



by ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

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(Continued)

CHAPTER II.

Guided by Quintana's directions, the three had made a wide detour to the east, steering by compass for the cross-roads beyond Star Pond.

In a dense growth of cedars, on a little ridge traversing wet land, Quintana halted to listen.

Sard and Sanchez, supposing him to be at their heels, continued on, pushing their way blindly through the cedars, clinging to the hard ridge in terror of sink-holes. But their progress was very slow; and they were still in sight, fighting a painful path amid the evergreens, when Quintana suddenly squatted close to the moist earth behind a juniper bush.

At first, except for the thrashing of Sard and Sanchez through the massed obstructions ahead, there was no sound in the woods.

But, presently, came a soft, swift rhythm like the pace of a forest creature in haste—discreetly hurrying tread which was more a series of light earth-shocks than sound.

Quintana, kneeling on one knee, lifted his pistol. He already felt the slight vibration of the ground on the hard ridge. The cedars were moving just beyond him now. He waited until, through the parted foliage, a face appeared.

The loud report of his pistol struck Sard with the horror of paralysis. Sanchez faced about with one spring, snarling, a weapon in either hand.

In the terrible silence they could hear something heavy floundering in the bushes, choking, moaning, thudding on the ground.

Sanchez began to creep back; Sard, more dead than alive, crawled at his heels. Presently they saw Quintana, waist deep in juniper, looking down at something.

And when they drew closer they saw Georgiades lying on his back under a cedar, the whole front of his shirt from chest to belly a sopping mess of blood.

Sanchez looked stealthily at Quintana, who said softly:

"Blen sure. \*\*\* In his left side pocket, I believe."

Sanchez laid a cool hand on the dead man's heart; then, satisfied, rummaged until he found Georgiades' share of the loot.

Sard, hurriedly displaying a pair of clean but shaky hands, made the division.

There seemed no need of explanation. The dead Greek lay there where he had not been expected, and his two pistols lay beside him where they had fallen.

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When the three men had silently pocketed what was allotted to each, Quintana pushed curiously at the dead man with the toe of his shoe.

"Peste!" he remarked. "I had place, for security, a ver' large diamon' in my pistol barrel. Now it is within the interior of this gentleman \*\*\*" He turned to Sanchez: "I sell him to you. One sapphire. Yes?"

Sanchez shook his head with a slight sneer: "We wait—if you want your diamond, mon capitaine."

Quintana hesitated, then made a grimace and shook his head.

"No," he said, "he has swallow. Let him digest. Allons! March!"

But after they had gone on—200 yards, perhaps—Sanchez stopped.

"Well?" inquired Quintana. Then with a sneer: "I now recollect that once you have been a butcher in Madrid. \*\*\* Suit your tas'e, tami Sanchez."

Sard gazed at Sanchez out of sickened eyes.

"You keep away from me until you've washed yourself," he burst out, revolting. "Don't you come near me till you're clean!"

Quintana laughed and seated himself. Sanchez, with a hang-dog glance at him, turned and sneaked back on the trail they had traversed. Before he was out of sight Sard saw him fish out a Spanish knife from his hip pocket and unclasp it.

Sanchez made no effort to find them. They had been gone half an hour before he had finished the business that had turned him back.

As he stood there, examining his clothing, and washing what he could of the ominous stains from sleeve and shoe, very far away to the north he heard a curious noise—a far, faint sound such as he never before had heard.

If it were a voice of any sort there was nothing human about it. \* \* \*

Probably some sort of unknown bird. \* \* \* Perhaps a bird of prey. \* \* \* That was natural, considering the attraction that Georgiades would have for such creatures. \* \* \*

If it were a bird it must be a large one, he thought. \* \* \* Because there was a certain volume to the cry. \* \* \* Perhaps it was a beast, after all. \* \* \* Some unknown beast of the forest. \* \* \*

Sanchez was suddenly afraid. Scarcely knowing what he was doing he began to run along the edge of the bog.

He was tired, or thought he was, but the alarming sounds were filling his ears now; the entire forest seemed full of them, echoing in all directions, coming in upon him from everywhere, so that he knew not in which direction to run.

The next instant he fell headlong over a ledge, struck water, felt himself whirled around in the icy, rushing current, rolled over, tumbled through rapids, blinded, deafened, choked, swept helplessly in a vast green wall of water toward something that thundered in his brain an instant, then dashed it into roaring chaos.

Half a mile down the turbulent outlet of Star Pond—where a great sheet of green water pours thirty feet into the tossing foam below—and spinning, dipping, diving, bobbing up like a lost log after the drive, the body of Señor Sanchez danced all alone in the wilderness, spilling from soggy pockets diamonds, sapphires, rubies, emeralds, into crystal caves where only the shadows of slim trout stirred.

Very far away to the eastward Quintana stood listening, clutching Sard by one sleeve to silence him.

Presently he said: "My fren', somebody is hunting with houn's in this for'e".

"Don't leave me!" gasped the terrified diamond broker. "I don't know where to go!"

Quintana faced him abruptly—with a terrifying smile and glimmer of

white teeth—and shoved a pistol into the fold of fat beneath Sard's double chin:

"You hear those dogs? Yes? Ver' well; I also. Run, now. I say to you run ver' damn quick. He! Houp! Allez vous en! Beat eet!"

He struck Sard a stinging blow

on the fleshly ear with the pistol barrel, and Sard gave a muffled shriek which was more like the squeak of a frightened animal.

"My God Quintana—" he sobbed.

Then Quintana's eyes blazed murder; and Sard turned and ran lumbering through the thicker like a stampeded ox, crashing on amid withered brack, white birch scrub and briar, not knowing whither he was headed, crazed with terror.

Sard could not run very far. He could scarcely stand when he pulled up and clung to the trunk of a tree.

More dead than alive he embraced the tree, gulping horribly for air, every fat-incrusted organ laboring, his senses swimming.

And now, directly ahead, he saw clear gray sky low through the trees. The wood's edge!

He began to run.

As he emerged from the edge of the woods, waist-deep in brush and weeds, wide before his blood-shot eyes spread Star Pond.

Even in his half-stupified brain there was memory enough left for recognition.

He remembered the lake. His gaze traveled to the westward; and he saw Clinch's Dump standing below, stark, silent, the doors swinging open in the wind.

And after a long while he ventured nearer, slinking through brush and frosted weed, creeping behind boulders, edging always closer and closer to that silent house where nothing moved except the wind-blown door.

And now, at last, he set a furtive foot upon the threshold, tip-toed in, peered here and there, sidled to the dining room, peered in.

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