## An Afternoon Miracle

O. Henry

At the United States end of an international river bridge, four armed rangers sweltered in a little ‘dobe hut, keeping a fairly faithful espionage upon the lagging trail of passengers from the Mexican side.

Bud Dawson, proprietor of the Top Notch Saloon, had, on the evening previous, violently ejected from his premises one Leandro Garcia, for alleged violation of the Top Notch code of behaviour. Garcia had mentioned twenty-four hours as a limit, by which time he would call and collect a painful indemnity for personal satisfaction.

This Mexican, although a tremendous braggart, was thoroughly courageous, and each side of the river respected him for one of these attributes. He and a following of similar bravoes were addicted to the pastime of retrieving towns from stagnation.

The day designated by Garcia for retribution was to be further signalised on the American side by a cattlemen’s convention, a bull fight, and an old settlers’ barbecue and picnic. Knowing the avenger to be a man of his word, and believing it prudent to court peace while three such gently social relaxations were in progress, Captain McNulty, of the ranger company stationed there, detailed his lieutenant and three men for duty at the end of the bridge. Their instructions were to prevent the invasion of Garcia, either alone or attended by his gang.

Travel was slight that sultry afternoon, and the rangers swore gently, and mopped their brows in their convenient but close quarters. For an hour no one had crossed save an old woman enveloped in a brown wrapper and a black mantilla, driving before her a burro loaded with kindling wood tied in small bundles for peddling. Then three shots were fired down the street, the sound coming clear and snappy through the still air.

The four rangers quickened from sprawling, symbolic figures of indolence to alert life, but only one rose to his feet. Three turned their eyes beseechingly but hopelessly upon the fourth, who had gotten nimbly up and was buckling his cartridge-belt around him. The three knew that Lieutenant Bob Buckley, in command, would allow no man of them the privilege of investigating a row when he himself might go.

The agile, broad-chested lieutenant, without a change of expression in his smooth, yellow-brown, melancholy face, shot the belt strap through the guard of the buckle, hefted his sixes in their holsters as a belle gives the finishing touches to her toilette, caught up his Winchester, and dived for the door. There he paused long enough to caution his comrades to maintain their watch upon the bridge, and then plunged into the broiling highway.

The three relapsed into resigned inertia and plaintive comment.

“I’ve heard of fellows,” grumbled Broncho Leathers, “what was wedded to danger, but if Bob Buckley ain’t committed bigamy with trouble, I’m a son of a gun.”

“Peculiarness of Bob is,” inserted the Nueces Kid, “he ain’t had proper trainin’. He never learned how to git skeered. Now, a man ought to be skeered enough when he tackles a fuss to hanker after readin’ his name on the list of survivors, anyway.”

“Buckley,” commented Ranger No. 3, who was a misguided Eastern man, burdened with an education, “scraps in such a solemn manner that I have been led to doubt its spontaneity. I’m not quite onto his system, but he fights, like Tybalt, by the book of arithmetic.”

“I never heard,” mentioned Broncho, “about any of Dibble’s ways of mixin’ scrappin’ and cipherin’.”

“Triggernometry?” suggested the Nueces infant.

“That’s rather better than I hoped from you,” nodded the Easterner, approvingly. “The other meaning is that Buckley never goes into a fight without giving away weight. He seems to dread taking the slightest advantage. That’s quite close to foolhardiness when you are dealing with horse-thieves and fence-cutters who would ambush you any night, and shoot you in the back if they could. Buckley’s too full of sand. He’ll play Horatius and hold the bridge once too often some day.”

“I’m on there,” drawled the Kid; “I mind that bridge gang in the reader. Me, I go instructed for the other chap—Spurious Somebody—the one that fought and pulled his freight, to fight ‘em on some other day.”

“Anyway,” summed up Broncho, “Bob’s about the gamest man I ever see along the Rio Bravo. Great Sam Houston! If she gets any hotter she’ll sizzle!” Broncho whacked at a scorpion with his four-pound Stetson felt, and the three watchers relapsed into comfortless silence.

How well Bob Buckley had kept his secret, since these men, for two years his side comrades in countless border raids and dangers, thus spake of him, not knowing that he was the most arrant physical coward in all that Rio Bravo country! Neither his friends nor his enemies had suspected him of aught else than the finest courage. It was purely a physical cowardice, and only by an extreme, grim effort of will had he forced his craven body to do the bravest deeds. Scourging himself always, as a monk whips his besetting sin, Buckley threw himself with apparent recklessness into every danger, with the hope of some day ridding himself of the despised affliction. But each successive test brought no relief, and the ranger’s face, by nature adapted to cheerfulness and good-humour, became set to the guise of gloomy melancholy. Thus, while the frontier admired his deeds, and his prowess was celebrated in print and by word of mouth in many campfires in the valley of the Bravo, his heart was sick within him. Only himself knew of the horrible tightening of the chest, the dry mouth, the weakening of the spine, the agony of the strung nerves—the never-failing symptoms of his shameful malady.

One mere boy in his company was wont to enter a fray with a leg perched flippantly about the horn of his saddle, a cigarette hanging from his lips, which emitted smoke and original slogans of clever invention. Buckley would have given a year’s pay to attain that devil-may-care method. Once the debonair youth said to him: “Buck, you go into a scrap like it was a funeral. Not,” he added, with a complimentary wave of his tin cup, “but what it generally is.”

Buckley’s conscience was of the New England order with Western adjustments, and he continued to get his rebellious body into as many difficulties as possible; wherefore, on that sultry afternoon he chose to drive his own protesting limbs to investigation of that sudden alarm that had startled the peace and dignity of the State.

Two squares down the street stood the Top Notch Saloon. Here Buckley came upon signs of recent upheaval. A few curious spectators pressed about its front entrance, grinding beneath their heels the fragments of a plate-glass window. Inside, Buckley found Bud Dawson utterly ignoring a bullet wound in his shoulder, while he feelingly wept at having to explain why he failed to drop the “blamed masquerooter,” who shot him. At the entrance of the ranger Bud turned appealingly to him for confirmation of the devastation he might have dealt.

“You know, Buck, I’d ‘a’ plum got him, first rattle, if I’d thought a minute. Come in a-masque-rootin’, playin’ female till he got the drop, and turned loose. I never reached for a gun, thinkin’ it was sure Chihuahua Betty, or Mrs. Atwater, or anyhow one of the Mayfield girls comin’ a-gunnin’, which they might, liable as not. I never thought of that blamed Garcia until—”

“Garcia!” snapped Buckley. “How did he get over here?”

Bud’s bartender took the ranger by the arm and led him to the side door. There stood a patient grey burro cropping the grass along the gutter, with a load of kindling wood tied across its back. On the ground lay a black shawl and a voluminous brown dress.

“Masquerootin’ in them things,” called Bud, still resisting attempted ministrations to his wounds. “Thought he was a lady till he gave a yell and winged me.”

“He went down this side street,” said the bartender. “He was alone, and he’ll hide out till night when his gang comes over. You ought to find him in that Mexican lay-out below the depot. He’s got a girl down there—Pancha Sales.”

“How was he armed?” asked Buckley.

“Two pearl-handled sixes, and a knife.”

“Keep this for me, Billy,” said the ranger, handing over his Winchester. Quixotic, perhaps, but it was Bob Buckley’s way. Another man—and a braver one—might have raised a posse to accompany him. It was Buckley’s rule to discard all preliminary advantage.

The Mexican had left behind him a wake of closed doors and an empty street, but now people were beginning to emerge from their places of refuge with assumed unconsciousness of anything having happened. Many citizens who knew the ranger pointed out to him with alacrity the course of Garcia’s retreat.

As Buckley swung along upon the trail he felt the beginning of the suffocating constriction about his throat, the cold sweat under the brim of his hat, the old, shameful, dreaded sinking of his heart as it went down, down, down in his bosom.

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The morning train of the Mexican Central had that day been three hours late, thus failing to connect with the I. & G.N. on the other side of the river. Passengers for Los Estados Unidos grumblingly sought entertainment in the little swaggering mongrel town of two nations, for, until the morrow, no other train would come to rescue them. Grumblingly, because two days later would begin the great fair and races in San Antone. Consider that at that time San Antone was the hub of the wheel of Fortune, and the names of its spokes were Cattle, Wool, Faro, Running Horses, and Ozone. In those times cattlemen played at crack-loo on the sidewalks with double-eagles, and gentlemen backed their conception of the fortuitous card with stacks limited in height only by the interference of gravity. Wherefore, thither journeyed the sowers and the reapers—they who stampeded the dollars, and they who rounded them up. Especially did the caterers to the amusement of the people haste to San Antone. Two greatest shows on earth were already there, and dozens of smallest ones were on the way.

On a side track near the mean little ‘dobe depot stood a private car, left there by the Mexican train that morning and doomed by an ineffectual schedule to ignobly await, amid squalid surroundings, connection with the next day’s regular.

The car had been once a common day-coach, but those who had sat in it and gringed to the conductor’s hat-band slips would never have recognised it in its transformation. Paint and gilding and certain domestic touches had liberated it from any suspicion of public servitude. The whitest of lace curtains judiciously screened its windows. From its fore end drooped in the torrid air the flag of Mexico. From its rear projected the Stars and Stripes and a busy stovepipe, the latter reinforcing in its suggestion of culinary comforts the general suggestion of privacy and ease. The beholder’s eye, regarding its gorgeous sides, found interest to culminate in a single name in gold and blue letters extending almost its entire length—a single name, the audacious privilege of royalty and genius. Doubly, then, was this arrogant nomenclature here justified; for the name was that of “Alvarita, Queen of the Serpent Tribe.” This, her car, was back from a triumphant tour of the principal Mexican cities, and now headed for San Antonio, where, according to promissory advertisement, she would exhibit her “Marvellous Dominion and Fearless Control over Deadly and Venomous Serpents, Handling them with Ease as they Coil and Hiss to the Terror of Thousands of Tongue-tied Tremblers!”

One hundred in the shade kept the vicinity somewhat depeopled. This quarter of the town was a ragged edge; its denizens the bubbling froth of five nations; its architecture tent, jacal, and ‘dobe; its distractions the hurdy-gurdy and the informal contribution to the sudden stranger’s store of experience. Beyond this dishonourable fringe upon the old town’s jowl rose a dense mass of trees, surmounting and filling a little hollow. Through this bickered a small stream that perished down the sheer and disconcerting side of the great canon of the Rio Bravo del Norte.

In this sordid spot was condemned to remain for certain hours the impotent transport of the Queen of the Serpent Tribe.

The front door of the car was open. Its forward end was curtained off into a small reception-room. Here the admiring and propitiatory reporters were wont to sit and transpose the music of Senorita Alvarita’s talk into the more florid key of the press. A picture of Abraham Lincoln hung against a wall; one of a cluster of school-girls grouped upon stone steps was in another place; a third was Easter lilies in a blood-red frame. A neat carpet was under foot. A pitcher, sweating cold drops, and a glass stood on a fragile stand. In a willow rocker, reading a newspaper, sat Alvarita.

Spanish, you would say; Andalusian, or, better still, Basque; that compound, like the diamond, of darkness and fire. Hair, the shade of purple grapes viewed at midnight. Eyes, long, dusky, and disquieting with their untroubled directness of gaze. Face, haughty and bold, touched with a pretty insolence that gave it life. To hasten conviction of her charm, but glance at the stacks of handbills in the corner, green, and yellow, and white. Upon them you see an incompetent presentment of the senorita in her professional garb and pose. Irresistible, in black lace and yellow ribbons, she faces you; a blue racer is spiralled upon each bare arm; coiled twice about her waist and once about her neck, his horrid head close to hers, you perceive Kuku, the great eleven-foot Asian python.

A hand drew aside the curtain that partitioned the car, and a middle-aged, faded woman holding a knife and a half-peeled potato looked in and said:

“Alviry, are you right busy?”

“I’m reading the home paper, ma. What do you think! that pale, tow-headed Matilda Price got the most votes in the News for the prettiest girl in Gallipo—/lees/.”

“Shush! She wouldn’t of done it if you’d been home, Alviry. Lord knows, I hope we’ll be there before fall’s over. I’m tired gallopin’ round the world playin’ we are dagoes, and givin’ snake shows. But that ain’t what I wanted to say. That there biggest snake’s gone again. I’ve looked all over the car and can’t find him. He must have been gone an hour. I remember hearin’ somethin’ rustlin’ along the floor, but I thought it was you.”

“Oh, blame that old rascal!” exclaimed the Queen, throwing down her paper. “This is the third time he’s got away. George never will fasten down the lid to his box properly. I do believe he’s afraid of Kuku. Now I’ve got to go hunt him.”

“Better hurry; somebody might hurt him.”

The Queen’s teeth showed in a gleaming, contemptuous smile. “No danger. When they see Kuku outside they simply scoot away and buy bromides. There’s a crick over between here and the river. That old scamp’d swap his skin any time for a drink of running water. I guess I’ll find him there, all right.”

A few minutes later Alvarita stopped upon the forward platform, ready for her quest. Her handsome black skirt was shaped to the most recent proclamation of fashion. Her spotless shirt-waist gladdened the eye in that desert of sunshine, a swelling oasis, cool and fresh. A man’s split-straw hat sat firmly on her coiled, abundant hair. Beneath her serene, round, impudent chin a man’s four-in-hand tie was jauntily knotted about a man’s high, stiff collar. A parasol she carried, of white silk, and its fringe was lace, yellowly genuine.

I will grant Gallipolis as to her costume, but firmly to Seville or Valladolid I am held by her eyes; castanets, balconies, mantillas, serenades, ambuscades, escapades—all these their dark depths guaranteed.

“Ain’t you afraid to go out alone, Alviry?” queried the Queen-mother anxiously. “There’s so many rough people about. Mebbe you’d better—”

“I never saw anything I was afraid of yet, ma. ‘Specially people. And men in particular. Don’t you fret. I’ll trot along back as soon as I find that runaway scamp.”

The dust lay thick upon the bare ground near the tracks. Alvarita’s eye soon discovered the serrated trail of the escaped python. It led across the depot grounds and away down a smaller street in the direction of the little canon, as predicted by her. A stillness and lack of excitement in the neighbourhood encouraged the hope that, as yet, the inhabitants were unaware that so formidable a guest traversed their highways. The heat had driven them indoors, whence outdrifted occasional shrill laughs, or the depressing whine of a maltreated concertina. In the shade a few Mexican children, like vivified stolid idols in clay, stared from their play, vision-struck and silent, as Alvarita came and went. Here and there a woman peeped from a door and stood dumb, reduced to silence by the aspect of the white silk parasol.

A hundred yards and the limits of the town were passed, scattered chaparral succeeding, and then a noble grove, overflowing the bijou canon. Through this a small bright stream meandered. Park-like it was, with a kind of cockney ruralness further endorsed by the waste papers and rifled tins of picnickers. Up this stream, and down it, among its pseudo-sylvan glades and depressions, wandered the bright and unruffled Alvarita. Once she saw evidence of the recreant reptile’s progress in his distinctive trail across a spread of fine sand in the arroyo. The living water was bound to lure him; he could not be far away.

So sure was she of his immediate proximity that she perched herself to idle for a time in the curve of a great creeper that looped down from a giant water-elm. To reach this she climbed from the pathway a little distance up the side of a steep and rugged incline. Around her chaparral grew thick and high. A late-blooming ratama tree dispensed from its yellow petals a sweet and persistent odour. Adown the ravine rustled a seductive wind, melancholy with the taste of sodden, fallen leaves.

Alvarita removed her hat, and undoing the oppressive convolutions of her hair, began to slowly arrange it in two long, dusky plaits.

From the obscure depths of a thick clump of evergreen shrubs five feet away, two small jewel-bright eyes were steadfastly regarding her. Coiled there lay Kuku, the great python; Kuku, the magnificent, he of the plated muzzle, the grooved lips, the eleven-foot stretch of elegantly and brilliantly mottled skin. The great python was viewing his mistress without a sound or motion to disclose his presence. Perhaps the splendid truant forefelt his capture, but, screened by the foliage, thought to prolong the delight of his escapade. What pleasure it was, after the hot and dusty car, to lie thus, smelling the running water, and feeling the agreeable roughness of the earth and stones against his body! Soon, very soon the Queen would find him, and he, powerless as a worm in her audacious hands, would be returned to the dark chest in the narrow house that ran on wheels.

Alvarita heard a sudden crunching of the gravel below her. Turning her head she saw a big, swarthy Mexican, with a daring and evil expression, contemplating her with an ominous, dull eye.

“What do you want?” she asked as sharply as five hairpins between her lips would permit, continuing to plait her hair, and looking him over with placid contempt. The Mexican continued to gaze at her, and showed his teeth in a white, jagged smile.

“I no hurt-y you, Senorita,” he said.

“You bet you won’t,” answered the Queen, shaking back one finished, massive plait. “But don’t you think you’d better move on?”

“Not hurt-y you—no. But maybeso take one beso—one li’l kees, you call him.”

The man smiled again, and set his foot to ascend the slope. Alvarita leaned swiftly and picked up a stone the size of a cocoanut.

“Vamoose, quick,” she ordered peremptorily, “you coon!”

The red of insult burned through the Mexican’s dark skin.

“Hidalgo, Yo!” he shot between his fangs. “I am not neg-r-ro! Diabla bonita, for that you shall pay me.”

He made two quick upward steps this time, but the stone, hurled by no weak arm, struck him square in the chest. He staggered back to the footway, swerved half around, and met another sight that drove all thoughts of the girl from his head. She turned her eyes to see what had diverted his interest. A man with red-brown, curling hair and a melancholy, sunburned, smooth-shaven face was coming up the path, twenty yards away. Around the Mexican’s waist was buckled a pistol belt with two empty holsters. He had laid aside his sixes—possibly in the jacal of the fair Pancha—and had forgotten them when the passing of the fairer Alvarita had enticed him to her trail. His hands now flew instinctively to the holsters, but finding the weapons gone, he spread his fingers outward with the eloquent, abjuring, deprecating Latin gesture, and stood like a rock. Seeing his plight, the newcomer unbuckled his own belt containing two revolvers, threw it upon the ground, and continued to advance.

“Splendid!” murmured Alvarita, with flashing eyes.

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As Bob Buckley, according to the mad code of bravery that his sensitive conscience imposed upon his cowardly nerves, abandoned his guns and closed in upon his enemy, the old, inevitable nausea of abject fear wrung him. His breath whistled through his constricted air passages. His feet seemed like lumps of lead. His mouth was dry as dust. His heart, congested with blood, hurt his ribs as it thumped against them. The hot June day turned to moist November. And still he advanced, spurred by a mandatory pride that strained its uttermost against his weakling flesh.

The distance between the two men slowly lessened. The Mexican stood, immovable, waiting. When scarce five yards separated them a little shower of loosened gravel rattled down from above to the ranger’s feet. He glanced upward with instinctive caution. A pair of dark eyes, brilliantly soft, and fierily tender, encountered and held his own. The most fearful heart and the boldest one in all the Rio Bravo country exchanged a silent and inscrutable communication. Alvarita, still seated within her vine, leaned forward above the breast-high chaparral. One hand was laid across her bosom. One great dark braid curved forward over her shoulder. Her lips were parted; her face was lit with what seemed but wonder—great and absolute wonder. Her eyes lingered upon Buckley’s. Let no one ask or presume to tell through what subtle medium the miracle was performed. As by a lightning flash two clouds will accomplish counterpoise and compensation of electric surcharge, so on that eyeglance the man received his complement of manhood, and the maid conceded what enriched her womanly grace by its loss.

The Mexican, suddenly stirring, ventilated his attitude of apathetic waiting by conjuring swiftly from his bootleg a long knife. Buckley cast aside his hat, and laughed once aloud, like a happy schoolboy at a frolic. Then, empty-handed, he sprang nimbly, and Garcia met him without default.

So soon was the engagement ended that disappointment imposed upon the ranger’s warlike ecstasy. Instead of dealing the traditional downward stroke, the Mexican lunged straight with his knife. Buckley took the precarious chance, and caught his wrist, fair and firm. Then he delivered the good Saxon knock-out blow—always so pathetically disastrous to the fistless Latin races—and Garcia was down and out, with his head under a clump of prickly pears. The ranger looked up again to the Queen of the Serpents.

Alvarita scrambled down to the path.

“I’m mighty glad I happened along when I did,” said the ranger.

“He—he frightened me so!” cooed Alvarita.

They did not hear the long, low hiss of the python under the shrubs. Wiliest of the beasts, no doubt he was expressing the humiliation he felt at having so long dwelt in subjection to this trembling and colouring mistress of his whom he had deemed so strong and potent and fearsome.

Then came galloping to the spot the civic authorities; and to them the ranger awarded the prostrate disturber of the peace, whom they bore away limply across the saddle of one of their mounts. But Buckley and Alvarita lingered.

Slowly, slowly they walked. The ranger regained his belt of weapons. With a fine timidity she begged the indulgence of fingering the great .45’s, with little “Ohs” and “Ahs” of new-born, delicious shyness.

The canoncito was growing dusky. Beyond its terminus in the river bluff they could see the outer world yet suffused with the waning glory of sunset.

A scream—a piercing scream of fright from Alvarita. Back she cowered, and the ready, protecting arm of Buckley formed her refuge. What terror so dire as to thus beset the close of the reign of the never-before-daunted Queen?

Across the path there crawled a caterpillar—a horrid, fuzzy, two-inch caterpillar! Truly, Kuku, thou went avenged. Thus abdicated the Queen of the Serpent Tribe—/viva la reina/!