



# SPICY-ADVENTURE STORIES

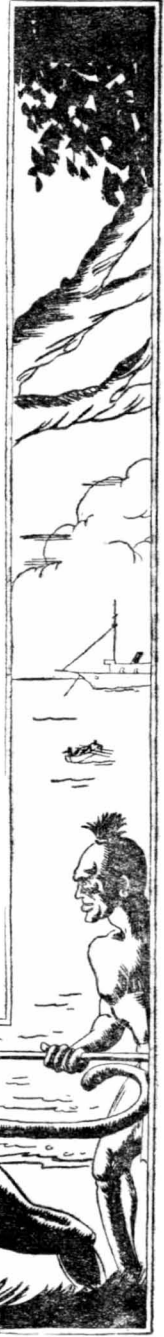
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# CROWN of THORNS



*Despite all the girl's pleading, he went on investigating the Penitentes, their evil rites, floggings, crucifixions. . . .*

AS he stepped from the comparative shade of the railroad coach to the uncovered station platform at *Las Palmas*, Tod Hunter felt the broiling mid-day sun beating down on his shoulders and head in recurrent waves of unbearable heat.

He pushed his panama back on his head, mopped a handkerchief over his perspiring face, and headed for the tiny,

clapboard station that bore the almost unreadable legend:

LAS PALMAS  
N. M.

*Sante Fe 135 m.—390 m. Phoenix, Ariz.*

There wasn't a human being in sight. A drooping, raw-boned horse—dirty,

## By ARTHUR WALLACE



sickly grey like everything else under the hot, hellish sun—stood immobile in the shafts of a light, dusty carriage.

The sound of the station door creaking on its hinges as Tod pushed it open, was harshly alien. He stepped inside. A swarthy half-breed was stretched out on the lone bench, his straw sombrero covering the upper part of his face.



There was no evidence of a station agent nor anyone resembling a station agent. Only the sleeping half-breed. Tod patted his sweat-soaked handkerchief to his brow. Now how the hell was he supposed to get up to Colonel Edgren's place? Walk? The very thought of footing it under that blanket of heat made him weak.

He was about to awaken the half-breed when the man rubbed his eyes, spat. He mumbled something under his breath, then squinted at Tod.

"You go *La Casa del Toro, señor!*"

*La Casa del Toro*—The House of the Bull—was Colonel Edgren's cattle ranch. "Si," Tod replied.

The half-breed eyed the big suitcase, gave it a wide berth as he shuffled out of the station. Tod, picking up the bag, followed.

It was almost a surprise to see the decrepit horse lift its head when the half-breed stepped into the carriage. Tod slid his bag into the back seat.

The carriage got under way. Tod breathed sparingly.

"Is it hot like this all the time?" he questioned.

The half-breed took a full minute to reply. "Si," he said.

Tod gritted his teeth. One more "Si" and he'd go slightly nuts. Rather than run the risk of insanity, he lapsed into silence until the horse, threatening at any moment to give up its equine ghost, had pulled the carriage to the crest of a small hill. Straight ahead, almost incongruous on this barren, grey landscape, stood a huge white house, its gilt weather vane sucking in the most brilliant rays of the sun.

TEN minutes later, as Colonel Edgren, big and rangy, led him into a shade-cooled conservatory, Tod commented on

the half-breed's loquaciousness in reverse.

The wealthy ranch owner laughed. "Pedro? No, he isn't very talkative, especially when he's angry?"

Tod accepted the long, cool drink a house boy brought on a tray. He soothed his parched throat with a long swallow.

"So that's what it was. I wondered."

"Yes. Pedro's our station man. He meets the trains when we have guests coming. My daughter entertained quite a crowd from the Coast last week. Pedro hasn't recovered from it yet."

Tod's brow wrinkled. "Your daughter? Mr. Bellows didn't say anything about your having a daughter." He stopped short. Something happened to his eyes. They remained fixed on the entrance to the conservatory. The pupils dilated. His mouth remained open.

There, standing in the doorway, one hand on a curving hip, was a girl as gorgeously impossible as the view from the station had been unreal. Long, ebony hair fell about her shoulders, framing a face that was almost fictional in its beauty. Dark eyes and voluptuously carmine lips vied for Tod's attention.

She was wearing a simple white linen dress, but its very simplicity served as a clarion for her maturely slim figure. The bodice fell caressingly over soft, full breasts as though even the inert material appreciated its favored position. Her waist was narrow and hips were a not-too-pronounced lyre.

Tod got to his feet. "My daughter, Aline," Colonel Edgren boomed. "Aline, this is Mr. Hunter."

She smiled and extended her hand in greeting. Tod took her long, tapering fingers, half-expecting them to dissolve in his palm. But they were real. Cool and real. Her voice was a reality, too. Smooth and low-pitched.

"I've been waiting to see you . . . anxiously." She withdrew her hand, slid into a chair. "Please sit down."

Tod sat. He could not help noting the rhythm of her breasts as she settled herself. His heart thumped against his ribs and the roof of his mouth went dry. The ecru warmth of her sun-tanned throat where the low V of her neckline bared it was something Tod could almost feel. She leaned forward. The bodice fell away. There was a definite color line where the brown of her throat became the milky white of her lush breasts.

"You're not at all what I expected," she said with ingratiating candor.

Colonel Edgren chuckled. "Aline expected someone with long hair and a ferocious temper."

"Dad!" reprovingly.

"What did you expect?" Tod asked.

A flush crept over her cheeks. "Well—I—I rather expected you'd be—well—oh, I don't know! I just didn't think you'd be like—like you are!"

Colonel Edgren leaned over and kissed his daughter's forehead. "Now that you've got your writer, kidlets, you can show him around the place." He addressed Tod. "Bellows said you'd want to be left severely alone while you were working. I fixed up a little bungalow on the hill. You won't have to come down to the house unless you feel the urge. I'm sure you'll be comfortable there. I've got to run along now. We're shipping steers tomorrow and there's plenty to do. You'll have dinner with us tonight, of course. Pedro will drive you to the cottage after dinner."

ALONE with Aline, Tod lost some of his usual composure. It was a mystery how anything so lush and lovely could remain that way in this dry, searing climate. He feasted his eyes on her

for long moments, drank in her dark, sensual beauty.

Her eyelids fluttered and her cheeks pinked. She stood up, shaking out her dress. Her breasts quivered under the bodice.

"Would you like to see the corrals? Or maybe you want to wash up or change?"

Tod drew a deep breath. "Your dad said to show me around the place. I insist on it."

The sun was an orange disk in the western sky when Aline led Tod back to the ranch house. "I don't suppose you'll ever be coming down to see us, will you?" she said.

Tod came as close to her as he dared. His eyes ran over the swell of her firm breasts. "I'm wondering whether I'll ever be able to stay away and work! If I had known your dad had a daughter like you, I—"

"You wouldn't have come to New Mexico!" challengingly.

"I would have taken a *plane!*"

A tall, broad-set man came through the wide-flung French doors. He hesitated, doffed his fawn felt sombrero. His eyes flickered under dark, shaggy brows.

"Hello, Del," Aline greeted. "Del, this is Tod Hunter. Mr. Hunter. Mr. Saunders. Del is dad's ranch manager."

Tod shook the proffered hand. Its grip was firm and hard. His eyes met the ranch manager's. For a moment he thought he detected a suspicious glint in their steel-grey depths.

"Pleased to know you, Mr. Hunter," Del Saunders said. Then, to Aline: "That dogie died."

"Oh!" One hand came to her throat. Her forearm pressed against a rounded breast. "A new-born calf I was nursing," she explained to Tod. Moisture glazed her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Tod said. He felt a little silly.

LATER, long after dinner, when he and Aline stood beside the carriage that was to take him to the cottage, he wanted to ask about Del Saunders. Whether or not there was anything between them. It bothered him. The way Saunders looked at her—possessively.

"I'll ride up with you," Aline said.

Tod thrilled. He helped her into the carriage. For a fleeting blissful moment his knuckles brushed against the warm hill of a breast. Hot waves rolled up his arm.

It was a good three miles to the cottage on the hill. Tod followed Aline inside. Pedro, still sullen and uncommunicative, remained in the carriage.

"Think you'll like it?" Aline queried. "I fixed it up."

Tod glowed. "It's perfect, except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"It's so far from the ranch house."

She changed the subject abruptly. "I forgot to ask you. What are you going to write? Fiction?"

"No, I'm after facts this time. I want to do a series of articles on the *Penitentes*. I—"

Aline's body went rigid. Her eyes bulged. The color drained from her cheeks. Impulsively she stepped forward and gripped Tod's shoulders.

"No!" she gasped. "You mustn't!"

His hands dropped gently on her hips. Looking down he could see her globular breasts almost touching his chest.

She drew away quickly as hoofbeats sounded outside the cottage, but not before Del Saunders on a big roan had seen the tableau through the open door.

"Don't mention it to anyone until I

talk with you," she whispered. "Please, for my sake."

SAUNDERS stepped into the cottage. "Sorry to interrupt," he mumbled. His lips were thin-drawn. "You know your dad doesn't like you traipsing around after dark, Aline."

"I—I thought I'd ride up with Mr. Hunter, Del. Just—just to get him acquainted with the cottage." She forced a smile. Her eyes flashed a warning message to Tod. "Good-night."

Del Saunders lingered. "I'll send a spig girl up tonight, Hunter. She'll do your cooking and cleaning. The coyotes are liable to bother you the first few nights but you'll get used to them." He flicked a short whip against his breeches leg. "You won't have no call to come down to the house"—an ominously significant pause—"unless you want to. Good-night."

Tod stood at the door until the carriage melted into the darkness. Even longer, when there was nothing but the star-studded night. He wondered why Aline had reacted so peculiarly at his mention of the *Penitentes*, that strange cult of religious fanatics whose pagan ceremonies were shrouded in deep, dark mystery.

Was the cult, whose worship reputedly consisted of whip-lashing and torture, as dangerous to outside meddlers as it was alleged to be? Was it possible that here, within a stone's throw of modern civilization, ghost-figures practiced horrors that no stranger, without fear of disaster, might look upon?

Tod had heard stories of how the *Flagellantes* of the strange sect scourged themselves by rolling in cactus until their naked bodies were torn and bloody. How, at the esoteric conclusion of their mad ceremony, one of their number sub-

mitted to crucifixion. How his flesh was lashed with bull whips as he hung on the cross. How, when the last breath of life had left his tortured, gore-smeared frame, he was cut down and carried off to secret burial in the black hills.

But was it all true? Aline's startling reaction to his mention of the *Penitentes*

lent credence to the stories told. His blood tingled with excitement.

"You may be in for a hot time, Hunter," he said aloud.

Before the sound of his own voice died away, Tod was conscious of an answering wail. It hung on the same high-pitched note almost indefinitely,



The whip whistled through the air, lashed across the helpless girl.

slipping into the nothingness beyond hearing in a pitiless tremolo. It was a cry replete with unsoothed anguish; a toneless threnody of inhuman sorrow.

He stepped out into the night. Again the wail seemed to creep out of the darkness beyond the hills, curling and twisting like a thing alive.

Coyotes! Of course! Tod chided himself for permitting a chill to run up his spine. Hadn't Saunders mentioned the coyotes? He turned back to the cottage, stopping short as a new sound broke through the ghastly wailing like an obligato to the main theme.

*Swish! Swish! Swish!*

Tod held his breath. He marked the steady rhythm of it.

*Swish! Swish! Swish! Swish!*

He knew then that he was listening, not to the cry of a coyote, but to a human plaint torn from the lips of those who were being scourged with whips! He was hearing, for the first time, the ghastly litany of the *Penitentes!*

Forgotten was Aline's dire warning. Tod raced into the cottage, opened his bag and dug out his small camera with its automatic flash attachment.

A BRIGHT quarter-moon made his progress over the rough terrain not so hazardous. He climbed the hill, drawing nearer and nearer to the sounds of torture. *Swish! Thud! Swish! Thud!* He could almost feel the barbarous leather strands biting into his own back.

At the crest of the hill he stopped to draw his breath. The sight that met his eyes drove his blood back to his madly pumping heart. There, in the valley below, slowly ascending the very hill on which he stood, was a thin, wavering line of men and women, heads bowed and bodies slumped as though in bondage.

Leading the procession was a man

whose upper torso was naked and bloody. The cross bar of a huge wooden crucifix was hooked over his left shoulder, the upright dragging behind him.

Tod dropped to one knee. His scalp was crawling and the muscles of his face twitched. It was almost as though some invisible hand had drawn back the curtain of time to let him look upon the hideous, uncivilized barbarism of the Dark Ages. This was no vista of the twentieth century—those whips, hissing through the air and tearing unmercifully into human flesh.

On they came through the thin, silvery moonlight, the procession of penitence, naked backs wet with life blood, wailing with the horrible pain of their self-inflicted wounds. Even the women had bared their breasts to the stinging bite of the lash. Some wore about their necks garlands of barbed cactus. With each slow, measured step they took, the hard, dry spines raked their skin, drawing blood that trickled into the valley of their breasts and formed a crimson network over their stomachs.

As the leader, bearing his cross, approached, Tod drew back, crouching behind a dwarfed, scrubby *pinon* tree. When they reached the hill-top the cross was placed on the ground. He who had been carrying it stood for a moment immobile, his arms outstretched. It was then that Tod became witness to the horrible state of the man's upper torso.

His back and shoulders were raw. The flesh of his upper arms hung in bloody shreds. His face was ghastly pale, the eyes hidden behind a black mask. Not a sound escaped his writhing lips as he approached the cross and stretched himself out on it. The wailing of the others increased in volume. They swayed back and forth, lifting



masked faces to the star-lit canopy of the sky.

One of their number stepped forward, a heavy mallet in his hand. At once Tod realized what was about to happen. *They were going to nail the whipped man to the cross!*

**I**N the timeless moment before the first mallet blow sounded dully, Tod suffered the tortures of hell. He knew he should have tried to stop this infamous, cabalistic ritual. But he knew, too, the folly of revealing himself to these unreasoning fanatics.

Suddenly, before he realized it, the work of nailing the penitent was done. The wailing became a *largo pathétique* as the rough-hewn rood was raised with its human burden.

Tod's stomach turned. His fingers were ice as he brought the camera up and focused it on the unbelievable scene. The pinioned man's head dropped to his lacerated chest. Women clustered at the base of the cross, tearing at their breasts and giving voice to chilling cries.

To make use of the flash would be to court danger. There was enough light from the moon. Tod clicked the camera shutter. He took six shots. All of the *Penitentes* were down on their knees in a circle about their human sacrifice. Blood dropped on their bowed heads from the martyr's pierced hands and feet.

Nauseous and cold with the horror of it all, Tod backed slowly down the hill. He was within sight of the cottage when he turned to look again on the fearful scene. It was a shadowed silhouette against the sky, a motionless tableau that, from a distance, seemed unreal. No longer was the night pregnant with human wailing. All was quiet; deathly quiet.

Suddenly, and without warning, a deep, throbbing voice broke the silence. Tod spun around. A tall, masked figure, shrouded in a black cloak, faced him.

"*La camera, senior,*" he said, pointing to the camera in Tod's hand.

Tod knew what he meant. How had they known he was crouching behind that scrubby tree? Were they mystics as well as fanatics? Tod's mind raced. How to get by this masked giant with his precious exposed films. He backed away.

"You can't have it!"

"*La camera, senior,*" the low voice repeated. "*Prontamente!*"

**T**OD came off his feet in a lunge, his right fist balled. There was a taunting, guttural laugh from the depths of the giant's cowl. Hard knuckles crashed against Tod's jaw. He lost his grip on the camera case but he managed, somehow, to keep his balance. He ducked under a hurtling fist, closing with his mysterious antagonist.

Down they went to the dry floor of the mesa, Tod struggling to reach the other's throat. The shroud-like cape was an effective barrier. Time and again Tod's head snapped back as a granite fist crashed into his face. His lips were puffed and bleeding. He could taste the warm, salty blood. His head was beginning to spin and thunder roared in his ears.

The end came quickly. A powerful knee shot up and buried itself in his stomach. Red and orange lights flashed before Tod's eyes. Every nerve in his body screamed with a hell of pain. The very intensity of it acted as a numbing analgesic. He felt the force of a blow on his head. The twinkling lights disappeared. There was only darkness.

TOD was in the cottage, stretched out on a bed, when he regained consciousness. He blinked wonderingly at the pretty, dark-skinned girl who hovered over him applying wet compresses to his throbbing head.

The girl smiled. "*El Señor* feel better?"

It seemed a little incongruous for a man who had just been out cold to be thinking about feminine charm, but despite his condition Tod did not fail to notice how the girl's ripe, young breasts bellied out the bodice of her faded cotton dress. She was either Spanish or Mexican or a little of each. She had the full, voluptuous lips of women born in the hot countries; the dark, flashing eyes.

Tod sat up. Del Saunders was leaning against the door jamb. "Didn't take you long to get messed up, did it, Hunter?"

Tod grinned foolishly. "What happened?"

"That's what I was wondering. I brought Carlota up to take care of the place. We didn't find you in the cabin. You were laying out on the mesa about a hundred yards up the hill, cold as a cucumber. What hit you?"

"Hit me?" Tod remembered Aline's warning. "Why—er—nothing hit me. I—I guess I stumbled and fell. Maybe a rock—"

Saunders pointed to the candid camera on the bureau. It was a twisted shambles as though someone had smashed it with a hammer.

"That yours?"

Tod nodded. "Er—yes. I—I wanted to get some pictures of the moon coming up over—"

The ranch manager approached the bed. His voice dropped. "Don't be a fool, Hunter. I know what you were

after. You're not the first man who tried to photograph a *Penitentes* ceremony. They don't like strangers around. You'd be smarter to leave them alone. There are graves in the hills waiting for meddlers. Take my advice." He pulled down the brim of his sombrero. "I'll be seeing you."

Carlota followed him out the door. She returned when the echo of his horse's hoofbeats could no longer be heard.

"*Tiene el señor hambre? Quiere a beber?*" she queried.

Tod shook his head. "No, I'm not hungry or thirsty." He swung his feet off the bed, unlaced his shoes. Carlota watched him, seemingly fascinated. She backed to the door when he fumbled with his belt.

"*Buenas noches, señor,*" she murmured.

TOD looked up. The light from the front room silhouetted her curved figure beneath the thin, cotton dress. She was a big girl, but beautifully proportioned. Her breasts were plump and mature, her hips arched with Junoesque fullness.

"Good night, Carlota," Tod said. "Where do you sleep?"

She pointed to a pallet near the front door, slipped quietly out of the bedroom. Tod undressed, blew the lamp light out, and slid beneath the covers. The door between the bedroom and the front room was open. He watched as Carlota, in full view, reached for the hem of her frock and lifted it over her head. Tod's pulses pounded as her lush, brown body was bared. Nothing broke the dusky sweep of undulating curves. She raised her arms, tightening the globes of her splendid bosom. The lyred softness of her hips and the ivory warmth

pony, galloped to the door. Worry lines creased her brow as she entered the cottage.

"You didn't listen to—" She stopped



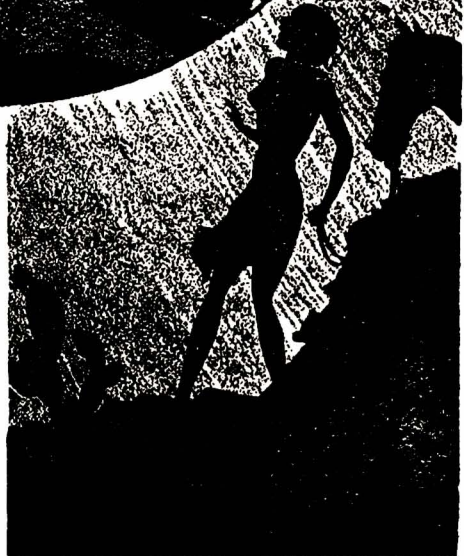
The black-cowled figure had a giant's strength.

of her flesh-perfect thighs gleamed in the flickering light of an oil lamp.

For a fleeting moment she faced the bedroom door, eyes glistening. Then the light went out and darkness enveloped her glorious nudity.

It was a long time before Tod fell asleep.

**H**E awoke with the sun streaming in the window. No sooner had he finished the tasty breakfast Carlota set before him, then Aline, astride a piebald



short, noticing Carlota. Her eyes flashed a message to Tod. "How about looking my calves over? They're in the south corral, not far from here. We can walk."

When they were beyond earshot of the cottage, Aline spoke. Her voice was strained. "Why didn't you listen to me? I told you not to think of bothering with the *Penitentes*. Del said they attacked you."

They had crossed a knoll and the cottage was no longer visible. As far as the eye could see there was only rolling mesa, dry and sun-scorched.

"The report is greatly exaggerated," Tod retorted, smiling. "Only *one* of them attacked me, and he didn't, really. I attacked him."

"Tod!" Her hands gripped his arms. "You must promise me not even to think of trying to get information about them! Please promise me."

Her ripe, red lips were only an inch from his mouth. He could almost taste their sweetness. Her breasts rose and fell tumultuously beneath a closely knitted sweater.

"Does it mean that much to you, Aline?" he questioned.

She hesitated, dropped her eyes. Tod slipped his arms about her waist, drew her close. His heart pounded against her soft, yielding breast. He felt as though he had known this girl for years rather than hours.

"Yes, it does," Aline said softly, throwing her head back, luring him with her moist, parted lips.

Their mouths joined and their bodies blended in a fervent embrace. Tod moved one hand up over her hip, along the curve of her waist, following the sweetness of her back to the shoulder. His lips slid down to the hollow of her throat.

Neither of them saw a rider come up over a brown hill, rein in, shield his eyes

from the glaring sun. Neither of them knew that Del Saunders had seen them locked in each other's arms, drinking the sweet nectar of love. They were alone with their ecstasy, the thrilling nearness of each other. When, after long moments, they drew apart, the rider had disappeared from the horizon.

Aline's breath was hot against Tod's cheek as she pulled her lips away slowly. Words were without meaning now. The brightness of her eyes and rise and fall of her swollen breasts spoke volumes.

"I love you," she whispered.

Tod embraced her again. He kissed the smoothness of her cheeks, her throat, until she quivered with the ardor of the caress, until her bosom rose majestically, proudly, happily.

"Father wants to see you, Tod," she said at length. "You can spend the day at the house. My pony will carry both of us."

COLONEL EDGREN was waiting on the porch of the ranch house. He led Tod to the conservatory. "You'll have to give up this mad plan of investigating the *Penitentes*, Hunter," he said, his lips set in a hard, thin line. "I won't be responsible for what happens. Del tells me you tried to photograph their ceremony last night. It's a wonder you're alive today. They won't hesitate to string you up next time."

Tod marveled at the respect given to the weird pagan sect. It was almost beyond belief that nobody seemed to question their right to conduct bestial ceremonies.

"I don't get the whole set-up," he replied. "Who's at the head of this fantastic outfit?"

"Nobody knows. Religious fanatics are secretive. Twice a year they elect a *cristo* for their cross ceremony. The



titular head is the *Hermano Mayor*, but his indentity is shrouded in mystery. Most of the half-breeds in this section are members of the society. One never knows whether he is addressing a cultist or not. However, I must ask you to give up your notion of delving into their secrets. Have I your word, Hunter?"

Tod looked across at Aline. Her eyes pleaded and the hand that rested on her breast trembled.

"Yes, you have my word, colonel."

Aline's face brightened. "I'm so glad," she said. "I was terribly afraid something might happen."

She waited until her father had excused himself, then came into Tod's arms, giving him her warm lips and holding her hands tight against his cheeks.

**I**T was after ten that night when Tod, having refused Colonel Edgren's offer of an escort, mounted Alpine's piebald and started up the mountain toward his cottage. A mile from the ranch house he heard the thud of approaching hooves. He reined in, waited for the rider to come out of the dark night.

It was Del Saunders, astride a big roan. He leaned over and rested his hand on the pommel of the piebald's Mexican saddle.

"Another thing, Hunter," he said, each word measured. "It might not be wise to pay too much attention to Miss Edgren."

Tod laughed. "Possibly not wise, Saunders, but pleasant."

The ranch manager's white teeth flashed. "You'd do best to keep away from her!"

"And better if I didn't. Thanks for the tip but I prefer to take my chances." He snapped the reins. "Good-night, Saunders."

He expected the ranch manager to follow, but looking back he saw horse and

rider moving swiftly towards the ranch house.

Tod dismounted at the door of the cottage, tied the piebald to a post, loosened the saddle girths. His hand was on the knob of the door when he heard a muted feminine scream from the interior of the cottage. He swung the door open.

Carlota was crouched on the floor, a crooked arm protecting her fear-twisted face. Straddling her, a short thick whip in his right hand, was a leering, dark-skinned halfbreed. The whip hissed through the air, lashing across the girl's bare thighs. Either the braided leather or the halfbreed's clawing fingers had torn away her dress bodice, half baring the creamy brown plumpness of her breasts.

The breed wheeled as the door slammed back. He dropped the whip, snatching a long-bladed knife from his belt. Tod knew better than to rush in blindly. He waited for the snarling killer's initial lunge. It came with lightning speed, the knife blade flashing in an overhead arc. Tod ducked. Lethal steel clenched in murderous fingers, whizzed over his shoulder, a hair's breadth from his neck. It was the chance Tod wanted. He caught the halfbreed's arm, slid from under it and twisted it with all the strength at his command. The knife slid from inert, muscle-tortured fingers, quivered as its point stuck in the wooden floor.

But the half-breed was far from through. He wrenched loose and struck out, landing his fist on the point of Tod's jaw. The blow stunned Tod and before he could clear his head the half-breed was on him, bearing him down.

Dazed and weak, Tod struggled to keep the killer's strong brown fingers

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# CROWN OF THORNS

[Continued from page 85]

away from his throat. Once those broad, flat thumbs reached his windpipe it would be all over. He strained his muscles to throw the half-breed off but it was hopeless. Too many hours at the typewriter back in the airless canyons of the city were taking their toll.

This was the end. No story, no Aline . . . nothing. Bleached bones on the rolling mesa. Buzzards riding high as they left his carcass picked clean. The end . . . of everything. He felt those deadly thumbs pressing . . . pressing. He gasped for air, struggling pitifully in the half-breed's death grip.

**S**UDDENLY the killer's head snapped back. His powerful fingers relaxed. For a moment his body stiffened. Then, like a half-empty sack of wheat, he rolled over on his face. Tod sat up, sucking in great breaths of air. He saw Carlota leaning forward. He saw the handle of the half-breed's knife protruding from between his shoulder-blades. He understood.

"*Gracias, Carlota,*" he said simply.

The girl dropped to her knees and threw her arms about Tod's neck. Her hot lips mashed down on his mouth and the soft globes of her breasts flattened against his chest. It was a gesture of gratitude, given in the only way the girl knew.

The intensity of the caress left Tod gasping. If there had not been Aline he might have responded to Carlota's advance. Her bosom was round and full and her body was alive with animal magnetism. He could still feel the moistness of her soft lips.

He came to his feet. "Bathe your wounds, Carlota, and go to bed," he said gently, conscious of the disappointment in her eyes.

She nodded, crestfallen. "*Si, senor; mil gracias.*"

Tod, still weak and trembling from his narrow escape, watched from his bedroom as Carlota dragged the dead half-breed out of the cottage. He undressed and got into bed. Again Carlota stripped

---

off her single garment in full view. Tod's blood pounded at his temples. He turned over to wipe out the exciting vision of her full-blown nudity.

It must have been hours later when he awoke to an undercurrent of sound resembling the tramping of heavy-shod feet. He sat up in bed. The darkness was absolute, but woven through it were the invisible tendrils of an alien presence.

"Who's there?" Tod gasped.

A blinding light flashed in his face. Something hard crashed down on his head. The light went out. Everything was pitch black.

A STINGING pain brought Tod to consciousness. Again the stinging pain across his shoulders. He opened his eyes. He was lying flat on his stomach, one cheek grinding into the dirt. *Swish! Thud!* As though a hot iron was being dragged across his back. *Swish! Thud!*

All at once the truth dawned on him. *He was being whipped!* The *Penitentes*, in revenge for the desecration of their ceremony, had chosen him as a human offering.

He rolled over on his back. *Swish! Thud!* Braided leather bit into his chest. Cruel, oil-soaked knots tore away strips of flesh.

Tod tried to rise but the flailing whip beat him down. His wrists and ankles were tight-bound. Now he heard the same ungodly wailing that had marked their mad ritual on the hill-top. Men's voices low and throbbing, women's voices high-pitched and hysterical.

Would they carry it to the bitter, ghastly end? Nail him to the wooden cross and leave him to die? The thought turned his heart to ice. He cried out for mercy. The stinging whip lashed across

his mouth. Blood salted his tongue. Again and again the black leather snake rose and fell until his body was a mass of agonizing welts. Then, when the end seemed near; when it was more than human flesh could stand, the torture stopped.

Through glazed eyes, Tod saw the same tall, black-shrouded giant who had taken his camera from him, step forward. He issued a guttural order. Willing hands lifted Tod and carried him a short distance. Did it mean he was free? *Free?*

He felt something being fitted to his head; something that scratched his ears and temple. Then his arms and legs were stretched out. His knuckles grated against rough wood. *He was on the cross! They were going to nail him to it! Crucify him!*

Screaming madly, he tried to struggle loose. It was a pitifully useless effort. Iron fingers together with his bonds, held him tight. For one horrible moment he felt the prick of a spike point in his right palm, saw the heavy mallet upraised in the hand of the black-shrouded one. He closed his eyes.

The mallet never descended. Hell broke loose. Men shouted and women shrieked. A shot rang out . . . another . . . another! A heavy body fell across Tod's legs. People scattered like leaves before a gust of wind, seeking the protective darkness of the valley.

"Tod! Tod!"

It was Aline's voice, and in a moment Aline's cool fingers were soothing his feverish cheeks.

"Tod, darling! Are you all right?"

He smiled wanly, forced himself to sit up. The body of the black-shrouded one rolled off his legs. He reached out and ripped the mask from the man's face.



*It was Del Saunders, his features cruelly twisted in death. Del Saunders, the Hermano Mayor of the Order of Penitentes!*

LATER, at the ranch house, Aline explained how Carlota had run the three miles from the cottage to tell her that the *Penitentes* had taken Tod.

Colonel Edgren cautiously fingered a wreath of dry spikes. "You had a narrow escape, Hunter," he said. "This crown of thorns meant that you were doomed to die."

Tod smiled at Aline. "And what do orange blossoms mean?"

She came into his arms, kissing his swollen lips tenderly.