

# L. RON HUBBARD



## SIX-GUN CABALLERO

GALAXY  
P R E S S

## CHAPTER ONE

SON,” said Judge Klarner, slapping his beefy hand down upon his host’s glossy linen table cloth, “I came halfway across the United States and I rode myself raw over two hundred miles of desert to keep you out of trouble. And now, damn it, you might at least listen to me!”

Michael Patrick Obañon paused in the act of helping himself to the breakfast proffered on a platter by a young Mexican. He put the silver spoon and fork back and waved the servant away.

“*Señor*,” said Michael Patrick Obañon. “Forgive me. I assure you it was only out of courtesy that I forbade you to talk until you had at least eaten. Come,” he said with a flashing smile, “is it so dangerous that even breakfast must wait?”

“Dangerous!” puffed Judge Klarner. “Young man, when your daddy and mother first came to this land it was worthless. But they built! They increased their herds! They have left a heritage of a hundred thousand acres to you, their son. Have you no sense of responsibility? Can you lightly wave aside the loss of this great fortune?”

“But I did not think this was so serious. After all, the United States government will certainly recognize the old Spanish grants. And what have I to fear, my good judge?”

“What have you to fear?” roared Klarner. He left it there for a moment, to sink back with an orator’s taste for dramatics. Such a question left him powerless. His great shoulders sagged inside his white broadcloth coat. Even the lodge pin on his great watch chain drooped. With a great effort he straightened out his white mustache and collected himself.

With great care, Klarner began again. “Young man, what do you suppose will happen to the overflowing scum from the California gold fields? Did you expect they would all find wealth? No! And now Gadsden has purchased all this land from Mexico. He has reserved some of it for railroad and the rest is wide open to settlement. These Americans will descend upon you like locusts!”

Michael Patrick Obañon could not restrain a smile. “*Señor*, you have been misled. You have forgotten. Perhaps I hold my title to this land from Mexico but certainly I am as good an American as any of them. I am still a citizen of the United States. How can this possibly affect me?”

That fact recalled Klarner to himself. Yes, he had forgotten. This tall, thin youngster with his blue eyes and silky black hair, with his faint Spanish accent, was indeed a citizen of the United States. Yes, he had been misled by that white silk shirt, the wide-bottomed, laced trousers, by the silvered, flat-brimmed sombrero which hung from the wall.

“I am not at all certain of your title,” said Klarner, returning to the attack. “I am here as your father’s friend to ask you to refile upon this land. True, you could not have your hundred thousand acres. After all, that is a nation in itself. But a few thousand can be saved before you are driven out by settlers.”

“*Señor*,” said Michael, “my confidence in the United States would seem to be greater than yours. Certainly this is a large rancho. My father’s title to it was clear enough. He was a friend of Mexico and they would not play him false. Why should I contact these lawyers you recommend just to file on what is already mine? That would imply lack of faith in my title.”

Klarner lowered his great shaggy brows. “Son, the fact is this. During the last three months, the Mexican border has moved far to the south of you. Three months ago you were on Mexican soil, but now this house sits within the territorial boundaries of the United States. Any day, men will come in upon you, stake out sections of your land, drive off your cattle, deny your right to remain here. In their ignorance they will consider you a Mexican and give you scant respect as such. In memory of your parents you must take every precaution. . . .”

A *vaquero* charged through the door, pulled up to a sharp stop with a jingle of spurs and yanked off his sombrero.

“Your pardon, *don* Michael. I do not mean to interrupt your breakfast.”

“What is it, Enrico?”

“*Don* Michael, some thirty men are approaching the ranch at a swift trot. They are Americanos and they are armed!”

“It looks,” said Klarner, “as though I arrived too late.”

“Enrico,” said Michael Patrick Obañon, “how many rifles and pistols would you say our men possess?”

“Not more than ten in all including your own, *don* Michael.”

“Enrico, you will withdraw those *vaqueros* in the vicinity

off to a nearby line camp and then report again to me. Oppose nothing these Americans do as we wish no one killed.”

“*Sí, don Michael. I go.*”

“I see, *señor el juez*, that you understand our language.”

Klarner scowled. “Enough to know that I was right. You evidently intend to give up without a struggle. My boy, your father was made of sterner stuff. But Mexico City has softened his son.”

Because Judge Klarner was under his roof and because the man had been his father’s friend, Michael Patrick Obañon said nothing.

He beckoned for his breakfast and Antonio padded silently into the room with it.

“*Don Michael*,” whispered Antonio, his brown face drawn with fear, “you will not be reckless! These men from the north and west . . . I have heard those things which have happened in California. *Don Michael*, we could not do without you. Please do not allow your reckless . . .”

“Serve the *señor*, Antonio.”

“*Sí, don Michael. I am sorry. But the people of Santa Rosa owe you . . .*”

“*El juez*, Antonio.”

“*Sí, don Michael.*”

But Judge Klarner touched no food. His faded eyes, crouched in their webs of wrinkles, studied the calm youth before him.

Michael Patrick Obañon was a handsome fellow. He had a graceful air about him and when he spoke he made poetry

with his long-fingered hands. His voice was controlled and gentle and his glance was friendly and frank. For all the world he appeared not Irish but a Castilian gentleman from the court at Madrid.

Many hoofs, dulled by the sand of the yard, came close and stopped.

Michael stood up.

“Where are you going?” demanded Klarner, staring first at Obañon and then at the silver-mounted revolver which hung holstered from a peg on the wall.

“To ask them in, of course,” replied Michael, unconcerned.

Klarner caught at the leg-of-mutton silk sleeve. “Don’t be a fool. We’ve still got time. You and I can make a run for Washington and . . .”

The door crashed inward with a swirl of dust and the two turned to face the intruder.

The man was tall and thickly built. He had a Walker pistol in his huge and horny hand and his squinted, ink-dot eyes probed the dimness of the room. His heavy, Teutonic face was almost covered by a shaggy, untrimmed beard. The faded red shirt with its big bib and pearl buttons attested that he had come from California, as did his flat-heeled miner’s boots.

“Come in,” said Michael with a ghost of a bow.

“Is this Santa Rosa?”

“You are correct,” replied Michael. “*La hacienda de Obañon.*”

The stranger turned and made a come-on gesture with his heavy Walker pistol. “This is the place, Charlie. Come on in!”

Leather creaked and voices rose.

“What the hell do I care where you eat?” roared the stranger. “There must be grub somewhere in these shacks. Go find it. You ain’t helpless!”

He turned back to the room and crossed heavily to the table. A choice apple, carefully grown on the rancho, caught the stranger’s eye. He picked it up, wiped it on his shirt and sank his yellow fangs into it with a loud crack. Somehow he managed to chew the bite but it impeded his speech for some little time.

Two more men appeared in the doorway.

The stranger again motioned with the pistol. “C’mon. Here’s food.”

One of the men was squat. His head was large and so were his features, all out of keeping with his size. Though covered with dust, his clothes were loud, consisting of a checkered vest, a yellow suit and a small green hat which he now jerked off and twisted in his hands.

“Mebbe we’re intruding, Gus. Mebbe these gents ain’t finished their breakfast.” He took another turn on his hat and looked nervously at Michael. “Don’t mind Gus. He ain’t got much manners like Charlie and me.”

“Think nothing of it,” said Michael with another ghost of a bow, much to the amazement of Klarner. “I shall have a servant bring in more food for you.”

“Hell,” said Gus, gnawing on the apple, “you speak pretty good English for a damned greaser. Don’t he, Mr. Lusby?”

Mr. Lusby gave his hat yet another turn and looked uncomfortable and perspiring. “You don’t mind, Gus. If it’s too much trouble, *señor* . . .”

“Think nothing of it,” said Michael. “Please be seated.”

“My name is Lusby. Julius Lusby, Mr. . . .”

“I am *don* Michael to my friends, Mr. Lusby.”

“Sure. Sure. Glad to meetcha, *don* Michael. Look, this is Gus Mueller and this is Charlie Pearson.”

Gus did not even bother to nod. He prowled around the big room, still gripping the Walker pistol, opening doors and closing them, bending a calculating eye upon the beautiful Indian rugs and the finely carved, imported furniture.

Charlie Pearson was leaning against the door jamb with his boots crossed. His shirt had once been white linen and his stock was flowing black silk. He had the hard but easy air of the gambler about him.

He eyed Michael suspiciously. Finally, he muttered, “Pleased,” and went on picking his teeth.

“Maybe you can tell me where is the boss?” said Mr. Lusby hesitantly.

Gus came to the center of the room and tossed the apple core out the window. “Sure. We got business around here. Where’s the greaser that owns this dump?”

Michael smiled. “Perhaps he has already heard of your coming.”

“I get it,” said Gus with a harsh laugh. “And he wasn’t far from wrong, neither. I suppose you’re the major-domo, huh?” And as Michael did not show any signs of doing anything but smiling politely, Gus nudged Mr. Lusby. “Show him the papers.”

“Yep,” said Charlie. “Show him the papers. We got to make this here thing legal.”



Mr. Lusby ran his hands nervously through his pockets and at last located the documents. He edged up to the table, giving the impression of being about to run, and laid several sheets face up on the cloth.

“Since the border’s moved,” said Mr. Lusby, “all this is United States. I fixed it so the boys could file. And here’s the deeds, all ethical and legal, to the Santa Rosa Valley. This ranch house is on it, ain’t it?”

“Yes,” said Michael.

“There,” said Mr. Lusby with a sigh of relief. “I got it done.” Antonio came to the kitchen door and stared in.

“Hey, you,” said Gus, “hustle some grub. I could eat a mule.”

“*Don* Michael . . .” said Antonio.

“You heard the gentleman, Antonio.”

“*Sí, don* Michael,” and miserably he withdrew. A moment later came the loud crashing of dishes being thrown about.

Mr. Lusby looked apologetic. “We don’t want to put you out none, *señor*. . . .”

“Naw,” said Charlie. “But the point is, you’ll have to find someplace to sleep. We’re takin’ over here.”

“Naturally,” said *don* Michael. “Come, judge.”

“Wait a minute,” said Mr. Lusby. “Look. We don’t know nothing about this place. We don’t know where the cows is or nothing. Maybe you want a job, huh?”

“A job?” said Michael.

“Sure,” said Mr. Lusby. “You look like a pretty good feller. We’ll pay you thirty dollars a month.” He added hastily, “But not another nickel!”

“Why, you are too kind,” said *don* Michael. “As I am out of

employment, I shall be happy to accept such a liberal offer.” He gave them a smile, accompanied by a floating gesture of his hands which gave them to understand that he was completely theirs to command. “And now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I shall show your men where the forage is kept.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Charlie unexpectedly. “When you find out the other gent’s got a third ace as his hole card, don’t go quittin’. Deal ’em up, I says.”

Michael took his silver-encrusted sombrero from the wall and put it on, adjusting the diamond which held the flowing chin thong. He buckled the silver-inlaid pistol about his waist, and so normal did that gesture seem to the three strangers that they failed to note it.

Michael motioned to Judge Klarner and walked out into the hot morning sunlight of the yard.