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About sixty years ago, in the troublous days of the frontier, Vincent Boone, a gallant and adventurous young Kentucky visitor to Texas, spent a day hunting among the hills to the northwest of San Antonio. After trampling many miles through dense thickets of mesquite, he found himself on his return standing amid the grove of giant pecan trees at San Pedro Springs. He was so fagged out that, had the summer night promised dryness, he would have lain down beneath one of the trees and slept till morning, rather than trudge on through the deepening dusk to town. But the evening storm threatened a severe storm; besides, he was extremely hungry.

At a little distance he saw the blessed gleam of a light in the unshuttered window of the small stone chapel which still stands in San Pedro Park, sharing in antique interest with the missions and other relics of old San Antonio. The spot was one of dreary loneliness, and Boone marveled much as to who might be the occupants of this chapel, which had long since been abandoned as a place of worship. However, it was not a moment to stand on ceremony, for darkness as well as the rain began to fall.

Hastily approaching the door he knocked, with the assurance of one determined to gain admittance. His knock was answered by a short, burly, dark-faced man about fifty years of age, evidently a Mexican, who merely frowned as he looked upon the stranger. Without waiting for a welcome, Boone, with his gun over one shoulder and a gunny sack full of small game over the other, pushed his way into the apartment - part kitchen, part dining-room, part bedroom - and wholly unattractive. An old stained table stood in the center of the dirt-covered floor, upon which was a lighted candle. This, with two rickety rawhide chairs, a washstand holding a chipped basin and a crippled ladle, comprised all the furniture in the room. A small portion of the room was partitioned off with a canvas curtain behind which was, presumably, the bed.

In order to soften the forbidding aspect of his low-browed host, the American thought of his money, which, like most travelers in that primitive era, he carried about his person. Making a hurried effort to extract a couple of dollars from his pocket for the Mexican, he felt uncomfortable lest he might have inadvertently allowed a roll of bank notes to be seen. However, brushing aside this feeling, he tendered the two silver dollars and said courteously:

"Parson me, señor, for this intrusion. I have been late into the country hunting and was overtaken by the storm. If you will give me a bite to eat and a place to rest until the rain ceases,

I will then try to make my way into town. Here are two dollars which I gladly give you for your trouble." To his surprise, the Mexican answered in good English:

"Put back your money, señor American, the pleasure of entertaining you shall be mine. The roads will be too muddy even if this heavy rain stops soon and I shall be glad to have you remain here all night if you choose."

As the man spoke his evil eyes sparkled and his whole repellant visage shone with a smile which, though intended to be conciliatory, produced the opposite effect on his guest. The young man was naturally of a courageous temperament but his suspicions as to the sinister intentions of his host were aroused. He was about to make polite excuse and depart, despite the savage weather, when he was checked by a pause of astonishment.

In the shaded corner of the room the curtain was pushed gently aside and there emerged a young lady of most charming aspect. "My stars! This is something better than a two-mile trip through the rain and slosh," thought the American.

"My little daughter, Lolita, señor, who keeps house for me. My name is Pedro Lara, and yours?"

"Vincent Boone," smiled the guest as he sunk into one of the chairs, drinking in the features of this frontier beauty.

Lolita Lara was indeed prettier than any girl had a right to be, for she had a petite, graceful figure, a complexion that was a mixture of the lily and carnation, rich auburn hair, black eyebrows, and long, sweeping black eyelashes that veiled the most glorious black eyes in the world - a high-bred Castilian type. Her face was a perfect oval and there was a dimple under the full underlip, which a Spanish poet would have called the grace of hearts. Nothing in her manner or appearance seemed to confirm her reputed relationship to the ragged, uncouth Lara.

Boone was aroused from his momentary trance of pleasure by his host's imploring voice, entreating anew that he might accept of their hospitality until daybreak.

"It is an awful night, señor, and it would not be good for your health or safety to continue on to town over the bad roads. You, perhaps, are wondering how I can lodge you. Come to the door and I will show you a plain but rainproof room, where you may sleep all alone without intrusion until morning."

The stranger stepped to the door. Through the intermittent flashes of lightning Lara pointed to a little thatched hut some fifty yards from the chapel, situated on a rise, near the point where present San Pedro Avenue begins its elevated course along the western verge of Laurel Heights.

"The room has a neat little bed," pursued Lara, "which I keep clean for any struggling friend or refugee from old Mexico, some of whom find their way here at odd times since Texas threw off the Mexican yoke. You are more than welcome to pass the night there if you will."

"Oh, you must indeed, señor," chimed in the pretty Lolita, in soft, caressing, almost supplicant tones that lightened the veil of suspicion about the heart of the American. He felt his prejudices melting away. Certainly treachery and falsehood could never be so masked by such charming, cordial simplicity of bearing. Her entreaty was enough. Young and always susceptible to the snare of beauty, no matter where found, he threw caution to the winds and accepted their invitation. Inwardly resolving, however, to take his gun to the hut, as well as a small English bulldog pistol which he carried in his inner coat pocket.

Lara, of course, knew nothing of the pistol, but the shotgun seemed to interest him.

"Is it loaded, señor?" he asked.

"Yes. I reloaded after shooting my last plover. By the way, you may have all the birds in my sack there. I hunt more for the sport of the thing than anything else."

"Many thanks, señor, we are poor people and will appreciate the gift very much," graciously responded the girl, who now busied herself placing before the stranger what their larder could afford. Not much - some cold coffee, rice, tortillas and tamales - but the young man was hungry and devoured the food greedily. After the repast the girl, at the request of her father, sang a little Spanish love song for the diversion of their guest, who thanked her with undisguised admiration for her lovely voice and asked if she knew any English songs.

"Two or three," she replied softly, "I learned them from an American friend."

"Won't you kindly favor me with one, just one, señorita?"

She smiled sweetly, blushed at his complimentary tone and broke forth into the following coquettish ditty:

*Ah, love's a bird too sly to take,  
Cease, then, the fool endeavour;  
As subtle as the wily snake;  
Today as false as ever.*

*Hark to her song: "Come take me, friend!"  
His whims will pursue it,  
Hot in the chase, shall miss his end,  
And I ever after rue it.*

When the song ceased, Boone thanked them for their hospitality and signalled his willingness to retire.

"Why burden yourself with the gun, señor?" remonstrated Lara. "It will be all right here and you will be as safe in your humble lodging as if you were in your own bed at home."

His guest uttered a commonplace apology but retained the weapon. The girl bade him good night with effusive cordiality and, accompanied by her father, he ran through the rain to the hut. On entering it Lara lit a candle he had brought with him. The place was bare, it is true, but cleanly, containing two chairs and a cot bed which looked more inviting to the stranger than he had expected, the pillowcase and sheets being white and neat. In one corner of the room stood a large homemade unpainted chest, about five feet high by four broad.

"As you are a hunter, the contents of this box may interest you, señor," said Lara, walking over to the chest and throwing open its one door. "Here is the hide of a buffalo which I killed on the Llano Estacado, here also is the prize of the largest fur ever seen in this section, as well as the horns and hides of several fine specimens of deer which I shot not more than ten miles from this spot."

Boone expressed his pleasure over these sportsmanlike trophies, thanked his host again for his kindness and, taking the candle from his hand, wished him good night.

After the Mexican's retreating footsteps, as he splashed through the rain to his own abode, were no longer audible, Boone, by an instinct of prudence that surprised himself, began a careful survey of his novel sleeping apartment. He was somewhat startled to find that the front

door, the only entrance or exit to the room, possessed no lock, latch, or bar. He set the two chairs against it, one above the other, in such a manner that the door could not be opened without causing clatter sufficient to awaken him.

Though satisfied with this precaution, he paced up and down the small hut for several minutes, unable to shake off a strange restlessness and a presentiment of some approaching event that meant dilemma or danger. But was not this just what he craved? Fear, he knew, was a stranger in his daring, adventurous spirit. Yet his mind constantly reverted to the villainous face of Lara and he determined to take no chances. Finally, without undressing, he lay down on the cot. Outside, the wild voices of the wind and rain shrieked sobs and moans that sounded monotonously dismal. Soon he was fast asleep.

Suddenly he awoke. How long he slept he could form no idea. The rain was over and the silence about him profound, yet he suspected that he had been awakened by a noise at the door or somewhere in the room. He got up and groped his way to the door. It was closed, with the two chairs barricaded against it just as he had placed them. He crept back to bed and again fell asleep, only to be reawakened abruptly after a period of slumber he could not estimate. He conjectured, however, that it must be about midnight. This time he was certain of the noise - a sound as of rats nibbling behind or within the chest of furs and horns. It seemed most likely that the disturbance was caused by rats, nevertheless he pulled his pistol from under the pillow, softly cocked it and held it across his breast.

Very soon he was startled by the stealthy but unmistakable sound of footsteps in the vicinity of the chest. He turned his eyes in that direction but the darkness prevented his seeing anything.

"What's there?" he asked, as he sat up and reached his left hand into his pocket for a match. No answer came. He instantly struck the match and was horrified to see framed behind the chest the head and face of Lara, his eyes luminous like those of a beast of prey, his uplifted right hand clutching a long, slender dagger. In a flash Boone knew that, foiled in his purpose of plunging the weapon into the sleeping body of his intended victim, the midnight assailant would be upon him with the leap of a tiger. "Caramba!" hissed the disconcerted Mexican as the American sent a shot straight at him. The lighted match which he held in his hand was extinguished and fell to the ground. A shuffling and scrambling noise behind the chest disturbed the pitchy darkness but he did not recognize the thud of a falling body. Thinking that his aim might have been bad, he struck another match as quick as thought, and peered before him with his cocked revolver ready for action. To his utter amazement he saw no one in the room, dead or alive.

He was dumbfounded. Was his excitement the effect of a nightmare stimulated by dreams of his unsavory and suspicious looking host? Had his overwrought imagination conjured up the misty shape at which he had fired? Springing out of bed he lit the candle, walked around the chest, opened it and looked inside, but there was no trace of his would be assassin. He next pushed the chairs from the door, drew it open and gazed out into the night. Overhead, the moon struggled faintly through the scurrying clouds. As he stood there listening intently he heard footsteps sloshing along through the sloppy path that led to the hut. Soon a white-robed figure, like a ghost, came rushing toward him.

"Stop!" he commanded. "What do you want?"

"Pedro! Pedro!" screamed a female voice; "where is Pedro?" The voice was that of Lolita, his bewitching enchantress of the previous evening. Somewhat reassured, he replied:

"Pedro would be in hell where he belongs, had my aim been true, señorita. As it is, I no more know where the scoundrel is than you do."

"Oh señor, do not trifle with me! I heard a shot. Have you kill my - father? Let me in for the love of the Virgin, and tell me the truth. I am only a poor, unarmed, frightened girl."

At whatever cost or danger he felt that he must have this distracting mystery solved, so he yielded to her appeal and permitted her to enter. She stood in the hut, clad only in her night dress, alarmed and panting. His rage gave way to pity when he saw her clinging to one of the chairs for support, her long hair blown about her shoulders, her bare, wet feet showing white on the cold floor and her large, dark eyes quietly questioning him to tell her what happened.

He did so, pointing to the spot where Lara had stood when fired upon. An involuntary cry escaped her, a swift gleam of intelligence lighted up her agitated face and, running behind the huntsman's chest she stooped down, raised a trap door in the floor and peered into the darkness below. A foul, sickening odor swept into the room.

"Bring the light, señor, quick!" she implored.

Boone stepped over to her with the candle in one hand and his drawn revolver in the other. He now saw that the hut was above the entrance to a shallow cave, hewn out of the stony soil, its mouth choked and closed by heavy boulders of rock. The girl let herself through the opening and dropped onto the ground beneath. All was still for a few seconds. She was evidently searching for something and made no sound or sign. Presently she came out:

"It is true, then. Here he is. Look, señor, he cannot harm you now, for he is dead! Yes, here is the wound - through his head. Oh, Pedro!"

Boone leaned over and flared the light into the cave. The girl had spoken the truth. Prone upon his back, his yet unclosed, ghastly eyes staring upward, lay the dead body of Lara. He had stumbled back when shot and fallen through the trap door, causing it to close after him and overturning a short ladder that now lay by his side.

"So that is where this precious father of yours would have sent me had I not been too quick for him, eh, little woman?"

"Oh señor, he was not my father, thank God!" blurted out the girl between sobs. "That was only a tale he told sometimes."

"Who was he, then?" demanded Boone.

"My master, señor. You Americans know not what a peon is in Mexico, and even here in Texas I dared not leave him for he would have killed me. He held me in peonage since I was a child. Ah, me! It is all over at last. I am free."

She said this in an amazed level tone in which grief seemed to have no portion. For a brief space his eyes rested on the girl's upturned face as she knelt over the corpse and he read a flashing hatred mingled with horror. Whatever her relations to the dead, he felt that her turpitude was quite as great as his, and he called severely to her to come back into the room. She placed the ladder in position and ascended. Noticing the stern expression in his face, she began to cry.

"Oh, spare me, señor! I am not so bad as you think. I always tried to get Pedro to lead a different life and prayed to him before, as I did this night, not to harm the strangers. But he

always waited till I was asleep and then stole away and did as he pleased. Oh, I am so miserable, señor, spare me."

"How often has the villain done murder here?" he asked, choosing to disregard her entreaty, although he could not help owing to himself that the spell she had cast over him the evening before was beginning to reassert itself.

"Twice that I know of, señor," she answered quietly.

"And what became of the victims?"

"He dug graves in the cave and buried them there. Yes, I know Pedro was a villain, as you say, but I have not willingly shared his guilt. I was his peon, señor, his - no matter what. I could not help myself, but now I am free, thank God!"

"Don't be too sure of that," said Boone, trying to be firm. "You have lured your last man to destruction, señorita, for I infer that the others were detained here just as I was, by your pretty face, your siren song, and your whole hellish lot of enchantment. In a way, you were as guilty as Lara, and I feel it is my duty to hold you till morning and then turn you over to the police."

"Oh, have pity on me, señor! I have been unhappy always, and most unhappy when I tried to be gay as you thought me last evening. Don't you understand my position, señor? I was no more than a slave. Oh, spare me any further trouble! I am only a poor, outcast, unprotected girl, señor, with not a single friend in the world."

Boone realized that he began to feel like a relenting fool under the onslaught of this wretched little piece of femininity and resolved to end the matter by a compromise. Had she accused herself of the unforgiveable sin mentioned in the Scriptures he knew that he could not at that moment have delivered her over to justice.

"Go to your home and stay there till morning," he said, with an assumed sternness. "I shall come over early and expect you to accompany me to the town. If the authorities let you go I advise you to leave the country at once. It will not be healthy for you to remain in it."

A bewitching little smile of gratitude lit up her distressed face and, murmuring a muttered "Adios, señor," she hurried away in the dark.

At break of day, after the shocking anxieties of the night, burdened with the consciousness of the gruesome thing underneath him, he went over to the chapel. He did so hastily, mechanically, for he felt sure that the bird had flown. And so it had. The doors were locked and the sound of his rapping on them and the windows brought no response from within. Breathing a sigh of relief he threw his gun over his shoulder and trudged on to the town.

That was the last he ever saw or heard of Lolita Lara. For reasons of his own he thought best to tell no one of the tragic episode. The next day he left San Antonio and never returned.

Vincent Boone is now a very old man, but his thrilling experience is still a vivid memory, and that is why, after the lapse of half a century, he smiled knowingly when he read a newspaper dispatch from San Antonio telling of skeletons unearthed by a gravel paving force on San Pedro Avenue. He is satisfied that he knew the former owner, or at least one of those skeletons, while visions of the wild, stormy night, the sylvan park, the Franciscan chapel, the ill-fated Lara, and the charming Lolita rise from the mists of the long ago.