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I woke up in the red-gold glow of embers to the fine strong smell of horse in my nostrils and the jingling sounds of bridles, the squeak of saddles in my ear, and a low voice from the gloom above speaking Spanish. “Pequeño, see what treasure this one can provide us.”

There were the gasping sounds of a rider dismounting, bootspurs jangling near my ear. My gunnysack was pulled roughly from under my head.

I rolled over trying to see through the gloom who my rude visitors were, and my cap came off, loosing my hair wild in all directions. I should have let Pola cut it when she nagged me about looking like a girl.

The man named Pequeño said in Spanish, a language I can speak on account of Pola, “Nothing, Jefe. Nothing but the sack here with some poor tools and books and papers.” The fellow called Pequeño kicked at my side and I sat up, rubbing my eyes, my cap askew and my hair flying every which way. “But a big knife, too big for any lone traveler.” Pequeño snatched my Bowie right out of my grip.

“Aaagh,” he said. “the *güero* here looks like a child. No treasure here. Not even a burro. We should have Jack slice his gringo throat with this nice big sharp knife. Too big for the little one here.” The giant fellow picked me up by the back of my neck and flung my whole body across the glowing embers of my campfire. Another fellow grabbed me and

threw me back. I was like a ball tossed between athletes, my feet dragging sparks.

“Hey,” I hollered. In actual fact, I could feel warm pee stimulated by anxious concern somehow appearing in the front of my pants. But for the first time in many months I felt real vigorous ire. These fellows were picking on me for no reason at all. They had attacked a harmless young fellow in the dead of night. This was not sporting behavior. This was in actual fact irritating, burdensomely irritating in the extreme, as my papa would say.

Staggering, I managed to fling my body to the side, out of the clutches of the throwers. I landed next to a piece of dead wood. I could feel that the wood was the size and shape of one of Papa’s canes, the supports he uses to get around on. Without thinking very hard about whether I should surrender or defend myself from these fellows, I grabbed up the canewood like a sword and swung it in the near-darkness. I felt it strike something, heard a yelp, heard someone laugh, and then felt a blow on the side of my head. I fell to the ground with my ear burning where I had been struck.

From the figure on a horse above my view, the low voice said again in Spanish to my attackers, “He defends himself well. This little one has courage. Leave him be.” And in American he said to me, “Where you go, *güero*?” His words were not in an American sound, and “*güero*,” which he said like “gware-o,” is a Mexican way of saying I had yellow hair. The throwing back-and-forth had stopped when I struck out in defense. I stood there in the gloom, my bare feet on stickery twigs, somebody’s huge-big hand again gripping the back of my neck, holding me in place.

“I am going to seek my fortune at the diggings,” I said in my best Spanish language, trying to be polite, and ashamed of the wet front of my pants that these people probably would not notice in the dim light. I wondered who it was I

had hit with my stick, but I decided not to apologize. Now there was laughter all around me. The laughter sounded surprised and almost friendly.

Maybe they appreciated my courtesy in using a refined form of their language. This was a good-size group of riders, maybe five or six, not only the two or three who had spoken.

The low voice continued, this time in polite Spanish, “Where is your traveling money, young sir? We need for you to donate it to our ministry.” More laughter.

My voice was shaking, probably from my exertion, but I managed to say, “I got a hunk of goat cheese left you can have.” In actual fact I did not have much left and had hoped to save it for my breakfast. I thought maybe I could reason with these rude fellows.

Pequeño said, “Let us have Jack shoot him, Jefe, and be done with it.” He was asking permission of the chief—you say the word *chief* in Spanish as *heffay*—to have me killed.

My blood turned cold when I heard this Pequeño fellow talk about having me shot. He meant shot dead. If I had not already emptied by bladder, I would have wet my fine new jeans once again. But I spoke right up, the way my papa would do, “You shoot me and down in the settlement it is an actual fact that they are sure to hear the shot.” My lips were practically sticking together, but I stretched the truth a little, since it was the Fourth of July, the American birthday holiday, and people had been exploding and shooting stuff all day and all night.

But I went on. “I am only just over the hill from Hangtown. There is a whole platoon of cavalry down there and they do not like rough-house, and they are sure to hear you and race on up here to see what is going on.” I could hear my heart beating, *ka-bon, ka-bon, ka-bon*.

Another voice said, “It will be daylight soon and we have to find a place in the trees. If they know we are in the area,

they will be looking for us.” Then it was almost as if Pequeño had read my mind.

He said, “The idiots down in the town have been shooting off their pistols, celebrating all day and all night. Nobody will hear a shot up here.”

I tried to struggle away from Pequeño’s grip and I shouted in my most-polite Spanish words, “Leave me alone or you will be sorry. My papa was a Corporal of Dragoons and he will be along with his pistols and his six big dogs and all his cavalry friends soon. He is bringing me breakfast, and we are all going to the diggings together.” I was breathing heavily.

The low, unhurried voice continued in Spanish. “Where did you learn to speak the language of civilized persons?”

“My papa can talk all kinds of languages and my papa’s wife is Mexican.” I suddenly was happy that Pola nagged me so much and made me say good Spanish words over and over so I didn’t sound like a *peon*.

“You can read the English?”

“I have completed the fifth-year book in arithmetic and I can read German and Shakespeare, too.” This was all a slight exaggeration, but I thought I’d better lay it on pretty thick.

A snarly-sounding voice said, “We should shoot him, Jefe. We don’t need him. I can speak enough of that *gringo lingo* to keep us informed.”

“I must disagree, Jack. We can use this one. Tie him up, Pequeño, and throw him behind your saddle. If he does not behave, Jack can shoot him later.”

“What to do with his materials?”

“Bring along the cheese and beans and the blankets and the big knife. We must go now.”

“I need that fine knife. Give it to me, Pequeño,” said the snarly-sounding Jack.

“What about my tools and my books?” I yelled, trying to place my capstring under my chin so my fine cap made of blue-jean fabric wouldn’t fall off. Pola would be unhappy for me to lose the cap she had sewed me, for it had a visor to block the direct rays of the sun from my face, and it looked new. And Papa would be more than unhappy to have me lose his tools.

“Well, bring his sack along, too” This from the chief.

And so one of the men, a fellow whose breath smelled strongly of likrish, tied my hands and ankles with itchy rope and two men up-ended me and threw me over the back of the horse. My cap stayed on because of the cinched-up capstring, but my water bottle and Mutti’s big Cooper book slipped to the ground with a clank and a thud. Nobody bothered to pick them up.

In the growing dawn I saw that my captors were in actual fact five or six horsemen, and there were pack animals, one of which got to carry my sack, now stuffed with my blankets and slicker and tied on with a hunk of rope. The men said nothing and we moved uphill toward the pine forest with only a few clinks and squeaks of tack, snorts of horse, hoof sounds, and my gasps and groans.

I was gasping and groaning because of my uncomfortable face-down position behind Pequeño’s cante. My head and arms hung over one side of the horse, knees and feet dangling down on the other, lungs and chitlins practically collapsed from the jouncing. But the horse must have been maybe sixteen hands or more, huge, and its rump was broad so I wasn’t likely to fall off. It seemed to me that if I could stay alive I would have something interesting to tell my papa about my trip after all.

As dawn began to break I could see Pequeño’s backside out of the corner of my eye. He was not in actual fact *pequeño* at all, which means “tiny” in Spanish. He was maybe

twice Papa's size. And I caught a glimpse of the low-voiced fellow Pequeño called "chief." He was not wearing a sombrero, but had a flat, broad-brim black hat, the hatstring under his chin. His face was pale. He had unfashionably long black hair tied in back with a rawhide lace, but mustaches that did sag down in high style on each side of his mouth. He was wearing a long black cloth wrapped several times around his neck, lacy-looking, like Mutti's veil. He looked a lot like the posters on the buildings down in Hangtown. He looked a whole lot like newspaper pictures I had in my sack of the famous murderer, ear-cutter, and bandit leader Joaquin Mu-rieta.