

**Matamoros**

**By**

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Dedicated to Gene Ringgold

*In 1848 the Mexican-American War resulted in Mexico losing almost 1/3 of its territory to the United States – including New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, and the annexation of Texas. It was a bitter loss for Mexico; yet the U.S. celebration was brief.*

*In 1861 – just 13 years later – the American Civil War began with a string of Southern victories. But by 1862 the Northern Navy had successfully blockaded most Southern ports. This was of critical importance to the Confederacy, since the Southern states had no industrial base of their own. All they had was cotton, and the slaves to pick it. So supporting their war effort depended on exporting cotton to Europe, and in return, importing guns, ammunition, and other essentials.*

*Matamoros, Mexico, was key in this. A sleepy village of 300 souls before the wars, it lay just across the mouth of the Rio Grande river from Brownsville, where the boot tip of Texas kicked into the Gulf of Mexico. Since Union gunships could not, by law, blockade foreign ports, Matamoros became the “back door of the Confederacy” – the port where Southern cotton was exported to the world, and war materiel smuggled into the South.*

*But 1861 was also the year that Napoleon III of France invaded Mexico with visions of conquest. Assisted by Mexican nobility who wanted a return to monarchy, French forces had the Mexican Army of President Benito Juarez on the run. In October of 1863 Napoleon named Archduke Maximilian of Austria as the Crowned Emperor of Mexico.*

*By July, 1863, the population of Matamoros had exploded to 40,000, and was host to 150 tall ships offshore daily, warships and commercial craft alike. It had become a hive of Northern and Southern spies, runaway slaves, Confederate deserters, escaped Yankee POW's, corrupt cotton brokers, profiteering weapons dealers, Mexican revolutionaries who wanted to take Texas back from the U.S., Texas Rangers determined to stop them, French Foreign Legionnaires, British merchant marines, Mexican resistance fighters, US naval blockade runners, Kiowa slave traders, bar girls, diplomats, bandits, lawyers and rogues of every stripe.*

*This is where our story begins.*

## Chapter 1

“We were north of Denver,” Clayton remembered, “winter of ’58, packin’ up the mountainside in a blizzard with a headwind, three of us spread out. I tripped and damned if it wasn’t over the body of that very same lawman, frozen in ice, must’ve been two months dead—that’s when he’d set out lookin’ for us.” Clayton laid his country accent on when he told tales to his bar crew.

“What’d you do then?” said Jim, the bartender.

“Well, I thought, I’m gonna have myself some fun with these boys. I brushed over my bootprints, backtracked a little, then walked around and twenty yards higher. Shot my pistol and the others come a-runnin’. They say, ‘What’s the matter?’ I say I’m damned if I don’t smell a dead body somewhere. O’ course they snorted at that. ‘Can’t nobody smell a corpse in a blizzard,’ Pete told me. I said I don’t know about that, but I smell one, and it’s comin’ from down there somewhere. They give me even more shit then. ‘The wind is blowin’ down that way!’ Oily yells at me. ‘Can’t smell nothin’ if you’re upwind from it.’ I said I couldn’t fault his logic, but I knew what I smelled.”

The barkeep could hardly contain his glee at what was coming next. “Go on, what’d they say then?”

“They were all for movin’ on. But I said it wasn’t proper to leave a man dead where critters could pick his bones, and I was gonna go look for the body. They didn’t like it, but they said okay, they’d help search for ten minutes, to humor me, but we had to make the miner’s cabin by sunfall. I said Oily should look in the trees and Pete better check out that bare patch below us. I knew Pete had the best eyes, so if I put him in the right neighborhood he’d see the fellow. Sure enough, five minutes later a shot goes off and Pete’s pointin’ at that body froze in ice....”

Jim was laughing like he’d never stop now. “Go on, go on...”

“How’d you smell that?’ Pete says to me. ‘I told you I was the best tracker in the county,’ I told him. ‘Nose like a bloodhound. So now will you pay me to find your miserable partner who run off with your stake?’ He reaches into his pocket on the spot, pulls out his poke full of gold dust...”

At that moment Isaac walked up, looking serious. “Teamster at table four appears to be cheating,” he said. “The fellow we discussed.” Isaac was a muscular black man in red vest and cravat. Dressed like a house slave, though there were, of course, no slaves here on the Mexican side of the river. There weren’t even that many slaves across the border, in Texas—partly because escape into Mexico was so easy, partly because it was generally cheaper to hire Mexican labor and let them wade home at the end of the day than it was to keep and feed black American chattel.

Isaac spoke with an educated, vaguely New England accent. What he was doing south of the border was a matter of debate, and sometimes actual wagering, though neither Isaac nor Clayton offered any explanation. Their relationship alternated between fraternal and hierarchical, although it must have been a hierarchy of their own invention. In fact they acted a little like brothers; though obviously they were not.

Clayton, at 38, had straw-colored hair, clean-shaven face, a Louisiana lilt and a bent nose from a long-ago drubbing. His first offer was generally a smile. His second, less genial. As owner of the Brave River Gambling Emporium he dressed in the finest suits of London silk or linen. And though the summer temperature was still above 90 past midnight, Clayton gave the impression of never sweating. Some attributed this to pricey medicaments he purchased from a Kiowa medicine man he did business with from time to time; some to the good fortune of a cool-blooded ancestry. Clayton answered few questions of a personal nature, though. That would have been a tell, and Clayton was nothing if not a good gambler. Good gamblers hid their cards in plain sight, the way chameleons hid their skins. But the chameleon’s gift was also its failure; for it could be said to have no true color of its own.

As Clayton stood, Isaac stopped him with a gentle hand. “You all right?”

Clayton had been having his dreams again lately, so he was looking a bit haggard. “I’m right as rain,” he smiled, “but thank you for askin’.” Then he turned back to Jim behind the bar. “I’ll finish the story later,” he said.

Jim shook his head, still laughing, and walked over to try to tell his boss’s tale to Rheumy, the other bartender, though he knew Rheumy wouldn’t get it, and Jim would just end up aggravated with him.

Clayton followed Isaac slowly through the crowd, where he picked up the smell of gambler sweat mingled with a dozen other aromas: tobacco smoke, chorizos grilled in the kitchen by Milagra, his ancient Mexican cook; the sweet perfumed women at the bar, warm beer, burning kerosene and oiled boot-leather. Clayton took it all in, the scents and sights, the clatter and clamor. His domain.

Two faro setups, one monte, a dozen six-tops for poker. Three bagatelles and two billiard tables along the far wall, a cluster of Rebs playing Rattle-and-Snap in one corner. The long bar was filled with drinkers from several nations, hugging up to fancy girls and a few not so fancy. Laughing, telling whoppers, getting rowdy on whiskey and ale until occasionally some fell away to a row of small private cabins behind the casino.

Two main bartenders, Jim and Rheumy, were both on duty tonight. Jim was a big, cheerful bear of a man who rarely spoke, but big enough to stop fights just by walking up. The other barkeep, Rheumy, was a tough old, dark-skinned fellow, some Mestizo mix who kept a beehive out back, where he went to get swarmed once a week. Swore the beestings did wonders for his rheumatism. Clayton trusted them both to manage the room.

Draping the walls were flags from sixteen countries—mementos from the sailors who'd gambled away their shore leave. From above the bar a stuffed giraffe's head, neck included, stayed forever vigilant since being left on the doorstep by who-knows-who.

Tattered crepe streamers still hung around the windows from some long-ago celebration, when mayors from three towns had come to a party The Daily Rancho reported kept both sides of the Rio Grande awake all night. Only one celebrant died of alcohol poisoning and one from accidental gunfire, which Clayton called a good night and the sheriff called good riddance after seeing who the victims were. In any case the revelry went on for two days. Clayton was toasted many times, met many a lass in the stockroom for a few minutes of slap-and-tickle; and one in his office, for a bit longer.

He passed a roped-off corner where a Reb and a Yankee boxed— bare-chested, bare-knuckled, bloody-faced—a dozen bettors cheering or booing. A 9-year-old pickpocket lifted the money pouch of one of the spectators, but Clayton grabbed the kid, made him slip the purse back to its rightful owner, and gave the boy a

scowl meant to look dangerous. The youngster just stuck out his tongue. Reminded Clayton of himself at that age, stabbing him with a keen momentary flash of longing for that innocent time. He took a licorice stick from a jar on the bar, gave it to the kid and pointed his thumb at the door. The little would-be thief grinned and ran off.

Clayton made his way across the floor, exchanging the occasional nod of hello or wide eyes of innuendo. Not that he ran all his flirtations to ground, but he liked having the reputation for excessive womanizing. It diminished him in the eyes of some men, which made them less on their guard in his presence, so more likely to speak of things they ought to have held close. Those casual divulgences were grist for Clayton's mill.

Tonight's crowd was relatively sedate: a couple deserters, both North and South; some British Royal Navy on shore leave; a few Juaristas— soldiers of the Mexican resistance army—currently surveilling the French invasion force, which tonight consisted of two besotted Frogs at the end of the bar having a drinking contest. And then there was Clayton's most reliable customer, Scully, the Irish-born French Foreign Legionnaire who always wore a leather glove on his left hand. But more of Scully later.

Clayton paused at one of the casualties of one of the wars— Hermano—a 40-year-old Mexican with a 3-year-old mind ever since an unrifled musket ball had creased his skull. Clayton let him live here, in a cabin out back, in return for work—though his only job was to crank a hand pump, moving water from a ground basin up to a cistern on the roof that provided indoor plumbing for the second floor. It was an occupation Hermano loved.

Clayton put a hand on his shoulder. "Como estas, Hermano?" Hermano smiled broadly, nodding his head like a nutating cow. "Bien hecho," Clayton told him, patting his back with genuine affection. Good job. Clayton wished someone could tell him the same some day. Hermano patted his own back, feeling Clayton's pride in him.

Isaac and Clayton moved on. A longhaired gambler in elbow garters backed up his chair from a faro table, knocking into Isaac.

"Whyn't you watch where the hell you walkin', boy?"

“Next time I’ll try to step livelier, suh,” Isaac replied, keeping his eyes downcast. He spoke Slave when he wanted to avoid trouble, or sometimes just to be a joker.

The gambler sensed insult. “Don’t you backsass me.” He spat on Isaac’s chest.

As Isaac’s fist clenched, Clayton whacked the dandy’s head against the doorjamb. Stunned but not out, the man slid to the floor. Clayton grabbed a spittoon and emptied it over the fellow. “I wouldn’t want you to leave shy of spit,” said Clayton. “Just don’t come back for more, now, hear?”

He rolled the soggy gambler out the door, waving off bartender Jim, who’d come up with a truncheon in case help was needed. Then he returned to Isaac. “You all right?” he asked, wiping the spittle off Isaac’s vest with his handkerchief.

“You mean after you tried to show everyone you were faster than me?”

“Didn’t have to try too hard, did I?”

They shared a quarter smile and walked side by side until they reached the table in question, where they paused to watch four men play out a hand of stud poker.

One wore the dented badge of a Texas Ranger, peevish but too drunk to focus.

Beside him was a young fellow named Tinbury, dressed in diplomat blue, for the past months trying desperately to grow a mustache. He was the Union charge d’affaires from Leonard Pierce’s office, Pierce being the United States Ambassador in Matamoros, appointed by Lincoln himself. Tinbury, on the other hand, was a career bureaucrat, posted here through random assignment—bad luck, he’d say. Clayton nodded to this junior diplomat, whom he knew slightly, and disliked slightly more.

The third man at the table was a young, smooth-faced corporal in a Yankee blue uniform, with some kind of Grand Army of the Republic campaign medal pinned to his chest. Looked too young to be a soldier, really, but every year the recruits got younger, as the early enlistees got killed off. Clayton had seen this boy quite a bit lately, here and around town, though they’d never spoken.

Tinbury made introductions. “Wilkes, this is Beale, the new Corporal of the Guard at the embassy compound. Beale, Wilkes.” They nodded at each other, then Clayton’s gaze moved on, while the corporal kept studying Clayton’s face.

The last poker player was clearly the teamster Isaac had referred to, the man he'd said was cheating. Bewhiskered and weathered, his clothes were filthy, the way teamsters seemed to like them. He had the look of someone arrived in town that day, with a sizable stake by the looks of the mound in front of him. Clayton watched the man rake in another pot. Tinbury was watching as well, with more than a squint of suspicion.

Clayton began telling a story. "You boys know how a rattlesnake'll kill itself if it don't know when to slither away?"

"How's that, Mr. Wilkes?" smiled Isaac, who had long experience being the shill in Clayton's tales.

"Man just needs to bring up his pistol and wave it real slow, back and forth, in front of the rattler. Snake'll take a bead on the muzzle, follow its moves inch for inch, gettin' ready to strike. Thinks the gun muzzle is the eye of a hawk. That's when the man pulls the trigger. Blows the rattler's head off. Snake did all the aimin' for him—blind man coulda done it. O' course, if the snake had any sense it woulda just eased on out."

There was a confused silence. "What the hell's that mean?" said the Texas Ranger.

"Means there's a snake at this table who needs to ease on out," said Clayton. He walked behind the teamster, put a hand on the man's shoulder. "I'll have to ask you to divvy up your winnin's to the other men and vacate the premises, sir," Clayton addressed him with courteous regret.

"Ask away, friend. I'm here to gamble."

"You have done so, sir, and lost. Out you go."

"Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Clayton Wilkes, and this is my establishment."

"You got special house rules I don't know about?"

"The rules of the house are no cheatin'." Clayton grabbed him by the scruff of the shirt and pulled him upright.

The man spun, drawing a Colt single-action from his belt. But Clayton brought up a derringer right quick, put the barrel to the teamster's chest and pulled the trigger. The blast from the small firearm was barely loud enough to rise above the din of the room—but strong enough to knock the man backwards onto his ass on the table. A bullet to the heart will do that.

He lay still, on his back, as a bloody stain spread across his shirtfront and his poker mates got up, stunned.

“Oh, my Lord,” said Tinbury.

“The teamster drew first, I saw it.” This from the Texas Ranger, laconically indicating the recently deceased.

“That was...amazing,” said Corporal Beale in awe, evidently new to gunplay.

Clayton reached under the dead man's sleeves and around his collar. Nothing there. But Isaac came forward to pop open the corpse's big belt buckle. An ace fell out. Isaac smiled. “Some men like to keep their secret treasures close to their family jewels.”

“Sorry about this, gentlemen,” said Clayton. “Y'all just split up his money.”

The Ranger dug into the pile of cash between the cadaver's thighs and dispersed roughly equal portions to himself, the dumbfounded Yankee corporal, and Tinbury, who was methodically going through the dead man's pockets.

“Wish you hadn't done that, Wilkes,” said Tinbury. “We had good reason to believe he was an agent for the Confederacy. I was all set to have Beale arrest him.”

“Found out he was a spy you'd have hung him anyway.”

“Yes, but if I'd been able to learn who his contact was, it might've shortened the war by a year.”

“War's good for business, I got no use to shorten it. And folks hear I let cheats play at my place, it's bad for business. That's my only politics.” He shrugged and turned to Isaac. “The water is wide, Isaac, you best send this boy home to Jesus.”

“Yassuh, Mmmistah Wilkes, sssuh,” Isaac stammered; then laughed as if it were the funniest thing he'd ever said. Clayton just shook his head patiently. Isaac

picked up the body, flung it over his shoulder like an old coat and exited the back door.

The Texas Ranger moved to a new poker table.

Consular aide Tinbury drilled Clayton with a stare. "That was a helluva thing. How'd you know he was a cheat?"

"Isaac told me."

"What if your boy'd been wrong?"

"He's not my boy. And the day he's wrong I'll wire you the news."

Though Tinbury had a Union posting, he'd grown up in southern Indiana and didn't much care for Negroes, though he knew it would be impolitic to say so if he expected advancement in the diplomatic corps of the North. But his childhood feelings crept out when he was under stress. And he was stressed now that the man he'd been following was dead. U.S. Ambassador Leonard Pierce would be irked, notwithstanding there was nothing Tinbury could have done about it. And nothing to be done about it now, Pierce be damned. So Tinbury just cursed his ill fortune and walked away.

"Damn!" said a voice cracked by excitement and youthful hormones.

Clayton turned to see the young Yankee corporal looking at him with incredulous eyes. He'd forgotten the kid was still here.

"That was so audacious," said the young soldier. "I mean, what guts it took, not to mention quick thinking. You are one cool customer."

"You run a place like this, you learn to anticipate behavior," Clayton demurred.

"Anticipate is one thing. Ricochet the hell out of it's another."

"We all have our own particular skills. I've no doubt you're a jim dandy sentry."

With that Clayton nodded politely and headed back upstairs to his office. The corporal watched him all the way.

Isaac felt someone watching him as he walked out the back door with the deadweight burden draping his shoulder, but he didn't look around to see who it was. Looking would have been a sign of weakness, or fear.

A light fog dampened his face as he made his way over the sandy earth, ground-covered with blue sage and sea grass, an easy walk to the river. The Rio Grande was shallow, twisting, muddy and wide. From here it rolled 25 miles east to the port of Bagdad, where it dumped into the Gulf of Mexico.

Bagdad was the poor cousin to Matamoros, a hasty city of brothels and bars and tar-wood bonfires on the beach, where bales of cotton were piled high awaiting transfer to the ships offshore that would take them to the English mills. Isaac always expected to see Charon poised there on his ferry, readying to carry all those smokey souls across the river.

When he reached the water's edge he lowered the teamster to the sand and spoke softly. "Go with God, my friend." He rolled the body into the river, where it tumbled slowly in the current, reflecting the gibbous moonlight until it floated around a bend, lost to the world of concerns, out to the sea.

Isaac rose, turned, and just stood there for a moment to watch the city of Matamoros play its night games. Laughter and arguments in the zocalo were punctuated by an occasional gunshot, either celebratory or acrimonious. A chorus of opera from the magnificent Teatro crossed melodies with drunken sea shanties and mariachis rising from the bars. All brightly lit with lanterns, candle flame and intrigue. Isaac surely loved the clockworks of a city night, where everyone was a free agent.

A puff of wind flared up embers in a nearby, smoldering pile of charred dresses and satin bustiers, tin skirt hoops glowing orange. As sparks twisted up into the starry night, it seemed to Isaac as if the spirit of the South itself were turning to smoke and blowing away. If only it were that simple.

A man of the spirit, Isaac felt connected to all living things and made it his practice to experience that connection daily. Not that he wouldn't kill if he had to—but as he knew from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, great military conflicts are best won without doing battle. He'd studied the Sun Tzu text, along with other histories and philosophies, by reading them secretly at night, lifted from the shelves of his last owner—a Florida doctor who'd taught him medical arts as well, designating Isaac the caretaker of sick slaves on the doctor's plantation, so the doctor himself wouldn't have to dirty his hands.

But it was Shalako, the Zuni shaman, who'd taught Isaac that when he did have to kill an enemy—like he did that scrofulous doctor who'd owned him—he should always take a moment to thank the body for sharing that sacred moment of death. Same way you thanked the deer you killed for providing you with food. Because in being connected to all, Isaac touched his own mortality with every life he took. Isaac walked back to the casino. He saw Tinbury watching from the shadows but gave no hint that he saw. Tinbury was a fool and would believe what he wanted to.

“Waterboy done tol' me,” said Harley. “They found a beava dead in the wings.”

“A beaver,” said Clayton, holding a smile. “Son, where'd you hear that?”

“Waterboy said Miss Catherine tol' him. Was that singer what she called the beava.”

“Diva, not beaver. The diva's dead? How'd that happen? Some patron of the opera not overly fond of Verdi?” Clayton had heard from the captain of the *Sea Queen* that *La Traviata* closed its run after just one week in Paris; but here in Matamoros audiences were generally more forgiving.

“Yellow fever took her, more like. Whole mess o’ black flux out back.”

“Have to burn her costumes, then, that’ll cost the house a pretty penny. You give Catherine my regrets.”

“Yessir, Cap’n.” Harley called every man Cap’n. He was a Confederate Army deserter, Alabama infantry, poorest of poor whites before the war, hardly better off now; so he felt deference to all was probably the safest way to stay out of hot water.

“Any talk of the invasion?”

“Everyone talks, Cap’n. Ain’t nothin’ to credit.”

The impending invasion of Texas by the Yankee army was second only to the weather as a subject of speculation in Matamoros—and summer weather in the Rio Grande basin was a trial, going from heat so bad it was hard to breathe to tropical storms by September. They’d had torrential rain for just a single day the week before. Ever since then Yellow Fever cases had started hitting town; nothing like the epidemic of ’58, but still enough to make a man wary, and would continue to do so until the weather turned cooler in the fall. As if there weren’t enough cause to die in this season.

Times of drought the streets were arid with a fine dust swirling in on the desert wind, like the war rumors that blew through town. Some rumors were true, of course, whispered by officers through the cigar smoke between acts at the Opera House—the Teatro de la Independencia— where Harley worked as a janitor. He picked up details there as he swept out the loggias, keeping Clayton abreast of it all. For nickels mostly, but a half dollar for solid military rumors. Once, a Golden Eagle.

Though Clayton bought and sold information of all sorts, he didn’t much care to trade with Yankees, reputedly due to their having burned down his family’s plantation back in Louisiana. And because his sentiments were known around town, Union agents seldom approached him. If they did—even with cash on hand for intelligence about Southern troop movements—he usually declined their business. If accused of being a Reb sympathizer, he’d only say that he was a Mexican resident now, and took no sides in the American War Between the States. He was on his own side; in his own war.

Harley lingered another moment while Clayton found some coins in his pocket to give the man.

“Thank you, Cap’n.”

When Harley left, Clayton sipped his coffee—the real stuff, from Jamaica, strong and sober, a premium drink few in the Confederacy enjoyed—and walked to the French doors where Chinese silk curtains hung still in the windless night. He stepped out onto the *senorita* balcony.

The view had a dreamlike hush to it, the fragmented reflection of the moon gliding on the slow current of the Rio Grande. Shards of moonlight, all broke to pieces. Made him glance over at the William Morris stained glass window he’d had shipped over from the 1862 London Exposition, shattered in a storm off Cuba, now lying in fragments on his workbench. Clayton had been piecing it together for weeks; like a puzzle. Maybe when he was done he’d have a go at fixing the river-splintered moon.

Clayton was, among other things, a fixer. People were in trouble, or in need, or in deep, Clayton was the man to fix you up. For a price, and with a sparkle in his eye. He bought and sold guns, cotton, documents, Confederate money and above all, information. Commonly to the highest bidder; but always as it pleased him.

Clayton inhaled deeply—another way to get information. He had a keen nose—not as good as he’d made out to his companions the day of that Colorado blizzard—but still, he’d been known to pick up clues on the air. It was clean now, though. No whiff of gunpowder, nor panic sweat, nor arson smoke; nor mercy, for that matter. Just the air, with a hint of moisture in it tonight, pure in its own way, devoid of artifice. He took a moment of peace before he stepped back inside. To his world of artifice.

Every curio in his office came with its own story. The Chinese curtains he’d bought from a whorehouse in San Francisco, the English rolltop rescued at the auction of a bankrupt Georgia peach plantation; the threadbare Persian carpet in which a fleeing pasha had been rolled to escape his enemies. He surrounded himself with objects of wonder; for life was short, was it not? And in that brief window, the senses might be soothed, even when the soul felt devoid of beauty.

Clayton walked to the workbench where the William Morris glass splinters lay. Picked up a red fragment and held it to the kerosene lamp on the desk. The color of blood, informed by fire. As if the war had seeped into everything.

He walked to his office door overlooking the gaming room and peered down through the stagnant layer of smoke that had found its level ten feet above the floor. It was four in the morning; quiet downstairs. Just French Foreign Legionnaire Scully out cold at a table, his leather-gloved hand gripping an empty shot glass; Little Andy, the dead-hours barkeep dozed against the backbar; and some lone banjo player picking a sad-wise tune for no one but himself.

The place never closed, but business dropped off between three and ten a.m. Clayton knew he should go to sleep, but he rarely slept more than a few hours anyway. His dreams saw to that; bad dreams, bitter memories. Clayton grew up on a cane plantation, the sole child of a doting mother and a strict father. His only friends were his father's slave children; and every summer, his Mother's siblings in France. But his mother was dead now, his father too, the plantation burned to ashes, Clayton vowing never to return. Sitting at his desk, he sipped a Tennessee whiskey until his head grew heavy, lulled by the banjo chords downstairs...

*A banjoist plinked on the back step as two boys huddled nearby. Eight years old, one Negro, one white. The kitchen was abuzz with slaves preparing party food. The white boy nudged the black boy, who walked into the midst of the scurrying servants, took a handful of walnuts from a bowl and put them in his pockets. As he walked back to his co-conspirator he grabbed a dish of butter, and the boys ran out of the kitchen giggling.*

*The twilight party was a grand affair. Sixty ladies and gentlemen in fine gowns and elegant frock coats filled the drawing room, the gardens, the conservatory, drinking juleps and whatnot. Banjo and fiddle played, the moon was full, the magnolia sweet.*

*The two boys crouched behind a wisteria in thrilled anticipation of the moment. An old servant approached three ladies near the pond, bearing a silver tray of walnuts, figs and grapes. A young lady in a hoop dress reached for a walnut and nutcracker. The boys squeezed each other's hands tightly, stifling laughter. The*

*lady cracked a nut. It split with ease into two perfect halves—each half filled with rancid butter. Without looking she reached into the shell for the nut-meat but only came back with a finger full of yellow goo. She looked at her finger, shrieked and slipped into the pond.*

*Next morning the Negro boy got tied to a post. All the slaves were made to watch, including his parents. Including the white boy. The overseer held a cat-o-nine-tails. The white boy's father—the plantation owner—stood beside his son grimly.*

*“This is your doin’, Clay. You best not forget this.” He nodded at the overseer. The overseer whipped the black boy's back ten times. Every lash drew blood. The white boy twitched at each scourge. The eyes of the two boys met, until Clayton looked away.*

*When the whipping was done, Isaac's parents carried their unconscious son off to the slave quarters. Everyone dispersed quietly. “That's what happens,” the white boy's father told him, as Clay stood there, shaking...*

Clayton startled awake, still sitting at his desk. He'd just heard a sound; or if not heard, at least sensed the vibration that living things sometimes make instead of sound.

A man stood silently behind him now, hidden in the Oriental curtains bracketing the open French doors. Motionless as granite and dripping wet. His shirt was stuck to his chest by the dark bloodstain the derringer ball had left.

He stepped silently closer to Clayton. He wanted to be standing directly behind Wilkes before he made his presence known. Wanted to put his hand on Wilkes's shoulder, as Wilkes had done to him in the casino. He took one long stride toward the desk, then paused to set himself.

Clayton was able to estimate the size of his visitor by the almost soundless sag in the floorboard where the man stepped. He heard a few drops of water hit the floor with the man's step, too; river water, by the smell. That said it all. Clayton smiled. Without turning around, he lifted the whiskey bottle. “Will you join me?”

The man in the bloody shirt relaxed, his little surprise blown. It was the dead teamster. But not all that dead, apparently. His name was Dupree. "Make mine a double. This powder burn is killin' me.