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Cargo ^{of} Coffins

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

When Enemies Meet

THE tattered giant saw Destiny standing against a blindingly white wall. But he did not recognize Paco Corvino as Destiny. Paco Corvino was the last man Lars Marlin had expected to see in Rio de Janeiro.

The first reaction was surprise but it quickly gave way to a surge of stolid hate which made Lars Marlin clutch the butt of the .38 inside his sun-bleached, wind-ripped shirt.

Paco Corvino deserved to die, had merited death for years, but now, as always, he stood in too obvious a position to be killed. Thinking of killing Paco was pleasant, and Lars stood where he was in the blue depths of a shadowy entrance considering it.

Across the street a dusky, booted policeman stood vigilantly under an awning. Lars saw him and drew back instinctively. Again the giant's chill gaze, bitter as an arctic sea, turned to all-unknowing Paco.

The butt of the .38 was sweaty in Marlin's palm. The temptation was great. Did the risk warrant the pleasure of revenge? One well-placed shot at this range of forty feet and Paco would drop off the curb and into the gutter. His confident, insinuating smile would be frozen forever upon his too-handsome face.



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Lars drew the .38 up a little, still keeping it out of sight. How he had prayed for this chance! For years without end he had waited patiently to even up a long-standing score.

But with the mud of the swamps of French Guiana hardly dry upon his bare feet, Lars was running a double risk. Any suspicious move from him would bring investigation from the Rio police, and that investigation would send Lars Marlin back to Devil's Island.

His grip tightened upon the .38 and he drew it closer to the torn front of his shirt.

Paco was elegantly dressed as always. Even in French Guiana he had managed to find excellent clothes but now he surpassed himself. His coat was of the best linen and the best cut. His trousers were pressed until the creases were sharp as bayonet blades. His shoes were so white they hurt the eyes on this brilliant tropical day. His cap would have been the envy of a British naval officer, so rakish was its slant, so shiny was its braid.

The insignia was strange to Lars. But it did not matter. Paco was a steward on a yacht, he supposed. But Lars wasted no thought upon Paco Corvino's present. The past was a dull throb in Lars Marlin's brain.

There, jaunty and well fed and reasonably safe, stood Paco, pleased with himself because the Law had just tipped its cap courteously to him. If that officer only knew Paco. . . .

Murderer, contraband runner, escaped convict. A man with no more conscience than a bullet, a man cool and deadly, masking a cunning brain with a winning smile.

Oh, yes, Lars Marlin knew all about Paco. It had been Paco who had changed Captain Lars Marlin into Convict 3827645. Paco had done that out of vengeance and now, thought Lars, the tables were turned. One bullet . . .

Lars looked again at the Law under the awning. His gaze went back to Paco and then beyond him, down the cool avenue to tall green and tan palms. Red roofs and white walls. Rugged, pleasant hillsides rising . . .

Once more his hand clenched on the .38. This revenge was sweet enough to repay any consequences. Too long he had dreamed of this moment. He pulled the .38 clear of his shirt, pressing back against the cold, harsh wall. Carefully he leveled the gun. He had no compunctions about the sportsmanship of this. Paco knew that someday Lars Marlin would find him.

The finger began to squeeze down on the trigger.

Laughter nearby jarred Lars Marlin's nerves. The world was ugly to him and this laughter was too gay. Two American girls and a youth had come into the range, approaching the shadowy place where Lars stood.

As the group passed Paco, the blithe Spaniard saluted the man and swept off his cap in a low bow to the ladies.

"Good afternoon, all. Good afternoon, Miss Norton," said the smiling Paco.

Lars looked at Miss Norton. He did not take his eyes away. He could not. It had been long since this homeless American had seen a woman of his own race. And this woman was no usual girl. Her hair was as yellow as the sun. Her graceful body was enough to make de Milo weep from sheer inability to hold those unhampered, lovely curves in marble.



*"Good afternoon, all. Good afternoon, Miss Norton,"
said the smiling Paco.*

Straight and clean and beautiful, she gave the spellbound and unseen Marlin something back, something he had lost in the swelter of heat and the ungodly cruelty of an alien prison camp.

Almost ashamed, he slid the .38 back into his shirt.

Her voice was low and clear. "We sail at midnight, Paco. Make certain you're with us."

"Yes, Miss Norton."

The group passed on. They were almost abreast of Lars now. In a moment they would pass within two feet of him. He sensed the presence of her companions but he had eyes only for Miss Norton. He had not heard laughter for years unless it was the wild laughter of madness.

Involuntarily he took off his cap as she passed. A supercilious, patronizing voice brought him back.

"Here, my man."

Silver clinked in Lars Marlin's cap. Blankly he glanced up at the donor. The youth was back between the girls, walking away. Lars looked at the fellow wonderingly. The man had been drinking, as his walk was exaggeratedly straight. Neat and flabby, he had no more character than a dummy outside a clothing store.

Lars Marlin took the *milreis* out of his cap and looked at it. His big, hard mouth curled with contempt. He threw the coin across the walk where an ancient, scabby beggar scooped it up avidly.

Lars looked back at Paco.

Not here. There were other ways. But meanwhile he must

not lose the man whom fortune had placed so kindly in his way.

Hesitantly, Lars stepped forward. The hot sun struck his half-bare back and showed the play of muscles through the shredded rag he wore. Beyond him Paco stood looking across the street, jingling coins in his pocket. In profile his face was hawklike and his ivory white teeth flashed like fangs. But, even so, he was pleasant to look upon.

He had been raised on the wharves of world ports without number, foraging with the rats, keeping the society of the drifting flotsam, appearing and disappearing, untraceable. He had developed a smile as armor and it was no deeper than the metal of a *salade*. And though he did not know his real name he had carefully developed the manners of an aristocrat. It was like Paco to stand in plain sight of the Law, smiling, secure and confident.

Lars came to a heavy stop on Paco's right. They were the same height but there the similarity ended. Lars was built strongly, hewed massively from granite.

Paco looked down at his feet and saw a blue shadow lying there. He saw the breadth of that shadow, how motionless it was, how broad the shoulders were. He saw the outlined tip of an officer's cap.

Paco knew without turning that Lars Marlin, whom he thought to be two thousand miles away in safe confinement, stood with him in the blazing light of the Brazilian sun.

It was not part of Paco's code to show shock. For all he

knew, the bullet he so well deserved might be on the verge of an eager trigger. Fear made Paco curl up like burning paper—but only inside. He was sick with nausea and his heart lurched heavily and began to pound in his throat.

Across the street stood the Law, beyond call. Paco must stand there and give no sign.

Only slightly congealed, only a little more false than before, Paco's smile was slowly turned to Lars.

Their eyes clashed. Dark orbs recoiled before the baleful certainty of Norse blue.

Lars did not move, but Paco sensed that he did. Lars was holding himself enchained and his hands, thumbs hooked into rawhide belt, were shaking slightly. Shaking, Paco knew, because they could already feel a man's breath damned up in his contracted throat.

But Paco smiled. He had no ace in his sleeve but he had a knife, strapped to his wrist in a sheath. He had only to jerk his arm and the knife would glitter in his palm, ready to strike.

Paco's voice was easily mocking. "So you came to Rio for me. If you had arrived tomorrow, I would have been gone. You always were lucky, Lars."

"I was lucky until I met you, Paco."

"How did you escape?"

"The same way you did." Lars Marlin's tones were heavy, monotonous, eating into Paco with far more effect than if they had been the ranting harshness of rage.

"Congratulations," said Paco.

"If you have a few minutes," said Lars, "I'd like to see you alone." Paco knew he meant the Law across the street. It

seemed funny to Paco to be standing here, actually under the protection of the police.

"I don't think we have anything to talk over, Lars. If you need money . . ."

"Silver won't buy your life."

Paco was amused. "In the numerous times we have met, Lars, you have yet to come out a winner."

"That was yesterday. This is today. Shall we go to some quiet place, Paco?"

Paco shrugged. "I can understand that you might be angry about that Casablanca deal, but after all, Lars, you were the one who turned me over. Wasn't I entitled to take you along to French Guiana with me?"

"If you were, then I have some rights now," said Lars.

"Rights! Does an escaped convict babble about rights? See here, Lars. If you . . . Wait. You're branded now. You can't live inside the law. I've just had an idea."

"I am not interested in your ideas. Will you come or do I have to . . ."

A man in brass-buttoned whites stepped between them, facing Paco. Lars was annoyed at himself. At the first flash of gold he had recoiled in fear of police. But this was not police. The man was elderly. His rum-reddened face was flabby, filled with small broken veins. His hair was white as a bleached bone. He wore a captain's stripes and the insignia upon his cap matched Paco's.

"Sorry I kept you waiting," said the strange captain to Paco. "*They* won't take less than . . ."

Paco shot a triumphant glance over the old man's shoulder

to Lars. "Just a minute, Captain. I wish to present one of my old friends. A man who might be expected to help us." When the officer faced around, Paco, with a mocking wave of his hand, said, "Captain Simpson, this is Captain Lars Marlin."

Simpson's weak eyes showed his distrust. His freckled hand in Marlin's was cold and moist and weak.

Paco swept on. "Marlin is an old friend of mine, Simpson. We were together years ago on the *Moroccan Queen*. You recall the incident?"

Simpson was startled. He looked swiftly from Lars to Paco, and in an incredulous voice, cried, "You mean he's . . ."

Paco's smile was amused. "Yes. He just managed his escape from Devil's Island."

Simpson gasped and stared at Lars. The tattered giant's glare was hot enough on Paco to wither him. The mighty fists were drawn up in steel mauls.

But Paco's quietly laughing voice surged on. "I see you remember, Captain. It was all very interesting. You recall when the French authorities searched the *Queen* for contraband dope? They found it on me, of course. Marlin here gave them the first clue which fastened it upon me. And you remember what happened after that. It was discovered that quantities of it were in his cabin. He swore he did not know how they got there, those little tins. Naturally they packed him off with me. Lars here is a very persistent fellow. He tried three times to kill me in the Penal Colony. That scar you can see on his chest was given him by my knife on the third try. And now he is with us again. Good, kind Lars."