



Señor Devil-May-Care

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

WHEN one of the ragged peon girls brought to dance at DON ESTEBAN DE LA ZAMORA's fiesta turns out to be the proud SENORITA MARIA GODINES in disguise, Don Esteban has unwittingly committed an outrage. The girl's too devoted admirers, JUAN FELIZ and MARCOS CHAVEZ, swear to avenge her; and in order to protect the young hot-bloods from a matchless swordsman, the governor of Alta California sends Don Esteban to San Diego de Alcalá.

But that is not the governor's only reason for the temporary banishment. Don Esteban

—called SENOR DEVIL-MAY-CARE—has served him before on secret missions, and now it will be his duty to outwit a plot to overthrow the governor. The principal in this treasonable scheme is DON JOSE DEL RIO, a nobleman who feels that he has been politically slighted. His allies are his son MANUEL, his beautiful daughter ANITA, and the pig-like MIGUEL BROCAMONTE, a wealthy merchant.

SHORTLY after his arrival in San Diego de Alcalá, Don Esteban is summoned to the mission by FRAY FRANCISCO, and there he swears an oath that he will not use his sword for sixty days except in self-defense. Don Esteban does not know that Juan Feliz

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and Marcos Chavez are already on their way to San Diego. He is greeted with fitting ceremony by Don José del Rio, who has already decided that Señor Devil-May-Care will make an excellent ally in the plot to overthrow the governor. After all, Don Esteban has been banished, a victim of the governor's harsh hand.

But Esteban de la Zamora brings only grief to the plotters. He insults Brocamonte; and when the infuriated merchant tries to stir up the peons against him, Don Esteban quickly wins their allegiance. He manages, too, to convince Brocamonte that the del Rios are planning to throw him over; and so that fat trader goes to Don José with an outrageous proposal. Unless he is given Anita for a wife, he will no longer support the del Rios in their plan for revolution. Having broached this, he is ordered out of the del Rio hacienda.

SO TREASON is not faring any too well. But Don Esteban knows that agents of Brocamonte's have already begun to incite an uprising among the natives in the hills. Don Esteban has sent one GONZALES, a trusted servant of the governor, into the back country to counteract the work of Brocamonte's men.

Then Manuel del Rio, incensed at Señor Devil-May-Care challenges him to a duel. But Don Esteban remembers his oath; he cannot defend his honor for sixty days. Returning to his inn, smoldering with anger, Señor Devil-May-Care is suddenly confronted by Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez. Chavez flatly calls him a coward, and that is too much. His oath momentarily forgotten, Don Esteban rushes at the young caballero. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

PAYMENT POSTPONED

MARCOS CHAVEZ retreated a step in the face of Don Esteban's furious and determined advance. Juan Feliz gave a cry of nervous alarm. This rough and tumble was not at all to his duellist's taste. The expression on Don Esteban's face was murderous.

But he did not whip his blade from its scabbard. Instead, he seized Marcos Chavez by the arms and hurled him back against the wall and pinned him there.

"Give me attention, *señor!*" he said. "I am under oath not to give or accept challenge for a certain period of time, and that

oath was not of my asking. I promise you this . . . I shall make an attempt to be released from the oath. If I can be, it will give me the greatest pleasure, *señor*, to meet you and your companion, at once or singly, and to teach you the last lesson you will learn on earth."

He released Marcos Chavez violently and stepped back, breathing heavily, his eyes snapping and face hotly colored. Marcos Chavez gasped in anger. When he could speak, he said:

"You have dared lay hands on me—"

"Do not torment me further, or I may forget myself to the extent of forgetting my oath also. Keep out of my sight!" Don Esteban stormed.

Boots suddenly ground the gravel outside the door, and Capitán Angelus strode in.

"What have we here?" the *capitán* asked. "More trouble? Is this to be a day of brawls?"

"This is an affair between gentlemen, *señor*, and does not concern the soldiery," Juan Feliz said.

"I am the *commandante* of this district, *señor*, and all affairs here concern me," Angelus replied. "Your arrival has just been reported. You are travelers off El Camino Real, but you have not complied with the regulations by stopping at the *presidio* to leave your names, rank and business."

"We were eager to confront Don Esteban de la Zamora as soon as possible, *señor*," Marcos Chavez said. "He evaded our challenge in Monterey—"

"*Señor!*" Don Esteban roared in warning.

Capitán Angelus lifted his hand in a demand for attention. "Let us step into the patio, *señores*, where I will have something to say to you in private," he ordered. "Kindly lead the way, Don Esteban."

Don Esteban tossed up his head and strode through the doorway, and the others followed. The landlord closed the door at the *capitán's* gesture. Angelus took the others a short distance aside, where they would not be overheard.

"For you, *señores*," he said, bowing to the two young *caballeros*, "things should be put right. For certain official reason which is none of your concern, His Excellency the Governor sent Don Esteban away from Monterey—"

"Thereby doing him a great favor," Juan Feliz interrupted.

ANGELUS glared at him. "And, at the order of His Excellency, Don Esteban was required to take oath at the chapel of mission here not to engage in combat during a stated period. Do not be deceived into thinking that Don Esteban is avoiding a challenge from you. You should know better than that. He has never refused before, has he? Now he is not his own to dispose of."

"If that is the way of it, Esteban," Juan Feliz said, bowing, "I ask your pardon for accusing you of evasion. But I promise to challenge you the instant you are free of your oath."

"And I, also," Marcos Chavez added.

"If he lives that long," Angelus said. "Don Esteban has incurred the enmity of a wealthy trader who may be inclined to hire assassins to get at him. He has aroused a mob against him already. If it is your passion to fight Don Esteban some day in the future, *señores*, make it your business to guard his life until the appointed time."

"I need no guards!" Don Esteban roared.

"No cowardly assassin will get at him," Chavez declared. "Our wish is to save him for ourselves."

"Do not let me find you tagging around at my heels," Don Esteban warned them.

"If you do, *señor* what can you do to resent it?" Juan Feliz asked. "You cannot attack us, because of your oath."

Capitán Angelus laughed. "I wish I could explain everything to you, *señores*, but government secrets cannot be revealed," he said. "Why not simply enjoy your visit to San Diego de Alcalá for the time being, and await developments? You do not have to forget your enmity entirely.

If you like, glare at Don Esteban whenever you see him."

"Are you presuming to laugh at us, *señor*?" Marcos Chavez demanded, hotly.

"And are you presuming to raise your voice to me, *señor*? I am under no oath to prevent my fighting you; and I could split you from top to bottom at a stroke. Then you would never have your chance to fight Don Esteban."

"We will arrange for living quarters here at the *posada* and decide what is to be done," Juan Feliz said, with as much of his dignity as he could salvage.

He bowed low, Marcos Chavez did likewise, and they went back to the common room to locate the landlord and make their arrangements.

Capitán Angelus turned to Don Esteban and smiled slightly.

"If they watch over you, Don Esteban, they may prevent worse rogues from getting at you," Angelus said.

"And chain me at every step."

"Oh, if you desire to evade them at any time, I know you are clever enough to manage. Which reminds me, Don Esteban, that I believe I have had an example of your cleverness. As a result of it, I found myself in difficulties this morning."

"How was that, *señor*?"

WE WERE holding two prisoners accused by Miguel Brocamonte of theft. During the disturbance last evening, they were rescued from the *presidio*, after the guards had been manhandled. One of the guards told me that a score of men were in the affair, all masked and heavily armed, and that they rode away on swift horses. Later, he confessed there had been but one masked man. Two horses have been reported missing."

Don Esteban smiled in return. "The prisoners must have been persons of importance."

"I have been wondering considerably about that, Don Esteban. They seemed to be only a ragged peon and a halfbreed girl. But I believe I understand the situation. The rescue is a black blot on the

record of the *presidio* . . . but at least I was perhaps spared releasing them officially without trial, and thus causing comment."

"Black blots on records may be removed by official action, *Señor el Capitán* . . . when the full truth is known."

"I thank you, Don Esteban. Hereafter, if you will only take me into your confidence, possibly things can be made easier for you."

"At this time, *capitán*, I merely suggest that if the escaped prisoners are seen again they will not be seen . . . officially."

"I gather your meaning, *señor*. When Brocamonte roared this morning because the prisoners were gone, I pointed out to him that their release would not have been accomplished had not his own mob drawn all the soldiers away from the *presidio*. That silenced him."

"'Twas a fine rebuke," Don Esteban said.

"I am existing in the dark," the *capitán* deplored. "I know only that you are doing some service for His Excellency, and are to have protection and any help you may ask."

"When it is possible, *capitán*, I'll tell you more."

"I have been informed also of your little tilt a short time ago with Manuel del Rio. I accosted him and assured him that I knew of your oath, letting him believe it was punishment for some trouble you had in Monterey. So his enmity, too, will be held in abeyance."

"When the oath is removed," Don Esteban said with a laugh, "I shall have half the country to fight."

"'Twould be a pity if you were obliged to carve those two young hotbloods. They are only foolish, romantic adolescents. Don Manuel del Rio is another matter."

"Quite!" Don Esteban assented.

"I do not know the cause of the trouble between you—"

"'Tis personal."

Capitán Angelus bowed. "Your personal affairs are your own, Don Esteban. But, if you ever need help, command me!"

CHAPTER XVII

A ROSE AND A BLADE

DON JOSÉ DEL RIO seldom came into the town of San Diego de Alcalá. He considered it nothing but a cluster of mud huts and a community of persons of little account, and was content to remain for the greater part of the time at his *hacienda*, where he was lord of all his eyes could see. Occasionally, he visited some other *hacienda* owned by one of sufficiently high birth to address almost as an equal.

But today, soon after the siesta hour, the Del Rio carriage came rolling into town and traveled toward the *posada*, and those along the way beheld Don José himself sitting on the cushions, his head erect and face inscrutable. The *señorita* and her *dueña* rode in the carriage with him, and the flashing eyed Don Manuel was in saddle at the carriage's side.

It was an event for Don Manuel and Señorita Anita to appear in town twice in one day, too; and the populace wondered what was afoot. For news of the quarrel between Manuel del Rio and Don Esteban was public property.

The fat landlord almost had an apoplexy when he saw the carriage stop in front of his establishment again. He clapped his hands wildly for his servants and rushed them about, tore off his soiled apron and hurried through the door, to stop and bow until his head almost touched the ground.

"Welcome to my pigsty, Don José," he greeted.

"You have named it correctly, *señor*, but why boast of it?" Don José asked.

An outrider spread a carpet on the dirt, and Don José got out of his carriage and helped the *señorita* and her *dueña* alight. Don Manuel dismounted stiffly and handed the reins to a *posada* servant.

"We have come to pay our respects to Don Esteban de la Zamora and return the courtesy of his visit to us," Don José told the landlord. "Notify him that we are here, then conduct us to your patio and say nothing."

A servant went quickly to notify Felipe, who in turn notified Don Esteban. Another was sent to clear the patio of any guests who might be there. The landlord himself conducted the party across the common room to the patio door, bowing at every backward step.

Sitting at a table in a corner of the common room, Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez heard and saw all, and their eyes bulged when they beheld the beauty of this proud *señorita* who bore the name of Del Rio. They regretted for the moment that they were in disagreement with Don Esteban and so could not properly ask him for an introduction to her.

DON ESTEBAN was halfway across the patio when the party entered, and he stopped and bowed, hiding his surprise to find Manuel with the others. Servants had placed chairs around a table beneath the arches, and were hurrying with the landlord's best goblets, a skin of the best wine, honey and little cakes.

"I am deeply honored," Don Esteban said, with the ring of sincerity.

They seated themselves and took the drink of ceremony, even the *señorita* sipping a bit of the golden wine. The servants retired out of hearing. Don Esteban made some small talk, including Don Manuel in an offhand way, meanwhile wondering whether this was a visit of courtesy or something more.

At a gesture from her father, Señorita Anita arose and beckoned her *dueña*.

"I am going to inspect the rosebush at the end of the patio, señores, and you need not accompany me," she said. "I know you wish to talk about men's affairs."

After the men had reseated themselves, Don José unbent slightly and leaned across the table.

"Don Esteban, I am here as the head of my house to make abject apology to you regarding my son," he said. "Manuel must have had a moment of madness this morning. There must be no quarrel between you, especially now."

"Now, Don José?"

"I am going to speak to you in confidence, Don Esteban, asking only that, if we do not come to an agreement, you will not repeat our conversation. But it is not necessary for me to ask that. You are a *caballero*."

Don Esteban inclined his head slightly.

"You are aware of my ambition and intention. You know that I associated myself with Brocamonte, the trader. That association is at an end, Esteban. I kicked the rogue out of my house last night. He had the effrontery to propose an alliance of marriage with my daughter."

"He dared?" Don Esteban cried.

"I would have ripped open his greasy carcass, but I did not wish to soil my sword," Manuel put in.

"A whip would have been more fit," Don Esteban said.

"So I find myself now without an associate in my enterprise," Don José continued. "Do you feel that you can join me, Esteban?"

"Don Esteban does not wish natives and peons to die in the gratification of a man's ambition," Manuel said, his lips twisting slightly.

Don Esteban glared at him. Don José flashed him a look of warning.

"Accusing me of a remark like that brought on our quarrel this morning," Don Esteban said. "At that time, Don Manuel, you did not know of my oath. Now you know. Is it the part of a man of gentility, *señor*, to taunt another when he is powerless to strike back?"

Manuel started to get off his stool, but his father thrust him back upon it.

"DON ESTEBAN is right," he said.

"You forget yourself, Manuel. I feel sure nothing has passed between you so grievous that it may not be forgotten."

"Let us consider Don José's question and exclude all other matters," Don Esteban suggested. "From the talk I had with Miguel Brocamonte, I am sure he means to go ahead with the enterprise alone."

"The scoundrel even thinks he can be governor," Don José said.

"If he attempts it, he will fail and he will pay the penalty of failure. An uprising cannot succeed," Don Esteban said. "This is but a small corner of Alta California. There are strong forces of soldiers at Santa Barbara and posts north of there. I understand and appreciate your ambition, Don José, but I would in friendship advise you to forget your project."

"A man afraid of failing wins nothing," Manuel said impetuously.

"I was hoping you would join me, Esteban," Don José confessed. "I was hoping . . . several things. Brocamonte's absurd proposal last night caused my thoughts to take a certain other line. My daughter meets so few eligible men—"

"Your daughter is a delight to the eye, Don José. Upon we can agree."

Don José had signaled his watchful daughter covertly, and now she called:

"Don Esteban! If you are through with your affair, will you speak with me about this rose?"

Don Esteban rose immediately, bowed, and hastened to her side. Her *dueña* moved away as if to look at a bank of flowers near the fountain.

Señorita Anita smiled up at him as he stopped at her side.

"The handsomest roses here are in your cheeks," he said, softly.

The girl laughed. "So they teach flattery in Monterey?"

"I believe so, though I never took lessons. That was not flattery, but the truth."

With deft fingers she plucked a full-blown rose of ivory white. "Have you and my brother made up your quarrel?" she asked. "Do not hold it against him. He has been nervous and distraught recently, and is not himself."

"I hope no ill will come of it, *señorita*."

"Had my father spoken to you about . . . a certain project he has in mind?" She bent her head to the flower's fragrance, raising her gaze to his through lustrous lashes.

"Sí, *señorita*. We do not see alike in the matter, I fear. I wish every happiness for

you, and a high place in the world—but one that is secure. The attempt Don José contemplates will fail and may result in disgrace. I beg you—use your influence against it, if you love your father. We all dream dreams, *señorita*. When we have one which cannot come true, it is wisdom to cast it aside and search for another."

"You almost convince me," she said. "But, if one cannot find another dream so good—?"

"That is always possible," he told her. "Perhaps I am searching for one now."

She flushed beneath the depth of his gaze, then looked away quickly. "I'll tell my father that we will search for another dream," she replied. "And I hope to find one that will come true."

They walked back to the table.

"THE door of my casa is always open to you, Don Esteban," Don José said. "My house is yours. Do not keep us waiting too long to make you welcome."

Don Esteban bowed. "I thank you, Don José."

"Manuel, if you would only extend your hand—" his father hinted.

"Not at this moment, please," Don Manuel said.

Don Esteban smiled and bowed again. "As you will, *señor*."

They walked on toward the door of the common room. "Two young *caballeros* have arrived from Monterey," Don Esteban said. "They came to challenge me to combat. Perhaps you have heard the story."

"And your convenient oath made it impossible for you to accept any challenge," Manuel suggested.

Don Esteban's face burned angrily. He ignored the thrust and spoke to Don José again:

"They are Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez, of good lineage, with parents prominent in Monterey. I vouch for them. They will be lonesome here for their own kind—"

"You may present them to me, Esteban," Don José said, immediately. "I'll

invite them to ride out to the *hacienda* with us."

"I would suggest that there be no talk of politics," Don Esteban said. "They are only raw boys, wine makes them talk . . . and their fathers know the governor."

Don Esteban performed the introductions in the common room. Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez forgave him much for that. They accepted Don José's invitation to ride to the *hacienda*, and hurried to get their mounts.

Don Esteban had a moment aside with Don José as they went on to the carriage.

"I regret that we do not see alike politically, Don José," he said. "What has passed between us on the subject is buried in my bosom. Perhaps in the future honors will come to you, not through an act of treason. If your former associate attempts what he has in mind, he will come to an ignoble end, I am sure."

"It is a matter which requires thought," Don José replied. "I hate to cast good plans aside."

Don Esteban went with them to the carriage, held the *señorita's* hand an instant as he helped her into it, and exchanged smiles with her. Don Manuel did not speak again, and his face was like a thundercloud as he mounted. The carriage started away, with Don Manuel and the two young *caballeros* riding behind it.

Don Esteban smiled slightly as he watched them disappear. Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez would not be there to dodge his steps and watch him now.

At his feet, crushed and soiled, lay a crumpled white rose. Bending, Don Esteban picked it up and carried it away.

CHAPTER XVIII

ATTACK BY NIGHT

WHEN the Del Rios reached the *hacienda*, their guests were shown about the *casa*, and then conducted to a chamber where they could rest until the evening meal. Don José summoned his son and daughter to his own chamber in another wing of the house.

Don José's face was grave as he sat in the huge chair beside the fireplace and confronted his children. "I have decided not to go on with my plans," he announced.

"Father!" Manuel cried.

"That is my decision, my son. It was madness to think of it. Don Esteban is right."

"Don Esteban!" Manuel raged. "There was no halt in our arrangements before he came among us. He has ruined everything. We could have gone ahead with Brocamonte—"

"That beast!" the *señorita* exclaimed.

"We could have made use of him at least, and rewarded him with trade concessions. He would not have got ideas in his head except for this Don Esteban."

"I have decided, my children," Don José told them. "My ambition was wrong. I would have waded to power through the blood of men."

"Peons and natives—scum of the earth!" Manuel exploded. "Who cares for them? A Del Rio should sit in the governor's chair—"

"Not unless the viceroy puts him there," Don José interrupted. "And do not forget—Brocamonte is not with us now with his gold, and Don Esteban will not join us and take his place."

"Anita, tell him he is wrong!" Manuel cried.

"He is right, Manuel. It was a crazy dream. If we go ahead, it will end in disgrace for all of us. Don Esteban made me see clearly—"

"Don Esteban again!" Manuel raged. "He and his oath! When he is free to fight, I'll split him with my blade! Are you really going to let him turn us from our project? The uprising is at the point of starting. The men in the hills are being inflamed. Brocamonte may try to carry it on. But they will want a man of station to fight for. They always do."

"I have decided, my son, and let that be an end," Don José said.

"The end of the del Rios! We never shall amount to anything. The viceroy

honors everybody but us. Perhaps you are done, but I am not!"

"What do you mean, my son?"

"I do not know yet. But I am not going to let Don Esteban de la Zamora turn me aside."

Manuel rushed madly out of the room, and they heard him clattering down the stairs. . . .

DON ESTEBAN ordered Felipe to get his black horse and have him in front of the *posada*, for he intended riding to the mission in the cool of the evening for a conference with Fray Francisco.

When he emerged, the horse had been waiting for some time, and the crowd of beggars also. Don Esteban tossed them coins and galloped away.

As he rode, he thought. He had carried out the instructions of the governor well so far. He had separated the associates in this treason, and got them at each other's throats so it was impossible for them to continue as associates.

Now, he had to stop Don José carrying himself, his family and name to ruin, thus putting a black blot on all men of lineage. And, above all, he had to prevent the uprising.

Jorge Gonzales was in the hills, and Don Esteban waited a report from him eagerly. Until it came, and he was sure what was transpiring, he would remain in San Diego de Alcalá, where he could watch both Don José and Miguel Brocamonte.

He dismounted at the mission, tethered his horse, and was welcomed by Fray Francisco, who was smiling.

"I anticipated a visit from you, my son," the *fray* said. "I have heard of the day's events in town."

"Three men have challenged me, and I have been unable to meet them," said Don Esteban mutinously.

"I know, my son. But they are aware now that you are under oath, so cannot call you craven."

"Release me from the oath, *fray*!"

"So you can engage in violence? I do not

understand about your quarrel with Don Manuel, but the other two . . . My son, the intelligence from Monterey was that they were on their way here to fight you. That is why an oath was asked of you, so you would not slay them."

"You knew they were coming? It was a trick?"

"Would I participate in a trick, my boy?"

"Did you not, *fray*?"

"I followed the orders of my superiors, and one of those orders was to require the oath from you without letting you know the two were on their way here. Is it not better? Do you wish to slay them?"

"They are but foolish boys, but Don Manuel del Rio—"

"What was your quarrel with him?" the *fray* asked.

"He flared up over some remark I made. It grew out of nothing."

"As many quarrels do."

"Will you release me to the extent that I can defend myself against Manuel del Rio?"

"You may defend yourself if he attacks you and puts your life in danger, but you may not accept a challenge merely to save your pride."

"It is in your hands, *fray*."

"Partake of the evening meal with me, my son. The calm atmosphere of the mission may soothe you now."

Don Esteban remained for the frugal evening meal, and listened to Fray Francisco's story of a *fiesta* to be held there in six days time. The moon was up when he mounted his black horse and began the ride to town.

He had not gone more than a mile when his foe struck.

DON ESTEBAN was riding with loose reins. Three men rushed from the brush beside the road. One sprang to seize the reins, another dashed in with a knife, and the third discharged a pistol.

Don Esteban felt a slight shock as the ball from the pistol bruised his upper left arm. He swerved his horse suddenly and

struggled to get out his blade. The horse knocked one man sprawling.

But the other two were at him again. He felt a hot streak as the knife struck his left arm. Another pistol was discharged, and the ball missed the target. Then Don Esteban had his blade out.

"Assassins! Scum!"

He jumped his horse to one side as the man with the knife charged again. He sent the big black forward with a squeeze of the knees, his blade flashed in the moonlight, and the man gave a scream and went down.

Don Esteban wheeled his horse, to see the third man running. He raced after him. The knife was thrown, and flashed past his head.

"Carrion!" Don Esteban howled, and sent the blade home.

One foe was left, the one who had been knocked down by the horse. He was on his feet and trying to stagger away. "Halt *señor*, or you die!" Don Esteban cried.

The man turned, stopped, held his hands high above his head. Don Esteban sprang from his saddle and pressed the point of his blade against the man's breast.

"Spare me—!"

Don Esteban looked him over. He was a strong man of middle age, a field-worker from his appearance.

"Have you anything to say, *señor*?"

"'Twas the promise of gold made us do it, Don Esteban."

"You meant to rob me?"

"Sí. It was to look like we had slain you for robbery."

"To look like it?"

"But the real gold was to come from the one who sent us. He ordered us to slay you and turn out your pockets. You had upset his plans, he said."

"So! You let a man like Miguel Brocamonte lure you into this mischief."

"Not Brocamonte, *señor*. We would not have done it for a man like him. But when Don Manuel ordered—"

"Don Manuel?" Don Esteban cried.

"You dare intimate he would engage assassins to attack me?"

"We work on the Del Rio rancho, *señor*. He saw us and promised us gold. We hurried to San Diego de Alcala, and learned you had gone to the mission, so followed to waylay you. Do not slay me, *señor*. I have a wife, children—"

"This is almost beyond belief!" Don Esteban said. "Stand as you are!"

Don Esteban got a rope from his saddle and put a noose around the man's neck. He mounted and tightened the rope.

"We go back to the mission," he ordered. "March ahead!"

The whimpering man plodded through the dust, keeping up his entreaties. Don Esteban kept him ahead, for he was growing weak, and did not want the other to notice it. He was losing blood rapidly.

He almost fell from the saddle when he reached the mission and Fray Francisco and some neophytes came running.

"Seize this man and hold him," Don Esteban ordered. "He and two others waylaid and tried to slay me. The others are dead. I did not break my oath, *fray*—I had to defend my life. Send for the sergeant at the *presidio*. I . . . have been cut and shot—"

The assassin was thrust into the strong room of the warehouse. Fray Francisco sent a man on a mule to the *presidio*. Then he prepared to dress Don Esteban's wounds.

"You have lost blood, my son, but the wounds are not serious," the *fray* reported.

"I realize that, *fray*. But I do not want others to know. You helped play a subterfuge on me in the matter of the oath—now help me play one. Give out that I am sorely wounded and must be confined to my couch. Give me a corner in the guest house."

"To what end, my son?"

"That I may play a little game of my own, *fray*. And you will perhaps keep me from breaking my oath and taking a life. I know the name of the man who hired the assassins to kill me."

"My son!"

"Do not ask me to say more now. Get me on a couch and tuck me in. Send a man

to my servant, Felipe, and say that I am wounded and will not return to the inn for several days. Tell him to have transported here my leather chest—he will know which one I mean.”

CHAPTER XIX

THE LASH BITES DEEP

DON ESTEBAN was assigned a small room in the guest house. His arm was dressed, and he was unclothed and in bed before anybody arrived from the town. The ball from the pistol had only broken the skin and bruised the arm. The knife cut was on the upper arm, fairly deep. Fray Francisco, who knew something of medicine and surgery, had sealed the cut and put a soothing and healing salve on the wound.

Sergeant Salazar came pounding out to the mission, but he was not alone. The neophyte the *fray* had sent to the *presidio* had dramatized the affair and made Don Esteban seem at the point of death. So Capitán Angelus had come with the sergeant, and had brought a couple of troopers along.

Don Esteban asked to see the *capitán* alone.

“The man I caught and brought here—he tells a story I hate to believe, *capitán*. He says Manuel del Rio sent the three men to assassinate me.”

“Manuel del Rio! I shall question this man, then take Don Manuel into custody.”

“You have told me to command you if necessary.”

“Such are my orders.”

“Then you will say nothing to Don Manuel about this affair at present. Incarcerate this fellow in the *presidio* and guard him well. Let it be known that he has admitted he and his companions were hired to slay me, but not that he has said who did the hiring. We will see what occurs.”

“It shall be as you wish, Don Esteban.”

“You have the right to hold the fellow against release until I am able to be up and around again?”

“Certainly, Don Esteban. We will keep everybody away from him. Do you care to tell me more?”

“Not at present, *capitán*. The two I killed—you can readily ascertain whether they worked on the del Rio rancho, and this one, also.”

“That will be done immediately. Now you had better rest and sleep, *señor*. Fray Francisco says you lost a quantity of blood. The good *fray* will have your wounds healed in a few days. Felipe, your body servant, is here to attend you.”

“Send him to me as you go out,” Don Esteban said. . . .

FELIPE guarded the door of the little room the following day, and Fray Francisco turned aside all visitors.

“He has been hurt, but he will get well,” the *fray* told all who asked, which was truthful enough.

Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez called and offered their services, which were politely declined. Don José sent his *superintendente* with a message that he hoped for Don Esteban’s speedy recovery.

Capitán Angelus appeared in the evening.

“I scarcely can believe it, Don Esteban, but the man you caught undoubtedly told the truth,” Angelus reported. “We have found that the three who attacked you worked on the del Rio rancho, and were often engaged by Don Manuel for outside labors. Manuel del Rio must hate you well, to forget his blood and breeding and descend to hired assassination.”

“No doubt,” Don Esteban replied.

“I am holding the fellow you caught. I think he will die of fright before we have time to try him. Sergeant Salazar talks to him continually about how they hang a man.”

“There has been no attempt to have him released?” Don Esteban asked.

“None, *señor*. Miguel Brocamonte called at the *presidio*, and desired me to understand that he had nothing to do with the attack on you. I said little and looked knowing. Let him fret!”

"I will be on my feet in a few days, *capitán*, then perhaps moves can be made," Don Esteban said.

Night came, and those of the mission retired. Then, Don Esteban de la Zamora became Señor Devil-may-care. Under careful instructions, Felipe slipped out of the guest house like a fleeting shadow and got the black horse ready. Don Esteban opened the leather chest which had been brought from town and removed from it the clothing and weapons he had used when he had rescued the prisoners from the *presidio*.

His arm was a little stiff, but not enough to bother him greatly. He dressed; and when Felipe returned with the information that the horse was tethered in a certain spot, Don Esteban got through the window and into the darkness against the wall, and Felipe barred the door and remained on guard, to say that Don Esteban was sleeping and could not be disturbed, if anybody approached to question.

Don Esteban rode slowly and as silently as possible until he was some distance from the mission, then went at a swifter pace cautiously along the highway toward the town, ready to leave the road quickly if he heard anyone coming. He did leave the road just before he reached the town, kept away from all buildings, and finally stopped his horse in a dark depression not far from Miguel Brocamonte's house.

SAN DIEGO DE ALCALA slept. A torch burned in front of the inn and another at the *presidio*, and there was light in Brocamonte's house also, but the remainder of the town was in darkness.

Don Esteban dismounted and tied his horse to a stunted tree. He put on his mask and got his pistol ready. He was wearing the blade also, and into his belt he had hooked a whip such as was used by horse tamers, a weapon with a long lash.

He crept slowly along the wall of Brocamonte's house until he came to an open window, and got through it. He could hear the voices of men coming from the living room. Step by step, he neared the

open door, and finally was able to peer through.

Two burly, roughly-dressed men were talking to Brocamonte, as they ate and swigged down wine. The dust of the trail was on their clothing.

"Get back into the hills as quickly as you can, *señores*," Brocamonte was telling them. "Keep up your work. Inflammé them! Be sure to explain repeatedly that I, one of their own class, am working to liberate them. We will drive the *grandees* out of the land and seize their acreage and houses. I will be the governor—I, a man who knows the needs of common folk."

"We understand," one of the men said.

"If it is possible to do so safely, send me news each night. Take this pouch of coins with you, and pass them out with my compliments. When the time is ripe to strike, we will strike first at the del Rio *hacienda*. In that house are certain persons I desire to humble."

"We shall do as you say, *señor*."

"Be loyal to me, do your work well, and you will be richly rewarded. Now, I will let you out. Do not be seen."

Don Esteban stepped back into the darkness behind some draperies as Brocamonte waddled to the front door with his two visitors. The trader unbarred the door and opened it, and the men darted out into the night. Brocamonte put up the bar again, belched, turned—and almost choked with surprise and fear.

A MASKED man stood there before him like a grim specter, his body bent forward, eyes glittering through the slits in his mask. He held a pistol in one hand and a whip in the other.

"Come here to me, *señor*!" Don Esteban ordered in a voice not his own.

"Wh—what—?"

"Keep your voice low, if you wish to live! Come to me!"

Trembling with fright, Miguel Brocamonte waddled forward, his eyes bulging and his fat body shaking. Alone and without his hirelings to fight his battles, Brocamonte was no lion of courage.

"Who are you?" he muttered. "What do you want here? If you are a robber—"

"Here to me!" Don Esteban ordered. "You forget your place, it seems, Señor Brocamonte. You dabble in treason and insult your betters."

The whip shot out, and the lash bit into Brocamonte's fat body. Don Esteban cut once because of the mob, once in the name of Señorita Anita, and several times in behalf of the government. The singing lash bit and stung. Brocamonte's howls of anguish filled the house.

"A lesson for you, *señor!*" Don Esteban said.

He whirled and darted back through the dark room and got through the window. He heard the shrill cries of frightened servants as Brocamonte's bellowings reached them. More lights came on in the house.

But Don Esteban was far back in the shadows, and had reached his horse. He swung into saddle and touched with the spurs. For a short distance he rode madly, then slowed his big black to a walk and turned aside, to curve back toward the mission road.

Once during the journey he was compelled to pull off the highway and hold his horse's nostrils to prevent a whinny as two riders passed going toward the town. But he reached the mission, safely, tied the horse and got through the window and into the little room.

"Go put up the horse," he ordered Felipe. "I'll undress and get into bed. Go and come by the window, and make sure you are not observed. Did anything happen here?"

"Nothing of importance, Don Esteban. Nobody knows you have been absent."

"If anybody asks, I have not been," Don Esteban replied.

CHAPTER XX

THOSE WHO RIDE AT NIGHT

MIGUEL BROCAMONTE did not suspect Don Esteban, for he believed him to be seriously wounded and in bed at the mission. But he did suspect Don

Manuel del Rio or one of his hirelings. He went straightway to the *presidio* with some of his servants, aroused the *capitán*, exhibited his hurts and made a loud outcry. His house had been invaded by a masked man who had beaten him. He was entitled to the protection of the soldiery, being a man of substance . . . and what was Capitán Angelus intending to do about it?

Angelus questioned Brocamonte at length regarding the masked man's clothing and general appearance, and an expression of bewilderment came into his face for a moment. He suggested that the trader go slow in charging Manuel del Rio with such an offense, lest he be punished for slander.

"Why did he say he whipped you?"

"He made some remark about me insulting my betters. I had a slight business understanding with Don José and his son, and may have said some harsh things. Do you not see, *Capitán*, that it was either Don Manuel or a man he sent to whip me?"

"Surely you would have identified him had he been Don Manuel."

"There were few candles burning in the room. He was about the size of the del Rio, and his voice was similar."

"Proving it would be difficult," Angelus told him. "If I were you, *señor*, I would not make the charge until I had better proof. Guard yourself better. You appear to have many enemies."

"'Tis the penalty for being prosperous," Brocamonte said.

He went away fuming and swearing to have revenge, and Capitán Angelus spent some time thinking about the incident. The description Brocamonte had given of the man who had whipped him tallied with the one that the *presidio* guard had given of the apparition who had released the prisoners; and Angelus knew that man's identity. Don Esteban was playing some wild game, he decided.

In the middle of the morning, Angelus rode out to the mission and had speech with Don Esteban alone.

"How goes it with you?" he asked.

"I am mending slowly, *Capitán*."

"There was an amusing incident during the night. A masked man entered Brocamonte's house and whipped him. The description given me fits the man who raided my *presidio*."

"Remarkable!" Don Esteban said.

"Brocamonte is of the opinion that the del Rios sent the man. He says the intruder accused him of insulting his betters."

Don Esteban smiled. "Is it not possible, *Capitán*, that the intruder was there gathering information and the whipping was his secondary object?"

Angelus sighed. "Anything is possible. It is difficult to live in the dark. Do you have any special requests of me, Don Esteban?"

"None, *Capitán*. Fray Francisco is caring for me well by day, and Felipe sees that nobody disturbs me at night."

"An admirable arrangement, Don Esteban. I hope you do not develop a wound fever, wander in your head and . . . walk in your sleep."

"I must be well in time for the *fiesta* which is to be held here in a few days," Don Esteban said. "I like merriment."

The *capitán* departed, and Don Esteban slept a part of the time during the day. Again, when night had come and all was quiet around the mission, Felipe got out and made the horse ready, and Don Esteban dressed in his somber clothing once more, got pistol and blade and mask.

THIS time, he went a short distance along the highway and then cut across country to the del Rio *hacienda*. This was more perilous, he knew, than what he had done the night before. And he disliked the spy on the del Rios.

But he had a task to perform. He had to save Don José from committing folly, tarnishing his name, and bringing odium on all his class. He wondered if Don José had reached an absolute decision regarding the uprising.

Señor Devil-May-Care expected to use

extra precautions in this escapade. It would not look well for Don Esteban de la Zamora to be found playing the eavesdropper . . . especially when he could not bring the governor's name into it and explain that he was carrying out a duty.

He wondered, as he rode cautiously, about the *señorita*. A vision of her beautiful face was before him. He had seen an abundance of proud and beautiful girls, and had had not a few tossed at his head by ambitious fathers and mothers. But Anita del Rio had attracted him beyond any of these.

As he neared the *hacienda*, he redoubled caution. He was obliged to tie the black horse a distance from the house and approach afoot. Though it was late, lights were burning in the big living room of the *casa*.

Don Esteban reached the side of the house safely and began following a wall toward a window. It was possible that Don José had peon night-guards around the place to watch for thieving natives, and he had to be on watch for them.

As he neared the arched entrance to the patio, he heard Don José's voice, and that of the *señorita* answering. Crouching in the darkness behind a clump of shrubbery, Don Esteban listened.

"Manuel must be mad," Don José was saying. "What a low thing to do—and send assassins after Don Esteban."

"He is mad with ambition," the *señorita* said. "When you told us that you had given up the project of the uprising, he was beside himself."

"And for him to rush away as he has done now, rush into peril—!" Don José continued. "I have sent men after him, ordering him to return. He will disgrace us all, I wish I had never contemplated this accursed enterprise."

"Don Esteban was right, Father. It could not succeed."

"Don Esteban! I cannot understand Manuel's enmity toward him. And you, my daughter—what are your feelings?"

"Regarding Don Esteban?" she asked. "He is a very attractive man, Father, and

is very wealthy. His wife would be received everywhere, even at the court of the viceroy in Mexico."

"So you are falling in love with him, my child?"

The *señorita* laughed. "Love?" she asked. "He would make a good husband, no doubt. He could give a wife everything. Marriage with him would be a convenient arrangement. But, if by love you mean an insane hammering of the heart, a feeling of childlike fondness . . . no, my father."

"Marriage should be only for love, my daughter."

"That may be true with some, but not with me. Royalty does not marry for love. If I marry Don Esteban, be assured it will be because of the position he can give me, that he can take me away from San Diego de Alcala and let me see something of the world. And a married woman, my father, has better chances than a girl under her *dueña's* eye, if she has a fancy for a mild flirtation."

"My child!"

"Do I shock you, father? Perhaps Manuel going away at this time is a good thing. If he were here, I would see but little of Don Esteban because of Manuel's silly quarrel. And I desire to see much of the *señor* and let him see much of me."

"Manuel must return!" Don José said. "He will involve me in the business to my ruin. And we must patch up the quarrel between him and the Zamora. I have given up the conspiracy, but Don Esteban is in a position to give me aid in high places."

"Especially if he is married to me," the *señorita* added.

"If you marry him for ambition, my child, perhaps love will come to you afterward," Don José said. "Pour me a little wine, and then I must retire."

CROUCHING in the darkness, Don Esteban considered what he had overheard. Here was confirmation that Manuel del Rio had tried to have his assassinated. And it appeared that Don Manuel had also left home on a perilous enterprise.

Not the least of Don Esteban's thoughts dwelt with the statements of the *señorita* concerning him. His lips twisted in a wry smile.

"What a mistake I might have made," he muttered. "Ambition gnaws at all these del Rios."

He heard a step behind him, and turned quickly. A dark shape lunged at him from behind the shrubbery.

"Who are you? What do you here?" a voice challenged.

Don Esteban sidestepped and struck wildly. A pistol exploded almost in his face, and he felt the hot breath of the ball which missed him by scant inches. His assailant yelled for help and charged again.

Don Esteban turned to run, but tripped on a root and sprawled. The other was atop him instantly, striking at him with the heavy pistol. Don Esteban twisted and hurled the other aside, struggled to his feet as other servants came running, as Don José bellowed to know what was amiss.

Getting out his own pistol, Don Esteban struck as the other rushed. The blow made his assailant reel. Taking to his heels, Don Esteban crashed through the shrubs and ran beneath the trees.

"A thief! . . . a thief!" somebody was howling.

Then, Don Esteban realized that he had lost his mask. He wondered whether it had been lost in time for the man who had attacked him to see his face. He rushed on as another pistol exploded behind him, and heard the ball cut leaves off a tree above his head.

Panting and half exhausted, he reached his horse. The pursuit was gaining on him. He got into the saddle and raked with his spurs, bent low, and dashed along the highway.

"After the rogue!" he heard Don José shouting.

But with the big black beneath him, Don Esteban did not fear pursuit. He feared only an inability to get back to the mission without being discovered. He

touched with the spurs again, and the black carried him swiftly toward the town. At the proper spot, Don Esteban left the highway and cut across country toward the mission.

The mission buildings were dark when he approached them. He was cautious as he neared them, muttering imprecations when a hound barked. But he got the lathered horse tied where Felipe could find him and care for him, and went on quickly toward the guest house.

Beneath the open window, he stopped an instant to gather strength. Felipe heard him, and helped him into the room.

"I had a close escape," Don Esteban said. "Help me undress. Let us stow the things in the chest. Get me to bed, then attend to the horse. Wipe his coat well, for he is hot."

"Your arm is bleeding badly, Don Esteban."

"The wound is opened, I suppose. I ran into a little violence I did not expect. Attend to the horse, and I'll attend to the wound."

CHAPTER XXI

THE INSULTED LADY

FELIPE got through the window after helping Don Esteban undress and get into his bed, stowing what he had worn away in the leather chest with the weapons, and helping Don Esteban bandage his arm anew.

Don Esteban sat on a stool at the window, letting the night breeze refresh him. He had learned all he could. Now he had only to watch them while he waited to hear from Jorge Gonzales.

"Señor! . . . Don Esteban!" somebody whispered at the window.

Don Esteban got up from the stool and stood at the side of the casement. He could see nothing except a dark splotch against the wall outside, and saw the splotch move slightly.

"Sí?" he asked, whispering also.

"It is Rosá."

"Rosá!" Don Esteban bent out of the

window, and she stepped close to him.

"I had difficulty finding you, Don Esteban. I learned you had been hurt and were here. But I was compelled to hide until night. I saw you ride away, and could not reach you in time to speak. And I saw you come riding back."

"Give me news!" he said.

"If you have food or wine . . . I am famished."

"Come through the window."

She scrambled through and stood panting beside him. He led her to the stool and whispered for her to seat herself. Cold meat and wine were on a table in a corner, and he brought them to her.

"Eat and drink first," he whispered.

She gulped some of the food, washed it down with the wine. In a fever of impatience, Don Esteban waited.

"Now I can talk," she whispered.

He crouched beside her. "Talk in whispers."

"MIGUEL BROCAMONTE'S men are preaching rebellion. He is sending money to them, and furnishing meat and wine. They are being told that he will lead them, that he is their own kind and knows their needs, and will be their governor."

"The fool!" Don Esteban said.

"The idea caught some of them, *señor*. Others thought a man like Brocamonte would not do for governor, and wanted a grandee who would promise to make their lot easier. That divided them."

"*Bueno!*"

"But there is a new development, *señor*, and Jorge Gonzales got me a horse and made me ride here with all haste. Don Manuel del Rio is in the hills."

"What?" Esteban gasped.

"He tells them he is there to lead them. And he is winning many of them over, *señor*. They are thrilled to think a man like Manuel del Rio would come out to aid them instead of waiting in his fine house for the blow to be struck."

"So!" Don Esteban said.

The meaning of what he had overheard at

the del Rio *hacienda* was plain to him now. Incensed because his father had given up the conspiracy, Manuel del Rio had decided to lead the uprising himself.

"The thing is dangerous," he told the girl. "But, if the two factions cannot get together on a leader—"

"Jorge Gonzales desires instructions, *señor*. We have been talking against the uprising, and have won some others to our way of thinking. But the great many, *señor*, are still hot of blood and eager to raid the *haciendas*."

Don Esteban paced the room a moment, then returned to her.

"When I learned Don José had given up his project, I believed my troubles over," he said. "I was not much concerned about Brocamonte. It appears I was wrong in both cases. A del Rio is involved again—"

"What must I tell Jorge?" she asked.

"Keep on talking against the rebellion. Keep on saying they will be fighting other men's battles, will suffer and die for naught. I'll remain here and watch for three or four days more, then contrive to ride to the hills and meet you. I am supposed to be suffering from a wound, and cannot leave too soon, lest it cause talk."

"If you could only be there, *señor*, to show my people into what sad trouble they are heading! They do not like Manuel del Rio much, for he is too arrogant. He scorns the men he would lead, and makes it apparent."

"Either you or Jorge return to me in three days with a full report of the situation. Do you understand, Rosa, what I am doing? I would save an illustrious name from being stained. I would keep the peons and natives from going to slaughter. If the uprising really starts and *haciendas* are raided, the soldiery will have to strike—"

"I understand everything, *señor*," she said.

A SHADOW appeared at the window, and Felipe crawled into the room. He gave an exclamation of surprise when he saw that Don Esteban was not alone.

"This girl, Rosa, is working for me," Don Esteban explained. "She has brought me information."

"*Sí, señor.*"

"And now she must get away. Give her some money, Felipe, from my pouch. She can use it to advantage. And do not forget, Rosa—let me have news in three days' time."

A moment later, the girl was gone.

In the morning, Fray Francisco looked at him suspiciously after he had examined the wounded arm.

"It is not doing well," the *fray* said. "It looks as if there had been undue exertion. And your general condition, Don Esteban . . . you appear tired, exhausted."

"I will contrive not to get exhausted again, *fray*. My subterfuge is over for the time being. You may announce that I am able to arise and dress today, and wander around the mission a bit."

Capitán Angelus appeared in the middle of the morning.

"More excitement last night, Don Esteban, and this time at the del Rio *hacienda*," he said. "They had a prowler last night, and one of the guards almost caught him. He says the man was masked. The mask was found at daybreak, so perhaps the rogue dropped it while escaping. It seems he had a fast horse."

"A remarkable amount of excitement in this locality recently," Don Esteban commented.

"What is your condition, *señor*?"

"I am much better, on the mend. In a few days, I may even ride up El Camino Real and see some of the country."

"If you desire an escort—"

"Not necessary, thank you, *Capitán*."

"I am still holding in the *presidio* detention room the man who attacked you. Do you wish to prefer charges and bring Manuel del Rio into the matter?"

"I prefer to deal with Manuel del Rio myself," Don Esteban replied.

"May I express the hope that I am there when you deal with him?" Angelus asked, smiling. "I have heard of your supreme art with a blade." . . .

AFTER the siesta hour, Don Esteban dressed. From the leather chest, Felipe took new garments which had been made in Monterey just before Don Esteban's departure and never worn.

"I shall take a stroll," Don Esteban said.

He left the room and the building, walked slowly beneath the arches, watching the *frailes* and neophytes as they went about their work. He visited the stables and patted the big black on his glossy neck as if he had not seen him for several days.

When he returned to the guest house, he found Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez waiting for him.

"We are glad to find you recovering, Don Esteban," Juan Feliz said. "We regret that we were not near you when the attempt was made on your life."

"We beg of you to take proper care of yourself hereafter," Marcos Chavez added. "We have an engagement in the future, *señor*."

Don Esteban bowed. "I shall not forget it, *señores*."

"It is imperative that you do not. We promised the *Señorita* Maria Godines that we would kill you, and no doubt she expects us to keep that promise. She has even come to see its fulfillment."

"What is this?" Don Esteban cried.

"She arrived at an early hour this morning with her father in a carriage. It appears they left Monterey shortly after we rode from there."

"Don Luis Godines and the *señorita* are in San Diego de Alcalá?"

"They are, Don Esteban," Juan Feliz said. "They are coming on to the mission to reside in the guest house here until Don Luis can arrange for a property. He desires to make his home in this section, since the disgrace you put upon his fair daughter has made Monterey impossible for him."

"I shall be glad to see Don Luis and the *señorita*, for I owe them an apology," Don Esteban said.

"An apology will avail you nothing, *señor*," Marcos Chavez said. "We will re-

main in your vicinity until the time limit of your convenient oath expires."

CHAPTER XXII

SERENADE BEFORE BATTLE

THE guest house of the mission was commodious, with several chambers and a large common room. Neophytes worked under the direction of a *fray* preparing two of the chambers for the expected guests.

The Godines carriage arrived, Don Luis and the *señorita* were welcomed by Fray Francisco and retired to remove the stains of travel.

Don Esteban went to his own room and stretched on the couch to rest. Nor did he leave the room until Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez had taken leave and ridden back to town. He wanted the two young hotheads out of the way when he met Don Luis and the *señorita*.

"Felipe," Don Esteban called.

"Sí, Don Esteban."

"We return to the *posada* this evening. See to the arrangements."

Felipe began his packing. Don Esteban opened the door and went into the common room, where Don Luis Godines and his daughter were resting in easy chairs near the fire place.

Don Esteban bowed before them.

"I have never had the pleasure of meeting you, before, Don Luis Godines," he said. "I am Esteban de la Zamora."

"Well, *señor*?" Don Luis asked.

"I desire to make my abject apologies to you and your daughter for an incident which happened in Monterey—"

"An incident!" Maria exclaimed. "You made me the mock of the town, *señor*!"

"I desired to present my apologies the following day, but was prevented by the governor."

"We understand you ran away to escape a challenge," the *señorita* told him.

"Surely you do not believe that, *señorita*. I was sent away so the challenge could be avoided. I have no wish to slay Juan Feliz or Marcos Chavez."

"Are you so sure of the outcome, *señor*?"

"I am a master of fence," Don Esteban said, his voice that of a man speaking of fact, and with no boasting in it.

"Oh, how I hate you!" she cried. "To have me treated like a peon girl . . . dragged into a cantina . . . made to dance!"

"I am willing to spend my life trying to atone, *señorita*."

"I can exist quite well without sight of you, *señor*. I had hoped the two young *señores* had accounted for you before this, but I understand that now there is a convenient oath which keeps your sword in scabbard."

Don Esteban's face burned. He bowed to the *señorita* and turned to her father.

"Don Luis, I regret what happened in Monterey. I do not think it resulted in any harm except to the *señorita's* pride—"

"How dare you, *señor*!" she cried at him.

Don Esteban ignored her. "I am told that you felt shamed and so removed to this place," he added to Don Luis.

Don Luis smiled slightly. "It was my intention to come to San Diego de Alcalá anyway, *señor*," he said.

"Father!" the *señorita* raged.

Don Esteban glanced at her. She was beautiful in her rage. Don Esteban felt his heart beating quicker.

"I am returning to the *posada* in town, so you will not be embarrassed by my presence here," Don Esteban said.

"That is not necessary, *señor*, if you desire to remain at the mission," Don Luis assured him.

"My personal property is there, *señor*, and I am now well enough to go. I hope to meet you again here at the *fiesta* which will be held in a few days. This *fiesta*," he added, giving the *señorita* a glance, "does not call for masquerade."

"*Señor!*" she flared at him.

Don Esteban laughed a little and bowed low, and went to the door, but there he stopped and turned.

"If you are interested in finery, *señorita*, I may say that one of the traders in town received a shipment of fine goods

on the ship *Magdalena*. If I can give you any further instruction about this locality—"

"*Señor!* Can you not understand that I hate you?" she cried. "Have I not said you will die for what you did? You, who made me dance—"

"You were beautiful as you danced beneath the torches," he told her. "You are beautiful now, *señorita*."

He bowed to her again, to her father, and strode on out.

FELIPE had engaged a cart to carry the leather chest to town, and would ride with it. Don Esteban gave thanks to Fray Francisco and mounted his horse. He rode leisurely, humming an air.

The bowing landlord welcomed him back to the *posada*.

When time for the evening meal came, he invited the two young *caballeros* to eat with him, and the three made a merry meal.

"This business of waiting for the time limit of an oath to expire no doubt is irksome," Don Esteban said, "but we may as well enjoy ourselves meanwhile."

"We rejoiced that you escaped death at the hands of the assassins, *señor*," Juan Feliz said. "From this moment, we shall guard you."

"It may prove a busy task, *señores*."

"When do they hang the fellow you caught?" Marcos Chavez asked.

"He told a tale of being engaged by another to slay you, Esteban," Juan Feliz reported. "Name the man who hired him, and we will deal with the rogue."

"I shall deal with him myself."

"But you may be killed in the attempt, and we would save you for our own swords."

"Your kind interest overwhelms me," Don Esteban replied.

He bowed and left them. They saw Felipe hurry out. And after a time Don Esteban came from his room again, with a guitar.

"You will play for us?" Juan Feliz asked.

"For more delicate ears," Don Esteban replied.

Wondering, they followed him through the common room and outside, into the bright moonlight. Then they saw his horse ready, and shouted for their own.

He did not urge the black to high speed, and the other two soon overtook him. At the mission gate, he dismounted, and they followed his example.

Don Esteban walked around the buildings until he came to the guest house. He knew the window of Señorita Maria's room. Standing just outside it, he strummed the guitar and began a love song of Old Spain.

"The effrontery!" Juan Feliz said.

Don Esteban sang on. In the distance, some of the native neophytes took up the song softly. Watching the window, Don Esteban had a moment's glimpse of the *señorita's* face as she peered out, and knew she recognized him in the bright moonlight.

"Father!"

"Sí, my child?"

"There must be an abundance of coyotes in this part of the land. One is howling now beneath my window."

CHAPTER XXIII

CLAWS OUT

THE next afternoon, Señorita Maria Godines decided she must inspect the trader's goods Don Esteban had mentioned, and drove into town with her father.

The arrival was noticed by Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez, who immediately forgot they were guarding Don Esteban from assassins and hurried to the warehouse.

Don Esteban decided he would don new garments before he went to the warehouse also, and when he was dressed and ready met with a delay.

For the del Rio carriage had come to town again also, and Señorita Anita and her *dueña* had been left at the warehouse to inspect the goods while Don José rode on to the *posada*. He asked for a con-

ference with Don Esteban, and the patio was cleared for them.

"In the name of your lineage, Don Esteban, I ask you to aid me if you can," the elder man said.

"In what way, Don José?"

"I can go to nobody else. You know how things have been with me. I decided to forget my ambitions, but my son would not."

"I fail to see what I can do about it, *señor*," Don Esteban said. "Your son has seen fit to make himself my enemy. The attack on me on the mission road was his doing."

"The boy is beside himself. Ambition has maddened him, and I am to be blamed, for I entertained that ambition first. I am an old man, and cannot go to him. Forget your quarrel, Don Esteban, for a time. Go to Manuel and beg him to return home before he does that which may cause him to be hanged for a traitor. Fight him afterward if you must . . . I would rather have him die on the point of a blade than on the end of a rope."

"Don Manuel would not listen to me."

"Make him listen, Esteban! Make him spare me this shame and disgrace. The men in the hills will not revolt unless a *caballero* leads them. Get Manuel home, and the trouble will be over. They will have no leader. Brocamonte . . . they are merely taking his gold and laughing at him. They would not fight for him. But they may for Manuel. They will burn, steal, kill. Then the soldiers will come and finish them . . . and their leader."

Don José's fear, his near approach to grief, touched Don Esteban. And the governor would be pleased, he knew, if this thing could be stopped without bloodshed.

"Don José," he said, "I will do my best. In two or three days, I will be prepared to go. My wound is not properly healed—"

"The shame of that! Manuel must have been mad! I will do anything to make amends, Esteban. Get him home, then do as you will. My daughter will thank you, also. She is now at the warehouse," Don José hinted.

JUAN FELIZ and Marcos Chavez thought they were doing a service when they introduced Señorita Anita del Rio and Señorita Maria Godines. But they only started fresh trouble.

"I have heard of you," Señorita Anita said. "About the affair with Don Esteban de la Zamora; I mean."

"I have my champions, *señorita*," Maria Godines agreed, smiling at Juan and Marcos. "Have you none?"

"I have no need of them, *señorita*. I have not been seized in the street while dressed in rags, and carried to a cheap cantina and made to dance."

"Twas the best cantina in Monterey," Marie protested. "They say I danced very well, though frightened. Some can not."

Don Esteban saved the situation, striding in from outdoors, head up, a smile on his face, the eyes of Señor Devil-May-Care twinkling in his head. Señorita Anita flashed a smile at him.

"Ah, Don Esteban!" she said. "I am truly glad to see you again. I rejoice your hurt was not more serious. You are acquainted with Señorita Maria Godines, I believe?" There was malice in the remark.

"Indeed, yes!" Don Esteban agreed. "I had the honor of serenading her last evening at the mission, but she did not like my voice."

"Perhaps I will like it better another time, Don Esteban."

"How interesting," Anita del Rio purred. "Will a serenade wash away an insult?"

"It soothes one," Maria replied.

"I did not know. I have never been insulted. I have never dressed in rags to attend a peon's *fiesta*."

"It does take courage," Maria observed.

Anita del Rio turned from her abruptly. "Don Esteban, will you favor me by helping me decide between two pieces of satin?"

"After he has helped me decide between two pieces of silk," Maria Godines said. "It is his duty, for I would not have known of this finery had he not told me yester-

day at the mission, on his visit there."

"It is of small consequence," Señorita Anita assured her. "On second thought, none of the goods here are desirable."

"Oh, but this silk is what they consider to be quite the thing in Mexico at the viceroy's court," Señorita Maria replied. "But you would not know that, of course, being a provincial."

Anita del Rio's face flamed, and she almost choked in her wrath. She did manage to choke back a retort which would have been very unladylike.

"*Señores*, will one of you escort me to our carriage?" she asked. "I see my father is waiting." Both Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez bowed to her.

"I was very rude," Señorita Maria said in a low voice, as Don Esteban bent toward her.

"Charmingly rude," he assured her, smiling. "May I have a dance at the *fiesta*?"

"Can you not understand, *señor*, that I hate you for what you did in Monterey, and hope to see you slain?"

"Hate is akin to love, *señorita*. And I would not let myself be slain, if it would bring tears to your pretty eyes."

"Tears in my eyes? I should laugh!"

"Look straight at me and say it."

But she would not. She turned to the trader and began asking prices, and Don Esteban smiled and walked through the door and into the sunshine. Señorita Anita was in the Del Rio carriage, and the two young *caballeros* were bowing to her. She beckoned Don Esteban.

"Let me say again, Don Esteban, that I rejoice at your recovery, and my father joins me in the sentiment," Señorita Anita said.

"Visit us soon, *señor*," Don José urged.

He gestured to the coachman, the *señorita* smiled, and the Del Rio carriage rolled away. Don Esteban turned to find Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez glaring at him.

TELLING a tale of wishing to ride up El Camino Real and see some of the country, Don Esteban quietly made prepa-

rations to go to the hills the day following the *fiesta* at the mission. He was hoping to receive a report from Jorge Gonzales before then, so he would know how to reach Don Manuel quickly.

The *fiesta* started with a meal at noon, which attracted peons and natives from country miles around. Later, people would attend from the *haciendas* and from town. Don Esteban decided to remain at the *posada* until dusk, hoping he might hear from Jorge Gonzales.

Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez deserted him and went to the mission early. Don Esteban saw the del Rio carriage pass through town and turn out the mission road, with Don José, the *señorita* and her *dueña* in it.

He dressed with care, and had his horse got ready. Dusk had come as he rode out the highway. He passed others bound to the mission, tossed coins to those who cried for alms, sang as he rode. Don Esteban was light of heart.

Musicians were playing when he reached the mission. A throng sat around the tables and another throng danced. In front of the guest house, persons of lineage sat on benches and watched the merrymaking.

Don Esteban swaggered around the edge of the dancing crowd, going toward the guest house. The moon gave a bright light, but the *frailes* had put torches and tallow pots everywhere also. Streaks of amber light wavered and flickered as the dancers wove through them.

The music stopped, the dancers went back beneath the arches. Now, peons and natives would watch the fine folk dance by themselves. As the music began, Don Esteban reached the benches.

SENORITA ANITA looked perturbed when she saw him approaching, for she had just risen to dance with Marcos Chavez. Don Esteban bowed to her and passed on. Maria Godines was claimed by Juan Feliz, and they danced away. Don Esteban walked aside, to where Sergeant Salazar was standing with a couple of troopers from the *presidio*.

"Ho, sergeant!" he said. "So you like music and laughter?"

"I am here on duty, Don Esteban, I shall eat and drink my fill, but not dance."

"Your *capitán*—?"

"In the guest house, Don Esteban. He said he desired to see you as soon as you arrived."

Don Esteban found Angelus pacing around in a corner of the common room, with nobody near enough to overhear.

"I have had disquieting reports, Don Esteban," the *capitán* said. "A horde of men up in the hills are preparing for another confounded uprising. Miguel Brocamonte is behind this one."

"He is not alone, *capitán*. That is the matter which brought me here," Don Esteban confessed.

"So?"

"His Excellency desires to save a man of noble lineage from the consequences of folly."

"Del Rio! So that was why Don Manuel tried to have you killed. He must have known you are a Governor's man."

"'Twas not that. I was invited to participate, and refused to do so," Don Esteban replied, smiling.

"What shall be done?"

"They must be stopped before they make a move."

"And how—?"

"I start for the hills in the morning . . . possibly late tonight. They do not like Don Manuel, for he does not know how to handle them. I do."

"How, *señor*?"

"I'll stand their friend, scatter money among them, show them they are but dupes if they play another man's game."

"I hope you succeed, Don Esteban. What shall be done with Brocamonte?"

"That has me puzzled," Don Esteban confessed. "He may drag the del Rios into it. They were associated at the start of the affair. I am awaiting a report now. I'll let you know what I hear."

There was a burst of laughter outside, and the music began again. Don Esteban left the *capitán* and hurried out. He

brushed Marcos Chavez aside and bowed to Señorita Maria Godines.

"Will you dance once, *señorita*, with the man you wish to see slain?" he asked, in a low voice.

She smiled at him and arose to take his arm.

THROUGH the shadows they danced, now at arms' length and now close together. After a little laughter and banter at first, they did not speak. The *señorita's* eyes were starry as she looked up at him. They became lost in the crowd. Don Esteban danced her to where the shadows were deeper, and bent his head.

"That I should love the woman who hates me!" he said.

"Is this a jest, *señor*?"

"You know it is not. From the time I left Monterey, I have had before me a vision of you in rags, tears of rage streaming down your cheeks. Let me spend a lifetime in atoning."

"All is forgiven, *señor*," she whispered.

"You do not hate me, then?"

"This I feel cannot be hate."

He whirled her in the dance, swept her into his arms and held her tightly. In a shadowy spot, he bent his head swiftly and touched her lips with his own. Fire burned against fire.

"Señor—" she breathed.

"I may speak to your father?"

"Sí. Take me back now, and leave me alone a little while. 'Twas at a dance I learned to hate you, and at a dance that the hate turned to—" She faltered.

"Say it, *señorita*!"

"Later . . . after I have heard you say it first."

Don Esteban left her with her father, and walked back along the wall, for he wanted to be alone and examine this thing that had happened to him. Señor Devil-may-care was caught at last! He would be tamed now—at least in a measure. No more dangerous wild pranks for him.

Yet the most dangerous of all, the most terrible, was at hand. He glanced through one of the arches—and saw Rosa, the peon girl, beckoning him.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



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