1955

El Patrón

Jim Bowman
Denison University

Illustrator
Unknown

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When he came within sight of the concrete tank at four-mile well, Matthew Fennel saw that the cattle were gone. They usually lay in the long morning shade of the high tank, the Herefords rising to their foreknees and bawling, the more wary Brahmans shying away a safe distance into the desert. As he nudged the charcoal mare forward he saw that the cattle troughs were half-filled with dry sand, as stark as untended flower boxes. Yet overhead the windmill cranked away in a breeze he could not feel on the ground.

Quickly he tied the horse and walked around the base of the big tank. On the west side he found the damp crack, and in the sand, the green hair he feared, a dozen blades that showed where tankfuls of water had seeped away into the blotting sand.

Slowly he climbed the rickety wooden ladder to the brim of the tank. It was empty. He knew he should go back to the ranch for Chapo and some tar, but the old Mexican would fake that he couldn’t understand and it would mean dragging him. If Jesus were still here, Matthew thought, he could be sent out to fix it himself. But if he were here the crack would have been spotted days ago. He wished he had not sent Jesus away, but it was a matter of getting rid of one Mexican rather than losing two to the immigration men. If Jesus had only been as content as Chapo he’d have stayed at the ranch. Matthew grunted and backed down, cursing.

At least he could plug the crack until he got back with the tar, and save that much water. His eyes ran over his saddle gear, and his hands explored his pockets. He drew a rat’s nest of cotton from his hip pocket. It shook out into a yard-square parachute.

“I might have known you’d find a way to show me your parachute, Kit,” he muttered. “Good boy, too.”
His eyes wrinkled into a smile as he saw himself telling Margaret—and the smile lingered as he climbed back to the rim of the tank.

He saw he would have to put the ladder down on the inside. Straddling the rim he began to pull the wooden frame up behind him. A nail jutting from one of the rungs caught. He tried to bend it over, but lacked leverage; he stood straight on the narrow wall, balancing, and jerked. The rusted head snapped. He felt falling and let go of the ladder. In slow motion it sidled to the ground and he tried to follow it. For a second he hung suspended, every muscle straining toward the outside of the tank. Then he knew he was going over backwards, on the inside. He grabbed the edge, but he was too late and the rough concrete grated outstretched fingers.

He tried to turn in the air, but his left foot, turned awkwardly inward, hit first, taking the weight of his body. His toes and heel ground together. The hollow snap of the boot sole, breaking, hung in the tank after the soft crash of his body. His breath left his lungs in a single hoarse choke.

He lay a long time on his stomach, waiting for the pain in his foot to stop twisting and jumping. When the throb became steady he rolled over from the waist up. He found he could move his leg, but the attempt left him faint. He looked around in the quick appraisal of one accustomed to meeting nature at its worst.

The tank was a greasy cell, twenty feet across. Its walls rose sheer and rough, shutting out all but the cloudless sky and the top of the windmill. The quiet was like a vacuum in his ears. Rays of the rooming sun had just touched the rim of the west wall—a tiny arc that penetrated into the shadow like golden paint oozing down the inside of a grey can. The heat would feel good at first, soothing the pain-chills that lodged in the softness of his back. But then the concrete would absorb its share, and the fiery rays would bound and rebound from all angles. At midday there would be no shadow.

But he would surely hear Chapo's horse by afternoon. Chapo would come then, see the black mare tied, and instinctively, after mulling over the muffled yells and seeing the overturned ladder, climb to the brim, and find him.

He sat up and bent forward, edging his hand slowly toward his left foot. The unornamented, tan Mexican boot, one that would have grown supple with age, was twisted into a grotesque form that betrayed the foot within. There was a black split across the center of the sole. At one end of the fissure there was a sticky, half-clotted trickle of blood.

Cut the boot away, he thought, get it out before the swelling comes. The knife—ohhhh, tight pockets pull on the foot. Be sure it's the leather, not the skin. Lucky Kit hadn't had his hands on the knife.

The steel blade slid easily through the new leather. Cutting now near the foot itself he was dizzy and knew he must finish in one long thrust. He braced himself and sliced from the instep to the toe. The knife cut leather and skin, and the feeling was no different. He wanted to stop then but he knew the boot must be pulled away. When the twisted foot was free, he saw there was no more to do. He fell back on the concrete to wait for Chapo and the sun.

The patch of light crept imperceptibly down the west wall and then seemed to spring across the floor toward him. It passed over the dust-soaked Panama that lay near his head and lighted a face molded in two parts, young and old. The jaws were strong and tanned with a coarse stubble of bleached grey whisker; his thin lips, dry and creased, gave an appearance of withered age; fine dark lines met at the corners of his brown, watery eyes. Above the grey brow a line divided the young and old. The forehead above the line was smooth and milk-white like a baby's. Only a powdery veil of white hair betrayed this youthfulness of skin, and even the hair had about it an aura of something newly created.

There was no sound except the occasional creak of the windmill. Once, far away to the south, he heard the whistle of the Southern Pacific as it sped across the arid desert, in the lee of the Hornbacks, toward Tucson, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Giggling fools, he thought, from the Alamo, and Houston, and New Orleans in their air-conditioned compartments, ignoring the landscape to speak their babbled lies and hypocrisies. It will pass Margaret and Kit on their way to El Paso. Kit will wave and want Margaret to race, and they will lose. He listened for the whistle again, but it was gone.

Matthew Fennel tried to avoid the sun but his legs would not move themselves. Chapo will come soon, if . . . and the thought was new and startling . . . if he would come at all. He thought of the Mexican and the incident with the half-breed palomino the day before.
The palomino was the only extra horse in the corral when Chapo came in, riding the brown mare across the ranch yard. The mare's right front hoof was split and she was limping badly.

"Get down off that mare," Matthew yelled from the porch.

The tall, stooped Mexican slid to the ground. He wore a buttonless blue shirt with a rip across the length of the back, and blue faded denim pants behind a pair of grimy leather chaps. The same clothes, except for the chaps which he put on only when he rode, had been on his back continually, even to sleep, since Matthew, three months before, made him stand naked in the adobe shed and there sprayed him and cut his hair, while Margaret Fennel tried to wash away the crusted stench of his shirt and pants.

"Why didn't you lead her in? Look at that hoof!" He tried to be calm with the Mexican.

There was no answer. Chapo looked at his shoes like a being punished.

"Do you want me to turn you in—and back to Chihuahua with you?"

"No, Patron," Chapo whispered through clamped jaws. He turned and led the mare toward the corral.

"Take the palomino along the west fence," Matthew yelled at his back, "Patch that hole I showed you."

No answer.

The old Mexican took his time removing the saddle from the mare. The horse was nervous and turned in a circle when he tried to undo the cinch. He kicked at her hind legs. When the saddle, bridle, and sweaty blanket were off, he threw them over the corral fence, slapped the mare across her flank, and disappeared into his adobe shed.

Matthew waited on the porch, but the dust settled and there was no more movement in the corral.

He found Chapo on the straw mattress. His eyes were closed and his lips drawn tight.

"I told you to get the palomino." He pulled the Mexican roughly to his feet.

"Devil horse!"

"Devil horse, hell!" Matthew was losing his temper and wanted to hit the sulky face. "Get on him and out of here or the uniforms will be here to take you across tonight."

Chapo stood still as though deciding which was worse, the immigration men, or the palomino. Then he slowly strapped the chaps around his thin legs and walked listlessly back into the corral.

The palomino allowed himself to be caught and saddled; only his quivering nostrils gave away his fear. When he was ready, Chapo hesitated for an instant as though waiting for a reprieve, but none came and he climbed doggedly into the saddle.

The horse reared back, screaming, and dropped forward on stiff legs. Chapo kicked away the stirrups but stayed in the saddle. Without another kick or twist the palomino fell on his foreknees and then went into a roll. The Mexican threw himself clear.

"Devil horse!" he said when he got to his feet. Then he turned and hobbled to his shed leaving Matthew to put away the horse and saddle.

The sun was now like a white-hot ball being pushed by an asbestos monster, slowly up and over the wall of the tank, until, he imagined, it would balance on the edge and then, with a final convulsion, tumble in on him, leaving a smoking cinder and blue fumes. He tried to maneuver his head into the shadow but the sun was ahead of him now. His only protection was to place the panama over his eyes. If he took the sun now he would get the first shadow in the afternoon. He covered as much of his aching head as possible with the hat.

Chapo will come soon, he thought, bound to see Blackie tied and know where to look. Strict instructions to look for me always by afternoon. But Margaret and Kit in El Paso and can't tell him. Can't tell time. Too dense to look for me. The wet spiks—they're the honest ones because they have to be honest, and cheap, and dense. Should have kept the kid, he thought, Jesus had brains.

"I'm taking Jesus back to the river tonight and putting him across," Matthew said to his wife, when Kit had been put to bed.

"But Chapo's been so happy with him, why?"

"I caught him in town. Pretty soon he'll have himself and Chapo both picked up."

And that same night, Chapo talking to the young black-haired Jesus in the shed when Matthew came to take him away. The boy knowing he will go and the old Mexican smiling because he is about to solve a bad thing.

"He will stay here, Patron. He will no longer go to the town. He will work with Chapo, very hard. Jesus is good..."
“Get a water bottle, Jesus. You have a long walk tonight,” Matthew said.

When Jesus had gathered his belongings in a bag Chapo still could not realize that he was going. “Why do you fill your bag? We have much work to do. . . .”

“I will be in Chihuahua tomorrow,” the boy said simply.

Chapo would not say goodbye. He busied himself, examining the rusty stove where he boiled his tomatoes and onions. His head was turned away when Matthew and the boy left.

The boy cried silently and was unable to answer when Matthew said he must get out of the car and pointed toward a damp irrigation ditch that led through a field of cotton to the river. He ran quickly into the darkness and Matthew waited until the sound of his feet disappeared before he started the motor and drove away.

Yes, Jesus would have come looking, he thought. Matthew Fennel lay now in a pit of flame. The shadow had disappeared entirely and the air seemed to contain a strange gas, thick and without odor. It clogged his throat and nostrils and pressed heavy against his brain. He could not shut his eyes tight enough to keep out the glare. To open them, he thought, and find a red velvet moonless night when there should be white day, blue sky, rustling cottonwoods against a purple evening. Blackened orbs as useless as broken bits of coal in northern snowmen. Melting away into ice water.

He pictured Jesus climbing over the rim of the tank and dropping to his side, pouring cool canteen water on his burning tongue and over the broken foot. Chapo would not come now. He would come when Margaret got home from El Paso. He would be frightened by her frantic voice. He would search carefully, because she said, “Con cuidad!” in distinct Mexican Spanish that he understood and could not pretend to misunderstand.

Chapo would come at night when the fiery tank had died to an ember. Jesus would not come at all because he was in Mexico, because he was too smart.

When Chapo comes he will have to be told what to do. He will not have to be told why he must do it because he does not need to know this and would not understand anyway.

A ragged Mexican had come walking across the desert from the south. He was alone, and old even then, and across his shoulder hung a burlap-covered water bottle. Matthew stood in the corral and watched him as a plodding speck in the distance. He came into the corral, his black hair caked with blown dust.

“Chapo knows horses, and cattle, and the making of adobe brick,” the Mexican said. “I will work hard, Patron.”

“For six months, then I will pay you and take you to the river,” Matthew said. He needed adobe bricks.

For six months of tomatoes and onions and two bags of coffee and a crisp alfalfa bed, Chapo made many adobe bricks.

“Another six months and you will be paid and taken to the river.” Matthew needed many adobe bricks.

Chapo went back to Chihuahua then with his coins, and in a month he had returned.

“For six months . . .” Matthew hired him. For six months, and six months, and another bag of onions. Chapo knows horses, and cattle, and the making of adobe bricks, and that after six months he will be paid and taken to the river, but still he does not know to come to four-mile well unless he is told to come to four-mile well.

The shadow came slowly across the concrete floor of the tank. It was sinister and felt its way over the hot concrete like a timid spider. Matthew had watched it come down the west wall. It did not come gay and triumphant like the morning sun. It came sneaking back, ashamed that it must be the messenger of night. Matthew watched it crawl toward him and he did not want it, because he knew he must have it. He did not even want the hoofbeats in the sand when he first heard them.

He did not want them because Chapo should not have known to come himself, and there was no one to tell him to come, and yet he had come.

The hoofbeats slowly circled the tank at a walk, a nervous, stomping walk, the palomino’s walk. They stopped. Silence. Matthew lay, waiting. He did not speak or yell or scream or even move. He only waited.

“Patron,” a voice whispered from beyond.

“Chapo,” Matthew answered, and his voice trembled.

Again all was quiet.

A horse whinnied.

“Put the ladder up . . .” But already the two knobs of wood poked above the rim.

The ladder creaked as Chapo climbed. The familiar black sombrero with brown leather band came up, a silhouette against
the sky. Grimy hair hid the ears and made the head appear large and rectangular. The face showed teeth but had no expression.

"Drop the ladder down inside," Matthew directed, lifting his head slightly. "Did you bring water?"

But the dark face was no longer there, and soon the ladder disappeared. It fell on the sand with a dry rattle of old wood.

"Vamonos." Chapo's voice came loud above the sound of his hand on the charcoal mare's rump. The empty stirrups slapped against the black's ribs as she galloped away to the north, toward sweet piles of alfalfa and pleading voices that would mean nothing to her.

The nervous stomp of the palomino faded southward, and the grey shadow of a cool evening played in the fine white hair of the man in four-mile well.