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Deep Canyon

By CURTIS MARTIN

THERE WAS a picture of Rudolph Valentino on the white-washed wall of the room. It was a large picture, wide and tall, the dark face and slick hair showing plainly in the enlarged photograph of the movie idol. Across the room on the opposite wall hung the picture of an old Indian, white hair down over his shoulders.

The adobe shack clung low beside the creek that trickled from the deeper canyon, through the cottonwood trees, and out beyond to the plain.

The sun was rising, throwing long shadows, irregularly over the narrow floor of the canyon and the creeping water. In the deeper water at the head of the creek a tiny trout splashed once and settled to the rock bottom of the stream, to hold quivering against the current. Smoky shadows hung below the lava rimrock, over the pine trees, over the cottonwoods, with their roots in the moving water.

The irregular shadows shortened as the sun rose brilliantly, and in the room the dark pictures emerged more clearly against the white wall, the eyes of Valentino matching, gleamingly, the eyes of the Indian.

A greasy blanket stirred on the low bed in the corner of the room. A pock-marked face lifted from a soiled pillow, and flashing eyes glanced about the room, not noticing the two framed photographs; they had hung in their places too many years for that; then the head went back on the pillow. But the eyes stayed open, staring at the brown boards of the ceiling, not five feet above.

Outside a rooster crowed, and now in the brilliant sunlight a herd of goats shot up the bank of the stream, across the yard to the top of the earth mound over the cellar.

The black eyes on the pillow winked and Joseph turned on his side.

"Maria," he said to the woman in the bed beside him, "*Es Tarde*, it is late. Let's be up."

There was no answer but the bed heaved as the round mass of woman rolled from beneath the blanket.

"Jesus," the pock-marked Joseph shouted. "Jesus, get out. Get out, it is late." From beneath the door came a man's voice in muttered answer.

After the woman was dressed and out of the way, Joseph rolled across the bed, dropped his long feet to the rough floor and rising, his neck bent to miss the ceiling, stretched his giant, big-bellied frame. He glanced at the picture on the wall at the foot of the bed. But there was no thought in his mind as his eye took in the harsh face of the Indian, the long white hair that seemed almost greasy, even in the photograph. Joseph moved his hand over the short hair at the back of his head; hair now turning gray, a glistening gray like that of the Indian in the picture. The same fierce light shone from the photograph as that which struck from the eyes of old Joseph as he reached for his shirt. Over his shirt he pulled a slack pair of overalls, and shoes in hand, padded heavily through the low doorway to the outside. Coming into the sunlight he dropped his shoes beside the door and stretched, again facing the low rimrock of the upper canyon. He brushed his hand over his head, pushing back the gray hair, revealing the wide, deep pock marks on his forehead.

Looking about he saw the goats, butting and plowing up the dirt of the cellar mound. Bellowing heartily, he rushed across the yard and grabbed a stick from the fence and flung it heavily after the fleeing goats. Picking his way carefully now across the pebble-strewn yard, wincing from the sharp rocks on his bare feet, Joseph returned to the doorway and, seating himself with a sigh on the door sill, laced on his heavy shoes.

As old Joseph laced his shoes, the door at the other end of the adobe opened and a thin man of twenty came out. He was dressed sturdily and almost neatly. His eyes were narrow but doubly brilliant; peering, seeing eyes.

The young man grunted as he came abreast of his father. The old man was heaving as he folded over his great belly to lace his shoes. The young man, Jesus, stood as his father had done and gazed up the canyon, where the sun was now rapidly melting the mist.

His shoes laced, Joseph stood up, large beside his son, and moved off to the tiny outhouse, just behind the adobe. Jesus leaned back against the wall. Suddenly he stepped forward and, turning, bent inside the doorway. When he straightened, he had a long rifle in his hand. Kneeling, he aimed and the roar made the earth tremble. Up beyond the goats, on the hillside, a lean yellow coyote kicked weakly, the blood trickling from its nose and ears.

Old Joe burst from the outhouse, lunging against the door and splintering one side of it. "*Caramba*, what happens?" he shouted. His son's face twisted upward in a tight smile. "Up there," he said, "above the Cabras. One coyote." His hand passed along the stock of the rifle. Then he leaned it against the wall and opening his knife as he went, he climbed the hill to scatter the goats from his kill.

When Jesus returned he carried the evil smelling skin in one hand and the bloody knife in the other. Laying the skin on the corner of the roof, he wiped the knife blade on his pant leg and entered the house.

His father sat hunched over a plate of fried squash, from which he dipped large mouthfuls with a folded tortilla. Beside him was his wife and at the other end of the small table was Jesus' wife, Barbara. Her brown eyes were happy as she looked at her husband. The fat pouches under her eyes moved upward as she smiled.

"My God," the old man said looking at his son, "You smell like the hell." But he was happy.

Finishing breakfast, the father and Jesus and his wife pushed back from the table, and went out of the house to the rude shed near the creek. Each taking a hoe they crossed the stream and climbed the bank to the level ground above. There, enclosed by a straggling five-wire fence, was a large

patch of garden. Beyond the garden, and enclosed by small separate fences were three ancient apple trees, bending now with green apples the size of eggs.

Without speaking, the fat Barbara let down the wire gate and went inside, beginning to hoe between the rows of corn nearest the gate. Joseph closed the gate and with his hoe on his shoulder went to the far end of the field. Jesus had already gone up the stream a hundred yards, where the water was dammed up by a twenty-foot earthen dam, and opened the ditch that carried water to the garden. Cleaning the ditch carefully in front of the oozing water he had a fair sized stream entering the field within an hour. His father had already laid out ditches down the rows of corn, which had been cleared of weeds, and along the long rows of squash.

The men worked silently together, threading the water to the rustling plants, saw the old mother hobble down the bank and cross the creek, and come through the gate. She spoke a minute with Barbara, then went along the corn rows feeling out soft ears for roasting.

The sun burned into the narrow canyon, driving fiercely into this wedge in the earth, reflecting from the hillsides and dropping again on the laborers in the field. The old woman worked methodically down the rows.

Together the men heard the scream and running, they reached the old woman and saw the snake slide away beneath the heavy vines of a watermelon. Barbara was there at the same instant and ripped the dress over the knotted, heavy legs, as the old woman directed with mutterings and pointings. The bite was high on the thigh, a mere nick, through the heavy clothing, as she had kneeled to gather up an ear of corn she had dropped.

They carried her into the house and Barbara turned away, her face contorted, as the son held the thrashing legs, while the father with knee firmly on the woman's chest, cut a deep, even "X" over the green mark of the tiny fangs. Jesus would have sucked the wound, but it bled freely as the woman rested. And they knew it was not bad now, merely

a scratch, while the other time, three years before, it had been deep in the calf of old Maria's leg. Barbara brought kerosene and, soaking the cloth in a solution of kerosene and salt, she tied it over the wound to draw the poison.

Placing Maria half-upright on a couch beside the table, the men went back to their watering. Barbara went to the field and gathered up the corn Maria had dropped and taking it back to the house, started a fire and set a kettle of water to boil. Maria dozed, almost restfully, on the couch. Jesus spent a little time looking for the rattler before his father called him back to work.

In the evening Old Joseph and Jesus milked the goats. The *cabras* had to be roped and dragged, their four feet furrowing the earth, to the fence where their heads were tied close to a post. It was twilight when the milking was done and the goats driven back across the stream. Jesus took the large can of milk to the fenced-in spring above the house, and set it in the running water, weighting it with rocks. Taking a smaller can which had been in the water since the evening before, he returned to the house. His father was standing bare-headed in front of the door, his huge body wider than the doorway, his head higher than the sloping roof. He had just come up from the creek where he had been washing. His chin and hair were dripping water. He was looking off up the canyon, over the black rimrock, where a few stars showed in the coming darkness. Jesus, the boy, stood beside Joseph a minute before entering the kitchen with the milk. The table was set, waiting. Old Maria was propped up, eating a bowl of green soup. Joseph came in then, and they sat to the table.

After dark, the light from the flickering coal oil lamp catching and reflecting from the glass fronts of the two pictures, there was a knock at the door. The men glanced at each other, Jesus stepping back as his father called, "*Quien es? Who is it?*" Then the loud voice of Pedro came back, booming, "*Es Pedro. Open up. Open up.*"

Joseph sprang to the door, face alight, and swung it inward, and Pedro, a blinking baby in his arms, and a short,

pretty woman following him, entered. Into his arms, baby and all, Joseph clutched Pedro, then the woman. From the other room came the querying voice of Old Maria, and a dark light crossed Joseph's eyes as he explained quickly in Spanish. "But it is nothing, is nothing now," he said. "In a week, all right," he said, explaining to this other son of his. Jesus backed into a corner and sat down as Joseph made much over this Pedro, the older son, who had dropped in for a visit from over the mountain.

Pedro was a large man, nearly as tall as his father, with a heavy body that had no fat on it yet. His eyes flashed beautifully in the light, his arm and shoulder muscles rolled under the light polo shirt he wore, and the slick hair, the thin moustache, and brown skin matched the Valentino in the picture. You knew now why it was there. Even now, as they talked, Pedro's eyes roved to the picture, saw it in its accustomed place, were satisfied, wondered a moment if his own features still so nearly matched those of the picture as they once had. Jesus in the corner watched his brother's every move.

Pedro's wife, too, was beautiful, and that was not all; she had an inheritance. Her father had worked many years for a lawyer, and the lawyer, seeing the old Mexican failing in health, had sold his property for him and adding a sum to the amount, had set it aside for the daughter, Audelia. Audelia's father had hated Pedro. Now he was dead and Pedro had married his daughter and was living comfortably on the twenty-five dollars a month they would receive as long as Audelia lived. Pedro was now a man of leisure with an income. Once a month he and his wife came over the mountain from the little village of Folsom to visit Joseph.

Pedro brought word of his sister, Mary, whose husband ran an ash truck in Trinidad. "She is coming here for a visit," Pedro said, moustache working thinly up and down above his lips; lips so delicately red that they seemed expertly colored. "She will bring all the kids and come for a visit. I will wait here to see her."

"*Si, si, yes, yes,*" Old Joseph cried. "You *bècha*. This summer all come to see me. We have plenty. Plenty in the garden to eat. No, Jesus?"

They talked late, Pedro and his pretty wife, with the inheritance, and Old Joseph. Barbara and Jesus sat silently by, Barbara smiling honestly at times, but sometimes almost sneering.

The next day there was no work. Maria was feeling better and thought that she would be up in a few days. At noon the two horses were driven in from the pasture, the dilapidated harness strung on them, and hitched to the wagon. Joseph, with a gleaming, new white hat and wide smile, climbed to the seat and started for the railroad station nineteen miles down the creek to get his daughter and her brood.

It was ten o'clock that night before the loaded wagon returned to the yard. The children in the wagon were all asleep, but the huge woman beside Old Joseph was wide awake. As the horses limped to a stop she jumped from the wagon and burst into the house, stumbling over a box in the dark, and sending it spinning across the room, crashing into the table. "*Ahi, Mama. Mes hermanos. Mes hermanas.* My brothers. My sisters," she cried.

As soon as Joseph fumbled a light she waddled from one bed to another, soundly kissing every one, then beginning over again, exclaiming in Spanish, constantly, about the rattlesnake bite, the size of Pedro's baby, and the long trip from Trinidad.

While she talked Jesus and Barbara crept out of the room and to the side of the house, where they had prepared a lean-to with a thin bed, in case there was no mistake and the sister did arrive.

Old Joseph carried the five sleeping children into the house, then the baby asleep in a market basket. They were all placed in one bed, their bodies twisted, one sleeping across another's head, and one using another's feet for a pillow.

The children were up with the sun and bounding in and out the narrow door, waking Barbara and Jesus in the lean-to, waking everyone in the house. When Joseph looked out he saw three of them running the goats over the ridge at a high lope, the oldest bouncing along holding a jumping goat's tail.

That morning Maria lay in her bed and gave orders that Barbara get plenty of everything from the garden and fix up for company. Barbara sullenly started across the creek but Mary came after her crying for her to wait. In the garden Mary stripped ears, large and small, soft and hard alike, from the corn stalks and flung them into the basket. She jerked squash and watermelons from the vines, almost uprooting the plants. She gathered a bushel of green beans and another of peas. Then, surveying the harvest, she shouted loudly for her children to come and carry it to the house. Two youngsters finally did come, but as they were going out the gate, leading to the ground, a scared goat crept out of the bushes and ran for the hills. The food was dumped immediately and the half-naked children were away, with dark legs flying, over the weeds, over the lava rocks, away up the mountainside after the vanishing goat.

Old Joseph stood across the creek and roared with laughter, and after a time, when his huge belly had stopped shaking, he carried the food to the house.

In the kitchen Barbara set to work, under the voluble advice of her sister-in-law, Mary, to prepare the meal. Jesus took up his rifle and went up the stream, eyes lowered. Pedro and Joseph talked in the cool room where the pictures of Valentino and the ancient Indian hung.

It was dark when Jesus returned down the creek. The children poured from the hillsides to see if he had any game, and their mother, who had called them without result for an hour, grasped up two of them and drove the others into the adobe, before they could escape.

Under the yellow glint of the smoking light they wrote out an order to Montgomery Ward and Company of Denver.

Joseph had sold furs in the spring and later twenty kid goats, and had saved all the money for this occasion. He had fifty-five dollars that needed spending. Before the order was finished it had to be rewritten three times. Twice because changes had been decided, and the third time because the youngest of the children, that is the youngest walking member, had snatched the order blank from the table and escaped under the bed, and before he could be dragged out he had clawed the paper to pieces.

When the order was finished there was something for everyone. Even Pedro, whose wife had an inheritance, had placed an order for a large size bottle of hair oil. There were shoes for each member of the house, and over-alls for the men, and stockings for the women and girls. Jesus sat in the corner. There had been something that he had wanted to order for Barbara, but he could not speak now in front of so many of them.

It was a week before Pedro took his baby in his arms and, with his wife following, set out over the mountains for his home; and still three days later before Mary's husband rattled up the canyon in an ancient model "T" truck, with solid rubber tires on the front wheels, and demanded that his wife and children return home to the city. When they left the truck was loaded with vegetables of all varieties. To Jesus, as he watched, it seemed that they loaded the truck with all the food that it could possibly bear, then threw the children on top of that, then drove off slowly, down the trail, out to the prairie. Across the thin running stream the garden stood sadly shorn. No protection there now for hiding rattlesnakes.

In August when the stream had almost stopped flowing, and the sun poured into the canyon, boring for the center of the earth, Jesus got a job.

Jesus' uncle Dan, brother of Old Maria, came over the mountain trail one evening to stay a while, but also bringing good news. The government biological survey had decided

to poison prairie dogs in that district. Those small burrowing animals were the dearth of that Western country. They dug holes and mowed down vegetation over areas sometimes covering several square miles, then moved on to the same performance at the next well vegetated spot. The government had decided to poison as many as possible.

A week after Dan arrived with the good news, the government director drove up with a truck load of poisoned grain. Old Joseph's house being the first along the canyon trail, the director stopped there and unloaded the poison.

Uncle Dan was waiting for him and asked for a job, for himself and Jesus. The jobs were given and Jesus appointed foreman for the district. He was given orders to hire six other men and proceed to distribute the poison.

Gallantly Jesus, on an old saddle, astride one of the long-lipped work horses, set out up the canyon to hire his men. He found six men eager to work for the month that the poison would last, and to receive the three dollars a day the government paid, for a man and horse. They accepted Jesus' offer, but looked sullenly after him as he rode away.

The first morning the six men rode up together and waited silently for their orders. Jesus had things straight in his own mind, but he had no idea how to tell the men what to do. So he showed them the sacks of poisoned grain that were to be tied to their saddles, and Dan explained how they were to scatter a handful of grain near each dog hole they saw during the day's ride.

That first day Jesus rode silently behind the group, following where they led. The second morning he told them that he believed they would work out a certain section near a Juan Gonzales' farm.

At the end of the week Jesus took a half hour every morning to give each man explicit and detailed orders as to what he was to do that day. Through the day Jesus was left alone with Dan, as the others grouped together talking in low tones, which turned to silence when Jesus approached.

Among the men, who were all black, dark-haired, low-browed Mexicans, was one young fellow of twenty. He was fat and oily; but he had been to school in Trinidad and had finished the fifth grade. This young Pablo knew of no especial reason why he should be taking orders from Jesus. The thought that Jesus was his master was insufferable to Pablo. Pablo had a cousin, a tall slow Mexican who had been perfectly satisfied to do his work quietly at first, but who was very touchy by the end of the week, under the crafty plan of the fat Pablo.

On Sunday there was no work. It was a calm day with the sun boiling along the edges of fleecy white thunderheads, tokens of rain to come.

Jesus lay in the shade of the largest apple tree and listened to the heavy drone of insects around him. Barbara sat nearby, watching the goats along the hillside. Jesus stretched lazily. He was enjoying his day of rest after labor. The white clouds boiled, passing overhead, changing shape as Jesus watched.

Barbara, from the side and rear, watched Jesus' face as he chewed on a tough apple skin. Half in the hot sun she drowsed and thought about the children she did not have, although she had been married two years. As she watched she saw a man come out of the trees up the canyon and walk toward the adobe. She did not speak to Jesus, who lying down, did not see. She saw that the man was Pablo.

Pablo spoke a moment with Old Joseph at the doorway of the adobe, then came across the creek to the apple tree.

"*Como lo va?*" he said to Jesús. "How are you? How are you?" His mouth worked loosely, and he slobbered over his chin. He took the bottle from his hip pocket. "Have a little," he said.

Jesus took the bottle and swallowed some of the wine and passed it to Barbara. She looked at the bottle and handed it back to Pablo.

"How goes things?" Pablo asked Jesus. "How are things?"

"Good. Good." Jesus relaxed and began talking.

When the bottle was empty Pablo stood up. "We will go up to my house. We have more up there," he said, looking at the bottle.

Jesus was up instantly, but Barbara caught his arm. "No, Jesus," she said. "Not today. Please not today."

Jesus shook her off and the two men started without another word, unsteadily up the path.

They had been gone an hour before Barbara got up from beneath the apple tree and went hurriedly across the stream to the house. She went inside and came out with an old straw hat on her head. Old Joseph saw her go, but did not speak.

Under the trees she began to run, her heavy sides rolling. Coming over the slight bank she saw Jesus and Pablo and the tall cousin in the yard below her. Jesus fell from a blow as she looked. He was up instantly and with flaming Indian eyes, and Indian savagery that came down to him from the old Indian in the picture, he knocked Pablo down and began beating the tall cousin back against the wall of the adobe. Jesus knocked the cousin down just as Pablo came up from behind and mashed Jesus' skull with a hard driven rock. He fell stiffly backward, and Pablo began beating in his face with the rock.

Barbara was down the bank, heavily over the fence and as she passed she grabbed a pitchfork and, swinging wildly, she struck Pablo with the first blow and knocked him over. With crazed eyes she made for the tall cousin who stood a moment before he turned and ran. She came back for Pablo, but he staggered to his feet and plunged inside the door of the shack before she could reach him.

Jesus was blinking as she bent over him, the blood covering his eyes until he could not see. He struck at her before she could speak, then lay still when he heard her voice.

It was dark when Old Joseph met them, halfway home, and together Barbara and the old man dragged Jesus along, over rocks, feeling for the path.

In the house they bathed his face and hands, pulling away flakes of dried blood, and felt the holes and knots about his head. One eyebrow was laid open half an inch, the eyeball bulging crazily to the side.

Through the night Old Joseph walked softly before the door of the room. He felt the cold night wind, but mostly he heard the mutterings from the bed where Jesus lay. He looked at the high stars, and thought of his father, whose picture hung on the wall across from Valentino's, with his white hair long and untamed. Joseph felt his own close-cropped hair, and thought of the changes that had come during the last fifty years. He knew what his father would have done in such a case as this, and he would have acted instantly, not dragging his decision through the night like this.

Still Joseph waited for the morning, doing nothing, until he saw how Jesus came out. He knew that with the blood that flowed in his veins there could be only one decision. Still he waited.

At daylight the muttering lessened and in the half-light Joseph leaned inside the door and saw his son, dark on the pillow and Barbara asleep, kneeling beside the bed. He went closer to be sure that both were breathing, and straightened when he knew they were.

Outside again he looked out over the rimrock that separated him from the world, and saw the beginning of a beautiful morning. He went down to the stream and washed his head and face, and went to his bed beside Old Maria, not answering her questions. Just before he slept he knew and was glad that he had waited. He felt stronger, somehow, than the Indian in the picture. He was glad that it would be he who went for the sheriff that day, and not someone else sending for the sheriff to hunt him.