

Gold

Gold

By Lewis Shiner

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Pirate gold. Coins, rings, ingots. Necklaces of emeralds and opals and sapphires. Chalice, bracelets, daggers inlaid with diamonds and lapis and ivory.

Malone rolled over in the soft hotel bed.

Not just gold but the things it would buy. A two-story house of brick and wrought iron. Greek columns in front and coaches parked in the drive. Built high on the center of Galveston Island, away from the deadly storms of the Gulf, away from the noise and stink of the port. White servants and negro slaves. Fair-haired women to sit at the piano in his parlor. Dark-skinned women to open their legs to him in the secrecy of the night...

He sat up in a sweat. I will think no evil thoughts, he told himself.

Outside, the sun rose over New Orleans. Horse-drawn carts creaked and rattled through the streets, and chickens complained about the light. The smell of the Mississippi, damp and sexual, floated through the open window.

Malone got up and put a robe on over his nightshirt, despite the heat. He turned up the gas lamp over the desk, took out pen, ink and paper, and began to write.

“My dearest Becky...”

*

He smelled the French Market before he saw it, a mixture of decayed fruit, coffee, and leather. He crossed Decatur Street to avoid a side of beef hung over the sidewalk, swarming with flies. Voices shouted in a dozen different languages. All manner of decrepit wooden carts stood on the street, their contents passed from hand to hand until they disappeared under the yellow canvas awnings of the market. Beyond the levee Malone could see the tops of the masts of the tall ships that moved toward the Governor Nicholl's Street Wharf.

The market was crowded with cooks from the town's better families, most of them Negro or Creole. The women wore calico dresses and aprons and kerchiefs, in all shades of reds and yellows and blues. The men wore second-hand suits in ruby or deep green, with no collars or neckties. Like their suits, their hats were battered and several years out of style. They carried shopping baskets on their shoulders or heads because there was no room to carry them at their sides.

Malone let himself be drawn in. He moved slowly past makeshift stands built of crates and loose boards, past heaps of tomatoes and peppers and bananas and field peas, searching the faces of the vendors. His concern turned out to be groundless; he recognized Chighizola immediately.

Nez Coupe, Lafitte had called him. With the end of his nose gone, he looked like a rat that stood on hind legs, sniffing at something foul. The rest of his ancient face was covered with scars as well. One of them, just under his right eye, looked pink and newly healed. He was tiny, well over eighty years old now, his frock coat hanging loose on his shoulders. Still his eyes had a fierce look and he moved with no sign of stiffness. His hands were large and energetic, seeming to carry his arms unwillingly behind them wherever they went.

"Louis Chighizola," Malone called out. The old man turned to look at him. Chighizola's eyes were glittering black. He seemed ready to laugh or fly into a rage at a moment's notice. Malone pushed closer. "I need a word with you."

"What you want, you?"

"I have a proposition. A business proposition."

"This not some damn trash about Lafitte again?" The black eyes had narrowed. Malone took a half step back, colliding with an enormous Negro woman. He no longer doubted that some of Chighizola's scars were fresh.

"This is different, I assure you."

"How you mean different?"

"I have seen him. Alive and well, not two weeks ago."

"I got no time for ghosts. You buy some fruit, or you move along."

“He gave me this,” Malone said. He took a flintlock pistol from his coat, holding it by the barrel, and passed it to the old man.

Chighizola looked behind him, took one reluctant step toward Malone. He took the pistol and held it away from him, into the sunlight. “Fucking hell,” Chighizola said. He turned back to Malone. “We talk.”

*

Chighizola led him east on Chartres Street, then turned into an alley. It opened on a square full of potted palms and flowers and sheets hung out to dry. They climbed a wrought-iron spiral staircase to a balcony cluttered with pots, old newspapers, empty barrels. Chighizola knocked at the third door and a young woman opened it.

She was an octoroon with skin the color of Lafitte’s buried gold. She wore a white cotton shift with nothing under it. The cotton had turned translucent where it had drunk the sweat from her skin. Smells of fruit and flowers and musk drifted from the room behind her.

Malone followed the old man into an aging parlor. Dark flowered wallpaper showed stains and loose threads at the seams. A sofa with a splinted leg sat along one wall and a few unmatched chairs stood nearby. An engraving of a sailing ship, unframed, was tacked to one wall. Half a dozen children played on the threadbare carpet, aged from a few months to six or seven years. Chighizola pointed to a chair and Malone sat down.

“So. Where you get this damn pistol?”

“From Lafitte himself.”

“Lafitte is dead. He disappears thirty years ago. The Indians down in Yucatan, they cook him and eat him I think.”

“Is the pistol Lafitte’s, or is it not?”

“You are not Lafitte, yet *you* have his pistol. Any man could.”

Malone closed his eyes, fatigue taking the heart out of him. “Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I have only deceived myself.” A small child, no more than two

years old, crawled into Malone's lap. She had the features of the woman who answered the door, in miniature. Her dress was clean, if too small, and her black hair had been pulled back and neatly tied in red and blue ribbons. She rubbed the wool of Malone's coat, then stuck two fingers in her mouth.

"I do not understand," Chighizola said. "You come to me with this story. Do you not believe it yourself?"

"I wish I knew," Malone said.

*

Malone was born poor in Ohio. His parents moved to the Republic of Texas in 1837 to get a new start. Some perverse symbolism made them choose the island of Galveston, recently swept clean by a hurricane. There they helped with the rebuilding, and Malone's father got work as a carpenter. Malone was ten years old at the time, and the memories of the disaster would stay with him the rest of his life. Block-long heaps of shattered lumber, shuffled like cards, the ruin of one house indistinguishable from the next. Stacks of bodies towed out to sea, and those same bodies washing in again days and weeks later. Scuff marks six feet up inside one of the few houses left standing, where floating furniture had knocked against the walls. The poor, Malone saw, would always be victims. For the rich there were options.

One of the richest men on Galveston Island was Samuel May Williams. On New Year's Day of 1848 he had opened the doors of the Commercial and Agricultural Bank of Texas, his lifetime dream. It sat on a choice piece of land just two blocks off the Strand Avenue, "the Wall Street of Texas." Williams' fellow Texans hated him for his shrewd land speculation, his introduction of paper money to the state, his participation in the corrupt Monclova legislature of '35. Malone thought them naive. Williams was a survivor, that was all.

Not like his father, who found that a new start did not necessarily mean a new life. Malone's mother died, along with a quarter of Galveston's population, in the yellow fever epidemic of '39. Soon his father was drinking again. Between the liquor and his son's education, there was barely money for food. Malone swore that he would see his father in a fine house in the Silk Stocking district. He never got the chance. Instead he returned from Baylor University in the spring of '48 in time to carry one corner of his father's coffin.

Malone's classes in accounting were enough to land him a position as a clerk in Sam Williams' new bank. Within a year he had married the daughter of one of its board members. His father-in-law made Malone a junior officer and an acceptable member of society. A long, slow climb lay ahead of him, leading to a comfortable income at best. It did not seem enough, somehow.

He had been in Austin on the bank's business. It was a foreclosure, the least pleasant of Malone's duties. The parcel of land was one that Williams had acquired in his early days in Texas, "going halves" with immigrants brought in by the Mexican government.

That night he had stood at the Crystal Saloon on Austin's notorious Congress Avenue, drinking away the sight of the sheriff examining Malone's papers, saying, "Sam Williams, eh?" and spitting in the dirt, the sight of the Mexican family disappearing on a mule cart that held every battered thing they owned.

A tall man in a bright yellow suit had stood at Malone's table, nodded at his satchel, and said, "On the road, are you?" The man spat tobacco onto the floor, the reason Malone had kept his satchel safely out of the way. The habit was so pervasive that Malone took precautions now by instinct. "I travel myself," the man said. "I am in ladies' garments. By trade, that is."

Malone saw that it was meant to be a joke. The drummer's name was O'Roarke, but he constantly referred to himself in the third person as Brimstone Jack, "on account of this head of hair." He lifted his hat to demonstrate. The hair that was visible was somewhere between yellow and red, matching his mustache and extravagant side-whiskers. There was, however, not much of it.

Malone mentioned Galveston. The talk soon turned to Jean Lafitte, the world's last pirate and the first white settler of Galveston Island. That was when O'Roarke offered to produce the genuine article.

Four glasses of bourbon whiskey had raised Malone's credulity to new heights. He followed O'Roarke to a house on West Avenue, the limits of civilization, and there stepped into a world he had never seen before. Chinese, colored, and white men sat in the same room together, most of them on folding cots along the walls. Heavy, sour smoke hung in the air. The aroma left Malone both nervous and oddly euphoric. "Sir," he said to O'Roarke, "this is an opium den."

A man in the far corner began to laugh. The laugh went on and on, rich,

comfortable, full of real pleasure. Malone, his good manners finally giving way to curiosity, turned and stared.

The laughing man had fair skin, a hatchet nose, and piercing black eyes. His black hair fell in curls to the middle of his back. He was in shirt sleeves, leather trousers, and Mexican sandals. There was a power about him. Malone felt a sudden, strong desire for the man's good opinion.

"May I present," O'Roarke said with a small bow, "the pirate Jean Lafitte?"

Malone stared in open disbelief.

"Privateer," the dark-haired man said, still smiling. "Never a pirate."

"Tell him," O'Roarke said to the dark-haired man. "Tell him who you are."

"My name is John Lafflin," the man said.

"Your real name," O'Roarke said, "damn you."

"I have been known by others. You may call me Jean Lafitte, if it pleases you."

"Lafitte's son, perhaps," Malone said. "Lafitte himself would be, what, nearly seventy years old now. If he lived."

The hatchet-faced man laughed again. "You may believe me or not. It makes no difference to me."

*

Sitting there in Chighizola's apartment, watching dust motes in the morning sunlight, Malone found his own story more difficult to believe than ever. From the shadows the woman watched him in silence. He wondered how foolish he must look to her.

"And yet," Chighizola said, "you *did* believe him."

"It was something in his bearing," Malone said. "That and the fact that he wanted nothing from me. Not even my belief. I found myself unable to sleep that night. I returned to the house before dawn and searched his belongings for

evidence.”

“Which is when you stole the pistol. He did not give it to you.”

“No. He had no desire to convince me.”

“So why does this matter so much to you?”

Malone sighed. Sooner or later it had to come out. “Because of the treasure. If he is truly Lafitte—or even if he is merely Lafitte’s son—he could lead us to the treasure.”

“Always to the treasure it comes.”

“I grew up on Galveston Island. We all live in the shadow of Jean Lafitte. As children we would steal away into the bayous and search for his treasure. Once there we found grown men doing the same. And if I feel so personally connected, how can you not feel even more so? It is your treasure as much as Lafitte’s. You sailed with him, risked your life for him. And yet look at yourself. In poverty, living by the labor of your hands.”

“I have not much time left.”

“All the more reason you should want what is yours. You should want the money for your family, for your daughter here, and her children.”

Chighizola looked at the woman. “He thinks you are my daughter, him.” She came over to kiss his scarred and twisted face. Malone felt his own face go red. “Here is a boy who knows nothing of life.”

“I am young,” Malone said. “It is true. But so is this nation. Like this nation I am also ambitious. I want more than my own enrichment. I know that it takes money to bring about change, to create the growth that will bring prosperity to everyone.”

“You sound like a politician.”

“With enough money, I would become one. Perhaps a good one. But without your help it will never happen.”

“Why am I so important? This man, Lafitte or not, what does it matter if he can lead you to the treasure?”

“If he is Lafitte, he will listen to you. He cares nothing for me. He will lead me nowhere. I need you to make him care.”

“I will think on this.”

“I am stopping at the French Market Inn. My ship leaves tomorrow afternoon for Galveston. I must know your answer by then.”

“Tell me, you who are in such a hurry. What of ghosts?”

“I do not understand.”

“Ghosts. The spirits of the dead.”

“Lafitte is alive. That is all that concerns me.”

“Ah, but you seek his gold. And where there is gold, there are ghosts. Always.”

“Then I leave them to you, old man. I will take my chances with the living.”

*

Malone had already packed his trunk and sent for his bill when the woman arrived. He mistook her knock for the bellman and was shocked into silence when he opened the door. Finally he backed away and stammered an apology.

“I bring a message from Chighizola,” she said. She pushed the door closed and leaned her weight against it. “We will go with you to see this Lafitte.”

“‘We?’” Malone could not take his eyes away from her.

“He says we are to divide the treasure four ways, equal shares, you, me, Louis, Lafitte.”

“Which leaves the two of you with half the treasure. I thought he did not care for money.”

“Perhaps not. Perhaps you care too much for it.”

“I am not a schoolboy. I have no desire to be taught humility at Chighizola’s hands.”

“Those are his terms. If they are agreeable, we leave today.”

Malone took a step closer to her. Curls of black hair had stuck to the damp flesh of her throat. It was difficult for him to speak. “I do not know your name.”

“Fabienne.”

“And what is your interest in this?”

“Louis,” she said. “He is my only interest.” She stepped to one side and pulled the door open. “We will meet you at the wharf in one hour.” She closed the door behind her.

*

The voyage to Galveston took a day and a half aboard the S.S. Columbia, now-aging stalwart of the Morgan line. Malone saw Chighizola and his woman only once, when the three of them shared a table for dinner. Otherwise Malone remained in his cabin, catching up on accounts and correspondence.

Malone stood on the bow as the ship steamed into Galveston Bay. Even now Sam Williams might have his eye on him. Legend had it that Williams watched incoming ships with a telescope from the cupola of his house, deducing their cargoes from their semaphored messages. He would then hurry into town to corner the market on the incoming merchandise. It did not increase his popularity. Then again, Williams had never seen public opinion as a necessary condition for money and power.

Williams had proven what a man of ambition could do. He had arrived in Texas under an assumed name in May of 1822, fleeing debts as so many others had. He had created himself from scratch. Malone knew that he could do the same. It was not proper that a man should live on his wife’s fortune and social position. He needed to increase and acquire, to shape the world around him.

Chighizola joined him as they swung in toward the harbor. “Do you never miss the sea?” Malone asked him.

“I had enough of her,” Chighizola said. “She care for nobody. You spend your life on top of her, she love you no more than she did the first day. A woman is better.” He squinted at the island. The harbor was crowded with sailboats and steamers, and beyond it the two-story frame buildings of the Strand were clearly visible. “Hard to believe that is the same Campeachy.” He looked at Malone. “Galveston, you call it now. Are there still the snakes?”

“Not like there used to be.”

“Progress. Well, I will be glad to see it. Every new thing, it always is such a surprise for me.”

“You will have to see it another time. We must catch a steamer for the mainland this morning, then a coach to Austin.”

“Yes, I forget the hurry you are in.”

“I have to know. I have to know if it is Lafitte or not.”

“It is him.”

“How can you be certain without even seeing him? I tell you he looks no more than forty years old.”

“And I tell you we buried Lafitte twice, once at the Barataria, once at Campeachy.”

“Buried him?”

“For being dead. Lafitte, he eats the blowfish, him. You understand? Poison fish. In Haiti he learns this. Sometimes he eats it, nothing happens. Sometimes he loses the feeling in his tongue, his mouth. Twice he gets stiff all over and looks dead. Twice we bury him, twice the Haitian spirit man watch the grave and dig him up again. Ten years he eats the blowfish, that I know him. In all that time, he gets no older. But it makes him different, in his head. Money is nothing to him after. Then the second time, he cares about nothing at all. Sets fire to Campeachy, sails off to Yucatan with his brother Pierre.”

“I have read the accounts,” Malone said. “Lt. Kearny and the *Enterprise* drove him away.”

“You think one man, one ship, stand against Lafitte if he wants to fight? He sees the future that night. He sees more and more Lt. Kearny in their uniforms, with their laws and courts and papers. More civilization, like in Louisiana. More government telling you what you can do. No more room for privateers. No place left in this country where a man stands alone. So he goes to Mexico. But first, before he goes, we burn the whole town to the ground. So Lt. Kearny does not get Lafitte’s nice red house.”

Malone knew that Lafitte’s pirate camp had numbered two thousand souls by the time Kearny arrived in 1821. Lafitte himself ruled from a two-story red house near the port, surrounded by a moat, guarded by his most loyal men. Campeachy had been a den of vice and iniquity: gaming, whores, liquor, gun-fights and duels. There were those in Galveston still that wondered if the island would ever recover from the evil that had been done there.

Malone shook his head. Chighizola had got him thinking of ghosts and now he could not rid himself of them.

“You did not go with him,” Malone said. “To Mexico. Why not?”

“I do not like the odds. I think, a man looks at Death so many times, then one day Death looks back. Life always seems good to me. I am not like Lafitte, *moi*. I do not have these ideas and beliefs to keep me awake all night. You are still young, I give you advice. To sleep good at night, this is not such a bad thing.”

*

The coach took them from Houston to San Felipe along the Lower Road, then overland to Columbus. From there along the Colorado River to La Grange and Bastrop and Austin. Chighizola was exhausted by the trip, and the woman Fabienne blamed Malone for it. Malone was tired and irritable himself. Still he forced himself out of the hotel that night to search for Lafitte.

The opium house was deserted, with no sign left of its former use. He stopped in two or three saloons and left word for O’Roarke, then gave up and retired to the comparative luxury of the Avenue Hotel.

Malone searched all the next day, asking for both O’Roarke and Lafitte by name. The first name met with shrugs, the second with laughter. Malone ordered a cold supper sent to his room, where he ate in silence with Chighizola and the woman.

“It would seem,” the woman said, “that we have come a long, painful distance for nothing.” She was dressed somewhat more formally than Malone had seen her before, in a low-cut yellow frock and a lace cap. The dangling strings of the cap and her dark, flashing eyes made her seem as wanton as ever.

“I do not believe that,” Malone said. “Men have destinies, just as nations do. I cannot believe that my opportunity has passed me by.”

There was a knock and Malone stood up. “That may be destiny even now.”

It was in fact O’Roarke, with Lafitte in tow. “I heard,” O’Roarke said, “you sought for Brimstone Jack. He has answered your summons.” He noticed Fabienne, removed his hat, and directed his goblet of tobacco juice at the cuspidor rather than the floor.

Malone turned back to the room. Chighizola was on his feet, one hand to his throat. “Holy Christ,” he said, and crossed himself.

Lafitte sank into an armchair. He seemed intoxicated, unable to focus his eyes. “Nez Coupe? Is it really you?”

“Me, I look how I should. You are the one that is not to be believed. Lafitte’s son, you could be.”

Malone said, “I warned you.”

“A test,” Chighizola said. “That is what you want, no?”

Malone shrugged. “I feel certain it would reassure us all.”

Chighizola rubbed a thick scar that ran along the edge of his jaw. “There is a business with a golden thimble I could ask him about.”

Lafitte waved his hand, bored. “Yes, yes, of course I remember the thimble. But I suppose I must tell the story, to satisfy your friends.” He shifted in the chair and picked at something on his shirt. “It happened in the Baratania. We had made the division of the spoils from a galleon taken out in the Gulf. There were three gold coins left over. I tried to give them to your wife.” His eyes moved to Fabienne, then back. “Your wife of the time, of course. But you were greedy and wanted them for yourself. So I had the smith make them into a thimble for her. I

think it ended up in a chest full of things that we buried somewhere.”

“It is Lafitte,” Chighizola said to Malone. “If you doubted it.”

“No,” Malone said, “I had no doubt.” He turned to O’Roarke. “How can we reward you for bringing him to us?”

“You can cut me in on the treasure,” O’Roarke said. Lafitte put back his head and laughed.

“I do not know what you mean,” Malone said.

O’Roarke’s face became red. “Do not take Brimstone Jack for an idiot. What you want is obvious. You are not the first to try. If you succeed I would ask for only a modest amount. Say, a hundredth share. It would be simpler to cut me in than to do the things you would have to do to lose me.”

Malone looked at Chighizola. Chighizola said, “It comes from your share, not from ours.” Fabienne smiled her agreement.

“All right, damn it,” Malone said. “Done.”

Lafitte leaned forward. “You seem to have matters well in hand. Perhaps I should be on my way.”

Malone stared at him for a second in shock. “Please. Wait.”

“You, sir, though I know your face, I do not know your name. I seem to remember you in connection with the disappearance of my pistol.”

Malone handed the pistol to Lafitte, butt first. With some embarrassment he said, “The name is Malone.”

“Mr. Malone, now that you have divided up my treasure, may I ask a question or two? How do you know the treasure even exists? If it does exist, that I have not long ago spent it? If I have not spent it, that I even recall where it was buried?” Unspoken was the final question: if he recalled it, why should he share?

“Is there a treasure?” Malone asked at last.

Lafitte took out a clay pipe shaped like some Mexican deity and stuffed it with brittle green leaves. He did not offer the odd tobacco to anyone else. When he lit it the fumes were sour and spicy. Lafitte held the smoke in his lungs for several long seconds then exhaled loudly. "Yes, I suppose there is."

"And you could find it again?"

Lafitte shrugged again. "Perhaps."

"You make sport of us, sir. You know our interests, and you seem to take pleasure in encouraging them. But you give us no satisfaction. What are your motives in this? Has money in fact lost all appeal for you?"

"I never cared for it," Lafitte said. "You may believe that or not. I cared for justice and freedom. Spain stood against those principles, and so I carried letters of marque to make war upon her. The riches were incidental, necessary merely to prolong that war. But time has moved on. Justice and freedom are antique concepts, of no importance to our modern world. The world, in the person of Lt. Kearny, made it clear that it had no use for me or my kind. I have learned to return the sentiment. I have no use for the things of this world."

He relighted his pipe and took another lungfull of smoke. "You ask about my appearance. I met a brahman from the Indian continent a few years ago. He explained that it is our connection to worldly things that ages us. *Karma*, he called it. I believe I am living proof of the Brahman's beliefs."

"What of those of us still in the world?" Malone said. "I see in you the signs of a former idealist, now disillusioned. I still have ideals. There are still wars to be fought, against ignorance and disease and natural disaster. Wars your treasure could fight. And what of Chighizola, your shipmate? Is he not entitled to his share?" For some reason the fumes from Lafitte's pipe had left Malone terribly hungry. He cast a sideways glance toward the remains of supper.

"If you sailed with him," O'Roarke said to Chighizola, "you must persuade him."

"I think," Chighizola said, "people try that for years now."

"You never answered my question," Malone said to Lafitte. "Money does not motivate you. Neither, it seems, does idealism. At least not any longer. So what

is it you care for? What can we offer you?”

“A trip to Galveston,” Lafitte said. “I would like to see my island again. To see how things have changed in thirty years. Then we will talk some more.” He set his pipe down. “And for the moment, you could hand me the remains of that loaf of bread. I find myself suddenly famished.”

*

They occupied an entire coach on the return trip. Between O’Roarke’s spitting and Lafitte’s pipe, it was even less pleasant than the outbound journey. They got off the steamer in Galveston late in the evening of a Sunday. The wharf was crowded nonetheless. Several freighters were being filled with cotton, the bales crammed into place with mechanical jackscrews to allow larger loads. The screwmen were the kings of the dock and shouldered their way contemptuously through the newly-arrived passengers, carrying huge bales of cotton on their backs.

Malone led his party, now including a couple of Negro porters, past Water Street to the Strand. It felt good to have the familiar sand and crushed shells under his feet again. “The Tremont Hotel is just over there, on 23rd Street,” he said. “If there’s any problem with your rooms, just mention the Commercial and Agricultural Bank. Mr. Williams, my employer, is part owner of the hotel.”

“And where do *you* live?” Lafitte asked. He had not ceased to smile in the entire time Malone had known him.

“About a mile from here. On 22nd Street. With my wife and her family.”

“Do they not have guest rooms?”

“Yes, of course, but it would be awkward...”

“In other words, since this is a purely business venture, you would prefer to put us up like strangers, well away from the sanctity of your home.”

“That was never my intent. My wife, you see, is...highly strung. I try not to impose on her, if at all possible.”

“We are an imposition, then,” Lafitte said. “I see.”

“Very well! Enough! You will stop at our house then. We shall manage somehow.”

“That is gracious of you,” Lafitte said. “I should be delighted.”

*

There was no time, of course, to warn Becky. Thus Malone arrived on his wife’s doorstep with four strangers. He had the porters bring the luggage up the long flight of steps to the porch; like most Galveston houses, it was supported by eight-foot columns of brick.

Jefferson, the Negro butler, answered the door. “Please get the guest room ready,” Malone told him. “I shall put a pair of cots in the study as well, I suppose. And tell Mrs. Malone that I have returned.”

“Sir.”

Chighizola and his woman left with Jefferson. Malone paid the porters and took Lafitte and O’Roarke into the study.

“Nice place,” O’Roarke said.

“Thank you,” Malone said, painfully pinching a finger as he set up the cots. “Use the cuspidor while in the house, if you do not mind.”

Becky appeared in the doorway. “How nice to see you again,” she said to Malone, without sincerity. “It would appear your expedition was more successful than you expected.”

“This is Mr. O’Roarke and Mr....Lafflin,” he said. Lafitte smiled at the name. “This is my wife, Becky.”

She sketched a curtsy. “How do you do.”

“They are business associates of mine. I regret not letting you know they would be stopping here. It came up rather suddenly.”

“I trust you will find a way to explain this to my father. I know it is hopeless to expect you to offer any explanation to me.” She turned and disappeared.

“When I lived on the island,” Lafitte said, “we had a whorehouse on this very spot.”

“Thank you for that bit of history,” Malone said. “My night is now complete.”

“Is there anything to eat?” O’Roarke asked.

“If you cannot wait until morning, you are welcome to go down to the kitchen and see what you can find. Please do not disturb Jefferson unless you have to.” Malone felt sorry for the old Negro. In keeping with current abolitionist sentiment in Texas he had been freed, but his wages consisted of his room and board only. “And now, if you have no objections, I shall withdraw. It is late, and we can resume our business in the morning.”

*

The house was brutally hot, even with the doors and windows open. There had been a southeast breeze when it was first built; the city’s growth had long since diverted it. Malone put on his nightshirt and crawled under the mosquito net. He arranged the big square pillow under his shoulders so that night-borne fevers would not settle in his lungs. Becky lay under the covers, arms pressed against her sides, feigning sleep.

“Good night,” he said. She made no answer. He knew that he would be within his rights to pull the covers off and take her, willing or not. She had made it clear she would not resist him. No, she would lie there, eyes closed, soundless, like a corpse. He was almost tempted. The days of confinement with Fabienne had taken their toll.

He could recall the flush of Fabienne’s golden skin, her scent, her cascading hair. She would not receive a man so passively, he thought. She could, he imagined, break a man’s ribs with the heat of her passion.

Malone got up and drank a small glass of whisky. Imagination had always been his curse. Lately it kept him from sleep and interfered with his accounts. Enough gold, he thought, would cure that. The rich needed no imagination.

*

Malone rose before his guests, eyes bloodshot and head aching. He scrubbed his

face at the basin, dressed, and went downstairs. He found his father-in-law in the breakfast room and quickly put his lies in order. He explained Lafitte and the others as investors, wealthy but eccentric, here to look at the possibility of a railroad causeway to the mainland. Becky's father was mad for progress, in love with the idea of the railroad. He smiled and shook Malone's hand.

"Good work, son," he said. "I knew you would make your mark. Eventually."

Chighizola and Fabienne came down for breakfast at eight. Becky had left word for Cook and there were chafing dishes on the sideboard filled with poached eggs, liver, flounder, sausage, broiled tomatoes, and steak. There was a toast rack, a coffee service, a jug of orange juice, a tray of biscuits, and a large selection of jams in small porcelain pots. O'Roarke joined them shortly before nine. He seemed rather sullen, though he consumed two large plates full of food. He ate in silence, tugging on his orange side whiskers with his left hand.

Lafitte, in contrast, was cheerful when he finally arrived. He was unshaven, without collar, braces, or waistcoat, and his long hair was in disarray. He ate only fish and vegetables and refused Malone's offer of coffee.

When Jefferson came to clear away the dishes Malone asked, "Where is Mrs. Malone this morning?"

"In her room, sir. She said to tell you she had letter writing to see to."

She might come down for supper, then. Unless, of course, she suddenly felt unwell, a condition he could predict with some confidence. "If she asks, you may tell her I have taken our visitors for a walk."

First he showed them St. Mary's cathedral, at 21st Street and Avenue F, with its twin Gothic towers on either side of the arched entranceway. It was barely two years old, the first church on the island and the first cathedral in Texas. To Malone it was a symbol. Virtually the entire city had been rebuilt since 1837 and structures like St. Mary's showed a fresh determination, a resolution to stay no matter what the odds.

He pointed out the purple blossoms of the oleanders that now grew wild all over the city, brought originally from Jamaica in wooden tubs. He led them west to 23rd Street, past Sam Williams' bank. Then he brought them down the Strand, with its commission houses and government offices.

“The similarities to Manhattan Island are clear,” Malone said. “Galveston stands as the gateway to Texas, a perfect natural harbor, ideally situated on the Gulf.”

“Except for the storms,” Lafitte said.

“Man’s ingenuity will find a way to rob them of their power. Look around you. This is already the largest city in Texas. And everything you see was brought about by human industry. Nature withheld her hand from this place.”

“You need hardly remind me,” Lafitte said. “When we first came here there were salt cedars and scrub oaks, poisonous snakes, and man-eating Indians. And nothing else. Am I right, Nez Coupe?”

Chighizola said, “You leave out the malaria and the infernal gulls.”

“You can see that things have greatly improved,” Malone said.

“Improved? Hardly. I see churches and banks, custom houses and shops, all the fetters and irons of civilization.”

“Shops?” O’Roarke said. “Against shops as well, are you? What would you have?”

“No one owned the land when we lived here. Everything was held in common. The prizes we took were divided according to agreed-upon shares. No one went hungry for lack of money.”

“Communism,” Malone said. “I have heard of it. That German, Karl Marx, has written about it.”

“He was hardly the first,” Lafitte said. “Bonaparte urged many of the same reforms. As did Rousseau, for that matter.”

They had turned east on Water Avenue. At 14th Street Lafitte stopped. He turned back, with one hand shading his eyes, then smiled. “Here,” he said.

“Pardon?” Malone asked.

“La Maison Rouge. This is where my house was. Look, you can see where the ground is sunken. This is where I had my moat. Inland stood the gallows. Rebels

and mutineers, those who raided any but Spanish ships, died there.”

Now there was only an abandoned shack, with wide spaces between the boards where the green wood had shrunk. Malone stepped into its shade for a moment to escape the relentless sun. “Truly?” he said. “Truly, you never attacked an American ship?”

“Truly,” Chighizola said. “The Spanish only. He was obsessed.”

“Why?”

Chighizola shook his head.

“A private matter,” Lafitte said. “I was angry then. Angry enough to burn La Maison Rouge and all the rest of it when I left, burn the entire city to the ground.”

“Your anger,” Malone said, “is legendary.”

“No more,” Lafitte said. “To have that much anger, you have to care deeply. To be attached to the world.”

“And you care for nothing?” O’Roarke said. “Nothing at all?”

Lafitte shrugged. “Nothing comes to mind.”

*

Dinner was long and arduous. Lafitte seemed willing enough to play along with Malone’s railroad charade. However his lack of seriousness, bordering on contempt, left Becky’s father deeply suspicious. O’Roarke’s crude speech and spitting would have maddened Becky had she not been upstairs, “feeling poorly,” in the words of her maid. As for Chighizola and Fabienne, they were simply ignored.

Afterwards O’Roarke stopped him in the hall. “How much longer? By thunder, Brimstone Jack is not one for waiting around. We should be after the treasure.”

“If it is any consolation,” Malone said, “I am enjoying this no more than you.”

Malone retired, but was unable to sleep. Exhausted, yet with his nerves wound tight, he lay propped up in bed and listened to the clock on the dresser loudly tick away the seconds. He finally reached the verge of sleep, only to come awake again at the sound of someone moving in the hallway.

He dressed hastily and went downstairs. He found Lafitte in the porch glider, smoking his hemp tobacco.

“Might I join you?” Malone asked.

“It is your house.”

“No,” Malone said, sitting on the porch rail. “It is my wife’s house. It is a difference that has plagued me for some time. I crave my independence.”

“And you think my treasure will buy that for you.”

“That and more. Political power. The ability to change things. To bring real civilization to Galveston, and all of Texas.”

“I am no admirer of civilization.”

“Yet you fought for this country against the British. You were the hero of New Orleans.”

“Yes, I fought for your Union. I was young and foolish, not much older than you. I believed the Union would mean freedom for me and all my men. Instead they pardoned us for crimes we had not committed, then refused to let us make a living. When we removed ourselves to this island of snakes, your Lt. Kearney found us. He came with his laws based on wealth and social position, to tell us we were not to live equally, as brothers. Is this civilization?”

“You cannot judge a country by its frontier. It is always the worst of the old and the new.”

“Perhaps. But I have seen New York and Washington, and there the poor are more oppressed than anywhere else. But I shall not convince you of this. You shall have to see it for yourself.”

They sat for a few moments in silence. A ship’s horn sounded faintly in the

distance. "What of your wife?" Lafitte asked. "Do you not love her?"

"Certainly," Malone said. "Why do you ask that?"

"You seem to blame her for your lack of independence."

"Rather she seems to blame me, for my lack of a fortune. It is the same fortune I lacked when she married me."

"She is a lovely woman. I wish there were more happiness between you."

"What of you? Did you ever marry?"

"Once. Long ago."

"Was this in France?"

"I never lived in France. I was born and raised in Santo Domingo. My parents were French." He stopped to relight his pipe. Malone could see him consider whether he would go on or not. At last he said, "They came to the New World to avoid the guillotine. Trouble always found them, just the same. Haiti and Santo Domingo have been fighting since Columbus, two little countries on one island, back and forth, the French against the Spanish, the peasants against the aristocracy."

"And your wife?"

"She was fourteen when we married. I was twenty. She was pledged to a Spanish aristocrat. We eloped. He took her from me by force. She killed herself."

"I—"

Lafitte waved away his apologies. "It was long ago. I took my revenge against Spain, many times over. It proved nothing. I always hoped I would find him on one of the ships we captured. Of course I never did. But as I have said, that was long ago. When my anger, as you say, was legend."

"I do not believe you," Malone said.

Lafitte raised one eyebrow.

“You have told me again and again how you care nothing for things of this world. Yet you nearly destroyed Spanish shipping in the gulf for the sake of a woman, and that pain eats at you still. As does your hatred of Lt. Kearny and everything he stood for. As does your belief in liberty, equality, fraternity. Perhaps I am young, but I have seen men like you, men who numb themselves with alcohol or other substances to convince themselves they have no feelings. My father was one of them. It is not your lack of feeling that has preserved you. It is your passion and commitment that has kept you young. Whether you have the courage to admit that or not.”

Lafitte sat for at least a minute without moving. Then, slowly, he tapped the ash out of his clay pipe and put it in his coat pocket. He stood up. “Perhaps you are right, perhaps not. But I find myself too weary for argument.” He began to descend the stairs to the street.

“Where are you going?”

“Mexico, perhaps. I should thank you for your hospitality.”

“What, you mean to simply walk away? With no farewell to Chighizola or the others? All this simply to prove to yourself how unfeeling you are?”

Lafitte shrugged.

“Wait,” Malone said. “You are the only hope I have.”

“Then you have no hope,” Lafitte said, but he paused at the bottom of the steps. Finally he said, “Suppose I took you to the treasure. Tonight. Right now. Would that satisfy you?”

“Are you serious?”

“I do not know. Perhaps.”

“Yes, then. Yes, it would satisfy me.”

He took another half dozen paces, then turned back. “Well?”

“Am I not to wake the others? To fetch tools? To tell anyone where I am bound?”

“If we are meant to succeed, fate will provide. That is my whim. Come now or lose your chance.”

Malone stood, looked uncertainly toward the house. “I will share it with the others,” he said. “Just as we agreed. I swear.”

“That is your concern, not mine. If you are coming, then come now.”

*

Lafitte led him to the harbor at a pace too rapid for conversation. The docks still swarmed with activity. With no attempt at stealth Lafitte stepped into a small sailboat. He motioned Malone to silence and gestured for him to get aboard. Malone saw a shovel, a machete, and several gunny sacks on the floor of the boat.

“But...” he said.

Lafitte held a finger to his lips and then pointed it angrily at Malone. Malone untied the stern line and got in. Lafitte rowed them out into the channel. Once they were well away from land Malone whispered, “This is not your boat!”

Lafitte smiled. There was little humor in it. “Do you accuse me of piracy, sir? I warn you I am not fond of the term.”

“Is this not theft, at least?”

“Reparations. Owed me by the Republic of Texas and the United States of America. Besides which, you shall have it back before dawn.”

Once into Galveston Bay the wind picked up. A chill came off the water and Malone was glad for his coat. In the moonlight the Texas coast was clearly visible, a gray expanse dotted with darker patches of brush. Malone counted at least another dozen sails on the water. Shrimpers, probably, though smuggling was still common. As they passed Jones Point the mainland receded again.

Lafitte was a mediocre sailor at best. He steered them inside South Deer Island, barely avoiding the sandbars. At one point they had to wait for a swell to lift them free. Then, a few minutes later, they rounded a spit of land and headed into Gang’s Bayou. It was little better than a swamp, full of marsh grass and sucking

mud. Mesquite bushes, with their thorns and spindly branches, grew along the banks around an occasional salt cedar or dwarf willow. It seemed unlikely that Lafitte could hope to find anything in this shifting landscape. Malone began to fear for his life. He should not, he thought, have challenged Lafitte on his lack of feeling.

Lafitte passed one paddle to Malone and kept the other for himself. He lowered the sail and together they pulled the boat into the bayou. The inlet turned quickly around a U-shaped intrusion of land. At the base of it, out of sight of the bay, Lafitte tied up to a squat, massive old oak.

“Bring the shovel,” Lafitte said. Malone gathered it up with the gunny sacks. He brought the machete as well, though the thought of violence appalled him. Lafitte took his bearings from the low, marshy ground around them, then drew an X with his boot near the base of the tree. “Dig here,” he said.

“How far?”

“Until you strike the chest.”

Malone removed his coat and waistcoat and began to dig. He soon lost his chill. Sweat ran into his eyes and his hands began to blister. Lafitte sat a few yards away, uphill on a hummock of grass, smoking his pipe again. The swamp dirt was fine-grained and damp and had a cloying smell of decay. Malone managed a hole three feet around and at least that deep before giving out. It was as if the evil air that came up from the earth had robbed him of his strength.

“I must rest,” he said. He laid the shovel by the hole and then crawled over to the trunk of the tree.

“Rest, then,” Lafitte said. “I will take a turn.”

*

Malone fell into a trance between waking and sleep. He knew he was on Gangs Bayou, on the north shore of Galveston Island. He had lost track of the year. From where he sat it seemed he could see the entire city of Galveston. The streets of the city began to pulse and swell, like an animate creature. Bricks and blocks of quarried stone floated in the air overhead, then alighted on the ground. They formed themselves into towering heaps, not in the shape of houses and

churches and schools, but rather in chaotic columns that swayed to impossible heights, blocking the sun. They filled nearly every inch of the island.

Then Malone noticed bits of paper floating in the air between the towers. They seemed to guide the shape of the buildings as they grew. There was printing on the bits of paper and Malone suddenly recognized them. They were paper notes from Sam Williams' C&A Bank. As he watched they folded themselves into halves and quarters and diagonals. He had once seen a Japanese sailor fold paper that way. They made themselves into people and dogs and birds, and they crawled over the crevices between the bricks, as if looking for shelter. Then, slowly, their edges turned brittle and brown. They began to burn. As they burned the wind carried them toward Malone, who huddled in terror as they began to fall on him.

"Wake up," Lafitte said. "I need your help."

Malone lurched forward, grabbing at nothing. It took him a moment to remember himself. "Forgive me," he said. "I have had the strangest dream. Less a dream than some sort of vision." His head hurt from it, a dull ache that went all the way down his neck.

"Ghosts, most likely," Lafitte said. "They favor treasure. Now come help me get it out of the hole."

"The gold?" Malone said. "You have found it?" It seemed beyond belief.

"See for yourself."

Malone got up and peered into the hole. There did seem to be a sort of trunk there, though mud obscured its details. The top of it was more than four feet down, one end higher than the other. The hole around it, seeping water, was another two feet deep. The thing seemed to have fetched up against the roots of the tree, else it might have sunk to the center of the earth. Malone climbed into the hole and found a handle on one end. Lafitte joined him at the other and together they wrestled the box up onto solid ground.

"Have you the key?" Malone asked, his voice unsteady.

"It is not locked."

Malone used the machete to pry open the lid. Inside he found a greasy bundle of oilcloth. He tugged at it until it unfolded before him.

Even in the moonlight its contents glowed. Gold, silver, precious gems. Malone knelt before it. He took out a golden demitasse and rubbed it against a clean spot on his sleeve. It gleamed like a lantern.

A voice behind him said, "So. This is what you made off to do."

It was O'Roarke. Malone got up to face him. Behind O'Roarke stood Chighizola and the woman. O'Roarke kept walking, right up to Malone. He took the demitasse from Malone's left hand, looked it over, then threw it in the chest. "We thought as long as you were determined to cross us, we would let you do the work. I see now what your promises are worth. You never intended me to gain from all my efforts on your behalf. You merely waited for me to turn my back."

"I swore I would share this with you," Malone stammered, knowing how weak it sounded. "Lafitte witnessed my vow."

"Liar," O'Roarke said. He turned to Lafitte, looming half a foot over him. "And as for you. I should have expected no less from your kind. Once a pirate, always a pirate."

Lafitte slapped him, hard enough to send O'Roarke staggering backward. Malone was suddenly aware of the machete, still in his hand. He wished he were rid of it but was afraid to let it go, afraid to do anything to call attention to himself.

O'Roarke's hand went to his waist. It came up with a pistol, a two-shot derringer. "Die here, then," he said to Lafitte. "Treacherous bastard."

Malone knew he had to act. This was neither dream nor vision, and in a second Lafitte would die. He took a single step forward and swung the machete blindly at O'Roarke's head. O'Roarke's eyes moved to follow the blade and Malone realized, too late, how terribly slow it moved. But O'Roarke turned into the blow and the machete buried itself two inches into his neck.

O'Roarke dropped to his knees. The blade came free, bringing a geyser of blood from the wound. O'Roarke's eyes lost focus and his arms began to jerk. A stain appeared on his trousers and Malone smelled feces, almost indistinguishable

from the odor of the swamp. O’Roarke slowly tumbled onto his back, arms and legs quivering like a dreaming dog’s.

“Christ,” Fabienne said, turning away.

“Finish him, for God’s sake,” Lafitte said.

Malone was unable to move, unable to look away. He had witnessed violence all his life: the drowned, the mangled, the amputated. But never before had he been the cause.

Chighizola grabbed Malone’s arm. “Kill him, you stinking coward, eh? Or I do it myself.” The old man jerked the machete from Malone’s hand and brought it down swiftly on O’Roarke’s neck. It made the same noise as the shovel going into the mud. The head rolled sideways, connected only by a thin strip of skin and muscle, and the hideous tremors stopped.

“So, Lafitte, what you up to here, eh? What tricks you pull now?”

“Whim,” Lafitte said. “I thought you did not care for this treasure.”

“I do not care to play the fool.” He threw the machete toward the hillock and it buried itself in the ground. The man’s scars were monstrous, inhuman, in the moonlight. Malone could barely stand to look at them, barely get breath into his lungs. “It makes no difference now,” Chighizola said. “The deed is done. Help me put this dead one in the ground.”

They dragged O’Roarke’s corpse to the hole and threw it in. The head came loose in the process and Chighizola sent it tumbling after the body with a short kick. “So much,” he said, “for Brimstone Jack.” Malone shoveled mud onto the corpse, eager to see it disappear, to give his shaking hands something to do.

“You have your own boat, I trust,” Lafitte said.

Chighizola nodded, then was taken with a bout of coughing. “By Christ, this air is foul. Yes, we...borrowed a felucca from the dock.” Chighizola seemed exhausted. Fabienne took him by the arm. When she looked away from him, at either Lafitte or Malone, her face filled with contempt.

“The three of you can take the treasure back in your boat then,” Lafitte said. “I

shall keep this one for myself.”

“You will take none of the gold?” Malone asked.

Lafitte shook his head. “It would only be extra weight.”

Fabienne said, “I will help Louis back to the boat. The two of you can manage the trunk.”

Malone watched her help Chighizola up the hillock. “This is the end, then. You will simply disappear again into Mexico. To hide in a drunken stupor from a world you have not the courage to change.”

Lafitte smiled. “Courage is certainly not something you lack. Not for you to speak to me this way.”

“I have come to respect you,” Malone said. “I had hoped for better from you.”

“Would it please you to know that I have given much thought to your words? All that thought, and now the sight of your gold and the things it has already brought you. Quarrels and deceit and death. For one who is wrong in so many, many ways, you are right in at least one small one. Perhaps it is time to take the lessons of Campeachy to the world. To Europe. Perhaps to this German, Marx. I think we might have much in common.”

Malone held out his hand. “I wish you luck.”

Lafitte took it. “And I you. I fear you will need it far more than I.”

Lafitte got in the boat. “How will you get to Europe without gold?” Malone asked. “What will you have to offer this Marx?”

Lafitte took up the oars, then looked back at Malone. “Life is simpler than you believe it. I hope some day you will see that.” He raised one hand and then pushed away from the bank, into darkness.

*

Malone divided the treasure between the two gunny sacks and carried them to the other boat. The sacks must have weighed thirty pounds each. That much gold

alone was worth a fortune, even before including the value of the jewels.

Chighizola did not look well. He lay with his head in Fabienne's lap, pale and sweating. Malone rowed them out into the bay, then Fabienne raised the sail. She was far more skillful than Lafitte had been. She took them through the Deer Island sandbars without incident, the water hissing smoothly past the hull.

There was no sign of Lafitte or his boat. He had utterly disappeared.

As the lights of the harbor grew close, Fabienne said, "We shall not return to your house, I think. Louis is very sick. We shall find the first boat headed for New Orleans and be gone this morning."

"I will not argue with you," Malone said. "No more than I would with Lafitte. The agreement was equal shares. You must help me divide it."

She looked at the two sacks. "We will take this one," she said. "You keep the rest."

"As you wish. I shall forward your luggage to you in New Orleans." She had picked, Malone was sure, the smaller of the sacks. His heart filled with joy.

*

He took the burlap sack to the carriage house. There he transferred the treasure to a steamer trunk, piece by piece. At the bottom of the sack was a golden thimble. Malone held it up to the lantern. The words CHARITY & HUMILITY were engraved around the inner lip. He placed the thimble in his waistcoat pocket, locked the trunk, and put it safely away.

He was clean, with his muddy pants and shirt hidden away, by sunrise.

*

Discreet inquiries provided Malone with a man in San Felipe willing to dispose of "antiquities" with no questions asked. Malone began to carefully convert the treasure to gold specie, a piece at a time, whenever he travelled north on bank business.

In the fall of 1851 he arranged an invitation to dinner at Sam Williams' house,

set on a twenty-acre tract west of the city. Williams was in his mid-fifties now, his hair completely white and parted high on the left side. He was short and heavysset, with a broad forehead and deep lines at the corners of his mouth. He took Malone up to his cupola, where they stood on the narrow walkway and watched for ships in the Gulf. They could hear Williams' daughter Caddy, aged nine, as she played the piano downstairs.

"I understand you have come into some money," Williams said.

"Yes, sir. An inheritance from a long-lost uncle."

"And you are interested in politics."

"Yes, sir."

"There is a good deal an able politician could accomplish these days. I regret I had no knack for it. People found me cold. I do not know why that is." After a moment he said, "You know they are determined to destroy my bank."

"There is a faction, of course, sir, but..."

"Make no mistake, they are out to finish me. They consider me a criminal because I made a profit while I worked for the public good. Why, profit is the heart of this country. It is the very thing that makes us grow. And paper money is essential to that growth. Paper money and venture capitalism. Mark my words. That is where the future lies. You're married to—"

"Becky Kinkaid, sir. John Kinkaid's daughter."

"Yes, a good man. And an important connection. You will want to hold on to her, son, believe me. That name can take you a long way."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, let us see. We can start you out on the city council. It will not be cheap, of course, but then you understand that already."

"Yes, sir."

"Good lad. Nothing like a realistic attitude. You will have need of that."

*

There was nearly a run on the C&A the following January when a rival bank folded. But Galveston merchants exchanged Robert Mills' paper at par and disaster was narrowly averted. In March the Supreme Court upheld Sam Williams' charter. The anti-bank faction replied with yet another suit, this one based on the illegality of paper money. In April Malone took his seat on the city council and bought his first block of shares in the Commercial and Agricultural Bank.

He found himself with many new friends. They wore tight-fitting suits and brightly colored waistcoats and smoked Cuban cigars. Their opinions became Malone's own by a process he did not entirely understand. But he learned how things were done. A divorce, for example, or even a separation, was not to be considered. Instead he kept a succession of mulatto girls in apartments on the Gulf side of the island, girls with long, curling black hair and unguessable thoughts behind their dark eyes. In time he found that he and Becky could live together with a certain affection and consideration, and it was quite nearly enough. Except for certain hot, muggy nights in the summer when his dreams were haunted by Fabienne.

Still, they were preferable to the nights when he dreamed of towers of stone and folded bank notes and Brimstone Jack O'Roarke with a machete buried in his neck. On those nights he awoke with his hands clutched in the air, on the verge of a scream.

In the next five years he moved from the city council to the Railroad Commission. The next step was the state legislature, via the election in February of 1857. Malone had thought himself a Democrat, but Williams' power lay with the Whigs. The Whigs were traditionally the money party in Texas, and so Malone became a Whig. The campaign was expensive, and took a firm pro-banking stance. On January 19th, banker Robert Mills was fined \$100,000 for issuing paper money. Two days later Williams settled out of court on similar charges, paying a token \$2000 fine. Editorials condemning banks and paper money appeared throughout the state.

The Democrats carried the election. The week after his defeat, Malone accepted a position on the board of directors of the C&A.

In August the Panic of '57 brought the closure of one bank after another, all across the country. Tales of bank failures in New Orleans arrived via steamer on October 16. There was a run on the C&A. Williams exchanged specie for his own notes, but refused to cash depositor checks. Malone sat through the night with him, drinking brandy, waiting to see if the bank would open the next day. They did open, and Malone brought in the last of the gold coins from his safe deposit boxes to make sure there would be enough.

That afternoon the bank closed early. Malone stopped for a whiskey on the way home and found the bartender honoring paper money at 75 cents on the dollar. Malone saw only fear and resignation in his eyes. "I got kids, mister," he said. "What can I do? Blame the bankers."

Williams continued to pay gold the next day. The police came to keep lines orderly. By noon the fear had gone out of the customers' eyes. By the end of the month the crisis had passed, only to make way for a new one: counterfeit C&A notes.

The weeks began to blur. In December, Sam Williams' eldest son died. In January the Supreme Court postponed another anti-banking suit, and Williams' lawyers fought delaying actions through the spring and summer. In the first days of September the yellow fever came again.

Malone watched the fever take Becky, watched her skin jaundice and her flesh melt away. Williams' wife Sarah, ever thoughtful, sent servants with ice to soothe Becky's fever. It was no more use than Jefferson's herbs. She died on September 7th, a Tuesday.

That Friday Samuel May Williams succumbed to old age and general debility. He was 62.

It was the end of an era. Malone moved out of Becky's parents' house and took a suite of rooms on Water Street. The building was not far from where Lafitte's Maison Rouge had stood. Nothing remained of the treasure but the golden thimble, which Malone still carried in the watch pocket of his waistcoat. He sat at his window and studied the workmen as they built the trestle for the first train from Houston, due to arrive in a little over a year.

He still attended board meetings, though there was little hope the bank could survive. Malone watched with detachment. He saw now how money had a life of

its own. For a while he had lived the life of his money, but that life was drawing to a close. The money would go on without him. It was money that had brought the future to Galveston, not Malone. The future would have come without him, in spite of anything he might have done to stop it, had he wanted to. Lafitte had learned that lesson long ago.

He gave up the last of his string of mistresses. The sight of her parents, living on fish heads and stale bread, was more than he could bear. He mounted one final campaign for mayor. His platform advocated better schools, better medicine, a better standard of living. But he was unable to explain where the money would come from. He lost by a landslide.

In March of 1859, the Texas Supreme Court ruled that the Commercial and Agricultural Bank of Texas was illegal. Its doors were closed, its assets liquidated. The last of Malone's money was gone.

*

He arrived in New Orleans early in the morning. The city had grown as much as Galveston had. The changes were even more obvious to his stranger's eye. The old quarter was bordered now by a new business district, with bigger buildings growing up every day.

They still knew Chighizola's name at the market. Many of them had been at his funeral, years before. They knew his children and they remembered the beautiful octoroon with the French name. Malone followed their directions through crowded streets and stopped at an iron gate set into a brick wall. Through the arch he could see a shaded patio, broadleafed plants, small children.

Fabienne answered the bell herself. She was older, her skin a dusty tan instead of gold. Strands of gray showed in her hair. "I know you," she said. "Malone. The hunter of treasure. What do you want here?"

"To give you this," Malone said. He handed her the golden thimble.

She took it and turned it over in her hands. "Why?"

"I am not sure. Perhaps as an apology."

She held it out to him. "I do not care for your apology. I do not want anything of

yours.”

“It is not mine,” Malone said. He closed her hand over it and pushed it back toward her. “It never was.”

He turned away. A sudden movement in the crowd caught his attention and, for a moment, he thought he looked into the sparkling black eyes of Jean Lafitte, unchanged, despite the years. Malone blinked and the man was gone. It was merely, he thought, another ghost. He took a step, then another, toward the river and the ships. He had enough left for a passage somewhere. He had only to decide where to go.

“Wait,” Fabienne said.

Malone paused.

“You have come this far,” she said. “The least I can do is offer you a cup of coffee.”

“Thank you,” Malone said. “I should like a cup of coffee very much.”



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