Fate-Master of Revels

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FATE—MASTER OF REVELS

As Miguel lazily poked about a broken-handled hoe in his little bean patch under the burning Sonora sun, he thought wistfully of the cool bar-room of the fat Senora in Nogales, where, if one had the money, one could buy ice cold beer or the tequilla—that soother of troubled minds. Then one could sit down at a table and listen to the black Esteban play upon the guitar, or one could exchange tall stories of past amours or adventures with the congenial idlers who were always about. Tempting thought! Not good to think about for one who is saving his money! Miguel shrugged unconsciously, sighed heavily, and leaning on his hoe, surveyed his little 'dobe hut with longing. It was so cool in there—and the sun beat down so hard outside, searing his flesh through sundry rents in his shirt which he had neglected to patch. His guitar lay in the corner awaiting eagerly the touch of his skilled fingers upon its strings. Miguel could stand it no longer. Throwing down his hoe, which broke a bean stalk, he wiped the sweat from his soft brown eyes with a torn black handkerchief and went inside, stumbling over some empty tin cans at the doorway.

Throwing himself on his unmade bed, Miguel eyed the two day pile of dirty dishes with disfavor. Closing his eyes to shut out the sight, he gave himself up to bitter calculation. Five hundred dollars more and he would have enough to buy a half-interest in Pancho Romero's saloon. Five hundred! It would take him a year to make that much money. He had two hundred in the filthy mattress under his bed, but to get that he had sold his horse, his rifle, and his dogs. He had no more horses, rifles, or dogs with which to obtain more money, and no one cared to buy his little patch of ground. Not that he could blame them. Dios! It was hard to till that parched piece of desert. Of course he could accept the job which the Gringo cattleman had
offered him across the line, but there he would have to work from morning 'till night. There would be no playing upon the guitar, nor could he see Perita, his sweetheart, in the evenings. Unwillingly his mind began to toy with the other alternative. The fat Senora had always a smile and a word for him, and there had been plain indications that she was not averse to any advances he might make. Dios! How ugly and fat she was. No, he could never look at her when he was sober. Besides, there was Perita, who loved and depended upon him. But how could he gain her father's consent with no money?

Miguel despondently gave up and rolled into a sitting position. He would go to Nogales to see if he could wheedle or cajole Pancho into lowering his price a little. No, he would not even stop at the Senora's. After putting on his good shirt and his gay straw sombrero, he once again stepped out into the glaring sand and started to Nogales with a light heart and a twenty-dollar bill. For after all, perhaps he would stop at the Senora's and get a glass of beer. Perhaps two, but no more. Where was the harm in that? Gaily he lengthened his stride, whistling, then singing in a soft baritone "La Paloma". Reaching the fringe of straggling run down 'dobe shacks stuck on the side of the hill at the outskirts of Nogales, he walked still more quickly. When he passed the neat little casa in which he had been born and raised, and which he had sold after his father's death, squandering the money in two weeks of drinking and gambling,—he experienced a momentary qualm of regret.

He found Pancho in a singularly complaisant humor. He had just won an argument with his wife as to how much she needed a new black dress, and a little later, he had won fifty dollars on a cockfight. And the fact that he had won the money from a Gringo tourist added a keen edge to the zest of his victory. After a long roundabout conversation about Pancho's rheumatism, various cures, the possibil-
ity of rain the health of the Senora Romero, a new shipment of beer, the health of the little Romeros, and the past cockfight, Miguel arrived at his point. He was surprised and delighted to hear Pancho say, after much consideration and figuring with a pencil stub, that if business held out the rest of the winter, he would sell the half interest for a hundred dollars less than the original figure.

In order to get away before Pancho changed his mind Miguel shortened the long and courteous leave-taking as much as he could. Then with a song on his lips and a glow in his heart he hurried to the blithe haven of the Senora’s to celebrate his good fortune,—perhaps with three beers—now a bright red string of beads in a shop window caught his eye and, resolving to let his sweetheart share his good fortune, he went in and bought them, thinking dreamily of the kiss she would bestow upon him for this beautiful gift. Whistling softly he swaggered on to the Senora’s where he was soon telling his friends of his good stroke of business and was paying for a round of beers.

A crafty-eyed old negro, sipping his glass at a table in the corner, nodded an indifferent return to Miguel’s general greeting upon his entrance, and resumed sipping, becoming immediately engrossed in solving an intricate problem with his bare toe in the sawdust. When Miguel, his tongue loosened by several rounds of beer, explained to his friendly circle how he had sold his horse, rifle, and dogs, and was going into the saloon business himself, the negro’s eyes narrowed slightly and he went over to join the circle around Miguel, ordered a round of tequilla and joined in the congratulations. When the idlers had, one by one, dropped off to supper, he plied Miguel with more tequilla and introduced a little proposition to him whereby Miguel could make up the rest of the sum he needed at one stroke. The negro, old Mose, had a big red fighting cock, El Toro, which he was going to match the next day with the bird of a strange negro from across the line. Strange, that is, to
everyone but Mose, a fact he did not advertise. Now the red cock which Mose had just acquired, Miguel knew had never been beaten in twenty odd battles. Mose, seeing the gleam in his eye, painted a golden picture of the sure thing so dear to the heart of the Mexican. When Miguel, however, still objected on the score of past sure things into which Mose had let him and which he had lost, the old negro pulled his trump card, which was the fact that the other negro was a friend of his and was also betting on El Toro, his own bird being but half the size of Mose’s and therefore not having a chance, and that he, Mose, was letting Miguel in on this to recoup him for his past bad luck with Mose’s birds. The fumes in his head helped Miguel’s conversion and he promised to meet Mose the next afternoon with all the money he could lay his hands upon.

Miguel spent the next couple of hours in a poolroom, idly knocking the balls around, his exultation mounting as the time of tryst with Perita grew nearer. Then, for a last drink he stopped again at the Senora’s, which was now crowded with Mexicans and tourists sampling Nogales night life. The Senora flew back and forth between the backroom and the bar like an old hen, newly a mother, or a scared crow, but most like, thought Miguel, to a fat, perspiring old sow, in haste to gobble apples from the ground as fast as they fell from the trees. When she saw him she gave a tray which she was carrying to Jose, the barman, and waddled quickly to wait upon Miguel in person, a sign of her favor which swelled Miguel’s pride, the room being crowded. This alarmed him slightly. He felt like a ripe red apple, ready to fall. As he caught the covert winks and gibes of his friends at the Senora’s unprecedented conduct, Miguel’s vanity overcame his discomfort. After a couple of drinks his heart warmed, and he whispered a small gallantry to the Senora at which she was still blushing when he walked out, followed by her languishing glances. As Miguel reached the sidewalk he stopped stock-
still, his smile changing to a look of horror as the great grandfather of all exceedingly black cats stalked solemnly across his path with much dignity, his tail upright with a slight crick in the end which jerked to and fro mechanically, acting as a palmleaf fan to frighten the flies from his highness. Undulating rhythmically with each graceful step, he minced along like an eighteenth century beau. Miguel, thinking of the cock fight, crossed himself, wiped the cold sweat from his brow and cautiously tried to edge around the monster. After several narrow escapes he finally succeeded and proceeded happily on his way.

He stopped many times to speak to friends and acquaintances. Was he not the best guitar player in Sonora?—Therefore he was late, which made La Senorita a little petulant, so that she refused to kiss him. Miguel slyly pulled the red necklace out of his pocket and began to toy with it silently, affecting sullenness. Immediately she was all smiles and sweet softness, walking over and rubbing her ivory shoulder against his arm like a playful kitten. She wheedled him softly in her low musical voice until he could keep his stiff offended manner no longer. With a joyous laugh he gave her the necklace and picked her up and held her in the air, she inspecting the necklace minutely until he put her down and claimed his reward. Then leading her to the hammock in a small grove of trees, out of the light of the street lamp, he could no longer hold his good news which he had kept from her before because his goal had seemed so far away.

"Querida Mia," he blurted, "how would you like to be the wife of a business man?"

"I'd like it very much," she replied with a touch of irony, "but where am I to find such a one?"

"Gaze upon him, Dearest One." Showing his gleaming teeth in an infectious smile, he stuck out his chest and excitedly burst into explanations at her incredulous look. When he had finished, he sat back, awaiting her delighted
congratulations. When they were not at once forthcoming, puzzled, he sat forward again and tried to see her face. It was shadowed by some leaves and the moonlight. This left him still in doubt.

"What's the matter, Perita Mia? Are you not happy that now your father must let us get married as he promised? Why do you say nothing?" Softly and wistfully came her tardy comment.

"So you sold your horse, Miguel?"
"Yes." he returned, puzzled anew.
"And your gun, Miguel?" compellingly.
"Yes."
"And your dogs," she continued to catalogue.
"Yes, yes," he broke in "I had to——."
"And you are going to gamble the money yet,—on this so crooked cockfight," she continued mercilessly.
"It is sure,—this one,—Perita. I explained how I cannot lose this time." His words tumbled over each other in a puppylike eagerness.

"You certainly did Miguel ——" she choked,—a tear appeared upon the velvet cheek turned toward Miguel. "Father—father said—if you ever gambled again—I could not—I couldn't see you again—ever." She finished in a storm of tears. Miguel sagged back in the hammock, ran his hand through his glistening black hair and scratched his head like a little boy,—still silent.

"Miguel," her voice came quavering wistfully out of the shadows, "will you not promise me to gamble no more?" The answer was slow in coming.

"Yes, Querida,—but how can I then get the money I need?"

"Take the job the Senor Brown offered you," Perita returned quickly. "It will be hard work—but Miguel,—isn't it worth it?"

"All right," agreed Miguel. "I'll go tomorrow morning—but I won't see you again for a long time,"—with a pain-
tive note in his voice.

"Oh, Miguel!" She came forward out of the shadow, her eyes shining with a dewy gladness. Miguel pillowed her head on his shoulder, burying his face in her soft fragrant tresses.

It was late when the street finally echoed the homeward steps of Miguel. He was again treading upon the clouds. He had the temperament common to his race, mercurial, going from zenith of joy to the nadir of despondency and back again in a thrice. With the delicate scent of Perita's hair lingering in his nostrils and his lips still tingling with her last kiss, he hardly noticed when the pavement ended and he strode between the long, forked shadows of the giant cacti, those moth-eaten ghostly sentinels of the moon. Unable to woo the coy goddess of slumber, he sat on the bench outside his door and charmed the rustling night life of the desert with the tinkle of soft chords upon his guitar.

When the sun peeped over the nearest hills, Miguel arose and without washing or eating, leaving everything where it was except his money and his guitar, he set out slowly for the American side of the town; there to seek the Senor Brown and favor him with his acceptance of the proffered riding job. Miguel consoled himself with the fact that he would have a horse under him again, at least, for, being a gentleman born, he was unused to walking. Miguel reflected that his birth was his only credit with Perita's choleric father and even that was fast becoming obscured by his dissolute behaviour and his lack of money. There was also a rival looming upon the horizon, Paolo Mendez, who was the son of a large hardware dealer on the American side of the town. Paolo wielded much power and influence because he was the friend of the Secretary of State of Sonora. Miguel felt secure in Perita's love for him, however, and in her expressed dislike for the other. His heart grew tender as he thought of Perita, placing her candle at
the Wishing Shrine, as she had promised him, for his success. He knew it would not go out, that it would burn down to the very end; and he would never gamble again but would save his money and marry Perita and be happy for the rest of his life.

When Miguel arrived at the office which the Senor Brown maintained in Nogales, he was curtly informed that the Senor had just gone out. Thinking to find him at lunch Miguel retraced his steps to the nearest cafe, but failing again he went back to the office to ask when the Senor was expected back. He was told to return at three o'clock that afternoon. The gum-chewing Mexican stenographer disdainfully turned her back upon Miguel’s smiling “gracias” there being a strong dividing line of caste between those Mexicans who work on the American side of town and those who did not. And Miguel had not as yet “arrived”. With a softly spoken jest which brought the roses to her throat and cheeks, he turned on his heel and strode into the street. Hesitating a moment, he turned his steps toward the Mexican side, passing through the gate with a “Buenos dias”, to the guard who examined him for junk. Going the other way it had been for liquor—an amusing parallel. Miguel walked on to the Senora’s there to pass away the time until three o’clock.

The place was deserted except for the Senora who was busy taking the chairs from the tables where they had been piled upside down previous to cleaning the floor. The husky proprietress smiled at Miguel’s “Como esta vd?” Indicating a chair already taken off and rubbed, she went on with her work. When she had finished she went behind the bar and came out bearing Miguel a beer. Refusing his dinero with a smile she told him that the first one was always on the house. She rambled on through her repertoire of gossip without stopping for breath. This suited Miguel who sipped his beer silently, with now and then a word of polite interest to stimulate the flow. Commenting on the prolong-
ed absence of the black Estban, she sadly informed him of that worthy's sudden and forcible ejection from the premise via the front door, propelled violently by the Senora's brawny arms. This had followed his latest drunken spree, the climax to his long list of misdemeanors during working hours.

"And I don't know where I shall find anyone to take his place," she ended, with palpable invitation in her voice. She got up to get more beer. Miguel said nothing but it was evident to the Senora that she had touched a weak spot. To have nothing to do all day long except to wait on customers, talking when they talked, drinking when they drank, playing the guitar every night until far into the morning, accepting the applause, largess and proffered drinks which he could draw forth by his skill, from his appreciative audiences. How different from the life he would lead as nightrider for the Senor Brown. That was the proposed job, he being a new hand, and a Mexican. He quailed at the thought of enduring the rough practical jokes and the hateful condescending manner of the Gringo riders, the long vigils of night herding, and the rough fare which fell to the lot of the guild of vaqueros. The contrast of these two pictures struck him forcibly. Then Perita's sad face appeared to him, with faith in him and his promise in her eyes. He sighed heavily and put the unworthy thought from him, for one look into the eyes of the enamoured Senora told him what the position would entail. The sigh was not lost upon the alert Senora who had been gazing at him curiously out of the corner of her eye. She stooped behind the bar to draw more beer and to hide a slight smile of triumph. She spoke no more upon the subject, however, but turned the conversation upon the cockfight, allowing the seed to take root before she set about cultivating it. Miguel made a disinterested comment upon the coming battle, drank his beer, and walked out the door, bumping into Old Mose.
"Lo siento mucho," (I feel it much,) ejaculated Miguel. (Such is the peculiar Spanish idiom for 'I am sorry.' )  
"It was my fault," soothed the black. "All ready to make your killing? Let's have a drink."

"I've changed my mind," Miguel answered. "I've stopped gambling for good. It does not pay one."

"Doesn't pay! You've quit gambling! Are you loco?" Yelled Mose in astonishment. "After I was kind enough to let you in on a sure thing like this. Why, man! You can win back all you've ever lost before. Come on! Cheer up! Have a drink and forget it."

Miguel had not one but several. The black knew his man. With every drink Miguel's will weakened a bit more. As the liquor befuddled his brains the arguments of Old Mose seemed overpoweringly, irresistibly logical and right. A rosy glow pervaded the world. The black man became Miguel's best friend, about to do him a favor. The chairs and tables danced a merry fandango about the room. Steadying himself against the bar for a moment, Miguel's eyes focused dimly upon the Senora. Why she was not a fat sow! She was young and not bad looking! She liked him! Well he didn't mind a little plumpness, so he liked her too! He would go over and tell her so, and snatch a kiss or two and pinch those fat cheeks to see if she could still blush.

But it was now almost time for the cockfight, so Old Mose took Miguel's arm and steered him toward the door instead. Miguel tried to free himself, calling Mose several kinds of pig-dogs and sons-of-sheep, but forgot about it when he saw his old friend the lordly tomcat get up from the side of the door and stalk around the doorway. Stooping with a chuckle, he tried to pick him up, calling him his old amigo—his jolly playmate. The cat eluded him with dignified ease and continued on his lordly way. Miguel, swearing fiercely was again taken in tow by the ingratiating black man who steered his faltering step to an old barn
on the outskirts of the town where the fight was to be held.

A small crowd had already assembled and money was changing hands in a lively manner. The air was blue from the fat cigars of a few specially selected American tourists, suckers all, and from the brown paper cigarillos of the Mexicans, negroes, and a slight sprinkling of Chinese. Old Mose drew Miguel into a corner and systematically went through his pockets, telling Miguel he would bet his money for him. He also took the small knife which he found under Miguel's armpit next to the tobacco sack containing the roll of bills, just in case of an accident. Miguel rocked drowsily as Mose led him to his seat on the top of an old wagon. Calling another negro who was sitting on a rooster cage Mose made Miguel's bet so Miguel could see him do it and hence would sit quietly until after the battle. After three preliminaries which were fizzes Miguel went to sleep just in time to miss seeing a little black bantam cock tear Mose's El Toro to shreds and lift his reddened spurs one after the other and crow, surveying the bloodstained, feather-covered sawdust with an air of triumphant pride. After the crowd had settled their bets and had gone out, Mose and his confederate smiled at the sleeping Miguel and started for the border with the spoils of victory.

Miguel, upon an errand for the Senora, now his better half, after a long, hard day cleaning floors, washing glasses, carrying drinks and running errands, yelled at by the Senora and his patronizing friends, stopped at the Wishing Shrine. There he gazed at the candle Perita had placed there. It had burned down but a half inch. He sighed, and looking down at his old friend the tomcat who had accompanied him on his walk, turned on his heel and trudged wearily back to the grind, followed still by the lordly black cat—who now seemed to have a cynical leer in his yellow eye.

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