

SCOUNDREL
in the THICK

SCOUNDREL *in the* THICK

Vol. #1
The Life & Times
of
Colonel Thomas Edward Scoundrel, USA, Ret.

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Thomas Scoundrel in the Rockies

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*For Lesli, my wife, best friend, and partner in
the grand adventure.*

Thomas,

There comes a time in the life of each man, in the face of the wind, in the gut of the fight, when he has but an instant to make his most important decision; will I die as small as I have lived, or, will I live large, without hesitation or reservation.

I have tended to your fevers and watched you heal. I see a boy who has become a man and who has made a damn fine, shining decision. Give me the splendid, silent sun with all his beams full-dazzling, I hear you say.

Good on you, Thomas Scoundrel. You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life.

Do anything, lad, but let it produce joy.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Walt Whitman". The script is fluid and cursive, with a prominent flourish at the end of the name.

Walt Whitman
16 April 1865
Meridian Hill

PROLOGUE

Cuernavaca, Mexico, June 1882

The first shot tore through the bedroom door, shredding the hand-carved cherub on the headboard above Diego's pillow. The second shot severed the beeswax candle on the nightstand that he had blown out only a moment earlier.

He did not wait for a third shot. He threw back the covers, rolled onto the cold tile floor and scurried on his hands and knees over to the chair where the trousers and jacket he wore to the engagement party were folded. Out of habit he reached for the holstered Schofield revolver he kept on the arm of his bedroom chair. But, as he shook off the last remnants of sleep, Diego remembered that he was not in his own home, but in a second-floor guest room in the lakeside villa of Don Eduardo Verján, who was both the father of his fiancée Rosalilia, as well as the Minister of the Interior for Mexico, and the leading citizen of the city of Cuernavaca.

More shots rang out. Diego slipped into his trousers and went to the door. He took a deep breath, pulled the handle, and stepped out into the chaos.

His room was at the end of a rectangular gallery that ran the length of the villa, above a flower-filled courtyard. Candles flickered in gargoye-faced wall sconces mounted outside each guest room door, providing just enough light for Diego to make out figures running through the smoke that was billowing up from a fire somewhere below.

Doors began flying open along both sides of the gallery, and he

saw people rush towards the stairs in their nightgowns and robes. They were some of the two hundred guests who had gathered earlier under a starched cotton pavilion on the Verján's sun-drenched patio as Bishop Orozco joined Rosalilia's hand to Diego's with a satin ribbon to seal their formal engagement.

Then they moved to the terraced gardens, where dozens of wicker baskets filled with fresh-cut flowers were scattered among blossoming orange trees and lavender-colored bougainvillea vines. A dozen tables were piled high with platters of grilled beef, lamb, fresh shrimp, melons, savory tamales, roasted peppers and tomatoes, chilled sea bass, and all kinds of cakes and pastries. The smell of jasmine and honeysuckle intermingled with the elegant strains of a string quartet in the soft June air all that afternoon. Now, the sour odor of burnt gunpowder and roiling smoke nearly overwhelmed Diego's senses.

A pistol ball suddenly shattered a flowerpot on the gallery railing, and one of the guests stumbled over the clay shards and fell to the ground. Diego stooped to help the man up as another bedroom door swung open right in front of him. It was the room in which Rosalilia's widowed aunt was staying, but it was not the widow who raced out into the corridor. Instead, the portly Bishop of the city huffed into the crowded passage, tugging his nightshirt down over his pendulous belly. Behind the Bishop, also pulling on her nightgown, was the widow. They joined the crowd running for the stairs, oblivious for the moment that had they been seen like this in any other kind of social setting the scandal would have been the talk of the tight-knit aristocratic community of Cuernavaca for years.

Diego would normally have savored the sight of the famously officious Bishop caught in such a compromising position, but he could only think of getting through the hail of bullets careening around the gallery, down the smoke-filled staircase and into Rosalilia's room.

As for who was doing the shooting—and why—that question would have to wait. Diego knew that Don Verján's home was patrolled by private *soldados* who were paid to keep watch over the homes of the city's wealthiest residents. He hoped that some of the gunfire he was hearing was coming from those guards fighting back against the intruders.

Diego leapt down the stairs, pushing his way through the crush of guests trying to get to safety. When he reached the stair landing, he saw that the massive oak doors that separated the outer courtyard from the inner garden space had been blown off their hinges. It would take a cannon to do that, he thought. At the foot of the stairs a man in dark clothing with a black scarf tied around his face appeared out of the smoke directly in front of him. He seemed to recognize Diego and raised his revolver to shoot. But before he could pull the trigger, a dark object slammed into the side of the intruder's head, and he fell wordlessly to the ground.

Itzcoatl raised his war club and smashed it into the fallen attacker's head once more for good measure. The ancient Aztec weapon was studded with razor-sharp volcanic glass that was embedded into the wood. Diego knew the man would not be getting up.

The old warrior had been roused from his sleep in a warm corner of the estate's great kitchen by the sounds of gunfire, and he had immediately raced to find Diego, whom he had instructed and watched over since the boy was born. Now, Itzcoatl motioned for his ward to follow him outside to safety.

"No," shouted Diego above the din of shouts, breaking glass and gun shots. "First, we find Rosalilia!"

The two men shouldered their way through the crowd of people streaming down the stairs and into the courtyard. Diego had to leap to avoid tripping over one panicked man who lost his footing and slipped into the fountain. There was no time to help him. He sprinted down the hallway and through the open door of Rosalilia's room, where candles flickered on the oak sideboard and the smell of night-blooming moonflowers and sulphur drifted through the broken window. The covers had been pulled off the ornate four-poster bed and were strewn around the floor. On a pillow at the head of the bed, the leather-bound volume of poems by John Keats he gave Rosalilia at dinner was open to the page she had been reading when she was taken.

"*Tecolote*," called Itzcoatl from the doorway, using the Nahuatl word for "little owl" that he called Diego as a child. "Come with me, now."

Diego turned from the bed and went across the hall to Rosalilia's parents' room. A fight had raged here. Two chairs were knocked over, the mirror behind the oak dresser was shattered, and a tall armoire had toppled over. One of the window curtains was burning. Itzcoatl pulled it down and stamped out the flame.

The bed sat on an elevated platform in the center of the room, beneath a large oil painting of the Battle of Chapultepec Castle. That was where the young Lieutenant Verján and five of his military cadets held off repeated assaults by a company of American soldiers commanded by Captain Robert E. Lee during the Mexican American War, thirty-five years earlier.

Diego approached the bed. The lifeless body of his fiancée's father lay flat on his back, his arms splayed wide. His right hand still gripped the cavalry sabre he had pulled from the scabbard beside his bed to fight off the attackers.

Diego rested his hand on Verján's shoulder. Rosalilia's mother was not in the room. She and her daughter must be together. He motioned to Itzcoatl, and they climbed out the open bedroom window and into the flame-lit garden to join the fight.

Several dozen people were running through the moonlit garden in the direction of the lake. Diego watched as one of the estate guards knelt and fired at a dark-clad man who was clutching a silver candelabra he had ripped from the dining room ceiling. The .50 caliber bullet caught the robber square in the back, flinging him forward and slamming his body into the high garden wall.

Then, Rosalilia's aunt appeared at his side. She took his arm. "Do you know where my sister is?" she cried.

He shook his head and called out to one of the Verján servants who was rushing past. "Get the Señora to the lake," he told the man.

Then, a shout. Diego turned to see Itzcoatl on the other side of the fountain. One of his boots was pressed hard into the back of a man lying face down on the ground. His war club was raised high, ready to take another blow if the idiot was foolish enough to try to get up.

Diego splashed through the lily pads in the fountain pool and

joined Itzcoatl.

“This one will speak, now,” said Itzcoatl, “or he will die.”

A pool of blood was spreading on the ground around the intruder’s head. If he was going to speak, it had better be quickly.

“Who are you?” shouted Diego. “Why are you here, and where have you taken the mistress of the villa and her daughter?”

The man raised his head a few inches off the ground and turned in the direction of Diego’s voice. He defiantly spat out a mouthful of blood and teeth, grunted, and turned his head away.

Diego looked around at the scene unfolding in the smoky garden courtyard. Most of the guests had made their way out of the villa grounds and were being guided to safety down the lake shore by four of the private *soldados*. An outbuilding next to the villa was fully engulfed in flames, and two of Casa Verján’s defenders lay dead on the stone porch at the main entrance.

Then he saw the intruders: a dozen or more men in black woolen ponchos who were loading stolen valuables into three horse-drawn freight wagons outside the main gate. A tall man in a buckskin fringe jacket and wide-brimmed hat stood on the seat of the lead buckboard, barking instructions to the men loading the wagons. Diego noticed that his wagon, the only one backed up under the arch, had a small, swivel-mounted cannon clamped onto the tail board. That explained how the doors had been blown off their hinges.

What he saw next made Diego go cold. Two men were lifting a struggling woman dressed in nightclothes over the siderails of the middle wagon. A cloud slipped past the full yellow moon, and in the pale light Diego was able to make out Rosalilia’s terrified expression as the men dropped her into the wagon and then tossed a heavy blanket on top of her.

Itzcoatl saw it at the same moment. He delivered a final blow to the intruder on the ground and came up alongside Diego. The old man was descended from Aztec royalty. He wore his hair in the fashion of Motecuzuma, the ruler of Tenochtitlán who was killed by Hernán Cortés in the early days of the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1520.

Itzcoatl was as proud as he was stoic; he alone had taught the young aristocrat Diego Antonio de San Martín to ride, shoot, hunt and most importantly, to live as he should also be prepared to die: with honor.

Itzcoatl immediately understood what Diego was contemplating. Though they had only one weapon between them, Diego was going to charge the wagon in which his fiancée was held captive. They would probably die, Itzcoatl thought. He looked down at the heavy club in his left hand. Only one weapon, yes, but it was a weapon of kings. He would take many of the intruders to the afterlife with him.

For his part, Diego also knew what his mentor had in mind. He put his hands on Itzcoatl's shoulders. "You don't have to do this," he said softly.

"I have to do this as much as I have to breathe," Itzcoatl replied.

Diego nodded and began to move towards the wagon where Rosalilia lay covered. Smoke swirled everywhere, and the horses in the stable began frantically kicking at their stall doors. Suddenly, one wall of the outbuilding collapsed in a shower of sparks and flaming timbers right beside them.

Itzcoatl grasped his war club in both hands, and together the two men rushed towards the wagon. A black-clad intruder spotted them, raced forward, and fired his rifle at close range. The bullet hit Diego in the thigh, glanced off bone, and passed through the back of his leg. He spun to the ground, then righted himself and charged on. Itzcoatl's glass-studded club flashed in the firelight, and the shooter dropped. Then, a second intruder fired. This bullet pierced Diego's abdomen and knocked him hard back into Itzcoatl. Both men fell to the ground. Itzcoatl leapt back to his feet, but Diego was unable to stand.

He was losing a lot of blood and knew he would not remain conscious for long. He pulled himself up on one elbow, and, just as the last attackers clambered over the sides of the moving wagons, he saw the man in buckskins grab the reins of his buckboard and snap his horses into motion. Then, the man swung his head in his direction. Diego struggled to see through the fog of smoke and pain that was enveloping him.

The leader made brief eye contact with Diego and smiled. He slapped

the reins again, and his wagon lurched away from the gate and toward the town road that ran along the lake shore.

“Him!” Diego’s mind raged. “How could it be *him*?” Then he fell back to the ground at Itzcoatl’s feet.

The Aztec held his bloodied war club high above his head and straddled Diego’s body protectively until the wagons were out of sight. Then he knelt and cradled Diego’s head on his lap. He clutched the war club in one hand and reached down with his other hand to staunch the flow of blood from Diego’s stomach wound.

“*Tecolote*,” he said tenderly.

The wagons carrying Rosalilia and the Verján family treasures hurtled down the cobbled drive, away from the fires and choking smoke that were engulfing the villa. A moment later they passed a troop of soldiers from the Cuernavaca garrison galloping up the lakefront road towards the scene of the battle. They could not have known about the men in the wagons. But Diego knew.

Just before he passed out, he lifted his head.

“Find Thomas,” he said to Itzcoatl. “Thomas will know what to do.”

