

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

INSPIRED BY THE CBS RADIO AND TELEVISION PROGRAM SERIES **SUSPENSE**

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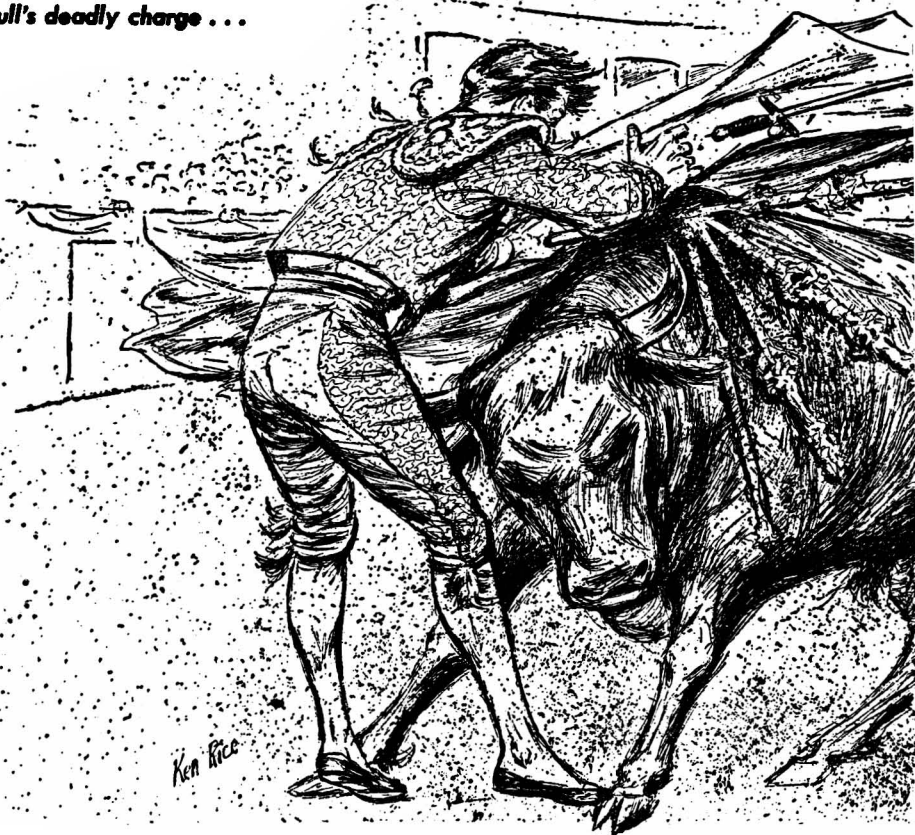
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Vengeance, fortune and
a man's honor rode this
bull's deadly charge . . .



EDUARDO MONTOYA promised to conduct me over the vineyards in the morning. I was weary after my long drive from France, although it hadn't taken many hours to reach the cool hacienda once I'd crossed into Spain. I was on a wine buying mission. But Montoya was an old friend as well as a business associate, and I couldn't help noticing the deep furrows in his lean and aristocratic features, the

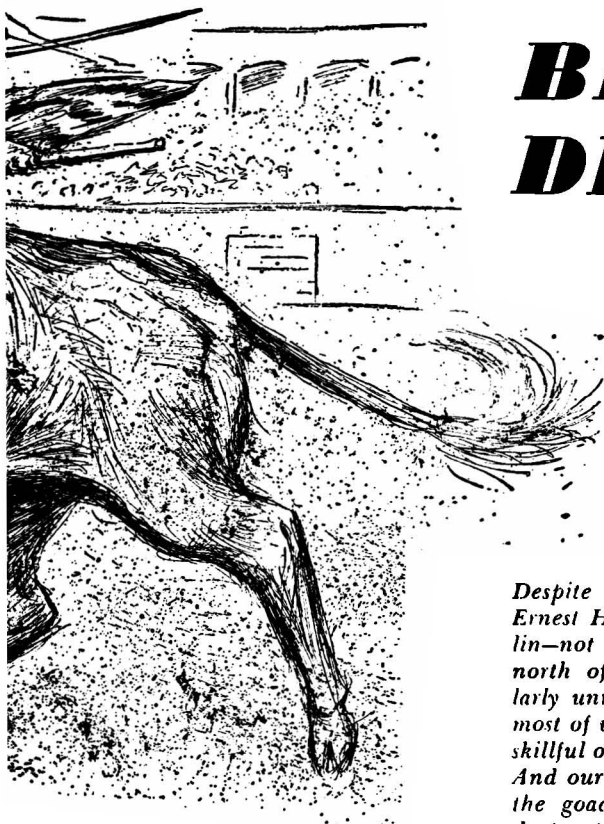
way he kept gnawing at his lower lip, his restless, shifting movements. "Ed," I called him by the American diminutive, "what's eating you?"

"The devil is in my heart, Stanley," He placed a hand with Latin expressiveness over his left breast.

This was the first time in two years that I'd visited him. His letters to me, exceedingly brief, had mentioned nothing of trouble. Montoya

BLACK DEATH

JOHN KRILL



drew in a deep breath and I could see the swift-beating tic just beneath the olive skin at the temple. His brown eyes probed deeply into mine. He was taller than I and much thinner. The thinness was padded by the conservative English tweeds he wore so well.

"Stanley, my good friend," he said in a voice that startled me with its sudden harshness, "we've stood up

Despite the best efforts of Tom Lea, Ernest Hemingway and Sidney Franklin—not to mention Bizet—Americans north of the border continue singularly unreceptive to the bullfight. To most of us, no danse macabre, however skillful or beautiful, can justify cruelty. And our sympathies generally lie with the goaded beast. So we can derive deep satisfaction from such a story as this. It relates of life, death and a magnificent gamble—in which the dice, for once, are not loaded against the bull.

for each other ever since we met at Yale nearly thirty years ago. But now I am about to do something you would instantly condemn. I'm going to kill a man."

I blinked my eyes in amazement.

"Hell's bells, Ed! You better lay off that green *vino*."

An angry sweep of his hand shut me up.

Then he told me in bitter words how Felix Lez, a handsome daredevil of a bullfighter, had played with the affections of Marie Rosa Montoya, promising to marry her. Lez then laughed off the promise. Marie Rosa had gone to the bull ring, had thrown herself in the path of a charging bull.

"My daughter lies in peace now these five long months." Montoya's lined face worked with bared sorrow. "But the hours of Felix Lez are numbered. He will meet death in the bull ring even as Marie Rosa did. It is all arranged."

"That's murder, Ed!"

"And my daughter's death was what?"

I couldn't sleep that night. I could hear the breeze stirring the heavily laden olive tree outside my window. I heard something else that made my heart compress with pity and fear for my old friend. His steady pacing over the flagstone walk in the garden below reached me plainly. Marie Rosa had been all that was left after Señora Montoya had died with her second child at its birth.

Perplexed, I tried to figure out whence came the sullen bellowing of an ox. None of these animals were used on the highly mechanized vineyard of over seven hundred acres. Toward morning I fell into an uneasy sleep. My last impressions were the steady pacing of Eduardo's feet and

the thundering bellows of the bovine.

Mounted on riding mules, Eduardo and I set out next day to inspect the ripening grapes. "Mules," he explained, "are more careful of where they trod than horses." The grapes with their heady odor stretched in long green rows ahead of us. Red earth separated the lines of green. A snorting and roaring of tractors filled the mild air as tenders began another day of nursing the fine muscat and tokay vines. Eduardo said very little.

"Where is the ox that bellows so loudly at night, Ed?" I asked.

I could see his jaws squeeze tighter together. "That was Black Death you heard, Stan. He and Felix Lez have a meeting next Saturday."

A chill ran up my spine. Was my friend going mad?

I didn't get to see "Black Death." But that did nothing to lessen the oppressing sense of calamity that weighed on me. I could sympathize with him. I had a wife and grown daughters. Probably I'd kill any man who hurt mine. No one knows what he'll do under pressure. Eduardo rode ahead, his proud back bowed, his voice listless as he answered my questions regarding the ripening grapes.

Later I rode into the mountain village that nestled at the foot of the range. Montoya's land ran over the flat plain beneath it. My Spanish was adequate enough to learn from the talk at the cantinas that something untoward was due to happen on the following Saturday. Señor Eduardo Montoya was wagering huge sums of money on his bull

against Felix Lez, the finest matador Spain had seen since the glowing days of the great Perez. Rumor had it that the Montoya holdings had been mortgaged to obtain additional betting money. And all the bets had been promptly covered. For Felix Lez was popular, and who in Spain had ever bet on a bull? It was unheard of. I rode back feeling sick.

Saturday came and my host and I went to the ring. The festive crowds filled it like bees fill a hive. Sand gleamed goldenly in the arena. Bright colors, waving flags, the surf-like murmur of thousands of voices, the rasping bellows of hidden fighting bulls, none of these things served to thaw the ice that sheathed my heart. Here was the stage for tragedy. If the bull were killed, Eduardo would be a pauper on the instant. If the bull won, it would mean a crippled, possibly a dead, Felix Lez.

I could sense Montoya's sudden tensing as the lithe, gold-embroidered figure of Felix Lez entered the bull ring to a wild roar of applause. Eduardo smiled grimly as a hoarse bellow thundered sullenly from the heavily barred chutes. I'd heard that bellow before. The warning rumble of Black Death!

Minor stars entered the ring with Lez, and killed their bulls first. They were saving Lez for the climax. Mighty animals drove at puny men in the arena. Always it was the cape they charged, only to receive the steel for their efforts. I began to worry over Black Death's chances. After all, Lez was Spain's greatest matador. . . .

Suddenly I realized what I was

thinking. Was I wishing for the bull to kill Lez? If not, was I hoping Lez would kill the bull and cause my friend's final disaster? My mind whirled in a confusion of irrational contradictions. Then at last the slim and incredibly agile Felix Lez was gliding into the ring. The hot sun shone on his heavily pomaded black hair, struck glints of golden flame from his short *casquilla*, heavily braided and ornamented tight knee-pants faced in gold, tighter silk stockings and light black slippers—all showing off the superb body to perfection. This was Felix Lez.

I glanced at my companion. Never had I seen a face so molded in profound hatred. Thunder came from the right. A huge bull, pale horns sweeping wide from a pure black head, burst past the unbarred gate. He stood pawing the yellow dust, eyes rolling wildly. This was Black Death.

My companion's soft sigh sounded like a prayer. I kept my eyes on the barbaric scene in the arena. Cheers rose from the thousands of blood-thirsty throats urging the confident matador to do his best. Cries of advice pattered down on his ears. Black Death stood uncertainly near the gate refusing to enter farther into the blood-soaked pit. The cheers for Lez turned into hoots and cries of contempt for the laggard bull.

"Who is that rabbit's raiser?" a deep voice bellowed.

"Eduardo Montoya!" a shrill voice answered mockingly.

The cries ran swiftly over the blood-mad multitude. They jibed

and jeered Montoya. Risking a glance at him, I saw his face composed and unheeding of the verbal abuse heaped on him. Anger filled my heart. I reached for his hand and gave it a hard squeeze. "Thank you, my friend," he murmured. "Let the fools cry out. They are gazing on their idol for the last time."

Again the icicles began to grow somewhere in my insides. The bull was standing still except for thrusting his massive horned head this way and that as if questing the air for danger. "Throw the mouse out! Throw him into the soup kettle! A sheep has more courage!" came the angry cries from every direction. The bull took a step forward.

Lez began to clown. I'd heard that he himself had accepted most of Montoya's bets, through go-betweens. He tied the red cape to the rear of his trousers, then, back to bull, he ran across the ring. The red cloth waved tauntingly in the breeze that pursued Lez. The big bull ignored the matador.

A rider on a horse heavily padded with protective canvas urged the jaded, fearful nag on with cruel rowels. He headed for the motionless black beast. Jeers filled the air and rubbish flew in the direction of the bull. The frightened horse kept rearing back and whinnying his dread. But the inhuman Spanish bit in its helpless mouth gave it no alternative but that of going on. Black Death ignored it completely. Exasperated howls dinned out.

A banderillero suddenly darted to the huge bull's side and with vicious

expertness planted two banderillas in the mighty black shoulders. Black Death leaped forward in a swirl of smoky yellow dust. I could see the shaft of the darts thrusting up from the neck, the little cloth streamers fluttering from them. A mighty roar beat out like the pound of a stormy sea. At last the reluctant bull had been goaded into action.

I don't know much about bulls. I never trusted them after having been chased up a tree by an angry Hereford in my youth. But I sensed that something was wrong with the one in the arena below me. Black Death kept thrusting his head forward and moving with a distressing uncertainty.

The bile grew hot within me as another and another dart was thrust into the magnificent shoulders. Felix Lez stood in an attitude of complete boredom in the center of the ring. His eyes had searched the boxes and had located Eduardo and myself. To my host he raised a hand in a sweep indicating his contempt for Black Death. Old as I am, I felt like leaping into the ring and hanging a good old American uppercut on that olive jaw.

Montoya was always a proud man. I could hear his breath whistle in angrily at the matador's gesture. "Pig," he whispered coldly, "your moments are numbered." I shifted closer to him. Something hard in his pocket dug into my side. I knew what he had there. The feel was unmistakable. It was a revolver.

There was only one conclusion to draw.

If the bull lost, then my friend would shoot Felix Lez and probably himself. What a rotten mess! The lighted match fell from my shaking hand. Eduardo lit his lighter and held it out to me with a hand that betrayed no trembling.

Felix Lez was evidently enjoying the comedy of a bull that was heavily backed with money and which failed to show any pugnacity. Black Death bawled with the pain of the banderillas and wheeled about with hooking horns at the tormentor. A derisive cheer welled from the impatient mob. A side glance at Eduardo revealed him holding a tiny bit of lint plucked from his trouser cuff, in the palm of his hand.

I stared in amazement at his concentration as a fickle breeze moved the bit of fluff this way and that. The fluff floated off in a different direction from its previous movements in the faint breeze.

Montoya sucked in his breath. His eyes shone with a light like that of a feasting tiger's. "Now!" he exclaimed.

Something was happening in the ring. Something startling and to me inexplicable. A long and particularly profane series of jeers faded into a gasp of surprise. Black Death was charging madly across the ring at the idle form of Felix Lez.

I sat frozen. Superb showman that he was—and I had to admire the handsome devil then—Felix Lez scornfully pretended not to see the onrushing beast until the last moment. Like a ripple in a swift stream he moved out of the way. A growing cloud of dust enveloped him.

Black Death wheeled with a surprising agility for a beast so huge. Lez held out the taunting cape. A supercilious smile played on his confident features. A sound like that of a sudden gust of air under great pressure suddenly broke from the crowd. Black Death's horns shot out to reach the man and not the baffling red cape. In the very last limit of time Lez threw himself back. A long and dazzling length of gold braid dangled from his gaudy *casquilla* where the sharp horn had grazed the lower ribs.

Surprise and fear crowded the matador's features now. His taut face was the dull gray of sour rye dough. Desperately he shook the blood-red cloth in the face of the wheeling bull. A deep silence struck the stands.

The bull had had direction after wheeling. Down on the slender man he hurled himself. The sun gleamed on the sweating black hide and red blood from the imbedded darts shone like brilliant dye against his ebon neck. The widespread horns with their sharp thin tips were leveled at man and cape.

The terrible hypnotic trance in which I was gripped was broken by a shrill chuckle from the man at my side. The chuckle became a burst of near-hysterical laughter. I jolted Eduardo in the side with my fist and he fell silent.

Below me a desperate man held out a cape as a buffer against death. The charging bull was on him again. Again it was the man and not the cape at which the mighty head aimed. Again sheer agility saved the

now sweating matador. He suddenly waved his hand for aid as the bull wheeled once more.

That was the undoing of Lez. For that fleeting instant he had taken his eyes from the snorting animal. Assistants scurried into the ring hoping to distract Black Death's attention from the sorely winded and thoroughly frightened matador. But the bull with Satanic wile ignored them and the fluttering cloths.

The sword gleamed with a liquid brightness in Lez's hands now. Hope shone in his eyes that just this once the bull would charge muleta instead of man, permitting Lez to find the vital spot at junction of spine and neck. A great tension stilled all sound in the stands. This was such a fight as none had ever seen.

The bull bore down on the erect figure of Felix Lez. Abandoning the classic style, he drew back his arm. Then like a lightening stroke the sword lashed forward. A sobbing sigh broke from the tense stands. The blade slithered from the bony head as once more the red cloth was ignored. A rag doll went soaring high into the air.

The bull was instantly at the spot where the limp figure landed in a grotesque heap. The ring swarmed with men all trying to haze the crazed animal away from its prostrate and motionless victim. But once again the sweeping span of horns hooked into the gaudy clothes and past them into flesh. Once again the doll sailed high into the air. In a frenzy now, the huge beast began to gore and paw the inert lump of flesh.

One of the assistants desperately snatched up the fallen sword and drove it deep into the ribs of Black Death.

The bull stood still for one awful moment. Then it dropped without a sound on the body of Felix Lez.

Next day was Sunday. I accompanied my host to the great cathedral for mass. In my mind I wondered at his serenity. His pockets bulged with the enormous amount of money he had won. I said, "Why are you carrying all that money, Ed?"

He didn't answer. My mind mulled over what he had told me about Lez. Lez was vain and used a specially compounded and heavily perfumed hair pomade. Montoya had secured a quantity by bribing Lez's chemist. Smearing himself liberally with it, my host temporarily blinded the black bull with a painless belladonna derivative. Then he began to beat the chained and helpless beast every day. Unable to see his tormentor, the animal charged by scent as far as the thick chain would permit.

That fatal day the bull with the drugged eyes had hunted down his victim by the scent of the pomade. That was why the cape had been ignored. Black Death couldn't see the fluttering cloth. But he could smell—and he charged directly at the source of the odor.

In church, my host sought out the priest after the services had ended, and placed a huge bundle of money in his surprised hands. "For masses to the repose of the soul of Felix Lez, Father," he whispered.