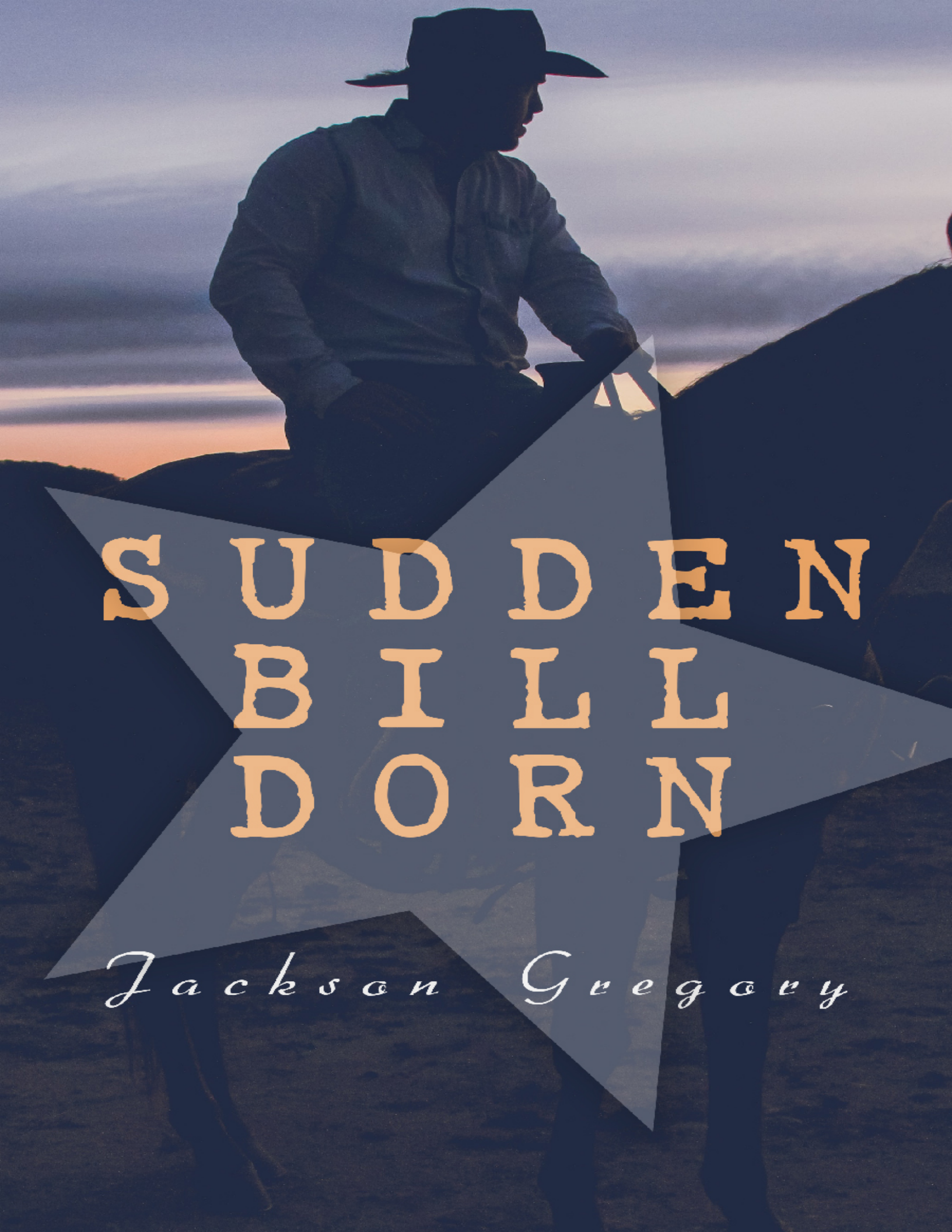
SUDDEN BILL DORN
Jackson Gregory

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Sudden Bill Dorn

A Western Saga

e-artnow, 2022
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Chapter 1

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If Bill Dorn had ever doubted that the sheriff was a true friend he would never doubt again. Dorn rose slowly from his table, littered with papers, and stepped to his open door, his face dead white, the muscles corded along his lean jaws, his dark eyes burning ominously. For a time, motionless and silent, he stared out across the billowing grazing lands sloping gradually up to the far pine-timbered mountains, yet saw nothing of the wide expanse. The sheriff watched him shrewdly, never batting an eye. Nothing of the rigidity of the still form escaped him, nor did the scarcely perceptible tensing and stiffening of the broad shoulders.

When Bill Dorn spoke it was tonelessly, almost under his breath and without turning.

“You’ve been mighty square with me, Bart,” he said. “I’ll be apt to remember.”

The sheriff, relaxing nothing of his vigilance, asked bluntly:

“Well? What are you going to do, Dorn?”

The rancher made no immediate answer. After a while, when he faced about, his eyelids drooped so low that he looked sleepy, but the sheriff, still seated, saw and read aright the hot flash of his eyes. Bill Dorn, about to speak, thought better of it; instead he filled his lungs slowly to a deep intake of air, then crossed the rude plank floor, bare save for its scattering of local Indian rugs, passing out of sight in an adjoining room. He returned almost immediately

wearing his coat and broad-brimmed old black hat. Sheriff Barton MacArthur, not the man at most times to overlook details, certainly not today, marked the bulge under the coat at Bill Dorn's hip.

"So that's the answer, is it?" he demanded. As he stood up he gathered the papers from the table, snapped a rubber band about them and put them into his wallet.

Dorn glanced at the clock on its shelf over the fireplace.

"I've got me some riding to do, MacArthur," he said casually. "The afternoon's half gone and I'd better be on my way."

"You said just now I'd treated you white, Bill Dorn," said the sheriff. His own eyes narrowed and the lines about his mouth hardened. "You said you'd be apt to remember." He shrugged heavily. "Buckling on your gun now and starting for a ride—well, it ain't going to make things any easier for me, is it?"

"I guess we've about talked this thing out, Bart," said Dorn. "I'm on my way."

"Into Nacional?" demanded MacArthur. "Have it your way, you hot-headed fool. I'm riding with you."

"No. I'm riding alone this time. Tomorrow, if you want me, or maybe tonight, I'll take orders. I'll never pull a gun on you, Sheriff, and you know it. But for a few hours I am my own boss."

Under one of the big live oaks was a saddled horse, its reins grounded, its dark hide stained with travel. Bill Dorn passed it on his way to the corral, selected one of the half dozen animals there and led it into the barn to saddle up. When he rode out into the open, ducking his head through

the doorway, the sheriff had already mounted the horse under the oak.

“You’d do well to take anyhow a day to think things over, Bill,” he called, and for the first time sounded angry.

“Thinking won’t mend matters now,” returned Dorn. “So long, Bart.”

He struck into the dusty road leading south, heading, as the sheriff had expected, to Nacional just over the Mexican border. Already the sun was dipping westward; the shadows ran out from the little hills making an early dusk in the barancas. It would be sundown by the time he reached the Mexican border town.

At first he rode with his head down, brooding, his hat drawn low, his somber eyes taking no stock of the country through which he rode. He did not glance back to see whether the sheriff followed; it would make scant difference what MacArthur chose to do. But presently he straightened in the saddle and swept the wide landscape with eyes which, still hard and bleak, yet were no longer unseeing.

“Wonder if I’ll ever come back to it?” he asked himself.

Here was a spot which he loved, one that had held him in rich contentment for the greater part of his life. The wide grassy valleys, the narrow, shady passes through the hills, the black, pine-clad slopes in the north and the silver-gray, sage-mantled reaches in the south and west—all this constituted an eternal, living, ever changing familiar scene which had come to mean very much in Bill Dorn’s life. He looked at it now as a man might regard a friend at time of a last handclasp. But it was for only an instant that his eyes

softened; again they grew hard with the bitterness within him.

Only when two or three miles from the ranch house, as he rode up into the first low line of brushy hills, did he turn to look back. The sheriff was nowhere in sight; evidently he had gone on about his business, leaving Bill Dorn to his own affair, even to carrying it out in whatever way he chose. After all a sheriff's work generally began only after the other fellow had said his say.

He struck into a dim trail affording a short cut through the hills and for the first time noticed a flock of buzzards wheeling low, dipping almost to the ground; the whoosh of their great wings was loud in his ears. He saw two or three of the ugly scavengers already on the ground; at his approach they eyed him balefully, took their few awkward hops and rose into the air with flapping wings, grown graceful only when sailing aloft, circling with their companions. They'd wait now with their desert-bred patience until the man moved on.

Any man would have tarried to discover what it was that had invited the red-headed nauseous birds down to their ghoulish feast. Despite the grim nature of Dorn's errand, despite its obvious urgency, he forced a snorting, rebellious horse down into the brushy hollow where he expected to find a dead coyote, shot by some cowboy, or perhaps an old pensioner of a horse which had stretched out here for the last time. Instead he saw through a thin screening of sage brush that it was a man's body lying there.

Dorn withdrew a hundred yards or so to a small scrub oak, tethered his horse and returned on foot. The man was

but recently dead; the cause of his death was written clear; his hat was off, lying within reach of outflung fingers, and in his forehead, dead center, was the bullet hole.

“It’s Jake Fanning,” muttered Dorn. “You’d almost say he killed himself; anyhow the gun was shoved right up close to his head.”

But he knew that Fanning never carried any weapon except his old double-barreled shotgun, and neither was this a shotgun wound nor was the weapon anywhere in evidence. Nor were Fanning’s horse and pack mule. Their scuffed tracks were at hand all right; they had brought him this far, had gone on, heading toward the road.

Bill Dorn squatted on his high heels and pondered. Jake Fanning, a man for whom he had never had any use, had been an ugly devil in life, and death had done nothing to beautify him. One of a special breed in the wide Southwest that harbors so many types, he was a desert rat, a shiftless prospector, a border town bum when in funds, a beggar or a thief when down to his last silver dollar. Maybe he deserved killing? Dorn was not concerned with that. The question was what to do with him now? Circling shadows still drifted over the ground when the black wings sailed low against the westering sun.

Bill Dorn, impatient to be on his way, regretted that he hadn’t let MacArthur accompany him; here was another job for an already overworked sheriff. In the end he shrugged heavily, got up and gathered the dead man into his arms. His horse was going to make a terrible fuss over it, but you couldn’t very well go off and leave even a dead Jake Fanning like this. Had there been a shovel, had there even been a

blanket or tarpaulin—There was no house within miles, other than his own ranch house; so, when he had subdued his blue roan, desperate as the beast was with terror, he heaved his unlovely burden up across the saddle, roped him there and started back on foot.

“Funny thing,” he thought somberly. “Here I set out to find Michael Bundy; here dead Jake stops me, and Michael was the last man that ever grubstaked Jake. It’s as bad as if he’d hired a dead man to hold me up for a spell.”

He found no one at the ranch house, but looking off across the ranch to the north where the cursed oil derricks lifted their dirty skeletons against the clean backdrop of the mountains—derricks which had started all the trouble, which had ruined something very fine, which had smashed a sort of dream and had made mockery of an ideal of friendship—he saw two home-drifting cowboys and with his old sombrero waved them the command to step along. They came racing in, wondering what the boss wanted.

“What did yuh kill him for, Bill?” they wanted to know. “An’ why drag him home with yuh?”

They carried dead Jake Fanning into the house, stretching him out on the floor with an old sheet over him.

“Seen the sheriff, either of you boys?” Dorn asked. They shook their heads. “One of you come along with me then; I’ll show you where I played it low on the turkey buzzards today —”

“Me, I’d think yuh done ’em a favor,” grunted one of his hearers, young Bud Williams, who like most others had small liking for the late Jake Fanning.

“Later you can look up the sheriff, if I don’t run into him in Nacional, and can show him the spot; there’s a chance, though mighty small, he might do some tracking from there. Somebody after killing Jake led his livestock off.—By the way, boys, I guess you’re not working for me any longer.”

They stared incredulously; slowly both tanned faces reddened and the eyes bent so frowningly on him hardened. “Fired, huh? Jest like that! Why, damn your eyes—”

“Not exactly fired,” said Bill Dorn coolly. “I’m off for a ride and it looks as though I’d not be riding back here.”

“What about Mike Bundy? Where’s he at?”

“I’m not sure, but hope to see him real soon.”

“Say, Bill! Yuh ain’t sold out to that—”

“That what, Bud?”

Bud shrugged and spat as he led the way outside.

“Sold out to him, have yuh?”

“Not exactly. But in effect I’d say it’s the same thing.” He swung up into the saddle of the blue roan, more eager than ever to be on his way. Bud Williams, frowning, was kicking up dust with the toe of his boot. He exclaimed, “Here, what’s this?” and stooped for something lying close to the threshold. Dorn turned, wondering what it was that the cowboy peered at so intently. “Quartz rock, by thunder, all shot full o’ gold!” exclaimed Bud. “Say, where’d it come from?”

No one knew whence it came. Spilled from Jake Fanning’s coat pocket as they dragged him down from the saddle? Quien sabe?

“Tell the sheriff about that, too,” said Dorn. “He’s the man hired to do all the tall guesswork, times like this. Let’s

go.”

He had lost upward of an hour because of Jake Fanning, and long before coming to the Mexican village, blossoming like a noxious flower on the international border line, he was riding in a violet twilight. Down into old Mexico the sun sank, flaring up a hot red before it melted into the low bank of clouds, then vanishing in a fanfare of colors. Thereafter came the purple night, far mountains swimming mistily and dissolving into the dark, the first big white stars flaring out across the white miles of desert between the southernmost confines of the erstwhile Dorn Ranch and the north rim of Mexico. A ridge of low-lying hills drew the line pretty fairly between a region of good stock land and one of aridity. Behind him was a grassy country; he rode now through vast sweeps given over to cactus and greasewood. Being a man not without imagination he wondered whether this sort of progress might be symbolic.

He crossed the border long before he came to the village, slipping from one country to another in a bit of rugged terrain which, some years before, when smuggling Chinese into the States went merrily on, had come to be called La Puerta de los Chinos. By now the sky was all purply-black velvet with brilliant stars strewn across it for glittering spangles, and the earth beneath was a silver-gray sea, lonely, untenanted save by himself, and without a beacon light anywhere. Then at last he rode up out of a hollow where desert willows grew higher than his head, and mounted a gentle rise of land; suddenly the few lights of that mad, bad little lost town of Nacional flared out at him, beckoning impudently through the big shady cottonwoods.

Now, Nacional drowsed in its shade through most days of the year, like a lean, hungry coyote keeping a low-lidded eye just enough open to be ready to leap and attack and rend at the proper moment; and though it stirred and awoke from its lethargy a little after sundown, still it went for the most part on padded feet, did its murdering with a quiet knife in a dark alley, and was outwardly inert until late enough for men to get drunk on as bad liquor as even a border town ever poured blisteringly down its ravening red throat. Tonight, however, early as it was, Bill Dorn heard the beast's growl almost as soon as he saw its eyes. Something out of the ordinary was afoot. But then there was the old saying which, translated from the Spanish, avers: "In little Nacional it is the usual thing for the unusual to happen."

But whatever it was that Nacional was bestirring itself about did not in any way interest Bill Dorn. His eyes and ears told him that more men were in town than was usual, and that they gave the impression of being in some sort of gala mood; his thoughts, however, did not bite into the fact. An earthquake or a conflagration, though forcing themselves on his notice, would not have concerned him. He was here looking for Michael Bundy. Nothing on earth mattered except the one consideration: He was going to find Bundy and kill him.

He left his horse at the stable, the first building at the end of the street, when one rode in, as he did, from the east. Then, walking with purposeful long strides, his boot heels echoing on the board sidewalks, he made his way between the two rows of squat adobe houses, headed for the nerve center of this place—what they called the Plaza, a

mere irregular widening in the road with a drinking fountain and a flagpole in the middle of it—looked out upon by the doors and windows and balconies of half a dozen two-storied adobe saloons and gambling hells. If Bundy were in town, Bill Dorn would find him somewhere along the Plaza. If Bundy were not here, some word might be had of him. So Dorn moved swiftly along, peering to right and left, seeing the men who thronged the street but making nothing of them save that so far none of them was Michael Bundy.

Before he had gone two squares, which is to say half the journey from Ramiro's stable to the Plaza, a dozen men had accosted him. His responses were curt, indifferent; he scarcely noted the men themselves beyond realizing each time, "That's not Bundy." As he drew nearer the Plaza he began shouldering his way, and even then he did not so much as ask himself what it could be that had caused the crowd to gather. Here were not only the scant handful of denizens of Nacional which housed scarcely more than seven hundred swarthy, lower class Mexicans and Indians, but men from ranches and mines and other settlements on both sides of the dividing line. There swelled in front of him, in a compact mass, a churning eddy of sombreros, blue jeans, hairy chaparejos, serapes. He, taller than most, looked over their heads for another taller, bulkier man, a big blond, handsome, dynamic, roistering man whom the border for five hundred miles knew as Mike Bundy.

Bill Dorn began to lose some of the paradoxically calm quality of his murderous rage, which had been somehow like a queer cold flame steady within him. It irritated him that today of all days of the year so many men should clutter the

street of Nacional and so make difficult the simple task of finding a wanted man here. When someone whom he knew caught his arm and said excitedly: “Say, Bill! What’s the inside dope? You’ve got it, ain’t you?” Dorn shoved him away so violently that he crashed into the thick of the crowd from which he had emerged. Other men, spotting him, followed him; they asked him questions which were like stinging flies plaguing his impatience. All these fellows seemed to take it for granted that he knew something that they would have given their ears to know. Some, seeking to be tactful, invited: “Hi, Bill! Come have a drink.” He muttered at them; he lifted his shoulders at them; he shook his head; and before he was done he damned them out of his way. He didn’t take the trouble to try to figure out what they had in their minds. At every step he hoped to come on Bundy.

From the first saloon to the last he looked in at every one. He would enter the front door, pass slowly through the long room, return slowly, his head pivoting, his burning-bright eyes searching out every face in the shadow of every broad-brimmed hat. He saw men gathered in small, tight, eager knots; he didn’t care the snap of his big hard fingers what they were discussing so earnestly.

After the first hour he unlocked his lips enough to begin asking, “Have you seen Michael Bundy?” No one had seen Bundy; many, it appeared, were asking about him, saying among themselves, “If anyone’s got the straight of this, be sure it’ll be Mike Bundy.” Bill Dorn had his first drink at the old adobe cantina leaning crazily away from the border line as though fearful of it. He was not a drinking man; none of

those who watched him so speculatively had ever seen him step to a bar alone and pour down his liquor as he gulped it tonight, his face hard, his eyes giving an impression of small hot fires glinting through smoke. They began to nudge one another and point him out.

“He ain’t like Bill Dorn,” one said, and many thought. “It’s like some other hombre had slipped inside his hide while ol’ Bill was away.”

By eleven o’clock Bill Dorn’s dark eyes were red-flecked and all who saw him coming gave him a wide berth. They had other things on their minds tonight than quarreling, and all any man could look for from Bill Dorn was trouble.

Chapter 2

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There are those men who go through life never known by any name except that wished upon them in their cradles. On the other hand, there are men who gather nicknames as inevitably as a magnet draws convenient steel filings. Speaking now of Bill Dorn: His name—fond parents concurring after a forceful mother had dictated the terms and an easygoing father had agreed, “Sure, why not?”—was William Stockney O’Shaunnessy Dorn. Now, twenty-seven years old, six feet four in his customary two-inch-and-a-half boot heels, he was known along the border as Sudden Bill, as Roll-Along Dorn, as Long Horn Bill, as Here-We-Go Dorn, as Daybreak, as Aces. How names did stick to him! One day a lean old chestnut-hued cattle man, a great friend of Bill’s, chanced to say in the presence of Bill’s Chinese cook, “Shore he’s a heller, that boy. Born a Dorn, ain’t he?” And the Chink had giggled and said, “Born-a-Dorn, damn good name. Me call him Born-a-Dorn Bill now.” That’s the way it went. His father, violently removed from the mundane scene some years before, was Early Bill Dorn.

And it was the father, Early Bill, who had carved out the original Dorn Ranch close to the rim of cattle country, on the edge of the desert. He was buried with his boots on, a forthright gentleman of the old school with Kentucky blood and proclivities in his staunch veins, leaving behind him a wife who still adored him, knowing him to the depths though she did; leaving also a single son and an unencumbered

ranch of six thousand four hundred acres, together with a tobacco tin heavy with gold coins under a stone in the hearth. Bill's mother lost interest in life, pottered about listlessly for three or four years, told young Bill that he'd never need her half as much as old Early Bill did, and died happily. Young Bill sat all night by the two graves. Then he hitched up his belt, looked life square between the eyes and tied in to his job.

He built the ranch up to sixty thousand acres. And he lived like a king—a barbarian king, to be sure—in the same old ranch house. It was close to a hundred years old—at least the kernel of it was—an imperishable affair of good honest adobe mud reinforced with honest straw, of field stone and cedar timbers hauled forty miles from the Blue Smokes Mountains. And now, all of a sudden, circumstances over which young Bill Dorn had not maintained control up-ended him.

He had been given what folk call "advantages"; that was because Bedelia Dorn, his mother, insisted. He had even had "schooling," though old Early Bill guffawed. He had had money to jingle at the age when jingling is sweet in the callow ear, so he had jingled it with the best of the Jinglers. He had knocked about a bit; he had "been places"; he was like the bear that went over the mountain. After his mother fluttered him a good-bye and slipped away to see if she could find the place where Early Bill would need somebody to see that his socks were dry, young Bill did some pretty precipitate knocking about. He was mighty glad and grateful to get back to the old Dorn Ranch.

During his prowlings he met many people, many kinds. One of them, encountered no farther away than Los Angeles, a city well known in Southern California at that time, which was long before Hollywood absorbed it, was a man who seemed to fit into Bill Dorn's life like a finger in a glove. That was Michael Bundy. The two clicked the first time they met.

They locked horns in a poker game in La Puebla de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles, which happens to be the proper name of the city now so pertly called Los or L.A. It was at a club in La Primevera Street, which the gringos have chopped down, for speed of all things, to Spring Street. The two plunged, but they plunged with method in their madness. The other players dropped out one by one; foregathering at the adjacent bar they were unanimous in their expressions of satisfaction at getting out with their skins intact. It was that sort of roofless game.

Bill Dorn was lean and dark, like a well-oiled spring ready to explode into expression of power released; Mike Bundy was blond, red-haired and dynamic, a favorite with women, also with men until they came to know him down to the boot heels, and Bundy was acute enough to make sure that few knew him as far as that. He was an adventurer and said so; he had knocked about as much as Dorn, and more; he was, as he himself said, a pioneer in black gold. That meant oil, at which most men, lacking Mike Bundy's vision, twitched their noses.

The two became inseparable. They became Damon and Pythias. Bill Dorn would have gone to hell for Mike Bundy. Mike Bundy would have gone to hell for an option on the

devil’s coal, sulphur and brimstone mines. That was how it was. And many outsiders realized it; some even tried to make it clear to Bill Dorn. One man, well-intentioned, had opened his mouth on the subject only to have Dorn, in sudden fury, knock him cold.

“Come out to the ranch, Michael,” Bill had invited one day. Bundy came and he stayed. He had money; he gave people the impression of having all the money there was. He nosed around for oil. The very first well he drilled on a near-by property brought in his damned black gold. The well never paid—that is, it never paid anyone but Mike Bundy. He spread out; he fished for suckers, at first with a hook, then with a net. He “promoted,” lovely word. On paper, where it’s as cheap to set down a long string of ciphers as it is to dot an “i,” he made money for many a credulous and suddenly avaricious, hitherto contented land owner. On paper—that was Bundy for you. Witness all those papers this afternoon on Bill Dorn’s table, gathered up at the end and snapped together in the sheriff’s rubber band.

It was another cutthroat poker game with Bill Dorn, only Dorn didn’t know it. He went in with his friend; he’d back his play to the limit. He did just that. And he did more. What else he did was the thing which stung him, now that the dead cards were spread out face up. He had gone to his own friends, and they were many, men who trusted Bill Dorn as some of them had trusted Early Bill before him, in the day when they had the quaint old saying, “His word is his bond.” Bonds were worth something then, and so was the word of a Dorn. When Bill Dorn said to his friends, “It’s absolutely safe; I give you my word for it,” they dug up their buried

hoardings and plunked down all they owned, all they could borrow. They saw themselves on the high road to becoming millionaires. Now they were ruined. So was Sudden Bill. But he wasn't thinking of his own losses; a poker player of the old school, he could shrug at them. But he couldn't shrug away the looks he knew he was bound to see in the eyes of his friends to whom he had said, trusting Mike Bundy to the limit, "It's absolutely safe; I give you my word for it."

His had ever been a light touch on life; he was Roll-Along Dorn; Here-We-Go Dorn; he had never known what it was to brood. But tonight he brooded. Those eyes of his, grown red-flecked, when not sharply focusing on some newcomer into his ken who might be Michael Bundy, gloomed bleakly into vast distances. More than one bartender who served him, and thus came under those smoke-dark eyes, experienced a creepy feeling and stood aside as soon as he could.

He entered, one after another, all the swinging doors facing the Plaza. Throngs continued to swell on the street, in the saloons and dance halls and gaming places, and he would have needed to be deaf and blind as well as preoccupied not to come early upon the explanation. When he understood, he merely made a wry face and went on, immediately forgetful of the cause of this latest Nacional mob scene. Men were damned fools, always chasing after the same thing—"There's a new Señorita who dances, and she sings, too, over at the place of One Eye," said the bartender in the border argot which passes as Spanish. "Don Bill, he has seen her, no?"

"Where in hell's Michael Bundy?" growled Don Bill.

So when at last he went to the place of One Eye, a burly, bulky Mexican bandit of the name of Pico Perez who boasted of the fact, if fact it were, that his lost eye had been gouged out by none less renowned than that immortal bandit El Toro Blanco, it was still seeking a man and without the remotest thought of a new Señorita who danced, and sang, too.

But there was no escaping that girl. Not a man of the many who thronged the place escaped her. She was as vital as life itself, as merry-mad in her dance act as a leaf blown along a March wind, as gay and triumphant, one would have said, as tossing banners of a victorious army—a girl, in a word, to strike any susceptible male square between the eyes. It was not that Here-We-Go Dorn was in the least susceptible on this night of all nights for him, but he did have two eyes and he could still see what was before him; and so he, like many another, saw the girl who danced at One Eye's place. But where others stared, Bill Dorn glared.

She disturbed him and he did not want to be disturbed. She wore a damnable little black mask which only made her beauty the more piquant. He worked up a sneer; with a glance, as though it were any affair of his, he as much as accused her of seeking to make a mystery of a trite, commonplace and altogether sordid bit of business. Hell take her and all her kind; he was looking for Michael Bundy.

He leaned back against the sixty foot bar, one high heel hooked on the foot rail, both elbows hooked on the bar, and gave the barnlike room a pretty thorough onceover. He overheard what two men, desert rats like the late Jake Fanning by the look and talk of them, were saying. The word

to rivet his attention was a man's name. They were talking about Mike Bundy.

"Shore," said the first man, and took off his drink garglingly, the way that old-timers, with desert alkali in their throats, knock off the first one. "Mos' folks think this is One Eye Perez's place; hell, it's Bundy's now. Bundy'll be showin' up here 'fore the night's over. An' if any man in Nacional has got the low-down on this last play, well, Mike Bundy's real apt to be that man."

"Shore," said the second man, who had throated his drink while the other spoke. Then he recognized Bill Dorn standing next to him and gave his partner a prod with his elbow. He added something in an undertone; that done he said for anyone to hear: "Shore, she's a cute trick. Wonder where Perez picked her up? Say, I'll pay that gal's rent any time." Bill Dorn looked down his nose at the man who had first spoken, looked at him with all the amiability of a man regarding another over the sights of a rifle. He demanded curtly:

"You say this is Michael Bundy's place now? You say he'll be showing up here?"

"Why, hello Bill," said the other. "I didn't see you. I—"

"This place used to belong to One Eye Perez," said Dorn. "How come it's Michael Bundy's now?"

"Perez needed money—he borrowed from Bundy—Bundy took a mortgage—Oh hell, Bill, you ought to know—" Bill Dorn left the bar and went to a small table, to sit alone. He was hungry but didn't know it. When a white-jacketed Mexican waiter with a damp towel in the crook of his arm came up and gave the table a swipe, thereafter giving his

towel a flick like a blacksnake, Bill Dorn ordered a drink. Then he shoved his hat back and rolled a cigarette and permitted his eyes to flick to the girl making a show of her pretty self on the platform at the end of the room. Three young gentlemen of confused Latin and Indian extraction, pianist, violinist and guitarist, made the music which lapped her movements in soft Durango airs.

How Born-a-Dorn Bill did resent that girl! She ought to have her pink and white face slapped, that's what she ought to have. She was the most graceful thing he ever saw, and hers was not the cheap stereotyped grace of the usual dance hall girl. She danced not as though trying to show her body to men, rather as one who so loved dancing that she couldn't help it; she gave the tremendously disturbing impression of having forgotten that she was being watched, of fancying herself quite alone somewhere in the woods, or on a seashore in the dawn or twilight. "Hell," snorted Dorn, and gulped his drink. He vowed he'd keep his eyes off her. There were too many like her—like her, that is, under the dainty white and pink exterior. He muttered sneeringly to himself: "Gilded tombs do worms enfold." He thought: "The world grows rotten, peopled with folk like Michael Bundy and this flip. Muchacho! Un otro aguadiente!"

He wasn't drunk. Don't get Sudden Bill Dorn wrong. But he was in a savage mood and his unaccustomed savagery had been nicely promoted along to a brutal stage by the fiery cargo he had taken aboard. He had not forgotten Mike Bundy; the only reason he was here was that he awaited with all the patience of a hungry tiger which, even starving, can control itself and wait—and wait. But meantime he

experienced an urge to spring up on the low stage and pull that girl's silly mask off and slap her face.

He grew conscious of three things: First, that the men all about him were talking excitedly about the stirring event which had brought the mob surging into Nacional; second, that now and then one or another of them would nudge his fellow and point Dorn out; third, that that damned dancing girl was watching him pretty nearly all the time now.

Now, Bill Dorn, down underneath the outward layers of him, was far more of a poet than he'd ever come to suspect; and with a great, soul-troubling love he loved beauty itself. Dawns and dusks and twilights over the desert, the wind in the mountain piñons, the satiny sheen of a thoroughbred's flank, the falling of water in a pool, a sudden unexpected strain of music—these and their kindred had the trick of putting a knot into his lean brown throat. He felt with the philosopher poet, whom he had once read, that if you get simple beauty and naught else you get about the best thing God invents. Here, in this girl, in the ripple and flow of her sweet young body down the current of music from hushed piano and whispering guitar and muted violin, was—perhaps he had had too much of the cursed border liquor!—beauty ineffable. Why, damn the cheap little wench, she looked like sweet sixteen pirouetting on the spray-misted crest of the rainbow-tinted wave which carries sweet sixteen along toward the inexorable years. Her voice, too, had reached him; she had sung just a few bars of a little old Mexican love song, a song as old in the South as La Cachucha itself, and her voice had been like the rest of her—all youth and innocence and lilt and loveliness.

She started to withdraw. There was a burst of applause. A flimsy curtain, more or less under the control of a grinning Chinese boy at the side, jerkily shut off the stage.

Bill Dorn stood up. He had been holding himself in check today, but after all he was Sudden Bill Dorn, Roll-Along Dorn, Here-We-Go Dorn, Born-a-Dorn Bill. At the side of the stage was a narrow passageway leading to the three rooms at the rear of the long adobe building, kitchen and dressing room and sanctum of One Eye Perez, former owner, present manager. Bill Dorn, wearing his hat perilously far back and walking on his heels, strode purposefully down that restricted hallway. He knew just where he would encounter her, coming down the three steps to the dressing room.

He intercepted her coming down. She saw him, read the purpose in his eyes, and made a dart in the murk of the three-foot passageway for the first door, that leading to One Eye Perez's office. Bill Dorn stepped swiftly in front of her and she brought up, frightened, her back to the wall and her hands lifted before her breast as if to fend him off.

"You make me sick," said Bill Dorn.

She gasped; he could hear the sharp intake of her breath. He glared; she could see even in this dim light the scornful anger in his eyes. He wanted to storm at her. Later, thinking things over, he rather guessed he did storm at her. She flattened herself against the wall, looking smaller and daintier, more fragile and fairylike than ever. He felt then that he could crush her between finger and thumb as easily as a silly butterfly; he felt also that he'd relish the job. Still he did not touch her as he started in to scold her.

“You’re no Mexican girl, no half-breed, no rag-tag of hell such as the border breeds,” he snarled at her. “You’re American, and to begin with you were damn fine American, of the finest stock in the world. Can’t I tell? And now, look at you! You cheap little gutter-snipe! Dancing in a place like this! Dragging loveliness in the muck! You’ve got no business here; you have no right to make your loveliness as cheap as a few dirty coins in some man’s pocket. Get out! Get the hell out of here—and keep going! Hear me? Beat it! And keep yourself decent—as decent as you are now, anyhow—or I’ll break your damned little neck!”

“You—you—” Breathless, choking up, her face scarlet under her sketchy little black mask, she got only that far when her voice left her. He saw the flash of her eyes; he didn’t know then what color they were; blue? violet? It was just that her anger, as hot as his own, darkened them.

“I tell you—” stormed Bill Dorn.

Just then her voice came back to her. She went straight on from where she had left off:

“You—you big ugly beast! The nerve of you, talking to me like that! You are out to do murder tonight, Mr. Bill Dorn; all keyed up to shoot a man—in the back, I suppose!—and you stand up and lecture me! You’d do better to slink off in your own slime and hide your ugly face in the good clean desert sand! You—you—you make me sick!”

Down here at the end of the hall they were out of sight of any in the barroom, out of hearing, too, since the men at the tables and strung along the bar were drowning with their own voices all other sounds. Bill Dorn lifted his hands as