

TERROR TALES



VOLUME TWELVE MAY, 1940 NUMBER TWO

A LONG NOVEL OF WEIRD TERROR

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THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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The Inside Story

IT IS fitting and just, we think, that we take a little time off this month to thank all you readers for your enthusiastic response to our request for suggestions and comment. Your letters of criticism as well as of praise are of tremendous help and encouragement—for a magazine that cannot arouse its readers is a very sick magazine indeed. Then, too, the editorial policy of any magazine is not a fixed, static thing. On the contrary, it is in a constant state of flux; for as the moods and opinions of every normal human being are ever changing, so, too, must the magazine which is but a reflection of its readers' desires. In short, your letters help us to give you the stories you want, when you want 'em.

One thing that gives us particular gratification is the rousing welcome you have given the short autobiographical sketches of our authors which we have recently printed. At first we were a bit doubtful about how much interest you would have in these brief, intimate glimpses into the writers' lives, but now it seems we won't be able to stop publishing them . . . Henry Chapman of Grand Rapids, Mich., writes in to ask for some dope on Donald Dale. D. D. must have been a regular hell-raiser, Henry thinks, to have acquired all the out-of-the-ordinary facts and knowledge he makes use of in his stories. Well, Henry, you shall have what you ask for. But prepare yourself for a shock. All is not as you seem to suspect—but we'll let Donald Dale do the talking:

I WAS born, I suppose. However, it cannot be proved, for the alleged event took place on a ranch in what was—and still is—the last frontier in Texas, and evidently nobody cared to ride the long miles to the county seat just to furnish me with statistics.

The next biographical question also proves embarrassing, for to "Where did you get your primary education?" I am forced to answer either (1) "I haven't never went to school, sir"; or (2) "On top of a windmill." The truth is that the ranch where I grew up, made-up an entire school-district, and there was no school-house. Therefore, we had the doubtful privilege of having a state-paid teacher come out and live with us six or eight months of the year. He always was one of those second—or third-grade—certificate fellows, who knew absolutely less than nothing. (Patriotic note: The state evidently found out about this, for the breed is long since extinct.)

This poor teaching forced me to the windmill-top. President Garfield was no doubt right when he defined a university as a log with a student on one end and Mark Hopkins on the other. But there is no log in all West Texas and no Mark Hopkins. So I was forced to prove that a university could be made of an omnivorous student with a windmill on one end and good texts in both hands. For that is how I got my introduction to Latin, plowing all the way through Caesar's Gallic Wars by myself; it was there I discovered that algebra is only a fascinating kind of puzzle and that Zanzibar, Tiboburra, Tanganyika, Popocatepetl, and Puerto Rico make beautiful sounds on the tongue and exciting thoughts in the head. The windmill was, of course, to keep away the rest of the ranch kids. Sometimes now I am tempted to take my typewriter and start climbing.

Later on, I went in for education more conventionally, taking a B. A. and an M. A. from Texas Tech, and was on the point of snaring a Ph.D. from Chicago when—to meet school expenses—I took a detour into fiction writing. Aware,

THE INSIDE STORY

through academic research, of the long and honorable history of mystery-terror literature, I began writing for Popular, and my detour has long since become the main highway for me.

I have done a number of years of college-professing in English, Spanish, and French. Add to that a good deal of public-lecture work and a twisted, dirty knot of a sweater nearly half knit and you have the main features of my life-work. I divide my time between West Texas and New York, throwing in for good measure a few house parties in Dallas, Chicago, and good old Emporia, Kansas. I like all active sports—tennis, bowling, ping-pong, riding, hiking, dancing. And, oh yes, fun.

Somewhere I must make a soul-searing confession. I shall make it here and run: I am a female! Afore I stoled them cow-critters from the Bar-None Ranch, my name wuz plain Mary Dale Buckner.

(Signed) Donald Dale.

Well, Henry, there's a portrait of Donald Dale. There doesn't seem to be very much abnormal about his—her—life, does there? It just goes to show what a vivid imagination a keen sense of the fitness of things—plus a real zest for living—can do for you.

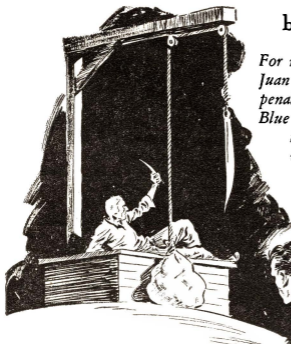
The Editors.



The Night Eternity Ended

by DONALD DALE

*For more than four hundred years
Juan Pérez had been paying the
penalty for daring to look upon the
Blue Lady of the Sierras during
those hours when the cold stone
was transformed into warm,
human flesh!*



RAMON FERNANDEZ' business was to search out true stories stranger than anything that could be hatched in the hectic imagination of a tale-monger. This time he had traveled for many days away from the city, southwest past the Sierra de las Cruces and on into the Serrania de Ajusco. And his quest had brought him to this filthy *choza* at the edge of the village of Oxtaca.

Through the broken window, the young searcher after strange truths could see the slumbering volcano, Matsohuitl. The red sun was fast falling toward the horizon and would soon sink behind this mountain whose three peaks formed the unmistakable outline of a sleeping woman—the feet, breasts, and head of *La Mujer Azul*, the Blue Lady of the Sierras. The lowering sun seductively gilded the three peaks with mystic gold.

Inside the ill-smelling mud hut, there was barely room for the dirty straw pallet and the low stool beside it, where

Ramon sat. For a confusion of strange objects crowded every inch of the dirt floor and covered the dingy walls.

It was an incongruous collection of pre-Cortez fetishes and Christian relics. Petrified deer-eyes hanging on a scarlet string beside the pierced body of Christ on a fragile crucifix. Carved serpent canes

from Apizaco propped in a holy chalice, like umbrellas in a rack. Enormous sheets of virgin silver, hand-chased with Indian picture-writing, hung around with dim ascetic saints. Fierce stone lance-heads, from which dangled dried insects to guide them infallibly to their marks, lying upon rich, leather-backed prayer-books with exquisite illuminated texts. And everywhere, the egg, that ever-efficacious agent of magic and mystic power; eggs in every size, every color, and of every age.

Those and many stranger articles unknown except to the initiate. Everything from the mind and store of the *curanderos*, or witch-doctors, together with every exorciser of the Devil known to orthodox and apocalyptic Christianity; every remedy created by modern science together with every potion concocted by primitive skill.

But the hideous nucleus of this weird room was the old man who lay on the straw pellet beneath a filthy grey blanket. It was this creature who called himself a man that Ramon Fernandez had traveled long, arid miles to see. But after one glance, the young man turned away in quick revulsion from the scorched, hairless skull, the rolling, sightless eyes, and the face contorted by never-ending agony. He fastened his gaze upon the votive smoke that rose from the Copal burning in a heavy silver brazier and, forgetful of his purpose as a supplier of newspaper features for sensation-greedy readers, listened.

Indeed, handsome, tense, smouldering-eyed, he might have been the very young man whose story the old man was now beginning.

WHEN I was young—the old man said—I was tall and very handsome and all the señoritas turned to look at me as I passed. No, don't apologize for your ill-suppressed exclamation of doubt. Blind though I am, I know how repellent I

must look. My face would terrify Harpies from hell and, though I am considerate enough to keep my body covered, I cannot prevent the everlasting seepage of blood from showing through.

Do you know how long I have borne the pains of old age and this torture that afflicts me? Do you know how long since I was young? Four hundred years. Yes, at precisely this hour on precisely this day four hundred years ago, I enjoyed the last of my youth. Another grunt of disbelief? That is stupid. You came for a story, and then you doubt? That could be offensive. But if you have the courage—or the insane rashness—to stay with me, I shall not only convince you of the truth of my story that has endured four hundred torture-filled years without surcease, but I shall let you witness its ending.

Ending—what a wonderful word. And tonight, as soon as that swift-sinking sun is hidden and the magic night is begun, I shall write *finis* to this tale of eternal suffering, *el termino de las angustias de Juan Pérez*.

Yes, you may see the finish, but I warn you that the ending I have planned for my story is like to destroy the whole world, for I well remember the prophetic volcano of blood in Hewanja's egg-glass. But that will not stop me. *Dios de los cielos*, if it will only destroy me, put a period to my eternal agony!

According to our Christian priests, Eternal Life is the *summum bonum*; but they forget that life is also eternal in hell. Do you know how long eternity is? Eternity, young man, is something that is endless. As you can see by the things that crowd this room, I have tried everything. Year after year, century after century, I have endured, until at last under the sharpness of my torture, I have worked out a solution. Tonight, I shall do the impossible.

Are you afraid? You should be. Will you stay? *¿Que dice?*—what do you say?

You cannot leave? *Bueno*, I shall proceed with my story. During this waiting hour, I shall unburden my soul with its telling and then—I shall end eternity!

YES, in those golden days of my youth, any señorita in this village was mine for the asking. And I asked many times and of many girls. And they all said yes. Sometimes with soul-shame for what they were doing, and sometimes with remorse for the pain they were causing others; but they could not refuse me. For I was the handsome caballero, Juan Pérez, whom no woman could resist.

Perhaps you do not know that among our people, one does not trifle with the heart. One casts his eyes upon a girl to like her, and, perhaps, if one is sufficiently continental, plays the bear outside her window a few nights, asks her parents for her hand, and marries her.

But such naivete was not for Juan Pérez. For I, Juan Pérez, had been to the bright cities, and learned the pleasure of sipping lightly from many cups instead of taking the fill from one.

There was a little Rosita, with mouth like a ripe pomegranate. Her father owned the candleshop on the corner of the square, and she was to marry Manuel Ortiz. And then, because love had made her beautiful, my eyes found her. Before a month was gone, I had tired. She stabbed herself. I saw her, lying on her father's doorstep, the red blood staining the whiteness of her bared bosom, and I was sorry.

Constancia was, unfortunately, a lover of theatrical effects. So when I stopped meeting her in my love-cave beneath the hill, and walked the streets laughing and talking with María, Constancia said she would jab her own eyes out to keep from seeing me with another. And she kept her threat. It broke my heart to see the lovely *niña* thus mutilated.

And that same María, when she found

herself with child and deserted by me, was whipped to death by her *novo*. 'Twas a pity, but all that a poor, disgraced fiancé could do. Miranda Flores cast herself into the flames. I saw her shining black hair drop off and the scalp shrivel like a burned meat-skin. If all this seems absurdly melodramatic, remember that I told you that heartbreak is not taken lightly among our people and a disgraced girl has only one course—self-destruction.

There were others and, month by month, the joy of conquest rose in me like a tide, chortled in my gay, infectious laughter, blazed from my insolent black eyes, burned in my irresistible love-making. But at last, a cankering restlessness began to torment me; a corroding dissatisfaction ate my soul.

You see that mountain? *La Mujer Azul*, the Blue Woman. Still and quiet and mysterious, she lies there, a cold heap of earth and stone, all the days of the year—except one. On that one day, *El Día de Los Difuntos*, just as the sun dips beneath the horizon, she stirs. And from that moment until the sun peeks over the hill the next morning, she is alive and warm and active. Then, no one dares raise his eyes to the Blue Woman.

And today, as you know, is the Day of the Dead. And soon the sun will set.

There are always, even in our simple village, profaners of the sacred. And once, Pedro Caredos, whose huge pudgy hands were so greedy for gold, looked upon the Blue Woman during her night, and his hands—right in front of the people who stood around him with becomingly lowered eyes—withered and shrank to useless claws. That was in my great-grandfather's time.

And long before I was born, a certain Jimena Moreno, the worst gossip of the village, defied the taboo and, at her first glance, her slanderous tongue grew,

within the space of a minute, until it sprouted from her mouth and grotesquely dragged the ground beside the *metate* in which she had been pounding maize.

Only one person ever dared to try it again. Ricardo Franco, stuffed to stupidity, absent-mindedly squinted his little pig's eyes toward the sacred place, and his stomach rose like a balloon—rose and rose, and burst with thunder in the face of his wife who walked beside him on the way to the mission. For he was the village glutton, and the Blue Woman deals out retributive justice, with never an error. The fate of Ricardo Franco was enough. Years passed, and no one ever dared again to violate the fearful privacy of the Blue Lady of the Sierra on her night of nights.

Never again, until, as I said, Lupe of the fiery heart put into words the cause of the undefined restlessness that was driving me insane. It was like an appetite that, satiated, still was not satisfied. When Lupe knew that my interest in her had guttered out like a candle in the wind, she cried out, "You are inhuman! You cast us aside as the bread-maker's son would throw away a tortilla, while others starve!"

"Perhaps," I taunted the beautiful little wild-cat, flashing my fine white teeth at her, "I am tired of tortillas. Perhaps I am too good for such prosaic nourishment. Perhaps the only fit food for Juan Pérez is the ambrosia and nectar of the gods. Am I not a—?"

"You fool! You *fanfarón!* No girl can satisfy you! We are all too easily won. Perhaps the Blue Lady of the Sierras would be good enough for you!" she spat at me. "This is her day, you know, All Souls' Day. Perhaps the great Juan will go up to her!"

I crossed myself, aghast at her blasphemy. "Lupe! You must not say such—" Suddenly my remonstrance died away, and excitement swept over my brain like

a fire through dry grass. My voice sank to a whisper. "The Allwoman. The Everywoman. *La Mujer Azul de las Sierras*. Remote. Unapproachable. Transcendental!" How often from my adolescence had my imagination been intrigued by thoughts of what she did on this, her night.

During that afternoon, the insane thought grew in my mind. Arrogance, vainglory, self-esteem sprouted and spread throughout me. I felt mighty and buoyant. My feet hardly touched the ground. "The Blue Woman of Matzohuit!"

There were only a few hours until sundown would release the Blue Lady to life, but those hours were confused centuries to me. At times, little buzzing insects of fear swarmed in my brain and nibbled at the edges of my arrogant thoughts. But, I brushed them aside, impatiently. For had I not proved my power—my superiority—over all earthly creatures? And I had already decided. No, not decided, for I came to feel that this had been foreordained from the beginning of time.

I should go up to the Blue Lady that night.

I COULD have slipped out secretly at sun-down, but that was not the way of Juan Pérez. So, I walked up and down the dusty *calle* in front of the mud huts, and boasted. "Tonight, I, Juan Pérez, shall not only look upon the Blue Woman in her magic hours of animation, but—I shall go up to her! And she will not punish! She will permit!"

At my vaunting, terrified counselors filed into the khiva. The people betook themselves to the temples and fell upon the altars, crying out their terror. My mother cast herself at my feet, groveling, begging. But I threw back my head and laughed.

Medicine men and priests tried to exhort me. Even old Hewanja, the most

ancient of the Indian *curanderos*, older than the memory of anyone who then lived, came down out of the hills to remonstrate. When I refused to listen, he finally took forth from its careful wrappings of many layers of straw one of his sacred eggs. Squatting, he broke this egg into the glass of clear water he had set upon the ground. I gazed fascinated; the future would roll before me in that glass.

The contents of the glass first became a milky whirlpool, shot with opalescent lights. A form began to appear, round like a globe, turning like our earth. Then a swirling torrent out of nowhere poured upon it, blood-red, covering it over. The globe trembled, sank, and in a moment all lay at the bottom of the glass, a chaotic, confused, meaningless mass.

Enraged by fear that chilled my ardor and deflated my vainglory, I profanely kicked over the sacred glass, letting its contents sink into the earth of the dry street. Then I cried out, for while we had talked, time had passed. "Look! The sun is gone!" The terrified people turned their eyes fearfully toward the ground.

Defiantly, I threw back my head, and looked!

Like a criminal before a death-dealing judge, I waited. Fear pounded painfully in my breast, but my head was arrogantly erect.

Nothing happened.

Yes, I looked upon the Blue Lady at the taboo hour, and no punishment fell upon me. And her justice was, from time immemorial, infallible.

I must be then—I was!—of all mankind approved of her. Perfect in her eyes!

THE sun's after-flame was dying slowly behind the magnificent form of the recumbent goddess-woman. It faded through a kaleidoscope of color—amethyst, rose, heliotrope, lavender, violet.

But I could perceive no movement. With my whole being aquiver I watched, waited. My heart had become an unendurable thundering drum. Had we, the people of Oxtaca, feared and revered a stupid pile of stone all these years? Had I, by my blasphemy, released us from superstitious terror—and robbed us of beautiful faith? I could not bear it. If the Blue Lady did not come true, I . . .

And then she stirred. Lazily, languorously, as a woman awakening from a deep sleep. Still, her infallible castigation fell not upon me. She was awake, and no fault of mine was brought to horrible, instantaneous infliction. So—I had no fault! My vainglory was no longer vain, for my perfection had now been finally acknowledged, approved, by the Blue Woman of the Sierras. That was my thought. I was a fool.

Heedless of those who groveled in fear around me, I started up the foothills of Matzohuitl. It was as if I wore seven-league boots. I have no remembrance of the way, no feeling of time, until I came upon a queer, horny cliff that rose abruptly before me.

Straining feverishly, I finally scrambled upon it, moving through the rare turquoise atmosphere along a narrow stretch and then up a swift, spongy incline to a narrow escarpment that lay along the edge of the mountain. The way beneath my feet was soft and velvet-smooth, and a strange dream-like blue. From it emanated a languorous, sweet warmth.

I was moving up the smooth, upcurving ridge, which on all days of the year, but one, was simply the easiest approach to the mountaintop. Now it was a woman's fingers, wrist, and arm—throbbing with warm life.

Self-glorification swept me along. And a confusion of strange thoughts washed through my mind. I thought of how Don Juan—idol of all romantic Spaniards

—had insolently tweaked the stone beard of the statue of the dead Comendador, whose daughter his irresistible love-making had brought to shame. For his audacious profanation, the Comendador had pulled the pillars of the world down around the youth and tumbled him into hell. Once I had gone up to the city to see the story dramatized in *El Teatro Nacional*.

Don Juan Tenorie seemed now a puny idol. For he had boasted only mundane conquests. Juan Pérez, too good for earth-woman, was favored of the transcendent *Mujer Azul*.

In my self-canonization, I felt kinship with Popocatépetl, Smoking Mountain, majestic lover of Ixtaccihuatl, the White Woman. At times, he stirred from his stone aloofness and awakened her, while in the puny valleys below, strong men shuddered, children whimpered, and women's shrill voices sank to fearful whispers. Godlike I was, like him, and far above the weak ones of earth.

Swept on by swelling thoughts, I rounded the smooth, pulsing curve of the shoulder and pressed upward toward the crest of the left breast. Look, you can see from here the tantalizing smooth mound; it is the nearest. And as I mounted, I could feel beneath my eager feet the ever-waxing beat of a great heart. The heart of *La Mujer Azul*! The sense of my own conquest made me dizzy. My

head spun in delight too great for the heart of mortal man. But for me, Juan Pérez—

IN INEFFABLE exaltation, I paused upon the rosy zenith, my soul rocking with the throbbing beneath me, and imperiously surveyed what was mine. That dark mat of trees there was a shadowy swirl of silken tresses to entangle the mind and lead the soul astray. And so it will be again, now in a few minutes, as soon as the sun has hidden itself.

The twin mountain lakes were eyes, slate-blue, restless, unfathomable. You see that ruddy bar, which you would call, prosaically, an outcropping of red sandstone? That was—and will be tonight!—warm, full lips, curving disdainfully.

In a haze of self-glory, I turned my enraptured eyes to all the charms of this wonderful Everywoman, while beneath me the mighty heart pulsed. I was the Anointed! The Superman! I would—

Then the full, red lips moved! A voice filled the air around me, cool and smooth and faraway, like old silver in some dim, shadowy cavern. Only one word: "Rosita!"

Rosita! The name of the lovely candle-maker's daughter echoed and reechoed through the thin violet air. And a cry of agony was torn from me. I clutched my breast, fighting the unendurable pain that stabbed me. I felt the wet blood flowing.

I saw the deep, deadly wound that—without touch of weapon—had opened through my heart, exactly as the broken Rosita had pierced hers when I had tired of her. Deadly wound, I say; but I did not, could not, die. And deep within me I began to know the meaning.

But there was no time to contemplate. The weird transcendental voice pronounced "Constancia!" With that name, my eyes became blazing coals of pain, jabbed cruelly with unseen dagger. And I was blind! Then, with awful finality, the certainty of vengeful justice came home to me, for Constancia, you remember, shamed and cast aside by me, had jabbed out her own eyes to keep from seeing me promenade gaily with another.

And all at once, the scourges, the agonies, which, in my cruel arrogance, I had caused to be visited upon others descended upon my body—the body that, a few moments before had been inflated with the imperiousness of a god-erect.

"María!"

The death-dealing lashes rained upon María by her incensed *novo*, her sweet-heart, now fell upon me, raised great, unbearable welts. But I did not die.

"Miranda!"

The flames that had destroyed Miranda Flores seared my flesh, burned my hair away, and made my scalp a shriveled cap of agony. But I did not die.

"Felicia!" "Celestina!" "Ramona!" More and more. Excruciating suffering created by me now returning to its creator. Not only the physical suffering, but shame, jealousies, the bite of unrequited love, made my mind and heart an unbearable chaos inside of my bleeding, burning, tortured body.

"And thus forever!" the voice intoned.

I begged, pleaded, groveled upon the great, white breast beneath which the relentless heart throbbed, insistently. And always, the answer came back, "And thus forever!"

Forever!

I do not know how I dragged myself down from the mountain to the village through which I had often swaggered, plucking what flowers caught my eye and throwing them aside as soon as they drooped under my withering, demanding touch. But now, I crawled in, whimpering, pleading. And the people turned aside, uttering oaths, or prayers. I became a pariah. My family lived their allotted years and died. Centuries passed and I lived on.

I sought all manner of relief—the medicine-men, the priests; charms, unguents, supplications. But there is no relief. I tried to kill myself, but I cannot die. For what is another wound to a man who already bleeds from his riven heart, night and day? Or what avail fire, or gun, or poison? I suffer them all, every minute of my unbearable existence. And I cannot die. For four hundred years, I have endured. Four hundred years! Look! Don't turn your eyes away! Look upon me! You wanted a story! Look!

THE story was finished. The old man fell back, throwing the filthy covers from him to disclose his naked body. The young man cried out, in terror and repulsion. For he looked upon a sight to sear men's souls. Shrunken, tortured skin, whip-flayed in raw strips, and every stripe that might have been whole, fire-scorched. Blood welling constantly from a cruel wound in the ancient heart. The infinitely agonized eyes and the flame-shriveled scalp, which had so repulsed the young man, were fit crown to this being of torture. Everything the man had said was true.

"I can endure it no longer," the old man said, shrouding himself again in the blood-sodden blanket, "now that at last I have found a means of escape. Every minute of these long, long years, I have suffered beyond the endurance of man.

And every year when the sun goes down on *El Día de los Difuntos*, my torture increases a hundred-fold—surpassing the unsurpassable. I shall not need eyes to know when the sun sets this evening. The crescendo of pain that will seize me, will mark the time. And when the last ray dips behind the horizon, a sharp, climactic chord will rip through. It can't be long now. And when it—"

A scream of agony cut his speaking in two. His body jerked spasmodically. The

with difficulty controlling his pain-hoarsened voice, "when you have finished."

The dirty-bloused peasants brought a litter and laid the old man upon it. "You wanted a story," Juan Pérez said again to the young man. "Will you come?"

To the Allwoman, the Blue Lady of the Sierras? Would he come? Fear greater than he knew could exist, shook the young man. But he had to go. For as a snake lures its bird-prey, that fear lured Ramon Fernandez.



sun was down. "But wait! Wait!" he whispered. "This time I have plans."

The minutes passed. The world grew unreal to the youth, as he watched through the window the lights change, fade, and blend on ancient Matzohuitl. And he almost forgot the writhing, whimpering human animal on the straw pallet as he seemed to see the smooth white breast-peaks begin to rise and fall softly, with rhythmical breathing. He could have sworn that the lips curved sweetly, as those of a waking woman, still half-dreaming of her lover. At the Blue Lady's taboo hour, he gazed, rapt, upon the one whom no one looks with impunity.

Sometime later, the door of the hut was thrown open and two huge, stupid-looking peons stood in the door. They only half-looked upon the hideous form on the pallet as they spoke. "We are here. Where is the gold?"

"You will get it," Juan Pérez answered

THE way seemed long to Ramon Fernandez, through the fast-deepening twilight up the slope of Matzohuitl. The soft-sandaled peons spoke not a word. The old man, between sharp, almost-stifled cries of pain, babbled of the plan he had to end his suffering. He had worked upon it for more than a year now, his brain directing the strength of these two stupid brutes who now bore him upward. He was blind and helpless, but, through them, he had been able to accomplish his purpose. And always, he speculated fiendishly about the *curandero's* egg-magic that showed a confusion of blood. What did he care for destruction, if only he could destroy himself?

Ramon felt a strange fear clutch at him as they at last came to a queer horny cliff—strangely like a finger-nail. They scrambled over it, and the way beneath him became spongy—like flesh!—and warm with the sweet, alluring warmth of

a woman. As they walked in uncanny silence along the curving escarpment, and at last were circling southward, Ramon could hear his own heartbeats, like a triphammer, answering the magnificent throb that was beginning to sound somewhere deep in this weird mountain of the Blue Lady. And as they mounted it filled his being and he was one with it.

It was useless to tell himself that all this was impossible, that this magnificent Everywoman was beyond the ken of mortal man. Useless, because her breast was soft and warm beneath his feet, and the beating of her heart made mad drums of his ears. Everything had a dream-like quality, but he knew it was not a dream. It was as real as unbearable pain, unspeakable death, and cosmic destruction.

A little more than half-way up the slope, they came upon a strange, monstrous device—the thing upon which old Juan Pérez had been working for so many long months. Out of place it was on the mystic, ivory hill. A large platform, or derrick. Suspended above the derrick and pointing downward was a huge, shining, razor-sharp blade, a dagger so long that it stretched the wildest imagination. This giant's weapon was held by a primitive pile-driving device—a large bag of stones, on a rope pulley.

Juan Pérez' wild laughter screeched out above the resistless throbbing of the great heart of *La Mujer Azul*, which was now directly beneath them. At last, the young man knew the plan and fear such as he had never known before, seized him.

The moon, new-risen, was a theatrical searchlight. Ramon looked wildly around him. Across a soft, smooth valley, beyond a firm, beautifully-rounded cliff, red lips smiled sardonically. Yes, lips. Warm, live lips. And eyes, deep and mysterious, hid ineffable secrets in their depths.

"You can't do this thing!" Ramon protested to the old man. "She's really alive!

She's really the magnificent Everywoman!"

"Of course. That's what I've been telling you. Did you ever doubt it?"

And the young man knew that until this minute, he had not believed the story of Juan Pérez. But now he could doubt no longer. He sprang toward the old man. "You can't—I won't let you!"

"Seize him!" And one of the powerful peasants grasped Ramon's delicate wrists in his huge vice-like grasp. The other, at Pérez' command, lifted the old man close to where the pulley rope awaited severance and handed him a keen blade, so sharp it would serve even a weak, palsied arm.

BOTH the servants were breaking under the strain. They pulled their sarapes close about their shoulders and began babbling fearfully. "You promised to pay us and let us go! We won't stay! We can't stay! You promised to wait until we were all the way down."

The old man clawed from under the ragged cover of the litter a bag of gold. "Take it and go! And take this searcher for stories with you."

Down the smooth spongy slope the two peons started swiftly, roughly dragging with them Ramon Fernandez, who kept twisting around looking back. The old man rocked his bleeding, eternally-suffering body in gleeful anticipation of what he had come to do. Fear urged Ramon down the mountain, but something stronger than himself tempted him back.

"Turn me loose," he growled.

"No." His captor's huge hand tightened upon his arm. "The master said take you away."

Regretfully, but almost with relief, Ramon let himself be led a few more steps away from that thing up there. It was none of his business. He was well out of it.

A hundred feet. Another hundred, their steps making no sound on the soft way to disturb the magnificent beat of the goddess-heart. Fifty steps more. And the thing within him grew until suddenly he snatched away from his now unsuspecting captor, and dashed back up the mystic slope until he came to the scarred, deformed old man, sitting beside the pulley-rope, holding in his twitching hand the keen-edged blade.

"I shall not let you do it!" Ramon called out.

The old man perceived his intent to grab the knife, perhaps bear him away. And the ancient eyes glittered with fierce resolution. Yes, he had promised the peons to give them time to go down the hill, out of the way of this thing he meant to do. But he had not foreseen that anyone would try to interrupt him.

As the young man lunged at him, old Juan Pérez raised his withered arm, sliced the rope which held the heavy bag of stones. The stones smashed to the ground. The dagger plunged downward toward the great beating heart. It cut deep into the smooth, white breast-slope. A weird, piercing cry rent the sky. There was a hissing, steaming, swishing, and a fountain of blood shot upward, folded over itself and descended upon the old man, upon the young man who had searched for a story stranger than any

that had even been written, upon the two peons who had, for gold, done the bidding of the blasphemous Juan Pérez of Oxtaca. And swept down the slope of Matzohuitl in a boiling, hissing cataract. And the magnificent throbbing stopped, and left a silence like death. . . .

The people in the village heard the thundering, hissing sounds from the top of the mountain. But they could not look up. More fervidly they told their beads, bowed to their altars, or fingered their charms. And so they did not see that mile-wide cataract of scarlet tumbling down the mountain side, deluging everything in its pathway, rushing down resistlessly upon their village.

It was only when it was almost upon them in man-high waves, that they began running. Only when they felt its warm stickiness, smelled its sweetly sickish odor, saw the crimson of its color and one terrified shriek rang out from all throats: "Blood!"

Oxtaca was no more. . . . But there is a queer, rust-red lake of cooled "lava" in the little cup of a valley at the foot of Matzohuitl. The few who pass that lonely way speculate about the hardened stream of unique red lava that flows from the left breast of *La Mujer Azul de las Sierras*, who lies so cold and pale and still, even after sundown on *El Día de los Difuntos*.

THE END