

Under the Friar's Ledge

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STRUGGLES' ATTITUDE toward the Sangre del Santo story was one of complete indifference. At the time he first heard the story, he was contract surgeon at Fort Huachuca with no time for chasing lost mine legends. It was common knowledge that Struggles had more than a superficial interest in precious metals—it was evident in the way he wangled assignments to extended patrols and would have his pan out at every water stop, and the leaves on which he went into the Dragoons alone with a pack mule and a shovel—but prospecting, to Struggles, was a world apart from chasing legends. Lost mines were for fools, or anyone too lazy to swing a pick and build a sluice box. Listening to the tale, Struggles' rough-grained campaigner's face would wrinkle like soft leather and a half smile would frame the cigar that was clamped between his teeth.

But that was while he was still at Huachuca. That was before he met Juan Solo.

In Soyopa, which is in the state of Sonora, there was another story related along with the one of Sangre del Santo. It concerned Juan Solo who made his home in Soyopa, and very simply, it told that Juan Solo, the Indian-Mexican,

knew the exact location of the lost mine. And once a year, they said, he would bring to the tienda a half bar of solid silver weighing one thousand ounces, a weight not used since the departure of the Spanish. And the storekeeper, who was becoming very rich, would allow Juan to purchase whatever he pleased for the rest of the year. When questioned about the mine, Juan Solo would smile, just as Doctor Struggles was doing at that very time up at Fort Huachuca, and he would shake his head and walk away.

They said that Juan Solo was one of Gokliya's Apaches until Gokliya turned wild and the Mexicans began calling him Hieronymo. They said Juan was lazy by nature and became tired of running, so he left the band and became Mexican. But changing his nationality did not erase from his memory the mine he had discovered hiding out in the Sierra Madre with Gokliya. And finally, after the Apache war chief was packed off to Florida, Juan Solo was free to visit his secret mine.

They said he could have been the richest man in Mexico, but his only concern was for mescal and a full bean pot to answer the growl in his belly. Spending any more would have been wasteful. On one occasion, two men resentful of Juan's niggardly attitude followed him into the range when he left for his annual collection. One came back a month later—with his mind still in the hills. The other never returned.

It was a long time before anyone tried it again ... but that was when Struggles entered the story...

In 1638, the Sangre del Santo was mining more silver than any diggings in New Spain with free, Indian labor. But perhaps the Spanish overseers and their protecting garrison were somewhat more demanding than was ordinarily common. The story has it that a Franciscan friar, Tomas Maria, could stand the inhuman treatment of the Tarahumare laborers no longer and so caused them to revolt.

It is said the Spanish killed Tomas Maria for putting thoughts into the heads of the Tarahumares; and after the uprising, in which the Spanish were taken by surprise and annihilated, the Indians found the padre's body and laid it away inside the entrance to the mine. Then they sealed it and defaced the mountainside so there would be no trace of the entrance. The adobe quarters of the Spanish were caved in and spread about until they again became part of the land. The country was restored, and the legend of Tomas Maria's spirit protecting the mine was handed down from father to son.

In Soyopa, the villagers crossed themselves when the name Tomas Maria was mentioned. Then someone would smile and say that the padre and Juan Solo must indeed be good friends, and then everyone would smile...

On a morning in early summer, Juan Solo left Soyopa prodding his burro unhurriedly in the direction that pointed toward the wild, climbing Sierra Madre.

A month before, Struggles had entered Sonora and started down the Bavispe. It had taken a long time to shake soldiering out of his life.

He had been contract surgeon all through most of the campaigns, from before Apache Pass to Crook's border expedition, and in those days he was too busy doctoring to give in completely to the urge that had been growing since his first year in the Southwest. Sometimes the troopers kidded him about it and accused him of knowing every rock within a five mile radius of Thomas, Bowie

and Fort Huachuca. Struggles took it with a smile because there was little enough to laugh about at that time.

He wasn't a fanatic about gold. Some men eat and breathe it and know nothing else. Struggles simply thought prospecting was a good idea. Sun and fresh air, hard work, enough excitement to keep your blood circulating regularly and the chance of becoming rich for life. Finally, after almost twenty years of campaigning, he reasoned that his obligation to the Army was at an end. He had served long enough that no one could say he had signed up just for the free transportation.

He worked the Dragoons for almost a year with only a few pyrite showings and then a trace that would die out before it had hardly started. It was enough discouragement to make him look for a new field. He decided to point south and follow the Bavispe down through Sonora, keeping the Sierra Madre on his left, working the foothills until he had the feel of the country, then go deeper into the range.

Five days after Juan Solo left his pueblo, Struggles found him in a barranca. They did not speak, because Juan was unable to. He was spread on his back in the middle of the depression, stripped, his hands and feet fastened with rawhide and pegged deep into the sand. Near him were the ashes of a fire over which his feet had been held before he was staked to the ground.

They spoke of it for a long time after in Soyopa. How Juan Solo rode out one morning on his burro and returned a week later tied to the animal with the American leading it, along with his own, and how the American stayed on with Juan at his adobe and tended him until his sickness passed.

STRUGGLES DID NOT consider saving Juan's life a special act of charity.

He would have done the same for anyone. Nor did the man's reluctance to explain completely what had occurred bother Struggles. At first, all Juan offered in explanation was that an American, a man whom he had trusted as a friend, caught him unaware and performed this torture on him. Struggles accepted this without pressing conversation and gradually, as his wounds healed, Juan Solo became more at ease. A natural friendship was developing, in spite of their extremely opposite backgrounds.

Finally, one day when Juan's burns were almost healed, he said to Struggles: „That was a good thing you did before.“ It was his way of thanking Struggles for saving his life.

The surgeon brushed it off. „No more than any man would have done,“ he said.

Juan Solo frowned. „It is not of such a simple nature. There was a good thing you did before.“

Struggles waited while Juan Solo unhurriedly formed the words in his mind.

„Once,“ Juan began, „I had a friend who desired to be rich. He begged me to show him silver, so I took him into the hills. But even being a friend, I blindfolded his eyes lest avarice lead him back for more, though I meant to give him plenty enough. For two days I walked behind his burro picking up the kernels of maize that he was dropping to mark the trail. And at the end of that time, I unbound his eyes and returned to him all the maize he had dropped, saying such a wasteful man would indeed not know how to use silver. And there I left him, discovering that he was no friend.

„The next time I went out from the pueblo, he was waiting for me and he took me and demanded that I show him the place of the silver.

„He had Mexican men with him, and at his word they built a fire to abuse the truth from me, as if the words would come from my feet; but I would not speak, so they left me to die.“

Juan Solo's eyes did not leave Struggles' hard-lined face. He went on, „Now I have learned that friendship is not simply of words. Man, I will show you silver; as much as your burro can carry will be yours. And there will be no blindfold.“

Struggles cleared his throat and felt a flush of embarrassment.

„Juan, I didn't treat you for a fee.“ And then was sorry he had said it when the Indian's sleepy eyes opened suddenly.

But his voice remained even when he said, „To a friend, you offer a gift. You do not repay him.“ He hesitated. „And I say offer, for you need not accept it. Approaching El Sangre del Santo is not the same as entering the great city of Chihuahua. Often there is danger.“

Struggles' cigar almost slipped from his mouth. „You know where it is?“ he asked, amazed.

The Indian nodded his head.

Sketchily then, the story of the mine formed in the surgeon's head.

He relaxed in his chair, putting the pieces together. He had almost forgotten the legend of Tomas Maria.

„What about the padre who acts as watchman?“ he asked cautiously.

„Is he the danger you spoke of?“

Juan Solo smiled faintly. „Here they say that he and I are good friends. No, the danger is from those who would take all the wealth from the poor padre.“

Struggles smiled at the Indian and said, „I imagine he gets pretty lonely up there,“ but Juan Solo only shrugged his shoulders. Struggles added, „I mean your ex-friend, the American.“

The Indian nodded. „After leaving me the thought would come to him that if I died his chance of discovering the mine would be remote.

„So he would return and find that someone had taken me. First he would curse, then inquire discreetly through one of his men if I had been brought to Soyopa; and finding this to be so, his choice would then be to wait for me to go out again and then to follow.“

„Well, you're just guessing now,“ Struggles said.

Juan Solo shrugged again. „Perhaps.“

On the fourth day after leaving the pueblo, Juan's conjecture came back to Struggles suddenly. From that afternoon on, there was little room in his mind for doubting the Indian's word. They were in high, timbered country moving their horses and pack mules single file along a trail that cut into the pines, climbing to distant rimrock. Where the slope leveled, they came out onto a bench that opened up for a dozen yards revealing, down over the tops of the lower pines and dwarf oaks, the country they had left hours before. In the timber it was cool; but below, the sandy flats and the scattered rock eruptions were all the same glaring yellow, hazy through a dust that hung motionless. At first, Struggles thought he was seeing sun spots from the glare.

He blinked before squinting again and now he was certain there were no sun spots. Far off against the yellow glare, a confused number of moving specks were pointing toward the deep shadows of a barranca.

Juan Solo was watching with the palm of his hand shading his eyes.

He looked at the surgeon when the specks passed out of sight. „Now there is no doubt,“ he said.

Struggles' rough face turned to him quickly. „Why, that could be anybody.“

„Senor Doctor,“ Juan said quietly. „This is my country.“

AT SUNDOWN they stopped long enough to eat a cold supper, then moved on into a fast-falling gloom. The country was level now, but thick with brush; mesquite clumps which in the evening dimness clung ghostlike to the ground and were dead silent with no breeze to stir them. Struggles, riding behind the Indian, felt his eyes stretched open unnaturally and told himself to quit being a damn fool and relax.

He chewed on the end of the dead cigar and let his stomach muscles go loose, but still a tension gripped him which his own steadying words could not detach. They were being followed. He knew that now, and didn't have to close his eyes to picture what would happen if they were overtaken. But there was more to the feeling than that. It was also the country—the climbing, stretching, never-ending wildness of the country. The Sierra Madre was like the sea, he thought. Both of them deathless, monotonously eternal, and so indifferent in their magnitude that either could accept the dust of all the world's dead and not have the decency to show it in posture. He thought: Now I know what people mean about wanting to die in bed. But again he told himself to shut up, because it was foolish to talk.

There was only a soft squeak of saddle leather and the muffled clop of hoofs on sand, and ahead, the dim figure of Juan Solo moving silently, rhythmically to the sounds.

The dusk thickened into night, and later Struggles could feel the ground beneath him changing though he could make out nothing in the darkness. There was a closeness above him along with the more broken ground, so that he sensed rather than observed that they were passing into rockier country.

And when first morning light reflected in the sky, Struggles saw that they were deep into a canyon. Ahead, it twisted out of sight, but beyond the rim a wall of mountain rose a thousand feet into the sky, tapering into a slender pinnacle at one end of its unbalanced crest. It seemed close enough to hit with a stone, but it was at least two miles beyond the canyon.

Juan Solo reined in gently and raised his arm toward the peak, pointing a finger. „Senor Doctor,“ he said. „Be the first American to observe El Sangre del Santo ... and know it.“

Struggles was unprepared. „That's it?“ he said incredulously; then wondered why he had expected it to appear differently. Lost mines needn't look like lost mines. Looking at the peak he thought of the legend, trying to picture what had taken place here; but then he thought of the other that he had been thinking all night, and he glanced uneasily behind him.

Juan Solo watched him. „They are many hours behind,“ he said, „since they could not follow in the night. So, if it is not abusive to you, I say we should go quickly to the mine and leave before they arrive, continuing on in the widest circle that ends again where we started. Thus they will not know that they have been to El Sangre and left it. And later, when they see us surrounded by seven hundred bottles of mescal—“ the Indian could not keep from grinning—„they

will scratch their heads and turn and gaze out at the mountains that say nothing, and they will scratch their thick heads again.“

Just past the canyon bend, Juan angled toward the shadowy vein of a crevice, the base overgrown with brush, which entered into a defile twisting through a squeezed-in narrowness to finally emerge in open country again at the base of the mountain. From the ledge, Struggles' gaze lifted to the thin spire of rock, then dropped slowly, inching down with the speck that was Juan Solo descending the steep, narrow path of a rock slide that made a sweeping angle from the peak to the ledge where Struggles stood, then lost itself completely in a scatter of boulders on a bench fifty feet below. Struggles moved to the edge and glanced at the animals on the bench then on down the grade to the canyon they had left a few hours before, squinting hard, before looking back at Juan Solo.

And as the Indian reached the ledge, Struggles shook his head, then pressed his sleeve against his forehead and exhaled slowly. „I'm worn out just watching you,“ he said.

The Indian swung from his shoulder a blanket gathered into the shape of a sack. „Climbing for such that is up there is never wearing,“ he said. He untied the blanket ends and let them drop, watching Struggles, as the surgeon looked with astonishment at the dull-gleaming heap of candlesticks, chalices and crosses; all ornately tooled and some decorated with precious stones.

„These and more were placed in the sepulchre of Tomas Maria,“ Juan Solo said. „Along with the silver that had already been fashioned into bars when the restoration took place.“

Struggles picked up a slender cruciform and ran his fingers over the baroque carvings. „It's unbelievable,“ he said, looking at Juan Solo. „These articles should be in a museum.“

Juan Solo shook his head and there was the hint of a smile softening the straight lips of his mouth. „Then what would Tomas Maria have? These were only for if your mind doubted,“ he said, gathering the blanket and swinging it over his shoulder. „Now I will get your silver.“ And started up the slope.

Struggles felt a tingle of nervousness now; a restless urge to move about or at least face the solidness of the rock wall, as if by not seeing, the sprawling openness of the grade would not make him feel so naked.

It stretched below him in a vast unmoving silence that seemed to hold time in a vacuum.

For a few minutes he watched Juan Solo almost a hundred feet above him. And when he again looked out over the slope, he saw it immediately, the thin dust thread in the distance on what only a few minutes before was a landscape as still as a painting. He watched it grow as it approached, squinting hard until he was sure, then he cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, „Juan!“ sharply. And when he saw the figure look down, he pointed out to the dust trail until he was certain Juan saw it, then went over the ledge, sliding down to the bench in a shower of loose gravel that made the animals shy at their halters and back away from the slope.

He moved them in quickly as best he could under a jutting of rock and pulled his carbine from its boot before moving back to the ledge.

THE BENCH WAS a good thousand yards up the slope from the basin floor, and from there the riders were only dots against the ragged country, indistinguishable, disappearing behind brush now and again; but finally

Struggles could make out six of them following the switchbacks single-file up the grade. He pushed his carbine out over the rocks watching the front door close as they approached. There was no back door. He had no doubt as to who they were, and still they kept coming, making no attempt to stay behind cover. From a hundred yards they all looked Mexican. One of them started to wave his sombrero and suddenly there was a pistol shot from above.

Struggles looked up, going flat behind the rocks, and saw Juan Solo down on the ledge again swinging his pistol in an arc before firing twice more; and when Struggles lifted his head above the rocks, he saw only a lone figure running after the horses that were scattering far down the grade. Nothing moved along the slope where the riders had been. Beyond the scattered rock and brush, the solitary figure was slowly rounding up the horses one at a time and leading them behind the shelter of a rise.

Struggles swung his carbine across a straight line waiting for something to move. They couldn't stay down forever. But for the next few minutes nothing happened.

Then, he saw the sombrero lift hesitantly above a rock for a full second before disappearing. After a few moments, the crown was edging up again when the pistol shot sounded from above and echoed back from down the slope. The hat disappeared again and someone yelled, „Hold your fire!“ and next a white cloth was waving back and forth over the rock. A man stepped out from behind the covering holding the cloth and motioned to the side until another man moved out hesitantly to join him as he started up the grade waving the cloth. He carried only a holstered pistol, but the second man held a Winchester across the crook of his arm. They came on slowly until they were in short-pistol range.

Struggles put his sights square in the center of the first man's chest and thought how easy it would be, but then he called, „That's good enough!“

The one with the rifle hesitated, but the other didn't break his stride.

„I said that's far enough!“

He stopped then, less than fifty feet away. A willow-root straw was down close to his eyes shading his features, but you could see that he was an American. There was an easiness about him, standing in the open in a relaxed slouch; and Struggles thought, He looks like a red-dirt farmer leaning against the corner on Saturday night. Only there's no matchstick in his mouth and a gun's only six inches from his hand.

The one with the Winchester, a Mexican, moved up next to him and stood sideways so that the cradled barrel was pointing up to the ledge.

The American followed the direction of the barrel, then looked where he thought Struggles to be.

„Tell that crazy Indian to do something with his nerves,“ he called.

Struggles lifted his head slightly from the rear sight. „You're the one making him nervous, not me.“

„There doesn't have to be trouble—that's what I mean.“ He pushed the straw up from his eyes. „Why don't you come out in the open?“

Struggles' cheek pressed against the stock again. „You better get to the point pretty soon.“ And with the words saw the American's face break into a smile.

„Well, the point is, you're sitting on a pile of silver and I want it.“ His smile broadened and he added, „And the edge of the point is that we're six and you're two.“

„Only when you come to get us, it's going to cost you something,“ Struggles said.

„Not if we sit back in the shade and wait for your tongues to swell up.“

„You look a little too skinny to be good at waiting.“

The American nodded to the ledge. „Ask Juan how good I am at waiting. I used up a lot of my patience while my vaqueros scratched for your sign, but I still got some left.“

Struggles admitted, „It didn't take you too long at that.“

„Your boy isn't the only one who knows the country.“ He was waving the white cloth idly. „Look,“ he said. „Here's how it is. You either sit and die of thirst, or else get on your mounts and ride the hell out. Of course, for my own protection I'd have to ask both of you to leave your guns behind.“

Struggles said, „You don't have a high regard for our reasoning, do you?“

The man shrugged. „I'm not talking you into anything.“ He waited a few moments, then turned and walked down the slope. The Mexican backed down, keeping the Winchester high.

Struggles fingered the trigger lightly and wondered what that principle was based on—about not shooting a man in the back. And when the straw hat was out of range he still had not thought of it.

Through the heat of the afternoon Struggles' mind talked to him, making conversation; but always an argument resulted, and his mind was poor company because it kept telling him that he was afraid. When the heat began to lift, a breeze stirred lazily over the bench and made a faint whispering sound as it played through the crevices above. And finally, the bench lost its shape in darkness.

It was cool relief after the glaring white light of the afternoon; but with the darkness, the slope that was still a painting now came alive and was something menacing.

Struggles crawled back to the slope and stood up, cupping his hands to his mouth, and whispered, „Juan,“ then gritted his teeth as the word cut the silence.

He waited, but nothing happened. He brought up his hands again, but jumped back quickly as a stream of loose shale clattered down from above. And as if on signal, two rifles opened up from below. Struggles went flat and inched back to the rim as the firing kept up, spattering against the flinty slope.

WHEN IT STOPPED, he raised his head above the rocks, but there was only the darkness. They're not a hundred feet away, he thought. Waiting for us to move. He settled down again, pressing close to the rock barrier.

Well, they were going to have a long wait. But now he wondered if he was alone. Since the firing there had been no sound from above. Had something happened to Juan?

Time lost its meaning after a while and became only something that dragged hope with it as it went nowhere.

Sometime after midnight, Struggles started to doze off. His head nodded and his chin was almost on his chest, but even then a consciousness warned him and he jerked his head up abruptly. He moved it from side to side now, shaking himself awake; and as his face swung to the left he saw the pinpoint of a gleam up on the mountainside.

He came to his feet, fully awake now, but blinked his eyes to make sure. The light was moving down with crawling slowness from the peak, flickering dully, but growing in intensity as it inched down the rock slide path that Juan Solo had climbed earlier.

After a few minutes Struggles saw a torch, with the flame dancing against the blackness of the slope, and as it descended to the ledge the shape of a man was illuminated weirdly in the flickering orange light it cast.

The figure moved to the edge, holding up a baroque cross whose end was the burning torch—the figure of a man wearing the coarse brown robes of a Franciscan friar.

He held the cross high overhead and spoke one sentence of Castilian, the words cold and shrill in the darkness.

„Leave this Blood of the Saint or thus your souls shall plunge to the hell of the damned!“

His arm swung back and the torch soared out into the night and down until it hit far below on the slope in a shower of bursting sparks.

The figure was gone in the darkness.

Quiet settled again, but a few minutes later gunfire came from down the slope. And shortly after that, the sound of horses running hard, and dying away in the distance.

The rest of the night Struggles asked himself questions. He sat unmoving with the dead cigar stub still in his mouth and tried to think it out, applying logic. Finally he came to a conclusion. There was only one way to find out the answers to last night's mystery.

At the first sign of morning light he rose and started to climb up the slope toward the ledge.

This would answer both questions—it was the only way.

He was almost past caring whether or not the American and his men were still below. Almost. He climbed slowly, feeling the tenseness between his shoulder blades because he wasn't sure of anything. When he was nearing the rim, a hand reached down to his arm and pulled him up the rest of the way.

„Juan.“

The Indian steadied him as he got to his feet. „You came with such labor, I thought you sick.“

And at that moment Struggles did feel sick. Weak with relief, he was, suddenly, for only then did he realize that somehow it was all over.

He exhaled slowly and his grizzled face relaxed into a smile. He looked past Juan Solo and the smile broadened as his eyes fell on the torn blanket with the pieces of rope coiled on top of it.

„Padre, you ought to take better care of your cassock,“ Struggles said, nodding toward the blanket.

Juan Solo frowned. „Your words pass me,“ he said, looking out over the slope; and added quickly, „Let us find what occurred with the American.“

Struggles was dead certain that Juan knew without even having to go down from the ledge.

Not far down the grade they found him, lying on his face with stiffened fingers clawed into the loose sand. Near his body were the ashes of the cruciform, still vaguely resembling—even as the wind began to blow it into nothingness—the shape of a cross.

Struggles said, „I take it he didn't believe in the friar, and wouldn't listen to his men who did.“ Juan Solo nodded as if to say, So you see what naturally happened, then said, „Now there is plenty of time for your silver, Senor Doctor,“ and started back up the grade.

Struggles followed after him, trying to picture Tomas Maria, and thinking what a good friend the friar had in Juan Solo.

