

SENORITA LUISA'S CHOICE

ON the road in front of the big house, which occupied one corner of the Hacienda la Victoria, surged a crowd of Mexican laborers.

The dust sifted in tiny puffs from the impact of sandaled feet; the sunlight scintillated on shirts of white, on sashes of red, and on towering sombreros of yellow or drab; while ever louder and louder arose the hum of excited voices.

In the doorway of the big house, stood the Senorita Luisa. Bedecked in holiday attire was she; store shoes, pink shawl, and bright calico gown, hanging loosely so that it served but to betray to all observers her lithe form. Bare headed, dark haired, a gilt chain outlined against her olive-tinted throat, motionless she poised, the very picture of mischievous wantonness.

Within the big house, sprawled the administrator of the hacienda, John Sebastian, peacefully dozing upon a canvas cot. From the red face and tousled hair, which thrust themselves above his sleeveless undershirt, to the bare feet which protruded below his crumpled duck trousers, unkempt, ungainly he appeared; yet, as the Senorita gazed on his unconscious form, into her black eyes there stole a look of infinite yearning.

JOHN Sebastian stirred in his sleep, and, startled, the Senorita vanished into the throng. Blinking, yawning, he raised his body, swung his legs, and sat upon the edge of the couch. Still nodding, he rolled and lighted a slender cigarette, and, with evident relief, he filled his lungs with its pungent smoke. Now thoroughly awake the sound of the uproar without reached his ears. Puzzled, he arose and sauntered to the door.

Thence he beheld his head capitan, riding recklessly here and there in vain attempt to force the assemblage to line up beneath the banana trees that flanked the roadway. The eyes of the two met and the capitan at once forced his steed to the doorway. Dismounting, he halted with uncovered head.

"What the devil, Juan?" inquired Sebastian. His voice gave no sign of feeling other than curiosity.

"A horse-race, senor," replied the capitan, stoically. "It is this way. Pablo Martinez and Manuel Salinas, they both love the Senorita Luisa. She say she not know who she love best, so she say they have good horses, they run race, she marry man who win. They down there by bridge now, all ready. When I give signal, they start."

"And who're the rest of this unholy outfit? Seems to me you've got 'em all here, from ace to two spot."

"They friends Pablo and Manuel. They come to see fun and make much bets."

"To see the fun, eh?" There was a trace of sarcasm in Sebastian's tone. "Well, clear the track and let 'er roll. I'm not going to have this mob howling around here all day. Sabe?"

Abruptly turning, he stepped inside for a moment, paused and wrinkled his forehead.

"Come to see the fun, have they?" he mumbled. "Every man-jack of 'em with a knife hidden in his sash and a quart of sun-rotted mescal sloshing around under it. Half of 'em packing machetes as long as the blade of a scythe. Some one's bound to cheat. Then if the devil doesn't break loose, I'm a Chinaman."

SOON he again was lounging in full view, but now, within easy reach, a Winchester shot-gun leaned against the wall, and above the band of his trousers appeared the handle of a revolver; yet, notwithstanding these warlike preparations, his ruddy face was calm and peaceful.

At the moment of his reappearance, a yell announced that the race had begun. From the first jump, madly galloped each steed; mercilessly each rider plied the quirt; and wildly yelled the frenzied crowd. But Sebastian, apparently oblivious of the dangerous contest, turned his twinkling blue-gray

By Elbridge H. Sabin

Pablo; with muttered oaths, he swung his deadly weapon; with vile threats, he dared the Administrator to approach.

Sebastian knew not fear; else, long ere this, the ranch had required another master. Like a snake entrancing its victim bird, his eyes he fixed on those of Pablo. Then, forward he moved, step by step—not slowly enough to indicate nervousness—not fast enough to reach his antagonist before the latter could experience a change of heart.

Little by little, the look of anger vanished from Pablo's face. Instead, came a queer, puzzled expression. His ignorant mind was struggling with new ideas. Who was this strange white man with the blue-gray eyes, who, without the use of arms, walked calmly against a naked blade? What mysterious power could

he possess? So Pablo, grappling with what he could not understand, lost his lust for blood. His right arm dropped to his side; his machete hung with its point on the ground.

AT this instant Sebastian took one long stride. Now he was within striking distance. Backed by the entire weight of his massive frame, his horny right fist shot forth, straight from the shoulder. Squarely between Pablo's eyes the blow landed. Its force lifted him from the ground. Sailing through the air, the small of his back hit against the upper strand of a barbed wire fence, over which he turned a complete somersault, and in the yard in front of the big house, flat on his face he fell. There he lay motionless.

At this evidence of the American's prowess, the mob was awed. Those in front, backed from him in alarm; those in the rear began hastily to depart. This was the psychological moment. "Clear out, every man of you," he shouted.

"Juan, if any of 'em act ugly, get me their names. I'll have the Presidente throw 'em in jail!"

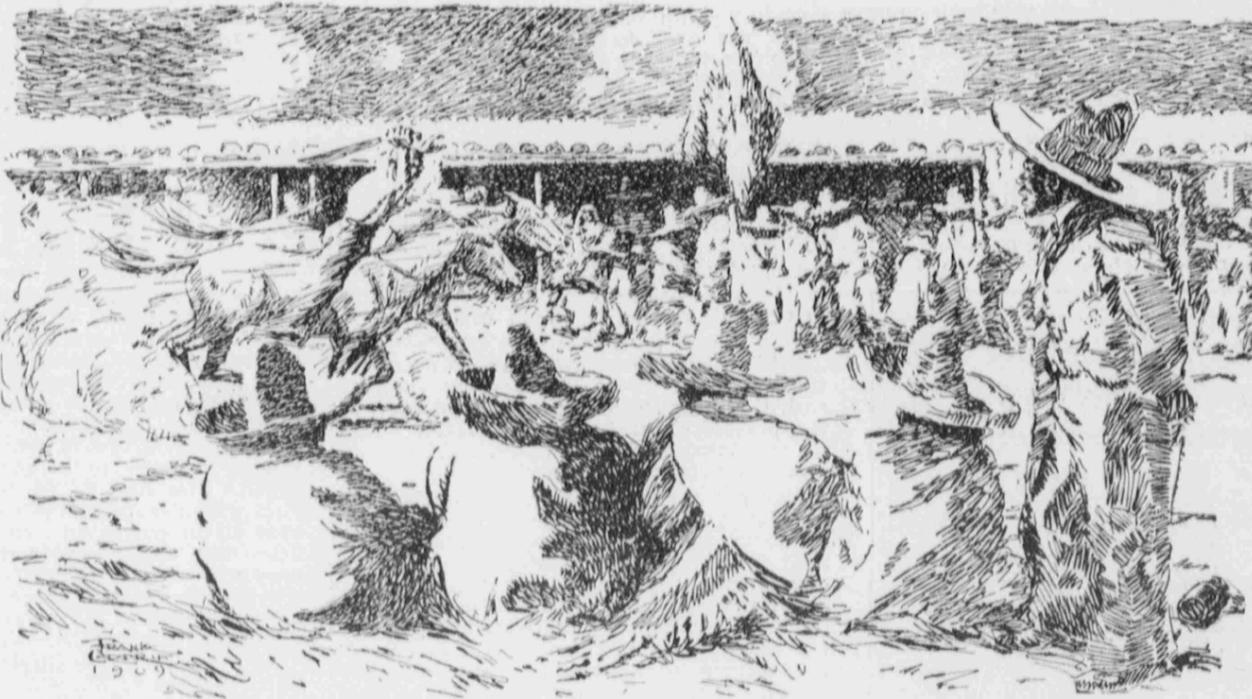
So speaking he stalked deliberately towards the door. With a cry of exultation, the Senorita Luisa sprang before him. Brushing her aside, he disappeared without one backward glance.

A half hour later, to him, idly scanning a week-old paper from the states, came Juan, the capitan, fighting timidly.

"What is it, Juan?" he inquired, kindly. A potent toddy slowly was penetrating the innermost recesses of his system. Already it had effaced the combat entirely from his mind. "Pablo, Senor. He dead."

"There's ten thousand devils in him yet," roared Sebastian, quickly remembering. "Watch me raise the dead."

Grabbing a water bottle, he leaped into the yard and



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eyes towards the Senorita Luisa, who had slipped quietly to his side. Alone, unnoticed, stood these two, their garments touching, and for an instant of unalloyed bliss the Senorita timidly placed one little hand upon his brawny shoulder.

The course was one hundred and fifty yards; the crisis would come quickly. At one hundred yards, neck and neck the horses sped. Then the bay of Pablo, with one desperate effort, drew ahead.

Thereafter, wearied by the strain, he lagged, though for a second only. This distance, once lost, he seemed unable to regain. Manuel, with his roan, would win, and his friends, redoubling their shouts, began to toss their sombreros in the air.

WAIT a moment. Pablo had one chance left. Quick as a flash, with a single motion, he drew his razor-edged machete, and, with a wide swing, brought it down upon Manuel's mount. Blinded by passion, he did not judge the distance correctly. Thus his blade slashed the animal on the far side. Jumping inward, its feet became entangled with those of his own beast. With a crash, horses and riders rolled in a tangled, dust-beclouded heap.

From Manuel's friends went up a howl of rage; from Pablo's, a cry of defiance. Only two persons apparently remained unmoved. John Sebastian and the Senorita Luisa. Impelled by some hidden motive, again he looked at her, and found her big eyes glowing brightly. Was this through love for him, or through pride that two suitors soon might shed their blood in madness for her favor?

Slowly the dust settled; and, half stunned by their tumble, slowly emerged Pablo and Manuel, each brandishing his machete. An instant they faced each other, while the crowd, at prospect of a duel, grew strangely silent. Then, with bitter curses, each advanced. Up to this point, not once had Sebastian's face exhibited interest in the action of these peons. Now his time had come. With a leap like that of a panther, between the two he landed; but the shot-gun remained leaning against the wall, nor did his hand seek the gun, still hanging from the waist band of his trousers.

"Drop those machetes," he commanded. His voice was low but vibrant. Like one aroused from a dream, Manuel hesitated; and obeyed. Not so



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