

*The Hired Help Sometimes Grow Particular As to Just What
Their Duties Are!*



DRIFTER'S LUCK

By ARTHUR O. FRIEL

Author of "Robbers' Roost," "A River to Cross," and Other Stories of the Venezuela Jungle

THAT'S a lot of tripe. How long have you been around here, anyway? Uh-huh. About two weeks. So now you know all about Venezuela and its people. And you'll be going back North on the next boat to write a book about it all: the great *llanos*, and the rough old Rio Orinoco, and the unexplored mountains and wild Indian tribes and so on. One more of those things.

No? Well, that's something. More than one book has been written that way, I hear. Fact is, I just lately read one myself, by an Englishman named Wigglewell. And they say he did all his intrepid exploring right here in this barroom. Anyway, the book's a horse laugh to anybody that knows this country. Come to think of it, what you just said sounded like him. And you're grinning. Trying to get a rise out of me, maybe?

All right, you got it, and I'll buy. Clap your

hands, and the waiter will come along. Sorry I can't. This left hand of mine is hors de combat, as us frogs say. Broke two fingers the other night. Doing what? Well, not knitting. They say he will be out of the hospital next week

Well, now, Mr.—er—I didn't quite catch it. Mack? Glad to know you. Hart's mine. Hart. Don't get me mixed up with the lad I'm going to tell you about. His name's Dugan. Sure, another frog, from the same green island the Harts and Macks came from, away back.

Now you said—or Wigglewell did—this country is unfit for white men, except here in Caracas and a few other big towns. A country of savages and half-breed cutthroats, held down only by the thin top crust of pure white Spaniards. Pure? Cripes! Show me one!

That's what Dugan would say, anyway. And I'll tell you why.

A WHILE ago Dugan was riding over the *Allanos*, the flat plains south of here, heading north. He had some money; hard, heavy South American money, packed in a saddle roll. And a revolver on his belt that looked important, but was really only a .22 long-rifle. And a horse under him, and a few old clothes on, and a bristly black beard, and not much else. A big North American drifter who had been knocking around a long time and been up against it plenty, but had lately had some lucky breaks. He thought his luck was still good. But you never know.

Plugging along over the hard-baked flats, with the sun grilling the juice out of him, he traveled slow and loose, seeing nothing worth looking at. Just the same old brown desert, thin grassed, small treed, thorn bushed, with dull green cactus here and there. But then up ahead grew a mass of woods, meaning a sizable waterhole. And his horse, sniffing the wind, picked up speed. And that wind brought some queer sounds.

Queer, because he couldn't figure them. Faint, low, dull sounds that just didn't belong in that empty land of empty wind. He let the horse go. They reached the trees; found a path through them; broke out in another open space—and stopped short as Dugan yanked back.

There was a gray house, low but large, among broad-headed trees set wide apart. There was a corral, downwind from the house. There was a thick, solid post, maybe used for gelding horses or cattle. There was a man tied by his hands to that post, and another man swinging a whip on him.

Sssswack! went the whip. *Sssswack!* Slow, hard strokes. *Sssswack!*

The swacker was a big buck nigger, black as the soot of hell, grinning at every swing. The fellow taking it was a medium-sized brown man, stripped naked. Behind the nigger torturer, several squatty yellow half-breeds in cheap clothes were watching.

Sssswack! went the whip again. The victim quivered, but jammed his face against the post and kept mum. And Dugan suddenly burned up. It wasn't his business, but—

HE JUMPED his horse at the gang. He swung his left fist low and uppercut into the nigger's nose. And with the weight of man and horse behind that punch, the black buck took an air ride. He straightened out and up and then hopped down out of sight. A couple of the breeds behind him went

under the horse and yowled. The others threw themselves clear.

Yanking his horse around, Dugan got back to the post and cut the brown man loose.

When the rope let go the fellow slid down, trying to hold up, but all in. And Dugan, looking down at his hamburg-steak of a back, made a speech, saying:

"You stinking, lousy, so and so and so's that haven't the guts to give a man a fighting chance—"

And then some. And he swung off his horse and, standing bare-handed, dared the whole bunch to make a pass back at him. He said it in Venezuelan Spanish, and nobody could miss it. But nobody did anything.

The nigger was out cold, with a face like a busted tomato. The breeds, bunching together, looked stunned, as if a thunderbolt from nowhere had exploded in their faces—which wasn't far wrong at that. So Dugan, having sounded off, turned to the fellow at the post.

First he saw only eyes. Big brown eyes, staring up at him as if he was a rescuing angel from heaven, instead of a tough-looking bozo just out of hell's backyard. Big eyes in a thin face, with a sensitive mouth and a set chin. The body underneath was wiry and bony, without an ounce of fat.

"*Arriba!*" said Dugan. "Up on your legs, *hombre!* Here!"

He reached down a hand, and the fellow grabbed it and got up. Up, he stood steady but still hung onto Dugan's big paw. Dugan almost threw him off; he always wanted his hands free. But after another look he let the man hang on, seeing that he couldn't stand alone yet. And then, facing the gang again, he saw something new. A white man.



A white man, in white clothes, was walking down among the dark trees from the gray house. Tall, easy, quiet, he just strolled along, smoking an expensive white *cigarrillo*. Everything about him was white. White face, white clothes, white smoke,

gray-white hair and mustache. A pure white Spaniard, if ever there was one. So white that he looked cold as snow.

Reaching the gang, he lazily sized up Dugan's hard face, sweaty old clothes, belt-gun and horse and saddle roll. He looked at the black buck's smashed face, and seemed amused. He ignored the others as if they were only animals. Tossing away his cigarette, he said:

"*Buenos tardes!* Good afternoon, stranger! Will you accept the shelter of my poor house through the hot hours of *siesta*?"

Dugan stood dumb a minute. All set to crack down anybody that got tough, he was taken aback. But then he said:

"Thanks, but I'm just riding through."

The white man smiled.

"As you will," he said. "But I would be pleased by your company. This is a rather lonesome place."

Dugan considered. And his horse decided for him. The beast was thirsty, and it snorted. And Dugan, bone dry, too, remembered that the water-gourd hanging from his saddle was almost empty. So he said:

"*Bien.* I can stop awhile. But what's going on here?"

He nodded toward his brown hanger-on. The white man smiled again.

"Just a matter of discipline," he said. "That one is a disobedient person. But I think the discipline has perhaps been carried too far."

AND, sudden as a *tigre*, he lashed out at the dumb peons.

"You brainless burros," he said, "can't I ever trust you with anything! Now take that black brute out of here! He's through! And take care of this man!" He stabbed a long finger at the brown fellow. "Wash him, bandage him, feed him! And then, if he has not yet learned his lesson, let me know, and I will oversee the matter myself. You idiots!"

He glared at them, then suddenly smiled again at Dugan.

"Shall we go, stranger?" he asked.

"When I've watered my horse," said Dugan.

"The men will attend to that," said the other.

"I'm in the habit of attending to it myself," Dugan refused. "And I wouldn't trust these *mozos* of yours anyway."

"Oh, very well," the master drawled. "Bring

him to the house."

So Dugan pulled loose from the whipped fellow, who let go without seeming to say anything. But, very low, he did say some words, meaning, "Watch out! Bad!"

Dugan let that slide off and walked his horse toward the house. The master swung ahead, moving with feet rather wide apart, back straight, and arms a little forward. Something about him made Dugan think of a cavalry officer, used to riding but not to marching.

They reached an open door in the gray walls, walked through a short corridor, came out into an open space; open to the sky, but closed on all sides. It was a small patio, with a well of water in the middle and several doors in the foursquare walls. Old-time Spanish construction; a little fort, built around a spring, with the living quarters inside thick walls and under a tough tile roof.

THE white man clapped his hands hard, and a sleepy-eyed brown woman came from somewhere, and he commanded:

"Water the horse! And unsaddle him, and let him rest!" Then, turning to Dugan, "Follow me!"

But Dugan didn't follow just then. His saddle roll held a thousand silver *bolívaes*, that might make a noise if dropped hard; and he had long ago learned not to let strangers know he had money. So he did his own unsaddling, and laid his pack down easy, and gave his horse a rub besides. The boss scowled a little at the delay, but waited. Then he led on into a cool, dark, heavy old room.

Heavy dark furniture stood around; mahogany and ebony and so on; big stuff; maybe centuries old. On the walls were some paintings of stiff-looking men in wigs or old-time uniforms; some out-of-date weapons—swords and horse-pistols and such. On a big table were a few books and some papers. The master nodded toward a big chair, sat in another, and smiled at the holster on Dugan's belt.

"You know," he said, "you could be imprisoned for carrying that gun."

"Could I? Who by, and how many?" asked Dugan.

The other man grinned and let it slide. He asked some questions about who Dugan was, where from, where going, and why. He got whatever answers Dugan felt like making, and didn't seem to care if they were lies. He was sizing up Dugan himself all

the time; and maybe he got the answer he really wanted—that this fellow could keep his mouth shut in all languages and probably had reasons to. Anyway, he suddenly said:

“Unless you are in a great hurry, I would be pleased to have you stay here for some time.”

Dugan, poker-faced, said nothing.

“And if you are in a great hurry,” the other man added, “anything behind you might possibly be stopped.”

“By what?” asked Dugan.

“By me!”

“And who may you be?” asked Dugan.

The Spaniard stared. The old Spanish families down here have been known for hundreds of years over hundreds of miles.

“*Caramba*, you are indeed a stranger!” he said. “My name is Guevara. I am a retired colonel of the army of Venezuela.”

If he expected the stranger to fall out of his chair he was disappointed. Dugan had been around too much, North and South, to be knocked over now by names and titles.

“*Pues qué?*” he said. “So what?”

“Retired,” Guevara repeated, “but not without influence. I have friends. Also, enemies. If you have some enemies, too—”

He waited. Dugan grinned and gave him the old Spanish answer:

“All my enemies are dead.”

That wasn’t strictly true, but it rung the bell. Guevara laughed loud, and said:

“*Hombre*, I want you!”

“How much?” Dugan asked.

Guevara threw out an arm as if tossing away a million dollars.

“How much do you want?” he asked.

“A thousand a month,” said Dugan. “And cartridges, of course.”

Those last words made it perfect with Guevara. A thousand a month in this country is \$200 up in the States, and fairly stiff down here, even for a rich man’s bodyguard. But the cartridges made it sound like real business—according to local notions.

“*Muy bien*,” said Guevara, grinning. “I think I can find a few cartridges. You stay, then?”

“Why not?” said Dugan.

And at that Guevara turned as stiff as any army officer looking at a rookie who’s signed up and can’t get away.

“José!” he barked.

At once a door behind Dugan opened—so quickly that Dugan felt it had been on the crack all the time, with a man watching behind it, and Guevara had known it. Now a small, sharp-eyed yellow man, soft-moving as a cat, stood beside Dugan, eyes front. And Guevara said:

“This man replaces the black Frasco. Take care of him!”

And to Dugan he said:

“You will receive your orders later.”

Dugan eyed him, not liking the sudden military manner. But then he got up and followed the pussyfoot out. And soon he was settled in a small room which, he guessed, was next to Guevara’s bedroom, but had no connecting door; just four thick walls, with one door opening on the patio and a small window on the outside—too small and too high for anybody outside to shoot through. Up in one corner was a small bell, with a wire running through a wall. And Dugan understood that if that bell rang in the night he was to jump into the patio with his gun ready and do whatever was necessary. On that point and others he waited for orders.

Orders were slow in coming. Guevara seemed to forget him. Days and nights passed without sight or sound of the white boss. And for awhile that was all right with Dugan. He had been moving around a long time and not eating too well, and now he was willing to stop awhile in a comfortable place.

The floor in his room was hard earth; and the first night he dug a shallow hole under his big old bed and buried his money-bag. The meals, brought in by a good-looking but wooden-faced half-breed woman, were rich. The peons outside took good care of his horse and grinned at him when he walked around; they had their orders, and he was supposed to be Guevara’s big tough gunman now. And, for his gun, he found a box of .44 cartridges on his eating-table the second day. At that he snickered, thinking of what the colonel might say if he knew his gunman’s gun was only a long .22. But, saying nothing, he buried the big slugs alongside his money.

SO FOR a few days he lived the life of Riley; loafing, eating, snoozing, cleaning up. He bathed, shaved, tossed his clothes outside his door at night, found them all washed the next morning. Everything around there seemed very well oiled, moving like clockwork when the master wound it

up.

But a few days of that were enough for Dugan. Nothing was doing. Nobody talked. The yellow José, who seemed to be a secretary, smirked at Dugan when they met, but said never a word. The house servants—brown women—moved around like dumb ghosts. The peons outside, living in little huts beyond the corral, rode out and back, chattered among themselves, but gave Dugan only polite good-days. It all got deadly dull.



So one morning he ordered a *mozo* to saddle his horse and rode out. The horse now was full of life, and he let it have its head awhile, then cruised around the place in a wide circle. There wasn't much to see; the same old flats, and some cattle, and a crooked creek, and the heavy woods surrounding the source of that creek and the Guevara fort-house. But he stopped his horse, now pretty hot, at the creek to let him cool off under the low but broad trees. When he started out, a voice said:

"Señor! Just a little minute, if you please!"

And there beside a thick tree stood the thin brown man Dugan had cut loose from the whipping post. Thinner than ever, if possible; but clean dressed and looking more alive. And when Dugan grinned he walked forward like a soldier.

"Señor," he repeated, "I have to thank you for saving me. I thank you."

That was all. Straight and short as a good soldier's report. And the man stood the same way; straight up, body stiff, arms down—but eyes watchful. Dugan grinned again.

"Thanks received," he said. "And glad I happened along just then. But what was it all about? And who are you?"

The other fellow stared. Then he asked:

"You don't know yet?"

"I don't know anything," said Dugan. "Nobody tells me anything, and I'm no mind-reader. And I'm just staying here a few days to rest up, anyway. So, if you want to tell me anything before I drift

along, let's have it."

THE brown fellow's big eyes shrunk and widened, and turned cold and hot, while he looked Guevara's gunman all over again. Then, with his mind made up, he said:

"My name is Miguel Ojeda. Once I was a soldier under Colonel Guevara—before he was kicked out of the army."

"Kicked out?" Dugan asked. "What for?"

"For cowardice!" said Miguel. "He was sent out to destroy the rebel *cuadrilla* of Tonio Rojas. They met at Heron Creek and Guevara had the advantage of position.

"But instead of fighting he sent a flag to Rojas, and they made an agreement, and the Rojas gang rode away and later disbanded."

"Hm!" said Dugan. "So he really broke them up, then?"

"Sí, in a way," Miguel admitted. "But of course they can come together again any time. And—you may not believe this—the colonel at his court martial said the sun was too hot for fighting."

Dugan, considering, could believe it. Guevara's lazy walk, his dark room, his loafing through these last few days, all showed that he didn't like sun, or exertion either.

"So he's not a fighter?" he asked.

"Fighter? Guevara?" Miguel spat. "Only by trickery and other men's hands. His father and grandfather—they were fighters, much respected. This one—pfah!" He spat again. "A parade officer, strutting for the eyes of señoritas and señoras! A fighter only in *el duelo*. He has shot in duels the husbands of several society women, who challenged him for good reasons. And even then he always managed to give his victims the sun in the eyes—*sí*, and a badly loaded pistol, it was said in the army! Fight? Really fight? This one? *Cra!* If he dared to fight why should he hire you?"

Dugan said nothing. Miguel swallowed hard; then said:

"Those things he said to you about me were all lies. Discipline! Disobedience! I am a free man, not his slave, nor even any more a soldier! And he has no authority now over anyone but his own servants."

"What were you whipped for, then?" Dugan asked.

"For telling him to his teeth what he is!"

"And how did you happen to do that?"

Miguel's eyes burned again. But he only said:

"A personal matter."

"Uh-huh. So he handed you over to the black buck?"

"Sí. With orders to break me or kill me—or both!"

And with that he stiffened up and ended:

"I have thanked you, señor. Now I advise you to leave Guevara at once—this very day. And so *adios!*"

Then he faced about and marched away.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Dugan called.

But Miguel slid behind a stout tree and disappeared. And when Dugan rode after him he was gone. Gone as if he'd dropped into a hole.

SO DUGAN rambled back to the house, thinking. And Miguel's talk did add up. Among other things, Dugan remembered how the colonel had come loafing down from his house to the whipping-post, knowing well what had happened. To know, he must have been watching. Watching his black brute cut the brown lad apart, and liking it. Watching the stranger smash the nigger, and liking that. And so on, up to now. And so Dugan, who was all fed up on this place anyway, decided to drift along north, and do it now.

But other people had other ideas.

Back in his room, Dugan flattened out under his heavy old bed and dug up his money. Or so he thought. The earth floor was smooth and the bag was there. But when he backed out and stood up, the bag felt wrong. So he opened it and found—nothing but dirt.

A thousand *bolívares* in hard silver were gone. Dirt was packed where the money had been. And when Dugan remembered the .44 cartridges and crawled back for them, they were gone too.

Dugan got hot. Yanking open his door, he started out to find the sneak thief. But then he stopped, looked at the empty patio, and thought hard. And slowly he figured things out—thanks to Miguel.

If he hadn't run across Miguel that morning—or Miguel hadn't been hanging around to catch him and say thanks—Dugan would have gone bull-headed into a trap. Just a small trap, set to shrink him down to the right size for future use. A trap set, he guessed, by the sneaky, smirky José, who had seen that Dugan was getting restless, done some snooping, found the cash, and handed it and the

cartridges over to his boss. And now the two of them were waiting for Dugan to bust out and rave around and then get called in and whittled down by the colonel.

Somebody, anyway, had figured that Dugan would have brains enough to look at his money before he pulled out, and was hot-tempered enough to start a row. And then, with no money—no cartridges but those in his gun—a yellow cat behind a half-open door, with another gun aimed at the back of Dugan's head—his horse held by yellow slaves—this big tough guy might wake up to the idea that he wasn't so tough, and he'd better do what he was told. Or else—

"Uh-huh," said Dugan to himself. "Just like that. Well, now, old dumbbell, we'll just stick around. And maybe we'll collect yet."

So he went back into his room, cooled off, and took a long siesta. Along toward sundown he strolled out and saw the pussyfoot José working over some papers at a little table on the shady side of the patio. And he said:

"Say, José, how about a little advance on my pay?"

"Why?" asked José, eyes sharp.

"Oh, a man always feels more comfortable with a few *bolívares* of his own," said Dugan. "A couple of hundred on account will be all right. I've earned that already."

The secretary's thin little mouth twitched. And Dugan saw that he knew about Dugan's buried bag, but thought Dugan didn't know it all yet.

"You have earned nothing already," he said. "You have done nothing at all. And in any case, we pay only at the end of the month."

His voice was sneering. And Dugan nearly smacked him down. But he just gave the fellow a hard look and said:

"In any case, hey? Meaning, try and get it?"

José didn't answer. His little eyes narrowed down and dodged away, as if he didn't like the set of Dugan's jaw but didn't know what to do about it. And Dugan said:

"I'll get it, bozo, or know why not. But I can wait."

And he gave José his back and loafed along down to the corral, as usual, to see that his horse was all right. It was. But the peons down there, taking care of their own scrubby horses, acted queer. Instead of the usual dumb grins they gave Dugan sly looks. And somehow the air felt thick, as

if a thunderstorm was building up somewhere.

WHEN he rambled away from there he looked back and saw the yellow fellows with their heads together, talking low. And when he was back in his room he inspected his gun and his few reloads, making sure that nothing funny had happened to them. Nothing could have; he wore them all the time; but he was getting superstitious. Sure they were all right, he ate the usual meal brought by the usual dumb woman and went to bed. But not to sleep.

Doors banged shut here and there, and bars thumped into sockets, and Guevara's fort was closed for the night. After awhile Dugan got up and, pulling on his pants and gun-belt, went out into the patio. There he walked around awhile, and then squatted and smoked beside the cool little well. Just why, he didn't know. He still felt restless.

Time dragged along. Slowly the air grew cooler, and overhead the clouds drifted along across the stars, and after awhile a weak old moon crawled up over east and let down more light. Inside the walls nothing moved, and Dugan got sleepy. So he stood up to go to his room. But then came a noise.

Just a dull thump, that noise. Where it came from, Dugan couldn't judge. The night wind was rattling the dry leaves outside, and inside all doors stayed shut. So he yawned and started again for bed. But then he stopped short and pulled his gun.

Things were on one of the roofs. Dark things that lifted their head all at once at the ridge, then squirmed over the top and slid down the inside tiles. Dugan knew now what that bump had been; a clumsy ladder, built by clumsy men in a land of scanty wood, with no tools but poor knives. He knew that without thinking. And, without thinking, his gun-hand shot.



That was always Dugan's trouble; his hands worked faster than his head. Before he could stop himself he had fired three shots at those things coming at him. Then he held hard. The sliding things were all down now, off the roof, but on their

feet on the ground. And in the thin moonlight he saw one lift an arm, and heard one say:

"Halt, men!"

Then, to Dugan, the same voice said:

"*Amigo*, stand still!"

Dugan stood still. Whether or not he had hit anybody, there were at least twenty men, all armed with machetes or shotguns. Some were Guevara peons. Some were strangers. All wore baggy-panted *llaneros*, yellow or brown, some with shirts on, some without. And their leader was the brown ex-soldier, Miguel Ojeda.

"I told you," Miguel snapped, "to get out of here! Now—"

"Now what?" Dugan snapped back. Being ordered out of any place always got his goat. And maybe his gun took a dead aim on Miguel's belly. Anyway, the brown fellow turned stiff and cold. What might have happened next, nobody knows. Just then the bell rang.

That dumbbell in Guevara's bodyguard's room rang for the first time. And a door near that room opened and a white face showed in the moonlight, ghostly against the darkness inside. At sight of it the gang in the patio growled, and it ducked back out of sight. Just in time, too. A gun banged off, and the closing door jumped back open.

"*Maldito!*" yelled Miguel, facing about. "What fool fired that? Who disobeys my order to take him alive? *Cra*, I will—"

There Dugan saw his chance and made a break.

Four little shots left in his little seven-shooter—twenty hard eggs to be busted—nope, not so good. And he didn't want to bust them anyway. Sprinting for that open door, he got through before anybody could shoot.

AND, just bawled out by Miguel, the gang didn't try to shoot. But feet slapped behind Dugan, and voices growled again, and something hissed behind his head like a machete splitting air. And as the door thumped shut and a bolt rattled, it creaked loud under the weight of men slamming against it outside.

"*Gracias á Dios!*" gasped somebody who sounded like José. And the colonel's voice rasped, "A light, now! At once!" And then, to Dugan, "Stand still, you!"

Dugan, saying nothing, opened his gun enough to lift out the empties; slipped in live ones, and had a full load by the time light came. Then he saw José

in a nightshirt, Guevara in sporty silk pajamas. The secretary was shaky and very pale yellow; the colonel stiff and tight-mouthed as a steel trap—and holding a military pistol aimed at Dugan. Outside, men pounded at the door.

“What the—?” said Dugan, scowling at the colonel’s .45. The colonel snapped back:

“Explain this!” His head jerked toward the patio.

“Explain it yourself,” said Dugan, sore again. “You probably know more about it all than I do. Offhand, I’d say you’ve got some chickens come home to roost.”

Guevara glared. And he said:

“No insolence! How did those cattle get in here? Did you open the way?”

Dugan couldn’t speak for a minute. Then, biting back some hot compliments, he said:

“No. They came in all by their own little selves, over your roof. They scared me so that I shot at them. They didn’t like that, and so I ran in to ask you what to do next. I haven’t your brains, you know.”

The door thundered under more hammerings, and something cracked. At that José squawked:

“*Dios Mio!* It breaks!”

Guevara flinched. His burning eyes left Dugan and went to the door. It wasn’t breaking. Not yet. But it was old, and probably never as thick as the two big outside doors, front and rear, in that hollow square. And the gang that had come over the roof had figured that out—or had it figured out for them by somebody. Maybe by Miguel.

The colonel turned whiter than ever and aimed his gun at the poor old door. Dugan slid his own gun into its holster and folded his arms. Then, as it happened, the gang outside stopped work to think things over. Guevara turned back.

“The furniture!” he ordered. “Move it, you men, and pack it against the door!”

José jumped to obey; tried to lift an end of the heavy table, and couldn’t. His spindly shanks bent under his nightshirt, and his ratty face puffed up, and Dugan snickered.

“You, *hombre!*” Guevara snapped. “Move that!”

“Not me,” said Dugan, standing easy. “I didn’t hire out for a furniture mover. Any time I do, I collect in advance—not at the end of the month. And that reminds me of something. You owe me a thousand *bolivares*. In a bag. A nice new bag, not an old one full of dirt. How about it?”

GUEVARA stood very still. José made a queer noise like a choky gulp. Dugan grinned with his mouth, but maybe his eyes didn’t look funny. And Guevara, after a long hard look, said:

“José!”

“*Sí, señor!*” wheezed José.

“Pay this man a month’s wages, now!”

“*Sí, señor!*”

“And,” said Dugan, “don’t let anything stick to your fingers, José. I’ll count it. And make it all good hard silver. The same silver as before. You know what I mean.”

“*Sí—*”

José bit off his parrot-word *señor*, but he ran fast into another room. And then the shooting started.

Guns outside sounded off. Little old muzzle loaders, single barrel, small bore—that’s all the law lets a *llanero* have, and usually he’s out of powder and shot. But those little old guns were doing business. Slow, steady shots, fired a few inches from the old door, were making it jump. And every jump started at the same spot—around the bolt. And the charges weren’t birdshot. Solid balls, with plenty of powder behind.

One or two of those slugs came almost through, stopping in the wood but showing what they were. Guevara strode over, picked at one with a fingernail, and backed off from another dull blast.

Then José ran in with a bag. A heavy, stout canvas money-bag. He planked it on the table, and it clinked. And Dugan said:

“All right. I’ll count it later. And now, Colonel, I’m right where I was when I came here. Just a guest of yours, remember, stopping over to keep you company. Not a nigger slave, or a starved bum, or whatever you might think. And now what?”

Thump! Thump! Thump! said the guns outside. Guevara glared again at Dugan; then stepped back quick. A slug had come through and smacked on the far wall.

“*Diablo!*” he said. “Where in hell did those cattle get so much powder and ball?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Dugan. “But some of them are strangers to me. Maybe they’re furnishing the ammunition. I’m beginning to think you aren’t popular around here, colonel *mío*. Their boss, by the way, is the brown lad your bucko was cutting to pieces last week.”

At that the Spaniard swore furiously.

“That one? Ojeda?” he asked. “*Por Dios*, I will

kill him tonight if it's the last thing I ever do!"

"Uh-huh," said Dugan. "Well, now, as a guest of yours I'll give you a hand at moving that table—if you'll do some work yourself. This little rat of yours in the nightshirt can't even raise a mustache."

GUEVARA stood scowling until another ball crashed through. Then, gritting his teeth, he dropped his gun in a chair and, for once in his life, did some labor. Between them they set the table over against the door—ducking another slug or two—and jammed some other pieces against that. All that old stuff was heavy as iron; and by the time it was set the soft-living colonel was panting like a run-out horse.

Then the door broke; slammed in an inch or so, stuck against the barricade. José, with a squeak, blew out the oil light. Standing there in the dark, the three heard the gang cursing and heaving, and then Miguel's voice:

"Stop that! You only hinder one another. Go open the back door and fetch in the ladder!"

"The ladder? Why?" somebody asked.

"For a pry, thickwit!" snapped Miguel. "Cut it apart, ram one end of a rail through this crack, and all heave together. Then—"

"Haaah!" the mob growled. "*Sí*. And then—"

Feet spat away toward the short corridor where one outside door could be opened from the patio. And then the other outside door—the front one, in the colonel's quarters—made a small sound like a bar sliding. And Guevara snarled and rushed for the chair where he'd left his gun; bumped into it, clawed around, and rushed away.

Then he snarled again:

"Traitor! Sneak! Rat! You—"

"No no no, Colonel!" José squalled. "I only wished to see if we could slip out this way to the corral! Just one little look— We must do something—"

"*Peste!* You must know that men must be stationed outside here! You dirty—"

Bang! And a red flash. And Dugan knew José was all through.

FOR a minute Dugan himself was deaf and dumb. A .45 in a closed room knocks you that way, especially if it's unexpected. Then, though he had despised José, he got red-headed and pulled his own gun again. The poor little yellow-belly had only been trying to sneak out, too scared to know

just what he was doing. And a slap in the face would have been enough.

"You damned old fool!" he said. But then he took a quick think and a quick walk across the room, backing up against the far wall.

Guevara, hiding all the time inside his little fort, was clearly nuts on the subject of treachery, and Dugan saw no sense in pushing himself into another .45 bullet. Things were tough enough now. And as his hearing came back he heard Guevara coming back too, hissing through his teeth:

"So! Another snake gone! And I alone must—"

There he stopped, as if just remembering Dugan. Then he said:

"You, *hombre!* Where are you?"

Dugan said nothing. He heard Guevara's slippers take soft steps here and there, and guessed that the big pistol was poking around for him. He followed the moves with his own gun. But then through the narrow space between the busted door and the jamb came more excitement.



Feet came running, and the clumsy ladder dropped with a bump in the patio. And excited voices said:

"Miguel! Other men come! On horses!"

"Who?" Miguel asked.

"*Quién sabe?* We don't know. Go look! All at once they come, riding like soldiers!"

For a minute everything was dead quiet outside. Inside, Guevara pulled a quick breath, let it out with a hollow sound that wasn't right. It wasn't glad. Anything but. And then, outside, Miguel said:

"Very well. I will see."

Again everything was dead quiet. Nothing even seemed to breathe. Not even Guevara. Once he swallowed loudly, and that was all. And Dugan, against his dark wall, wondered. Here in a tough jam, with a mob on his neck and his water supply cut off and no way out, the colonel wasn't glad to hear of soldiers riding to the rescue. Instead, he sounded sick.

Then, away outside, voices barked at each other

like hostile dogs. Soon they sank to a growl. Then feet padded into the patio and somebody said:

"*Compañeros*, they are soldiers, and Miguel says we must not fight. Hide your guns there on the dark side, and keep only your machetes! Quick, they come!"

There was a rush. And a quick beat of hard-heeled boots. And a hard hammering on the door, and a snappy voice saying:

"Open!"

Guevara swallowed again. Then he answered:

"Who speaks?"

"Colonel Felipe Tovar! Who answers? Colonel Diego Guevara?"

"*Si!*" Guevara's voice was proud now. "In a moment, Colonel! I am not dressed—"

The man outside laughed.

"Forget that," he said. "This business is urgent. From the supreme commander himself."

Guevara's feet moved toward the door. Then they stopped. And he asked:

"What is the message?"

"Message!" The voice outside turned snappy again. "*Dios!* What do you think I am? A messenger boy? Not so! And I do not talk to a shut door! Are you Diego Guevara or not? If you are, show your face!"

Guevara chuckled. That military snap got him; that and the whole general situation. And he said:

"A moment."

MOVING around, he found matches and relighted the lamp. And Dugan, putting away his gun, hauled away the furniture far enough to let the door swing. At once an officer pushed in; a real cavalry officer, lean, quick, hard as nails and keen as a hawk; black-eyed, black-mustached, tan-skinned. Behind him marched four soldiers. Others stayed outside.

The officer gave Dugan a swift once-over, stopped, asked:

"Who are you?"

"Just a guest here," said Dugan. "The Colonel will—"

Then he looked around. And the colonel was gone.

"Colonel Guevara!" barked Tovar.

"A moment," came Guevara's voice from his bedroom. "I am dressing. Have the kindness to be seated."

Tovar's mouth turned tight. He looked quickly

around. Then he signaled two men toward the door opening into the front corridor, and two to watch Dugan. He himself swung to the door of Guevara's bedroom.

"Dressing can wait!" he said. "I ask you to come out!"

That was an order, not a request. Slowly Guevara came out, hands empty, eyes set on Tovar.

Tovar stepped back and smiled.

"Ah! Colonel Guevara himself!" he said. "*Bueno!* I know your face, Colonel, but not your voice. Well, now—"

But he stopped there. One of his men at the front door had grunted:

"There's a dead man here."

Tovar looked; then ordered:

"Bring him here!"

So they hauled in what was left of José; a skinny thing without much of a head. A .45 at close range sure does blast things away. And Tovar asked:

"What's this, Colonel?"

"A traitor!" said Guevara. "One of the rebels who have been trying to kill me tonight! And now that you are here we shall stand them all against the wall."

"Perhaps," said Tovar. "Who shot this one?"

"I! Who else?" Guevara stood very big and proud now. "And I, *por Dios*, will take pleasure in shooting all these other snakes outside! They caught me asleep—I am ashamed to confess. But those things do happen. Especially when a sentry is asleep at his post."

He glanced at Dugan. And Tovar said:

"Ah. This man is your bodyguard?"

"A poor imitation of one," said Guevara. "A worthless tramp who came here begging, and—"

He stopped and shrugged. Dugan nearly blew up. But, watching Tovar, he kept mum. Tovar's sharp black eyes weren't missing a trick.

"Take his gun," Tovar said. A soldier took Dugan's revolver without a struggle. And then Tovar smiled again at Guevara.

"I quite agree with you, Colonel," he said, "that traitors should be shot. And that, by the way, is why you are wanted in Caracas."

His smile turned hard and his voice turned cold. And the whole stuffy hot room somehow turned into a damp icebox. Guevara froze, growing death-white. And Tovar went on:

"The supreme commander wishes you to

explain how you happen to be in seditious correspondence with one Tonio Rojas, the rebel you didn't fight. Your last note to Rojas went astray."

Guevara said nothing. He and Tovar watched each other, and the temperature sank away below zero. Then Guevara bowed.

"There is some mistake," he said. "But I am always at the orders of the commander. We shall ride pronto. But I refuse to travel in pajamas."

"Naturally," said Tovar. "I'll wait. But not too long."

GUEVARA nodded, turned away, and stopped a second. And Dugan, watching, saw his eyes swing along those dingy old oil paintings of his ancestors—big fighting men of the old-time, gone to their graves now, but still watching this last Guevara; Guevara the soft slug, parading for women, cheating in duels, dickering out of a battle, kicked out of the army, and now bound for a firing squad or a deepwater old Spanish dungeon, and everlasting disgrace to his proud old name.

Then Guevara walked into his dark bedroom. And then came a gunshot.

"*Dios!*" said Tovar, trying to look surprised. He jumped into the bedroom; came out with a sad face, with eyes somehow smiling; looked at Dugan, and again turned hard.

"You, *hombre*," he said, "will go with us—for investigation."

And that was bad news. Dugan wasn't exactly on the dodge, but he had been in some jams down here and some men had suddenly died. It had all been in self-defense, but he couldn't prove it. And now, caught with a gun on, he saw a short trial and a long prison term ahead, if nothing worse. But there couldn't be any argument with this officer. So he said:

"If you're riding north, I was going that way anyhow."

"You'll ride north," Tovar promised. Then he called:

"Outside, there! Bring in the leader of this disturbance!"

Voices spoke. There was a growling argument. Then in came a sergeant and a heavy-set fellow, yellow-skinned, sloppy-dressed, who didn't belong to Guevara. Tovar snapped:

"The leader, I said, Sergeant! That brown one—Ojeda—who talked to us outside!"

"That one is gone, sir," said the sergeant.

"Gone?" What the hell do you mean? Gone how?"

"He walked out, sir," the stocky sergeant said, eyes set. "The colonel will remember that Ojeda gave us free entrance. And no orders were given against giving him free exit."

TOVAR swore hard and hot. But then he turned on the sloppy-dressed *llanero* and asked him what this ruction was all about. And that fellow, standing steady and cool, answered:

"We got mad."

"Oh." Tovar grinned a little. "What about?"

"Everything," the local fellow said. "For many years Colonel Guevara has treated us badly."

"Really?" said Tovar, grinning wider. "How?"

"How not?" The farmer swallowed something; then went on. "Among other things, he has taken our women for his pleasure. That is the old Spanish custom, of course, but we did not like it. But he was Colonel Guevara, with power. We are nobodies. And we are peaceful people, with no weapons but old shotguns and bush knives. And so—"

He stopped, set his teeth, and waited a minute. Then he said:

"So it went on until lately. Then we learned that Guevara was plotting with that wild dog of the *llanos*, Tonio Rojas, to start a war against the government. That meant we must all fight for Guevara and Rojas or be shot for refusing. And those wild dogs of Rojas' are worse than our own cattle-dogs. About women, I mean. Not even our littlest girls would be safe. So we decided to stop it all before it could start."

"Hmmm!" said Tovar, through his nose. "I see. But how did you know about this Rojas plot?"

"Miguel Ojeda," said the slow-speaking yellow fellow, "learned it. We can't read. Miguel can. Miguel got hold of a note from Guevara to Rojas, three days ago. A note carried by one of Guevara's peons. He told us."

"Hmmm!" said Tovar again. "Three days ago. Yes, I see. Well, *hombre*, that note never reached Rojas. Somehow it got mailed at the town of San Thomé to the supreme commander himself. And so we are here now. But about this Miguel Ojeda—What had he against Guevara?"



His voice was friendly now. He seemed to like this steady-spoken farmer. And the local lad said:

“Miguel has a daughter, just turned fourteen, very pretty. Colonel Guevara saw her and ordered her brought here. Miguel objected. Guevara had him whipped almost dead. He got away somehow. A very good man, Miguel. He was a soldier once.”

Tovar nodded. And he said:

“*Muy bien*. You men needn’t worry any more about Guevara, or Rojas either. Something will happen to Rojas very soon. Now we go. Will you bury anything you find here that needs it?”

The slow fellow looked at the shot José,” and at the dark doors around, with a dead Colonel Guevara somewhere beyond; and he grinned and said:

“With pleasure.”

“*Bueno!*” said Tovar. “Now, do you know this man?”

He jerked a thumb at Dugan.

“No,” said the native.

“All right,” said Tovar. “Let’s go! You first, *hombre!*”

HE signaled again. The soldiers closed in on Dugan. And Dugan walked out, mouth shut. This Colonel Tovar had come hell-bent under high-pressure orders, and he was going back the same way, and a shut mouth catches no fly balls.

They swung out into the patio. The gang over in the shade stood very quiet. More soldiers closed in behind Tovar and Dugan, and they all marched out into the open. And a whistle blew, and horses and men came from all around. But there wasn’t a mount for Dugan. Naturally, there wouldn’t be. So there was some delay while he got his own horse saddled up in the corral. And that was lucky.

Tovar was a colonel, but he hadn’t brought a

regiment to take Guevara; just a small platoon of picked men on good horses. And now, with nothing to do but convoy an unknown tramp back north, they all let down. When Dugan swung aboard his animal they took a slow trot, without formation, through the woods toward the open *llanos*. Outside they would probably have formed up and stepped on it. But something happened.

Among the trees, guns flashed in a ragged rip of fire. And voices yelled:

“Rojas! Rojas! *Viva Rojas!*”

“Hell, the rebels!” Tovar yelled. “Close up, men! Fire at will! Charge!”

And what a mess that was! Caught off guard and in disorder, the platoon went wacky. Horses plunged, bumped each other and the trees. Men swore and shot wild, fighting their horses with one hand and something they couldn’t see with the other. And Dugan grabbed his chance. Yanking his horse to one side and ducking low, he bolted through the grove, heading west.

Somebody shot at him from behind. Bullets smacked into trees or rattled off limbs. But nothing hit Dugan. He broke out into the *llanos*, swung south, and rode hell-for-leather. His horse was fresh, and if any soldiers took after him they soon quit. When he did look back he couldn’t see anybody. But he kept on going, just for luck.

FINALLY he holed up at a small *morichal*, where stubby palms stood thick around a scummy spring. The next day, getting hungry, he rode back to the Guevara place.

And there he found the Guevara peons and Miguel Ojeda, all looking very contented, and nobody else. No Rojas rebels. No soldiers. And only two new graves. Nobody dead but Guevara and José. And when he asked questions, the home guards just grinned and Miguel was poker-faced.

“You must have been dreaming, *amigo*,” Miguel said. “No Rojas men were here last night.”

And, looking the brown fellow in the eye and thinking back, Dugan realized that those sudden gunshots in the grove hadn’t lasted long, or even sounded just like the .44 rifles the outlaws use down here. More like muzzle-loading shotguns. And he remembered how Miguel had coolly walked out on the soldiers—leaving some words in the minds of his gang, maybe. Perhaps Miguel had another gun outside, and was willing to take the job alone if necessary. But the delay at the corral, and

Tovar's haste to get back and report, let the gang loose. And, firing in the air and yelling, giving Dugan a break if he wasn't too thick to take it, and then disappearing like shadows, as those *llanos* lads can—

Dugan got it. And he knew that if Tovar had caught any or all of them he'd have shot them pronto, and they knew it too. So why should they risk it, when all they had to do was stand quiet in the patio and play safe? You tell me. Anyway, Dugan began to think those funny yellow fellows sort of liked him.

So, when he found that his money bag was gone, he didn't say anything. The local boys who found it must have taken it for Guevara's; and a thousand *bolívares* don't go far among twenty men with families. About ten dollars each, in our money, and a godsend to them. And Dugan was always funny that way; he hated a sneak or a gyp, but he'd give his last dime to a square shooter. And when Miguel gave him Guevara's .45 automatic and cartridges to replace the little old .22 revolver Tovar had taken away, Dugan thanked him.

"It is nothing," Miguel answered. "I am afraid of this pistol, anyway. A military rifle I can handle. A good revolver, too. But this thing is too tricky. If you can use it—"

"Maybe I can," said Dugan. "It's done a couple of good jobs I know about, and it might do more. And if there's nothing more I can do around here, I'll be riding."

MIGUEL smiled, and his big eyes said a lot, but his mouth shut. Dugan mounted to ride. The yellow boys stood around, grinning in their dumb way. And Dugan grinned back and pushed out north, without a *bolívar* in his pants, but somehow feeling well fixed.

So that, Mack, is what I started to tell you. That's what's down yonder. Just a bunch of

savages, says Wigglewell, held down by the thin top crust of pure white Spaniards. Thin is right. Worn so thin, if you ask me, that they have to blow off their own top sometimes to get out of paying their debts. Debts of blood and misery, centuries old, to better men, a little off-color maybe, but men. Men good or bad, bright or dumb, like the rest of us; but the kind of men who'll stand by another man if—

Wait a minute. There's an army officer just come in, heading this way, and I don't like his looks. If I stand up quick, you take a dive and stay down.

Whew! All right. It wasn't Tovar, after all. But say, you seem to rate a cordial smile from that stiff-necked bird. Tourists don't get anything like that. How come?

MacLeod? You said Mack, or Mac, the first time. Are you that fellow MacLeod that's been down yonder three-four times, studying the Indians and breeds and whatnots? And writing scientific stuff to prove that the old oh-so-pure-white Spaniard stuff down here is all washed out, and the old Indian stock with white brains grafted on is building up a new world? Doctor MacLeod?

Well, Doc, you sure have played me for a sucker. But I've read a couple of your booklets in the library up-street, and they said something. And—

Well, if you're fixing up another trip down there and want a good man along, I can get hold of that fellow Dugan any time. He's made some more money since the time I was just talking about; but he's tired of sitting around this town. But then again, if you're only looking for something else to write about, I wouldn't know him. My name's Hart. And you or the army or police can't prove a thing by me.

Hey, waiter!