

Max Brand



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GALLERY OF BOOK COVERS
THE END

I. — BECKONING LIGHTS

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"SILVERTIP" was what men called him, since the other names he chose to wear were as shifting as the sands of the desert; but he was more like a great stag than a grizzly. For he was built heavy to the waist; below, he was as slender as any swift-running deer. Yet the nickname was no accident. Above his young face, high up in the hair over his temples, appeared two tufts of gray that at times and in certain lights had the look of small horns. For this reason the Mexicans were apt to call him "El Diablo," but Americans knew him as Silvertip, which they shortened often to Silver, or Tip.

On this day, he had ridden out of the green of the higher mountains, and now, among the brown foothills, he sat on his mustang and looked over the gray of the arid plains below. The day had hardly stopped flushing the upper peaks with color, but night was already rolling in across the plain beneath. It covered the river; it covered Cruces for a few moments, also, but then the lights of the town began to shine through.

The place glimmered in the thickening welter of shadows, and as Silvertip watched the gleaming, he remembered the little garden restaurant of Antonio Martinelli, down yonder in Cruces. He remembered the taste of the acrid red wine, and the heaping plates of spaghetti, seasoned with Bolognese sauce and powdered with Parmesan cheese.

He knew, then, why he had ridden down through the upper valleys. It was not only because the law did not

threaten him, at the moment, but because he was a little tired of venison or mountain grouse roasted over a camp fire. It was dangerous for him to leave the fastnesses and descend into the plains, for even when the law did not want him, there were always sundry men who did. If they could not pull him down single-handed, they would try in numbers. They had tried before, and his body was streaked and spotted with silver where their grip had touched him.

But just as an old grizzly rouses from the whiter sleep in the highlands and looks off the brow of some mountain promontory down into the shadows of the plains, remembering the danger of guns and dogs and men, feeling his ancient wounds ache, but recalling also the taste of fat beef and, above all, the delight of the dangerous game— so Silvertip looked down into the shadows and smiled a little. With an unconscious reaction, his right hand went up under his coat to the butt of the six-gun that hung beneath the pit of his left arm, in a clip holster; then Silver started the gelding down into the night.

It was not long before his horse was slipping and stumbling over the water-polished rocks at the bottom of the ford; then the close warmth within the streets of the town received him, the half-sweet, half-pungent odors. The children were still playing, flashing through pale shafts of lamplight and turning dim in the darkness beyond; the house dogs ran with them; only the pigs had gone to sleep.

A sense of comfortable security began to come over Silvertip. He fought against that as a traveler in the arctic struggles against the fatal drowsiness of cold. He sat straighter in the saddle, shrugged back his shoulders,

expanded his nostrils to take a deeper breath. As he rode on, his head automatically kept turning a trifle from side to side while his practiced eyes, with side glances, studied the houses at hand and all the street behind him, as well as the way before.

He had to go most of the way through Cruces before he came to the jingling sound of a mandolin and the noise of jolly laughter that told him he was near Antonio Marti-nelli's place. It stood off by itself, surrounded by the olive trees and grapevines, which only the pain of Italian handwork could make flourish in the dry West. The two windmills which gave life and greenness to that spot were both whirling their wheels high overhead with a soft, well-oiled clanking.

He did not go directly in, but first rode past the lighted front of the saloon, hotel, and restaurant; for Martinelli's place was complete. He rode close, piercing the windows with his glance, peering over the top of the swinging doors of the saloon through the smoke wreaths at the faces within. All seemed friendliness and cheer; the dangerous feeling of security welled up in him, again, irresistibly. His taut mind relaxed as a body relaxes, after labor, in a warm bath.

He rode straight back around the building to the stable, and led the mustang inside. The horse drew back, cowering a little. It snorted and stamped; it trembled at the unfamiliarness of inclosing walls, for it was as wild as the mountains among which Silvertip had caught it.

High up on the mow, a voice was singing. Hay rustled and thumped down into a manger.

"Hey, Piero!" called Silvertip.

"Hey? Who's there?" called the voice of a man from the top of the haymow. Then, as though the tones of Silvertip had gradually soaked deeper into his memory: "Oh, Silver! Is it Silvertip?"

"Yes," said Silver.

"I am coming—quickly!" panted Piero Martinelli. "Oh, Silver, this is good! Is it safe for you to be here? Are we to hide you? Must I talk softly? How long will you stay? Father will be happy—mother will dance and sing. Ah, Silvertip," he finished, as he came breathless to the bottom of the ladder and gripped the hand of the larger man, "how happy I am to see you again!" said Silver. "And I don't have to hide, this time. Look out —this is a wild devil of a horse."

"I know," said Piero, laughing. "You don't like tame things; you like them wild. Oh, we all know about that. I won't come near those heels. Does it bite and strike?"

"Like a mountain lion," said Silvertip, stripping the saddle from the round, strong barrel of the horse. "There's plenty of hay for him. Will you come in with me? Are you through here?"

"Of course I'm through," said Piero. "The work ends when you come. I'll tell every one that—"

"No," cautioned Silvertip. "Don't do that. I want a corner table in the garden; to be -as quiet as possible; to hear the singing; to eat pounds of spaghetti. You know, Piero, that the day has passed when I could walk into a crowd and be comfortable. It's bad medicine for me to have any one standing at my back."

"Ah, ah," groaned the other. "I know! Well, we'll go in the side door."

They walked out into the open, following a curving path covered with gravel. The step of Piero was a loud crunching, but the foot of Silver, in spite of his weight, made hardly a sound.

"Tell me who's inside," said Silvertip.

"All good fellows," answered Piero. "All except one."

"Never mind about the others, then. Tell me about him."

"The Mexican, Bandini, he—"

"You mean Jose Bandini?"

"Yes, that one—with the record of killing so many men—that same Jose Bandini."

"He's a bad hombre," remarked Silvertip, pausing. "And there's an old grudge between us."

"Hi!" exclaimed Piero under his breath. "Is there an old grudge? And will he face you? Will he really dare to face *you*, Silver?"

"He'll face anybody if he has to," answered Silver. "But he'd rather shoot from behind. Bandini's there, is he? Well, that's bad." He walked on, slowly, saying in addition: "I know him and I know his record. But his killings are mostly talk. Like mine, Piero. You know what they say of me, and it's mostly talk."

"Ah—yes?" murmured Piero politely. Then he went on, with a touch of passion: "That Bandini is with another Mexican—a young man—a very fine-looking young Mexican. They are eating together in one of the small rooms. Bandini is making trouble. We hear their voices jump up high, for a minute or two, and then drop away, again. There is a lot of trouble between them. My mother is worried."

"If Bandini's talking," said Silvertip, "you don't need to worry. That sort of snake doesn't rattle before it strikes."

They went in through a side door into a kitchen filled with smoke and whirling wreaths of steam, for all the cooking was done at a great open hearth, with black pots hoisted on cranes in various places above the flames. Two women were working, one slender and young, one overflowing with fat and energy and high spirits. Her rosy face grew redder still when she saw Silvertip. She threw out her arms as though she would embrace him, and then with moist hands, took both of his and struck them softly together.

"Ah, Silver," she cried, "I speak of you, and you come. But I am always speaking of you, and you are seldom here. Look, Maria! Do you see him? He is bigger than I said, eh? See the gray spots in his hair? See how brown he is, too, and how his eyes laugh. See how he smiles, exactly as I said; mostly with his eyes. Look at him! You'll never see such a man again, so good and so bad and so gentle and cruel and so much of everything that we love. We have reason to love him; I've told you the reason, too."

The girl began to blush and laugh. Silvertip, with that faint smile of his, picked a handful of smoke out of the air and made as though to throw it into the face of Mrs. Martinelli.

"What do you have, Silver?" she asked him. "Antonio has a bottle of red wine saved for you. It is the last of the old wine, that you liked. It is down in the cellar, covered with dust, old with waiting for you. But what will you eat? Look—here are Spanish beans—yonder is roast kid—here's roast chicken. Look at the brown of it, Silver! And here—"

"Spaghetti, that's what I want," said Silvertip.

"Spaghetti of course, and then?"

"Spaghetti first, with that meat sauce, and lots of Parmesan cheese to sprinkle on it. I can't think about what I'll want next until I've looked at that spaghetti."

"You see, Maria?" said Mrs. Martinelli. "I told you that he was true Italian. He will have his *pasta*. And if—"

"No!" cried a voice from beyond the wall on the left. "No, Jose!"

That cry struck a silence through the kitchen, and banished all the smiles except that quiet smile of Silvertip which was so often on his face.

"There! There!" whispered Mrs. Martinelli. "You hear, Silver? It's Bandini. There's murder in the air. It's Ban-dini—and he means to kill, I'm sure."

"Tush," said Silver. "He's talking too much. There'll be no shooting."

"Ah," said Mrs. Martinelli, "you may say that, but I tell you, Silver, that a man's eyes—even your eye—can only see what it falls on. But I see something more. And there is death in the air tonight. Some one will die before the kind daylight comes back."

A door opened, with a sudden bang, and Jose Bandini stood on the kitchen threshold.

II. — THE SHOT IN THE DARK

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EVEN without the force of his reputation, Bandini would have given pause to the eye and the mind of any observer. He was one of those tall men with narrow shoulders and long fingers, who are strong as apes *in spite of* their slenderness. Of the meager width of his shoulders he was very conscious, and usually wore, as he was doing now, a cloak with a wide-flaring collar. He was dressed like a Mexican cow-puncher on holiday, with a silk shirt and a colorful scarf tied about his hips. But nothing mattered, on second glance, except the face of the man. For it was built back from the chin in a series of steps, all rugged. Chin and mouth, nose, brow, receded in due order, and yet there was plenty of brain capacity in that head. It was a handsome face, in a strange way, time-battered, life-worn; and at will Bandini could be either charmingly pleasant, or savagely dangerous.

He was dangerous now. He thrust forward his head a little and blazed his eyes at Mrs. Martinelli.

"You woodenhead!" he shouted. "Where's the pepper sauce for those frijoles? And send me a waiter with another face, because if I see the fool again, I'm going to scramble his brains on the floor!"

Suddenly he was silent. He had seen the face of Silver-tip, and the faint, small smile on it. The fingers of the right hand of Bandini made a sudden movement which could hardly be followed; it was the sign against the evil eye. The glance of Bandini lifted to the small gray tufts, like incipient horns, high above the temples of Silvertip. "Senior Silver,"

said Bandini, and made an ironic bow. Then he came across the room, deliberately. It was plain that he was afraid, but a devil of the perverse in him forced him on into the danger. He stood right in front of Silvertip, and eye to eye.

"Have you come to see me, senior?" he asked. Silvertip said nothing. He kept on smiling, and looking. The moment lasted ten grim seconds. Suddenly Bandini turned white, and shouted:

"Have you come here to insult me? You know where to find me! Bandini does not run!"

"I want to talk with you," said Silver. "Come outside into the dark for a moment, will you?"

Bandini turned yellow-white about the corners of his mouth.

"Only for talking; I want a word with you alone," said Silver.

"Dark or light and day or night, I avoid no man," said Bandini, and went out through the door with a swagger that brushed his cloak against both sides of it.

Silver took heed of the round eyes of fear that were fixed upon him from both sides, and he reassured them with a smile. Then he stepped behind Bandini into the darkness, and pulled the door shut behind him.

There was only starlight here, and the stars were dim lanterns by which to follow the movements of Bandini.

Silver became just a trifle more alert than a hunting cat.

"Now!" breathed Bandini. "And what do you want?"

"I want some news," said Silver. "I want to know about the fellow who's having dinner with you. I want to know what's in the air."

"Just a fool of a boy—that's all he is," said Bandini. after a moment. But there was that in his eyes that made Silvertip yearn to see the face. A single glint of light would have helped then, to reveal a story. "And what business is it of yours?"

"It ought to be every man's business," said Silvertip, "to watch you. No good ever came out of you, Bandini."

"Do you insult me?" snarled the Mexican.

"You don't understand me, Bandini," said Silvertip. "I don't insult you. A man doesn't insult a rattlesnake; he shoots it. And that's what will happen between us, before the wind-up."

He heard no answer—only the heavy, irregular breathing of the Mexican. Bandini was afraid—sick with fear— and Silver knew it.

"Every man who has ever seen you at work has reasons enough to wish you dead, Bandini. That's why I'm asking you what deviltry you're up to with that other young Mexican, to-night?"

No matter what fear there was in Bandini, he exclaimed suddenly: "Is every man to tell you his secrets—or be murdered?"

Silver, gritting his teeth slowly together, mused on that answer before he said: "I've seen you deal crooked cards; I've seen the scar of your knife left on a man's *back*; I knew some of the dead men you've left behind you. Now you're at some deviltry again, and you're not going through with it, if I can help it. I'm going to give you time to think it over. Pull yourself together and make up your mind.

"There's no reason why we should spoil our dinners about this. But by nine thirty I'll look for you in front of the restaurant—anywhere on the street in front of it. If you're there, I'll know that you want to have it out with me. If you're not there, I'll know that you've left town. But if you're neither in the street nor out of town, I'm going to start looking for you, Bandini, and I'll break down doors until I get at you. It was never intended that rats like you should go about the world gnawing at the lives of honest men!"

There was another moment of pause; he heard, again, the hurried breathing of the Mexican, like that of a man who has been running hard. Then Bandini turned on his heel. His cloak swished with a whispering sound through the air, and he passed back into the kitchen. As Silvertip entered in turn, the farther door banged behind Bandini, and Silver stepped into a strained moment of silence in the kitchen.

Silver turned with a sudden cheerfulness to Piero.

"If there's a corner table in the garden, I'm going to have it, Piero."

"Come!" said Piero Martinelli.

"No," said Silvertip. "Quietly does the trick. I'll find my way. I'm hungry for that spaghetti, Mrs. Martinelli."

Then he went out toward the garden. The bustling in the kitchen began again, behind him.

"Wake up!" cried Mrs. Martinelli to the kitchen maid. "Get the pepper sauce for that Bandini devil. Fan that charcoal and bring it to life. Do something! What's the matter with you?"

Maria looked at her with wide, dark eyes.

"You were right," she said. "There will be a killing. And Bandini will be the dead man!"

Then she fell to her work again.

But out in the garden, there never was a more tranquil face than that of Silvertip as he passed under the high grape arbors until he found a small corner table. All the rest of the little garden was filled with family groups, Americans, flavoring their food with hearty portions of the red, home-made wine of Martinelli. No one paid any attention to Silvertip as he passed. Americans lack the public curiosity of the Latins, and only unhappiness makes them aware of the outside world. A contented party is surrounded by an unpenetrable wall of its own pleasure, as it were, and that wall is rarely peered over. So those ranchers, miners, town tradesmen and shopkeepers of Cruces, with their families about them, talked high or low, and paid no heed to Silvertip as he went by.

He, apparently, had no more eye for them, and yet he studied every face in turn, analyzed it, shaved a mustache here to see if the naked skin might bring out a dangerous likeness; put on a beard there for the same reason. By the time he had reached his corner table, he was fairly well convinced that he knew none of them, and that none of them knew him.

Still, as he sat down, he was by no means willing to relax. He measured the height of the wall behind him.

He regarded the thickness of the arbor foliage, behind which a man might easily hide.

For Bandini was near, and Bandini would kill him by courage or by craft, if possible.

Antonio Martinelli came hobbling on his crippled leg. He embraced one of Silvertip's hands in both of his. He leaned over Silver's table, and beamed upon him.

"How are things?" said Silvertip.

"How can anything be bad with me? How can I ever complain?" said Martinelli. "I have a leg and a half, instead of no legs at all. Therefore we all thank God and Silvertip every day of our lives. Look! Here is the wine. If it is not beautiful, every drop, you shall have the blood out of my heart."

Silvertip made him sit down at the table. They tried the wine together, Martinelli smacking his lips.

"What's happening in there between Bandini and his friend?" asked Silvertip.

"It's no friend that's with Bandini," said Martinelli. "All I know is that Bandini wants something out of that young Mexican, and can't get it. But there'll be trouble! There'll be trouble!"

"I think so, too," said Silvertip, with a voice filled with quiet meaning. "I wish you'd watch and listen as much as you can. And let me know if a break seems to be coming on."

"You would help? You would stop the trouble?" asked Martinelli. "You know what one gun fight does—it spoils the name of a place. It takes away the cheerfulness. If people say: 'Martinelli's, where the man was killed the other day'—if they say that, they will come to me no more. I'll go and watch them like a hawk. I would give twenty dollars to have them under my eye as well as under my ear. I can only hear mumblings through the door, and very few words."

He went off, and Maria came, bearing a plate, the grated cheese, the Bolognese sauce, and a great platter of spaghetti. She put all the dishes down, deftly, and arranged them without making a clatter, and yet all the time her thoughtful eyes were on the face of Silvertip, not on her automatic work.

She paused one instant, watching Silvertip lift from the platter the first white-dripping forkful of spaghetti and bring it over to his plate.

"You think of him still," said the girl, "But he will not harm you if you keep away from him."

She hurried away, as though frightened by her own boldness in giving an opinion, and the hazel-gray eyes of Silvertip watched her out of sight, before he moved his hand again.

He finished the spaghetti slowly. The goodness of the food to one who had eaten little except meat for many weeks, filled him again with that sleepy content against which he had to be so on guard. Finally he roused himself, as Martinelli came hobbling up the path, ducking under the trailing green of the arbor.

His face beamed a brighter red than before, as he exclaimed: "It is all finished; it is all well; and they're in the saloon drinking together like brothers!"

"Are they?" said Silvertip. "Then the trouble is right on the verge of breaking. I know the sort of brotherhood there is in Bandini!"

He looked at his watch. It was nine thirty.

He finished his wine with a gulp, and rising from the table, with a swift, secret gesture he touched the revolver

that hung under his coat. Martinelli gaped vaguely at the form that strode so quickly before him, and started to hobble in pursuit.

But Silvertip entered the barroom far ahead. One glance showed him that Bandini was not there, in the long irregular line of noisy drinkers. He called the bartender with a crooking of his forefinger.

"Bandini?" he said.

"Bandini's just gone out with a young fellow, a friend who —"

Silvertip waited to hear no more. He felt sure that the young fellow was now indeed in grave danger, so he slipped out of the swinging doors onto the street. He whipped that street from end to end with a rapid glance, and saw the mere fluttering of a cloak as a man passed from view. Bandini, after all, was awaiting him in the street!

That was enough for Silvertip. He ran like a greyhound to that corner. A dark, narrowly winding alley moved away on his left. He winced back a little from that darkness, as a kennel terrier might wince from the black tunnel of a fox's earth. Then he hurried straight forward, stepping long and light, every nerve in his body made acute, every sense working with electric surety and speed.

Something moved before him. Heels ground against the earth. He saw the swaying of a cloak, dimly seen through the shadows.

"Are you ready?" cried Silvertip. "Then fill your hand!"

The form whirled toward him, the cloak fanning well out to the side. One hand rose, as if to let go with the gun it seemed to hold. The other did not rise.