would break the bones of the devil who proposed to destroy the soul of the woman he—Charlie Hinges—had sanctified.

They met, and in their meeting Jacinta saw that the boast of Hinges would most certainly be fulfilled. One single blow lifted the half-breed from his feet so that he fell back crashing against the faro table. So far the boast was indeed verified. The man leaned there, his hands limp by his side, his face yellowish white, his eyes smoldering with pale, dun fire. The hush of fear that fell upon the crowd showed what every man thought: there was a chance for a carefully timed right on that jaw which would have killed him.

“Wait,” Jacinta said, the softness of her voice falling upon the silence like a song’s echo. She rushed to Hinges, grabbing his poised, tense arm.

“You told me you had changed from a brute!”

She could not move Hinges’s arm, because of its iron strength. It hung there, ready for the one horrifying crash into the softened, pallid face. Yes, it could have killed him. Every one who saw the poised weight of the giant’s body ready to go behind that blow knew it could have killed him.

The girl clung to the great arm. “You can finish the Chink—we all know it. But *have* you changed?”

“I have! And little do I care for this coyote crawling beneath the table. I’m giving you your life, China Jones, because it’s not worth the cracking of my knuckles against your filthy mouth.”

Hinges turned to the mob of men who at the first intimation of gunshooting had jammed the door.

“Now, then, if there’s any gent here who still believes China Jones owns this girl, let him say so. Otherwise, we’ll call the meeting over.” He took one of the revolvers from Jacinta. “And if there’s any man who doesn’t believe the meeting’s over, and who thinks he’ll follow the girl and me to where we’re going, I’ll read a benediction to him out of this little prayer book which I hold in my hand.” For a moment he stood, showing his six-gun to the silent mob.

His challenge unanswered, he took the dancing girl by the arm and led her through the aisle, which opened miraculously in the jam of gaping men. The aisle closed behind them, and by the time the gang turned its attention to China Jones, the fallen king of Little Hell, Jacinta and her savior had found the palmist and the three mounts which were to take them into the heart of the desert.

Señora Augustina had perfected her plans with a foresight worthy of the soothsayer she was. She had even overstepped herself. For the fall of the king of Little Hell had so enthralled the monarch’s erstwhile subjects that there appeared to be no immediate necessity for escape. It would be some time—hours, perhaps—before China Jones could persuade his men to act. For all this, the three fugitives, when they met at Augustina’s cabin, found everything in readiness for a flight into the desert.

There were three saddled bronchos—two little pintos belonging to the palmist, and the raw-boned fuzztail—the only earthly possession of Charles Hinges. Slung before the pommel of each saddle was a duffel bag into which the wise old duenna had packed a grubstake. It satisfied her soul to think they would be in flight for several days—and the longer the three were in the

desert, the safer it would be when they reached the farther edge and entered some bordering cow town.

Two kyacks of rawhide were slung on each side of Hinges's horse. These sacks, which the *señora* called *alforjas*, contained bran mash for the mounts, as it was not probable that they could rely on the animals doing much of their own foraging in the Bad Lands in which they proposed to hide. Some old blankets tied to the saddle strings completed the meager outfit.

In one detail Señora Augustina had failed. She had not bargained on the fact that Jacinta would escape the barroom in the scanty costume in which she had danced. Accordingly in the brief moment that it took Charlie to unhitch the horses, Augustina dove into an old wardrobe box in her fortune-telling booth and extracted a brilliant yellow squaw's skirt with the usual ribbon adornment common to the Navahos. This, together with the scarlet *rebozo*, and a black Mexican sombrero, supplemented the ravishing, ethereal whisp of silk that partially covered the childlike body of the dancer.

It was thus that the little cavalcade trotted out from among the shacks of Little Hell. They kept constantly to the darker parts of the town, avoiding the riotous saloon, and escaped out upon the county road just as China Jones's place was beginning to realize that a dance-hall girl had been abducted—and that her proprietor, the monarch of Little Hell, was being sponged by a group of frightened henchmen.

A mile gallop on the county road, and then a sharp cut-off into the darkness of a cañon which was choked with Spanish sycamore and bearbrush; next a careful traversing of the rocky, precipitous trail down to the long bench of land—the first great step into the desert. Finally an easier jog-trot across the mesquite-covered flat, another descent, and out again upon the scarp of the second step.

Then it was that they felt themselves safe.

Breathing the keen night air, with its fragrance of sage which the long, hot day had brought up out of the cañons, Jacinta felt a sudden ecstatic thrill. On one side of her rode the old crone—hunched like an owl on the little pinto's back. On the other side rode the brute.

This was strange company to enter the untracked wilds of the Bad Lands, but the girl's thrill was one of complete safety and of a glorious sense of freedom.

“They incline, but do not compel!” the old witch of Pimas intoned as the three fugitives looked out upon the limitless desert, over which had risen a

swarm of pale stars. “From now on the way of one of us will be the way of the other two—for many days—except that the stars do not compel!”

“Riding with Hinges at my side,” Jacinta observed, “I’m not afraid of anything—not even your stars!”

## CHAPTER XII

### HINGES REMEMBERS A CURSE

It was a bizarre trio of characters that came up out of the eastern edge of the desert three days later. The first figure to catch the eye, and that seemed the most harmonious with the spirit of the Bad Lands through which the fugitives had traveled, was the old duenna, jolting along on her little pinto, the harsh black of her *zerape* softened with alkali, her downy lips and cavernous eyes darkened with dust, her long black skirts trailing the lathery flanks of her mount. The witch of Pimas seemed now possessed of a sinister rugged power—which was apart from the tawdriness and theatricality of her better moments.

Just as striking a figure was the hulking grimy buckaroo, mounted on his gaunt, black gelding. The sun and wind had not changed Charles Hinges—except, perhaps, to clear his eyes of the last bout of heavy drinking, and to narrow them to squinting points of light. His tall, peaked sombrero, his opened calfskin vest, and his chaps were cloaked with a complete layer of fine dust. Dust powdered the heavy black hair so that when he doffed his sombrero the hair was of two distinct shades—jet black and mouse colored; dust stuck and caked on the large, red cheek bones; it gloved his chunky fists; it flecked the haunches of his horse and divided into rivulets and deltas down the wet flanks.

Charles Hinges looked every inch of his tremendous size—the apparition of a desperado coming out of the heart of the desert. No mark of weakness was yet discernible in the horseman—but his mount was certainly succumbing. Its hanging head and shuffling gait showed that the beast was good for scarcely another day.

But to one of the number there belonged a color and a beauty which the dust could not destroy. Fatigued and drooping, Jacinta seemed bleached by the terrific heat, tortured by the dry hot wind. She clung weakly to her saddle, her scarlet *rebosa*, now softened to orange, trailing behind her, her white shoulders agleam in the intense light, her tossed hair a shining, dusty gold.

At sunrise of the third day this desert-stricken cavalcade reached the crest of a mesa, and the three fugitives looked down the interminable slope of a cañon toward a plain of rolling prairies. There the first sight of green

during their desert ride greeted them. Cholla cactus gave way to grama grass, and farther on toward the east, beyond a mirage, they saw the serpentine bed of a dry creek. Dull mauve shadows filled the cañons beyond where the rays of the sun had not yet fallen; but above the mauve brightened to purple, and higher, on the crest of the divide, silhouetted against the pale-pink sky, they saw the shacks of a town.

“That town is Black Horse,” old Augustina said. “My name has spread among the stockmen and grangers of that town as a soothsayer. Therefore, if I enter it with you, we will be known.”

“And why not be known?” Hinges inquired. “If there’s any one that wants to fight me, I’m ready.”

“Yes, he’s ready, all righto,” Jacinta commented. There was still a pleasant ring in the weary voice. “These birds around here ought to learn a few lessons after what he did to Little Hell.”

“But that is not the trouble. China Jones will send word all about that you have wrecked his house, and that you are a robber. There is a crooked sheriff at Black Horse, who will do as China Jones tells him. It is best that we avoid that place.”

“You won’t catch me avoiding a place!” Hinges commenced saddling the horses and packing up after the night’s encampment. “Especially,” he added, “since we’ve got a spavined horse—and the three of us are starving for something to eat, not to mention the old plugs.”

“I am not afraid to go into that town, if Charlie Hinges goes with me,” Jacinta said. “If they know you there, *señora*, Charlie and I can go in together, pretending we’re a couple of civil engineers.”

“I’ll see a horse doctor about this fuzztail of mine, get another grubstake, and we’ll hit south.”

“That’s the ticket,” Jacinta agreed.

Augustina shook her head ominously.

“I’ll consult the cards,” was her comment.

Hinges mounted Jacinta’s pinto, so that the disabled horse would have the lighter weight of the girl for its burden. The three riders then followed the rocky trail down the face of the mesa. At noon they rested in the shade of a gulch, letting their mounts graze for the first time for their own forage. The sick horse, suffering now from the heat and lack of water, stood listless with its nose a few inches from the rocks, while the others grazed on the grama

grass. When they resumed the journey Hinges swung the girl behind him, where she rode with arms about his waist.

Augustina packed away her ragged cards, which she had consulted during the rest. “The time is inauspicious,” she grumbled, clambering to her saddle. “But what can an old woman say when two who are young and strong are bent on a foolish thing?”

“We are not afraid. Charlie can fight anybody!” Jacinta insisted.

“You are coming more and more to fall in love with Hinges,” the old woman muttered; “but it is about that love that the cards have warned.”

“Oh, if it’s only about that, let’s go,” Jacinta laughed.

Hinges pressed his mount into a trot, and they crossed the creek while old Augustina, mumbling her warnings, followed. She led the spavined, riderless horse, which kept her lagging farther and farther behind Hinges and the girl.

When they had crossed the creek and entered one of the cañons which cut up through the long slope toward Black Horse, Hinges came suddenly out of a reverie and spoke to the girl.

“Look here,” he blurted, “you’ve acted during this long desert journey as if you were in love with me.”

“I am,” she said.

The girl was taken by surprise. She felt, intuitively, that a delicate situation was arising.

She had chosen this man as a fighter—merely as a stepping stone to freedom. Naturally he would fall in love with her—she had bargained for that. But to be worshiped as a devotee worships a Madonna was a different matter. It was a new experience for Jacinta, the dancing girl, and she realized that she had her hands full.

“I know little of women.” Hinges spoke over his great shoulder to the girl clinging to him. “Leastwise, I know practically nothing of such women as you. Old Augustina, yes, she’s easy to understand—a sentimental and wise old lady. Love and her cards can make the world go round. And I understand other kinds of womenfolk—Little Hell women and all that. But you are the first of your kind I’ve ever felt clinging to me as you cling to me now.”



“What’s your point, Charlie—are you doubting me? You fought a dozen men and won. Is there a woman in the world who wouldn’t fall in love at that?”

“Yes, there is—there is a woman in the world who wants more than that. You’re the woman yourself. I can see a thing or two! It’s a long time we’ve been close together jogging through these Bad Lands. You can’t hide everything when you’re living, eating, riding, starving with a man for this length of time. And this is what I’ve found out: there’s something lacking in me!”

“Now, you’re kidding me, Charlie. There’s nothing lacking. You’re immense. At night time, when we were sleeping underneath the stars, my dreams told me there was nothing lacking in you. In my heart I could hear you—when the stars went out and it was pitch dark. There was no one in the world but the old witch and you and me. There was a big star and a coyote calling to the terrible desert, but I knew I wasn’t alone; for the first time in my life—honest, I didn’t feel lonely. A funny thing, you’d say; the very first time in my life that I didn’t feel I was lonely was out there on the black sand dunes with just one star—and the howl ’way off from nowhere of some starved coyote.”

“Then you can say that you’re mine—that I’ve won you?” Hinges asked eagerly.

“Sure thing. You’d win the Queen of Sheba herself if she’d seen you fight the way you did back there at China Jones’s place.”

“Maybe the Queen of Sheba, but not you. A woman like you wants something else. If you saw a big gorilla fighting a bunch of hunters in the desert, say, does that mean that you’d fall in love with the gorilla?”

“You’ve got something else aside from what a gorilla’s got.”

“Have I?”

“Well, I sort of thought so. Haven’t you?”

“Well, what is it? What is it you’d want? What is it a woman like you’d want in a man besides the strength of a brute? What is it I’ve got besides the strength of a hairy beast?”

“Darned if I know!” the girl said naïvely.

“Well, I’ll tell you. It’s something my old dad—the sky pilot back there at Buzzard’s Mountain—used to talk about when I was a little kid. It’s something I don’t know much about—never thought much about till I saw

you. And much less did I ever believe in it. You wouldn't fall in love with a fighter just because he can smash the bones of a bunch of sousing crooks in a barroom."

"Well, maybe not. There is something else I want. Now that you come to mention it. I don't think much about these things, as you know. I've told you several times when things went wrong on this little camping trip of ours, that I'm happy-go-lucky. When you get to talking so deep it makes my head ache."

"I'm going to say something deep now, so get ready to think. You can't love me—because I'm a fighter without a soul."

"Without a what?"

"My old dad was always shouting about a soul, and I never listened to him—not until now that he's dead and gone. But now I'm listening. *You're* the one that's bringing his voice back again so's now I can hear it."

"I'll say perhaps you're right."

"You want strength—you want heroic strength—but you also want him to have this thing they call a soul. And I'll be hogtied and switched if I know how a man can get one."

"Ask old Augustina. She's good at that stuff."

"I doubt it," Charlie said seriously. "This thing my father was always ranting about hasn't got anything to do with her stars and her belly-aching about the rising of Venus and all that. If I asked her how I could get a soul she'd like as not take out the jack of spades from her deck and start in praying to it."

"You're getting beyond my depth now, Charlie. All I know is I like you. I'll swear to that. And I'll do anything in the world for you to show you how grateful I am to have you. But there's nothing in the world can ever repay you for—" The girl stopped suddenly, and Charlie turned around and stared questioningly into her face.

There was a new expression there, partly a frown, partly a light, as of some one beginning to recall an old dream.

"Say, Charlie!"

"Now what?"

"You saved me from China Jones, and when we use that word 'save' I begin to see something in this deep stuff you're springing. Just what was it

you were saving?”

“That’s it!” Charlie shouted. “You’ve got it. It’s the thing I lack!”

“So, *that’s* what a soul is!” she said, with the satisfaction of a child who has solved a toy puzzle. “That’s what those birds in Frisco who called themselves Salvation Army captains meant hollering about a soul!”

Hinges’s reaction to this was a glorious abandon.

“Look here, will you marry me?” he blurted out with the characteristic, unannounced dispatch in which he would have shot out a right hook to the jaw.

“Say, Charlie, don’t take my breath away like that, or you’ll have me falling off this nag’s croup and standing on my head in the sand.”

“Since you can understand now what it is in you I worship—that same thing I saved for you from China Jones—will you reward me?”

“Of course I’ll reward you.”

“Will you marry me?”

“Not here—and on second thoughts, not even in town. It’s too dangerous a place for us to be pulling off a wedding.”

“But you love me enough to be my wife?”

“Well, look here, Charlie. You’ve sort of sidetracked yourself from the point you were making. You were talking about not having a soul. Then all of a sudden you slip me a proposal of marriage while I’m hanging onto you with both my arms, and am—as you might say—helpless. I heard somewhere as a kid that it was bad to propose in a cab because it’s so darned uncomfortable if you’re refused. Well, I’ll say proposing to a girl who’s riding behind you on the same horse makes a cab look like a Pullman car for room!”

“Then, you’re refusing me?”

“Well, I’ll say this, Charlie. Much as I love you I must say this in fairness to both of us: I haven’t given a thought to marriage since I was fourteen years old and went to the melodrama regular out in the mission district in Frisco.

“Since then I’ve learned a few things about men, which sort of got me making resolutions. The main resolution was this: a man is a girl’s enemy. He may treat her swell and all that—and I must say no man ever treated me

better than you have—but in the long run he’s going to say he’s her master, and then she wakes up, and she begins to understand why the theaters don’t stick on an extra act showing the lovers’ happy married life. And I came to the conclusion that I would not marry unless I found a certain kind of a man.”

“You didn’t find that kind—when I—”

“When you beat up China’s army? Well, yes, I did. Except—”

“Ah, then I was right!”

“Right about what?” Jacinta asked.

“You did find I was all right—my fighting—my strength—except for one thing.”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly have put it that way.”

“You’re looking for a fighter with a soul?”

“Well, I didn’t know I was until you said it.”

Hinges drew rein and wheeled his horse about so that he could look back on the long journey they had taken. The desert was a simmering caldron of heat, its rim forming the string of mesas, on one of which they had camped the preceding night. Below, the dry creek wound through its wide bed of caked mud; rolling hills and hog-wallows filled up the foreground, and at the foot of the trail which led up the cañon bank where Hinges and the girl waited they could see old Augustina riding her gaunt pinto and leading the lame horse behind her.

“We’ll wait for her,” Hinges said. “She knows the town and can tell us how we can find a veterinary, and where we can get provisions. We have a long journey together, you and I.”

“Well, I’m satisfied, Charlie,” the girl answered.

When they had dismounted Charlie turned to his companion.

“Being refused by you,” he said, “has shown me something I never could see before. My father tried to show me it when he was dying, but I would not listen to him. I have wasted the giant strength he gave me—that is, until I saw you. Then I made use of what power I had—for the first time. Now, as a sky pilot might say, I am reformed inside and out.

“It’s like some of these road agents you hear about, who get religion after a life of crime—only they generally get it when they are about to slip

on a rawhide necktie, and then it's too late to do them any good. I am going to reform, and in time to win you. I will come to you when I have a soul."

They waited—the girl resting on a boulder, Charlie standing knee deep in the sage looking down the trail.

"But before I can say I have a soul," he went on, "I've got to square myself with my dad, who said my kid brother David was the one who would bring me to see the sin of my ways. This is a good joke, but when you hear things said on a deathbed they sure do stick with you.

"Before I can get that curse out of my brain I've got to find that kid brother of mine. I've steered clear of him now for years. Can't remember when I saw the raw-boned little snipe last. I've hated him—hated him like poison—like one rattler hates another.

"But now I'm going to find him and tell him I'm a new man—that I've shed my splotchy old skin and the rattles are gone and the old poison teeth have been busted out.

"I am going to take his hand and call him brother. The word will stick hard, but I'll oil my throat up a bit with hootch. And I'll put my arms about him, and all that stuff. When I'm squared with him I'll be squared with the old man, whose last words cursed me for being a brute without a soul. When all that's said and done I can come to you."

"Do you reckon this brother's like you, Charlie?" the girl asked with that feminine tendency to sidetrack the point—particularly a point which to her seemed too serious.

"We had the same father—a giant, they called him. That counts for something."

"Well," the girl said, "you're on the right track, Charlie. Go to it."

By this time old Augustina, her gray hair disheveled and her black *reboza* trailing in the hot wind, came up out of the cañon and reached the top of the trail.

## CHAPTER XIII

### PEG REVERDY

Peg Reverdy's shack was on the outskirts of Black Horse, which at one time, when rodeos were held twice a year, had been in the liveliest part of the community. But with the growth of the little cow town and the building of a new series of stockyards on the northern side, Reverdy's stables had fallen into disuse.

Little old wizened one-legged Peg himself had lost some of the utility and fame which frontier days had accorded him. His business as a veterinary had fallen off with the new methods in stock raising; and in his declining years he retired, a bachelor, into his tumbledown domain.

A weather-beaten and warped house, a few shake barns, some hogs, and a scattering of corrals with wire that was no longer stock proof, and finally an old brilliantly painted chow cart, were all that met the eyes of Charles Hinges and Jacinta when they turned in from the county road.

"The best thing we can do is to go in and kid this old bird along," Hinges said. "Trade our bad horses off, get some provisions, and then go back to the *barranca*, where the old lady's hiding. It'll be night time then, and the three of us can get away off to the south without any one in town knowing what direction we took."

"But it will be a good joke on us," Jacinta remarked, "if this horse doctor is one of the sheriff's gang."

"Take a chance," was Hinges's reply. "What can one man do?"

Peg Reverdy, hearing the patter of horses' hoofs and the loud barking of his watchdog, came out of his shack, where he had been preparing his supper of flap jacks and bacon.

He was a little man in khaki trousers and a large khaki shirt, from which his small, bald head protruded like a frightened bird's. On his good leg was a jackboot of a style long out of date. Serving as his other leg was a stout pine peg, the varnish of which had been blistered by the Arizona sun.

Peg Reverdy had large, thoughtful, brown eyes, a beet-red scalp so tight that it shone, and a face lopsided from his tobacco cud. A red nose

explained, in part, why Peg Reverdy had not advanced in the ways of civilization as fast as his environment.

“I’m glad to see you, pard and madam,” he said with a ceremony that is common only to tramps or down-at-the-heel members of the landed gentry. “I see you’ve got a sulky horse and are making the mistake of bringing him to me.”

“Why is it a mistake?” Hinges asked. “A sheep herder down on the cañon trail told me you were a veterinary.”

“My methods are methods of half a century ago.”

“That suits me. I don’t figure on staying here until my horse gets well. I want to trade him.”

“In that case I should like to know more about you,” the old veterinary replied. “And if you don’t mind my saying so, you look a bit down and out—both of you. Will you have a drink?”

Hinges scarcely knew whether to regard this invitation as an act of charity or a trap. Jacinta’s intuition had guessed at Reverdy being one of the sheriff’s gang and in league with China Jones. A frowzy, one-legged gentleman like Peg Reverdy would appreciate a big reward such as China Jones might offer for the capture of Hinges.

Hinges glanced to the girl as if to ask what her intuition was telling her now. As he looked at her he saw how pale and sickly she had become after their desert hardships. This alone persuaded him.

“Whatever else happens, I must take care of her,” he reflected. Then, turning to the old doctor, who had been furtively studying every emotion, hesitancy, and thought that passed over his face, he said: “The girl here is about to keel over with thirst. Coming in from the desert like this, I think she could stand a little jolt.”

The veterinary ushered his two visitors into the one-story frame house. The large, stuffy room in which they found themselves resembled an apothecary’s shop of the Middle Ages.

There were still the bottles of Reverdy’s old profession, dust covered, draped with webs. A stuffed Gila monster, a centipede and tarantula preserved in a bottle of alcohol, and a large collection of butterflies and moths marked the change of Reverdy’s life from a veterinary to a naturalist. His library, in one corner of the room, consisted of farm almanacs, a book on

cattle plague and Texas fever, and an assortment of Shakespeare in paper covers.

The host picked up a Hopi jug, explaining with considerable enthusiasm that the pictures on it recorded the deeds of an ancient Indian hero. Out of the jug he poured three glassfuls of wine.

“Being a one-legged man,” Reverdy remarked, “I have stepped aside and watched the world go by. Not that a veterinary with two legs is any better than a veterinary with one. But I have naturally the retiring nature of a scholar. I prefer to study people and things.

“I am a naturalist, a chemist, a student of Shakespeare, and, if I may say so, I am an expert on Arizona, Mexico and Texas moths.” Reverdy poured another round, and his two guests, after drinking, listened to his remarks on life with combined reverence and impatience.

“As a one-legged man,” the host went on, “I have of course looked with a sort of envy—and a sort of worship—at such men as this jug tells of.”

“Was this Indian a gunfighter?” Jacinta asked with an unassumed wonder.

“A fighter, yes. But in those days they had no guns. He was of great physical prowess and courage.”

“He fought with his fists, then?” Jacinta asked.

“Probably—and with the jawbone of a mountain lion.”

“That’s going some,” Jacinta remarked. “But if you want to see a man fight with his fists you ought to watch this gentleman here when he gets started.”

“I judged that. And if you don’t think me too personal I will confess something. Your proportions, sir, caught my eye the very moment I saw you. A weakling of my sort—who is handicapped as I am—has a curious feeling for great and invincible men. I always want to bring them in here where I can offer them a drink. I worship them.”

Hinges and the girl exchanged glances. The girl was convinced that Reverdy was playing with them, leading up to some climax of his own. But curiously she liked the game he was playing. If he knew who they were it meant danger—but it was the kind of danger that Jacinta liked. With Charlie Hinges in the room facing this crippled man, she could not have been afraid if she had tried.



Charles, on the other hand, was interested in the old man's talk for its own sake. It was converging toward a point with which Charles at that time was obsessed. He had talked with the girl but a short while before about the "fighter with a soul." This was a far more important matter to Hinges just then than the chance that the wily little cripple was about to trap them and deliver them into the hands of the sheriff and China Jones.

"Where do you get this idea of worshiping invincible men?" Charles asked, leading the conversation into his own channel.

"I can't tell. It can't be explained," the veterinary rejoined. "But all my life I have watched the cowboys ride past my door out to the range. I have looked at them very much as a crippled horseshoer might have watched the knights of King Arthur going out to the lists. They seemed like knights to me—in shining armor with plumed helmets—going out to do great deeds."

"There's nothing to this physical prowess stuff, pard," Hinges said confidentially. "It's sure to get you in bad."

Jacinta darted a warning look at her companion. She realized that Charles seemed bent on revealing himself, and she saw that the little man's face lit up with smug satisfaction. If Peg Reverdy had said, "Ah, ha! So you are the bully that fought in Little Hell!" he could not have betrayed his thoughts more clearly.

But Reverdy smothered his own emotions with his voluble talk. "I don't mean plain physical prowess," he said. "I mean the kind the knights had; the kind this Hopi jug tells of. It's a heroic, spiritual power inside of a perfect man. I don't worship these plain drunk brawlers, you understand. They must have something else."

"Maybe your knights with feathers and tin stove suits had something else," Charles remarked, "but I've never seen any cowboys that had much else under their sombreros but a low brow and a red neck."

"Ah, that's where you make your mistake," Peg Reverdy grew enthusiastic. "There's no real difference between a great fighting buckaroo that we might see on the range and one of the heroic knights of old. That is to say, if"—he added, wagging a slender forefinger—"if they have the soul of a hero."

Hinges looked down at the man's face with a start.

"Say, look here, pard," he said pointedly, "did you ever hear of Charles Hinges—over there on the Buzzard Mountain side of the desert?"

“Have I!” The old man’s face lighted up in surprise. “I certainly have. His father’s been on that range for half a century—and there’s not a man of the old frontier days that doesn’t know of his great power. Now, this son of his you speak of— Well, I’ve known about him for some time, and just this morning the whole town has heard some news of him.”

“Some news—about Charles Hinges?” Jacinta broke in.

“What about him?” Charles asked, with a tone that was at once belligerent and boastful.

“Every man in town’s talking about how he busted up a saloon back there in Little Hell, slugging a lot of men in a brawl, and brutally beating the owner.”

“And what are they going to do?” Jacinta asked with exaggerated calmness. “I mean the men in this town—what do they care about it?”

“Why, haven’t you heard?” Peg asked, leaning to the girl and leering up into her face until she winced. “No, of course; you’ve just come in from the desert.”

“You are right. We’ve just come in from the desert.”

“Well, there’s a reward out.”

“A reward! Who’s giving a reward?” Charles cried with the same belligerence.

“China Jones.”

“Well, the filthy—” Charles checked himself. “What’s the reward for?”

“To get Hinges. The charge being felonious assault.”

Hinges burst into an incontinent guffaw, but Jacinta waited breathless, pale.

“And it’s a good big reward,” the old man went on. “I’d like it myself. I could get a dipping vat put into my outfit and my business would pick up. A horse doctor in these modern days needs a dipping vat.”

“And you figure you might try for the reward, eh?” Charlie asked, his huge shoulders still shaking with laughter.

“I do, except for one thing,” Peg replied.

“And what’s that?” Jacinta asked. “Are you afraid if you met this Charles Hinges he might object to your catching him?”

“Not at all. I’d have ways to get him.”

“With a knife, or a six-gun?”

“Perhaps.”

“He wouldn’t be afraid of you,” Jacinta said, “if you had a stick of dynamite in each hand.”

“There’d be ways,” the man said, his face wrinkling into a smile that tightened the brown eyes to crafty slits. “For instance, suppose he come out of the desert—where I understand he went, abducting China Jones’s girl—and suppose in coming out he stopped at the nearest house to get water or food? He’d be helpless, starving. I could give him a choice of going back to the desert without food, or else coming with me to the sheriff’s, or else one last resort, he could, for fear of meeting the sheriff, commit a great crime—kill me and rob my house.

“But in case Charles Hinges did come to my house, I’d think a long time before giving him up to China Jones—even for a reward. China Jones is crooked, and so is the sheriff. They could trump up anything they wanted. Since he abducted a girl, they might even scare up a lynching party— —”

He stopped and studied the two for a moment during which there came the first long silence in their conversation. It was oppressive—and to Jacinta maddening. She herself broke it.

“Is there something in you, then, Mr. Horse Doctor, which would make you think twice before you gave Charles Hinges up to a lynching party?”

“Exactly! That’s the point we’ve been discussing all along. I’ve been thinking very hard about this thing. Isn’t Charlie Hinges just the sort of man who *ought* to be lynched? That’s what I’ve been thinking. Is there anything in him besides just a downright brute?”

“Damned if I know!” Charlie answered. He turned to Jacinta as if to let her opinion be the final judgment.

But Jacinta was concerned with the judge who really counted—the veterinary.

“Say, look here,” she said, “what do you think *you* know about Charlie Hinges?”

“Well, I admit it’s just from hearsay. I’ve heard about these repeated assaults of his on weaker, smaller men—the brutal way he beats them up, and now this trouble he got in back there in Little Hell.”

“If you don’t like a man who can beat up Little Hell, what kind of man, for the love of Pete, do you want?” Jacinta asked spiritedly.

“I’ll tell you. I can give you a contrast without going very far afield. Hinges reminds me of a character in this book.” The old man rummaged among his heap of paper books and extracted a dog-eared, yellow-backed copy of “As You Like It.” “The name of the man is *Charles the Wrestler*.

“He seemed invincible because of his size, strength and skill. He could throw everybody in any court that admitted him. Then along came a handsome youth with a spirit as invincible as his body—he was called *Orlando*. *Orlando* had something that the big, professional brute lacked, and when they met it took a good bunch of the *Duke of Burgundy’s* servants to clean the lawn up after *Orlando* got through.”

“This is Arizona,” Jacinta scoffed, “not Burgundy, wherever that is. In Arizona, the kind of strength Charles Hinges has goes as far as any ordinary sheriff will stand for.”

“Right here in Arizona is a man like *Orlando*—a man that can lick Charles Hinges,” the veterinary said.

“Yes? You don’t tell me?” Jacinta replied, joining in with Hinges’s laughter.

“Rumors have come up to this town of a young foreman down in the Big Horn Basin. He first showed his strength when he threw a mad bull that was on a rampage in a village of the Navaho Reservation. Then a story went about of his killing a giant grizzly with his bare hands. That, I believe, was an exaggeration, but on the other hand there are some things that have to be believed: capturing a band of desperadoes down on the border, for instance. It’s in the county records, they say. And then there’s no one can excel him at bronc-twirling and bull-dogging. He’s got all the hand-tooled saddles and prizes ever offered down in that part of the country for winners of rodeos.”

“But does he do any fist-fighting?” Jacinta asked.

“Yes. But only in rare instances, and then because he finds it a better way of stopping rustling than using a gun. And it’s seldom that any man has ever dared to stand up against him—because of the name he has.”

“If Charles Hinges stood up against him—” Jacinta began angrily.

“If Charles Hinges met this man,” Peg interrupted, “it would be a fight between brute strength and a superman. This young fellow down in the Big

Horn Basin could take Charles Hinges up with one hand and throw him into an ash heap like the dead carcass of a mule.”

“I’ll say he can’t,” was Jacinta’s sulky reply.

“What’s this man’s name?” Hinges asked laughingly.

“It’s Charles Hinges’s own brother, David.”

The eyes of the lumbering young giant bulged and blood left his lips until they turned gray and trembled. As he looked at the deeply furrowed face of the old veterinary and stared into the brown, sharp eyes a vision came to him—again of the man dying on Buzzard Mountain and cursing him with his last breath. Unforgotten words rang in his ears: “He is blessed with my strength as you are cursed with it!” And then the prophecy thrummed through his brain: “He will be like the sheaf of Joseph to which the sheaves of his brethren bowed down!”

The old veterinary looked up at the face of his guest and saw the curious pallor that had come over the rusty iron jowls.

“Will you have another glass of this? It is a good wine—something like the *jarez* they drink in Chihuahua.”

“I’ll say he will,” was the dancing girl’s comment.

## CHAPTER XIV

### REVERDY JUDGES THE MAN-BEAST

Charles Hinges quaffed the drink which the old veterinary poured for him. The color came to his face and he stood up, staring for a moment at his own clenched fists. Then with a shrug of his shoulders he remarked: "Let's be taking a look at the horse, pard."

As Peg Reverdy started to follow Hinges to the corral the girl took his arm. "Say, look here," she said, "what sort of a game do you think you're pulling off?"

"No game, miss. I don't play games."

"Say, you aren't blind! You know who we are. Now, where do you get all this stuff, plaguing him—rubbing him the wrong way?"

"Yes, I know who you are—that is, I could make a pretty good guess," the old man admitted.

"And after you made your guess you just figured you'd play with us a while?"

"What do you think I'm playing?"

"You're getting us in your power—that's what you are playing. We've come out of the desert, ready to drop from hunger. We have a sick horse, and all you think you'll have to do is put the screws on, and maybe swipe our horses and turn us over to the sheriff if we squeal?"

"If I played games like that with folks who have sick horses I would be a more prosperous veterinary than I am to-day."

"I guess I haven't quite got your number." The girl studied the old man's face.

"Not yet. I don't even know my own number. I may help you, if— —"

"If what?"

"If I find Hinges is something else besides a brute who ought to be lynched."

Reverdy hobbled out to the corral to join Hinges; the girl followed. The veterinary examined the disabled horse from shoulder to rump, and from the

mouth to the four hoofs.

“How far do you reckon you’ll travel with this horse, and when do you intend starting?” he asked after a long and thorough study of the animal.

“We’re going directly into the desert again—a trip of maybe a few weeks,” Hinges replied. “It all depends on how much help I can get from you. I don’t want to go back to the desert without some kind of camping outfit for the little girl. She’s not built for the desert. You can see that. She’s not born to the plains, range fed, or cut out for rocky traveling. I’d give anything for an outfit for her—a couple of pup tents, maybe. Or if you can’t do that, maybe you have some tarpaulins? If I could settle that little matter I reckon we’d be on the way after dark.”

“Well, concerning my diagnosis of this horse, I can say it’s not going to get well before dark.”

“I’ll leave him here with you, then,” Hinges said. “Perhaps in exchange you can grubstake us.”

“In case I became interested in this bargain,” Peg Reverdy said non-committally. “What else would you like?”

“I don’t reckon we’ll need any money where we’re going.”

“This horse of yours is a good horse—that is, under my treatment he’ll be a good horse in a few weeks. I can stake you to twenty dollars worth of canned goods. But I would be coming out much the best in the trade. If I traded on sick horses I would be having a prosperous veterinary establishment in the center of the town. The business of trading does not appeal to a naturalist and student.

“That old chow cart over there: that’s the result of a trade—a trade which I regret. I regret it first because the medicine I treated the horse with was fatal. That chow cart there belonged to a Jap *tamale* vender; his horse fell sick; its owner brought it to me, saying he would pay after a certain poker game that night. The Jap died of the poker game, and the horse died of glanders, and I was the sole beneficiary of the two deaths. That’s what I got—a chow cart that I’ve been trying to sell for three years. This winter I shall use it for kindling wood.”

Hinges looked across the corral to a rickety old contraption which still bore a mottled remnant of its flaming yellow paint. Its roof was of a streaked and hideous red—the stark, splotchy red of slaughter-house mud. Signs glared from every eave and corner—the largest in blocked letters of black and orange proclaiming its late owner, “John Nogo, the Hot Dog Man.”

Lopsided windows, broken panes, several missing spokes, and one wheel askew, testified to the sanity of Peg Reverdy's judgment: with one stroke of an ax it would make good kindling wood.

"As I told you, Mr. Horse Doctor," Charlie said, "the past few days I've been wishing this little jane here could have had some of the comforts of home, since I was in a way responsible for her new ways of living. Now it comes to my mind, as you mention it, that that chow cart would serve as a good schooner to carry us across the horizon again."

"Just why are you going across the horizon?" the veterinary said with a significant drawl.

"Just why do you ask?"

"I'm doing business with you—that's why."

"Tell him, Charlie," Jacinta interrupted.

"I'm a prospector," Charlie snapped belligerently.

"I don't believe you."

Charlie burst out into an oath. "Well, if that isn't my luck—to have a lame man call me a liar! Look here, Mr. Horse Doctor, I'll tell you who I am. I'm Charlie Hinges! You get that now! And don't let's beat about the bush! Charlie Hinges—the man you call a brute; the man you can get a reward for!"

"You don't mean it!" the old fellow said mockingly.

"And you've got us at your mercy. We can do nothing. We're one horse shy—we've got no outfit, no grub, no shelter. The girl's breaking down from the hardships. So all you have to do, Mr. Skunk, is to call the sheriff and claim your reward. I'll get a good fight out of it, anyway."

Peg Reverdy looked up into the big, red face, and then to the pale face of the girl. He rubbed his long, scrawny fingers, cracked them, and then said quietly: "I prefer to strike my own bargain."

Charles Hinges's jaw dropped with surprise; the girl, flushing with new excitement, put her hand into her companion's tremendous paw.

"Yes, I have you at my mercy," the veterinary went on, "and I've a good mind to appropriate this horse and send you packing because of the renegade scoundrel that you are. But there's been a doubt in my mind all along about just what I should do with you two young people."



“And what have you decided? I’d like to know in a hurry,” Jacinta said.

“Well, I puzzled about this one thing: Charles Hinges, the gentleman here, abducted one of the dance girls from Little Hell—so the report went. The dance girl belonged to China Jones, who is a crony of the sheriff of this town. I happened to know China Jones in days past, and I figured that his dance-hall women are of his own kind. But since seeing the young woman who was abducted, I figure that it’s lucky for her she was saved from Jones—even if it took a big brute to do it.”

“All right, pard,” Charles interrupted loudly. “That being the case, do you want to strike a bargain, or are you going to call the sheriff?”

Peg Reverdy went on without heeding the interruption. “You see, I’ve been puzzling which would really be better for this girl—China Jones or Charlie Hinges, the bully and scoundrel. That was a riddle, you will admit.”

“Sure, I’ll admit it. I’ll admit anything,” Hinges said. “Bring on your sheriff. I’m getting het up again for a good fight. It’s been four days now, and I’m getting soft.”

“If it’s a riddle you better solve it in a hurry,” Jacinta advised. “And if you can’t solve it I’ll save you from cracking open your brains thinking too hard. I’ll give you the answer right here and now—”

“No, no. I’ve found out the answer. I reckon that if China Jones had you and was escaping through the desert he would not stop to argue about a chow wagon for you to travel in. Would he?”

“I’d say he wouldn’t!”

“And he wouldn’t take a chance on being trapped in a town like this just because he wanted to get some drink and food. Would he?”

“I’ll say not!”

“Well, there you are! If Hinges wants to give you a house and home before he lands in civilization, he shows he can take care of you. And as the big brute who saved you from China Jones he deserves a reward. Take the chow wagon, and I’ll fit it out for you,” old Peg Reverdy concluded. “We’ll put in a couple of slabs of bacon, a coffeepot, baking powder, spuds, prunes, and anything else you want for a two weeks’ journey.

“I reckon, at that, I’ll be coming out ahead with this horse of yours. And one thing else that finishes this bargain and goes with it: it’s a promise from me that I’ll set China Jones and the sheriff on the wrong trail. As far as I’m concerned, *you two are free!*”

## CHAPTER XV

### THE STARS INCLINE

Augustina, the palmist, beguiling herself for hours at solitaire, was interrupted by the rumbling of a cart drawn by two little pintos. Her first impulse upon seeing this vehicle plunging down out of the darkness was to flee into the thicket, but the driver—a huge man in tall-peaked sombrero—dismounted and ran toward her. In the midst of her dismay—which was vented in prayers to her favorite saint, as well as incantations to the devil—she recognized Charlie Hinges.

“Have no fear, *señora!*” Jacinta called out from her position on the driver’s seat. “We’re going to sail away into the desert in this old schooner, and when we show ourselves again to civilization we’ll be out of the clutches of Mr. China Jones.”

“Then the cards were wrong?” Augustina asked, bewildered.

“If the cards announced a bust-up of our little family,” Jacinta answered, “it looks to me as if there was a misdeal somewhere. Step up and take a look at our new address.”

Hinges lifted the palmist into the chow wagon and lit a jacklantern which hung from the roof of the little cabin. Jacinta showed the old woman the shelves, the floor and the bunks of their little home, which had been scrubbed and swept clean of *débris*. Augustina gazed about the walls, which still contained John Nogo’s signs: “Hot Tamales, Two Bits”; “Hot Dogs, Five Cents”; “All Fighting Done Outside”; “Chile Con Carne, Ten Cents”; “No Spitting Aloud,” and so on.

The stove of the chow cart had been removed by its previous owner, and a soap box full of canned goods had taken its place. Two bunks, one above the other, suggested the atmosphere of a yawl’s cabin. It would need several more washings to efface the suggestion of “hot dogs” which had clung to the old chow cart since the unfortunate, poker playing Japanese had used it as a lunch wagon months before.

“I’ll burn incense,” was the palmist’s first reaction.

“And the cooking after this will be done on a couple of rocks in the desert,” said Jacinta. “That will help.”

“And this door in the back being torn from its hinges will give us plenty of air,” said Charlie. “And we’ll only use the burlap curtain in case of storm.”

“Or in case coyotes or Mexicans come nosing around when we’re wrapped in a balmy snooze,” said Jacinta.

The two women started in to prepare their first big feast since the long fast of their past journey, and Charlie Hinges vaulted up to the driver’s seat, lashing the pintos into a smart trot down the long slope of the hill.

For an hour they clattered along the edge of the cañon through which, that afternoon, they had come out of the desert. Where the county road turned from the winding course on the edge of the bluffs they abandoned it and followed a long, winding cow trail across the limitless grazing lands that bordered the desert.

At the first downward trail sufficient for a wagon team they plunged into the dark gulch. Far from the beaten paths, secluded in the densely timbered bed of the cañon, Hinges brought his team to a stop. Here they made their first camp, and here, Hinges pointed out, their fire would be well hidden from the civilized world.

Bacon, hot coffee, flapjacks, and a bottle of Peg Reverdy’s *jarez* broke their long fast; the pintos tossed their heads eagerly to get the last grain from their nosebags, and when the dinner was over Hinges inhaled gloriously at a rolled cigarette while the old duenna smoked her pipe.

“Get out your cards, Augustina, and tell us what trail to take,” Hinges suggested.

“We’ll live in the desert until our provisions are gone,” said the palmist. “We will travel to the horizon—and then what?”

Charles Hinges had no answer, but while he puffed his cigarette it was Augustina who spoke: “We will live like gypsies. I will tell people’s fortunes, and get more money. Then we will sail again for the horizon.”

“It won’t work for you to support this outfit,” Jacinta said; “particularly with the two horses and Charlie thrown in. I have been thinking as we were riding down into this cañon. There is talent enough in this trio to pull off a better show than a palmist can give alone in her booth. We can rig up a stage in back of this cab when we hit a town. You can tell fortunes; I will be the dancer, dancing in this very costume that I’m wearing underneath this crazy quilt.

“Of course, a yard or two of cheese cloth will be necessary—as all places we hit won’t be like Little Hell, and we don’t want to be mixing in with any ladies’ aid society. Then, to complete this little company of strolling players, we have with us to-night Mr. Charlie Hinges, otherwise known as Charles the Wrestler, who will take on all comers.”

“That suits me,” Hinges replied. “But where do you get the idea that I’m Charles the Wrestler?” he asked with a flush at the remembrance of their talk with Peg Reverdy.

“Shakespeare himself gave me the idea.”

The palmist looked up, and the flickering camp fire lighted her unbelieving grin.

“No, *señora*, I’ve never read Shakespeare, I admit,” Jacinta said. “But I know for a fact that he wrote a part expressly for Charles Hinges. The horse doctor back there told us all about it.”

“It’s a good plan,” Hinges agreed. “The three of us will make a troupe and set up our show at any little cow town that pops up in our course.”

“If the stars agree—it is a good plan!” Augustina cried. “And to call this man Charles the Wrestler is the best plan of all, for by traveling about the range under a new name he will not be searched out by China Jones. From this night on we’ll call him Charles the Wrestler, and no man shall ever know that we are Augustina, the palmist, and Charles Hinges, the brute, and Jacinta, the dancer of Little Hell.”

“As I remember,” Hinges said suddenly, “the old horse doctor said something about *Charles the Wrestler* being thrown by a bird named *Orlando*. Now, if I’m to take on this fancy name for show purposes I want you two ladies to distinctly understand that there’s no Orlando this side of the Rio Grande—or on the other side—that can ever lick *me!*”

“We understand that,” Jacinta said. “There’s no one going to argue with you on that point. Like as not, the men you meet won’t last half a round, and you’ll have to use a pillow to throw ’em on, for fear the sheriffs on our road will bust the show because of manslaughter.”

“The cards will show us the trail.” Augustina shuffled her dog-eared pack. She smoothed a flat space on the sand, dealt cards face upward, and then with a firebrand held over them read her incantations.

“Across the horizon!” she cried as if the cards had revealed a great truth.

“Now, that’s sure like a palmist giving advice!” Jacinta taunted. “She tells us ‘across the horizon,’ and most boneheads bite and think that means something. All *we* have to do is to figure which direction the horizon is from here!”

The palmist flushed darkly, swore, and all but threw the firebrand at Jacinta’s shiny ringlets.

Hinges held the angry, clawlike arm.

“I’ve decided which way we’re going,” he said.

Jacinta, sensing a new note, looked into his face, grim in the cold, blue light of the stars.

“I am still Charles, the brute—until I see my brother. I am going to wipe out my father’s curse by meeting David. I must see him—down there in the Big Horn Basin. And it is through this challenge I will meet him. For if any man should come out with a challenge like this—the challenge that I will hurl out in every town—my brother will surely answer it. For he is of my blood. The blood of Peter Hinges is in my brother’s veins as it is in mine. That is the way I will square myself with my father.”

“And when you meet the brother— —” Jacinta began.

“When I meet him I’ll take him in my arms, and say there is to be no more hatred between the two of us from then on. I will say that the curse of my father was a vain curse, and that I have come to him as a reformed man to throw off that curse.”

“No,” Jacinta said, with a melodious, inexorable calmness. “Do not throw your arms about him—except as a wrestler. Fight him.”

“Fight him!” Charles cried in surprise. “Look here, girl, you’re forgetting that it is for you I am reforming myself from a brute. And again you tell me to fight—as you did back there in the saloon at Little Hell.”

“If you do not fight him,” Jacinta said, “then you cannot throw off your father’s curse. If you do not fight him—and defeat him—how will you know he might not have licked you?”

“Licked me?” Charles cried hotly. “Licked *me*!” His first flush faded, leaving his forehead wet; then slowly he burst out into a scoffing laugh. “I’ll meet him!” he shouted. “Get into the old boat and we’ll ride through every town in the Basin till we find him. And I’ll say, ‘Come on, all you buckaroos—if you’ve got the blood of a fighting man! Come and meet me!’ And *he’ll* come! That much I know of him. *He’ll* come, and we’ll see what my old dad

meant when he said—with his last breath—that my sheaf would bow down to his!”

When Hinges drove the cart out through the mouth of the arroyo they found themselves at the threshold of the desert—a serene, misty sea of billowing blue hills. The sharp contours of the nearer cañons—etched black—merged into softer, wavelike lines of the valleys. The limitless plains shimmered in the soft light with their deposits of bright, white alkali, quartz, and mica.

In the distance the stark, wind-polished mesas were lit to the enchanting color of jade. This color deepened on the rim as the eyes of the fugitives circled it to the east. Here it was jet black, and the crest of the table-lands cut across a huge, dilated moon.

The setting brought back an ancient thrill to the heart of the fortune teller. The beam caught a glint on the grotesque comb, and a brighter light in the sunken but smoldering eyes. Augustina was happy with the happiness that she was ever searching. Once again she was a strolling player, and no setting could have been more satisfying to her soul.

Charles Hinges, too, was enraptured with new desires. The greatest was love, but there was also another joy: the fulfilling of a new hope; the thrill of a search. Eager was this giant renegade to perfect himself for the sake of the girl. He felt a curious new drunkenness—more subtle than the abandon of fighting or the ecstasy of strong drink.

He was searching for a soul.

It was a tangible thing—this soul—something even Charles Hinges could understand. It was a search for his brother, David Hinges. Beyond those moonlit mesas Charles knew he would find David and consummate his reform. With his huge arm about the dancing girl who rode beside him on the driver’s seat, Hinges broke out into incontinent and lusty song.

He was no more buoyant than the girl at his side. Every sound of the enchanting night—the call of the coyote, the droning wind, even the thudding of the horses’ hoofs in the crisp sand, touched a chord in Jacinta’s breast. She teemed with youth and life; she was ecstatic with desires; she breathed gloriously of the thin, cool, sage-scented air.

And still, deep within her, even while she laughed and sang, there was a yearning which she knew Charles Hinges, for all his worship and for all his power, could not satisfy.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE VOICE OF THE CAÑON

The multitude of desires submerged deep within the care-free, buoyant spirit of Jacinta had focused into one—it was a desire for freedom. In Little Hell she had been fettered almost as literally as a prisoner is locked in a cell. Now her sudden liberation set free not only herself, but all her latent yearnings—yearnings for happiness, for life, for a thousand things she could not name or understand. But certainly there was no yearning for the arms of the lumbering fighter who had saved her.

Charles Hinges evoked no thrill in Jacinta. But everything else did—the immensity and loneliness of the desert, the thin, crisp, scented air, the intermittent, wild call of coyote, panther, or the wind. And the remote dome of the sky swarming with stars touched a chord in the girl's breast after the days of depressing captivity.

But then there came a moment which held a world of experience for Jacinta—a moment that awoke some strange, dormant sense within her which she could not explain. It was merely a passing thought, but her reaction to it could not be forgotten. It came with the first light of daybreak on the desert horizon.

That light, faint as it was, seemed of a terrific power. It was greater than the desert—ininitely greater, more inexorable, more terrifying. It could wipe away the blackness of the desolate scene about her with one faint breath of wind. It could wipe away the light of the stars themselves. While she watched that coming sunrise Jacinta heard a distant call far down the valley like the wailing scream of a woman. That night they had encamped in the dry wash of a cañon. Augustina was asleep, but Jacinta, peering out of the chow cart door, saw Charles standing, looming against the pale green light of the horizon. The cry of the puma far down the cañon was enough to curdle any one's blood.

It was then that she experienced that new, fearful, momentary thrill: she knew that Charles Hinges, who was protecting her, was more powerful than the desert. She identified his love for her with the changing, growing light on the horizon. Then she forgot about it, and laughed joyfully as she saw Charles take out his six-shooter and bound away down the rocks of the dry wash.

“Wake up, *señora*, and we’ll build a fire!” Jacinta cried to the palmist. “Charlie’s gone hunting, and we’re going to have fricassee of wildcat for breakfast.”

Charles followed the dry creek bed, over sand and boulders and black patches of rattleweed.

The light of the horizon was shut out as the cañon narrowed, but the sky was slowly coloring far to eastward. Directly beyond overhanging crags he could see the moon. It was losing its power—turning fainter and more wraithlike. The stars had disappeared, except one, a brilliant sapphire light in the west.

A long, fast hike brought the hunter to a narrow gulch. Here the upheaval of rock strata had dammed the sparse water of the past season. Overhanging granite walls prevented the evaporation caused by the terrific desert afternoon. A well of water reflected the sky so that it seemed a mirror of pale jade, and from its rim circles of light rippled out from a boulderlike form on the opposite shore.

Charles drew his gun, fired, and the shot ricocheted deafeningly in the arroyo. The crouching form which had seemed like a shapeless boulder carved in the dark rock strata surrounding it leaped up from the edge of the pool, coming miraculously instinct with life. Charles saw it bound through the air a distance of twenty feet, then fall—kicking, convulsed, in the sand bed.

The sound of the shot came, a singular and vital language, to Jacinta as she waited at the upper end of the cañon. And it was as understandable to her as if it had been a call from Charles himself, proclaiming: “I am the lord of this desert; all beings are subject to me, and to all enemies of my mate I will deal death.”

Having slain the cougar, Charles went down to the pool, knelt at the edge where, but a moment before, his victim had lapped up the water. Brackish as it was from alkali, Charles was refreshed.

Stripping himself, he stood on the edge ready to dive. The pale green of the sky had become tinged and its light shone from the bosom of the pool now like a garnet with the overhanging cliffs reflected in perfect detail. For all the beauty of the setting, there was one detail in that crimson mirror which could not be matched by any touch of nature, of veined rocks, or even of the dawn itself. It was the superb magnificence of Charles’s body.



He saw his tremendous shoulders, the heroic sculpturing of his neck, the symmetry and grace of the long muscles rippling up to a knot as he doubled his arm. It was just this fleeting glance Charles had of himself. One dive into the deep cool water and the image shattered into a thousand ripples.

He splashed and rolled, scattering the spray so that it glowed almost like phosphorescence in the growing light. And as he splashed and swam there seemed to be more strength in that image of life and youth than in the gigantic boulders and the granite cliffs which made the background.

When he came out dawn shone upon him and his muscles gleamed with the drops of sparkling water as well as the glow of his blood. The thrill of power and of exuberant, youthful life which his plunge had awakened in him was breathed into every movement of his body.

Even when he clothed himself again the grace and symmetry and power could not be hidden. With the cougar thrown over his shoulder he bounded up the cañon, again shouting, singing—a figure that was all powerful, heroic in mold, ruling that domain like a god on the slopes of Olympus.

Jacinta saw him coming, and as he leaped up from one great rock to another and strode across the big stretch of sand where they had camped, she waited. Her beautiful lips parted with wonder at this new aspect of her slave and lover; then, when Charles threw the cougar at her feet she burst out:

“Say, Charlie, you’re absolutely immense! If I didn’t think I was falling mad in love with you, I’d even go so far as to say that you’re positively handsome!”

Charles held out his arms, and she noticed now the fire of life underneath the bronzed skin. Looking up to his face, she saw the glow of perfect health underneath the unshaven stubble.

“Then you’re telling me of your own will that you love me!”

“Sure I am! You’re great—that’s all. That’s the only word I can think of. You are simply great! There’s not another man in the world like you. You’ve got the strength, the power, the size—I’m up to my neck in love with you, if you want to know my honest opinion.”

“You’re a little child.” Charles knew in his heart that though she loved his physical brawn, there was something else lacking—something that she would surely desire. “You don’t know yet what sort of a man you want for a mate.”

“Well, if you won’t suit as a mate, it looks to me as if I must be pretty particular. What more would a girl like me want? I’m not the Queen of Egypt, you know; and even at that I’ll bet if they put old King Solomon himself up alongside of you, they wouldn’t call you any too much of a slouch!”

“Look here, girl, come into these arms. Feel them—see how they could shield you. Look at this fist of mine here—to break the jaw of any man who’d try to take you from me. Just put your head on this chest of mine. Could you feel any safer if it was a granite boulder protecting you? And listen to the heart beating there—a heart that wouldn’t quiver if ten men—or ten cougars—jumped me to rob me of you!”

Jacinta resigned herself to his irresistible, fascinating physical power. He did not press her to himself; he did not so much as give her an intimation of the crushing power of his arms; he did not kiss her.

It was the girl who kissed him.

The power was there, and she could feel it as if it had been a radiating heat—a part of the new, fresh glow of his great body.

And so—momentarily—Jacinta fell completely in love. It was an impulsive act, as any deed of Jacinta’s must be impulsive. But even if it were only momentary, such moments—according to Augustina, the witch of Pimas—were worth all of eternity.

The old seeress, poking her sleepy head out of the door of the cart, nodded wisely and triumphantly. Impulsive love was the only kind written in her cards—or for that matter in her sky. As she saw the two lovers embrace—at the very moment that the first rays of sun fell upon the background of yellow, rain-painted rocks, she smiled with a thrill of romantic joy—a thrill that satisfied her soul.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE MAN KILLER

At the end of ten days the troupe of three players rode down the northern rim of the Big Horn Basin. The chow cart was a moving patch of color—reds, greens, yellows, with the added garnishment of Jacinta's crimson scarf, the palmist's purple bodice, and lastly, a yellow skin of a wildcat bagged in the Bad Lands by Hinges and stretched, drying, across the roof.

The old ark lumbered southward on the trail where the thin air of the mountains was touched with the fainter, warmer perfume of sage and mesquite. The piñons grew scraggly, but the rocky plains of the upland mesas gave way to gently sloping valleys of Spanish sycamore, bur clover and mutton grass. When they reached the edge of the rimrock plains and drove down onto the cattle trails they knew that they had come out of the desert. Now they were no longer fugitives, but strolling players.

The trail led them across buffalo wallows, down to a watering place, across to a limitless cattle range, and finally to a box cañon which had served as a bed ground for the traveling herds. Here the trail—an intertwining of a dozen smoothly beaten paths—widened like a delta, and at the mouth of the cañon narrowed again into what seemed like a two-furrowed stage road. Following this for a six-hour ride, the little troupe came precipitously upon the outermost ranch of the Big Horn Basin.

It was a cluster of calf wards, bunkhouses, barns and paddocks, with a central house of unpainted oak, badly warped by sun and rain and twisted by the wind. Two half-breed dogs, an old Mexican *vaquero*, shuffling about one of the corrals, and a freckled towheaded boy riding a big horse, were the only signs of life about the place. But the dogs setting up a loud yelping at sight of the chow cart brought out a woman from the main ranch-house.

She was the usual ranch type, with sun-faded hair, sun-reddened face, and soiled Mother Hubbard. Her pale eyes narrowed as she squinted suspiciously at the chow cart, at the huge, unshaven driver, and the pretty girl beside him.

“What do you-all want here?” she asked.

“We want to water our team—and also ourselves.”

“Who are you, and where you from?”

Hinges turned to Jacinta, and the two exchanged smiles.

“Don’t be afraid of us, lady,” Hinges said. “We aren’t desperadoes—and we don’t intend to touch you. There’s three of us—myself, this girl, and the old lady—and we’re a troupe of performing actors looking for the nearest town where we can pull off our show.”

“Gypsies, eh?” the ranchwoman said with a suggestion of a snort.

“Traveling players!” Augustina corrected crisply.

“Well, it’s the first time I seen any gypsies hereabouts!” the ranchwoman went on. “You won’t find much stock taken in gypsies in this part of the country.”

The freckle-faced boy rode up, reined in his huge horse, and sat gaping at the gayly dressed people on the rider’s seat, and at the drying wildcat skin.

The ranchwoman ordered the boy to call Pedro, their *vaquero*, and accordingly the little fellow wheeled his huge mount by pressing a small bare foot into the animal’s haunch.

“It appears to me that little shaver can handle a pretty good-sized nag,” Hinges said, staring at the boy and his mount with a peculiar intentness.

“What’s the matter, Charlie?” Jacinta asked. “Is that the long-lost brother you have been looking for?”

“I was looking at the horse—not the boy.”

“That thar’s my boy,” the ranchwoman said, her reserve thawing now at its weakest point. “He’s nine years old. He can ride a horse good. He’s a smart little man—that boy.”

Jacinta, noting that Charlie still seemed tongue-tied, looking at the black broncho, broke the silence herself.

“Are you two running the ranch alone?” she asked.

“I sure run it,” the ranchwoman said in her dry, tired voice. “Them menfolk ride out on the range—that’s all they do. I’m the one that runs it. There’s nine hundred head of cattle the menfolk have under herd. It’s a good beef herd.”

Hinges watched the big, shaggy, black horse trot off to the corral and then respond to the boy’s shifting weight as he heeled it about and led it to the chow cart.

“What in Sam Hill do you see so wonderful about that nag?” Jacinta asked again.

“That’s a famous hoss—everybody has seen that hoss,” the ranchwoman said.

It was a villainous-looking animal, if looks alone count. The lean, meager muscles of the withers, the heavy thick shoulders and coarse neck made an ugly enough animal at best. His curved Roman nose and the ears sticking out like the ears of a jackass indicated that he was about as mean as he was ugly. Then the size of him made a formidable-looking beast: black, shaggy, more like a prehistoric wolf than a horse—he looked in fact as if he had been fed on meat instead of grain. And the peculiar thing about it all was that instead of acting like a man killer or a wolf, he was like a lamb.

“What’s the matter, Charlie? What are you looking at? Is there a ghost, or maybe you think the old black cayuse there is a nightmare?”

“It sure is,” Charlie muttered. “Look here, lady”—he turned to the ranchwoman—“if you want my honest opinion, I’d advise you not to let that little man ride that broncho. First thing you know the horse will turn around and swallow your son and heir alive.”

“I can handle him,” the boy said condescendingly. “I know how to handle him.”

“Sure he can handle him,” the ranchwoman said. “Every one knows about that old buckler—he’s harmless.”

Pedro had arrived from the corral, and he put in his testimony. “This cayuse wouldn’t swallow a horsefly without askin’ its pardon first.”

Charlie interrupted. “I’ve seen that horse before—it’s an outlaw. Maybe you don’t know, ma’am,” he said to the ranchwoman, “that there’s a man killer.”

“I reckon you seen him when he was a show hoss.” The ranchwoman grew disdainful.

“Exactly. And he was the all-firedest, cussingest show horse in the business. There wasn’t a bronc-twirler in all Arizona could get within wrangling distance of him. I’ve seen him up north in a bunch of rodeos, and he’d thrown everybody. He’s a biter, a forestriker, a cakewalker, and everything else. It beats me how you’ll let a little kid like that ride him.”

“Well, I’ll tell you,” the ranchwoman explained. “We bought that hoss from a rodeo superintendent down to Elko. He said it was no more use to

him because he couldn't get another buck outen him even if he set fire to his belly. We bought him for next to nothin', and used him hayin'. After a while some of our men got it into their heads they'd like to ride him, knowin' he was such a famous outlaw and the feelin' bein' on his back made 'em think they was somebody. Well, we kep' him for nigh on a year, and more and more people rid him. I've rid him myself all the way to Elko to market. He'll even get into harness."

"I've rode him, too, *señor*. Me that's an old man and afraid to try our other cayuses—our rope hosses and such. But this cayuse, *señor*, is safer than the chow cart in which you are ridin'."

"My little boy can ride him, too," the ranchwoman said. "He's a good rider—my little son."

Hinges let out a slow whistle and an oath. "If I'd ever thought this nag could have come to such disgrace! How did it happen?"

"Ah, that's a great story—how it happened!" Pedro exclaimed feelingly.

"He was busted," the little boy broke in. "A cowboy busted him. I'm going to be a cowboy when I grow up. I'm going to bust outlaws."

"It was a great event, *señor*!" old Pedro went on. "The fall of this stallion was like the fall of a great bandit chief, for as you know no man could ride him—not even with hobbled stirrups or locked spurs."

"I know," Charlie nodded with a glow of excitement. "I've seen him sunfish with a poor bronc-peeler that thought he could win a championship staying on. I've seen 'em step up on this horse's hurricane deck and think they'd take a seat in the saddle. Instead they took a seat on their own necks. I've seen 'em!"

"And down in Elko there was a rodeo, *señor*, and there came a man to the rodeo who had performed many feats, and whose name was spread about the country as they will spread the name of a brigand and instill fear about his wonderful works. Well, this young man came riding to the rodeo, and some wranglers took this horse and old-manned him with a gunnysack blindfold, and three snubbin' hosses surrounded him as the bronc-buster hurdled into the saddle. Then the beast started such hell-diving as you've never seen by any horse in this natural world.

"But it was a great bronc-buster in the saddle—a man who knew which way his mount would dive—by watching his muscles. That is the only way to stay on a horse that has seven devils with him, *señor*. But the hunching and diving and twisting of this horse was terrifying to behold. The devils in

him contorted him—he was convulsed, and still the man on his back stayed on. He raked the beast from shoulder to rump, rolling the rowels fore and aft until the very hair flew and the sun twinkled on the stirrups as if they were swords in a duel! The devils were cast out—as the devils were cast out of the swine in the story the priest told me down at Nogales.”

“Well, I’d think everything you’ve told me was a plain ornery Mexican lie, Mr. Mozo,” Hinges remarked, “except that I see the old skyscraping, cake-walking ton of dynamite right before my very eyes, and with a little barefooted child handling him with his naked heels. Would you mind telling me the name of the hero who broke the spirit of this demon? It is my business as a show wrestler to hunt out big men, and I’d admire to meet your bronc-buster, for there is little doubt but that we could draw a big crowd to see our show if I challenged such a great man to a wrestling match.”

“It must be you have just come to the Basin, if you ask such a question,” the *vaquero* said. “There is only one man that can perform such deeds hereabouts—and his name is famed all over the cow towns and ranges of the Big Horn Basin country. I’ll tell you the name of the man who rode that horse—and from this day on, when you hear of him, you will hear that he has the strength and skill, not of one man, but of a band of men. He came down years ago from the Buzzard Mountain country— —”

A cold, sinister hand of warning—of unnatural fear—clutched Charlie’s heart before the *vaquero* uttered the fateful name.

“And,” continued the Mexican, “he is called David Hinges.”

An icy calmness drenched over Charles Hinges. The great, decisive moment of his life *was about to begin!*

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE SHEPHERD OF HUMILIATION

Pedro, the ranch hand, led Hinges's dusty little pintos to the trough and pumped some water for them to drink. The three travelers filled their canteens and the water pail which hung from the rear axle of the chow cart. Having drunk of the well water themselves, they embarked again, preparatory to riding out upon the Elko trail.

"Elko's a ride of fifteen miles," the mozo said. He pointed toward the wide sweep of plain beyond the cattle ranch, which was bordered by a series of mesas—a glaring yellow, red and buff in the brilliant sun. "The county road takes you direct, *señor*. Beyond that sage plain and across the Snake Cañon you'll find a water pool, but no creek. The creek's not dry, but runs underground. Five miles farther you pass a sheep range, and it's our custom, *señor*, to advise travelers who come into the Basin as strangers from the desert to be careful of that range.

"There's a bad *hombre* there whose hand is against every man. He is a big man—as big, yes, almost as big as you. He has not your shoulders, but there is no doubt he is taller, and his eyes are a sharp gray, always looking out for trespassers. He had stock-proof fences about his range, but they have been cut, and the shortest way to Elko is through his range.

"People who are unwise take that journey, not knowing they are riding through cut fences. It is best for you to go around, following the cañon bed, which is a longer journey, but safest."

"I don't reckon the mutton man will hurt us any," Hinges replied. "I'm taking the shortest way—sheep or no sheep, fence or no fence, and bad man or no bad man."

The ranch hand shook his head, but then said, with a shrug: "I have warned you—that is enough."

"The journey in the desert has been hard on this lady of mine." Hinges indicated the girl at his side. "The sooner we get to town, the better for her—and there's not a bad man that can scare me out of a short cut."

"If he calls our attention to the fact that we're trespassing," Jacinta remarked, "our little Charles the Wrestler will show him a point or two about arguing."



"I guess so," Charlie admitted, elated at the prospect of meeting a sheepman who would cross him.

"This sheepman is merciless in a fight," the *vaquero* warned again. "He beat three prospectors who had lost their path—and they had to be taken away in a buckboard to Elko, being too badly mangled to stay in their saddles."

"What did they do to deserve such a deal?" Charles asked.

"Nothing. That is the way with the sheep rancher—Pablo Griffon. He is half Navaho, half idiot. He needs no cause to start his brutality."

"They were innocent men—those men that were lost?" Charles asked.

"Yes; and little hope of sympathy can you have from the people of Elko if you go through his ranch after being warned—and he attacks you."

"Take his advice," Augustina put in. "I am a soothsayer, and I presage evil here."

Charles looked at her, and then turned abruptly to the ranch hand. "Say, look here—where is this ranch exactly?"

"You cross the creek where the county road goes down to its bed, and you cut up over the hills for a distance of five miles. As you mount the hills you enter upon the ranch. You will see large flocks grazing. To avoid it you do not cut up into the hills from the pool, but follow the creek bed. I am glad, *señor*, you wish to make certain where it is and thus avoid it."

"Avoid it!" Charles snorted. "I'm making certain so's I won't miss it." He clucked to his horses, and the old cart creaked, moved and rumbled out to the road. Jacinta waved good-by to the *vaquero* and the grim, faded ranchwoman who was watching from her veranda. The freckled boy followed for a furlong, riding beside the cart as the bodyguard of a royal coach.

"David Hinges rode this horse," was the general burden of his conversation. "And I can ride him, too. He's a good horse. He won't buck—see? I can rake him, but he won't buck. You couldn't make him buck!"

At the outermost corral the boy wheeled the big brute about with a final exhibition of his horsemanship and galloped off toward the house.

A hot, dusty ride across the sage plain, and then a descent into a rocky, winding cañon brought them, late in the afternoon, to the water hole. Again

Hinges watered the pintos, but the pool was too brackish to serve as drinking water for himself or the two women.

From here the road cut up across the shelves of the cañonside. It was an old road and one rarely used. Rattleweed choked it at places, and deep cross furrows had been cut in the adobe mud by rivulets in times of storm. Finally, after winding over a hill, it descended into a wide prairie of sun-faded forage where, a mile or two farther on, the travelers caught sight of a flock of sheep.

The flock seemed limitless, spreading up the sides of the hill, moving across the wallows like a tide, churning up a faint mist of alkali which turned blue in the distance. As Hinges drove on, keeping to the road, which the sheep monopolized beyond, he saw the figure of a horseman emerge from the curtain of dust.

“I guess this is Mr. Muttonman himself,” Hinges said to the girl. “Now, as you know, I’m a reformed man, and it’s much against my principles to pick a fight. I am not going to beat this man up—unless he asks me to as a personal favor.”

Hinges drove on, and the old spirit of fight took possession of him, as the evil spirits had taken possession of the outlaw horse his brother had broken. It would be an act of great glory to beat up this bully of a sheepman, particularly with his girl looking on. And to have punished a man so notorious in that part of the country would most certainly make a good entrance for the troupe of actors—especially for their leader, Charles the Wrestler.

“No, I must not beat him up—unless he starts it,” Charles repeated. “I am a reformed man. You have reformed me.”

With these very words he took his plaited cowskin whip and lashed the little pintos into a furious gallop. The old chow cart thundered down the road toward the flock and plunged into the very center of it, so that the sheep scattered in every direction like bees from a jet of boiling water.

Two shepherd dogs, barking and yelping, increased the panic so that the maddened sheep raced down the hill, some piling up when a boulder obstructed them, others stampeding into an arroyo. Having effected this, Hinges drew his team sharp up to a jolting stop, and at that moment he came almost literally face to face with the big horseman.

The sheep rancher was thunderstruck with what had happened. His thin lips, colorless with anger, were parted, his mouth all but gaping. His green

eyes—now burning with a yellow fire—were so widened that the whites showed all around.

“Holloa, Mr. Muttonmaker!” Charlie said. “It’s a nice day—ain’t it?”

The rancher’s horse stood with its shoulder against the rider’s seat of the chuck wagon. The two men were looking at each other scarcely a yard apart.

“Yes, it’s a nice day—it’s lambing time for my sheeps—until you come along. It’s damn lucky they didn’t stampede back thar in Snake Cañon, or they’d have gone over the cliff—every ram, lamb and ewe of the lot!”

“Who do you reckon it’s lucky for, Mr. Muttonmaker? For you—or for me?”

The yellow flame burned up as the eyes narrowed. Then, with a weakening of the thin lips that surprised Hinges, the rancher answered: “I reckon I meant it’d be lucky for the sheep.”

Hinges turned to Jacinta with every mark of astonishment on his big, red face. “Say,” he drawled in a changed tone, “who are you, anyway? I guess I’ve made a mistake. Are you the owner of this sheep run here—the man that put up some wire and objected to trespassers?”

As he asked these questions Hinges and the girl saw two other horsemen rounding up the scattered flock.

“I guess you’re in the wrong pew, Charlie. The owner must be one of those birds down there.”

“I am the owner,” the sheepman said. “This land belongs to me. I put up some wire, but it was called moonshine wire by the cattlemen, and I kind of submitted to their tearing it down.”

“You submitted, eh? Well, I understand you submitted after beating up every one that came through here.”

“Oh, yes!” The man shrugged. “I did a little fighting at first, but I’m not naturally a fighting man.”

Hinges gathered his reins and released the foot-brake. “You notice, Mr. Muttonman, that I wasn’t hesitating very long when I decided to ride through your ranch.”

The sheep farmer smiled a cringing smile. “Sure—but it’s all right,” he said. “I ain’t lookin’ for trouble, pard. My sheep hands has got the flock together pretty well. You didn’t do no harm to speak of. It’s all right. Everything’s jake.”

“You notice I’m not asking your permission to keep on going the way I came? I’m going right on.”

“That’s all right, pard. Don’t mind what you heard about me. I’m naturally a peaceable man, I am. Go right ahead.”

“Say, what the Sam Hill’s come over you, mister, anyway?” Jacinta asked.

“It weren’t his fault, miss,” the farmer replied wheeling his horse as Hinges started down the road. “At first I thought it was his fault, so I rid up for to ask him to explain. But now I come to figure I should not orter monopolize the road with my flock. It was my fault.”

Hinges and Jacinta looked at each other and both burst out into a hearty laugh.

“Well, they certainly fooled us about that *hombre* when they told us he was a bad man! I never saw such a cringing, fight-leary half-breed in my life!” Charlie’s laugh died down to a feeling of disappointment. His desire to show off before Jacinta had not been satisfied.

They passed one of the sheep hands farther down the road. Hinges called to him. “Hey, there, mozo! Come over here. I want to talk to you!”

A little man with a wrinkled face, peppered with his unshaved stubble, rode up to the chow cart.

“How far is it to Elko?”

“About twenty miles. You can’t make it to-night in that schooner.”

The sheep hand was considerably more independent in his address than his master, the bad man.

“Well, I reckon we can camp for the night before we get there,” Hinges rejoined. “But one thing else you can tell me, pard. I’m looking for a man that every one seems to know in the Big Horn Basin—a foreman of a cattle outfit by the name of David Hinges.”

The sheep hand’s forehead wrinkled up. “H-m! David Hinges! What’s your business with him?”

“My business with everybody is this: I’m a show wrestler; I take on all comers. We figure on opening up a show at Elko. The old lady back here with the earrings and the *rebozo* is a palmist; this little jane is a dancer; I’m the big act—wrestling’s my business.”

“Well, if that’s your business you better close up shop and take a inventory of your teeth and bones afore you go takin’ on all comers at Elko. You look like a pretty good wrestler to me—and maybe you can lick most of the Elko cow gents—but when you mention the name of this here Dave Hinges you’re pronouncin’ your own death sentence. Your business would go to smash so quick that thar ain’t a harnessmaker in the country could put your outfit together agin.”

“You’ve never seen this boy tussle,” Jacinta put in.

“That’s all right. When speakin’ of Dave Hinges you don’t have to see the other guy afore you place your bets. It’s safe—no matter if you get a bullfighter fresh outen the ring at Pozo Verde—or for that matter, the bull himself. Dave Hinges could take a bull and a toreador—and you, too, Mr. Gypsyman—and churn the bunch of you up like you was a barrel of butter!”

“Is this David Hinges living near Elko?” Jacinta asked.

“All as you have to do is to say that you want all comers for to enter a wrasslin’ match. Then you’ll find he’s living near Elko, all right enough. That’s all as is necessary to find his address.”

“My Charlie can beat him!” Jacinta cried proudly.

The sheep hand opened his big, brown mouth in a scoffing laugh.

“That’s what they all say!” he snickered finally. “That’s what we said about our chief over there— —”

“About who?” Hinges asked, with a slight intuition of a coming shock.

“You see that big man over there ridin’ around the flock? The man who rode up to you when you busted in and scattered our sheep?”

“You don’t mean to say he fought this wonderful David Hinges?” Charles laughed. “He’s about as polite as a lamb talkin’ to a bunch of coyotes.”

“That’s him all right—polite as a lamb. Well, if you’ll believe it, pard—that thar chief of ours was the orneriest, cussingest bully as ever picked a fight! And he’d taken on any one, too—he weren’t a coward bully. He’d take on everybody and lick ’em!”

“That’s his rep even now. We heard it this mornin’ from a ranch hand across the plain.”

“Sure—folks haven’t seen the change that’s come over him. He’s been busted, that’s the reason—just a short while back, too. Busted as good and

proper as any loud-mouthed four-flusher as ever picked a fight. He got into one fight too much—that's what.

“And that's where *you're* headin' for—one fight too much! I don't care who you are. We all cringed and quaked whenever our chief opened his mouth—but no more, I'll tell you. Why, he's so plumb scairt now that he's even afeared of a ole man like me! Can you beat it?”

“And all because of a good licking?”

“Exactly. Dave Hinges licked him. He did it because the chief beat up them three prospectors as came in here a short while back and argufied with him. And Dave Hinges sure did his job right. He came here one morning and asked to see the boss. The boss was asleep from too much alkali hootch. So Dave wakes him up and axes him to give his reasons why he smashed them prospectors' jaws.

“‘I didn't have no reason at all,’ says the boss; ‘that's why I let them live. But I got a reason to smash you—waking me up at this time of the mornin’.’ So he up with his fist, aimin' for Dave's jaw—and he ups with it still higher, with the help of Dave's hand, and instead of landin' anywheres with that fist, he lands on his own neck like he was a hog under a sledge hammer at the slaughter house. And that wasn't all.

“You can see the ground tore up from that fight all over the pasture. If ever a man got his nerve broke as well as his jaw—it was our chief.”

Charles Hinges again released his brake, gathered his reins, and clucked to his team.

“You're sure Dave Hinges will be at Elko when we open our show?” Jacinta called.

“You ain't goin' to put that challenge out—after what I've told ye?” the sheepman asked.

“Well, I guess we will!” Jacinta cried. “And if you want to see a good catch-as-catch-can match, ride into Elko. *The big act takes place tomorrow!*”

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE DESERT TROUPE

Elko was a well-populated cow town at the bottom of a wind-swept valley. The surrounding plain, the deeply cut gorges, and the ranges in the distance were colored in varying shades of pale yellow to the vivid red of Spanish topaz. The richly painted mesas—purple, cubical projections on the long, straight line of the horizon—alternated with the plain at such regular intervals as to suggest the battlements of an immense castle.

But the dun, depressing brown of the cow town was unrelieved by any spot or hue. As the three vagabonds drove across the intervening “hogback” range they looked down an immeasurable distance upon little shacks that seemed like a toy village—not the brilliantly painted sort bought at a toy store, but a homemade panorama of brown paper and old cardboard boxes.

Over the whole was a shimmering blanket of heat.

Half an hour later, having jolted and rattled down the rocky zigzag trail, the chow cart made its entry down the main street of the town. Its driver, Charles Hinges, had a certain eye for what might be termed a triumphal entry. He ordered Jacinta to array herself in her dancing costume and sit beside him, while old Augustina, her black *serape* trailing in the wind, was perched like an aged crow on the roof. Having satisfied himself of the advertising value of this tableau of three—the old crow, the giant, and the beautiful girl—Hinges galloped the little team so that the glaring red and yellow cart sailed into the town, bumping over the rocks, careening out of ruts, and thundering along like an old-time Deadwood stagecoach.

This entrance fulfilled its purpose—that of the familiar and effective circus parade. They had scarcely passed the first saloon before a crowd of stock tenders, Mexicans, Navahos and horsemen lined the broad, hot street—all with the vague impression that a stagecoach escaping a bandit hold-up was arriving.

Meanwhile a pack of boys and yelping dogs trailed after the cart, until every lunch stand, saloon, rooming house and blacksmith shop had disgorged its startled occupants.

Thus the chow cart, with its lathered little team, its strange troupe and its escort of boys and dogs, drove into the center of the town. Here Hinges

reined in his horses and swung off the road to a sand lot between a saloon and a long, low shack which was labeled a penny arcade.

The crowd followed. It circled about the whole outfit, the ranchers examining the two little pintos, the boys climbing up to the sill of the door in the back of the cart, and the cowmen in general eying the fancy costume of Jacinta with a gaping wonderment.

Before Hinges dismounted he looked about at the crowd below him. For a moment he seemed to scan every face, his eye running from the wrinkled visage of some old cattleman to the sharp features of a Navaho, then to the sun-scorched, wizened face of a buckaroo.

He did not look at the few women in the crowd—women from the surrounding dance halls, the waitress, the cashier, the saloon-keeper's wife, the blacksmith's daughter. He seemed only concerned with the men—and the younger men, at that. And as he looked the crowd over with a combined aloofness and anxiety, they in turn passed remarks about the three newcomers.

"Looks like a circus gang," the harnessmaker said. He was a pale-eyed, blinking man with hairless brows. "Except he ain't got no tent nor no girafths."

"It's a chuck wagon," the barber insisted. "Like as not, they're selling grub—they ain't no doubt of that, if you-all kin read."

"He looks like a barkeep," said the owner of the First Chance Saloon. "Mebbe he's goin' to open a hootch hall. He's got a saloon gal with him."

"They're gypsies, if I know anything," the veterinary, a man smelling of sheep dip and constantly biting a drooping mustache, stated emphatically. "Look at that Egyptian up thar shufflin' cards. That means they're gypsies."

"You're all crazy!" The deputy sheriff waved his abnormally long arms. "Cain't you nobody read? It's John Nogo and his chow cart. Up to Black Horse they call him Nogo the Dog Man. I've et in his cart myself, and remember him well."

Charles Hinges paused summarily in his survey of the upturned faces. Beneath one of the wide-brimmed felt hats he saw familiar features—a pulpy nose, a swollen cheek bone, a beefy face. It was a man who gave unmistakable evidence of having been in a brawl not very many days before. Squinting at Hinges from the outskirts of the crowd was the barkeep of China Jones's place back in Little Hell—*Fat Milligan himself!*



Shocked at first at this discovery, Hinges recalled how easily Fat Milligan had gone down before his fist in their last encounter, and a broad grin of triumph came over his face. If anything, the appearance of Fat Milligan at that moment spurred Charles the Wrestler to a particularly enthusiastic rendition of the speech he had prepared.

“Ladies and gents!” he shouted, standing up on his driver’s seat, removing his sombrero, and putting the thumb of his other hand into his calfskin vest. “I and the two ladies here compose a theatrical company which has come to town to give you the snappiest little show you’ve ever seen outside of Frisco, or, anyway, Phoenix. This afternoon, gents, at two o’clock sharp, Madam Augustina—this gifted seeress sitting on the roof—will tell the fortune of any bullwhacker or buckaree that wants to know where he’s heading. She has told the fortunes of all the crowned heads of Spain and Mexico—and if you want to know just what date to round up your beef herd, and just when to expect Texas fever, or if you want to know who’s rustling your steers, or where the mother cows are hiding their calves this season, ask her. She holds communion with the stars.”

“Can she tell me if I’d orter set in at stud poker to-night?” the barber inquired.

“Does she ever tell how many times you kin justifiedly draw to a bobtail straight?” asked the harnessmaker.

“Did she ever tell *you* where you kin find oil?” the deputy asked Hinges pointedly.

“Now, listen here, gents!” Hinges went on loudly. “All these things she can most surely tell. If you want to know where the bandit’s cache is; if you want to know how you-all are coming out in that little love affair with Mr. Cattleking’s daughter; in short, gents—and ladies, too—if you want to know anything underneath the skies, let Madam Augustina consult her charts, read your palm and shuffle the little old deck! And all it’s going to cost you is four bits.”

“Well, that’s easy!” the deputy shouted. “But ain’t there nothin’ else but to hold hands with the ole dame? What’s the little gal in the light harness goin’ to do?”

“Now, that four bits, gents, will let you in on another act—the act with the big kick! Madmoyselle Jacinta—this little jane sitting right down here on the driver’s seat beside me, and who I have the honor to present— —”

The introduction of Jacinta, the dance girl, brought forth a rousing cheer from the crowd, and a volley of enthusiastic remarks. Although the remarks were anything but polite, their general purport seemed to be that Jacinta had found favor in the sight of the town of Elko.

Hinges had to raise his hand and shout in his bid for silence. "Now, understand, gents, there's not to be any one try to hold this little jane's hand. I'm here to see to that! Any cow-puncher that thinks he can flirt with her will get his chin lifted over into the next lot. If you want to hold hands you'll do it with the old lady on the roof."

Hinges pointed with his thumb to Augustina.

Laughter, grumbling, and a few remarks concerning the size of Charles Hinges's shoulders answered this warning.

"Now, gents, if you ever saw a dance which will take you back to the days of your childhood when you tried to catch the sulphur moths in the alfalfa—you just watch the act we have in store for you. Madmoyselle Jacinta is so light on her feet, gents, that if you held out the palm of your hand she could actually dance a jig on it—and you'd think it was an Inca dove fluttering in your fist. Only let me add, gents, that there's no man here with a fist good enough to hold this girl's foot except me."

Observing that this remark also went by unchallenged, Hinges went on to the climax of his announcement. "Now, then, folks and ladies, Jacinta gives the act with the kick, but there's another act, which we call the act with the punch. And that's me—Charles the Wrestler."

"Who do you think you'll punch?" the barber asked.

"You, for one—if you have the nerve to meet me this aft. You or any one. It's an open challenge, gents—a wrestling bout—no rules—anything allowed from tripping to jujutsu! And I'm here to say right now that if there's any one here thinks he can throw me, he'll have to prove it at the show this aft.

"And if he proves it, there's a prize of twenty-five bucks offered. If he fails—he loses nothing, and gets nothing—except the laugh from the audience."

"So you think there's no one in this town who can throw you, Mr. Circusman!" a blue-jawed barkeep cried.

"None that looks like you," Hinges answered.

“Since when have you changed from a dog man to a champion, John Nogo?” the deputy asked, insisting that he knew Charlie Hinges as the one-time owner of the hot-dog cart.

“I never changed to a champion!” Hinges shouted. “I’ve always been champion. And there’s no man never tossed me from the very day I was born.”

This announcement was greeted with a peal of laughter in which it seemed every member of the crowd joined. Hinges flushed purple with anger and his great bull neck seemed to swell as the blood vessels filled.

“Laughing’s easy,” he bellowed, “but I don’t notice that any one’s taking up my challenge!”

“Just be here yourself,” the blue-jawed man shouted. “You’ll meet a wrassler all righto, and he’ll fold you up and throw you acrost the street!”

“You be here—and the town will be here—and a wrassler will be here!” roared the lanky, yellow-haired deputy. “And I will be here with a stretcher for to take you to the hoss doctor’s when the match is over.”

“Is thar to be any bettin’ on this e-vent?” the blinking harnessmaker asked, still apparently brooding over the questionable chances of drawing to a bobtailed straight.

“I’ll say there is!” Charles exclaimed.

The old crone, perched on the eaves of the cart roof, held up both of her dark, thin arms. Between each of the spidery fingers was tucked a card.

“There will be betting!” she cried in a high-pitched voice that broke croakingly. “There will be such betting as Elko has never seen. I myself, Augustina, the witch of Pimas, will bet all I possess upon the champion, Charles the Wrestler! There is no man in the world that can throw him! There are not ten men together who can throw him!”

To quell the laughter which this evoked the old hag threw out the cards she held so that they fluttered like bats out over the heads of the crowd. Laughingly the men caught at them.

Then the witch cried out:

“For every man that has a card let him bet all his wealth. And let every man that draws a spade bet on Charles the Wrestler. If you draw a heart, then bet on him who answers the challenge. For the symbol of the power of

Charles the Wrestler is the spade, which is death—and the symbol of his opponent is the heart, which is the color of blood!”

The owner of the First Chance Saloon edged his way to the steps of the chow cart. In his upraised hand he held one of Augustina’s soiled cards. “It’s a heart, gents—it’s a heart! And if the fortune teller knows anything—which I generally grant they do—I’ll bet any wad that this here wrassler will last about two minutes in the match this afternoon—and that’s all!”

“I’m holdin’ a spade!” the deputy cried loudly. “But that’s not sayin’ I won’t bet contrarywise—and any odds. The money I put up will say that when Mr. Charles the Wrassler grabs hold of his opponent he’ll find himself grabbin’ a bunch of dirt on the ground.”

The barkeep, the harnessmaker, the barber, as well as a dozen other leading citizens of Elko, clamored for bets, whether they had received a spade or a heart or any card at all.

“Who’s goin’ to cover all this jack?” the harnessmaker asked.

“Gents,” Charles replied, “I’m goin’ to put all I have, and so is the old lady up there. She is the banker of our show, and what she puts up is about all we’ve got. We’ll add the two pintos and the chow cart into the bargain?”

“How about the girl?” the owner of the First Chance asked. “Give me the chanst to employ her in my dance hall, and I’ll consider it legal tender and payment in full if I win the bet.”

“The girl’s mine!” Charles shouted with such belligerence that the saloonman melted away. “And any man that suggests it will get his head pushed through the bottom of the corral. She’s mine now and always!”

“If you lose, is she yourn?” some one else asked tauntingly.

“I’m not going to lose!” Charlie Hinges shouted back.

“Well, it appears to me you ain’t got enough money to cover the wealth of Elko, all of which is goin’ to be put ag’in you,” the deputy said. “Is there any one here can cover all bets aside from these show people, who ain’t got nothin’ but a pack of cards and a couple o’ fuzztails?”

With a hush of hopefulness the crowd of men began to look around from one to another. Finally a heavy-shouldered man with a wide-brimmed black felt hat and a loosely fitting store suit edged his way to the front of the crowd.

He was a stranger to Elko, and his appearance, as well as his manner of holding up his hand with a wad of bills, commanded immediate attention. A fat hand it was, with split knuckles from which the scabs of recent brawls had not yet gone. In his other hand he held a card.

“The jack of spades fell to me, gents! I’ve heard of this here wrassler, and likewise of the fortune teller, many a time, and what she says generally goes. I’m coverin’ all bets that you citizens of Elko put up. And my money says Charles the Wrassler can’t be beat. *I happen to know what I’m talkin’ about!*”

“I guess he does know!” Jacinta whispered to Hinges. “That’s the barkeep you beat up at China Jones’s place in Little Hell.”

“I saw him,” Charlie said out of the side of his mouth. “And I hope he starts something—but he won’t.”

“I—wonder!”

## CHAPTER XX

### JACINTA DANCES TO BATTLE.

Again Augustina, the witch, plied the art in which she was perfect—the beautification of a woman. Having made some purchases from one of the dance girls of the First Chance Saloon—a banjo, rouge, greaspaint and talcum—she transformed Jacinta from a waif of the desert to a ravishing Oriental.

“When she appears out in the blazing sun of this Arizona town, she will be perfect!” the soothsayer murmured, crooning at her work while Charles the Wrestler sat as a sort of watchdog at the door of the cart so that no man should see these intimate preparations. “And she must be perfect for this day. The hour is auspicious. The Ides of March remember. It is then that great things have happened in history. This hour will not go by without fruition!”

“I’ll say it won’t!” Jacinta laughed. “I’ll knock ’em dead with my dance, even if Charlie loses the bets.”

“I have studied your horoscope, which says you are to be the conqueror. And I have studied this hand,” she proclaimed as she was about to apply the powder on Jacinta’s hands and arms. “I have perused these palms many days and have learned the secrets of destiny revealed in them.”

The fortune teller, instead of dabbing on the powder, held Jacinta’s slender, tanned palm with its tapering fingers in her own wrinkled one. Charles looked worshipfully at the beautiful, almost childlike hand of the girl as the hooked talons of the old woman marked the lines.

“The Mount of Mercury,” she went on, “reveals that you are adaptive; now you are a girl from a city; now a dancer in a desert town; now the sweetheart of a man who is called a brigand; now a queen of the cañons and Bad Lands. You could say this without looking at her palm—but it is set down here for the skilled soothsayer to read, as if it were in printer’s ink, within a book.”

“If it tells you that, my hand doesn’t lie,” Jacinta laughed. “I’ve been changing all my life from swell restaurants to a bite of scorched ham out in the desert. What else do you know about me? Tell everything, for all I care.”

“The heart line breaks and starts again.” The old woman changed the tone of her voice.

“Now, what can that mean?” Charles asked anxiously.

“It can mean many things,” the witch replied, eager to soothe the anxiety she obviously provoked in Charles’s mind. “All can be well. Perhaps this line writes of some former love, and then, at an hour in her life when the stars warn of great change, she will form a new love and a greater love—for you! That is my interpretation.”

“Yes, that’s possible,” Charles admitted. “But it goes on the idea that she’s not particularly crazy about me now.”

“Then it’s all wrong,” Jacinta said. “I’m crazy about him—and you know it, Augustina.”

“Well, that satisfies me,” Charles rejoined. “What else do you read?”

“In the line of Saturn I find chance and haphazard will change this girl’s life in one brief hour!”

“And what hour is that?”

“In my study of your horoscope during our days upon the desert I found out that the hour is at hand—it is now.”

“Well, that’s saying something. Just what do you figure this chance is going to be?” Jacinta asked—for the first time showing anxiety.

“You yourself should be able to tell,” the palmist murmured cryptically, and with her usual clever evasiveness. “Here in your hand I read the line of the moon—which extols your intuition. When you are happy we should all be happy, and when you are afraid, there is something to be feared.”

“If you want to know my honest opinion, Augustina, and you too, Charlie,” Jacinta said, “I’ve no idea what this business called intuition is, but I will say that I’ve got a funny feeling in my bones right now. And it’s a feeling that something kind of unexpected is going to happen. Say, look here!” She drew her hand away from the old woman, and reaching for the huge paw of Charles the Wrestler, drew him into the cabin. “Suppose you tell us something about this bird, Augustina. Do you figure on anything serious happening to him within the next hour or so. He’s the one to be talking about now.”

“Ah, that is what I’ve been wanting all along to tell you two. Your horoscopes have much in common. And the same hour, the stars foretell,

your lives will change.”

One look at Charles Hinges’s tremendous fist was all that any man or woman needed in order to make a fairly safe prophecy: in a fight, irrespective of the where or the when, he would be victor.

“Victory is yours!” the palmist cried as if amazed at a new revelation. “The stars say it. The cards, which I have read a dozen times, come out with their glorious tidings. Victory is yours! And this palm says it. Here is written great power and imagination. Here is aggression, which I see in Upper Mars; temper, which I read in the Plain of Mars; strength as great as the bands of Orion. Bracelets strengthen the life line; and the Via Lascivia writes how intense are your desires of good and bad!”

“Well, you’ve soothed me with those words, Augustina,” Jacinta said, “for to tell the honest truth there’s been a scare working around inside of me right here—a scare that our Charlie might come out of this fight with a chew of alkali dust and wondering how the stars came up so early in the afternoon.”

Augustina shook her head. “The cards never lie.” She turned to the girl and put the finishing touches of powder on the white arms. “And the stars are infallible.”

“I guess not the kind of stars old Charlie hands ’em out with his fist!” Jacinta laughed softly.

“The stars have said that you two will attain the perfection of the soul’s growth—a perfection which some call *Yogi*! This hour will bring about your ultimate adventure—as the opening of the bud to a flower whose stamen for the first time sees the glory of the sun.”

“I don’t know much about flowers,” Jacinta rejoined, “except the kind they sell on the sidewalks of Kearny Street in Frisco—but are you sure that this dope you are handing us can’t be looked at a couple of different ways?”

“Now, take Charlie, for instance. The horoscope may say he’s going to see sunlight in the next few minutes. Well, anybody could tell a fortune that way. Sure he’s going to see sunlight—unless there’s a thunderstorm, and I don’t see the clouds stepping over the horizon with any too much pep. Don’t you figure, *señora*, the horoscope might mean that instead of seeing the sun Charlie’s in line for seeing night fall suddenly?”

“I have given my interpretation,” the old woman snapped. “It is more to be relied on than the fears of a stupid little dance girl!”



Snorting and coughing, she threw aside her make-up and left the cart in a rage. Charles and Jacinta, both chuckling, saw her crossing the lot, uttering maledictions, which were partly to soothe her ruffled feelings and partly to instill respect in the crowd of buckaroos, Indians, and saloon men who were gathering outside the improvised rope corral.

At that moment there was something of far greater importance to Augustina than quibbling over prophecies. And that was the reception of the audience and the exactment of four bits from each guest.

“I don’t believe a word of all her yarns and tricks and dreams,” the dancing girl laughed, “except this—you’re going to win!”

“And I don’t, either—and for that matter I don’t believe in this business they call intuition. The old dame said you had intuitions, and you seem to be getting anxious. Now, look here, Jacinta, you get that out of your head. There’s not a man in this whole range will take off his coat to me— —”

“Except your brother! And you remember the hot old time you had at the bedside of your father?”

“Sure, but that’s nothing. His fortune telling and prayers and curses and all are the same as our old palmist.”

“That’s your idea. It’s not mine. I want you to win, and I know you’ll win. But I’m telling you to watch out. There’s a big time coming. And I’m getting pretty anxious to see this brother of yours the whole town’s betting on.”

“Look, here Jacinta. There’s one thing old Augustina said that really worries me. She told something about your heart line busting in the middle of your hand.”

“Rot—every word of it. I just scratched it in the desert opening a can of beans. I love *you!*”

“I know you do—at times. I can tell at certain times— —”

“Not at certain times—for always! Any one loves a man who can’t be beat.”

“I know—but is that all? Isn’t there something else necessary to what they call real love?”

“What else do you want me to worship in you, Charlie—your looks?”

Charlie shook his head impatiently.

“There’s something besides just plain brawn,” he said. “If I haven’t got it, I can’t be sure of you.”

“Look here, Charlie, don’t get worked up before your bout. You’re breaking training rules. You’ll go out there trembling and nervous—all set for a dance with a pretty girl, instead of a wrestling match. Now, forget me for a while. Just understand that I’m in love with you—as the old palmist would say—now and forevermore.”

“All righto, girl! I’ll go out with that understanding, and after the match I’ll have more to give you than I have now. I’ll be a new man then—because I’ll be squared with my dad. I’m going to throw this brother of mine first—that’s the only way to square myself—to meet him and match my strength against his.

“There won’t be any more hate after that. I’m going to throw him proper—so’s there’ll never be any question from this day on. And the old man that prophesied against me—if he could see me he’d say he’d made a big mistake. I’m going to mash the kid to the ground—that’s what. I won’t put my foot on his neck—nothing like that!

“But I’ll sure leave no doubt in anybody’s mind as to who won! And then I’m going to take him in my arms and say that the past is wiped away.”

Such was the condition of affairs on the eve of Charles Hinges’s battle with his brother. The three vagabonds knew that it was a crisis, and each regarded it with a different personal viewpoint.

Charles Hinges, for all his scoffing, believed, without knowing it, in signs and omens. No matter how many times he swore to himself that his father had merely uttered the doddering words of a man whose mind was failing at the doors of death—he believed, deep down in his heart, that he had been cursed. Similarly, for all the fun he poked at the sinister old duenna and her claptrap about the stars, her prophecies evoked a distinct stir of savage belief in his soul.

One conviction, however, nothing in the heavens above nor the earth beneath could shake in the mind of Charles Hinges: he was going to give his brother a sound beating. There was no doubt about that, for all the Bibles or card decks ever printed.

Charles Hinges awaited the battle with the serene understanding that it was to be the consummation of his reform. Having won it, he would love his brother.

Augustina awaited the event with her own singular hopes and desires flaming. Eager to satisfy her romantic Castilian soul with a match between the big renegade and the dancing girl, she had done everything in her power to fan their love.

She read any meaning she wanted to into the signs and portents of the heavens and the cards. One thing—a run of hands which boded Charles's victory—persuaded her of the outcome. Charles would win, and by winning the fight he would win the girl.

But set against the trickery and the traditional nonsense of the fortune teller was the intuition of the buoyant, pulsating, dryadlike girl, Jacinta. In her heart was a faint, formless intimation of a coming tragedy. Jacinta's intuition, some would say, was perhaps more to be relied on than the portents of the stars.

The lithe, ravishing dancer, childishly unabashed, unblushing and unconstrained, went out into the mob of cowmen, Indians, gamblers and saloon-keepers. She was innocent of immodesty; she had a naïve air mingled with the enchantment of Circe. But there was a difference: Circe transformed her admirers into swine; this dancer transformed them into *men*—men who watch the divine, untarnished beauty of a child. Jacinta, characteristically, went forth to meet the crisis of battle by dancing!

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE COMING OF DAVID

The audience, in producing its champion to fight Charles the Wrestler, had no intimation of the real nature of the conflict. There was not a man there—other than Charles Hinges himself—who knew it was to be a fight between brothers. David Hinges was the last man to suspect that this great braggart, who styled himself as Charles the Wrestler, was in truth the elder brother whom his father had so scrupulously kept out of the young boy's life.

There was one man in the audience—Fat Milligan—who observed, with a sudden awakening, that both these fighters had the same name. As barkeep at China Jones's place in Little Hell, Fat Milligan knew Charles, and of course remembered his last name—the name that he had chosen to drop.

Fat thought of this circumstance while Jacinta was working her deft enchantment on the gaping crowd in the corral. He thought it worth mentioning—and it was interesting enough to mention to only a chosen few. In fact, that point was so significant that Milligan narrowed his few down to one man.

That man was Charles the Wrestler himself.

Before Jacinta's act brought forth its rousing cheer from the assembled cowmen and townfolk Fat Milligan left the audience and sneaked behind the chow cart, where he knocked for admittance at the improvised dressing room of the leading actor.

Charles, partially stripped, was interrupted in the act of examining the panther skin which was to serve him as a costume. He drew aside the burlap curtain and looked down into the round, pulpy, bruised face of his bygone and beaten enemy.

“Now, what the— —”

“Don't get excited, Charlie,” the barkeep hastened to say. “I'm not going to throw a gun on you. Only you sure do deserve it, after what you done to me up to China Jones's place in Little Hell a fortnight back.”

“Are you come as an enemy or as a friend, Fat?” Charlie asked. “If it's as an enemy, you wait until I've beat up my man out in the corral. Then I'll

attend to you.”

The sight of Charlie Hinges in the nude—a bronze gorilla with hair like a black burro’s—was enough to make the barkeep assume an air of almost exaggerated reverence.

“I’m come as a friend, Charlie—that is, on one condition. It looks like you been hankerin’ for to change your name, bein’ as it’s a well-known fact China Jones is eager for to get back at you and finish the fight you started up to his saloon.”

“I thought I finished that good and proper already.”

“No, not yet. As fur as I’m concerned, I’ll call it finished if you win your match to-day with this here man who, for some perplexin’ reason, happens to have the same name as yours.”

“You keep my name out of this fight, Fat Milligan, or I’ll brain you with one blow of this fist!”

“I believe in your fist, Charlie! If ever a man had cause to believe in it, it’s me. You win this match! I got all my money up on this match. It’ll mean a good haul for me, bein’ as they gave me big odds that this other Hinges would beat you. You win this match, and I’ll call you Charles the Wrassler. You lose, and I’ll call you Charlie Hinges, the bully from Buzzard Mountain.”

“If that’s all you want to warn me about, Mr. Fat, I reckon you’ll be satisfied. I’m Charles the Wrestler now and forevermore.”

The cheers of the audience announced that Jacinta’s part of the show was over. Charlie, having wrapped the pelt about his loins, leaped out of the door of the chow cart and stalked into the blazing sun. The first jeers of the crowd at his spectacular entrance dwindled and gave way to a reverential, almost awe-stricken silence. There was a snicker or two of laughter at the grizzly black hair which covered his chest. But through the hair they saw the heavy, powerful torso; they noted the bulging biceps of his arms and legs; the shoulders, like the withers of a bull; the great neck, corded and bronzed.

As Jacinta, standing at one end of the corral with a *serape* thrown around her shoulders, looked for the first time upon this primal paragon a thrill of pride gripped her. But it was no more vital a thrill than that. She knew that this great man-beast was hers, and it delighted her to think that all that crowd of men stood suddenly awe-stricken, whereas but a few hours before they had laughed at his great boast. As remarks were passed about she listened with the joy of a child who possesses a grizzly bear as a pet.

“Looks like Dave will have to do some hustlin’,” she heard a cowman remark.

“I bet my money,” said the barber, who had edged near to Jacinta with the hope of striking up an acquaintance, “and I always lose.”

“I bet mine—and now I wish I’d stuck to my poker,” said the harness maker.

“Dave can handle anything—he don’t stop at no giants!” the barber cried. “But where is he?”

“He’s late,” the deputy answered with spirit. “That’s where he is. Maybe he’s goin’ back on us.”

Jacinta made her own remark—but it was to herself: “They are all afraid of my big grizzly bear.”

“The stars incline!” The palmist jingled her four-bit pieces which she held in her shawl. “It is written across the sky that he cannot lose.”

“’Pears like as if you’re right, ole Mrs. Fortune Teller,” grunted the deputy.

But at this point, when the spirits of the crowd had suffered a very considerable fall at the sight of the giant in the cougar skin, a low rumble of voices began to churn up like the sound of a herd beginning to mill. The rumble mounted to a cheer. *Young David Hinges was galloping down the main street of the town.*

Jacinta turned, looking to where a horseman approached in a smother of dust. She saw a broad-shouldered man—scarcely more than a boy—keeping a loose, careless seat in his saddle as his black mare slowed to a hard trot.

There was no fancy posing when David Hinges rode into that lot, and yet the crowd watched his every movement with an adoration which seemed out of place. The boy jolted carelessly with his horse, drew rein, and leaped from his saddle.

“Is *that* the boy?” Charles Hinges snorted.

But no one heard him—and no one seemed to regard the newcomer with this disdain, not even Jacinta.

As David left his mount standing untethered in the middle of the lot and disappeared in a crowd of his chums the girl glanced back at the tanned half-nude giant who was her champion.

“Is *that* all I’ve got to throw?” Charles was saying with scoffing disappointment.

As she heard these words a qualm of fear gripped Jacinta, for she remembered a peculiar agility, a springy athletic grace, which David Hinges had shown when leaping from his horse. Perhaps the big brother lacked this, Jacinta thought, but then, gazing intently at the bulging sinews and the huge chest and the towering height of her man, she again felt assured. She listened to the shouts with a flush of defiance in her face.

“Come on there, Dave!” the barber was yelling over the heads of the throng. “We got a giant here for you to pack away. And we got a spot of turf here which you can use for a blanket to wrap him in!”

Others joined in with the shout: “Brush it up thar, Dave! What’s holdin’ you? Pull off that thar flannel shirt of yourn. And off with them chaps. Go out and tie the giant up and set on his face!”

In his inconspicuous corner of the corral, in a group of joking, laughing, tobacco-chewing buckaroos, David Hinges was disrobing and preparing to go out as his namesake of old went out to slay the giant of the Philistines.

As his companions took his shirt from his back and bared his muscles to the blazing sun, while he joked and laughed, his opponent stalked about the corral amid a ring of expectant, excited people. The attitude of the elder brother was much the same as that of Goliath of Gath stalking before the armies of Israel and waiting for the shepherd who was to say to him: “I am come to thee in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the Armies of Israel whom thou hast defied!”

That was the interpretation that their father, Peter Hinges, might have put on this meeting if he had been alive. But David, going out to fight his elder brother, said no such thing. In fact, he had no conception of the spiritual aspects of this crisis. To him it was a chance for a wrestling bout with an unknown bully from the desert, and he earnestly hoped it would combine an exciting mixture of sport and conflict.

That he was going out to fight his own brother was the last thing that could have entered his mind.

“Get out thar, Dave, and eat ’im alive! The big steer’s cut out for you—and you alone!” voices cried. “We’ve got all our jack on you, Dave. Bite ’im up!”

So David went out into the roped circle in the middle of the corral, where his mare had been waiting, pawing at the turf. He put the palm of his

hand upon the horse's nose, shaking the head playfully. With this reassuring caress he led the black mare to the edge of the mob, leaving her there with a final pat on her glossy neck.

Jacinta, standing in front of the mare, saw Dave step out again upon the turf and face his brother. The girl responded to his appearance with a curious thrill—partly of fear, partly of admiration. The boy was stripped to the waist, and in his clean-cut, tanned muscles she saw a symmetry and grace totally lacking in the larger man who was to wrestle him. And she saw a look in the clear gray eyes of David Hinges—a spark of fire, a sharp light, dancing with youth, pride of power, agility of mind. The arms were long and finely muscled, lithe, and joining the splendid shoulders in huge knots of tanned brawn. Jacinta observed that although he was smaller, he did not suffer in comparison with the giant Charles. His looks, his light-brown tawny hair, the smile on his face—like the mocking but boyish smile of a Grecian faun—and then his almost statuesque torso, narrowing to the small hips of perfect manhood, contrasted with the more rugged power of his adversary.

Charles Hinges did not notice these details of his brother which had so impressed the girl. But there was one look about the boy which he did notice. It was a look that was revealed to no other man—nor to any woman—of that crowd. It was a factor of more importance than anything else. If David Hinges had been twice the size of his elder brother it could not have been so great an advantage as this miraculous power which Charles saw.

The youth, standing erect, eager for the combat, his eyes flashing; aglow with the enthusiasm of the sport, was suddenly transfixed as Charles's eye widened and glared at him. It was like a strange new light—more terrific than the beating of the sun. It was not his brother that Charles saw—*it was the father towering with his last furious enthusiasm at the hour of death.*



## CHAPTER XXII

### BITTER DUST

To Jacinta the first clinching of these giants seemed of a subtle, quiet ferocity. Their arms moved and swayed, each man feinting for an advantageous opening, each sidestepping gracefully, sinuously, calculatingly. Then, suddenly locking each other's arms, they came hurtling across the corral and fell before her.

She saw the great, knotted arms grasped about the youth's waist so that he doubled backward; saw the momentary look of pain on David's face, as if every feature had responded, lighting up, coming to life. In that one flash, when the boy felt as if his back were breaking, she saw a tragic beauty about him—something she had not noticed when he smiled or when his features were in repose. She had never seen a fighter with such a look; she had never seen so handsome a face distorted.

And as an undertone to this thought she heard the frantic whinnying of David's horse—the horse that loved him. It was a heartrending cry, the cry of a brute perplexed, terrified concerning the safety of its master.

Jacinta turned from one glance at the trembling, sweating horse to the scene of the match—she could see only the writhing forms of the two great men. David had turned into a puma—convulsed, twisting, fighting, until of a sudden he leaped up, miraculously free, and bounded back a distance of six feet, while Charles, puzzled and grim, picked himself from the ground where they had been rolling.

Jacinta's incoherent cry and the second whinnying of the mare were drowned in the deafening yell of the mob. Their hero—who, in the very first moment of the combat, seemed to have lost—had freed himself. Jacinta had called to Charles—her pet bear—whose face, now distorted with a new resolve, terrified the girl. Her unspoken words took form only in a desperate yearning: "Don't kill him, Charles; don't kill this fine creature!"

But blind now to everything, Charles rushed out to meet his brother a second time, throwing his huge arms about the youthful body, lifting him up and hurling him to the turf. And then David wrapped his legs about the giant's waist in an unbreakable scissors hold which brought both men rolling again.

Charles was on top, David, his hips to the ground, writhing again to free himself. A viselike half-Nelson snapped under the boy's shoulder; there was a hush, and Jacinta's cry this time was audible, though unnoticed by a single man. She had scarcely gasped the words, "You'll kill him!" before she saw the boy throw his legs into the air, spin about again, leap free, and wave over the heads of the crowd to his frightened mare.

Again Charles Hinges lifted himself—like a huge gorilla upon whom some mischievous boy has played a trick. His forehead was beaded, his mouth grim, stained where it had dug the grass, muddied at the wet, down-curling corners.

Yells flattening to jeers, howls of joy at the second escape of their hero, articulated into shouted words: "He's playin' with the giant! Dave'll git him this time! Dave's got him seein' red—and that's all he needs! Dave's got the instinct for eatin' 'em up! He's hungry! He's goin' to treat him like he treated the sheepman! Zowie! Smash! There they go agin!"

And now as they met Jacinta saw the face of the younger brother a second time, as the two fell at her feet. He was reeking with sweat, but through the mud, the grime, the blood that trickled from the cut of his last fall, she could see the clear gray light of his eyes—calm, sharp, watching for his chance like a panther about to spring at the neck of a huge bison. Both men, puffing, snorting, all but frothing with their energy, tore up the turf, and no one there could tell which had the better hold; but Jacinta knew—from that one momentary glance—which one would win.

There was no cessation of the yelling after David's head-spin, by which he had saved himself from the vicious half-Nelson lock of his adversary. But agile and easy as the dangerous move had been, David had learned a lesson. Those terrific biceps pressing the life out of him had put him on his guard.

From then on every move he made was calculated, cunning, planned so that it became a conflict of almost unbeatable brawn against pure strategy.

Jacinta saw this. She saw the boy knit his brows—not with the bullying anger of his elder brother, but with the perplexed and worried thought of a man who knows he is meeting an enemy heavier and stronger than himself.

He backed into the sunlight and then studied the big giant, who peered, enraged, under lowered shaggy brows, as in primal ages the man apes first learned to frown by shading their eyes from blinding suns. He dodged the yawning arms as Charles rushed again, catching them as he would have caught the horns of a mad bull. Then he closed in.

Jacinta, trembling with excitement, saw the boy shove his brother's huge arm backward so that it doubled up in the hammerlock behind Charles's own back. She heard the snarl of the giant above the tumult of the gang; she saw him hurl his weight against the youth with a frantic attempt to throw him to the ground, only to lose his balance—as David had planned. Down he went with a thud like a bull that's hoolihanned by a daring herder, his own weight wrenching his shoulder and all but breaking the great locked arm. Jacinta caught his eye as he lay.

A new spirit came into Charles Hinges as he saw the girl pale, trembling, wringing her delicate hands. She must not see him lying there—no matter how great a pain was shooting through his arm, no matter if his back were twisted double. He struggled to his feet, and as he looked at the knotted, heaving torso of his enemy, glistening wet in the sun, a surge of hate sickened him.

The circle of howling faces was moving about—slowly one way, then another—and the corral was heaving, now like a ship's deck, now like a merry-go-round dying down but never stopping.

That was a terrific fall—he realized that—but it must not happen again. Jacinta was there in that corner—no, in another—no, beneath the sun. She was a red flash of beauty against that brown background of howling men.

Hate clenched his fist, but he knew he must not strike. He awaited the next onslaught of his brother with a stupid resignation, his one thought being he must not strike. He would kill him afterward, perhaps, but there was a game here—he must play up to it.

The onslaught came; he felt the brawn up against his body—a hated feeling—as the primal man would hate the soft, inexorable touch of a python about his thighs. He whirled around to free himself—not because it was crushing him, but because he hated the flesh—his own flesh and blood.

In whirling he swung his arm upward to get one grasp at that superb, heroic neck. He would break it with a single bend! And he felt the neck yielding to him. He could not see now because of the blood that was trickling into his eyes—it was blood from the boy's lips, not his own. In his blindness and his fury to break that neck he was like Samson praying, "Remember me and strengthen me, only this once, O God, that I may be avenged!"

And he bowed himself with all his might, as Samson bowed himself, *but the strength of the youth's body was greater than the pillars of the Philistine temple which Samson shattered*. The more Charles strained, the more his

own back was twisted. They fell, and Charles Hinges turned about in pain, and as he turned he felt the hands of his brother dart under his armpits and grasp him about the neck.

This time it was the youth who had him locked, and it was in the inexorable trap of a full-Nelson. Charlie's great body was thrown over, and then, as his head struck the turf, he arched his back to a bridge to save himself from the disaster of a fall.

But this expenditure of his strength saved him only for a moment. One shoulder was thrust to the ground with an ease on the part of David which now seemed pitiable. One point was gained—one final thrust and that other shoulder would touch the ground, making two points and victory. But before shoving down that other shoulder David released his Nelson hold. With one hand he kept his brother's shoulder to the ground. He lifted his other hand up. It was a gesture that brought a howl of joy from the mob.

But David was not bidding for a cheer in that act—a taunting, unsportsmanlike act it would have been, showing how complete was his mastery. He was waving to his horse, which had moved in through the crowd and was now standing directly behind the girl.

Jacinta dazed, astounded at this outcome, cried: "He's thrown him! He's thrown him!"

This cry Charles Hinges heard. The fallen man looked up, saw his brother wave in the direction of the girl and laugh. And he saw a strange look on the girl's face. Jacinta was astounded—not at the defeat of Charles, but at the superb strength and beauty of the younger brother. Charles read this clearly in her eyes. And at that moment his younger brother brought down his arm and straightened it upon the shoulder of his victim—the shoulder that was still free.

There was little strength needed in that arm now—it could have been the arm of old Peter Hinges at the hour of his death, with the strange power of a dying man. He had an abhorrent sensation as if that arm had been the scrawny, blue-veined, waxlike thing his father had held up before him that morning in the cabin in Buzzard's Mountain.

"There will come one who will smite you hip and thigh!" were the words that rang in Charles Hinges's ears. "Out of heaven shall he thunder upon you! For the strength that has gone from me has gone into the sinews of my boy David!"

“He has broken me!” Charles thought in a flash. “He has broken my life —for he has taken the only thing which I possess of life: Jacinta loves him!”

With this last vivid pang Charles’s shoulders seemed to crumple like a blacksmith’s bellows. He gasped and fell back into the comfort of the dust.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE BANDS OF ORION ARE BROKEN

Oblivious to the deafening roar of victory, David Hinges sprang to his feet. His glistening, wet muscles flashed in the sun; a smile came to his mouth; and, as it came, the last vestige of pain left his face.

He looked to the corner of the corral, where he had heard the panic-stricken horse whinnying to him. Again he waved to the mare, and, seeing her nostrils distended with fright and the hoofs pawing at the turf, he went to her. But between this beast and himself there was something else that caught his eye. He had loved his horse—it was the only affection he now had for living things. But there was a new, strangely bewitching being that confronted him at the very moment of his victory. In front of the champing, trembling horse Jacinta stood, robed in her crimson dancing costume, a brilliant splash of red in that sun, her face tilted up to him, mute with amazement at his unexpected victory, the vivid painting of rouge impotent to mask the childlike parting of her lips.

Here was a curious, new experience—ininitely more thrilling than the laudation of the crowd or the joy of victory. How ungainly the mare's head seemed as she thrust it over the bare, gleaming shoulder of the girl! How ugly, gaunt, stupid was this dumb beast which had carried him over range and cañon and desert in thunder and rain and sandstorm! Here was a new love—not the love of a man for a faithful, powerful horse, but of a youth for an enchanting woman.

No word was exchanged between the two, but the momentary glance held in it as much understanding as any words that could be spoken. David's cronies surrounded them—the victor and the girl. Jacinta and the young wrestler found themselves in a cheering, yelling mob of cowboys.

On the other side of the turf lay the vanquished.

For Charles Hinges it was a dark sky, a semi-oblivion, a terrific pain, and then he realized with a thrill that the hated, sweating leach which had sucked him to the earth was gone. He was free, but still he lay there, tasting salt in his mouth. He was mumbling stupidly as they wiped his bloody lips:

“I've never been beaten. Nobody can beat me. I was going to take him in my arms and call him brother.”

As he gazed up into the white sky he saw circling about in the infinite, blinding space—a buzzard. “God! Then it’s happened!” he cried with a sickening realization. About him was a circle of men—dark shadows silhouetted against the brilliant canopy above. A touch of sun stabbed him. He shivered with drenching water.

Again he tasted salt, shook his head, and swore a long string of oaths. Then he thought of some one—the first clear, coldly defined, appalling thought: Jacinta.

He looked to the corner where Jacinta had stood watching the match. Dave was there, coming out of the crowd.

“He’s going for Jacinta!” Charles tried frantically to rise, but failed; heard the men talking exuberantly, loudly, a wild jabber as undecipherable as the workmen gabbling at Babel. “No, she must not see me like this,” he muttered. “I’ll wrestle again, and I’ll throw him. Some one’s tricked me.”

This time he rose, and the ring widened. This pleased him. “She can see how they widen about me—like the saloon men at Little Hell. They’re afraid of me. They know I can’t be beaten.”

A voice from the outskirts answered this: “Well, he shore did throw you around, Mr. Charles the Wrassler!”

“Who said that?” Hinges added with a curse. “Whoever said that I’ll mash his carcass so’s the loboes’ll think he’s been dead a week!”

The ring of jeering faces widened still more, and an arc of it evaporated as Hinges lurched in the direction of the speaker.

“You ain’t goin’ to pick a fight with me?” cried the deputy, still hiding behind the three-deep ring. “It wasn’t me that beat you.”

*“Beat me!”*

“Are you picking a fight with the community because you was beat?”

Hinges doubled his fist and drew back as if to answer the deputy with a blow. The act of squaring off brought a spasm of pain into his shoulder, and he gasped at it, his wind-burned face turning ashen. One of the men—a veterinary—took his other arm, helping him to a seat on a mound of sand.

“Where’s the girl?” Hinges asked. “She will know I wasn’t beaten. It was a trick. I wasn’t beaten. No one can throw me. It was a trick. Go and tell the girl. Why isn’t she here?”

“Don’t say you weren’t beaten!” a woman’s voice cried angrily. Charles looked up, and the black, gaunt form of the palmist stood above him. “A stripling youth beat you—you who are a giant among men. Your glory is shorn from you. And I might have seen this written in the stars! A great change was to come into your life—so said the cards. And it has come. You are no longer Charles the Wrestler—you are Charles the Shameful. You have brought ruin upon us! All our money, our goods, our chattels, were wagered on your invincible strength. Invincible, *paugh!*”

The irate duenna shook her clenched claws at the nose of the fallen giant. Her grotesque comb nodded like the crest of a scolding jay.

The veterinary winked at the surrounding crowd and continued his examination of the wrenched shoulder.

“Where can we go now?” The duenna raised her voice to a cackle. “Where can Charles the Wrestler go now, with his great boasts—now that it will be noised abroad that in his first fight he was thrown? Wrestler! *Paugh!* Weakling is what you are—thrown by a youth—a youth with the mouth of a woman and the smile of a child can beat you!”

Charles listened only for a moment to the old woman. Dazed as he was, her fierce lashing seemed to awaken him and bring him to a fresh and complete realization of his ignominy. If the old palmist thought this, what did Jacinta think? Silencing the old witch with a storm of oaths, Charles stumbled off to the chow cart in search of the girl.

It was then that Jacinta realized that the lot of the vanquished was her lot.

Charles Hinges was hers—she had promised her love to him. The new, glorious youth who had beaten him was in reality her enemy. As she found herself in the jam of the buckaroos who were congratulating their hero, she thought of Charles and the last picture she had seen of him—pressed to the ground with the inexorable, unyielding arm of his younger brother.

She elbowed her way through the crowd, her hair falling disheveled about her in the tussle and the gold buttons tearing from her vest. As she emerged she saw Charles lurching up to the chow cart. She followed, and a few paces behind her hobbled Augustina, snorting disdainfully:

“A wrestler! *Paugh!* A youth with a woman’s smile throws him—and with one hand! Where is our glory now—our troupe, our home, our name?”

Jacinta did not listen to any of these words—a much greater conflict was surging within her. She reached the old chow cart a moment after Charles



had laboriously pulled himself up into the cabin. Nimbly she sprang up—like the dancer she was. Charles turned, and the two met face to face in the littered room.

“Charlie, you’re hurt,” she said. “I’ve come to help you.”

“I am not hurt!” he shot back with such ferocity that the girl recoiled. “Look here,” he went on, “don’t you tell me I’m hurt. I wasn’t beaten. Understand that now before you say another word. I wasn’t beaten. It was a trick. Get that now.”

“I’m not saying that, Charlie. What do I care about that? You are hurt. I can tell by the way you are holding your arm. Here, let me help. Lie down.”

Charles held his hand up, and the girl paled, thinking at first that he was going to strike her, but he merely held her off. “I’m not hurt,” he cried with an oath. “Don’t plague me by saying that. No one can hurt me. No one can throw me in a fair fight.”

“I know it, Charlie.” Jacinta grew a bit exasperated. She assumed the voice of a mother expostulating with a sulky child. “What do I care about your being thrown? That’s nothing. Forget that.”

“It’s nothing, eh? Let me tell you this—it’s everything! If you had a spark of love for me, which I sure doubt, it was love for my strength.”

“Sure!” the girl began.

“Sure! You admit it. Sure thing! My strength—that no man can stand up against. The strength that finished China Jones’s gang.”

“I know, Charlie. You can lick ’em all. I know it. I’m granting you that.”

“And that’s what you loved? Wasn’t it, now? If that wasn’t all, what else? I ask you that! What else about a brute like me could a girl fall for? Nothing—nothing in God’s world!”

“Well, why talk about that now? You are working yourself crazy about I don’t know what. You’re going to throw a fit in a minute. Calm down, Charlie, and believe this: *I love you.*”

Charles went on, gathering his anger and holding it in as a storm gathers clouds before bursting. “That’s all you love. You can’t deny it. And when a trick wrestler comes along and pins me to the ground, all but breaking my neck, he takes that away from me—that unbeatable strength you fell for. I’ve lost you. Don’t deny it. Damn it, I’ve lost you! I can tell by the look in your eyes. I could tell by the way you watched that hellbender twist my

shoulders. I could tell it at the very moment I was busting my back on the ground. You don't love me. You can't love me, because there's nothing left for you to love."

"Well, I'll say this, Charlie: you make me sick! Be a good loser and forget."

"Be a good loser!" Charlie roared. "I can't be a good loser. I don't know how." There was a pathetic truth about what he was saying which Jacinta didn't miss. "I've never been a loser before."

Jacinta went impulsively toward him, opening her arms, but then checking herself as she saw the new fire in his eyes. She could have controlled him once, perhaps, but now his wrath put him far out of her reach. He had seen her worship the younger brother, and the sight had thrown off all bonds with which she had once held him. He no longer worshiped her—that was certain—and as for her, she had seen his brother, and thus seen what Charles lacked.

The gulf widened.

"Look here, Charlie—listen to me just this once. Listen to a little bit of reason. In the first place, I want to know where you get this stuff about seeing in my eyes that I don't love you. You couldn't see anything like that while you were rolling around in the turf back there—and this stuff about seeing in my eyes that I love your— — Well, *him*—that's bunk! You *think* you saw something, that's what!"

This was a lashing stroke—just the mention of his brother. Charles straightened up and lifted his fists in a new fury. Now he forgot the pain in his wrenched shoulder, and before his white rage the girl stumbled back to the door of the cart.

"You love him! And when you say you don't you're telling a rotten lie! You love him! Any one could tell that. I could see it even with the sun burning into my eyes. And when you stay in this cart saying you love me it's a worse lie still. You're through with me. I know it. And I'm through with you. Get out of here. Go along—get out of here!"

Jacinta's lips whitened with anger, but she could not reply. Tears welled to her eyes, and her face trembled with a sob which she checked by clenching her teeth. Finally when Charles had turned his back on her and stepped to the front of the cabin, she murmured, almost inaudibly:

"Where will I go?"

The answer came from an eavesdropper who had taken in every word of the fight. Augustina poked her head above the sill of the door, her comb shaking with a disdainful quip.

“Yes! Where can you go now?” she croaked. “And where can I go now that our home is lost? And where will this great boaster go now that he has been thrown—upon his first challenge?”

Jacinta turned abruptly, her pale face reddening with anger. “Look here, you old loon, what right have you to come here taunting him just because he lost? That’s like you and your tricks and your lies. The thing to do now is to help him—not laugh at him.”

“Did you come to help?” The old duenna’s comb flashed jeeringly in the sun.

“Yes, I did.”

“His wounds are beyond help!”

“Yes, they’re beyond help,” Charles agreed bitterly. “So get out of here. I never want to see you again.”

“Then you’re sending me away? Remember that, Charlie,” the girl answered.

“Yes, I will remember it! Get out of my sight and forget me.”

“And where will I go?”

“Where?” Charles shot back. “Where else but to your lover? Go to him—to your new lover. He has already taken you from me. You mock me staying here. Go to him and tell him you are homeless and friendless. He is the victor—he— —”

The old palmist laughed mercilessly. “To the victor, yes—the spoils belong to him! You are the prize. You are what our great wrestler has lost. Go to the victor and present yourself.”

Jacinta bit her lips in a fierce attempt to hold back her sobs. She looked at Charles again, and the exchange of their glances frightened her. She fled.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### CHINA JONES SITS IN

There was one result of the lost match which had completely escaped the notice of Charles or Jacinta or old Augustina. Milligan, the barkeep, had put up his money, obtaining odds of a very satisfying generosity. Milligan like the three members of the ill-starred troupe, had bet everything. He knew little of young David Hinges, but of the elder brother he knew a lot—at least enough to believe he had a sure thing.

When Charles lost the match, Milligan kept to his word. Charles would pay dearly!

Now the fat barkeep of Little Hell knew that he could make his threat in earnest. Accordingly, having been stripped clean of his money—in fact, of everything but his clothes and his mount—Milligan left Elko immediately after the fight and took a day and a night's ride to Tippet, a cow town bordering the western edge of the Big Horn Basin.

Here Fat Milligan loafed for a day in the Dead Horse Pavilion—an establishment where he was unknown. The night he spent in a lodging house—a long, unpainted shack adjoining the Dead Horse Dance Pavilion. He spent the next day in the same manner, hanging about the bar, buying an occasional drink, but eschewing companionship; he watched the monte and stud, but refrained from drawing cards.

He was waiting for some one, as the townsfolk soon surmised, and he was growing more impatient, they observed, as the hours dragged by.

Finally late one night, when the dancing and gambling were in full sway, he found the man he was looking for. A group of riders had just galloped into town, all dusty, tired, grim looking. Their leader strode to the bar, ordered drinks, and, upon being refreshed, entered into an affable conversation with the surly gentleman who was employed as bouncer.

The leader of the band of newcomers was a tall man with a small head. A vest of yellow velvet beaded in black, an emerald ring on a long, pointed finger, a green beryl in an Indian tie, were conspicuous details of his attire. By these tokens, as well as by the Mongolian though handsome cast of his features, all men knew him to be China Jones, the keeper of a far-famed resort in Little Hell.

China Jones, it had been rumored abroad, had been shorn of his power—the fear sway he had held over Little Hell—by a fighter who went by the name of Hinges. In the Big Horn Basin it was undisputed that this Hinges must most certainly have been no other than the hero of the Basin—David Hinges.

But the sandy-mustached bouncer of the Dead Horse had a bet up that David Hinges had been in the Big Horn Basin, and not in Little Hell, at the time the fight had taken place. Hence it could not have been David Hinges, but some other of perhaps that same family.

The bouncer considered it worth his time to settle the point before the group of witnesses who had collected about the bar when China Jones entered.

“You’d orter be able to tell us something, China,” he began, diplomatically. “I’ve got a bet up that Dave Hinges was down in Elko that night when your gang tried to beat up a fist-fighter in your place at Little Hell.”

China Jones flushed darkly. His fear sway had indeed been broken—now that any bouncer could mention that night to his face. The long, spidery fingers snapped down to a holster where a revolver bulged through an open flap. And then China Jones collected himself. This was not the time for the fight he had planned. He broke out into an uncomfortable laugh.

“You can’t prove it by me, pard,” he said. “Never heard of Dave Hinges in my life.”

“What!” the bouncer ejaculated in astonishment. “How long have you-all been in this here Basin?”

“I’ve been here since the night you mention,” Jones rejoined crisply.

“And have you heard tell yet about the wrasslin’ match back there in Elko a few days ago?”

“I have. What about it?”

“Dave Hinges was in that thar wrasslin’ match. A circus man comes along with bulging muscles and says he kin throw anybody any time and anywheres. Dave Hinges shows up about that time and grabs the circus man’s shoulder with his fingers and pulls out a couple of tendons, and then tucks him away in the turf like a nurse biddin’ its baby good night.”

“This man Dave Hinges you’re talking about,” China Jones rejoined dryly, as well as cryptically, “is not my man.”

As he said this Jones felt a polite tug at his sleeve, and, turning about, looked into the round, red face of his own barkeep, Fat Milligan.

“I seen that wrasslin’ match,” Milligan said softly. “I got somethin’ to tell you about it kinder private.”

The crowd broke up, and China Jones followed Milligan to a booth.

“I been waitin’ here for you a couple of days, and I been hearin’ a thing or two which will be soothin’ music to your ears when I tells you. I heard of this here wrasslin’ match while I was scoutin’ around the Basin according to your order, helpin’ you hunt for Charles Hinges. I heard one of the men was named Hinges, so I shags out thar to Elko to see if he weren’t the man we was searchin’ for. Well, I was mistaken. The match was won by a bird named Dave Hinges, and as you yourself said, he ain’t your man. No, sir, he ain’t.”

“All right—that settles it!” China Jones replied disgustedly.

“But the man he wrassled,” Milligan hastened to add, “was a show fighter who come outen the desert with a gypsy fortune teller and a little dancer who had been travelin’ with so few clothes that she was sunburned all over. That gypsy was Augustina, the witch of Pimas. The dancing girl with the sunburn for clothes was little Miss Jacinta of Frisco. And—wait a minute! The circus man stylin’ himself as the unbeatable Charles the Wrassler was your ole friend who won the war at Little Hell—Charles Hinges—who was really tryin’ to throw his own kid brother.”

China Jones had listened, holding his breath and watching the narrator with a green glow of excitement burning in his eyes. When Fat Milligan finished China exhaled his dammed breath in a long, half-whistling purr. “And now— —” he prompted, smiling.

“Now he’s yourn. That’s all I can say. The travelin’ company of three is busted up. I hear tell as how Charles Hinges has gone on a souse—not a liquor souse, mind you, but somethin’ worse: it’s a souse up in his bean because he was beat for the first time in his life. He’s hangin’ around the saloons and gaming rooms, and there’s not a man dares go within ten feet of him. As I understand, he’s waitin’ for a chanst to bump off his kid brother.”

“Then, Mr. Milligan,” China Jones rejoined, “you deserve a reward. You’ve done your scouting good and brown, and brought back news that warms my soul. While Charles Hinges is waiting, as everybody knows, to kill his brother—that’s just the time for me to step in and wipe out the old

score. I'll leave you here with the rest of my gang, and I'll step into Elko alone and in the dark.

“Hinges’s days are numbered—and it will be spread about everywhere that his brother killed him. That protects me. On the other hand, when our folks up to Little Hell hear that Charles Hinges—the man who beat up my gang—is bumped off, then what’s the result? They’ll all say wisely, ‘I told you so! No man can buck China Jones without turning up his toes.’ One day, perhaps—maybe a week—maybe it’s three weeks—and then—the buzzards begin to circle—eh, Fat? The old buzzards begin to circle!”

And, leaving Fat Milligan alone in the booth, China Jones slid out into the night.

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE GENTLE PHIL BEASON

Jacinta found that the misfortune of the wrestling match was more significant than she had supposed. In the first place, the little troupe was broken up. The chow cart which had been so comfortable a home in the desert was forfeited because of the betting; likewise their pintos. Jacinta found herself alone.

The irate old palmist had nothing more to do with either of her former companions. Jacinta had purposely broken off relations with the witch of Pimas because of the latter's treatment of the fallen Charles. Old Augustina picked up enough from her palmistry to eke out a few days of living—and a pitiable amount it was because of the fact that Elko was now disposed to regard the three gypsies as out and out impostors. Jacinta could hope for neither consolation nor help from the fortune teller, and, worst of all, she had completely lost her one greatest asset—her protector and lover, Charles Hinges.

To be in Elko without food and lodging was a far more serious matter to Jacinta than she had at first thought. She was considerably more comfortable in the heart of the desert with Charles Hinges, the killer of cougars.

The lonely, rocky cañons, the dry, naked mesas, the wail of a cougar in the early morning, were far more friendly than the streets of Elko to a penniless gypsy. There was not much chance in a Western town for a strange girl to make a respectable living—particularly a girl clothed in the dancing costume which Jacinta wore.

For one day Jacinta took the place of a waitress in a lunch stand on the main street, but this brought her only enough to pay for two nights at the lodging house and for some scanty meals. Then, after putting her last two-bit piece across the counter of one of the Elko lunch stands for a meal, the turning point came.

A new character stepped into her life.

This was a little man, with sharp, dry face and bushy white eyebrows which beetled over his black eyes like the brows of an old and very sagacious dog. Phil Beason was the richest man in town, having operated a wheel in his gaming house successfully for thirty years. For reasons



unknown and uninvestigated, his roulette bank had never been broken. His dance hall, in like manner, had a long and colorful history behind it. From the very first sight he had of Jacinta, when she entered Elko on the driver's seat of the red and yellow chow cart, Beason had eagerly desired to introduce her as one of his features. This inoffensive, wily, bright-eyed little man was the head of a certain element in Elko—composed of the saloon men and protected by the deputy sheriff. Unlike the gaming house proprietor of the type of China Jones, he did not draw about him a court of criminals.

He preferred to build up a reputation of a more or less peaceful man, who always sided with the law. The law, he knew, was his most consistent protector—if consistently and generously paid. “The Elko law,” he maintained, “is a good servant of the public, but you cain't have servants without you tip 'em.”

Such was the power of Phil Beason in the town that any strange and attractive woman coming to Elko was, unknown to herself, subject to a very definite examination. From all quarters reports were given to Phil Beason concerning every circumstance of the girl's life. It pleased him to know that Jacinta, because of the outcome of the wrestling match, had lost her home, her money, her means of livelihood, and her protector.

For several days he bided his time, scratching his pointed nose and long, thin jaw, and smiling calmly when he was told that Jacinta had skipped her breakfast that day, and had not reëngaged her room for that night.

“Now the time has come,” he said to one of his gang—his blue-jawed barkeep. “Tell her there's a position open in ole Phil Beason's place which will bring lots of money in return for giving three dances a day. Tell her that's all she'll be axed to do—no dancin' with the cowmen nor nothin'. She'll be respectable—by that I mean she'll be featured. Whenever I feature one of my dames, tell her that means she's respectable.

“You cain't feature nobody that the cowboys figure is the same as all my other gals. Tell her all this. She'll refuse, of course. Whenever you so much as mention that a job's respectable a gal naturally figures it ain't. Now, when this gal refuses, you tell her all righto—that she might want to think it over. And explain how you understand that it ain't exactly right to put up a proposition to a gal when she's hungry, so you'll wait till after dinner for her answer. Then she can give an answer, you say to her, which won't be affected by her bein' hungry.

“That'll make her think you're a gentleman and want for her to be treated right. But mind you this—don't you give her any money for dinner!

Understand! That would queer the whole game. You leave her then, and tell her if she decides to accept my offer to come around at two o'clock. I figure that right about then the hot sun will get her, and my proposition will look like a life saver."

Phil's instructions were carried out to the letter. The girl, as he had anticipated, refused the offer, and was left with the invitation to come to the gaming house at two that afternoon if she changed her mind. Beason waited in his dance hall, calmly scratching his pointed chin, and, as he had expected, at two o'clock Jacinta appeared. Unruffled as the little old proprietor was, there was something about Jacinta's appearance which puzzled him. He had expected to see a girl dejected, pale, perhaps weak from hunger. Instead he found her smiling, her eyes merrily meeting his gaze, and her face flushed with excitement.

What the excitement was he did not know. "Perhaps she is eager to take up my proposition," he said to himself.

"Well, Phil," she said blithesomely, "here I am."

"I'm glad to see you, gal. Come into the gaming room. Set down, and we'll talk it all over."

"There's nothing to talk over. I'm going to dance in your place to-night. Put a sign up—and watch the crowd come. Say it's Jacinta, the girl from the desert, and they'll all bite."

"Good! Then all that's left is to show you the place." Phil Beason said this in a matter-of-fact, businesslike way, but underneath his placidity there was a very definite surprise.

Phil knew enough about women to realize that when they changed their minds they changed very definitely. But this complete surrender of the girl nettled him. He had heard all about how she had caused such a big brawl in her last place of engagement—up at Little Hell—and he decided she would bear watching. He continued in the same tone: "I'm proud of the old place. Been runnin' it now for thirty years, and it's what might be called a landmark."

He led the girl into the gaming hall. She looked around at the walls, which were completely papered with magazine and newspaper photographs of actresses, famous bulls, and dead toreadors. Bullet holes riddled the picture ladies—but this did not shock Jacinta. Little Hell had hardened her to the more or less funereal background of these ordinary Arizona dens.

“There’s been a little gunfighting here now and then!” she said, laughing. “If that’s what those holes mean.”

“Yes. And them holes don’t tell the best part of the story. Them holes are only half of the shots fired in my place during the last thirty years. The other half didn’t leave their mark—that is, not in the walls.” Phil Beason’s mouth widened in to a breathless, gaping, silent laugh. “You get the point, gal?”

“I sure do. I’ve been in a place like this before.”

“Sure, I know. China Jones’s place, up to Little Hell. I know all about it.” Phil sobered somewhat in making this remark. Then: “I’ll show you your dressin’ room now, gal.”

He led the way to the end of the big dance floor—a roughly planked surface around which the dancers with their high heels and spurs had worn a smooth, wide, circular groove.

“Lots of hell-for-leather dancing here, I take it,” Jacinta remarked.

“Wait till after supper and you’ll see the biggest night ever pulled off in Arizony.”

“I reckon I will,” Jacinta nodded.

The proprietor looked at her out of the corners of his glittering, foxlike eyes. Another remark like that from a woman, and Phil Beason felt that his thirty years of unruffled calm would be ended. Without commenting further, the proprietor ushered her up the stairs which led the way to a large balcony on one end of the floor. Opening onto this balcony were a number of rooms the size of stalls, which were occupied by the dance girls. Larger rooms opened off a long, narrow, dark hall. At the end of this hall a staircase, on the outside of the house, led to the ground.

“These front rooms on the balcony are all took,” Phil said. “But the star’s room, which is to be yourn, is empty, and it’s halfway down the hall.”

Upon entering this room, the girl looked about at the bed, the small table, with its fly-specked mirror, and the mess of make-up material scattered about. A chair and a washstand, with jug and basin, completed the furnishings. The walls were bare, except for penciled histories of former occupants, reading: “My name is Frisco Lou. I shore am pretty. And Tom Logan killed the sheriff because the two of them loved me—Frisco Lou.” Other elegies of the same tone were scrawled on the walls with the convincing punctuation of bullet holes.

“This suits me all right enough, Phil,” Jacinta said.

“It does, eh?” Phil rubbed his sleeve over the dusty, cobwebbed window, letting in more light. “I’m glad to hear it, gal. I thought kind of like you’d balk a bit. My place is a rough place and has lots of history behind it—but your job is entirely respectable.”

“Sure; I know all about it.”

“Now, I ain’t goin’ to ax you to go to work too soon. You can have this here room and rest up if you want. And I’ll order the barkeep to fetch a good big meal at supper time. Your first dance will be to-night—at ten, when the place is crowded up most. How about it?”

“Absolutely jake!”

“Fine!” Phil turned to the door to go, then added: “Perhaps you’d like your supper now.”

“At two o’clock?” the girl asked softly.

“I reckoned maybe you was down and out—had no money and all that.”

“Sure—send up the meal now.”

Phil stepped out to the hall, but this time the girl called him back.

“Just a minute, Phil,” she said. “There is something we’ve left out of this agreement.”

The proprietor looked at her a moment in a perplexity which he masked perfectly. He took off his black felt hat, and for the first time the girl saw his moist, low forehead and bald head. Slowly Phil’s mouth widened and gaped again in that silent, horselike laugh.

“You want money in advance?” he asked finally.

“No—that’s not it. Your part of the agreement is jake. Everything you’ve done I’ve agreed to. But I will say this. You showed me just now that you knew I was down and out. It’s *you* that’s got to do a little agreeing now. You knew I would come to you—because I didn’t have any way of getting a house and home.”

“Maybe it wasn’t fair for me to— —”

“To force me into accepting this job? It’s fair, as far as I can figure. I’m not kicking. I’m the one that hasn’t been fair.”

“You? Say, look here, gal—what’s got you, anyway? I thought I knew a thing or two about you—and you’ve got me goin’ in circles.”

“Well, before you throw a fit, Mr. Proprietor, I’ll explain everything. You’ve got me. That’s plain. But you think you’ve got me where you haven’t. You think you’ve got a girl who’s alone in the world— —”

“I kind of thought your two pals—the old woman and the wrassler—had forsaken you.”

“Well, they have. That is, until to-night at ten. When I come out on the floor down there and start in my solo dance you’ll have a war on your hands which will make all the past history of this gambling house and den look like a church meeting in some New England village. In plain terms, Mr. Beason, there’s a man in this town who’s going to object.”

“Which is who?”

“Charles the Wrestler himself.”

Again Phil’s mouth gaped in his dry, red, silent laugh, which sent a shudder through the girl.

“Who’s afeared of Charles the Wrassler? I seen how he wrassled; and besides, from what I hear, he’s offen you.”

“I know he is. And now comes the confession I wanted to make. You think you’re using me as a tool—just a feature to attract the sousing stock tenders, sheepmen, Mexes and bandits of the whole country. It’s you who are the tool—and I’m using *you*. Charles the Wrestler is off of me, yes—that’s true. And what I want to find out is if he’s off of me for good. He threw me over when he was crazy with the beating he got from Dave Hinges. I been thinking that maybe everything’s off. Maybe there’s no chance with him. To-night is going to show.

“If Charles doesn’t come for me to-night—when he hears I’m going to be a feature in your den—then it means he’s forgotten. I’ll know then, and the torment of these last few days will be over.” Jacinta paused. The suggestion of a sob came into her voice. “Then I’ll forget, too—if I can.”

## CHAPTER XXVI

### JACINTA CONQUERS

Jacinta hurried through the dark hall to the balcony, down the steps, through the dance floor, and out into the open sandy street. She waited irresolutely in the glare of the sun, and as she waited she was aware of a horseman galloping through the center of the town.

Although a cloud of dust partially obscured the looming form that was bearing down upon her, Jacinta knew at a glance that the horseman was young David Hinges, the man who had so completely wrecked her home.

This enemy of hers came now for a second time galloping dramatically into her life at an hour which—for him, at any rate—was most propitious.

Jacinta was at the end of her bridge.

She was friendless, and the whole world seemed suddenly to have become her enemy.

And here was the entrance of the man who had already fascinated her. No lover bent on wooing could have asked for more advantageous circumstances.

David rode up, reining in his horse so abruptly that it fell back upon its haunches when he dismounted.

“I am glad I found you,” he said cheerfully. “I’ve been thinking of you ever since I saw you at the wrestling match.”

“What are you glad to find me for?” Jacinta carefully masked her excitement.

“There’s something I want to tell you—that’s why.” He left his black mare standing where he had dismounted just as he had done when Jacinta first saw him riding into the corral before the match with Charles. “I could not get you out of my mind when I rode back to the ranch. And ever since I saw you I wanted to come back. There’s something I want to tell you.”

“No, there isn’t. There’s nothing you want to tell me, and there’s nothing I want to hear.”

“First, get this straight: I didn’t know what it meant to you—that wrestling match. I thought it was just a bit of sport. I wasn’t trying to break

that champ wrestler of yours. What is he to me, I'd like to know?"

The girl answered this with a dry, bitter laugh which Dave did not understand. She looked up to him, and her laugh was cut short as his face brought back the remembrance of the disastrous conflict with Charles.

Dave was a handsome boy, and there was an enthusiasm about him which lent a radiance to his tanned face. It was the same sort of radiance which, years ago, had lit his features that day in the cabin on Buzzard Mountain. But then it had been the rays of the sun, whereas now it was a more vital light upon a more mature and handsome face.

The girl thought him magnificent. Every word she said against him was said with a passionate scorn, but the passion was most certainly something other than the hate for a victorious enemy.

Suddenly she asked, with a steady, earnest stare:

"What do you want of me—boy?"

Dave felt baffled, cornered. He realized that two or three men were standing farther down the street. They could not help but notice the girl in the red, gypsy costume talking to the town hero. A farmer was passing in a lumbering wagon.

Dave blushed hotly, which brought a smile of derision, joy, pity—everything but sheer love—to the girl's eyes. Then the youth blurted out his answer:

"Damned if I know what I want of you—except to look at you again and see your eyes—to see 'em shine the way they did when I threw your champ wrestler."

The girl's white throat, her cheeks, temples and forehead reddened with anger.

"You like to call him my champ wrestler, don't you? You want to rub it in and remind me that he is not really a champ. Understand what I'm saying, boy—there's a gulch between you and me—a gulch as big and as deep as this whole cañon where this town stands—only it's much deeper. You can cross this cañon, but you can't cross the gulch that's between you and me. There's no use your making love to me. You haven't a chance in God's world—because I love some one else."

"Who is it? Is it the— —" Dave was again going to refer to the champ wrestler, but he refrained this time.

“Yes—the wrestler you threw. You beat him one way—because of your strength. You won that match, but when it comes to winning me from him you are outclassed. You haven’t got a chance. Now, don’t tell me that he’s an ugly brute, because I’ll box your ears. He’s not pretty like you are, I’ll admit. But I love him, and when he gets thrown down and out that’s the best way to make me love him ten times more.”

“I knew you were that kind of a woman. That’s why I’ve fallen for you myself. And if he’s the man who is picked out to make you happy, well and good. But it has chanced to come to my ears that you had a set-to with him, and that he has thrown you over, so that you are left in the town at the mercy of these bull-whackers and sheepmen who come in from the range eager for a big souse and a hot time. I reckoned that it was now a good chance for me to step in.”

“And hunt for your own hot time?”

Dave was abashed. He did not know the answer to this question. He started in, hesitantly groping for ideas as he talked. “It is a kind of a new experience, ma’am. I’ve been a plain range-fed jack out in the hills, practically speaking, all my life. I don’t know much about womenfolk, to tell you the truth. I never chanced to meet any, except when I was a boy up around Buzzard Mountain. Down here in the Big Horn women are as scarce as Dogrib Indians.

“Here in Elko I’ve never seen a girl that was what you’d call moderately good looking. These painted dance-hall ladies aren’t much to look at, you’ll agree. Mind you, I don’t mean I object to paint. You had paint on your own face when I first saw you, and I liked it. It was as red—and as good looking—as the bright flower on the tip of the ocotillo cactus. There was something else about your face which that paint couldn’t cover. If you’ll let me say it without it’s seeming that I’m in love with myself, ma’am, it was a look of your eye I saw which made me think you liked the way I wrestled.”

“You’re mistaken,” Jacinta snapped. “I don’t like anything about you—not then or now, either.”

Dave scratched his head. This was his first experience with love—that is, the love for a woman. He had had plenty of yearnings in his heart before—affections that centered in such things as the desert wind, his own pet horse, the rockbound cañons, the purple sage. Every man has them at times in the Big Horn country. But this new yearning within him was more baffling, more insistent.

Just as it was more wonderful.



This girl was like a cactus herself. He desired mightily to crush her as the thirsty prospector crushes the pulp of the barrel cactus and drinks the bitter juice. He had the feeling now that love was like that—thorny, baffling, bitter, quenching the thirst only to magnify it.

“I am going.” The girl turned. Dave reached out for her hand. He grasped it awkwardly, but firmly. “If you have looked at me long enough,” she said, “I would like to go. I don’t want to stand here listening to you.”

“Why not? Damn it, I love you!”

“I hate you.”

“Why?”

“You are my enemy—my worst enemy. I hate you. I never want to see you again.”

“Are you going back to *him*?”

“I’m going back to the man I love—the man who is your— —”

Jacinta stopped, paling slightly as she realized what she had almost told this man—that Charles Hinges was his brother. Then she resolved just as suddenly that she would tell him, anyway. It would hurt him—he had crashed disastrously into his brother’s life and humbled him. Jacinta thought it would be pleasant—and just—to see the boy wince now. It would punish him to tell him that the man he had crushed was his own flesh and blood.

“The man who fell at your feet, who was broken before the eyes of the town,” she began irresolutely.

“What about him? You love him. Is that what you want to say?”

“Yes, I love him—and that’s why I hate you.” She thought again that it was best to keep this information. It might come in very conveniently later. It would be a good card to play against this young, passionate, untamed boy. Later she would play it. “Now that you know I love him, think how much I hate you.”

She drew her hand ferociously away from David’s grasp. He leaned forward to her again, eager to infold her in his arms. She was frail, slender—a vivid, ravishing picture in that brilliant sun. He was drunk with the nearness of her beauty to him. The slap in the face with which she met his advance was nothing to him—nothing except that the tingle was pleasant because it was a touch of her flesh against his flesh. She had fled.

He stood there, oblivious of the laughter of the two stockmen at the upper end of the street. He was thinking that the tingle of her hand against his face was like the smart a man might feel who reaches to grasp the red flower of the ocotillo and who rubs his cheek instead against the brittle, piercing prickles of a cactus.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### “TO-NIGHT AT TEN”

For the first two days after his defeat Charles Hinges roamed the town without purpose, plunged in the depths of shame and ignominy. He developed a hatred for his brother which amounted almost to an obsession. He haunted the gambling dens and bars of the town, but he could find none of his ancient solace in drink or cards.

He was already drunk in his mind—intoxicated, drugged by his own brooding over Jacinta and David Hinges.

Finally his distraction began to focus to a partially definite purpose: the only thing was to leave the town—to flee the gaze of the Elko citizens who had seen his fall. And the direction he intended to take was toward the ranch where his brother Dave worked as foreman. This time when they met it would not be a wrestling match where tricks counted. It would be a fight, and the best man would win.

*A finish fight was the only thing left now!*

Accordingly he spent the whole day trying to borrow a horse. The deputy sheriff, observing that Charles was working himself into a frenzy, and fearing that he would murder the first man who chanced to bump into him on the street, offered to lend him a mount, with the stipulation that it was to be left at the adjacent town of Dry Creek.

Charles was satisfied with the arrangement, and the sheriff, seeing him riding down the main street toward the west, was likewise satisfied, and congratulated himself on this good riddance.

Before Charles reached the end of the town he reined his horse abruptly before the entrance of Phil Beason's place. Something there had caught his eye which changed his plans as well as the plans and hopes of the deputy sheriff. On the unpainted walls of the shack he saw a placard which announced in big, scrawling letters:

TO-NIGHT AT TEN O'CLOCK

JACINTA, THE REFINED HOOTCH  
DANCER! SHE'S GOT EGYPT  
IN HER! SHE'S ALIVE!

There was nothing in the wording of this sign that could shock Charles Hinges. He himself would have announced Jacinta in just that way. But it was the fact that she was returning to the dance hall life—the life from which he had saved her in Little Hell—that awakened him.

He realized now what the last few days had meant to Jacinta. She was alone. She had no other means of livelihood—she knew how to do little else but dance. By his own act he had thrown her upon the mercy of the town to beg her lodging and her food, or else to dance.

A surge of fury swept over him. It was a fury directed at himself. He leaped from his horse and yanked the sign down and stalked into the saloon.

An old sheepman was at the bar drinking with the blue-jawed barkeep who had been a conspicuous onlooker at the wrestling match. Both noticed from the look on Charles's face that trouble was coming, and the sheepman opened his ragged, brown coat in order to best display his holster.

The barkeep commenced wiping glasses and smiled diplomatically.

“Who put this sign up?” Charles called out in a hoarse, roaring voice.

The barkeep wiped his glasses with an added rapidity.

“The management,” was his answer. “The management put it up.”

“Well, the management is going to get a broken jaw. Where is he?”

The barkeep pointed beyond Charles's shoulder, and the latter, turning, saw Phil Beason standing at the door which led into the dance hall.

“I've sort of been expectin' you, Mr. Wrassler,” Phil said, walking across the hall and standing before Charles like an audacious fox looking up at a huge bull. Phil's jaw looked so thin and dry that Charles felt one tap would have shattered it.

“Beason, I understand you and the law of this town are hooked up tight with each other. But that ain't going to prevent me from staging a big fight on this floor of yours to-night.”

“Mr. Wrassler,” Phil said quietly, “afore you start in with yore war talk, they's somethin' I figure you'd orter know. They's somethin' you and me has in common.”

“You? A little skunk like you?”

“Wait a minute. I'm invitin' you to come here to-night. Be here at ten. You will see Jacinta comin' out on the floor to dance. You'll go crazy—and

you'll start a big brawl. I want it. It's good advertisin'. I've often wished my place could get the name of that hole up in Little Hell belongin' to some bird they call China Jones. You be here—I'll even pay you—a reasonable sum—for doin' a little of yore show fightin'—like they say you done up to Little Hell."

"I'll be here, all righto! That's settled!"

"And one thing else. I ain't mentioned yet the point me and you has in common. I seen yore wrasslin' match with Dave Hinges, and I seen how he sort of busted up yore troupe of performers. From what I hear, you consider him now yore worst enemy."

"That's nothing to do with you!"

"Certainly it has. *Dave Hinges is my worst enemy in the world, too!* He's a sort of leader among the young cowboys in this here Basin. They all look up to him because of the way he can handle men."

"*You'd orter know how he handles men, Mr. Wrassler!*" the barkeep chimed in, joining with the sheepman in a hilarious laugh.

"Now shut up, Jack," the proprietor said. "Leave me manage this." He went on, touching Charles's tense arm politely. "My trade was unlimited until this young boy, Dave Hinges, comes horsin' into town from Buzzard Mountain. Up there, they tell me, his father was a famous saloon wrecker, and the place was rapidly dryin' up, until the old man croaked. Then of course every one went to booze fightin' agin, as any community will which has prohibition thrust down their throats. Now, this young guy Dave Hinges has cost me more money than if my bank had broke a dozen times. I'm offen him—I'd kill him if I could get away with it. So would you. And don't you see, Mr. Wrassler—that makes you and me the same as two lovin' twin brothers?"

"It doesn't make us anything of the kind, you yellow-livered, fawning skunk!" Charles burst out. "And what I want to tell you is this: I didn't come here to make friends with a crook gambler; I came here to warn you that if Jacinta dances here to-night you and your whole outfit will go out and dance with her!" He threw the crumpled pieces of the sign into Beason's face. "You get it now, don't you?"

Phil Beason was never so calm.

"Sure. I get everything. It suits me. You be here."

The proprietor said no more, but his barkeep offered the parting shot: "Bein' as the management saw your wrasslin' bout with Dave Hinges, I reckon your war talk ain't goin' to scare nobody nor stop no dance nowhere!"

"It won't be a wrestling bout," Charles said in a soft tone which put a stop to the chuckling of the men at the bar. "And it won't be any solo dance, either."

The two listeners said nothing in response to this warning. They waited until Charles had stamped out into the street, then Phil Beason picked up the torn pieces of placard, and after the sound of Charles's galloping horse had died away he went out and nailed the sign up again. It had been ripped in half, but the announcement that Jacinta was dancing that night at ten was as legible as ever.

And it was read by two more ardent suitors. At sunset David Hinges, riding to town from his ranch, and bent on wooing, read the words.

"I will be here at ten," he said to himself, "and I'll tell her that I love her, and that no girl I love can dance in this house. If she refuses me this time and says she hates me, I'll say that I beat her lover and won her as cavemen won their mates from weaker enemies."

"Then if she still repulses me, I'll say that I've made up my mind not to be repulsed. I'll take her forcibly in my arms and toss her up to the saddle of my horse and ride with her to the mountains. After to-night I'll no longer leave it to her to say whether she wants me or not. She will have me. I will steal her away. I will fight for her against any man."

It was thus that young David, hot-blooded, strong-willed, worked himself up into a fervor of glorious passion. He waited for ten o'clock to come with the impatience of a lover who has a definite tryst with his beloved.

Then, after sunset, came the third suitor to read of Jacinta's début.

It was a man who came under cover of darkness—a tall man with a brilliant, velvet vest who stood before the sign so that the yellow light from the saloon window caught a green spark from the beryl in his tie. He, too, was a heavily built and handsome man; but he carried himself not so much like a man as a prowling puma. This impression was accentuated by the fact that his head was small, the neck thin and long, the teeth large and glistening as he smiled at the sign.

“Jacinta dances at ten, eh?” he said to himself. “Then my search is ended, for I will find my man here to-night.”

China Jones lit a cigar, sticking it into the left corner of his mouth, which was flabbier than the other corner and slightly stained. He puffed softly and started to walk down the darker side of the street. The light of his cigar waving in the air as he strolled might have indicated that he, too, was waiting for ten o’clock with the nervousness of a lover keeping a wished-for and vital tryst.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### “TO-NIGHT IF THE STARS INCLINE”

Considerably before ten o'clock Beason's place began to fill. The rhythmic banging of its dance music throbbed from every window. The shouts and laughter of a large part of Elko's inhabitants softened the ragtime—or at least cloaked it so that from the upper end of the street, where China Jones was strolling and passing the time, the noise seemed a prolonged din.

The night was one for merrymaking. Elko wanted music and dancing. It did not want and did not expect a fight. The proprietor and the blue-jawed barkeep expected some trouble on the part of Charles the Wrestler, but they considered it a small matter. The Wrestler could be handled, they reflected; he was not invincible.

China Jones watched the proceedings with a detached amusement, observing that every one was bent on pleasure. It was a good night for China's business. Everything was working out just as he had desired. And best of all, not a soul, so far as he knew, had an intimation of the fact that one of the men of that town, Charles Hinges—beaten and forgotten by everybody—was a marked man.

A little before ten China Jones decided to approach the dance hall. He kept to one side of the street until he came opposite the entrance, and then, avoiding the rays of light which the windows cast upon the sand, he slipped up to the old shack.

He did not enter the saloon door. He circled the building, coming around to the back, where the windows opened upon the booths of the dance hall. These compartments were already filled, but by watching the couples going out on the dance floor during the music China Jones finally picked his chance to vault over one of the sills and land in an empty booth.

Here he unconcernedly took a seat.

Couples passed. Some looked at him, but no one cast a second glance. He was a stranger in Elko among many strangers who, upon a night like this, flocked to Phil Beason's place. A waiter came, and Jones ordered a drink.

He sat in the recess of the booth thrumming on the table until his order was brought to him. The barkeep accepted his pay and was about to leave when China Jones called to him. A silver dollar was on the table.



“When you go, draw the curtain across the booth,” Jones said quietly.

“I sure will, pard, and anything else I can do I—”

“Beat it!”

The waiter disappeared, and China Jones tossed off the drink. Then he lit another long, black cigar. He picked out the beryl from his Indian tie and polished it until the gleam was like the green light flickering in his own small eyes. Satisfied with its brilliancy, he adjusted his tie and replaced the stone.

For a moment he polished his finger nails on his coat sleeve, tilting back in his chair and rocking, while from his mouth he emitted a rhythmic sound which kept time to the dance music. After what seemed to him an endless wait a woman entered the booth.

This woman was the only one in town who knew that China Jones had come. If there had been others there who had heard of China Jones they did not know what his mission in Elko was. But this woman did. She had seen him strolling up the darker parts of the main street, and from the waving cigar and the occasional spark of the beryl, and furthermore from his stature and walk, she knew him.

She had hidden herself in a lot which gave an advantageous view of the main street, and she had seen him pacing restlessly up and down. When a little before ten o'clock he crossed the street to the dance hall she followed him. She saw him circle the building and vault into the open window. Then, ascertaining which booth he had entered, she came to the front of the saloon, went in, and mingled with the guests of the dance hall.

When this woman entered China Jones saw at first the brilliant gypsy costume and the black *serape* drawn around the head in the fashion of Spanish women so that the face is covered.

Then the light of a hanging oil lamp fell upon the fantastic jet comb and the dark wine-purple bodice of Augustina, the witch of Pimas.

China flushed angrily and jumped to his feet. The woman tossed up her head, and, with a gesture that was eloquent of her love for all things theatrical, brushed back her *serape*. As China looked upon the iron-gray hair, the flashing black eyes and downy lips of the old woman, his mouth widened to a slow, disdainful grin.

“I didn't send for you, you old faker,” he laughed. “Get out of here, or I'll bash you in the face.”

“Don’t spurn me now, China Jones!” Augustina grew hot. “I have the upper hand now—the upper hand which I’ve been waiting for all these years.”

“Say! Shut up and leave me alone. I didn’t come here to see you. The sight of you makes me shiver, except that you are so laughable. Now get out of here. I’m waiting for another appointment.”

“I’m laughable, am I? You say that of Augustina—of the witch of Pimas, who stuck by you these many years!”

“Yes, stuck like a leech.”

“Who has been faithful when all other women have hated you!”

“Sure! Faithful as a bat sticking to my throat! Leave me alone! Get out!”

“I will not leave you alone now. I left you in Little Hell, and it is you that have come back to me.”

“Come back to you!” Jones cried, raising his voice to an uproarious laugh. “You think I’ve been circling this desert to hunt for you, eh?”

“You have found me—let that suffice. You have found me, and this time it will be harder for you to rid yourself of me. I have loved you, and I could love you now! I am not old. I have the blood of youth in my veins. I could love you!”

China Jones realized now that he had three people in Elko to deal with. He had at first thought only of Charles Hinges and then of Jacinta, but now he must take this uncontrollable, wily, impassioned tigress into his planning.

He considered it best to change his method of dealing with her. “All right, old lady,” he said, “have it your own way. I came to Elko looking for you. The love I had for you when you were a bewitching *señorita* is still burning here in my heart. I came to find you.”

Augustina burst out into a derisive cackle, long and truly hideous. She concluded, still laughing, with the words:

“You came here to kill Charles Hinges, liar that you are!”

“All right; I’ll admit that. I came to kill Charles Hinges. But if you want the truth of the matter, I thought I could get you back, too, and take you to Little Hell again, where you can live in comfort and ease. You will have fine horses, a mozo for a servant, and you can tell fortunes and gather in the dollars again to your heart’s content.”

“I am young when it comes to your loving me, China Jones,” the woman said. “But I am old and wise in the language of flattery: every word you say is a lie. You are here to kill Charles Hinges.”

China thought for a moment, rolling his cigar in his mouth and eying the woman with a perplexed frown. Something must be done, he knew, or she would beat his game before he had a chance to play a single move.

“Look here, Augustina, you played a foul trick on me, taking Jacinta from me, and helping Hinges escape from Little Hell after his fight at my place. But you have always played foul tricks. You did it because you once loved me with your fiery, hellcat, Spanish love. I can forgive everything because of that.”

“Shall I forgive, too?” the woman wanted to know. “Once I was a beautiful *señorita*—you say so yourself. And now what am I? What have you made me? What did you bring in return for the love I gave? I am an old woman and a laughing-stock. You yourself are the loudest in your laughter.”

“You left me for Charles Hinges,” Jones said, stumbling suddenly on a master coup. “What has *he* brought you? Did they laugh at you in Little Hell more than they laugh at you here? Are you making more dollars here than in Little Hell? Does he give you the comforts I gave you?”

“No, he does not. Charles Hinges is a beaten man. He is worth nothing—a drunk sheep herder reeling up into a bar is worth as much as Charles Hinges.”

“You help me even my score with him, and I will forgive the trick you played when you stole Jacinta from me. You help me; you keep your mouth shut until to-morrow. That’s all that’s needed. Then everything between you and me will be as it was before. Prosperity will come to you again.”

Augustina answered this proposition with an alacrity that surprised Jones. He had thought that the matter needed long and ardent persuasion. Instead she replied with a tone that was wheedlesome and propitiatory:

“I will consult my cards!”

“And then—”

“If the stars incline, there will be death to-night.”

“Hinges!”

“Perhaps. Follow me upstairs. We shall enter one of the rooms and discuss this murder with the loving kindness that once existed in our hearts,

the one for the other.”

## CHAPTER XXIX

### JACINTA'S SURRENDER

While China Jones and the palmist were absorbed in their own conflict the hour for Jacinta's dance approached. At the appointed time, as he had planned, young Dave Hinges tethered his horse at the watering trough. This trough was in the alleyway which ran down the long, unbroken wall of the dance hall. Although he tried to slip into the little side door unostentatiously, his entrance created a sensation.

In the first place, many of his own gang had come to Beason's place to join in on the big time. On the other hand, there was a large element of the town—Phil Beason's own party—who were Dave's enemies. The entrance of the town hero into this dive for the first time in his life was significant to both factions.

They realized that it was certainly to be a big night.

Dave acknowledged the cheers of the crowd—cheers which showed very clearly that his enemies were in the minority. The barkeep was most obsequious, and in answer to the newcomer's request to see the proprietor, answered fawningly:

"I'll call him, Dave. He'll be right glad to see you. We've long been hankerin' for your patronage, Dave! Have a drink on the house first."

"You call Phil," Dave rejoined. "I'm in a big hurry. And I'm not drinking anything on this house."

The barkeep did not choose to argue the fine points of this insult before that mob, so he obediently left for the proprietor's office.

In another moment Phil Beason appeared, unruffled, rubbing his dry, bony hands, and peering up at Dave under bushy white brows.

"I sure am glad you've at last made up your mind to honor my house, Dave," he said with the suggestion of a smile.

There was a smooth irony about this which brought the card players to their feet.

In a moment the two men were surrounded.

“I don’t reckon you’re too glad,” Dave laughed. “You know that I don’t patronize this house of yours when I’m in my right senses.”

“By that you mean you ain’t in your right senses now?” Phil Beason asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Exactly.”

The crowd laughed jovially at Dave’s method of insult. Cries broke out before the proprietor could reply. “That’s the boy, Dave! Go to it! We’re all behind you! Let’s see you do a little wrasslin’!”

“I don’t reckon your feelings toward me are any too friendly,” Dave said. “That’s why I’m finding it hard to say what I want.”

“A favor?”

“Yes. But, on second thought, it’s more of a bargain than a favor. I don’t like your house, or your wheel, or your gang, or your business. If I asked a favor of you I’d pay you back.”

“That’s fair,” Phil agreed, with a bid for the approval of the crowd. “But if you don’t like my house or my gang and all that, how is it you do us the honor of comin’ here to-night?”

“Because for the first time I find that I’ve made a mistake. There is something about your gang which I like powerful well. It’s not the whole gang—it’s only one of the employees—it’s a dancing girl—this little jane you’re featuring to-night.”

The proprietor winked and dug his elbow into the ribs of the barkeep next to him. The crowd around burst out into a big guffaw. Dave, the woman hater, had at last fallen into the way of sinners!—

“He’s in love!” they cried. “Dave’s givin’ up wrasslin’ and goin’ in for dancin’! Spring is here—and Dave hears the ole heel flies a-buzzin’!”

It was a mixture of laughter and cheering which had a very definite effect on Beason—but for some reason failed entirely to embarrass the suitor.

Dave was unabashed in his proclamation. Now that the crowd knew he was in love with Jacinta, the dance girl, he seemed to be twice as audacious. “I want to meet the girl—a big favor, I know. But I’ll return it.”

It was by no means the first time that lovelorn buckaroos had come to Beason asking to meet his entertainers. In fact, he prided himself on his skill in handling them.

“Dave,” he said softly—so softly that only the ring of men immediately surrounding them could hear—“it’s you that calls yourself my enemy. I ain’t got nothin’ agin’ you—except that you don’t believe in sousin’ and gamblin’. But that’s a matter of a man’s conscience. I cain’t kick at that. But it’s you that kicks at me. You say I’m a crook; you say my decks are cold; you say my wheel’s fixed; you say my place is a den of thieves, and all that, and you keep your stockmen away from my place. Now you come axin’ me a favor—”

As soon as the crowd sensed the fact that Phil Beason was going to stand between this lover and his girl they bawled out in a storm of protest. “Now, you ain’t goin’ to refuse him, Phil! Don’t hedge around and say you’re refusin’ him! Let him see his gal. It’s Dave’s first offense! On with the introdoocin’!”

“You come axin’ me a favor,” little old Beason went on with perfect equanimity. “And what do you reckon I’ll answer? With a tap on your jaw—or a little lead, mebbe? No, sir! The world loves a lover, and I’ll fix it! That’s my answer. I’ll fix it—after the dance to-night.”

“After the dance?”

“Sure. If you want to talk to her, I’ll fix it all. Leave it to me. We’ll call bygones bygones, that’s what. After the dance me and you and the gal will —”

“Not after the dance. Now!” Dave said.

The chorus interrupted: “Sure! He’s hit hard! Give him his gal! It’s the first time he’s axed for a gal!”

“Bein’ as I’m givin’ this favor,” Phil said, when the voice of the crowd had subsided, “it appears to me I’d orter say when I should give it. I’ll let you talk to my star—after her act.”

“I said it wasn’t a favor, but a bargain,” Dave answered. “I’m goin’ to pay you for it. And the way I’ll pay you is this: I understand that Charles the Wrestler is hanging around, ready to stop the dance, and I’ll promise you that he won’t stop any dancing to-night.”

“A good proposition!” one of the bystanders cried. And others joined in: “Dave’s always fair. Let him see her. And then when the wrassler comes, he can wrassle him agin. We’re in for another big match to-night. You cain’t refuse him, Phil!”

No, the truth was very evident—Phil Beason could not refuse him. Dave Hinges in love was a new sensation for the citizens of Elko. And the prospect of another meeting between the two big men thrilled every one.

“I admit it’s a good proposition,” Phil said. “Charles the Wrassler is a bad *hombre* and a big one, and I reckon it’d take a load off my mind if I know you’d promised to handle him for me. And you sure can do it!”

This brought forth cheers.

“Hey, Jack,” Phil cried to his barkeep, “show this gent upstairs to the star’s dressin’ room. He wants for to see Jacinta a minute—and I won’t deny a favor to Dave Hinges, the giant killer.”

The gang laughed and cheered as Dave followed the barkeep up to the balcony at one end of the hall, where for the first time the whole crowd could see him. Dave as a lover was a sight that warmed their hearts—even though he enacted his new rôle with a surprising placidity. The news spread over the whole hall: a thrilling romance had budded in the sun-scorched town of Elko.

Their hero had found a heroine!

As the gamblers, drinkers and dancers downstairs pledged the health and happiness of the two lovers Jacinta heard a knock at her dressing room door. She turned from accentuating the natural Cupid’s bow of her lips with rouge, and saw standing before her the very man whose image—face, form, look, gesture and voice—she had been wildly and futilely trying to forget.

“All right, Jack,” Dave said to the barkeep. “Get out of here. The agreement was that I was to see her alone.”

The barkeep obeyed without even the thought of an objection. Dave Hinges’s word was law, even when he was in his right senses. But now that he was so obviously in the delirium of his first love, there was not a man in the whole Big Horn Basin who would have crossed him.

Dave stepped, unbidden, into the little dressing room and closed the door behind him.

“Now, don’t be scared,” he said, seeing Jacinta pale so that her rouge stood out in two crimson spots on her cheeks. “The last thing you should do is to get scared.”

“Where do you get that idea, boy?” Jacinta waxed scoffing. “I’ve been in fixes that make this look like a prayer meeting in the old home town. What can I do for you?”



“You can quit painting up and getting ready to go out there before that sousing bunch of cowdogs.”

Jacinta picked up the lip stick and smeared a vivid streak on her mouth. “When a man with the standing that you have asks me a favor I wish you’d notice how I come through.”

“I know what my standing is with you—you love me! Don’t laugh. I mean it. You can’t hide a thing like love—I can see it in every pout of your mouth—in every flash of your eyes. I can hear it in every word you throw at me.”

“If you’re that clever I can’t figure why it is you can’t understand plain ordinary English: I hate you. That’s plain, isn’t it? It’s sure plainer than any other language which you say I speak with my eyes. I hate you more than I’ve ever hated any man in my life.”

“Yes, there you go! I can hear something else you are saying. It’s like the undertone you hear down at the Gila Bend. Your words when you say you hate me are like the smooth, ugly, brown water on the top, but what I hear is the water underneath raging in the bed of the cañon.”

Jacinta looked at the boy transformed with his passion, and she thought of Charles Hinges, who lacked this curious spiritual sense which their father, the preacher of Buzzard Mountain, had given the younger son.

“Maybe there is something underneath what I am saying,” she admitted, “but it’s something you can’t hear and that you can’t understand. It’s a love I have for the man you broke.”

“It’s not a love! All your love is for me! You will admit it soon. What you feel for your Charles the Wrestler is something that every good woman like you would have for a man—it is faith. But you are being faithful *to a man you do not love!*”

These words cut into the girl like a knife, so sharp was the meaning—so near what she herself had feared was the truth.

“Don’t talk to me about him. That I cannot bear. Leave me alone.”

“If I leave you alone you will go down to that den and dance.”

“Then you think you are staying here to prevent me?”

“Certainly.”

“By what right do you act as if you possessed me?”

“We love each other.”

“By the way you’re acting, it looks as if you thought I was your wife. Since when has there been a love-honor-and-obey agreement between us?”

“The moment our eyes met while I was wrestling! You know I love you. I didn’t know what love was—it never came before—but it’s certain this time. I know it, and the town knows it—it’s something I can’t keep to myself. I can’t hide my love any more than you can hide yours.”

Dave was unable to control himself further. He took the girl forcibly into his arms, but he did not crush her as he had desired. She was so frail that his arms trembled as they were tightened. It was a vibration, a shudder, that passed through his whole body.

He could not kiss her—perhaps because of his sheer surprise at her delicacy. Perhaps it was because he realized she had made no resistance to him. She could have fought; she could have screamed. There were people in a near-by room whose voices were dimly audible. They would have come to her.

But she did not call them.

Dave felt suddenly abashed—ashamed of his own tremendous strength in her presence. The weakness of the girl was unbelievable—and fascinating. And one thing else had surged up in his brain in that ecstatic moment: he was sure now that she loved him; that she was trying to be true to her other lover, the man whom Dave had beaten, and that she was trying in vain.

“You can’t fight against me,” he whispered. “You are mine!”

The girl lifted her face. There was no way of telling—she herself could not have told—whether she was lifting her face to Dave to receive his anxious kisses, or to throw back his words into his mouth, to scream out to him that he lied. But what she really did was to cover her own mouth with her fist, so that he could not kiss her. Then as he bent down she writhed with an almost snake-like magic out of his arms, with the same grace and witchery in which her supple body moved and writhed in her Oriental dance.

Without knowing it, Dave let her slip away from him. He had acted as if afraid to tighten his arms about her. She had seemed as perishable as a bird caught in his great hands. It seemed as if he had held a gilded flicker from the desert beyond Elko—a warm, throbbing, perishable being.

Jacinta noticed that the boy was really in awe of her. It reminded her of Charles Hinges's worship. They were brothers in that. The younger brother's attitude was the attitude of a boy to whom this experience was bafflingly strange. But the very next moment his indomitable, persistent youth again flamed up above his bashfulness.

It was not to be denied.

"You are not going to dance. You are coming with me. I will not give you up. I never gave anything up before if I could fight for it. I always won my fight, and this time I am going to win."

Again Jacinta found herself in his arms, and this time she knew it was impossible for her to squirm free.

She cried out, exhausted and trembling: "No! No! I won't dance! I can't dance before them! It's horrible—the thought of it. *He* saved me from that life, and I will not go back!"

As they stood by the open window the thin, exhilarating desert wind swept across the girl's hot face. From below the pounding rhythm of the music beat into her ears. It came from every direction—from the windows below, in through the door of the little make-up room; and the savage tomtom measures seemed to come up through the very floor on which they were standing. Then, when the din of the music grew most loathsome to her, she realized that she could no longer breathe deeply of the refreshing wind.

Dave was smothering her with kisses. But these kisses were not so smothering, so depressing as the music. They were fierce, cruel kisses—but somehow they seemed a part of the mountain wind which had just caressed her cheek.

She imagined that it was Charles Hinges kissing her, because of the strength of the man who held her.

And she accepted them.

"You are mine now! And I am going to take you away!"

"Where?"

Dave pointed out the window to the horizon where the moonlight fell upon a distant range of mesas.

Compared to the stuffy, dark little room and to the hullabaloo and racket which surrounded them, the picture of those mesas was like a serene and beautiful haven. She looked with an infinite yearning toward it. If she rode

there with Dave Hinges she would again be free. She felt wounded, imprisoned, tortured, and those mesas comforted her.

She thought of how Charles had cast her off and said: “Go to him—to your new lover. Go to him and tell him you are homeless and friendless. He is the victor.”

She was glad when Dave took her up into his arms and carried her to the door.

“Remember this,” she said. “My love belongs not to you, but to *him*.”

“Little I care about Charles the Wrestler now!” Dave was exuberant.

“Not now—but later, when I—”

“When you what?”

“When I choose to keep you away.”

“Charles the Wrestler will not come between us. He’s nothing to us. I’ve finished with him.”

“Perhaps not!” Jacinta knew as she felt the rapid pounding of Dave’s heart that she had a different sort of lover to deal with now. Possessed as he was with the soul of youth, he did not love her in the way his elder brother had loved her. There was a vital difference in her relations with this hot-blooded, unrestrained boy and her worshipful slave, Charles Hinges. Charles regarded her as a Madonna to be knelt before and worshiped; this youth regarded her as a woman.

And that is the reason Jacinta kept her trump card to play when it was most needed. She would protect herself with it. But now there was no need for protection. If this superb enemy who was abducting her fell too ardently in love—then would be the time for her to say: “There is something you must know first: I am promised to Charles Hinges, *who is your own brother!*”

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE CARD DECK, FORTUNA AND THE STARS

It was during the conversation that Jacinta had had with the impetuous Dave Hinges that Augustina led China Jones, unobserved, up the back stairs, then in through a door across the hall from Jacinta's room.

All the rooms were identical in size and furnishings: with a chair, a bed and warped table, a lamp, a tin basin, and a jug of stale water.

Augustina drew the chair up to one side of the table and extracted a pack of cards from her bosom.

"Sit down on that bed, China Jones," she ordered. "I am going to discover what fortune will befall this lodging house and this dance hall to-night."

"Make it speedy, now, *señora*." China spoke with impatience. "There's a lot of things for me to do to-night—an appointment first with Charles Hinges, and then with Jacinta."

"Jacinta!" It was a bitter cry. "Jacinta never loved you as I loved. She is but a child. She knows nothing. It is only when a woman has been through hell, as I have been, that she is capable of loving men as I love you."

"What do you want of me up here?" China Jones became abrupt.

"To ask you why I should hold my peace—while you kill Charles Hinges from behind a curtained booth."

"Will you prevent me?"

"Perhaps. I will consult my oracle—this deck."

Jones burst out with an exasperated oath. "What can I do, *señora*? I have promised you happiness if you came back with me. What more can I promise? What more can you demand?"

"Your love!"

"All right. I love you. That settles it. Deal your hand. Do anything you want. I am your slave."

Augustina dealt the cards and slowly began to enthuse over her work, mumbling incantations, leaning forward as she crooned, and occasionally

leering up into the face of China Jones, on which she could see every mark of disbelief, impatience and derision.

She picked up a card, caught Jones's eye, and whispered: "This ace is the calling card of death."

A smile of latent interest flickered across Jones's mouth. "I know it. You are good at that stuff. Always you announce something which we know without the trouble of shuffling the pack."

"Yes, we know that there will be death. But what I am studying further is —*who shall die?*?"

"Do you reckon I'll give Charles Hinges a chance to draw?"

"Let me read the cards. They warn if they do not prophesy."

Jones leaned forward. He was a skeptic, but there were ways about the old palmist which compelled her hearers. Jones had spent many recent sleepless, nervous nights, and his emotions were now susceptible to the masterful, tricky manipulations of the seeress.

"Let's see what the cards say. I'll make a bet on the fall," he remarked. "There may be a bit of luck in it. If they say Charles dies I'll believe you've got the right dope."

"This card speaks of love. Fortuna doles out her allotment of misery and happiness just as I dole out these cards. There is as much chance in the spinning of the Fates. Who can tell what will befall us to-night? Here is a card of love, of misery, of the rejected woman. It turns up in your life, and at an hour when all other things but love are submerged and forgotten! It is a card which is black with the hate of a woman spurned. I—myself—am that woman!"

"Well, your coming across my path, I will say, has balled up my plans for fair!" Jones laughed. There was no derision in the laugh this time. It was merely a dry, harsh chuckle to mask his feelings. These feelings—concentrating into a fear which the woman had gradually evoked—were betrayed when he asked in an entirely different voice:

"But what about my meeting—with him?"

"With him?"

"Charles Hinges."

"So far, the cards say nothing—except that death enters upon this hour."

“You give me the willies! Don’t stall and hedge and say things that have a dozen meanings. Who is to die—tell me that! Shuffle the deck again and tell me your—” He checked himself, bursting with an oath. “Rot—every word of it! What have the cards to do with our fight?”

“But the stars themselves have proclaimed it! Death is in this house. He is stalking through the dark halls, tall, gaunt, worn, hideous, grinning. His black cloak is trailing in the dust, his sword clanking against the floor, his spurs jingling, and the black plumes of his hat falling across his face, which is the face of a skull.”

“It’s enough, tricky old witch that you are! I’m through with you!”

“Wait and learn the truth. If you will save your soul let me read the cards again, for then we shall see who it is that death is seeking out in this house, coming eager to despoil!”

“Here—let me shuffle them!” China Jones snapped. “I can’t be sticking around here all night while you’re trying to throw a fit into me about nothing.”

She gave him the deck, and he tremblingly halved it, bringing it together again with a whir as the cards arched to a bow and dissolved into one deck.

“Deal them out, and cut out the theatrical stuff,” he ordered. “I’m not crazy, and you can’t scare me.”

But old Augustina did not cut out what he had termed “the theatrical stuff.” While he was shuffling the deck she had turned down the lamp wick slowly, until now, when she began to deal, it sputtered. “There’s no oil in this lamp,” she said. “Move the table here to the window, where the moon rays will fall upon the cards and their signs.”

Jones cursed volubly, but they were curses hissed under his breath and through his teeth. He cursed his own luck—that this woman should have so gotten him into her power—and all because she had chanced to see him in the street. But for this he could have killed his man, and with impunity.

Now he was trapped, and, worst of all, the old seeress was working up an insistent fear in him—a fear that had not existed before. He was beginning now to dread his meeting with Charles Hinges. Chance might work against him—chance, that element which this witch had been magnifying until now it dominated everything. Jones for the first time in his life watched the fall of the cards with an ardent belief.

“Death again!” the old crone mumbled. “The pack is full of death!”

“What does it say of *me*?”

She went on, without at first answering. “Death is walking toward us. His heavy footsteps are creaking on the stairs. He is searching the make-up rooms for his victim. Perhaps it is Jacinta he seeks! Who knows!”

“*What does it say of me?*”

“Nothing—yet. Your card is hidden among others. When the cards tell of a man—a tall man, a half-breed, a handsome man, who has transformed a beautiful woman into a hag—as you have transformed me—then I will tell you of your own fate!”

Now, it chanced that somewhere during the prolonged incantation of the seeress—after she had described the coming of a tall, richly robed skeleton, who was the person of Death—that David Hinges came out into the hall bearing Jacinta in his arms. The heavy footsteps made the floor of the warped old shack tremble, and the dull creaking was audible over the hullabaloo of the dance hall beneath.

Augustina leaped at the theatrical possibilities of this situation. “It is Death, walking like a conqueror!” she cried. “The plumes of his hat—can’t you see them brushing the cobwebs of the dark ceiling?”

China Jones turned, and the moonlight outlined a pallid face distorted with horror. But at that very moment—as Dave was bearing his beloved to the stairs at the lower end of the hall—the voice of Jacinta rippled back. Jones could not hear what she said, but he recognized her voice. He leaped to his feet, crying with a curse:

“You’ve made a fool of me, you old coyote! But I’m through with you and your rotten tricks. Jacinta’s going down to dance, and I’ll follow her. I’m going to claim her—I’m going to kill Charles Hinges, who took her from me. And remember this, you toothless old dog: if you breathe a word about my being in this town I’ll punish you as they punished the witches in Mexico City. You’ll have horseshoes nailed upon your bare feet—and you’ll be cast in the middle of the desert to walk home!”

Augustina burst into a raucous, screeching laugh. Jones fled to the door, but he found her clutching his sleeve. He tried frantically to shake himself free from her wiry old talons, which had dug into his arms like the bite of a dog.

“Let me go, if you don’t want me to drag you down the stairs head first!” He yanked his arm from her.



“Not yet. I will not let you go. There is yet this one card I must show you. It is the card which reads that the sinner shall pay for his sins. And the greatest of his sins will bring his own death upon him. Death comes to this house to-night—in search of China Jones! So cry the cards. So have the stars divined as they move across the sky in triumphant anthems. *You* cannot hear their music as I do! I heard it when first my heart was broken—and you cast me aside. I hear them now calling your name—repeating your damnation as a fugue thunders the same phrase over and over again: China Jones shall pass this night into eternity!”

The woman’s denunciations ended only when she was hurled bodily across the room so that she crashed into the little table and lay partly upon the floor—partly against the wall.

Jones turned, but even when he reached the hall he had not escaped from Augustina’s power.

One single flash of light came from the bundle of rags on the floor. The report was not loud, because of the roar and din of the music downstairs. But the flash seemed terrific—more like a fork of lightning coming from the stars than a shot from a little old woman tumbled grotesquely in a corner of the room like a castaway rag doll.

Jones lurched toward the other side of the hall, banged open the door, and then banged it shut, throwing the weight of his body against it. His knees sagged, and still he frantically leaned against the unpainted boards even while sinking to the floor. He struggled toward the stairs, shrieking in his terror to escape the bundle of rags that stirred, and rose, and crept toward him.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### “HE SHALL LAUGH AND HAVE YOU IN DERISION”

At the appointed hour, when the mob of cattlemen, Mexicans and Indians were assembled in Beason's place to see Jacinta dance, Charles Hinges rode up to the big hall. An exuberance came over him as he anticipated the evening's event. He was a beaten man—that he knew only too well. But his beating had not served to humble him or to quell an iota of his fighting spirit.

Rather, it had served to turn him back to his old ways—the ways of the fighting brute.

For the past few days he had analyzed his defeat—brooding over it from hour to hour—and the first reaction of shame which had come over him wore away. Something happened which happens to almost all fight champions who have lost: he began to think that in reality—apart from technical points—he had had the better of the match. Each hour he became more certain of this: he was bigger and stronger than his brother. No one could deny that.

It had transpired by the merest chance that Dave Hinges had won. Then he began to think just where that chance had come. And when he did this he remembered how he had seen his brother's face—and how of a sudden the eyes had been transformed so that the eyes of the young David Hinges were like the eyes of their father.

“I was fighting against my father then,” Charles said to himself. “The match was lost at that minute. No man can fight his father and win. It felt as if I were bending beneath *his* strength—the man who is dead—and, looking into his face, it seemed I heard his curse. No, I couldn't have won. No man could have won a contest like that.”

But now he was anticipating a different sort of combat—the kind he had won so gloriously at China Jones's place in Little Hell. When he went in to announce his intentions to the crowd waiting to see Jacinta dance, he would be facing a crowd of mortal men—an easy thing compared to facing his reincarnated father, as he tried to do wrestling his brother David.

He pictured a great brawl in which he himself was the central figure fighting again for his mate and vindicating himself in the eyes of every man

who had seen his recent fall.

He thought over what he would say to the assembled guests: “This woman belongs to me, and no man else can claim her or look on her beauty. When she dances it will be to delight my eyes—not the eyes of drunkards and gamblers. She is mine, and if any man takes her from me I will kill him.”

This speech satisfied Charles and spurred him on so that he was eager now for a big battle against great odds. “And after I have vindicated myself,” he said, “I will go to her and ask her to forgive my anger. I will tell her I believe she loves me still, and that I will never again accuse her of loving my brother.”

Charles had entered Phil Beason’s place a few minutes after his brother Dave had been ushered upstairs to Jacinta’s room. His entrance was thus most dramatic in the eyes of the crowd who had but a moment before heard Dave make his bargain with the proprietor.

Dave had promised to handle the wrestler, and the crowd, accordingly, was boiling over with enthusiasm and the expectation of a good fight.

“Bring in the dancer!” they cried. “And we’ll see how the circus fighter is going to stop it!”

“Call Dave and the gal down!” others demanded. “Everything’s set now for another wrassling match!”

Charles scarcely noticed the boos and cheers that greeted his entrance. He walked through the hall while the dancing couples stopped and made way for him, laughing and scoffing at his big boast. Having shown himself and his unbuttoned holster to the crowd, and in particular to Beason, Charles walked into the gaming room and there disappeared in the jammed buffet.

Approximately five minutes later the palmist’s distant, muffled shot snapped out in the upper part of the house. Few of the revelers in the gaming room or on the dance floor heard it. The thumping of the dancers, the cowmen pounding on the floor with their boots and spurs, the loud beating of the drums, and finally the general yipping, laughing and shouting—all in a room with four walls and low ceilings—created enough of a hullabaloo to drown the single crack of Augustina’s revolver.

There were, however, certain men whose ears were attuned to such sounds. One was Phil Beason, the proprietor; another was the deputy sheriff. These men were both in the dance hall, and although they heard the shot, the confusion was too great for them to ascertain its direction. It sounded to the

proprietor as if a piece of lumber had fallen upon the watering trough behind the saloon.

Of course he knew better. He had mistaken the sound of a revolver shot before, and knew now that on the side of a wall it often sounded like the slapping of a big plank.

The deputy sheriff thought the shot was fired out in front of the swinging doors of the saloon. Both he and the proprietor reflected that Charles the Wrestler had arrived, true to his promise that he would shoot up the place that night.

The deputy looked to the proprietor, and the latter looked, naturally, to the representative of the law—the man of whom he could demand protection. Both puffed casually on their cigars; one raised his eyebrows, wrinkling his forehead; the other—the deputy—thrust his tongue into his cheek and pulled musingly at his yellow mustache.

By this both indicated in a general way that something interesting had happened. They walked unconcernedly through the dancers and met at the door which led from the dance hall to the gaming room.

“Well, I reckon they’s a bit of shootin’ comin’ off,” the proprietor remarked.

“You-all have got pretty good ears, Phil. Seems like you and me are the only ones here that knows a good thing when we hears it.”

“Where was the gun shooter standin’ at?” the proprietor asked.

“Out in front. Most like Charles the Wrassler is gettin’ set. You seen how he walked through the hall here, his eyes red as a locoed coyote!”

“To me it sounded it was out in back,” Beason said. “I could hear it through that thar window.”

“Don’t you-all figger you’d better stop the shin-diggin’ until we get our bearings?” the deputy suggested. “If you go out thar in back you might be dropped without havin’ a chanst to verify yore estimations.”

“I reckon that’s a good idea,” the proprietor said. “And if *you* went out in front to verify *your* estimations, you might get dropped likewise. And it won’t do for us to have our deputy sheriff dropped.”

The music was silenced despite the clamoring of the dancers for encores. The shouting and yipping went on, but finally the realization spread over the

company that the music had been prohibited by the deputy sheriff himself, and abruptly in the middle of a dance.

They observed also that no more drinks were being served; that Phil Beason, the proprietor, was going from window to window; and that the deputy had hurried to the front entrance of the hall, elbowing every one unceremoniously out of his way. Slowly the laughing died down. A tense silence gripped the place.

The name of Charles the Wrestler was on everybody's lips.

The deputy, upon stepping out of the front entrance, looked across the backs of the horses tethered underneath the porch roof which jutted out in front of Beason's place, covering the space which might have been called the sidewalk in more civilized communities.

As he glanced down the street he caught sight of a horse bearing two riders—a man and a girl. The girl, unmistakable because of her brilliant, yellow skirt and scarlet shawl, was Jacinta. The man—as the deputy ascertained from a greaser who had seen the two riders depart—was Dave Hinges.

Meanwhile, Phil Beason, who was convinced that the shot had been fired not in front of the place, but in the rear, walked through to the buffet and then to the end of the long bar, where he found Charles the Wrestler.

Charles looked innocent enough, but Phil had good cause to be suspicious.

"If you do any gunshootin' here, Mr. Wrassler," he said with a quiet bravery—due to the fact that a half dozen of his henchmen were backing him up—"they'll be a lynch party."

"My six-gun don't come out of its holster," Charles said quietly, "until Jacinta comes out on the floor to dance."

"I'm of the opinion you've already started shootin'," the little proprietor said. "I heard a gunshot just now."

"You're a liar," Charles cried with something approaching a laugh.

"And I'll lay a wager here that the barrel of your gun's hot."

"I suppose now you're goin' to ask to see my gun?"

"You won't agree to a showdown, will you, Mr. Wrassler?" Beason insisted.

This might have precipitated the fight that every one wanted, except that the deputy bumped through the crowd and settled the affair in his own way.

“It weren’t Charles the Wrassler!” he said. “Leave him alone. He ain’t goin’ to do no fightin’ nor shootin’ to-night.”

Both Phil Beason and Charles turned to the deputy with a blank stare. Both blurted out a question, Charles adding oaths.

“Jacinta ain’t goin’ to dance,” the deputy announced. “That settles everything!”

“Well, I’m right glad to hear you-all have taken my warning,” Charles said. But his voice betrayed infinite disappointment. The chance for the big act on his part, calculated to win back the love of Jacinta, was lost.

“Nobody’s taken your warning,” the deputy snapped, “but the gal’s changed her mind. Or else somebody’s changed it for her.”

“Dave Hinges!” the proprietor yelled. “I knew damn well I hadn’t orter let him go up there—but the crowd forced my hand.”

Charles’s fist doubled and as he straightened up the crowd about him backed away. He stood there as if uncertain just whom to hit. Charles was baffled, blinded with a new anger.

“When you say Dave Hinges changed her mind,” he said quietly to the deputy, “just what sort of rotten lie do you figure you’re spittin’ out?”

“I seen the gal goin’ off on the road—with him. West, to the Mesa Ranch, they was going, if I know anythin’. She was settin’ behind him with her arms about his waist.”

“Behind who?”

“Dave Hinges. He’s won her, I guess.”

Without any further questioning Charles drew his revolver, and the crowd scattered before him like flies. Down the long buffet he went, stamping out of the smoke-befogged den to the thin, crisp night air.

Everything was clear now.

Every word of his father’s curse and prophecy had come to pass. David, the younger son, had broken his life. Now indeed “the sheaf of the elder brother was bowing down to the sheaf of Joseph!” Now indeed the words of his father burned in upon Charles’s brain till he saw them red, naming, torturing: “He that sitteth on the Most High shall laugh and have you in

derision!” And again he heard the cursing words: “The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken in pieces!”

Charles Hinges felt in that one moment that he had been shattered—broken in pieces as effectually as if he had been an image of crockery upon which some one had rained sledgehammer blows.

For a moment he stood out there in the night, pale, stunned, his brain reeling, and then his big frame seemed to be gathered together again by one dominant, compelling purpose.

*It was the purpose to kill!*

He could not consider, in his present blinding madness how he had loved Jacinta. And he could not consider that the man who had broken him—who had been sent by his own father to crush him—was his own brother. Beloved woman, and brother, were words now which had no meaning in his madness. The one motive—to kill—dominated him and excluded all else, as he rushed to the street and leaped upon his horse.

“I will kill them both!” he cried, digging his heels viciously into the flanks of his mount. The horse thundered down the street, the sound of it distinctly audible because of the fact that the Beason place was now silent.

As he rode out on the broad, sage-covered plain the wind beat into his burning face and into his mouth as he continued to mumble: “I will kill them both.” And then, slowly, his senses began to return to him. Part of his purpose was still definite—perhaps even accentuated in his mind. “I will kill him!” he said finally. “And Jacinta—Jacinta— No, I will not harm her! I could never harm her!”

## CHAPTER XXXII

### “AUGUSTINA BOWS TO YOU!”

Phil Beason called the deputy sheriff away from the gang and suggested quietly: “I reckon, deputy, mebbe we was wrong about a gunshot.”

“I reckon nothin’ of the kind,” the deputy answered. “Now that I get my brains working, I can figure the whole thing. That shot didn’t come from the street out in front, like I thought; and it didn’t come from the corral behind, like you thought. It came from some direction which could have sounded like either front or back—from upstairs. That’s the answer! Dave Hinges and the gal was both up thar.”

“It’s the answer, all righto!” Reason agreed. “Dave potted somebody while he was kidnapin’ the gal.”

Phil and the sheriff ran up the stairs to the hallway above. Here the proprietor led the way until he came to the open door of Jacinta’s room.

The deputy looked carefully about the room, but the sticks of grease paint, smeared towels, hare’s foot, powder puffs, and bottles revealed and suggested nothing. Finally the proprietor grew impatient.

“I told you you was mistaken,” he said. “There weren’t no shot. Forget it. I’m goin’ down to start the dancin’ again. I’ll say that Jacinta’s dance has been postponed on account of that there hero Dave Hinges has done a little welfare work and prohibited the performance. If I can get somethin’ on him, I’ll have my gang lynch him. Show me a teetotaler that hadn’t orter be lynched on sight!”

He went downstairs, but the deputy remained above. He took the lamp which was in Jacinta’s room, and, as the music in the dance hall again flared out, he commenced a search.

There was another open door leading to one of the rooms near Jacinta’s. It was here that Augustina had led her victim when she first came upstairs. The deputy looked in, but found the place empty. It was ridiculous, he now realized, to search through all the rooms of that second story just because he had heard—or thought he had heard—a shot somewhere in the vicinity of the dance hall.



He decided to forget about it, as the proprietor had counseled, when he noticed that his hand was wet with what he had thought was oil from the lamp he was carrying. He put the lamp in his other hand, and wiped the moisture on his sleeve, not thinking of the matter again until he had replaced the lamp on Jacinta's make-up table.

Then he saw a slight smirch of red on his finger.

He recalled then that when walking down the hall with the lamp he had seen a black mark on the floor. The deputy sheriff was anything but nervous, but the quest now excited and thrilled him. The moisture on his hand was oil—as he had expected—and the red was rouge. But there was a possibility, he said to himself—a faint, almost ridiculous possibility—that that dark mark was really blood.

He eagerly hoped that it was.

The deputy was a tall, tough individual—all the more rangy because of his drooping, yellow mustache and long, red neck. It would take a lot to work upon his emotions.

In fact, when he returned to the smirch on the floor and ascertained that it was blood, he stood up and looked about the hall with a thrill of excitement and pleasure.

That smirch of blood was before a closed door.

Most men in the deputy's position would have preferred crossing that door as the Angel of the Lord crossed the blood-smearred doors of Egypt in the first Passover. But the deputy sheriff was too ardent in his desire to search out murder to waste a moment's time.

He turned the knob and tried to open the door.

It pressed back upon him as if a culprit, hiding, were leaning against it.

"Come on, thar!" The deputy drew his gun with one hand, held the lamp with the other, and kicked the door open. "The law's got ye! Whoever ye are! Thought you could get away with gunshootin' with me in the house, eh?"

He stopped abruptly as the rays of the lamp shone at his feet. For a moment he stood there, puzzled. He edged himself into the room, looked about, put the lamp on the table, and replaced his holster. Then he stooped down and examined the body that had fallen down to the floor.

This dead man with a yellow face, and Indian tie, with green beryl and jet black hair, was a complete stranger to the deputy sheriff. But for all that, the situation now was most satisfying. While the music downstairs thrummed with increasing catchiness and rhythm, and the feet of dancers shuffled merrily on sawdust, the deputy looked at the body of the man on the floor and congratulated himself.

“I knew damn well I’d heard a shot fired,” he said. “And it weren’t a random shot!”

A few minutes later the deputy went to Phil Beason, who had again mingled with the crowd of riotous guests in the room below.

“Well, did you give up worryin’ about that thar gunshot you thought you heard, deputy?”

“I sure have. Ain’t no cause for me to be worryin’ now whether I heard it or not. I got the answer. That shot was stopped by a strange bird who’s lyin’ upstairs now. He has a yellow face and he’s six feet long. That murder has something to do with Jacinta, the dancer. The shot was fired by Dave Hinges, if I know anything. Now, I want you to bring that ole palmist lady who’s been hangin’ around here to-night, going in and out these booths, tellin’ fortunes. She’s the only one of that troupe that ain’t vamosed—Charles the Wrassler and the gal bein’ gone. Bring her up and we’ll see if we can’t pry into this business scientific like.”

Augustina was found sitting at a table in one corner of the hall, glowering at the dancers, and puffing vigorously at a cigarillo. When she felt the tap of the proprietor’s hand on her shoulder she held a mouthful of the smoke as he spoke to her.

“Come on, ole woman—they’s murder been goin’ on, and we want for you to do a little mind readin’.”

At this the palmist exhaled the smoke in a series of extraordinary rings. Then she looked up.

“What have I to do with death?” she asked. “I am watching youth and beauty and life, and am thrilled with this merry fanfare. Why is it that while they dance so eagerly and passionately you come and hiss murder in my ears?”

“Come on, ole woman. The law wants to talk to you. He wants you to tell us a few jokes.”

“I will tell him whatever he wants. I know everything—everything that is written in the sky—everything that is sung by the stars. I know that there is love and drunkenness and brawling in this house, but—of murder I know nothing.”

She arose, with the proprietor’s rough assistance, and followed him, still mumbling: “I know everything—everything that is racking the souls of the guests here to-night. I can read their faces—I can read their passions in their hands and in their drunken eyes. Nothing is hidden from Augustina, the witch of Pimas. I know all things that are coming to the lives of these people. But of murder, I tell you, I know nothing.”

By this time she was ushered into the hall upstairs and then into the room opposite the one in which she had a short while before prophesied the death of China Jones. The deputy turned to the woman. He seemed for the moment to have forgotten that he had sent for her.

“Now, don’t get scairt, ole lady,” he began. “But we sent for you because I figured you could help us. Dave Hinges has ran away with that little dance gal who came into town with you outen the desert. For some reason or other it happened that this stranger lyin’ stretched on the floor was bumped off just about the time Dave and the gal rode off. Now, I figured that you’d maybe know something about the gal’s past life, and that maybe you could identify this here stranger as having something to do with her.”

Augustina knelt down to the side of China Jones, looked into his face, then started back with a dramatic gesture of surprise.

“Is it indeed come to this?” she cried. “I know this man. He was a handsome man, and one whom women loved. He has come down from Little Hell on his search. Surely his coming had something to do with Jacinta, our dancer. He was in love with her. It was Jacinta he sought. And the fates and destinies so contrived that when he came to claim her, as she painted herself to dance, there came also this great fighter of your town—David Hinges. The two men met, and we find now that one was killed. The other escaped to the mountains with the girl over whom they fought. There needs no great revelation or clairvoyancy to discover the doer of this deed.”

“I guess not!” the deputy agreed conclusively. “It was Dave Hinges, sure enough.”

“And what he’s done is murder!” the proprietor added enthusiastically. “I been lookin’ for some way to get that four-flusher, and I got him now. Get up your posse, deputy, and I’ll join it. And Jack, the barkeep, will join it. We’re

good at the draw—ask any one. And get a dozen men and horses that are good at mountain trails.”

“I’ll do that, Phil,” the deputy said. “And we’ll ride to-night out past the Mesa Ranch, and we’ll surround his place up in the mountains. He’ll give us a good fight, that Dave Hinges, but thar ain’t no gunmen or murderers that I’ll ever let put anything over on me.”

The old palmist agreed eagerly. “I can tell that by your hand which you hold up—as a king stretches forth his scepter. You are wise beyond the wisdom of ordinary men; and your vision is of infinite power. Augustina, the seeress, bows to you as a ruler who cannot do wrong.”

“I’ll say the ole dame knows a thing or two, after all,” was the deputy’s comment.

Phil Beason sent the old palmist out with the injunction that she keep her own counsel concerning everything she had seen.

When she was gone he turned to the deputy sheriff. “Look here, Mr. Deputy, I hold the same opinion concernin’ your brains as that thar ole woman. Dave Hinges is guilty—and the time has come when me and him can even up our score.”

“I know you two are enemies,” the deputy said, “and maybe you know as how me and him are enemies likewise. He’s been getting pretty well lined up for the sheriff’s job—if I know anything—and this here incident, if we work it right, won’t hurt my feelings nohow.”

“Good! We understand each other. Now, granted that Dave’s guilty, we must bear in mind that the whole town, with the exception of my own gang, is on his side. You’d orter to seen the way they rooted for him when he axed me for to let him see the gal. They wouldn’t stand for no lynchin’, that crowd of his, you understand that! They’d want for a good, straight trial. And you never can tell about these straight trials. Wunst in a while a man is proved innocent. They ain’t a jury in these parts would convict Dave.”

“Don’t say another word,” the deputy interrupted. “I get your whole point, and it’s a good point, too. We’ll get up a posse from your own gang—good shots and good riders, and the added qualification that they will all do your bidding! None of Dave’s cow-punchers will be in this here posse! They’ll be your henchmen, every one.”

“And then—”

“And then,” concluded the deputy, “things will take their natural course.”

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### HOW THE LIGHT CAME OVER THE HOG-BACK

When Charles Hinges galloped his horse across the sage plain he had no definite idea what road to take, or, for that matter, where the journey would end. But one thing was certain in his mind: the trail led to death. Murder was in his heart, and it obliterated all other passions.

But with it there was the confused conception that murder could not solve his great problem. He knew that he was already beaten and destroyed. Nothing could save him—no act of which he could possibly dream could undo what had been done. And certainly his salvation could not come with murder.

For this reason he galloped along, racked in a frenzy of anger—an anger which there was no possibility of quenching. Shame should have come to him, but it did not. He was sunk far below that. He knew that he had reverted completely to the brute he had been before his futile attempt to regenerate himself for the sake of Jacinta.

There were no depths lower now for him to sink. He knew that he had reverted to the beast; that his days with Jacinta, in which he had been slowly trying to become another man, had availed nothing. All the good that had come of those days was now wiped away by this crowning desire to kill.

With this one madness surging in his brain, Charles naturally thought little of the trail he was taking. He lost the way. The Mesa cattle outfit, of which Dave Hinges was the foreman, was situated in the shelter of a group of table-lands about a three-hour ride from Elko. First there was a wide sweep of plain, the alluvial deposit of a winding river—now completely dry.

The plain was dotted with black sage, and gently indented with hollows of grama grass and sycamores. The trail led down to the dry rocky bed of the wash and then across the other half of the same sage plain. A road up through a gorge, which cut into one of the mesas so as to almost bifurcate it, was the straightest approach to the Mesa Ranch.

Charles could not find this gorge, but instead, having kept his horse at a merciless gallop across the plain, came out at the northern side of the mesa. Several times he found himself on blind trails which wound to the upper end of box cañons and promised no outlet.

In these narrow gorges the moon no longer lighted his path, and he found himself caught in the impassable undergrowth of manzanita bushes which tore his chaps, the legs of his trousers, as well as the flanks of his mount.

Doubling back on his tracks, he came out again on the sage plain, where the wind swept across his maddened, fevered face.

This was the darkest hour of Charles Hinges's life—and an hour which held no promise of a dawn. The climax of his conflict had come.

His furious hate was not the satisfying, fighting hate of man for man. It was complicated—made more torturing by the fact that it was directed partially against the girl he loved and partially against his own brother.

But during this very hour a certain circumstance was coming to pass which, unknown to Charles, was to change the course of his life. He saw a string of horsemen riding across the plain so that one by one they were silhouetted against the low, dilated moon. These horsemen, he guessed, were riding from Elko to the Mesa Ranch. Why, he did not know.

There was no reason for him to think that they were in search of the very man he himself wanted to kill. Perhaps they were riding to save Jacinta from her abductor, Dave Hinges. Whatever their purpose, they did not dissuade Charles from his own desire.

He spurred his mount on, galloping in the general direction of the troupe of horsemen. Farther to the south he found a sheep herder's hut, awoke the occupant, and was directed to the gorge which led through to the Mesa outfit.

A long ride through this dark arroyo and then across the flat, upland plain, and a descent on the western side of the mesa, brought Charles to the ranch. It was a scattering of cow sheds and corrals with a main house, from which the beams of a light still shone, even though the night was almost over.

Charles could get no news of either the fugitive or the troupe of horsemen from the sleepy rancher. This convinced him that Dave had taken the girl directly to his mountain cabin. Why the posse was riding neither Charles nor the rancher knew.

As for Charles, he did not care. Having followed down this blind trail, he left the ranch without any further delay and hit out for the mountain range.

The country on the western side of the Mesa Ranch was strange to him. The foothills of the mountains were thickly covered with grama grass, and trails scattered in every direction. The bed ground, where the Mesa cattle were rounded up at the end of their summer grazing, was far up in the mountains, and Charles knew that he must find out which trail to take before climbing too far into the range.

The country grew wilder, and there was no sign of human habitation in any of the desolate cañons or wide, upsloping prairies. At sunrise he felt sure he could find some trace of the horsemen who had preceded him, or at least some herder who could give him news of the posse.

Toward dawn he met a cowboy carrying a shotgun and leading a stumbling white horse. To Hinges, as he accosted him, the stranger seemed scarcely more than a boy of fifteen—judging from his figure and the high pitch of his voice.

“Who are you, and what are you doing out here on the range at this time of the morning?” Hinges demanded.

“I belong to the posse from Elko—if it’s any of your business.”

“Well, if you’re from Elko, you ought to know my business and who I am.”

“I shore do.”

“I’m after Dave Hinges.”

“And so was the posse—and me, too—until this here cayuse of mine was lamed,” said the lad.

“Then, you’re the man I want to talk to,” Charles said. “Just why is the posse after this Dave Hinges?”

“What are *you* after him for?”

“I guess you know he threw me back there in Elko in a wrestling match. And after that he stole my girl. I’m going to him to even up this score.”

“Is *that* all?”

“Sure it’s all,” Charles snapped. “And what I want to know now is just why a posse is gotten up to go after Dave Hinges—unless it was because he stole Jacinta, the dance girl, who, you must understand, belongs to me!”

“Well, I’ll tell you a thing or two, Mr. Wrassler,” the boy said. “If you’re hankerin’ for a revenge on that thar Dave Hinges, you’re goin’ at it too slow.



You ain't goin' to get no revenge now—unless you want to take a pot at a daid body that's pullin' hemp. The long and the short of it is this, Mr. Wrassler: yore man is goin' to hang.”

“My—*man*—Dave!”

“He's a murderer.”

“You're crazy! My man, Dave Hinges, a murderer?”

“There's a bird by the name of China Jones went after the dance gal when she was makin' up in her room above Phil Beason's place. Dave Hinges falls for the gal, and the two men have a rumpus. And China Jones gets shot up. The deputy and Phil Beason heard the shot, and a few minutes later the deputy sees yore man and the gal hittin' out of town for the mountains.”

Stunned as he was, Charles pictured in a flash the probable situation up there in that room above Phil Beason's place. China Jones had come searching for Jacinta—and Hinges had been persuaded, probably by Jacinta herself, to kill her dreaded enemy. But if that were so, Dave had good cause to kill.

“I'll bet Dave finished him up pretty?” Charles asked proudly.

“Plugged him.”

“They'll give him a trial—eh, kid? They will give him a trial, all right! They all like Dave Hinges.”

“A trial ain't goin' to do him no good. The whole thing's too plain. He's guilty. And this here deputy is all het up for a hangin'. *He* won't let Dave go, I'll tell you that. And Phil Beason has it in for him, too. They ain't no hope for him, if you want my opinion. And I know a thing or two.”

“Have they caught him yet?”

“They seen him when I had to drop outen the chase because of this nag of mine. They'll get him. And I reckon they'll go the limit with their gunshootin'. They're all afraid of Dave. They'll finish him before he has a chance. It's a dirty business, I'll tell you, and I'm glad this old nag of mine went lame so's I could drop outen it. It's no secret, pard—I'll tell you what I know right now. The whole Basin will know it to-morrow: Dave Hinges is goin' to be lynched.”

“Where are they?”

“I’ll tell you, pard. You cross this hogback divide, keepin’ on this side of that thar peak. The sun’ll be up by the time you get over, and then you’ll see the posse. The valley’s big on the other side—and no matter what they’ve done or where they’ve gone, you can find ’em as soon as you have light.”

Charles wheeled his horse, which, under the furious kicking of the rider’s heels, bolted up the trail.

“I warn you, pard,” the boy called after him. “It’s a lynch party, and you better steer clear. Don’t never butt into Phil Beason’s plans.”

Without hearing this parting admonition, Charles vanished in a smother of dust. A long, exhausting climb brought him to the divide, where he came into the rays of the morning sun.

Beyond, on the other side of the hogback, he looked far down into a blue valley which was still enveloped in the darkness. The early morning air was bracing without being cold, and the crystal depths of air below him in the valley were untouched by cloud or dust or smoke.

It was like a lake of transparent water with the range beyond emerging into the light of the rising sun like islands in a mirage.

Slowly, as Charles rode down into the wild, rocky abyss, finding himself again in the dark, the blue shadows became tinged with purple, and then merged into the crimson light on the break of the opposite slopes. The effect upon the west of the sunrise caused by a sun which was hidden behind the eastern divide he had passed worked upon Charles with a soft but compelling exhilaration.

Almost as miraculously as that dark-blue gulf lay suddenly revealed to him in the light of morning, his own tumultuous hate for his brother David cleared. He saw in the remote distance, like tiny brown ants moving down the slope, the posse. It was coming toward him. David, his brother, was most probably caught. He had heard the dreadful words—that he would hang.

Hate vanished with this thought.

“No!” Charles swore. “They cannot take his life!”

Suddenly Charles realized that underneath that blinding hate there had been another passion which he had for this man. It was deep down, unimaginable, so deep that even now Charles had only the faintest intimation of it. But it was there—and it was perhaps the greatest cause of the conflict he had been through since his defeat and humiliation. It was greater than hate; it was greater than the desire to kill; it was greater than the

yearning for revenge. It was the forgotten truth: this man and he were brothers.

Charles Hinges and the man he pursued were born of one mother.

As he rode down to meet the posse Charles had, without yet realizing it, passed through the first stage of his transformation from brute to man.

And then the last words of the boy whom he had met just before dawn came to him.

“He was right—that kid with the lame horse,” Charles said to himself. “No matter what they’ve done or where they’ve gone, you can find them ‘as soon as you have light.’”

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### IN THE WILDERNESS.

Although Dave and Jacinta both rode on the same horse, they reached the mountain cabin long before daybreak. It was a small shack, knocked together with a flattened foundation of adobe, walls of unpainted oak, and a ceiling of scores of tin cans broken and spread out and laid over one another like shingles. This was the headquarters of the foreman when the big herds were brought into the mountain for the summer grazing. From the eminence on which the shack stood the whole valley fell away sharp before them, every part of it within view.

Thus a herd could graze with a minimum of tenders. For this reason it was a bad place for cougars or loboes, rustlers or hairbranders. The cabin on the rim of the mountain was as good as a fire warden's post, or as the observation point of a general watching and directing a battle. The interior was comfortable—even homelike—although littered with bits of harness, quirts, lariats and cartridge boxes. On one side was a tier of bunks, the lowest of which was stuffed with canned goods; a table with a jacklantern stood in the center, and next to it was a stove made of five-gallon oil cans.

Dave kindled a fire, preparatory to making coffee.

Again the spirit of adventure thrilled the girl, and she helped cook breakfast, singing blithely, and completely oblivious of danger—or else convinced that the situation was one that she could handle.

The danger that did come was something which neither Dave nor the girl had bargained for.

They had been in the cabin scarcely half an hour when Dave dropped the can he was opening and sprang to the door. Both had heard the patter of horses' hoofs down the trail.

A moment later Dave came back, and, seeing the blanched face of the girl, tried to reassure her. "Like as not there's a covey of wild horses down in the arroyo. I couldn't see anything, because the moonlight shines only on one side of the cañon, making deep shadows."

"What else could it be, if it's not wild horses?"

"Nothing else."

“What if— —”

“Yes?”

“Charles the Wrestler might be trailing us,” Jacinta said. “I believe that he loves me yet—that he will follow me to the end of the world.”

“Yes—maybe it’s Charles the Wrestler. But that’s nothing to get excited about.”

In a little while their appetizing meal of flapjacks, canned beans and coffee was on the table, and they were about to sit down to it when another sound startled them. Both could hear the rattle of stones down the steep trail above the cabin. Dave sprang to the door, buckling on his holster, which he had cast upon the table. He stepped out into the open and glanced up the trail to where it wound into a dense thicket of sycamores and madrones. There was little use, he thought, in riding or climbing up there only to find the thicket deserted. A wildcat or coyote could have caused that noise.

He explained this to the girl, seeing that she had been so frightened that she could not enjoy the breakfast, now turning cold.

“The sound came from above us, Jacinta. If it had come down in the valley, where we heard the horses, there might be cause for us to watch out. Nobody coming from Elko would be riding down from the top of the mountain after us.”

But, as Dave sat down to eat, this very point—that they had detected sounds on both sides—worried him. It suggested the probability of there being more than one man. He reflected also that a band of riders from Elko mounted on good horses could have taken a detour and reached the cabin before Dave and the girl, who had come on one horse.

“But it’s ridiculous,” he said to Jacinta. “What crime have we committed? What are we afraid of?”

The girl was reassured at this, and again brought the pot of strong coffee to a boil. When she went to him and poured out his cup, he took her hand.

“Look here, Jacinta,” he said, “you are not afraid?”

Jacinta drew her hand away quickly, easily sensing and interpreting the change in his voice.

“Not of them,” she answered.

“But of me?”

She looked at his flushed, boyish face. It was peculiar, she thought, how the eagerness of some men changed their faces. That same flush which made many men's faces turn brutish made Dave's radiant.

"You have not much of the brute in you," she said.

"I haven't?" Dave's mouth hardened to an embarrassed smile. "Let me warn you: I have!"

"You think you love me," the girl went on rapidly, "and with a great love. I know it's not brute love, but it's something just as false. It's what we call—now, don't get mad—it's 'puppy love'—that's all. No, I am not afraid."

"Well, I guess you aren't!" Dave was disgusted with his newly discovered harmlessness. "Here we are in the mountains alone, shut in together in this cabin, and you're brave enough to say that you don't love me—that you love Charles the Wrestler. What man would argue more with you if you said that and called his love 'puppy love'? There aren't many men who would stay here and look at you across the table.

"What is it that makes you think you are so safe? You have gone pretty far with me already—farther than most girls would dare with a man violently in love with them—a man whom they swore they hated."

"I guess maybe you're a saint—that's the answer."

"No! It's not the answer. It's a lie! I'm a man—with the raging blood of a man." Dave circled the table and went to her. She saw that she had angered him, and backed away, keeping him at arm's length.

"Wait," she answered as coolly as she could. "Don't take me in your arms again—not here."

"Why not? How can you deny me? Do you think I have water in my veins? Can't you see that I am burning up?"

"Yes I can. You aren't a saint. I'd hate you much more if you were. You're a hot-headed boy that has to be kept away."

"You can't keep me away."

"I can't match my strength against yours, I know. You could break my wrist by just holding it in your hand. It feels as if you are breaking it now."

Dave instinctively let go—but only for a moment.

“There is one way I can protect myself from you,” the girl cried as he drew her again to him.

Perhaps at that moment Jacinta would have played her last card—which was to tell Dave that she had promised herself to his own brother. But she had no chance to play it then.

Just as Dave took her in his arms and bent to kiss her the cabin door burst open.

“Hello, Dave! Looks like you didn’t expect us.”

Phil Beason, who had spoken, stood in the doorway, and at his side stood the deputy sheriff, his revolver pointing at Dave’s chest.

Behind them the girl could see the faces of two unshaven Mexicans and a half-breed henchman. Simultaneous with this entrance the window had been knocked open, and in the frame Jacinta and Dave saw one of Phil’s barkeeps, his blue jaw thrust out, grinning from under the black shadow of his sombrero.

Behind him more of the gang showed rims of sombreros, jaws, colored bandannas.

Jacinta clutched Dave’s arm and cried out, thinking at first they were surrounded by desperadoes.

“It’s all right, now, girl,” Dave said. “It’s Phil and the deputy. No harm’s coming to you. What’s this joke about, men?” he asked, looking again at the muzzle of the six-gun which covered him.

“It don’t happen to be a joke, Hinges,” the deputy said.

Dave looked up into his red, wrinkled face, as he stepped in. The drooping, yellow mustache, covering the corners of his mouth, accentuated its grimness.

“Certainly it’s a joke—and a raw one, at that,” Dave insisted. “What’s the idea of busting in on my party? You all knew I left Elko with a girl.”

“Sure we did,” Phil Beason agreed, stepping into the cabin and standing behind the deputy. “That’s why we come.”

“Phil Beason,” Dave rejoined, “this is all your doings. You’re framing me for taking this girl away from your rotten den down in Elko. And you brought a posse with you?”

“Right!” the deputy answered steadily. “When I goes after a gunman which has committed murder I generally figures on a posse.”

Dave burst out into a laugh—in which no one joined.

The girl sank helpless into a chair. The deputy appropriated Dave’s gun and holster. One of the Mexicans stepped in with a lariat. Dave looked around at the faces of the men. He could see no one’s eyes, but the lamplight fell upon the determined mouths and bristly jaws.

Every man that Dave saw was a member of the Phil Beason faction, and when this fact was clear to him he realized that the matter could not be laughed off as a joke. “Just what murder are you planting on me, deputy?” he asked.

“China Jones was found in a room opposite to this here gal’s,” the deputy said. “He was plugged in the back.”

“Who’s China Jones?” Dave inquired.

She had burst out in a scream, checking herself and covering her mouth with her hand.

The deputy, Phil Beason and the rest turned abruptly to the girl.

“So you know China Jones?” the deputy asked, looking down at her terrified face.

“Look here, deputy,” Phil Beason said in his usual calm, quiet way, “the gal naturally knows all about it. She’s given it all away. You men can see it by the look on her face.”

“It’s a lie—the whole thing’s a lie!” Jacinta cried. “Dave Hinges came to my room, and we went away together. There was no shot fired—there was no one up there. The whole thing’s a frame-up.”

“Look here, deputy,” Phil Beason went on without the slightest excitement, “we must keep the gal outen it now. She’s goin’ into hysterics.”

“Sure,” the deputy agreed, anxious that the girl be eliminated from the whole business. “What we got to do don’t concern her.”

“No. Keep her out of it—I’ll agree to that,” said Dave. “You stay here, girl. I’ll go out with this gang and talk to ’em. There’s a mistake, no doubt, and I guess I can fix it. When I come back we’ll have breakfast.”

“But it’s a frame-up!” Jacinta was desperate. “Dave’s innocent, and you are framing him. I can prove it all.”



“There’ll be a trial,” Beason said soothingly. “Wait until then—and give your testimony.”

“It’ll be all right, girl.” Dave stepped out of the cabin.

Phil Beason barred the door when Jacinta tried to follow.

“Don’t you reckon somebody better stay with the gal?” Beason asked.

The deputy stroked his yellow mustache, while outside the lariat was being made fast about Dave’s hands.

“I reckon so,” he answered finally. “She ain’t got a horse, and the range is lonely at this time of the morning. We’ll leave old Hip Martin to take care of the gal.”

Accordingly, the posse led Dave down to the horses, and as he was directed to mount he called back to the cabin.

“Don’t get worked up about it, girl. I’ll be back.”

The sun rose as the posse wound down into the big bowl-valley. The rays came over the eastern slope on the opposite side of the cañon and shone in the rugged, determined faces.

Even now Dave could not realize the complete helplessness of his position. The suddenness of his capture and the determination of the lynchers was incredible. He knew that Phil Beason had long hated him; that the deputy was violently jealous of his renown; that Beason’s henchmen would stop at nothing if their master gave the word.

But for all this, Dave Hinges felt that surely there must be some hope, some delay, some intervention of Providence, which would break up this miserable, murderous scheme.

The long shadows which were cast by the eastern rim of the cañon receded as they zigzagged into the big bowl. The eastern rim had been at first black with shadows, turning then to a deep blue, and now purpling with the light of the sunrise. It was at this hour of the dawn that Charles Hinges rode over the rim and down into the cañon bed.

It was at this hour that the light had come to him.

When Dave saw a horseman tearing across the bed toward the posse, he recognized the man he had beaten and humiliated. “Of all men, why should it be this?” he might have said to himself. But this entrance of Charles the Wrestler upon the scene of his brother’s imminent lynching had a different effect.

It brought a peculiarly intoxicating *hope* into the heart of the condemned man.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### JACINTA WATCHES THE MIRACLE

When the deputy sheriff saw that the lynching was about to be accomplished he realized that his own part in the game became too complicated. Although he was firmly convinced that Dave Hinges was guilty of murder, he knew that as deputy he must have nothing to do with lynching him.

Before Charles the Wrestler joined the posse the deputy drew his men together and made a little speech. It was calculated to have the same effect in clearing his conscience as the act of Pilate washing his hands.

“Now then, boys,” he said, “as deputy sheriff I cain’t very well be present while this here Dave Hinges, which is justly accused of murder, is lynched. And yet I ain’t so narrow-minded that I cain’t see a good reason for what you-all want to do. With the exception of just this posse of riders I see before me, there ain’t a man in the whole Big Horn Basin would stand for Dave Hinges’s pullin’ hemp. For that reason I argues that the best way to see real Arizony justice done is to make this bird look up a tree afore we get to Elko.” Remarks of assent and encouragement indorsed the deputy’s speech, and he went on, with added enthusiasm: “I want all you men to believe that what you’re doin’ is right—and done for the good of this here community.”

“You’ll be made sheriff at the next election instead of Dave Hinges gettin’ the job!” the barkeep cried exuberantly. “That is one good to the community, eh, chief?”

“That ain’t got nothin’ to do with it!” the deputy protested hotly. “Murder is murder. And it’s often enough in this here Basin that murder gets away unpunished. Here’s once that me as deputy is workin’ things skillful like so’s there won’t be no slip. I’m goin’ to leave you men—and the understandin’ is, when questions is asked in Elko, that you-all held me up and took my prisoner away from me. I’ll ride on to Elko alone, and you birds can go wherever you want with this here Dave Hinges—and, provided you stick to the story we’re makin’ up, you’ll never be asked any questions yourself concernin’ his end.”

“It’s a go, Mr. Deputy,” Phil Beason said. “You leave, and we’ll agree that your hands is clean of the whole business. We’ll take Dave down to the

dry sycamore at the cañon bed and put on the ole necktie.”

The sheriff tried to answer with a few more philosophical remarks, but his voice shook and went high in his nose. He saw Charles the Wrestler galloping up suddenly out of one of the gutted arroyos of the cañon bed. His appearance was the signal for merriment after the tense situation the posse had just experienced.

“Well, we got your man for you, Mr. Wrassler,” one of the men yelled. It was the blue-jawed barkeep. “I reckon you’ve come to finish him now that his hands is wrapped in rawhide.”

“I reckon you won’t have to worry now about your revenge,” Phil Beason added. “This man has committed murder and is goin’ to get a little tight-rope justice for breakfast.”

“I reckon if it’s after yore gal you come ridin’ into these mountains,” the barkeep shouted, “you’ll be glad to witness the punishment of the bird who stole her.”

“The law, Mr. Wrassler,” said the deputy, “is goin’ to do your revengin’ for you.”

“The law?” Charles asked.

“Well, not exactly the law. You understand it is a brand of justice,” the deputy explained impatiently. “And if they’s any point of question in yore mind concernin’ it, I’d advise you to ride on. In plain terms, it’s goin’ to be *lynch*. You understand that word—*lynch*?”

Charles had been sitting in his saddle, looking from man to man; from the mild but wizened features of Phil Beason to the set, brutal mouth of the blue-jawed barkeep, and the grim, red faces of the rest of the posse.

The prisoner could have found no hope there, Charles could see plainly. He turned from the posse, and his gaze met the eyes of his brother.

He pressed his horse toward Dave, looked at him a moment, and then said to the gang:

“This boy is not going to be lynched.”

Phil Beason burst out into a string of high-pitched oaths.

“It has nothing to do with you,” said the deputy. “I told you if there’s anything you question about these here proceedings, you are better off away! So vamose!”

“It is my business,” Charles said quietly. “He is not going to swing.”

“Ride on, men!” Beason cried. “The wrestler is drunk.”

“Yes, ride on,” the deputy seconded. “I can’t be palaverin’ here all day.”

“Deputy,” Charles said, “maybe you’re fixing up this lynching because you think this kid really did the killing.”

“I can’t bother any more with you,” the deputy rejoined, wheeling his horse. “I know he done the killin’.”

“Well, he didn’t. Wait, or I’ll plug you!”

The deputy reined his horse back again and drew at his challenge.

“Deputy, if you are standing up for the law, all right. If you are lynching, all right, too. But I’ve got something to tell you first.”

There was no time for Charles to make a speech now. He realized that the posse was riding off to the scene of the hanging, and that it seemed impossible to save his brother.

Beason’s gang, as well as the deputy himself, were determined to carry out their murderous scheme on the bare bit of evidence they already had. They believed Dave guilty, and they wanted to hang him before anything destroyed that belief. In fact, the whole posse, Charles knew, was eager to accomplish the work before some new evidence came in to bring Dave’s guilt into question.

There was only one thing to be done now to save his brother. It was a last appeal to the murderous brand of law the sheriff represented, and it was the only possible appeal to Beason’s gang. Charles shouted out his statement to the posse as they were riding down the trail and to the deputy, who still covered him.

“Deputy,” he said, “I am your man. China Jones died by my own hand.”

These words fell upon the posse literally as if a bomb had exploded in their midst. The men wheeled their horses and sat staring at Charles, every one speechless with amazement. Of all men to come and offer himself to die for another this man was the last they would have dreamed of. It was incredible, stupefying.

Phil Beason was the first to react. It seemed that for fifty years he had been a volcano slowly gathering fury, and now for the first time he broke out. “Don’t you let him go! It’s a lie! The man’s drunk, I tell you!”

He shook his scrawny fists at Charles, and shouted to the deputy: “Don’t you let him go! Dave Hinges is guilty, I tell you, and this man is drunk, or he’s framing up a rescue. Dave’s guilty, and I’ll plug the first man who moves to free him.”

“Hang ’em both!” suggested the blue-jawed barkeep. “Then we won’t make no mistake.”

“Hold on now, men. There ain’t no cause for hysterics!” The deputy himself was dumfounded at the entrance of this man who had, but a day before, been swearing to kill Dave Hinges; but he knew that the whole aspect of the lynching party had changed.

Phil’s suggestion that this might be a frame-up was obviously ridiculous; for every one knew that these two men—Charles the Wrestler and Dave Hinges—were enemies. The deputy stumbled for an explanation, plucking nervously at his mustache.

“Now, then, men,” he began, “I cain’t seem to figure—and no one here cain’t—why this bird elected to come and die for the man who broke him, unless, says I, for one reason only—he’s guilty. I figure it’s well-nigh impossible for any man—no matter how rotten and black he is—to let an innocent man hang up in this here Arizony wind and dry.

“How Providence happened to send this bird here at the right moment I don’t know. We all thought he was after Dave Hinges for to stretch him. But whatever chanst has brought things thisaway, our lynch party is off.”

The deputy raised his voice over the growling of the crowd. “I let the lynching go on, seeing as how it was Dave Hinges, because I knew if we took him to Elko he’d have been set free. It was just, I figured, that we lynch him. But now that the confessed murderer has jogged into our midst that thar reason don’t exist.

“There ain’t a soul in Elko who will free Charles the Wrassler—you all know that—so why dirty our hands with a lynching when a regular trial with a prisoner who has pleaded guilty will accomplish the same benefits?”

Dave Hinges himself was the most dumfounded at the miracle that had saved his life. He sat in his saddle stricken mute and staring at Charles as if he were a ghost. To Dave alone it seemed that there was an element in the situation which was truly miraculous. It was something he saw—or thought he saw—in the face of the enemy who had come to save him—the enemy who had seemed so soulless, so powerless, for all his brawn.

“We have all mistaken him,” he thought. “He is not a brute!”

Charles, in fact, had taken on a curious power that seemed to light his features more radiantly than that early morning sun. He was suddenly invincible, magnificent.

“Somewhere I have seen that man,” Dave thought. “Not the man himself, but I have seen that same power.”

The deputy ordered the posse to take the trail for Elko with their new prisoner.

As they started Dave pressed his mount over to Charles.

“Look here,” he asked, “why did you save me?”

The deputy, Phil Beason, the barkeep, and every other rider of that posse, paused to listen to Charles’s answer.

“You are not the man to be swinging in the wind for a crime you did not commit,” Charles said quietly. “You are young, with a big life to live, and you are innocent. I’m guilty, and I’m broken, and there’s nothing on this old range—the world—which is crying out for me to stay. I’m beaten—and there’s not much hell to pay when a beaten man cashes in his chips. There’s nothing in life—not fifty years of it—which would be worth letting you swing. So get on your horse and shag out of here. You’re free. Go to Jacinta—that’s all I ask of you—and tell her I’m doing this for her.”

“She loves you!” Dave said. “She is one thing in this world that would cry out for you to stay!”

“Think how she would love me if I let you hang up there in the sun for the buzzards—for my sake.”

“But for my sake you are willing!”

“Yes.”

Dave saw then who it was that this man resembled—it was old Peter Hinges, his father. The strange light which had come into this brute’s eyes, the spiritual power which had so transformed his figure, was the same light, the same power, which had made old Peter Hinges invincible far beyond his mortal strength.

“Yes, he looks like him,” Dave thought. “They both had the same power—the power to lay down their lives!”

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### HOW THE BRUTE CONQUERED THE STARS

When the old gunman who had been set to guard Jacinta saw the proceedings in the valley below, he mounted his pinto and rode with Jacinta behind him to the Mesa Ranch. From here Jacinta was driven to Elko in a buckboard by one of the ranch hands. When they arrived she learned of the great change—a change which had come like a thunderbolt—into her own life; Charles the Wrestler was locked up in the Elko jail on the self-confessed charge of murder.

“They say ole Phil Beason was hankerin’ for to lynch Dave, anyway,” the driver said to her. “But Phil’s gang sort of went back on him when they saw that the deputy sheriff weren’t no longer on their side. The deputy took Charles Hinges’s confession as the last card played, and so called the game ended, and all the gang was satisfied exceptin’ ole Phil himself.”

They drove into the main street, and the driver turned to the girl. “Now, then, miss, where you be gettin’ off at?”

“At Phil Beason’s place.”

When she entered the dance hall Jacinta asked one of the bartenders to show her where China Jones had been killed. Up the stairs they went, past the bullet-ridden walls of the notorious old shack, down the long, dark hall, and there, opposite the room which Jacinta had used as her make-up room on that fatal night, she saw the place where China Jones had fallen.

“Phil Beason will be glad to see you,” the barkeep said. “You’ll be a big drawin’ card for the place now. Gals who’ve had a little gunshootin’ for their sakes is allus welcome to the management of this here house.”

Jacinta left the barkeep and slipped into her own room, where the place was still littered with powder, rouge and perfume bottles. She threw herself on the bed, her mind in a whirl with problems and ideas.

“There are two people who might have killed China Jones—two who knew him,” she thought. “Augustina was the other one!”

She tried to think back again upon all the events of that riotous night. The place was quiet now—hot, stuffy, the silence unbroken except for the buzzing of horseflies on the dusty window.



“He didn’t do it!” she kept saying to herself. “He didn’t do it—because he always fought with his fists, not with a gun. China Jones was shot in the back. If Charles had fought him he would have met him face to face and killed him—with his fists—easily.”

This argument was all the proof that Jacinta needed to analyze the crime. And the result was to her as simple and indubitable as the analysis of the most skilled and ingenious detective in criminal psychology. A slow, ominous knock upon the door broke in upon the dismal quiet. There was no mistaking that theatrically impressive knock.

Jacinta knew who it was, paled, jumped from her bed, and leaned against the door. “It’s you, Augustina! I know! Go away! I don’t want to see you. I’m afraid of you. Just the thought of looking into your face makes me shiver.”

“Ah, little damsel!” the cracked voice of the palmist answered. “Ah, little Inca dove—little being brought into the world to give men their earthly portion of eternal life—listen to my words!”

“Well, what do you want, any way—aside from calling me names?”

“Your lover has come to you, bringing with him a heart flaming with the precious oil of love!”

“My lover!” Jacinta cried, instantly losing her horror for the old woman. “Bring him to me!”

She threw open the door and stood, eager, transfixed, radiant. In her transport the frail girl seemed like a pallid bewitching flame. And just as suddenly as that beautiful light, which was her passionate joy, had appeared, it died away.

Before her she saw not the lover she had pictured—but the youthful, hot-blooded younger brother.

“You?” she stammered. “Why—I—thought—”

“Yes, Dave Hinges, your lover!” the old palmist cackled.

A wistful, heartrending sigh escaped Jacinta. “I thought Charles had come back to me.”

“Charles the Shameful!” the old palmist cried. “This is the man who really loves you—who has won you. This is youth, victory, passion—all in one! He is the bridegroom that has come searching in the desert for his

beloved. Harken to him. Arise and come away! The flowers appear on the earth—and the time of the singing of birds is come!”

The palmist’s chatter went unheeded by either the girl or David Hinges. Jacinta was staring at the youth. The dim light that filtered in through the window fell upon his features so that the roughness, the wind tan, and the sun wrinkles were effaced.

But in that one moment the girl had realized the great triumphant truth. She had never loved this man. She would never love him. She had been fascinated, perhaps, by this superb, exuberant faun, but not for a single moment of his violent siege upon her had he shaken her love for the elder brother.

Now there was no longer any doubt.

And there was no doubt in Dave’s mind. “I understand it now,” he said. “I did not know it until now. But you love Charles. You belong to him, and not to me!”

“Not to you!” the palmist cried scoffingly. “To you, the victor, she belongs! No man can deny that! And this girl cannot deny it!”

“I am not the victor!” Dave said. “Charles the Wrestler is the victor. I’ve lost. And I know I’ve lost to as great a man as I’ve ever fought!”

“Yes,” Jacinta said. “Charles is the man who has won. I know myself how great a man he is. Somehow I think that I must have known all along—before he forgave you—you who are the man who broke him. He gave himself up to save you.”

“No! He is a murderer!” the old palmist put in excitedly. “He is Charles the Wrestler no longer—but a murderer.”

Jacinta went on without heeding the old woman. “He gave himself to save you—and you owe him everything.”

“I know that.”

“If you ever loved me, or wanted to do anything to help me, do what I’m going to ask you now. Go to him. Bring him back to me!”

“I’ll promise you that, girl,” Dave said. “I’ll get him for you if I have to burn down the whole of Elko! I owe him that. He saved my life—that’s one reason I’ll bring him to you. Another is—for your sake.”

“And there is another reason greater than that,” Jacinta said.

“No.” Dave took the girl’s hand and kissed it. “There can be no greater reason.”

“But there is. You will know it—when you bring him to me.”

Long after midnight, as Charles lay in his prison cell, he heard a sound at his barred window which resembled the cautious gnawing of a rat. For a moment he paid no attention to it, and then, when the scratching changed to a slow tattoo upon the sill, he jumped up from his bed. A man’s head was silhouetted in the window against the starlit sky. A tall-peaked sombrero and the finely chiseled profile of his brother Dave were immediately recognizable.

Charles went to him.

“Everything’s fixed for you to get out,” Dave said. “I’ve got two of my herders talking to the deputy up at his office. There is another shooting craps with Pope Martin out in front. The whole town’s on your side now because of your getting me out of Phil Beason’s clutches. Now, do as I say, I’m going to help you out through this window. You will go over to your chow cart—it’s in Jimson’s lot now because he won it betting. You hide there until I come back with a couple of my best saddle horses.”

Dave produced two files, giving one to Charles and starting in to use the other himself. The rasp against the bar was alarmingly loud.

“I never file myself out of jails,” Charles said, throwing the instrument away. He put his back against the sill and took one of the bars in both fists. Bending himself with all his might, his whole giant body quivering, he tried to curve the bar. But this window was not like the window of the jail up in the Buzzard Mountain country, from which he escaped the night before his father’s death. This bar was too much for him.

“Give me a hand,” he said.

Dave took a similar position, putting his back to the upright part of the window frame, and his two hands on the same bar. Thus when the two put their strength together the iron slowly bent to a bow.

“Hide in the chow cart until I come back,” was Dave’s parting admonition when, a few moments later, Charles had clambered out.

Dave went back to Beason’s place, where Jacinta had been waiting for him since that afternoon. At that time of night the dancing was at its height, as was the gambling. Although the place was crowded and all lights blazing, Dave was able to climb the outside stairs of the big shack unnoticed.

When he knocked at the door of Jacinta's make-up room he found her in consultation with Augustina. The latter was hilarious and excited, shuffling and reshuffling her fortune teller's deck with dry, trembling fingers.

Jacinta received Dave eagerly, her pale, anxious face betraying the terrific strain of her long wait.

"Charles is all right," Dave said. "He's free, and I'm going to take you back to him."

"You took her from him," the palmist said, spreading her shuffled deck upon the table, "and now you are taking her back! The game is finished, the cycle is perfect. Thus, even as both of you have said, Charles the Wrestler is victorious."

"How about this woman?" Dave asked suspiciously. "Hadn't she better vamoose before we make our plans?"

"I know everything!" Augustina interrupted. "It is written in the stars that Charles is to be free—and that this girl is to be his! You cannot help it. You cannot bind the cluster of the Pleiades nor loose the bands of Orion! What is written is written."

"This old dame won't give anything away," Jacinta put in, still eager to hear Dave's good news. "We are not in her power. She is in ours. She will do as I say."

"All right, then," Dave went on. "I am going to take you to your chow cart. My men are guarding the county road. Two fast horses are ready to take you south. You can cross the border, guiding yourself by the Sierra del Aja, and staying well clear of Nogales—"

"Why do that?" Jacinta interrupted quietly. "Charlie does not have to leave this town."

"You want him hanged?"

"He will not be hanged."

"Of course he will. He confessed himself to the crime he committed."

"Then, *you* think he committed it?"

"Why, certainly I do. There's no way out for him now—unless he hotfoots it to Mexico."

"Look here, Dave—Charlie is not going to hotfoot it to Mexico. Get that straight. The murderer of China Jones is going, but it is not Charlie. It is this

woman!”

Dave’s jaw dropped, and he stared dumfounded at the old crone as she frantically dealt her cards.

The palmist stopped her incantations precipitously, but did not look up. After a tense moment of silence she said, as if speaking to her cards:

“The girl lies!”

“I didn’t lie. Everything’s clear. This woman was the sweetheart of China Jones years ago. He was a boy then, I’ve heard, a young gunman, and she a Spanish *señorita* just fading. He took her and dragged her through the hell that he had planned for me. And he threw her over. Spanish women don’t like that. She swore to kill him— —”

“Another lie! The girl can’t utter a word without soiling her red lips with lies that are foul.”

“When China Jones came down here, hunting for Charles, which one of these two people who knew him would have shot him in the back? Charles? Huh! He could have killed him that night up in Little Hell by just one blow of his great fist. It would have put China’s neck out of joint—just one blow! Why do you think *he* would shoot him in the back?”

“I know nothing of China Jones!” the old duenna cried, destroying her pattern of cards with one ferocious sweep. “I never knew him. I never loved him.”

“Look here, old lady,” Dave said, “if you want to plant this murder on some one else now, it may be all right, but we’re going to keep you until the trial brings everything to light. You’re in our power now, and we’ll give you one chance to save yourself. If you confess to this murder so that Charles the Wrestler can go free, we will let you go back to Mexico, where you belong. China Jones’s death does not need to be avenged. You did a good deed there. But think of the damnation that’s on your soul if you let an innocent man hang!”

“It’s a lie! I did nothing! I am innocent of any man’s blood.”

“Look here,” Dave interrupted. “You confess to this—sign a confession which we can show the deputy sheriff—and I will guarantee to get you safe to Mexico. If you refuse, then the whole business will come out in the trial. Think that over.”

“I say I am no murderess!” Augustina spat out her words with gathering fury. “I am a seeress who follows only the dictates of Heaven! When you

say I have this man's blood on my hands— —”

She paused, her scrawny, shriveled palms upheld in the lamplight before the eyes of the other two. She herself caught sight of the long, horny fingers spread out like a fan, and it seemed that they frightened her. “Will there be a trial?” she whispered.

“Of course there will! There is no more chance of a lynching now. The law is in the hands of the town. Don't wait for a trial. I'll give you two horses, outfit, grub, and cover your escape. Do you think you can get clear of this girl's accusation if there's a trial?”

“I can, and I will!” Augustina became hysterical. “My judges are not mortals, who are knaves and fools, but the stars which have declared me their priestess. Lies encompass me around about, but the stars will restore my soul in the presence of my enemies.”

She held her hand upward, pointing to heaven, and again choked and spat over her words. Again she stared at her hands as they were spread askew in the yellow light. “Are these swift horses which you will give me?”

“Swift, and sure for desert travel! You sign your name to a paper clearing Charles the Wrestler, and we will see that you go free. We'll not show your confession to the deputy until you're beyond his reach.”

“Should I sign a lie and perjure my own soul?”

“It's better sometimes,” Jacinta said casually. “You never can tell what this town will do.”

“Like as not they'll burn you as a witch,” Dave put in. “It's a bad town when once you're suspected. Look at what happened to me.”

“Yes, yes—but I am innocent. Look here at these cards. They will proclaim it. This deck, which is my oracle, confirms the revelations of the stars: ‘Augustina, the seeress, is innocent of blood!’”

She changed her voice again. “Are these horses you will give me— swifter than any?”

“Yes—the swiftest in the county. The deputy won't have a chance.”

“What care I if they have wings like Pegasus? Your horses do not concern Augustina. Let the sheriff come to me, and I will show him the signs of the Zodiac. He will know then how my enemies are beleaguering me!” She concluded breathlessly: “Will there be provisions enough for a long journey?”

“Everything. If you want I will furnish you with a guide.”

“No! No! I need no guide. The stars will guide me, and every night I will read the glorious truth blazing in the sky: ‘Augustina is guiltless of blood!’ Show me the horses, but I will sign nothing.”

“I’ll not show you to your horses, but to the deputy sheriff.”

“Well and good. Let there be a trial!” Augustina cried fiercely. “I am afraid no longer. China Jones destroyed me, and if I had killed him I would go unpunished. The witch of Pimas is immune—any woman who is wronged is guiltless—for here, underneath these Arizona stars, the men are great and strong; they are men who will not condemn. These Western stars will protect me, and so will every man who knows the truth. Bring me to trial!” she screamed exultantly. “For a deed of which I am proud; bring me to trial underneath the Western stars!”

The old crone rushed to the door of the little room, calling upon the name of the deputy sheriff, fighting like a hellcat when David tried to hold her.

In another moment the near-by rooms disgorged their frightened dance girls; up the stairs came Phil Beason, his waiters, croupiers, entertainers, and barkeeps; the hall jammed. As Augustina broke free, spitting, scratching and yelling, they made way for her.

Out to the balcony of the main dance hall she rushed, shouting: “Justice will be done, for I am a woman wronged—and no man will raise a hand against me!”

When she reached the floor the throng made way and followed, laughing and jeering, wondering what new sort of intoxication had so crazed the old witch. She ran to the street, crying out: “Bring the deputy to me, and let the law of this Arizona sky descend upon the witch of Pimas! Let justice be done forevermore!”

Simultaneous with this outbreak of hysterics on the part of the palmist news came to the crowd following her that Charles the Wrestler had broken out of jail. The old woman calling so frantically upon the name of the deputy sheriff was thus a circumstance of considerable significance in the eyes of the whole town.

Augustina soon found herself at the head of an excited rabble of saloon men, dance girls, Indians and cowboys. She led the way down the street, her iron-gray, scraggly hair streaming in the wind, her brilliant gown trailing in

the dust—the very picture of some medieval witch leading her nondescript followers to a Black Mass.

And in the crush of the laughing, jeering crowd was Dave Hinges and the dancing girl, carried along with the jam until the old palmist turned in at the very lot where Charles Hinges was in hiding in the chow cart.

In one corner of the lot Augustina had patched together a booth to ply her trade. Here was the typical gypsy camp on a very meager scale—a tarpaulin, a fire, a caldron. Now, as the crowd pressed in upon her, she heaped all of the sagebrush fagots and dried wood she had gathered, and in a moment a blaze of sparks poured into the sky. The whole town came out now, attracted by the fire, by the hubbub, and by the news of the escape of Charles the Wrestler. The red light fell upon as large a mob of expectant, bewildered faces as had ever assembled in the little cow town.

The harnessmaker, the veterinary, the blacksmith—all stumbled out from their beds, with linen dusters thrown over their pajamas; frightened women with Mother Hubbards over nightgowns mingled with dance girls in their knee-high frocks and red silk stockings and high-heeled slippers; Indians in blankets of blazing designs; Mexicans, stocktenders, gamblers—this was the congregation of old Augustina's witches' Sabbath!

The laughter and jeering died down, for Augustina had become the central figure of a vivid and barbaric scene. No witch shrieking incantation's in haunted forests could have been more convincing than this crone as she took a firebrand and waved it above her mop of matted, tangled hair.

The deputy sheriff's voice broke in upon the scene like the voice of a heretic laughing at some somber ancient ritual: "You're crazy mad, old woman! Come along!"

"A lie! I call upon the stars to witness!" Augustina screamed, beating her breasts with one hand and wheeling her firebrand about her like a scythe. The circle widened, and the deputy himself backed away, convinced that his law was impotent in this sort of a situation.

"I am not mad!" Augustina went on. "I was mad twenty years ago, when China Jones destroyed me. Now I am sane. My mind for the first time is free, because I am avenged. And I know that the thing that I have done will not be punished. I am immune, because the stars are my protectors—these Western stars, which smile upon the immaculate love of maidens! Be wise, you judges of the earth! You who would judge me—a woman—come now in the presence of the stars with fear and trembling!"



“Hearken to me and condone me, for I was like a potter’s vessel which is dashed in pieces—and the heavens have punished my destroyer with death! China Jones’s death will go unavenged, for it was not a man that killed him, but a woman who was wronged. I—Augustina, the witch of Pimas—put him to death! Take me and judge me, for it was by my hand—and no other—*that this man has entered into eternity!*”

The embers of Augustina’s fire had crumbled, and her captor, the baffled deputy, and the citizens of Elko, had gone away, leaving the little lot deserted but for three people.

The strong, cold morning wind came up, whistling through the dark shacks and bunkhouses. An all-night lunch stand threw out a band of yellow light from across the street; the dance halls were quieted, except from the remote edge of the town, where a mechanical piano thrummed like a pulse.

Now was the time for Dave to give Jacinta back to her lover.

“I’ve brought her to you, pard,” Dave said as Charles came out from his hiding place and stood on the little stepladder which led down from the cabin. “She’s yours—for that matter, she was always yours. Nothing I could do could steal her love from you. There’s lots more I owe you besides bringing this girl back. You took the blame of that murder on your own shoulders—why, I don’t know—but you’re free.”

Charles came down to the weed-covered sand where Jacinta was.

The girl looked up to him.

“Charlie,” she said, “I understand something that was way beyond my depth when we talked about it before. You talked of it, and Peg Reverdy, that old vet on the other side of the desert who gave us this chow cart, he talked of it too. It was about a fighter with a soul.

“I’ve found that man, Charlie. Never doubt again that I love him, because I myself, who didn’t have brains enough to know what a soul meant—I know now. Charlie, you’re what they mean when they say a fighter with a soul.”

Charles held out his arms to her, and she ran to him eagerly, lifting up her tear stained, beautiful face to receive his ardent kisses.

David’s own heart throbbed with a pang as he gave Jacinta up, but there was another strange feeling of happiness mingled with this regret. He stared at Charles as the dim blue of the starlight revealed his great figure. He had

seen that majestic figure before—it seemed ages before, back in Dave’s childhood.

Again he saw a reincarnation of the father on Buzzard’s Mountain.

“You gave yourself to save me,” Dave said; then asked: “Who are you?”

“Tell him.” Jacinta slipped out of Charles’s embrace and reached for Dave’s hand. “It’s going to comfort him. Tell him now.”

“Why did you want to save me by laying down your life—even though you were innocent? My father told me of that sacrifice many years ago, and he said there is no love greater than that. Who are you?” The boy stood expectant, radiant, eager with an intimation of the great truth.

And then Charles answered: “I am your brother.”

Dave stood for a moment as this revelation slowly came to him. It came, transfiguring his brother Charles as if the light of morning had already fallen upon that lonely, wind-swept sand lot!

And then he went to him, and as he embraced his brother Jacinta knew that he was comforted in his soul.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled 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.

[The end of *The Beloved Brute* by Kenneth Perkins]