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Jessica, the Heiress

JESSICA, THE HEIRESS

By
Evelyn Raymond

Author of
"Jessica Trent," "Jessica Trent's Inheritance," etc.

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Jessica, The Heiress

CHAPTER I.

JESSICA DISAPPEARS

Mrs. Benton and Jessica were upon the south porch of the Sobrante ranch house, the former busy as usual, the latter idly enjoying her charming surroundings as she swung to and fro in her hammock.

Mighty vines of pale yellow roses, intermingled with climbing fuchsias, cast shade and sweetness over them; the porch was bordered by a wide swath of calla lilies, also in full flower, while just beyond these a great shrub of poinsettia dazzled the sight with its gleaming blossoms.

When a momentary silence of the other's nimble tongue allowed her to speak, Jessica exclaimed:

"Aunt Sally, you're the only person I know who can do three things at once. You sew as fast as you rock, and talk faster than either. You're a very clever woman."

The old lady answered complacently, as she bit off a fresh needleful of thread and looked at her companion over her spectacles:

"Yes, dearie, I expect I am. I can do more'n that, too. I can keep up a powerful thinking."

"About what, pray?"

"How that life is a patchwork quilt. All the colors of the rainbow, and some that any self-respectin' rainbow would scorn to own. Some scraps so amazing homely you hate to put 'em in, but just have to, else there wouldn't be blocks enough to square it out."

"What sort of a scrap am I, Aunt Sally?"

"Huh! Fair to middlin'. Neither very light, nor very dark. You'd be prettier, to my notion, if you'd fetch a needle and thread and sew a seam with me, 'stead of swinging yourself dizzy out of pure laziness."

"Now, Aunt Sally! I call that unkind! I hate to sew."

"I believe you. You'll never put a stitch where a pin will do. But, never mind. If everybody else sets out to spoil you, I don't know as it's my call to interfere."

There was so much tenderness in the glance that accompanied these words that nobody could resent them; least of all the girl, who now sprang from the hammock and curled herself at the other's feet.

"Tell me those powerful thoughts, auntie, dear."

Mrs. Benton sighed, but responded nothing loath:

"There's your mother, Gabriella. Only child, left an orphan, raised by a second cousin once removed, who'd more temper than sense, and when your mother fell in love with your father, who'd more goodness than cash, shut the door on them both forthwith. So off they come to Californy and pitch their tent right here in the spot."

"They couldn't have chosen a lovelier place," their daughter answered, with a sweeping glance over the fair land which formed her home.

"That's true enough. Then him getting that New York company to buy Paraiso d'Oro Valley, so's a lot of folks that was down in the world could come out here and live in it. Poor Cass'us dying, just as he'd got things to his liking; the losing of the title deed and your journeying to Los Angeles to get it back."

"Not 'lost,' Aunt Sally. Poor Antonio hid it at El Desierto, in the cave of the Three Rocks. He--"

"Cat's foot! Don't you go to 'pooring' that snaky sneak, or you and me'll fall out. I should hate that."

"So should I. But you've set me thinking, too. How wonderful that Mr. Ninian Sharp was, the newspaper man. If it hadn't been for him, we'd never have won that battle. What could I have done, with Ephraim Marsh in the hospital, and I knowing nothing about the city? That Mr. Hale was another splendid man. I can understand how he had to keep his word and do his best for the company which thought father had wronged it; and I can also understand that he was as glad as we to find their money safe with the poor banker who was killed, Luis Garcia's father."

"'Pooring' again are you? Another scamp, too."

"Oh, Aunt Sally! He's--dead!" remonstrated Jessica, in awestruck tones.

"And a fine job he is. There's plenty of good-for-noughts still living. A man that's been wicked all his life ain't apt to turn saint at the end of it. I like folks that do their duty as they go along. If

the robber, Garcia, had got well he'd likely claimed our Luis and reared him to be as bad as himself."

"Aunt Sally, you're uncharitable this morning. What's made you so?"

"The plumb meanness of human natur'."

"Your own?" asked the girl teasingly.

"No, saucebox. My boy, John's. His, and all the rest of 'em."

"Toward whom?"

"Oh! 'tisin't toward anybody, out and out. If it was I'd roll up my sleeves and switch the lot of 'em, just as if they were the little tackers they act like. It's them pesky hints and shrugged shoulders, every time the Dutch Winklers or 'Forty-niner' is spoke of. I wish to goodness that man'd come home and clear his name, or give me a chance to do it. He no more stole that knitting-woman's money than I did."

"Aunt Sally! Stole? Stole! My Ephraim! Why, you must be crazy!"

"There, it's out. Needn't hop up like that, mad as a hornet, at me. I'm not the one hints and shrugs. It's the whole lot of your precious 'boys'--boys; indeed! and needing spanking more'n they ever did in their lives."

Jessica's swift pacing of the wide porch came to a sudden halt, and she dropped down again at Mrs. Benton's feet, feeling as if the floor had given way beneath her tread.

"This, then, was what my mother meant, that very day when I came back, that Ephraim was happier where he was! The dear old fellow; thrown to the street by his graceless Stiffleg; picked up with a leg full of broken bones; a prisoner in a hospital all these weeks; giving all his savings of years to us; and the 'boys' he's lived with since before I was born accusing him of--theft! Aunt Sally, it's too monstrous to be true!"

"'Tis, indeedy. Seem's if the Evil One had been let loose, here at Sobrante, when the word of a half-wit--poor half, at that--is held proof against the entire life of an honest old man."

Aunt Sally was so deeply moved that, for once, she allowed herself a moment's respite from unceasing industry, unconsciously holding a patchwork block to her moist eyes, and slowly swaying the great rocker as she sorrowfully reflected that:

"I raised him the best I could, that boy John. I gave him a pill once a week, regular, to keep his bile down. I washed him every Saturday night and spanked him after I got through. I never let him eat butter when he had gravy, and I made him say his prayers night and morning. I had a notion that such wholesome rearin' would turn him out a decent man; and now, just see!"

In spite of her own distress, Jessica laughed.

"Aunt Sally, if anybody but yourself hinted that John wasn't a 'decent' man you'd do something dreadful to punish the slanderer."

"Suppose I should? Wouldn't I have a right? Ain't he my own?"

Jessica smiled faintly, but sat for a long time silent. The talkative woman in the rocker also kept silence, brooding over many things. Finally she burst forth:

"I don't see why it is that just as soon as a body gets into smooth sailing, along comes a storm and upsets things again. There was your mother, beginning to feel she could go ahead and do what her husband wanted to, and now here's this bad feeling among her trusted hired men. Suspicion is the pisenest yarb that grows. The folks that could suspect old 'Forty-niner' of wrong things'll be plumb ready to watch out for one another. Somebody'll be caught nappin', sure. 'Tisin't in human natur' to walk upright all the time, and it's foolish to expect it. But--shouldn't wonder if I'd be the next one accused. And it comin' Christmas time too. Land! I'm so bestead I've sewed that patch in wrong side up. What? Hey? You laughin'? I don't see anything funny in this business, myself," said the old lady, fretfully.

"You would if you could look in a glass! Your face is all streaked purple and green, where you cried on your patch," explained Jessica, whose grief had changed to amusement.

"You don't say! I knew them colors'd run. John fetched the piece from Marion, last time he went for the mail. Of the two stores there, I don't know which is the worst. Their 'Merrimac' won't wash, and their flannel shrinks, and their thread breaks every needleful. But, to 'Boston'--dear me! Whatever did make me think of that place! Now I've thought, it'll stick in my mind till it drives me wild--or back there, and that's about the same thing. To go live with that slimsy cousin of mine, after being in the same house with your mother, is like falling off a roof into a squashy mud puddle. That's all the sense and substance there is to Sarah, that was a Harrison before she was a Ma'sh. I warrant she's clean out of medicine an money, for she's a regular squanderer when it comes to makin' rag rugs. I wish you could see 'em! I just wish't you could. Such dogs and cats as she weaves into 'em would have druv' Noah plumb crazy if he had to take 'em into the Ark. Their eyes are just round rings of white, with another round ring of black in the middle---

"Aren't rings always round, auntie, dear?"

"No, they ain't. Not after they've been trod on!" was the swift retort, as the old lady pointed downwards toward the floor of the porch.

Both stooped and rose again, astonishment deepening upon their faces as Jessica held out her

open palm with the injured trinket lying upon it.

"Elsa Winkler's wedding ring! How came it here?"

"How indeed? I don't believe that woman's been on these premises since I came."

"Even if she had, Aunt Sally, why should she bring the ring with her? It was always too small for her, and she never had it on except during the marriage ceremony. I've often heard her laugh about it; how Wolfgang bought a ring as big as his money would pay for, and let it go at that. She didn't see what difference it made whether it went only on the tip of her finger or all the way down it. But she must have been here, even if we didn't know it. I'll take it straight to mother to keep. Then, too, I've idled enough. I promised my dear I'd write all her Christmas invitations for her, because she says it will save her the trouble, and be such a help to my education."

"Christmas! Well, well. Does seem as if I couldn't leave before then, nohow. And hear me, Jessie, darlin', don't you let your poor ma worry her head over your book learning. Being she was a schoolma'am herself makes her feel as if she wasn't doing the square thing by you letting you run wild, so to speak. If the Lord means you to get schoolin' He'll put you in the right way of it, don't you doubt. Who all does Gabriella set out to ask here to visit?"

"Mr. Hale, of course; and dear Mr. Sharp. I hope Ephraim will be well enough to come, too. Then there are the Winklers, from the mine; the McLeods, from their inn at Marion; and, maybe--we've never had a Christmas without him--maybe poor Antonio."

"Well, all I say is--if you ask him you needn't ask me. There wouldn't be room on this whole ranch for the pair of us."

"Then, of course, it's you first. Yet, it's all so puzzling to me. If it's a time of 'peace and good will,' why do people keep on feeling angry with one another?"

"Jessica Trent, dast you stand there and look me in the face and say that you have forgive that sneaky snakey manager for cheating your mother like he did?"

"He was sorry, Aunt Sally. Every letter he sends here tells that."

"Fiddlesticks!"

"And he's punished, isn't he, even if the New York folks let him go free, by his disappointment? I can fancy how dreadful it would seem, did seem to think this beautiful ranch was one's own, and then suddenly to learn that it was not."

"Oh! Jessie! You try my soul with your forgivin' and forgivin'. Next you know you'll be sorry for Ferd, the dwarf, though 'tis he himself what's started all this bobery against 'Forty-niner,' and eggs them silly Winklers on to be so--so hateful. I'm glad that witless woman did lose her ring, and I hope it'll never be straightened out. I guess I'm out of conceit with everybody living, not exceptin' old Sally Benton, herself!"

With this home thrust at her own ill temper, the whimsical woman betook herself and her dangling array of patchwork to Mrs. Trent's sitting-room; there to discuss the prospects for holiday festivities and to take account of stock, in the way of groceries on hand. Deep in the subject of pies and puddings, they forgot other matters, till a wild whoop outside the window disturbed them, and they beheld Ned and Luis, painted in startling "Indian fashion," mounted upon a highly decorated horse, which had never been seen in the Sobrante stables.

"Hi, there, mother! Your money or your life!"

"Money--life!" echoed Luis, clinging to his playmate's waist and peeping over his shoulder.

The horse was rearing and plunging more dangerously each second, and both women rushed to the rescue of the imperiled children, who realized nothing of their danger, but shouted and screamed the louder the more frantic their steed became. Mrs. Trent caught the bridle, and Aunt Sally snatched first one, then the other, child from the creature's back, who, as soon as he was relieved of his yelling burden, started at a gallop across the garden, ruining its beds and borders on his way.

"Oh, oh! Children, how could you? Whose horse is that? Where did you get that paint? How shall I ever make you clean?"

"I'll tend to that part, Gabriella. You just call a boy to fix them flower beds before the plants wither. Oh, you rascals! You won't forget this morning's fun in a hurry, I warn you! You've been in John Benton's paint pots again. Well, you like paint, you shall have it, and all you want of it too. Red and yeller, green and pink, with a streak of blue. H'm! You're a tasty lot, ain't you!"

The lads squirmed and twisted, but Aunt Sally's grip merely tightened upon them so that finally, they ceased struggling and allowed her to lead them whither she would, which was to the small laundry, that stood at some slight distance from the house. Here she sternly regarded each bedaubed, but otherwise nude, little figure, with so fierce an expression upon her usually pleasant face that the young miscreants winced, and Ned cried out:

"Quit a-talking eyes at me that way, Aunt Sally Benton! I don't like it."

"Oh! you don't, eh? Well, what'd you disgrace yourselves this way for, if 'twasn't to make folks stare? Where's your clothes?"

"I don't know."

"Very well, then I'll help you to remember."

"I won't be whipped! I'll tell my mother!" shrieked Ned, retreating toward the closed door of the building.

"Won't be whipped, old Aunt Sally!" added Luis, clasping his leader; whereupon the customary scuffle ensued; for, no matter what their business in hand, personal contact always insured a slight passage at arms. At present, this diverted their thoughts from what might be in store at the will of their mutual enemy, and it came with appalling suddenness. Each small boy was lifted, bidden to shut his eyes and mouth, then plunged downward into a barrel of some cold slippery stuff. Here he was soused vigorously up and down, until every portion of his skin was smeared with the stick mess; after which he was placed on his feet and once more commanded:

"Now, son, just you stand there and dreen a spell. Lucky I made that barrel of soft soap last week. It's just the stuff to take this paint off, and what drips from you to the old adobe floor won't hurt. Pasqual's a master hand at scrubbin', and I'll give him the job of you and the floor both. Reckon you'll wish you hadn't ever seen paint pots time he gets through. Now--where's your clothes?"

Ned was silent, but Luis "guessed they's under a tree."

"Well, son, Garcia, knowing it better than guessing 'bout now. Me and Santa Claus is sort of partners, and he's due here soon. 'Twon't take me a jerk of a lamb's tail to write and tell him how things stand at Sobrante, and whose stockings'd better have switches 'stead of goodies in 'em. Hear me? Where's your clothes?"

A laugh caused Aunt Sally to glance through the window, where Jessica was an amused spectator of the scene within. She now begged:

"Don't be hard on the little tackers, auntie, dear. That was Prince, Mr. Hale's horse, that Pedro has tended on the mesa all these days. I'll find out how they came by it, and their clothes at the same time. Tell mother, please," and with a merry nod to the unhappy urchins, so shamfacedly "dreening" at Mrs. Benton's pleasure, she disappeared.

Disappeared not only from the window, but, apparently, from life, as suddenly and completely as if the earth had opened and engulfed her.

CHAPTER II.

THE HUSH OF ANXIETY

Mrs. Trent and Aunt Sally sat down alone to dinner. The little lads were in their beds, recovering from the sound scrubbing Pasqual had given them. Clothed in fresh nightgowns, and refreshed by generous bowls of bread and milk, they had been left in a darkened room to reflect upon the hard ways of transgressors. But reflection was unusual work for their active brains, and they had promptly fallen asleep; hence the profound peace which rested upon the house.

"I wonder where Jessica is? She was to have written my letters for me, but I haven't seen her since breakfast," said the mother, somewhat anxiously.

"Oh! she's around somewhere. Was at the laundry window while I was tending to the children, and said she'd go find their clothes. In all my born days I never saw two small heads could hatch the mischief Ned's and Luis' can. It's out of one scrape into another, and seems if they must break their necks some day."

"Oh! don't forecast evil. Their pranks keep my nerves on tension all the time, yet I shouldn't worry so. They always escape from harm. But I'd like to know how they got that horse."

"So would I. They must have had help painting it. Stands to reason two midgets like them couldn't have kept a high-spirited creatur' quiet while they wasted enough good paint on him to cover a meeting house."

"John won't be pleased. He's so careful of his belongings, even I never touch them without permission," said the ranch mistress, smiling afresh at the memory of the ridiculous picture the boys had made.

"Don't surprise me't you laugh, Gabriella, but you'd ought to put the reins on tighter to them chaps, lest first you know they'll be driving you, not you them. Do it already, seems if."

"How can I be stern with Cassius' little son? Every day I see more resemblance to his father in the child's face; yes, and in his nature, too. Nobody was ever fonder of fun than my husband, yet surely there never was a better man."

"Oh! Neddy's all right. Trouble is to keep him from thinkin' so himself. But, there. Why don't you eat your dinner? You haven't more'n half touched it. It's a shame to waste good victuals, and these are good. I fixed 'em myself."

The other smiled again at the complacency visible upon her friend's face, which so innocently displayed the same feeling that had just been deplored in Ned. However, Aunt Sally was too busy

with her own food to notice anything else, and it seemed long to her companion before she had finished and risen, to call, sharply:

"Pas-qual! Oh, Pasqual-ly! Why aren't you on hand to clear the table? Don't you know I've got-- and here followed a long list of things to be done, more than many could accomplish in several days." Each had some reference to the coming holidays, and the house boy understood this. He entered, more willingly than usual, grinning with the anticipation of the raisins he would have to stone, the nuts he must crack, and the goodly samples of each that he would surreptitiously procure.

Mrs. Trent asked him to put aside Miss Jessica's dinner, till she came in, and to be sure that it was also kept nice and warm.

"All right, lady. I'll do that good enough. Don't mind what I has to do for 'Lady Jess';" and immediately seized the plate, which Aunt Sally had already filled, to place it in the warming oven.

Then the mother went out, and among the adobe buildings, which formed the "boys" quarters and the business part of the ranch, calling gently, as she went, in the brooding sort of note which had long been a signal between her and her child. But no Jessica responded; and, to her fancy, it seemed that the whole place was strangely silent.

"After all, that is not to be wondered at. The men are done with dinner, and gone about their work. The boys are asleep, and only Jessica would be anywhere near. What can keep her, I wonder?" and with this thought the lady again uttered the tender call which would summon her daughter, if she were within hearing.

Then she returned to the house and tried to accept Aunt Sally's theory that, likely some of them 'boys' is in trouble about his job, and wants his 'captain' to go oversee. 'Mazin' strange, Gabriella, what a influence that child has over 'em. "They 'pear to think, the whole lot of 'em, that she can straighten out all the kinks that get into brains or business."

"She is quick to understand," said the mother, proudly.

"Course. Nothin' strange, is it, seein' who her folks was? Best go take a nap, honey."

"Oh, no! Thank you for suggesting it, but I'm too wakeful."

"Well, then, I'll fetch them kerns and citron right out here on the kitchen porch. The sun's off it now, and there ain't a prettier spot on earth where to prepare Christmas fixin's. I'll fetch the raisins and stone 'em myself. That Pasky boy'd eat more'n half of 'em, if I left 'em to him. Then we can visit right sociable; and I can free my mind. The truth is, Gabriella Trent, that I ought to be harnessin' Rosetty an' Balaam this minute, and be startin' for 'Boston.'"

"Oh, Aunt Sally!" protested the ranch mistress, in real distress.

"There, dearie, hush! Don't worry. I said 'I ought,' I didn't say I was goin'. Seem's if I couldn't just tear myself away from Sobrante. If Sarah Ma'sh, she that was a Harrison, and married Methuel, hasn't got gumption enough to bile her own plum puddin', I 'most feel as if she'd ought to go without. Though I don't know as that's real Christian in me."

"Dear Mrs. Benton, I wish everybody was as sincere a Christian as you are."

In her surprise, Aunt Sally tipped her rocker so far back that she just escaped upset.

"Why, Gabriella Trent! Me! Me! Don't say that, and make me feel meaner'n dirt. It's you, honey, is that---"

Mrs. Trent laughed as she answered:

"We make a mutual admiration society, don't we? But Aunt Sally, you mustn't think of leaving Sobrante before the holidays are past. I can't spare you. I need the help of your head, as well as your hands, and what would Christmas be to the children, if you weren't here to cuddle and scold them after their greediness has made them ill."

"Well, well, child, say no more. Here I am, and here I'll stay, if Sarah Ma'sh don't get a stiver of pudding or fowl. Here, honey, I reckon you best slice this citron. You've got a dainty hand for such work and--my sake's alive! That fruit cake'd ought to been made weeks ago, if it was to get any sort of ripeness into it before it was et! Hurry up, do. We haven't a minute to waste."

This adjuration had the good result of amusing Mrs. Trent so that, for an hour at least, she forgot to be anxious over her daughter's unexplained absence. Aunt Sally was a person who was always "driven to death" by the mere thought of tasks for which there was, in reality, ample time. But now that she had decided to remain at the ranch for a further indefinite stay, her spirits rose and her brain busied itself with a thousand plans for the comfort or amusement of the household, over which she domineered, yet so ardently loved.

"We haven't got much money for presents, I know. So I'll just get out the piece-bag to-night, and press off them canton flannel scraps. They'll make splended ducks for the youngsters---"

"I fear that would be wasted labor, friend. The little lads have outgrown homemade toys. Nothin that will not make a noise is acceptable to them. I'd thought of sending over to Marion for drums and whistles, if the stores there can furnish them."

"Well, Gabriella Trent! I declare you are the benightenest woman that ever set out to raise children! Drums! For them two? My, my! But what won't a mother do for her little ones, I'd like to know!"

The words were no sooner out of Mrs. Benton's mouth than she regretted them. At the name of "mother" Mrs. Trent's forced gayety vanished, and she lifted her eyes to her companion's face with a pitiful appeal.

"Aunt Sally, what has happened to Jessica?"

"Nothing, honey. Nothing in the world. What a master hand you are to worry."

The lady rose so hastily that the dish upon her lap slid to the floor, and the other laughed:

"There, Gabriel, you do beat all. If I'd dropped that dish 'twould have upset, and every slice of citron in it rolled whithrety-yonder. But for you--it knew better; just slipped off as slick as could be, landed right side up, and not a morsel scattered. Seem's if dirt nor nothin' disorderly ever could come a-nigh you, honey."

Mrs. Trent did not even hear. Upon her face had grown a look that hurt Aunt Sally to see; the more because the feeling it expressed was continually increasing within her own heart.

Where could Jessica be? Many hours had passed since she vanished from the laundry window, and if she had gone upon any errand for her "boys," she would have returned long since. Also, she would be swift to restore the missing clothes of the little boys, as soon as found, for she knew they would be prisoners within doors till she had done so.

"Don't you worry, I tell you, Gabriella. I'll take the great horn and blow a blast will fetch the whole kerboodle back here, hot foot. If that don't, I'll ring the mission bell! That'll mean trouble, sure enough, and its dreadful racket'll reach clear to Los Angeles, 'pears."

The mother crossed to the lattice and leaned against its post. Something was wrong with her darling. She knew that as well as if she had been told so by word of mouth, and a dreadful numbness stole over her whole frame. As if in a dream, she saw Aunt Sally emerge from the lean-to, where the great horn was kept, and raised the thing to her lips; but the blast which followed seemed to have been ringing in her ears forever. The silence that succeeded lasted but a moment, yet was like an eternity. Then from one direction, and another, came the ranchmen, understanding that there was need of their presence at the "house," and each quickly catching something of the fear so plainly depicted upon the faces of the waiting women.

"John Benton, where's 'Lady Jess'?" demanded Aunt Sally, with terrible sternness.

"Why, mother, how should I know? I was off to the lemon house early, fixing some shelves. I haven't seen her to-day and it makes it a long one."

Came "Marty" from his garden, a hoe over one shoulder and a mighty vine of ripened tomatoes over the other, exclaiming:

"How's this for a second year's growth? I thought you'd like 'em for catsup, Aunt Sally, and what's the horn for?"

"George Ceomarty, where's the 'captain'?"

"I don't know."

"You don't! You don't!" indignantly.

"No. How should I? Last I saw, she was sitting the porch along with you. You needn't glare at me so, but say yourself: 'Where's the "captain"?"

"Come, gardener, this ain't a time for foolin'."

He disdained to answer, reading the anxiety upon his mistress' face, and feeling an unaccountable one growing in his own mind.

It was a relief to all when the figure of Sailor Samson came into view, making for the cottage with those firm strides of his, that seemed to cover the distance with incredible speed. He was always to be depended upon in an emergency, and there was good cheer in his tones, as, having been asked the same question which had greeted his mates, he tossed back the light answer:

"Why, I don't know just at this minute, but I'll wager wherever she is, she's doing good to somebody, or finishing up some fellow's neglected job. Why? Ain't scared of 'Lady Jess,' are you?"

"That's just what we are, herder. She's no hand to run off an' stay off without tellin' where to; and if she couldn't find the children's clothes she'd been back before now to say so. Somethin' dreadful has happened to the precious girl, and you needn't say there hasn't!" wailed Mrs. Benton; adding in fresh dismay as the ranch mistress quietly sank to the floor in a faint! "There! Now I have done it! Oh! that tongue of mine!"

"Yes, old woman! That tongue of yours' has wrought a heap of mischief in its day," cried Samson, angrily, as he lifted the fallen lady and carried her into the house.

But Aunt Sally was quite herself again, and put him coolly aside, while she ministered to the unconscious ranch mistress, and, at the same time, gave him a succinct history of the morning's events. Everybody at Sobrante knew the deep devotion of Lady Jess to her widowed mother, and the thoughtfulness with which she always sought to prevent her loved one's "worrying," and all realized that there might be something seriously amiss in this protracted, unexplained absence. However, and to a certain degree, the child was allowed to be independent, and she was liable to reappear at any moment and to gibe at their "foolish fear" for her. But to summon her, at once, was the surest way of comforting Mrs. Trent, and Samson went out again to distribute the assembled ranchmen into searching parties, with the injunction:

"Don't scare the 'captain' when you find her, but just let her know her mother needs her, and her dinner's drying up in the oven. Now scatter; and don't you show a face back here without her in hand!"

"Can't all of us find her, herder. Ain't 'captains' enough to go 'round," said a cowboy, with an ill-attempt at playfulness, which was instantly frowned down. For, though all assured themselves that there was no substantial cause for alarm, and that women were "nervous cattle, always scared at shadders," they had already caught something of this nervousness. Each felt that the best sight for his eyes at that moment would be the gleam of a golden head, and the sweetest music his ears could hear the sound of a young girl's laughter.

But, alas! Daylight gave place to the sudden night of that region, where no lingering twilight is known; and still over the great ranch there rested the terrible silence which had followed the loss of one merry voice.

CHAPTER III.

OLD CENTURY TAKES THE TRAIL

The clatter of horse's hoofs on the dry sward made Pedro, the shepherd, lift his eyes from his basket weaving, but only for an instant. The sight of Samson, the herder, mounted upon the fleetest animal of the Sobrante stables, was nothing compared to the working out of the intricate pattern he had set himself to follow. Even the centenarian, dwelling in his lofty solitude, knew that there was approaching the blessed Navidad, whereon all good Christians exchanged gifts, in memory of the great gift the Son of God; and what could he do but put forth his utmost ingenuity to please his heart's dearest, even Jessica of the sunny face?

Like Aunt Sally, at the ranch, he had, at last, caught a feeling of haste and wished not to be disturbed; so he did not even look up again when he was accosted.

"Hello, old man! Hard at it, still?"

No reply forthcoming, Samson shouted, as if the shepherd were deaf:

"Where's Capt. Jess, abuleo (grandfather)?"

The deferential title won the attention which the loud voice could not gain, and Pedro glanced carelessly upon the mighty herder, a mere youth of sixty summers, and replied, with equal carelessness:

"Am I the nina's[A] keeper? But, no," then resumed his weaving.

In another instant the delicate, finely split rushes had been snatched from the weaver's hands, and he exhorted:

"By all that's great, old man! Tell me, has Jessica Trent passed this way?"

"Why for? Once, but once, since the long journey and the finding of that bad Antonio came she to Pedro's hut. Give back the basket. For her, of the bright hair, it is; my finest, and, maybe, my last. Why not? Yet still again I will keep the fiesta, si. The child. Many have I loved, but none like my little maid. The basket."

This was a long speech for the silent dweller on the mesa, and there was more of anger in his usually calm eyes than Samson had never seen there, as he rose and extended his skinny hands for his treasure.

The herder restored it, his heart growing heavier as he did so.

"Think fast, good Pedro. The old are wise, and hark ye! These many hours the child is from home. The mistress--you love her?"

"She is my mistress," answered the shepherd, in a tone which conveyed all his deep feeling. To him his "mistress" represented a material Providence. From her hand came all the simple necessities of his life. From her, on the approaching nativity, would also come some things which were not necessities, but infinitely more precious to the centenarian than such could be. On the nativity he would be sent, upon the gentlest mount his lady owned, to the mission service which he loved. Thereafter he would ride back to Sobrante, his own priest beside him, to feast his fill on such food as he tasted but once a year. At nightfall of that blessed day he would gather the ranchmen about him, in that old corridor where once he had seen the ancient padres walk, breviary in hand, and tell his marvelous tales of the days when the land was new, when whole tribes of redfaces came to be taught at the padres' feet, and when the things which now were had not been dreamed of. Some who listened to these Christmas stories believed that the secrets at which the shepherd hinted were vagaries of his enfeebled mind, but others, and among them Samson, gave credence to them, and yearly did their best to worm from him their explanation.

That mention of the "mistress" had touched him, also, to anxiety, and he motioned the herder to

repeat his statement. He then straightened himself to almost the erectness of the younger man, and begun at once to gather his rushes and rap them carefully in a moistened cloth. With an expressive gesture toward his cabin, he suggested that Samson was free to enter it and provide such entertainment for himself as he chose, or could find. And so well did the herder know the shepherd that he fully understood this significant wave of the hand, and replied to it in words:

"Thanks, old man, but some other time. At present I'm keener on the scent for my captain than for even your good coffee. If she comes, report, will you?"

The other did not notice what he heard, but himself proceeded to the cabin and safely deposited his handiwork within it. Then he came out again, whistled for his dog, Keno, whose head he stroked for some time, and into whose attentive ear he seemed to be whispering some instruction.

A shade of amusement, merging into wonder, crossed the herder's countenance, and he communed with himself thus:

"Blow my stripes, if Old Century isn't going to take the trail himself! He's telling that canine what to do while he's gone, and, ahoy, there! If the knowin' creatur' doesn't understand him! All right, grand sir! Yet, not all so right, either. It takes a deal of business to move Pedro off his mesa, and if he's riled enough to leave it now, it's because he sees more danger to Lady Jess than even I do. Hello! what's he waiting for?"

Evidently for Samson to depart, which that gentleman presently did, grimly considering:

"Old chap thinks the whole mesa belongs to him, and 'pears to suspect I might rob him if he left me behind. Well, friend, I've no call to tarry. Since my lady isn't here, I must seek her elsewhere," and down the canyon Samson dashed, his sure-footed beast passing safely where a more careful animal would have stumbled.

All this had happened soon after the dispersing of the ranchmen to search for Jessica, and Samson had now taken that turn of the trail which led to the miner's cabin.

"'Tisn't likely she's there, though. She'd never travel afoot that long distance, and Buster's in the stable."

The Winklers received him with gloom. The hilarious gayety that had once distinguished their small household had vanished with the loss of Elsa's money. Their son, and idol, had been defrauded of a rich future for which they had toiled, and life now seemed to them but an irksome round of humdrum duties, to be gotten through with as easily as possible. Over the cabin hung an air of neglect which even Samson was swift to note, and most significant of all, Elsa's knitting had fallen to the floor and become the plaything of a kitten, which evoked no reprimand, tangle the yarn as she would.

"Hello, neighbors! Ain't lookin' over and above cheerful, are you? What's wrong?"

"Good-day, herder. How's all?"

"Glum, I should say. Where's Lady Jess?"

Wolfgang elevated his eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders and made a gesture of ignorance, but said no word.

"Lost your tongues, mostly, hey? I say--where's the captain?"

Elsa lumbered forward to the doorway, and dully regarded the visitor; then, after a time, replied:

"Not here."

Her brevity was another contrast to her former volubility, but it was sufficient to thrill the questioner's heart with fresh dismay.

"Has she been here to-day?"

Elsa shook her head. Otto came out from the shed and glanced disconsolately at Samson, then slowly returned whence he had come.

The herder's temper flamed, and, snapping his whip at the air, he cried out, hotly:

"Look at me, you passel of idiots! You think you know what trouble is just because you've lost a handful of money? Well, you don't! You haven't even guessed at it. Money! The world's full of that, but there never was more than one Lady Jess, and I tell you--I tell you--she's lost!"

He had spoken out at last the fear he had scarcely acknowledged, and the shock of his own plain speech held him silent thereafter. His head drooped, his great body settled in the saddle, as if the whole burden of his sixty years had fallen upon him in that moment. His attitude, even more than his words, conveyed his meaning to his hearers, and, in a flash, the real values of what they had loved, and now lost, fell into their rightful places.

"Money? The little lady?" Ah! what, after all, was the one compared to the other?

"Man--you lie!" retorted Wolfgang, clinching his fist and advancing with a threatening air. Elsa stepped to his side, her wide face turning even paler than it had been, and a startled look dawning in her eyes. Even Otto, the six-foot "child," reappeared from his retreat and regarded the horseman reproachfully.

As for him, he roused from his momentary despondency and glared upon the trio of spectators as if they, and they alone, were to blame for the calamity which had befallen.

Question and answer followed swiftly, and again Samson was off down the slope, headed now for distant Marion, the least likely of all places wherein his darling might be found. Once he was out of sight, the Winkler household resolved itself into an additional search party; and it was noticeable that, whereas formerly, when they were leaving the home, they would carefully secure the cabin against intruders, they now disdained any further preparation than kicking the kitten out of doors, and removing the kettle of boiling stew from the fireplace to the ground before the door. A fleeting smile did cross Elsa's face, as she reflected that the meddler with her knitting would probably scald itself in the pot, but she didn't care. Her whole mind was now set upon Sobrante and its mistress, and so eager was she to reach the spot that she set off on her long walk with an alacrity she had not shown since the discovery of the robbery.

Wolfgang and Otto armed himself each with a sharp, iron-pointed staff, and silently, with one accord, started toward El Desierto. Why, even they could not have explained, beyond the fact that it seemed a place for hiding things. It was a long walk, and so weary had the "little boy" become by the time the deserted ranch was reached that Wolfgang left it unfatherly to force a return trip on that same day, although no signs of recent occupancy had rewarded their search.

So it was in every case. Jessica had simply and completely disappeared, and there settled upon the home the darkest night it had ever known. Even that on which its master had been brought back dead did not equal in intensity of anguish the uncertainty which drove the waiting mother frantic. At times she would call for a horse and ride wildly to and fro, peering into every shadowed spot and call pitifully upon her child, at others she would hasten to the house, eagerly demanding of Aunt Sally, "has she come?"

"Not yet, honey. Not quite yet. Just wait a spell, and you'll see her all right. Best be here at home when she does come, Gabriella. You'd hate to have anybody else the first to meet her, you know."

This advice, uttered in tones so gentle they were hardly recognizable as Mrs. Benton's, would be followed for the moment, till the torture of dreadful possibilities would send the distracted ranch mistress again afield.

So the night wore away, and sunrise came, and still there was no returning party that brought good cheer. Each tarried, for a brief time, to attend to the live stock under his immediate care, and some even to snatch a morsel of food, but mostly they were off and away again, a flask of water and a bit of hardtack in pocket, oftener than not forgetting even this meager nourishment.

By the end of the second day the sorrowful news had spread all over the countryside, and other ranches were well-nigh as deserted as Sobrante, while their forces joined in the apparently hopeless search.

By then, also, Mrs. Trent had resigned herself to a quiet acceptance of the worst, and sat for hours at a time rigidly motionless, with only her sense of hearing intensely alert, strained to its utmost for whatever news might come. As each party came back to consult the others, and for the refreshment that human nature could no longer do without, it reported to the waiting woman, who received the message in silence, yet with the courteous bow which acknowledged the other's effort on her behalf.

Aunt Sally now rose to the occasion as only her great heart could suggest. All the petty fussiness which had annoyed her neighbors dropped away from her as she moved softly, keen-eyed and solicitous, among them all. The steaming bowl of coffee and strengthening sandwich, ready on the instant for each arrival the unshaken hopefulness of her eyes, and her wordless control of the awestruck little boys, were comforts scarcely realized in that dark time; yet comforts truly. Even Gabriella could not refuse the nourishment so lovingly pressed upon her, and mechanically drank the cup of broth which her friend had taken care should be of the strongest. To one and all this homely ministering angel affirmed, with unshaken persistence:

"Jessica Trent is safe. Jessica Trent is coming back."

Meanwhile, old Pedro, for the first time in nearly a twelvemonth, had turned his back upon the mesa which he loved and set out on a toilsome path. In his hand he carried a curious, notched stick, upon which he sometimes leaned, but oftener bore upon his shoulder, as it were a precious possession that he must guard. Old as he was, his staff was older still. It had come to him when the valley mission had been abandoned, and the padre who bestowed it upon this, his faithful servant, had also given into his keeping a valuable secret. This metal-pointed rod was one thing Pedro never left behind him when he journeyed from home.

Starting from the east side of the mesa, he dipped into the canyon; not by the trail over which Jessica had ridden the ostrich on the day of her eventful meeting with Morris Hale, but by the farther, ragged wall where it seemed as if feet so old could never make their way. Yet make it they did, as surely if not as swiftly as in their younger days. There was not the slightest hesitation in their direction, though there were indeed, frequent pauses during which the Indian's keen hearing was strained for an expected sound. After each such halt Pedro would resume his path, climbing over rocks which looked insurmountable and skirting others by ledges less than a span's width. Over this part of the canyon wall none of the Sobrante ranchmen had ever come; though below it, along a smoother portion, ran the flume that watered the ranch in the valley.

Darkness found the shepherd still among the overhanging crags, and with true Indian stolidity he rested for the night. His blanket wrapped around him, his staff on the safe inner side, he lay down upon a shelf of stone and slept as peacefully as in his cabin on the level mesa, from which

two motives had driven him abroad.

Something had warned him that this approaching Christmastide might be his last, and that the time of which he had often dreamed was to come. He would now test the truth of the secret he had received, and, if it proved what had been promised, would share it with his beloved mistress, his priceless Navidad gift to her and hers.

Also sitting solitary at his basket, weaving on the isolated island, Pedro had still observed much. Each trifle was an event to him, and of late these trifles had gathered thick about him. With annoying frequency Ferd, the dwarf, had invaded and contaminated his solitude. The hints which the misshapen creature had dropped, though receiving no outward attention, had, nevertheless, remained in the Indian's mind to disturb it. It was to hunt for this wretched fellow, as well as to prove his "secret," that he was now in the canyon, believing that when he was found, there would be Jessica also.

When morning came he rose and tightened his belt about him and set out afresh. The long sleep had restored his vigor and his eye gleamed with satisfaction. The muscles that had stiffened from long disuse--he would not have admitted that the stiffness came from age--were limber as of old, and he felt that, after all, it was good to be once more upon the trail. But even his confidence would have been rudely shaken could he have foreseen the peril wherein that trail would end.

[A] Little one.

CHAPTER IV.

DELIVERANCE

A second night of fruitless search upon the rocky wall passed before the old Indian came to the spot which he had thought so near, full twenty-four hours before. He had fed his hunger upon the few wild plums he had found, and more than once he had descended to the flume to slake his thirst; then reascended the height again, for there he knew lay the road of his goal. Again and again he tapped the solid rock or the scant earth about it for a response to that magical tip upon his rod; and now, as the second day lightened the gulch, the response came.

The staff forsook his hand, as it had been a creature of volition, and stood upright upon a smooth-faced boulder. It needed all the man's strength to wrest it thence, and, grasping it securely, he carefully descended, for the last time, the precipitous wall. Always the staff tugged at his grasp, seeking the earth, but he carried it still toward a clump of gnarled trees which appeared to him like the faces of long-lost friends. It seemed to him that in all the half century since he looked upon them, neither branch nor twig had altered. So had they been on that sad day when the last of the padres had brought him hither and shown them to him. Beneath their roots lay the secret he had kept so well.

But the cave--what had become of that? And the stout shaft of hewn timber which led below into the heart of earth?

"Alas! I deceive myself. I have forgotten, for I am old; not young as I seemed to me. I have come in vain," he complained, in his thought; and with a gesture of despair, in his hunger and weariness, the shepherd sank upon the ground and dropped his face on his breast.

Long he sat thus, till there came to him upon the silence the answer no call could have awaked. He began to hear sounds. The creeping of some heavy body amid the chaparral, coming nearer, more distinct. Some wild shrubs sheltered him from sight, and, peering through their twigs, he watched in breathless silence. Ah! Reward!

It was Ferd who approached, as cautiously as if he were conscious of those gleaming eyes behind the mesquite, and who, turning in his path, entered a point among the trees which even Pedro had not suspected of leading any whither.

It was now the Indian's part to creep after this crawling creature; and he did so as swiftly, almost as silently, as if he were the dwarf's mere shadow. Always he kept a screen of leaves between them, less needed soon, as the unconscious guide led the way out of the sunlight into the depths of gloom. The cave at last!

But the half-wit, Ferd? Had he guessed its secret?

On and on, it seemed interminably. Now and then the dwarf would pause and listen, but at every halt there was utter silence behind him. Then onward again, and at length into a spacious place, around the walls of which great jagged rocks made recesses of impenetrable gloom. With one arm outstretched, feeling his way, and with his precious staff secured against his back within his blanket, Pedro paused in such a recess just in time, for the dwarf had struck a match and lighted a lantern. This he swung round his head, peering in each direction, and blinded, maybe, by the very rays with which he sought to disclose any possible follower. Satisfied that he was alone, Ferd moved onward again, and Pedro followed, hugging the chamber wall and

screening himself in every shadow.

But Ferd had no longer any fear of discovery or any thought of aught save that which lay before him. The passage was higher now and he could easily stand upright; the Indian also rising to his feet, though he had to bow his head lest it should brush the ceiling.

The dwarf began to talk aloud, to himself, apparently; but after a moment of this muttering, grew silent again. He had come to the mouth of a black pit which seemed to descend into great depths. In reality the depth was not so great; yet to anyone within it escape was impossible without help from above. Into this hole Ferd peered, holding the lantern so that its rays fell straight downward, and calling in a jeering voice:

"Is the 'captain' ready yet?"

"Oh, Ferd! good Ferd! Please, please let me out!" answered a voice that thrilled old Pedro's heart with joy.

"All right. The money first."

"But I have no money. You must help me up!"

"Down there safe. Is you hungry?"

"No, Ferd. The food you took out of Aunt Sally's pantry kept me from that."

The dwarf threw himself backward, on the rocky floor above, and laughed loudly, yet his mirth was shortlived. Pedro's hand was on his throat before a movement had been heard, and Pedro's voice was calling into the pit:

"Here am I, Sunny Face. Wait. I come."

During all the hours of her imprisonment, Jessica's courage had not faltered, but, at the sound of that blessed cry, it suddenly gave way and she burst into a paroxysm of sobs and tears, which effectually prevented her hearing the struggle that ensued in the gloom between the shepherd and the hunchback. For though the lantern had not been extinguished, as it rolled from its owner's hand, it had fallen upon its one glass side and gave no light.

For a time, even the Indian feared the issue of that battle in the dark and the abnormal strength of the dwarf's long arms; but the craft, if not the whole vigor of his own youth remained with him, and at a chance opportunity, he whipped off his blanket and smothered his opponent's face therein.

The blanket was almost priceless, and, next to his staff, his dearest possession; but when its heavy folds had subdued the other to unconsciousness, he did not hesitate to tear it into strips. With these Ferd was promptly bound, hand and foot. Then Pedro recovered the lantern and again called to Lady Jess:

"I find a way. Wait."

"Oh, Pedro! I know your blessed voice! There's a rope somewhere. Ask him. Quick--quick!"

"Wait."

But the dwarf had almost immediately recovered his breath, recognized his opponent, and now directed the search. With a few superstitious ranchmen, he shared the belief that Old Century was under supernatural protection, and that it was extremely dangerous to meddle with one so guarded. Of all who might have traced him to that hidden spot, here was the last he wished to meet; and now that he knew himself beaten, he began to whimper and plead in a cowardly way:

"Let me up, Pedro. Ferd'll take little lady out. Just fun, to make big talk. Ferd never hurt the 'captain;' no Ferd is a good boy, Pedro. Ferd is a good boy. Poor Ferd! Pedro, let poor Ferd go."

The only attention the shepherd vouchsafed the whiner was to put his own foot under the inert body and roll it well back from the pit's mouth. He had found the rope, a long and costly lariat which he recognized as having once been the property of Jessica's father, and he secured it about an upright timber that he tested and saw was still firm. Then he took the handle of the lantern between his teeth and slipped swiftly down the shaft.

As he reached the bottom Jessica threw herself upon his breast with a fresh outburst of joy and tears. But he dared not tarry below even with an apparently helpless enemy above, and, giving her the rope, he tersely bade her:

"Climb!"

With an intuition of his fear, she promptly obeyed him and stood guard over the lariat lest Ferd should make a fresh attempt upon it. Yet it seemed an interminable time that Pedro stayed below; and when at last he came above, she held him fast, not willing again to let him go.

But he was in no haste. Allowing her to keep between himself and the cavern's wall, even intrusting to her care the curious staff that now persisted in dancing along the cavern's floor in an elfish way which amazed the girl, he made a circuit of the place. At one spot he paused, and a single grunt of satisfaction escaped him. Then he seized a loaf of bread from a shelf-like niche and began to eat it eagerly. He even pointed to another, lying in the same place, but Jessica shook her head.

"No, no. I am not hungry. He gave me plenty of stuff to eat. Lots of things that have been missing from the kitchen and puzzled Aunt Sally so. Oh! Pedro, let us go! Shall I ever see her again? or my precious mother? How long has it been? It seems forever. Come, come! Oh!

come!"

"Wait," was the imperturbable answer, and the only one she could win from him. She was alive and well. He had found her. There was no cause for haste, nor had he ever hastened in his long life. The man who wastes his time in hurry loses all. He had found what he sought. This was the very pit, the forsaken shaft of which the padre told him. It led to what no other person dreamed. Was he to be balked of his purpose, for the child's whim? No. It was for her, even, that he tarried.

In his groping about the cave the lantern had revealed some loose fragments of rock which he now pushed in front of the dwarf's body, thus making him a more secure prisoner; and, satisfied that all was now safe, he descended again into the old shaft, leaving Jessica in darkness.

Her impatience was almost unbearable, and escape seemed as distant as ever, but there was nothing left except that "waiting" Pedro had so constantly advised.

It was rewarded, at last, by his call from the pit, and even his calm voice was now shaken by excitement.

"Come, Sunny Face!"

Leaning over the edge of the hole, she saw him point toward the rope and understood that he wished her to descend, but with a shiver of distrust she declined.

"Come."

This time the order was peremptory and she obeyed it, sliding swiftly down, to be caught and safely deposited on the floor of the shaft. Placing the lantern in her hand, the Indian began to gather a strange collection of articles from one corner of the narrow chamber and to display them to her. As each was held up, an exclamation of surprise broke from her, but even she had grown mostly silent now, and her interest prevented fear. When a goodly heap had been piled beside her, she found her voice again, saying:

"I reckon everything that's ever been lost from Sobrante since it began is down here. Elsa's little leathern bags with their knitted covers; Beppo's plumes; Marty's watch, that he thought he had lost in the gulch; Wun Lung's carved image. Oh, Pedro! how dreadful and yet how splendid!"

The shepherd allowed her rhapsodies to answer themselves. Though his eyes betrayed his complacency, he had more serious work on hand, and, pointing upward, he commanded:

"Fetch the padre's staff."

Lady Jess now realized that obedience was the shortest road to freedom, so climbed and descended the rope again, with the ease gained by her gymnastic training under the "boys'" tuition. But she took into the pit, beside the staff that curious basket which she had once seen Ferd carrying up the canyon and over which she had, most fortunately, just then stumbled.

"See, Pedro! This will do to hold all those things!"

The Indian "saw," indeed, that this was a bit of his own handiwork which had been missing from the mesa, for many moons. He nodded gravely, but was more eager for the staff than for his lost property; and, taking the lantern again to the inner wall of the shaft, he set the rod upon its point. It remained motionless, exactly upright, where he placed it; and now, truly, the old man paused to gaze upon it in wordless delight. He was so rapt and still that the girl grew frightened and awestruck, watching his odd behavior, and begged him:

"Tell me what that means, Pedro! The thing is bewitched."

"Ugh!" said the Indian, arousing from his contemplation, and, stooping began to dig amid the loose stones at his feet, with the only tools at his command--his own lean fingers. For these he sometimes substituted a bit of rock, and to Jessica it seemed as if he would never give over his strange task. When she had begun to really despair of the liberation which had seemed so near a while ago, he ceased his labor and stood upright, holding something shining toward the lantern's light. To the girl it appeared as only another worthless stone, of a pretty, reddish hue, but wholly unworthy the toil which had been spent to secure it. She was further surprised, if anything could now surprise her, to see the Indian place the fragment carefully within his shirt front and tighten his belt afresh below it. Then he lifted the basket she had filled with the articles they had found and motioned her upwards again.

"Now, we're really going, aren't we, Pedro?"

"Yes, Sunny Face. We go."

Indeed, he was as eager for departure as heretofore he had been loath. Releasing the dwarf's feet from their bandages, he helped his prisoner to them and gently propelled him forward by a kick of his own moccasined toe. Thus compelled, Ferd led the way, the shepherd at his heels, carrying the basket slung upon the staff over his shoulder, and his free hand pressed closely against his breast where he had placed the gleaming stone. Behind him walked impatient Jessica, with the lantern, and in suchwise the little procession came swiftly and silently to the end of the passage and stood once more under the free air of heaven. Here they had to halt, for a moment, till their vision became accustomed to the dazzling light; then with a cry of rapture, the "captain" darted from her comrades and sped wildly down the rocky gorge.

CHAPTER V.

JESSICA'S STORY

Though it had seemed as a lifetime to impatient Jessica that she had been kept in the cave, after Pedro's arrival there, in reality it was less than an hour; and it was yet early in the day when a cry she had expected never to hear again, rang through the room where Gabriella Trent was lying.

"Mother! My mother! Where are you?"

Another instant, and they were clasped in close embrace as if nothing should ever separate them again. Words were impossible, at first, and not till she saw that even joy was dangerous for her overwrought patient did Aunt Sally, the nurse, interpose and bodily lift the daughter from the parent's arms. All at once her own calmness and courage forsook good Mrs. Benton, and now that she saw the lost girl restored, visibly present in the flesh, anger possessed her till she longed to shake, rather than caress, the little captain.

"Well, Jessica Trent! These are pretty goings on, now ain't they?"

Gabriella sat up and her child nestled against her, their hands clasped and their eyes greedily fixed upon each other's countenance. The unexpected brusqueness of the question was a relief to their high tension, and Jessica laughed, almost hysterically, as she answered:

"They didn't seem very 'pretty' to me, Aunt Sally."

"What a sight you be! Where you been?"

"In the canyon cave."

"Didn't know there was one."

"Nor I--before."

"What for? What made you stay? Didn't you know you'd raised the whole countryside to hunt for you? Don't believe there's an able-bodied man left on a single ranch within fifty miles; all off huntin' for you. You--you ought to be spanked!"

"Mrs. Benton!" warned Gabriella, in a tone of such distress that the reprovèd one promptly sank in a capacious heap on the floor and fell to weeping with the same vigor that she applied to all things. Jessica, too, began to cry softly, at intervals, with such shuddering bursts of sobs, that the mother's tears, also, were soon dimming the eyes to which they had been denied during all the past anxiety. However, this simultaneous downpour was infinite relief to all; and presently the mother rose and with the strength happiness gave to her slight figure, carried her child away to rest.

"You are safe. You are here. I see that you have suffered no hurt, and bed is the place for you. When you have slept and rested you must tell us all. Oh! my darling! Many hearts have ached for you, and I thought my own was broken. But, thank God! thank God!"

Aunt Sally followed them, and, as if she had been a new-born baby, the two women washed and made ready for a long sleep the precious child that had been given back to them from the grave. Then the mother sat down to watch while Aunt Sally hurried to ring the ancient mission bell, whose harsh clanging had been agreed upon among the searchers as the signal of good news.

They all came flocking back, singly or in groups, from wherever the summons, which could be heard for miles in that clear air, chanced to find them. Impatience was natural enough, too, on their part, since to their eager questions Mrs. Benton could not give answer beyond the simple statement:

"Yes, she's back, safe and sound. Says she's been in a cave, though where it is or whether she's just flighty in her head, land knows. She's sleepin' now, and it won't be healthy for any you lumberin' men to be makin' a noise round the house before she wakes up, of her own accord."

Nor when Pedro and the subdued dwarf came slowly over the road would they make any further explanation. Indeed, they were both utterly silent; the Indian forcing his captive before him into the deserted office where he intrenched himself, with his basket and staff, until such time as it should be his mistress' pleasure to receive him.

Thus, with time on her hands and nothing else to do, Aunt Sally collared Wun Lung and withdrew to her kitchen, whence, presently, there arose such various and appetizing odors that the weary ranchmen scented a feast, and sought repose for themselves till it was ready. Samson and John, however, were called upon for aid, and, whereas they were ordered to "dress six of the plumpest fowl in the hennery," they brought a dozen, and for "one likely shoat," they made ready two. Nor, when they were upbraided for wastefulness, were they a whit abashed, but John demanded, with unfilial directness:

"Why, mother, what's got your common sense? Tisn't only our own folks you're cookin' for, but fifty others, more or less. Do you s'pose Cassius Trent would skimp victuals on such a day as this? My advice to you is: Put on all the pork and bacon you've got, to bile; and roast the lamb

that was butchered for our mess; and set to bakin' biscuit by the cartload, and---

"John Benton, hold your tongue, or I'll---

"No, you won't, mother! I've outgrown spankin' though I'd be most willin' to submit if 'twould be any relief to your feelin's, or mine either. I tell you this here's the greatest day ever shone on Sobrante Ranch, not barrin' even the one when the 'captain' came home with the title in her hand."

"You misguided boy, don't I know it? Ain't I clean druv out my wits a-thinkin' ever'thing over, and where in the name of natur' am I goin' to do it all, with them horrid gasoline stoves no bigger'n an old maid's thimble, and Pasqually gone off s'archin' with the rest, and no'count the heft of the time and my sins!"

"Had to take breath, or bust, hadn't you?" cried her disrespectful son, catching the portly matron about the spot where her waist should have been and hilariously whirling her about in a waltz which his own lameness rendered the more grotesque. "And where can you cook 'em? Why, right square in them old ovens at the mission. Full now of saddles and truck, but Samson and me'll clear 'em out lively. I'll make you a fire in 'em, and they'll see cookin' like they haven't since the padres put out their own last fires. They weren't any fools, them fellers. They knew a good thing when they saw it, and if they tackled a job they did it square. The ovens they built, just out of baked mud and a few stones, are as tight to-day as they were a hundred years ago; and, whew! won't old Pedro, that found her, relish his meat cooked in 'em?"

Nor was Benton to be outdone in suggestion on the matter of providing. Some of the searchers had brought back a quantity of game, with which the country teemed, and which it had delayed them but little to shoot. This was levied upon without ado, and in the preparation of the great feast Aunt Sally's helpers forgot their fatigue, and were as deftly efficient as women would have been.

Indeed, between sleep and labor, the hours of Jessica's unbroken rest passed quickly, after all; and the good news having spread almost as swiftly as the ill, the grounds were full of people when, at last, she awoke. But, even yet, Mrs. Trent's consideration for others refused a prior or full hearing of the story to which her faithful helpers had as good a right as she, if not as intense an interest in it. She made the child eat and drink, and went with her to her favorite rostrum when addressing her "company" of soldierly "boys"--the horse block. Here the girl stood up and told her simple tale.

"You see, dear folks, it was just this way: Aunt Sally and I were on the porch, and we found Elsa's ring, all crooked. We couldn't guess how it came there, and I'd just been made pretty angry about the way you felt toward 'Forty-niner.' Oh! it was dreadful, dreadful of you all, and I never was so ashamed of my 'boys,' not in all my life."

"Go on with the story, captain. Never mind us," cried somebody.

"And a little way farther I found a piece of Elsa's knitted bag. That made me think a lot. Then the tackers came, all paint, and with Mr. Hale's horse, that had been on the mesa ever since he was here. That made me think some more, and I told auntie if she wouldn't scold the little ones I'd try to find their clothes. I didn't find them, though, Aunt Sally."

"Go on! Go on! What next?" demanded an impatient listener.

"Then I saw Ferd. Oh, mother! If I tell I'm afraid they'll hurt him."

"He shall be protected, daughter, and you must tell," said the mother, though she now shrank from the hearing.

"I asked him about the horse and the children, and he said 'yes,' he had fixed them. He had driven Prince down from the mesa, when Pedro didn't see him, and had 'showed that old carpenter' something to pay for kicks and hard words. He knew something I'd like to know. So I asked him what, and he said it was Elsa's money. But if I didn't go with him without saying anything to anybody he wouldn't tell me how to find it. I begged to tell my mother, but he said her least of all. It wouldn't take long, only a few rods up the canyon; so, of course, I went. I thought I should be back long before dinner-time, and that mother would tell me to do anything which would clear old Ephraim's name from your cruel suspicions. And, oh, boys! You were wrong, you were wrong! He never took a cent that wasn't his own, and Elsa's money is found!"

Absolute silence followed this announcement, then Samson's great voice started the wild "Hurrahs" which made the wide valley ring. The cheers were long and lusty, but when they subsided at last, Mrs. Trent bade her daughter finish the tale.

"It wasn't a little, but a long way up the canyon; yet I was so eager to right Ephraim's wrong that I didn't feel afraid, though I never have liked Ferd. He can't help being queer, maybe, with his queer body to keep his half mind in---

The hisses that interrupted her were almost as loud as the cheers had been, and it would have fared ill with the dwarf had he at that moment been visible. Fortunately, he was still under the surveillance of the grim shepherd, in the locked office, and the majority of those present were ignorant of his whereabouts.

"Quit hindering the captain. Her story is what we want!" cried "Marty." "The dwarf can wait."

"So we went on and on, and into a strange, dark tunnel, that scared me a little, yet made me more curious than ever to see the end of it all. The tunnel led to a cave, and in the cave there was a deep hole; and before I knew what he was doing, Ferd had slung a lariat about me and

dropped me into it."

Again an interruption of groans and howls, that were promptly suppressed by a wave of the mistress' white hand; then Jessica continued:

"As soon as he had put me there, he told me he would keep me till my mother paid him great money to let me up. Yet he wouldn't even go to her and ask for it. He said I must promise, and that she would do anything I said. He told about a boy in 'Frisco, he'd heard the men say, was taken from his folks and kept till they paid lots for his release--even thousands of dollars! Antonio had taught him that money was the best thing to have. He believed it. He took it whenever he could find it. That's what made him take Elsa's, and blame it upon Ephraim. And I wouldn't promise. How could I? My dear has no money to give wicked men, and I knew the dear God would take me back to her when He saw fit. As He did, indeed. For it must have been He who put it into Pedro's heart to seek the cave just when I needed him most. Only the Lord could see through all that darkness and lead the shepherd by that crooked way."

She paused, and, turning to her mother, laid her sunny head upon the shoulder that was shaken by such sobs as moved her faithful ranchmen to thoughts of deep revenge. Eyes that had not wept for years grew dim, and out of that circle of listening men rose a low and ominous sound. Some, remembering their own idle talk of kidnaping and the like, shuddered at the practical application the dwarf's dim mind had made of their words; and various plans for punishment were forming when the captain clapped her hands for fresh attention.

"Hear me, 'boys.' Do you belong to me?"

"Ay, ay! Heart and soul!"

"Then you must mind me. You must let Ferd alone. You must do even more to please me--and teach him to be good, not bad."

None answered these clear, commanding sentences, which, as the strangers present thought, came so oddly from such childish lips, and they wondered at the effect produced upon the Sobrante men. These glanced at one another in doubt, each questioning the decision of his neighbor; and then again at the lovely girl who had never before seemed so wholly angelic.

"Will you do this?"

"Hold on, little one. Let the 'admiral' speak. Has she forgiven that human coyote?"

The unexpected question startled Mrs. Trent. She was a strictly truthful woman, and found her answer difficult. She had never liked the wretched creature who had just brought such misery to her, and she now loathed him. She had already resolved that, while she would protect Ferd from personal injury, she would see to it that he was put where he could never again injure her or hers. Her momentary hesitation told. The whole assemblage waited for her next word amid a silence that could be felt, when, suddenly, there burst upon that silence a series of ear-splitting shrieks which effectually diverted attention from the perplexed ranch mistress.

CHAPTER VI.

BEHIND LOCKED DOORS

The shrieks were uttered by Elsa Winkler, who frantically rushed to the horse block, demanding: "Where? Where?"

Mrs. Trent gave one glance at the rough, unkempt woman, and sternly remarked:

"Elsa, you forget yourself! Go back indoors, at once."

The unhappy creature shivered at this unfamiliar tone, yet abated nothing of her outcry:

"My money! My money! My money!"

She had come to the ranch thinking only of Jessica's mysterious absence, and meaning to do something, anything, which might help or comfort the child's mother; but the long walk, for one so heavy and unaccustomed to exercise, had made her physically ill by the time she reached Sobrante. Which state of things was wholly satisfactory to Aunt Sally, who, having received the visitor with dismay, now promptly suggested bed and rest, saying:

"You poor creatur'! You're clean beat out! If you don't take care, you'll have a dreadful fit of sickness, and I don't know who'd wait on you if you did. Not with all this trouble on hand. You go right straight up into one them back chambers, where the bed is all made up ready, and put yourself to bed, and--stay there! Don't you dast get up again till I say so; else I won't answer for the consequences. You're as yellor as saffron, and as red as a beet. Them two colors mixed on a human countenance means--somethin'! To bed, Elsa Winkler; to bed right away. I'll fetch you up a cup of tea and a bite of victuals. Don't tarry."

"But--the mistress!" Elsa had panted. "I come so long for to speak her good cheer. I must see

the mistress, then I rest."

"The mistress isn't seeing anybody just now, except me and--a few others. You do as I say, or you'll never knit another wool shawl."

"No, no. I knit no more, forever, is it? Not I. Why the reason? The more one earns the more one may lose. Yes, yes, indeed. Yes."

"That's the true word," Mrs. Benton had replied; "and so being you've no yarn to worry you, nor no mistress to see, off to bed, I say, and don't you dast to get sick on my hands, I warn you!"

So Elsa had obeyed the command, glad enough to rest and be idle for a time. Aunt Sally had seen to it that the visitor was kept duly alarmed concerning her red-and-yellow condition, nor had she given the permission to arise when Wolfgang and Otto arrived from their fruitless visit to El Desierto. They found the place crowded with returning searchers, and joyfully hailed the good news of Jessica's safety. But when there was added to this the information that their own property had been found, they demanded to be taken to Elsa, and it was their visit to her room which had sent her afield, half-clad, and with thought for nothing but her lost treasure.

Even now, husband and son joined their entreaties to hers, though Samson soon brought them to hear reason, and to withdraw from public for the present, asking, indignantly:

"Have you folks lost all your manners, as well as your dollars, up there on the foothill? The idee of a woman screeching her lungs out afore all the ranchers in Southern Californy! Your money? Well, what of it? If it's found, it'll be give to you, and if it isn't you ain't the first feller's been robbed. Besides, can't you smell? Don't you know that you're interruptin' the prettiest spread ever was seen at old Sobrante? Like chicken? Like roast pig? Like hot biscuit and plum sesh? Then go wash your face, and make your folks fix up and come enjoy yourself. So far as I hear, it's old Pedro holds the cash, and you might as well try to move the Sierras as him, if he ain't ready to move. At this present writin' he's set himself guard over that scalliwag, Ferd, and I ain't envying him his job, I ain't. Hurry up, there won't be anything but necks and drumsticks left for you laggards."

Thus admonished and reassured, Wolfgang hurried his family away to prepare for the feast, and the interruption they had caused to the proceedings at the horse block effectually relieved Mrs. Trent from an immediate answer to an awkward question, so she said:

"Come, daughter. I see by Aunt Sally's manner that she wishes the people would begin to eat. Every pair of hands, that belongs to us, must help in serving these kind neighbors who have flocked to our aid. Some of them have forty good miles to ride before they sleep, and they must be fed first. I'll stand by the head table yonder, and name them, and do you, for whom they left their business, wait upon them yourself. That will show them your gratitude, and give them honor due."

So it was, and to every dish she brought, the little captain added a graceful word of thanks, which seasoned the food better than even Aunt Sally's wondrous skill had done; and many an encomium did the child hear, in return, of that lost father who had made himself so well-beloved in all that countryside.

When all was over and done, when the last "neighbor" had ridden homeward, when everybody had had his fill, and more than his fill of good things, and the rudely constructed tables had been removed from the wide lawn, came Aunt Sally, beaming with happiness, and glanced over the scene, till there broke from her lips the wondering question:

"Can this be the same spot that was so dark and lonely yesterday? I've had my heartstrings so stretched and tugged at, betwixt joy and sorrow, that I don't know myself. I--I believe I'm tired! And if I am, it's about the first time in my life. Well, well! Talking of Christmas--this little supper we've just give is about equal to forty Christmases in one. Seem's if."

"Dear, kind, Aunt Sally, how shall I ever thank you for all you've done for us?" cried Mrs. Trent, appearing at her friend's side, and impetuously clasping the portly matron. The embrace was so unexpected, for the ranch mistress was never a demonstrative woman, that its recipient was, for the instant, speechless; the next, she had turned herself about and demanded:

"Gabiella Trent, have you had a bite to eat?"

"No. Have you, Mrs. Benton?"

"Not a morsel. I'm as empty as a bubble. No more has the captain touched a thing. She's here, there and everywhere, among her precious 'boys,' yet not a one of 'em has the decency to say: 'Share my supper, Lady Jess.' If they were my 'boys,' I'd---

"No, you wouldn't, mother. And I'm glad to see you two women resting a spell. Keep on sitting there. We're going to wait on you now, and don't you believe we haven't put by the pick of the pies for you all! The captain is fetchin' the tackers, and Pasqual's fetchin' the food. But what about old Pedro and the coyote?"

"John, don't call names, 'specially hard ones. They always come home to roost. But I'm glad you do some credit to your upraisin', and did remember that somebody else, except yourself, might be hungry. Wait, Gabriell'. Don't you worry about that Indian. I'll just step in and fix him somethin'."

"You'd better not, mother. He's got all the company he wants at this present writing."

This was sufficient to spur Mrs. Benton's energy afresh. Curiosity was her besetting sin, and she could not endure that anything should go on about the ranch in which she had no hand. Rising

rather hastily from a chair that was much too frail for her weight, she and it came to grief, and the fact diverted her attention for the time.

John was glad of this, though outwardly he sympathized with her slight mishap, and facetiously offered her a dose of her own picra.

Mrs. Trent also rose, saying:

"I will go to Pedro. Though I did try to thank him, when he first came, I had but a moment to give him then, and I fear he will feel he has been neglected. As if I could ever neglect one to whom I owe my darling's restoration!"

Mrs. Benton looked after her, and sighed.

"There she goes again! and that woman hasn't tasted a mouthful in a dog's age!"

"How long's a 'dog's age,' Aunt Sally?" demanded Ned as he helped himself to a buttered biscuit which Pasqual had just placed on the old lady's plate.

"Age as long as a dog," commented Luis, seizing the biscuit from his mate and running away with it. Of course, Ned gave chase, and the usual battle ensued, after which they dropped down upon the spot where they had fought, threw their arms around each other's necks, and munched the biscuit together with an air of cherubic delight.

Everybody laughed at the pair, upon which Aunt Sally now descended with a threatening mien and a plate of plum cake.

"Ain't you ashamed of yourselves, you naughty children? Fighting half your time. Here! Eat that and let your suppers stop. By the way, how many suppers have you had already?"

"Six or seven," promptly replied Ned, who had eaten with whoever invited him.

"Sixty-seven," echoed Luis.

"Then to bed you go, this instant!" And off they were marched, without delay. Of course, this was another postponement of Mrs. Benton's own meal, but she didn't mind that, so long as she had an opportunity to deal with the small lads. Explaining to them, as she undressed and bathed them: "You'd go to wrack and ruin if 'twasn't for me takin' a hand in your upbringing' now and then. You pull the wool over Gabriella's eyes the worst ever was. My! What you doing now, Edward Trent?"

"Pullin' wool, like you said!" and wound the white blanket he had caught from his cot the more tightly about Luis' head.

Meanwhile, the ranch mistress had gained the office and asked admission at its locked door. When a long wait ensued, she reflected rather anxiously upon what the men had often said, "That Old Century is as top-lofty as a king. Thinks he is a king, in his own rights, and his having lived a hundred years makes him better'n anybody else."

This was quite true. Faithful and devoted to her as he was, the shepherd exacted even from her the respect that was his due. On that day he felt that much more than ordinary consideration was owing him; yet he had been left for hours, unvisited by her for whom he had done, and meant still to do, so much. Therefore, it was with a bearing full of injured dignity that he at last slid the bolt and opened the door, though he did not invite the visitor to enter, nor withdraw from the opening.

"I came to see about your supper, good Pedro. Do you know that it has been cooked in the old mission oven? That should make it taste fine to you. You must pardon my not being earlier, but there have been so many, many guests. All gone now, save our own people."

"Senorita, am I not also a guest, yes? Was one at Sobrante as old as me? Should not I have ruled the feast?"

"Indeed, you should, my friend, if there had been any ruling whatever. It was simply take and eat, and away to their distant homes. You are already at home, nor have I, either, tasted food. Come now and feast with me. I am hungry, and so should you be. You mustn't keep the mistress waiting, you know!"

Pedro's countenance had softened, and he had expended all his sternness, but his caution remained. With a significant glance toward his prisoner, the dwarf, he shook his head.

"When he is safe, then will I break my fast. The senorita does me honor."

"That is what I should like to do, dear Pedro. But is not poor Ferd safe in here? Can we not send him in some supper and turn the lock upon him?"

She could not hide the repugnance she felt toward the miserable, misshapen creature, now sleeping on the floor, and after one glance in his direction looked swiftly away. But that glance had been sufficient to startle her by its resemblance to another face she hoped never to see again.

Pedro's keen old eyes noticed her surprise and dismay, and he smiled grimly.

"The mistress sees. Slumber shows it--the likeness. One breed of snakes were in the den. Fear both, watch both, for they are brothers. Yes."

This, then, explained many things; not the least, the wonderful influence and control which Antonio had always maintained over his half-witted "left hand," as the "boys" called the unfortunate hunchback.

"Antonio--Ferdinand--both Bernal--brothers?" asked Mrs. Trent, in a tremulous voice.

"Si. Yes, indeed. In truth."

"And all this time nobody knew or suspected it?"

"Senorita, the master knew. That was part of his great goodness to the wicked one who would ruin him if he could. 'Ware Antonio--'ware Ferd. One is the shadow of the other. One thinks, the other works. When Antonio went, Ferd stayed. No good, senorita. Watch him."

The lady sat down upon the nearest chair, and, as she did so, caught sight of the basket upon the desk. It was filled to overflowing with articles of various sorts, and beside it lay the curious metal-pointed staff. Her impulse was to reach forward and take it, but the Indian arrested her hand by an upward motion of his own. Then he opened it himself and showed her, at the bottom, a number of leathern bags with knitted covers.

"Elsa's money?"

Pedro silently assented.

"Oh, let us call her, and give it back to her at once."

"Fools must learn. Let the miner come, and Samson."

Mrs. Trent stepped outside and dispatched a messenger for the two men, who presently came; the one glum and offended, thinking in his slow way that he had been made a jest of, and that the money his wife so loved had not, after all, been found. The other, as always, proud and alert to serve the "admiral."

When they had entered the room, Wolfgang's eyes at once rested greedily upon the basket, which Pedro had again closed, as if he guessed what treasure lay within. Samson's glance went straight to the sleeping dwarf, and an almost irresistible impulse to kick the inert figure possessed him. But he restrained himself, and colored high when he met the lady's own glance.

"No, Samson, please. No violence. Yet it is Pedro's wise advice that Ferd be placed under the charge of somebody who shall know at all times just where he is and what he is about. Will you take that charge, herder?"

"That ain't the kind of cattle I keep, 'admiral.'"

"I understand it isn't a pleasant task. That's not the question, which is simply: Will you be responsible for--Ferdinand Bernal?"

The mighty sailor fairly jumped, but his reply was: "You could knock me down with a feather!"

Mrs. Trent laughed. "Yes, it is strange. But look sharp. The resemblance is strong. Pedro knows the relationship, and my husband knew it. I did not, until just now. Something better may suggest itself to you or me, but for the present, will you take charge of this unhappy one?"

A delayed and most reluctant "Yes" came at last from the herder's lips. If he had been asked to punish the dwarf the answer would have been swift and eager; but "take charge!" That meant constant association, decent treatment and responsibility for the most "slippery" of human beings.

"Then, please take him away at once."

Ferd had roused, and was sitting up; so that when Samson laid his great hand on the lad's shoulder, the latter understood, in a dim way, that he was now the herder's, rather than the shepherd's prisoner. Of the two, he would have preferred the latter keeper; but he would bother with neither very long.

It was a relief when the door closed upon the outgoing pair, and Pedro rose and locked it. There was something preternaturally solemn and mysterious in his manner as, placing a chair nearer to the desk for Mrs. Trent, he motioned Wolfgang to take another opposite. Then, standing between them he drew the basket toward himself, and keeping one hand upon it, thrust the other within his shirt and drew from that the reddish bit of rock which Jessica had seen him so careful of.

Holding it so that the last rays of the sun fell through the window full upon it, he extended it on his open palm and demanded of the miner:

"What?"

CHAPTER VII.

A ROYAL GIFT

Wolfgang took the bit of stone in his own fingers and examined it critically. Always deliberate in his words and actions, he was now doubly so, and Mrs. Trent grew impatient of a situation which seemed unimportant, and that delayed for others, as well as herself, a much needed

supper.

But Pedro was not impatient. He stood with folded arms and triumphant bearing, ready for the miner's reply, whether it came soon or late; also, quite ready to disregard it should it be different from that expected.

"Well, Wolfgang?" asked the ranch mistress.

The miner heaved a prodigious sigh, and returned the ambiguous answer:

"That is what I have thought already, is it not?"

"What have you thought, good Wolfgang?" demanded the lady, looking toward the Indian's glowing eyes.

"Copper. Copper, without alloy."

"Ugh!" grunted Pedro, with satisfaction, and taking the metal again in his hand bowed low and gravely presented it to his mistress.

She received it without enthusiasm, wondering what significance could attach to a bit of stone that might have been picked up anywhere. Her husband had believed that everything valuable would, sooner or later, be unearthed from the mountains of the State he so loyally loved, but her own interest in the subject was slight. However, she must say something grateful or again offend the dignity of her venerable servitor.

"Thank you, Pedro. It is very pretty. I will add it to the case of minerals that your master arranged yonder."

The shepherd cast one contemptuous glance toward the shelves she indicated, and straightened himself indignantly. He had loved and revered her, ever since she came a bride to Sobrante, and had tended him through a scourge of smallpox, unafraid and unscathed. Though she was a woman, the sex of whose intelligence he had small opinion, he had regarded her as an exception, and his disappointment was great.

"Is it but a 'thank you,' si? Does not the senorita know what this gift means?"

"I confess that I do not, Pedro. Please explain."

"Were the old padres wise, mistress?"

"So I have always understood."

"Listen. From them it came; from the last who left the mission here for another--to me, his son and friend. Into the heart of the world we went, and he showed me. Down low, so low none dream of it, lies that will make you rich. Will there be anybody anywhere so rich as the senorita and her little ones? No. But no, not one. This I give you. It is for the Navidad, the last old Pedro will ever see. And the senorita answers, 'thank you!'"

He was deeply hurt, and his manner was now full of an eloquent scorn. He was returning the stone to his breast, when she asked for it again, saying, gently:

"You are so old and wise, good Pedro, you must bear with my ignorance and teach me. This is copper, you say. It is very pretty, but how can it make me rich? I do not understand."

Wolfgang answered for the other, and his phlegmatic face had lost its ordinary expression for one of keen delight.

"It is true, what the old man tells you, mistress. He means--he must mean--somewhere on your property lies a vein of this metal. The dead master thought the coal was fine already. Ay, so, so. But copper! Mistress Trent, when this vein is mined, what Pedro says--yes, yes. In all this big country is not one so rich as he who owns a copper mine. Ach, himmel! It is a queen he has made you, and you say, 'Thank you!'"

He had fully caught the shepherd's enthusiasm and feeling, and for the first time in his life looked upon the lady of Sobrante as a dull-witted person.

But she was no longer dull. Even if it seemed an impossibility that even this "vein" could be mined, since she had no money to waste in an experiment so costly, still she realized, at last, what Pedro's will had been. Catching his hand between her own soft palms, she pressed it gratefully, and beamed upon him till he smiled again.

"Whatever comes of it. Pedro, you have given us a royal aguinaldo[B], and I do appreciate it. Come now, and share our rejoicing over that greater good that you have brought to Sobrante--the salvation of its little captain. For that--for that--I have not even the 'thank you'; my feeling is too deep."

Though he showed it little, the old man was almost as moved as she, and he followed her as proudly as if he were the "king" his fellow ranchmen called him. Yet even pride did not prevent his being cautious still, and he carried the basket and staff away with him, though Wolfgang protested, and asked, angrily now:

"The money? Is it not my Elsa's, yes? Would you break her heart already, and the little one so needing it?"

Mrs. Trent laughed. She, too, wondered that the Indian had not at once surrendered the other's property, but understood that he could not be hurried. So she merely suggested that Wolfgang bring his family around to the living room immediately after sunset, when, doubtless, he would receive his own again.

At that time, also, she meant to have John Benton present, to hear what Pedro had to say about this copper find, and to comfort him in his disappointment, for between these two there had always been close friendship.

However, to her surprise, John attempted no comfort. He was instantly and heartily on the shepherd's side, and demanded, excitedly:

"Begging pardon for plain words, as you are a woman with growing children, can you sit there calm as molasses and say 'you wish you could do something about it,' yet say no more. 'Wish!' Why, land of Goshen! this ain't a wishin' sort of business, this ain't! It's 'Hurray for old Sobrante! Hurray, hurray, hurray!' Call 'em in, captain, dearie! Call in the whole crowd! That was the luckiest gettin' lost anybody ever had! Oh, won't somebody call 'em in?"

To the group about the table it seemed that the sensible carpenter had suddenly gone mad. Nobody had ever heard him so address the mistress whom he loved, and his excited prancing around the room, alternately hugging and examining the mineral in his hand, added to the impression. While the captain departed to summon the other "boys," Aunt Sally attempted to reduce her hilarious son to sanity by a sharp box on the ear, and the sharper reprimand:

"You, John Benton! Do you mean to bring my gray hairs with sorrer to the grave? What's the reason of these goings on, I'd like to know? I never was so disgraced in all my life, never. Now, quit! Quit to once, or---"

He paid no heed to her, but laid his hand on Pedro's shoulder and shook it vigorously, demanding:

"What kind of a feller are you, anyway? Why in the name of sense didn't you tell this thing while the boss was alive? Shucks! Half of you is Indian, and that means dirt. Known it all this time, and kept it hid! You'd ought to be drawn and quartered, that's what you had!"

Mrs. Benton advanced with threatening hand, and from force of habit he retreated before her, and sank into the nearest chair; so that, when his mates entered, they found him sitting with bent head and down-hanging hands, as limp and inert as if his vitality had been sapped by the news he had heard.

"What's up?" asked "Marty," making his respectful salutation to the mistress, but looking past her toward the carpenter, who, with another change of mood, sprang again to his feet and waved the fragment of mineral overhead, exclaiming:

"This is 'up'! Copper's 'up'! Sobrante's 'up'! And lucky the men that belong to it. Only--that old villain, yonder, has known it even since forever, and was mean enough to keep his secret. That's what he is, that Pedro, yonder!"

Yet, with another whimsical change, he seized the shepherd's hand and wrung it till even that hardened member ached. But the Indian remained as calm and undisturbed, amid the torrent of blame or praise, as if he had been sitting alone at his weaving on the mesa. His soul was satisfied at last. He had done that which he had pondered doing for many years, without being able, heretofore, to bring his thought to action. Surely he had known that, locked within his own breast, his "secret" was worthless; yet he had clung to it tenaciously. Now he had imparted it to others, and behold! all the world knew it, even so soon. Well, that did not matter. It was no longer his. His part was ended. Meanwhile, on his beloved upland, there was a faithful collie watching for his return, and lambs bleating, needing his care. Suddenly he rose, placed his cherished staff in Mrs. Trent's hands, and bowing low, said:

"Keep this, as I have kept it, where none but you may find. At the Navidad I come once more, the last. Adios."

His departure was so unexpected that, at first, they did not try to prevent it, but Jessica was swift to follow and protest:

"Not to-night, dear Pedro! Please not to-night. You have been so good to me, you must stay and be glad with us this one night. In the morning---"

"In the morning the sheep will need new pasture. Adios, nina."

"Then, if go you must, it shall not be on foot. Wait! I know! Prince, Mr. Hale's horse, that he left with you on the mesa. It is here. The naughty children painted him, but I saw him in the corral, just now, and you shall ride him home. That is if you will not stay, even for me."

"The Navidad. Till then, adios."

She had never heard him talk so much nor so well as since these few hours among his friends. He seemed to be almost another Pedro than the silent shepherd of the mesa, and as she followed him, taking his direct way to the paddock, she wondered at the uprightness of his bearing and the unconscious dignity which clothed him like a garment. Then she remembered something else--his blanket, and sprang to his side again, entreating:

"Just one five minutes more, Pedro. Your blanket. You must have a new one."

He hesitated and sighed. Then shook his head sadly. That which he had torn, to bind the dwarf, had been a Navajo weave, so fine and faultless that even he, the wonderful weaver, knew it for a marvel. There could not be its mate in all that country, nor had been since the old padres went and took with them, as he believed, all the wisdom of the world.

Before he had caught and bridled the horse, Jessica was back, and playfully enveloped in a wonderful piece of cloth that made the Indian stare. If it were not the mate to his lost treasure,

it was quite as fine and soft, as generous in size, and far cleaner.

"See, dear old fellow. This was my father's. My mother sends it to you with her love. Put it on, so I may see how fine you look. Oh, grand! When the children play 'Indian' why can't they copy you, and not those dirty Diggers, that Ferd teaches them to be like! Pedro, you are splendid, and--I love you! I love you!"

All at once, as she gazed upon him, there returned to her a memory of that dark time in the cavern's pit, where he had found her, and which, in the general rejoicing over her safety she had, for the present, almost forgotten. By now, save for this old man, she might have been dead.

He received the onslaught of her embrace exactly as he had accepted the gift of the blanket--in silence. There was a momentary lighting of his somber eyes, but no word, as, putting her quietly down upon the ground, he mounted the barebacked Prince and loped swiftly away into the darkness and solitude.

Brighter by contrast was the room to which the little captain returned, after Prince and his rider had vanished into the night, and the circle of lamp-lighted faces gleamed with excitement. Everybody seemed trying to outtalk his neighbor, and only one glowering countenance showed dark by contrast; the face of Elsa Winkler, with its eyes angrily fixed upon the basket which Mrs. Trent held on her lap, quite forgetting what it contained in her listening to the others' words.

Suddenly, Samson brought his fist down upon the table, enforcing a brief silence, while demanding:

"What's amiss with using the capital on hand? There sits our 'admiral,' with money enough in that basket to start the whole business. Set Wolfgang to manage, and the rest of us to dig and delve. More'n one here has tried mining for a yellower metal than this"--holding up the bit of copper--"twould do us proud to give the first pick to Sobrante's fortune! Lads, what say?"

"Ay, and right off! That's what we say!" cried somebody, but Mrs. Trent lifted her hand, and they were silent.

She had become as interested now as any of the others; far more, indeed, since if this amazing tale of Pedro's proved true she would be able, at last, to fulfill her husband's interrupted life-work, and make Sobrante a power for good in the world.

"What does Elsa say? Will she lend us this money?"

[B] Christmas box or gift.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

All waited breathlessly for Elsa's answer. They knew her greed, or, rather, why she hoarded her money so closely, and were not so surprised, after all, when it came.

"No, I cannot."

"Can't? I should like to know why you can't?" demanded John Benton, indignantly, though Mrs. Trent protested against his urgency by a nod of her head.

"It is for the little one. It is mine. I want it already."

The ranch mistress at once extended the basket, but it was now the carpenter's turn to object.

"Please, 'admiral,' not so fast. Let her tell us, first, how much money she lost."

Elsa caught her breath. To save her life she could not have stated in exact figures the sum, because, though she had known to a dime before the robbery, at, and after that time, she had recklessly tossed aside the little that remained. This wasted portion belonged with the whole amount, and being as truthful as she was penurious, she hesitated. Her color came and went, as she looked anxiously into John's face, realizing that he had laid a trap for her and caught her in it.

But the mistress confronted her, saying:

"Never mind that, Elsa. I do not blame you for refusing to try experiments with what you have so hardly earned and so nearly lost. These are certainly your own little money bags, as I judge from their knitted covers; but it is just possible there may have been other money added to that was taken from you. So, tell me as nearly as you can, what you had, and we will examine them all together."

This was wise, and commended itself even to the eager Elsa, who stated promptly and proudly:

"Three t'ousand of the dollars it was. All gold. Big gold and littles ones. In them bags was lost entirely. In the others--I don't know. Oh! I don't know. It was much, much!"

It was Wolfgang's turn to interpose, and he did so, sternly:

"Elsa, wife! Three thousand dollars, and I not know it! How dare you?"

"Ach! how not dare I? It was the new pick, or the new pushcart, or the new everything, is it not so? Well, then, if one would save one need not tell."

Mrs. Trent's face saddened, and, seeing this, Jessica impatiently exclaimed:

"Oh, I hate money! It's always that which makes the trouble. It was about money that those New York folks made such wicked charges against my father. It was for a little money that you 'boys' were so quick to ruin 'Forty-niner's' character. It was money, and the greed for it, that changed Antonio from a good to a bad man."

"Hold on, captain. There wasn't ever any 'change' in him. He was born that way."

"He was born a baby, wasn't he, John? All babies are good, I s'pose. It's loving money has made Ferd do such dreadful things; and now, over a little money, Wolfgang and Elsa are quarreling, though I never heard them speak crossly to each other before. Oh, I hate it! Give it all back to her, mother dear, and let us forget all that Pedro said. I, for my part, hope his old copper mine will never be dug out."

Some who heard her laughed, but the mother grew even graver than at first, and looked searchingly into her daughter's face. Again there came to her mind the consciousness that the little girl was growing up in a strange fashion; seeming both too wise and too simple for her years. It could never be any different at Sobrante, where one and all conspired to spoil her, though innocently enough, and from pure affection. How could she, single-handed, combat these hurtful influences?

The answer came swiftly enough in a second thought: "Money."

If there were but a little more of that power for good as well as evil in her possession she could send the child to some fine school and have her educated properly. The separation would be like death in life to herself, but what true mother ever thought of self where her child was concerned? Certainly, not Gabriella Trent. It was with a little sigh that she put her arm about Lady Jess and drew her to her side, saying:

"Here, daughter, you and John examine these bags together, while the rest of us look on and tally for you. I want Elsa to have her own, at once."

They moved the books and papers from the table, and Jessica emptied the contents of the bags into one gleaming heap near the big lamp, whose light gave an added radiance to the coins, making more than one pair of eyes sparkle and stare. None could remember ever to have seen so large an amount displayed outside a bank window.

Even John's hands trembled slightly as he began to count the double eagles first, pushing each five of these toward his small co-laborer and reckoning:

"One hundred. Two hundred. Three hundred--one thousand!"

"One thousand!" echoed Jessica, in turn handing the pile to her mother, while the others watched, counting each for himself in silence, ready to check any blunder that might be made.

That is, the men were silent, but Elsa and Aunt Sally rather disturbed the proceedings; the former, by eagerly reaching out for the piles as each was arranged before the mistress, and being as regularly rebuked by the latter.

"There you go again, woman! How can they count right if you don't have patience? Keep your hands still, do," said Mrs. Benton.

"Keep your tongue, mother, too. Two thousand!" rejoined John.

"Two--thousand!" cried Jessica, tallying. But her voice had now lost its impatience, and she began to have a very different feeling in regard to this "money," which looked so real, and was so much needed at Sobrante. If Pedro's "copper" could be transmuted into shining golden eagles, why, after all, she guessed she didn't hate it quite so much.

"Three--thousand--and--ain't half--touched yet!" gasped Samson, throwing up his great hands in a gesture of astonishment.

Elsa was also gasping then, and the expression of her face was changing into one from which Mrs. Trent involuntarily turned her eyes. Cunning and avarice predominated, and in the woman's throat was a curious clicking sound, as if she had lost and were trying to find her voice. Which, when found, seemed not to belong to the good-natured Elsa, so changed it was:

"Ach, me! But I forgot already. I guess--it was not three t'ousand; it was two times so much. That was seven t'ousand, is it not? The money of this America--it so confuse, yes," and she tapped her forehead with one fat finger, while her eyes grew beady, and seemed to shrink in size as they gazed upon the wealth she coveted.

But Wolfgang would have none of this. He was as honest as the sun, and, till that moment, had supposed his wife to be of one mind with him. Indeed, honest she had been, in thought and deed, until that terrible temptation was spread before her.

"Elsa! Elsa Winkler! Is it my wife you was and would lie--lie--for a bit of that rubbish!"

"'Rubbish' is good," commented "Marty," under his breath, but nobody smiled.

The woman cowered. Accustomed as she was to domineer over the seemingly weak-willed man,

there had been times, within her memory, when he had thrown off her rule and asserted himself to a degree that terrified her. She had stumbled upon one of those times now, and sank back in her place with a deprecating gesture, advancing the flimsy protest:

"Are they not my bags, so? Sewed I them not with my own hands out of the skin of the little kid was killed? The covers I knitted with---"

The miner raised his hand, and she dropped her eyes before him.

"Give her what belongs, if you will, good lady, and let us be gone," he said, pulling his forelock respectfully to Mrs. Trent.

"Gone! Why no, Wolfgang, not to-night. It's a long way, and you should wait till morning. Indeed, you should," she replied, at the same time sending a questioning glance toward John Benton, and pushing toward Elsa all the empty bags and three of the thousand dollar piles.

For the carpenter nodded swift acquiescence, on his part longing to be rid of "them miserly Dutchmen, barring the man."

Elsa rapidly recounted, and bestowed the eagles within their receptacles, and these again, wrapped in a handkerchief, within her bosom. Then, as coolly as if she had not made an unpleasant exhibition of herself, she turned to her hostess and smiled:

"I go now, mistress. I thank you already for one good time I have. It is to buy the mine, one day, for my child. I must be going. Yes, I must. The stew! Ach! how I forgot! The cat--it was a good stew, no? And the cat has eat the stew!"

"Then you'd better stew the cat!" suggested Marty, with a facetiousness to which she paid no heed.

Holding out her hand for Otto to take it, she commanded:

"Little heart, but come. It is in bed you should be, yes. Good-by, all," adding in German, "May you sleep well!"

Wolfgang followed the retreating pair, but turned on the threshold to make his obeisance to the ranch mistress, and to say, "At your service, good lady. My pick and my head." Then, bowing again toward all the company, he disappeared.

Everybody felt the relief of their departure, and Aunt Sally humorously threw a kiss after them, remarking, with a sniff:

"Blessed be nothing, if somethin' is going to make a hog out of a decent woman. That there Elsy'd been content with half she got if she hadn't seen the rest that heap. I'm a good deal like Jessie, here. I think money's the root of all evil."

"That ain't an original observation, mother, though you do speak as if it was. Money's the root of a pretty consid'able comfort, too; and I'd like to know, for one, where in creation all this that's left came from," returned John.

"There's no doubt in my mind, that it came out of the Trent pocketbook, every dollar of it!" said Samson. "But how it came into Ferd's fist is more'n I can guess. Seems if even a half-wit would steal from his own brother, and it must have passed through Antonio's hands first."

"Antonio's brother!" cried Marty, incredulously.

"That's the true word. Pedro knew it, and the master knew it. The 'admiral' heard it, first, to-day; along with that other secret about the copper. Ain't any harm in mentioning it, is there?" said Samson.

The lady laughed, and answered:

"Even if there were the harm is done, herder. But that's right. I wish no secrets at Sobrante. I like to feel that we are all one family in interests and affection, as my husband wished. And now remains this gold. What is to be done with it? Where shall we bestow it that it may be both safe and ready when needed?"

Aunt Sally immediately went and closed the door and locked it; then fastened the windows and pulled the shades over them. At which a shout arose that the old lady heeded not a whit. She clasped her hands over her breast and her round face turned pale, as she whispered shrilly enough for all to hear:

"We're undone! We're all undone! We're a passel of fools--and--and--- Oh, suz!"

Down she dropped into a chair, and there was no more laughter. She was not a timid woman, and her fright was evident. Her son stepped to her side and laid his hand on her shaking shoulder, demanding:

"What ails you, mother? What did you see? Why did you lock the doors?"

"I--I---"

"Quit chattering your teeth together. What did you see?"

"Oh, son! I seen a--a--ghost!"

"Trash!"

Her courage began to return, and her anger to rise. She retorted promptly:

"No trash! A ghost. A spirit! As sure as I'm a-settin' here this minute; the spirit of--of---"

It aggravated John that she should pause and peep behind her, to be sure the windows were still covered.

"The spirit of what tomfoolery has possessed you, mother, I'd like to know? What's the use of scarin' folks half to death? As if we hadn't had enough things happen without your cuttin' up, too!"

"Hold your tongue, John Benton, you sassy boy. As sure as I'm alive, I saw the ghost of Antonio Bernal peeking in at that open window afore I shut it. He was so white I couldn't tell him from paper, and so thin I 'peared to see clean through him."

"Pshaw, mother! You're overtired, and for once in your life really nervous. I reckon it's the sight of more money than ever come your way before. Well, forget it. 'Tisn't yours nor mine. We've no cause to worry. I'll step and get you a drink of water and then you'll feel all right, and would better go to bed."

"I don't want water, and I shan't go to bed. I shan't close my eyes this night, John Benton, and you needn't touch to tell me so."

"All right. Stay awake if you like. It's nothing to me," answered the exasperated man, who, in spite of his strong common sense, had been more startled than he cared to admit, even to himself. But, glancing at Mrs. Trent and Jessica, he now felt that it would be wiser to express his own fear, which was of nothing supernatural.

"Mother's upset, 'admiral,' and don't you let her upset you, too. The fact is, we're a very careless set at Sobrante, where everything is--or used to be--all open and above board. It's a new thing for keys to be turned on this ranch, and it's a new thing for us to go suspecting one another of sneak notions. I, for one, am ashamed enough of the way I've felt about old Ephraim Marsh, and if he don't show up pretty soon, I'll make a special trip to Los Angeles to tell him so. Even if I have to foot it the heft of the way.

"Howsomever, all the world ain't as honest as them that had the honor of knowin' Cassius Trent. There's been a power of strangers on these premises durin' these last days; and it stands to reason that among 'em one villain might have crept in. I ain't sayin' there was. I'll never accuse nobody again--'cept--'cept---

Here the honest fellow interrupted himself with a laugh; remembering his ingrained suspicion of the two Bernals, which he would never even try to overcome. But he went on again:

"Mother thinks she's seen somethin', and like enough she has. There might be some scamp hangin' around; and if there was, and he looked through that window and saw all this gold, I don't wonder his face was ghosty-lookin', nor--Somebody stop me talking and answer this: Where's the safest place to stow that pile?"

For a moment nobody replied. Mrs. Trent was wishing, most heartily, that the money had never come into her possession, since she did not know to whom she should restore it; and beginning to feel, with Jessica, that "money" did carry discord and danger with it.

But the little captain was now all eagerness, and exclaimed:

"Oh! how I wish I'd seen it! Aunt Sally, I never saw a ghost in all my life, never! I thought they were just make-believes, but if you saw one, of course they're true. Do you s'pose we could see it again if we went out to look? Will you go with me?"

"I? I! Well, I guess not. Not a step will I step---

"But several steps I'll step, Mrs. Benton. I advise the money going into the office safe, that old Ephraim uses when he's at home. One of us better camp out on the lounge in the room there till we get rid of whoever's cash that is. I'll bunk there myself, if you like, Mrs. Trent, after I step outside and see if all's serene with my prisoner," said Samson, cheerfully.

"May I go with you, Samson? May I, mother?" asked Jessica.

The mother's consent was somewhat reluctant, for now she could not bear to have her darling out of sight. Yet if anybody on earth was to be trusted with so precious a charge it was the herder. Besides, she was annoyed at this talk of "ghosts," and knew that the shortest way to convince Jessica how nonsensical it was, would be by allowing her to go out and seek for them herself.

But Samson answered cordially:

"You do me proud, little one. Suppose you take your rifle, and then, if we see any specter you can pin it to the mission wall, and we'll have a show, charging ten pins' admission."

They went out, laughing and gay; the child clinging to the giant's hand, and hoping that she might really see the phantom of Aunt Sally's story, for she had no fear concerning it. They came back, five minutes later, looking grave and seriously alarmed.

THE PRISONER DISAPPEARS

"What's happened?" asked Mrs. Trent, foreboding fresh trouble, since, of late, trouble had become so familiar a visitor.

"Well, ma'am, the bird has flown."

"Please explain, Samson," she anxiously urged.

"That bird of dark plumage--Ferd, the dwarf. He's escaped, vamoosed, took wings and flew."

"Oh, Samson! I'm so sorry. I hoped you would look after him until I could find some suitable institution in which to place him. It's time he should be helped, for if he's so sharp to do evil, he must have equal capacity for better things."

"Yes, ma'am. So I allow; and I had them same hopes myself, not ten minutes ago. I hadn't said a word to anybody, but after you gave him to me, I remembered what the little captain had commanded, for it sort of struck home, that did. I ain't overly saintlike, myself, but what of goodness I'd caught from you all I meant to pass on to the coyote--I mean, Ferdinand Bernal. I reckon it was his face, 'stead of a ghost's, that Aunt Sally saw by the window."

"I thought you locked him in some room?"

"Lock and double-locked. Bolted, besides. Worst is, all bolts and locks are just as I left 'em. Had the key in my pocket and went in, saluting, and there wasn't anybody to salute. Well, ma'am, if he's out, and 'twas him saw that money, there'd better two of us sleep beside it, rather than one. He's the uncanniest creature ever I met, and I hope never to meet his mate."

"Very well. I do not see what harm he can do, after all, except to himself, now. Jessica, dear, please bring the key, and John can put this money in the safe. If it weren't for Elsa's satisfaction, I should regret that Pedro ever found it. Then we must all to sleep. It's been a most eventful day, and we are tired."

Before long the whole household was asleep; but the last to seek her rest was Mrs. Benton; nor did she do that until she had locked whatever locks would fasten, peeped under every bed, and invaded the sacredness of Wun Lung's "heatheny den." Then she placed her Bible on one side her bed, a broom and horsewhip on the other, and lay down to watch, explaining:

"'Cause I'm goin' to watch, even if I am resting my body horizontal. I'm so tired I can't set up straight, nohow, and I shan't wink a wink till daylight comes and the rest are moving."

Having called out this valiant resolution to Mrs. Trent, in the adjoining room, she instantly closed her heavy lids, and opened them no more till a series of thumps upon her shoulders aroused her. Then she realized that Ned and Luis were reminding her of yesterday's promise that, if they'd eat no more plum cake overnight they should have some for their breakfasts.

"Land of love! What you doing? Is it daylight? Why, 'twas dark as Egypt when I lay down, and I---Can it be that I--I--have overslept?"

"Plum cake, Aunt Sally," reminded Ned.

"Plumsally!" cried Luis, with a forcible whack. Which was instantly returned, and with such added interest that he ran howling away, leaving the disturbed matron to scold herself at leisure for her lapse from duty, while she hurriedly dressed.

Naturally, she had to submit to some teasing on account of her valiant resolution of the previous night that she "wouldn't wink a wink," but Mrs. Trent was delighted that the faithful woman had, at last, enjoyed a needed rest. Besides, everything was bright at the ranch on that happy morning. Even Wun Lung had caught the infection of Christmas preparations, and was intent upon providing some dainties of his own, against the approaching festival, which should so far outshine the homelier pies and puddings of Mrs. Benton, as his own revered country outshone, in his opinion, even this pleasant one in which, at present, his lot was cast. He had also felt good-natured enough to put aside a plentiful breakfast for his mate--or foe--of the kitchen; and since it was such a time of happiness, Aunt Sally condescended not only to eat it, but to pronounce it "good."

Hearing this unexpected praise, the Chinaman wound and unwound his precious queue, after a fashion he had of expressing satisfaction; and smilingly advised Mrs. Benton to "step black polch," where she would find things to do.

So to the back porch the good lady retreated, carrying with her great dishes of fruit to prepare, and not forgetting two enormous slices of the rich plum cake she had promised the little boys, and which would have made less active, hardily reared children ill.

Mrs. Trent had moved her sewing machine to the porch, and Jessica sat near, with a little table before her, trying to write the Christmas invitations that had been so delayed, and to express them after a style which should not too painfully expose her own ignorance. The result was not so bad, considering the slight training the child had had, and her few years, yet it did not satisfy the mother, who felt that education was the one good thing, and who longed to have her child's bright intellect developed as it should be.

Poor Jessica had written and rewritten the note intended for Mr. Hale a number of times, and still had it returned to her with many corrections, after Mrs. Trent's reading of it, and now laid it aside with a sigh of discouragement.

"Can't that wait a while, mother? If I may write to my darling Ninian Sharp, I'll get myself rested. He doesn't mind trifles like wrong capitals in the right places--oh! dear, I mean--I don't know what I mean. But may I?"

"Certainly, dear. Though, first, come here and let me try the length of this sleeve."

Lady Jess obeyed readily, for new clothes were rare events in her simple life. This natty little "Christmas frock" was white, with scarlet trimmings, and quite sufficiently in contrast with the plain blue flannel ones of everyday use to captivate her fancy and make her patient under the tedious process of "fitting." Yet she was glad to return to her table and her letter to Ninian Sharp, which she found no difficulty in composing, since she was free to do as she chose.

And this was the epistle which, after some delay, reached the newspaper man, at a time when he happened to need cheering up, and brought new life and interest into his overworked brain:

"MY VERY DEAR MISTER SHARP: My mother and the children and aunt sally, and Me and all the rest the Boys, are well and send Their LUV. We are Now Inviteing you To come and Spend the holidays at dear Sobrante. everybody is Coming, most, and i Got lost and was found in a Hole. The Hole is in the ground. there was Money in It, that the Boys said my fortynineer stole and He Didn't. It was elsa winklers and wolfgang was mad at her, and there was a Ghost, but it got away, else samson and Me would have shot it against the mission cordiror wall and had a nexhibition. and ferd that was lock up got away two; and say, please my dear mister sharp, Will you see if this stone that's in the package is any good? Pedro, thats a hundred years, says it's copper and copper is worth money. We need some money bad, and i hope it is, and I don't no anybody as clever as you. so Please write write away and tell us if you will come and tell ephraim Marsh, that the Boys will be at marion railway station with a buckborde and horses enough. i am Making something to put in everybodys stocking. i Began to make the things after last Christmas, that ever was, and i Have more than twenty-five presunts to Make and i Have got three done, one of Them is Yours. your Loving friend,

"JESSICA TRENT."

When the letters were completed, the little captain felt that she needed recreation, and her mother agreed with her; but, unlike her former habit, could not consent to the child's going anywhere alone. The recent terrible experience had banished from Mrs. Trent's heart that comfortable sense of security which had prevented life on the isolated ranch from being a lonely one. She now felt, as Aunt Sally phrased it:

"Afraid of your own shadder, ain't you, Gabriell', and well you may be. In the midst of life we are in the hands of them Bernals, and no knowin'. That son John of mine may try to hoodwink me that 'twasn't no ghost I saw last night, but ghost it was if ever one walked this earth. It wasn't, so to speak, a spooky ghost, neither; it was an avaricious one, and it wasn't after no folks, but 'twas after that money, sharp. Ain't disappeared, for good, neither. Liable to spring up and out anywhere happens; and you do well, Gabriell', not to trust our girl off alone again. Not right to once. Where's she hankerin' to travel now? She'd ought to be learnt to sew patchwork, instead of riding all over the country, hitherty-yender, a bareback on a broncho or a burro. If she was my girl---

"If she was your girl, dear Aunt Sally, you couldn't have been more anxious than you were while she was lost. And the life is good for her. It's right for all women to understand sewing and household arts, but the captain isn't a woman yet, and I have faith she'll acquire all fitting knowledge in due time. She's anxious to ride to Pedro's. She says there was something different in his manner, last night, from ordinary, and, indeed, I fancied so myself. She's gone to find which one of the boys can best leave his work to ride with her."

"It'll be John Benton, Gabriella Trent. You see if it ain't. That man just sees the world through Jessica's eyes, and he's never got over being jealous 'at he wasn't the one took her to Los Angeles that time. If he had all the work in creation piled up before him, and she happened to say 'Come,' some other whither, whither, 'twould be, and not a minute's hesitation. Anyhow, it's Marty's day for mailridin', and there he lopes this instant."

The ranchmen took turns in riding to the post, each esteeming it a privilege, and finding nothing but pleasure in the sixty miles' gallop to Marion and back. At that moment, indeed, Marty was swinging out of sight on his own fine mount, the mailbag before him on his heavy Mexican saddle, the wind created by the swift motion of the beast raising the brim of his broad hat and thrilling him with that sense of abounding life and freedom which comes so forcibly to men in the wide spaces of the earth.

He was the youngest of the "boys," even though past his first youth, and the "life" of the ranchmen's quarters, where all liked and some loved him.

The women on the porch watched him till he became a mere speck in the distance, and Aunt Sally sighed:

"That George Cromarty is as likely a youth as ever I knew. He's that good to his old mother, back in the East, I tell my own son John, he ought to profit by such an example. I should hate to have anything happen to him. Yes, indeedy, I should hate to have a single bad thing happen to poor George Cromarty."

A little nervous shiver ran through Mrs. Trent's slender frame, yet she turned upon her companion, as she threaded her needle, with a laugh, exclaiming:

"Oh! you dear old croaker! Why can't you let well enough alone, without mentioning more evil?"

You know the old saying that to speak of trouble is to invite its visitation. Surely, there was nothing about to-day's postman to suggest disaster. George is a typical ranchman, and my husband used to point him out to visitors as what a man might be, who grew up, or old, where 'there was room enough.' Big-hearted, full of fun, tender as a woman, but intolerant of meanness and evil doing. It would be a dark day for Sobrante if ill befell our 'Marty.'"

"Well, I don't know. Something's going to go wrong somewhere. I feel it in my bones, seems if. There, I told you so! Yonder comes that lazy boy of mine and Jessie. There's more things needing him here on this place than you could shake a stick at, yet off he'll go traipsing just at a nod from his captain."

"Don't begrudge them their happiness, Aunt Sally. Certainly, after grief, it is their due. Well, John, will you act escort for the little lady of Sobrante?" asked its mistress.

"Will I not? And do me proud. She ain't to be trusted with any of the flighty ones, Samson now, or---"

Mrs. Trent's laughter--that morning as heart-whole and free as a girl's--interrupted the ranchman's disparaging comments on his fellows, sedate grayheads as most of them were; for well she understood the universal devotion of all to their darling captain.

"Oh, John, I can scarcely associate the idea of frivolity or carelessness with our big Samson; but wait a moment, please, before you start. There's such a store of good things left, though in fragments, that I'd like to pack a basket for Pedro. I wish he did not insist upon living so alone. He is so old and I feel, as the native Californians used, that the older a person grew the more precious. I wish you'd try to persuade him to let somebody else take his place with the sheep, and to arrange his small affairs so that when he comes down for his Navidad he will remain. There's enough to keep him busy and happy here."

"I'll try, mistress. But he'll not be persuaded. Old Pedro wouldn't think he could breathe down here in the valley, for long at a time. Well, good-by. Ready, captain?"

"Ready, John, as soon as mother gets the basket. Quiet, Buster. I believe you're more eager for a canter than I am, even."

Then when the basket had been handed up to John, the pair merrily saluted the women on the porch and rode away; but Mrs. Benton called shrilly after them:

"Turn back and start over again! Turn back, I say! Both your horses set off left feet first. That means bad luck as sure as you are born!"

But nobody paid any heed to Aunt Sally's forecasts of evil, save to laugh at them. Only Mrs. Trent again felt that nervous shiver seize her, and but for shame's sake would have begged her daughter to defer her ride until another day.

However, shame prevailed; or common sense, which is far better; and well it was--or ill--that the riders kept serenely on their way, indifferent to "signs" and ignorant of what lay before them.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE ROAD HOME

The train from Los Angeles rolled slowly up to the little station at Marion and the asthmatic engine seemed to wheeze its relief that its labor was ended, as an old man stepped from the last car and looked eagerly along the platform. Then a certain degree of disappointment overspread his fine face, and shouldering a heavy parcel, strapped round with leather to give a holding place, he strode rather unsteadily forward over the same sandy road, or street, which had tried Ninian Sharp's patience on his first visit to the post town.

Yet, after a little, the man grew accustomed to his own stiffness of limb and moved with a sort of halting swiftness which soon brought him to the little hostelry of one Aleck McLeod, where a group of ranchmen were sunning themselves while they waited the distribution of the mail.

It was noticeable that the porch was spotlessly clean and that none of the idlers profaned its cleanliness by so much as one expectoration of tobacco juice, though all were either smoking or chewing that weed. They had far too great respect for Janet, Aleck's wife, and for the labor that cleanliness meant in that waterless region. They were all deep in the discussion of the late events at Sobrante and none heard the old traveler's approach over the soft ground, till he stood close beside them with his foot on the lower step.

But he heard them and their eager talk; and, pausing a bit, the more completely to surprise them by an intended halloo, he forgot that and all else save what they were saying.

"It was ten to one she was never found. 'Pears like a miracle to me, that old Pedro was led to find that very cave just when he did. My wife claims it was a miracle, same as used to be in

Bible days, and you can't talk her out of it. You know how women are," said one ranchman, who had aided in the search for Jessica.

"Well, first and last, them Trents have done a heap for this section of our 'native.' And they're square folks, every identical of them. Even the little tacker, that boy Ned. There's more in his head than he gets credit for, and one these days he'll show there is. He's a master hand with a gun, baby as he is, and if he'd had one handy I wager he'd have put some shot into the ugly carcass of that Ferd--- But he hadn't the iron and he didn't," added another smoker.

"It was a prime spread Mis' Trent gave us. Must have took about all the provisions she had in store, but nothing was too good for them that helped her in her trouble. Or tried to help, same thing; since it was her own man, Pedro, found the child. Away down in the bottom of a pit in the depth of an unknown cave! Think of it, somebody! It just makes my hair rise on end, known' there is such a fool and scoundrel joined in one dwarf's body--Hello! hel--lo!"

The last speaker's words ended in a sort of screech of astonishment and recognition, as a hard hand was laid upon his shoulder, and Ephraim Marsh demanded, fiercely:

"What's that you say, neighbor?"

"Why, hello, Marsh! Where'd you drop from?" cried one, rising and extending a hand in greeting.

"You're a sight to cure sick folks!" shouted another, pressing to "Forty-niner's" side, and slapping the veteran's shoulder in high good will.

But Ephraim had no feeling at present, save anxiety to know what their discussion had meant; and, all talking, they laid a succinct history of the last few days before him. He listened in increasing alarm and amazement and his old limbs tottered beneath him, so that he called out, hastily:

"Give me a seat, somebody, quick, before I fall. I--I--to think of my little gell--my own sweet-faced, lovin' little gell---Oh, I can't believe it! I can't and I won't. It's some plaguey Californy yarn' you're passin' the time with. Atlantic! But you might have chose a likelier subject to fool over, you might."

But Aleck himself had seen the arrival through the window and came out to greet him with the heartiness accorded all the Sobrante people, and to assure him that the story was all true; and that, after all, it were better that he had not been at home when the trouble came; "for it would have broke your heart, 'Forty-niner,' into more pieces than old Stiffleg broke your bones, and it wouldn't have healed so soon, neither. But, come in, come in, boy, and have a mouthful of dinner. Janet has as fine a dish of haggis as ever I tasted in Aberdeen at home, and it should relish to you, after all that hospital fare and so on. Janet! Janet! Here's Ephraim Marsh! Come welcome him!"

And Janet came quickly, like her husband cordial and sympathetic, and led the deeply moved frontiersman into her own kitchen, where no uninvited ranchman dared intrude, and there served him well with good things, including the haggis. And as she served she talked in a wise, womanly way that soothed his agitation and turned his thoughts from enmity against the dwarf into thanksgiving that now all was well.

"For since it is over and done with we can reckon the gain. The sweet bit bairnie has won for herself fresh friends. In all the countryside there was but one feeling, 'The child must be found.' No other thing was of any moment, and found she was, by a man so much older than any of the rest that nobody, not even you, can grudge him the honor. More hot milk? Oat cake? Nothing? Well, well; for a man that's traveling you've a small appetite. Must be off already and pack your own bundle? Why, friend, you would better leave that till one the boys rides up for the mail. Due before this, indeed, for Sobrante ranchers are ever keen for their post stuff. No? A horse, then? Aleck was going to do a bit of plowing with her, later on, but he'll eagerly give over that for you."

But Ephraim felt that he could delay for nothing more, not even for the arrival of a Sobrante messenger; and as for Jean, the sorrel mare--he and she were old acquaintances, and he declined her services with a grim smile, saying:

"Thank you, Janet, it's kindly offered, but I'm in haste and I'd rather trust my own lame leg than her four lagging ones. Besides, if Aleck has been afield in this search he'll be behindhand in his work, and he's a hand to keep things up to the level line. Good-by, good-by. Oh! wait a bit, though. I'd clean forgot that I put a scrap of white Scotch linen and a yard or two of plaid bodice stuff in my pack for you. This business of my captain getting lost has shaken my wits."

Though Janet protested against the trouble her face glowed at prospect of her gifts, and as she assisted him to unstrap and refasten his canvas sack, and even begged to be shown the simple remembrances he had procured for everybody he knew "at home;" not least among them being calicoes of brilliantly unwashable colors for Aunt Sally's patchwork. Then he set off alone, staff in hand, stolidly yet swiftly covering the ground with that halting stride of his that soon took him out of sight.

The assembled ranchmen received their own mail matter, mounted and rode away; and there settled over the little town that monotonous quiet which would not be broken again until the arrival of the evening train, when, possibly, some chance passenger might alight on the deserted platform.

Meanwhile, Ephraim was passing over the level road toward "home," feeling keener delight and

longing with each step's advance, and when he came to a little branch trail, where a rude signpost stated the fact that he had come "Five miles from Marion," he made his first halt, sitting to rest for a few moments under the eucalyptus trees bordering the arroyo. The branch road led to and disappeared among a group of buildings, some distance to the north, on the ranch of one Miguel Solano, a friend of Antonio Bernal, and a Mexican of ill-repute. The ranch was comparatively new and was rich in olive orchards and all the conveniences for producing a fine quality of oil, and had been bought and arranged by an easterner with all the accessories of profitable farming. Death had put an end to the settler's industry, and the property had come, at a low figure, into Solano's hands; whereupon everything industrious lapsed, neglect and discomfort usurping the place of thrifty comfort.

Gazing toward this place, Ephraim reflected that; "If that Greaser had half as much snap as he has wickedness he'd be a rich man. As 'tis, honest folks sort of give Solano's a wide berth. I'm thirsty as a dog and wouldn't mind havin' a drink out that artesian well they have there, but--Atlantic! There's somebody already stoopin' over it; looks mighty familiar!"

Then the old man stood up and shielded his eyes with his hand as he peered into the distance, ending his scrutiny with a shake of his fist in the direction he had gazed, and muttering aloud:

"No, I'm better off here. Queer how you can recognize a snake, no matter how far off! That's Ferd, the dwarf; and if I was near enough to touch him I couldn't keep my fingers off his dirty throat, nohow, till I'd choked the life out of him! Ugh! When I think--- But I mustn't think. I must just get up and jog on till I see a prettier sight than that. If I can spy the hunchback at one mile off I can see my little captain's bonny head at ten. Home, old 'Forty-niner'! Home's the word!"

As if the thought of Jessica had put new strength into his body Ephraim again shouldered his pack and started forward; but he had proceeded a short distance only when he again halted and this time in consternation. On the road before him, where it dipped slightly into a hollow, lay the prostrate figure of a man, face downward in the dust; and from the shrubbery near by came the helpless floundering of some big animal and its occasional cry of distress, than which there is no sound more pitiful in all the world.

Away flew the pack, and Ephraim bent over the man, gently turning him over, and crying in fresh dismay:

"It's Marty! George Cromarty, of all men, dead as a doornail!"

Alas! Ephraim's home-coming was proving anything but the delight he had anticipated. To be met first by the story of the trouble which had visited Sobrante and now by this dreadful discovery almost unnerved him; but he was a man of action and his hand flew to Marty's breast to feel if his heart still beat. With the other hand he softly brushed the dust from the rigid features and rubbed the colorless temples. After a second or two his face brightened, and he cried aloud, as if the other might hear and be cheered:

"Well, you aren't a dead man, after all, Marty, my lad! But I'd give a heap, this minute, for a bit of cold water to give you. And, Atlantic! I believe I'm losing my wits. 'Course, he's got it himself, handy. All the boys carry a flask in their pockets, even on the short ride to post, but Marty, being teetotal, fills his with water and gets laughed at for his notions. A mighty good notion it'll prove for him if it saves his life, and here goes!"

Raising Marty's lean body so that his head rested on the fallen bundle, Ephraim secured the flask, found it full, and began to moisten the white lips; then, cautiously, to force a few drops down the stiffening throat. Success soon crowned his efforts since, fortunately, the ranchman was merely stunned, not killed, by the ugly fall he had taken when his horse so suddenly pitched forward and tossed him overhead against the pile of rocks.

For it was a horse in agony which sent that moving appeal from the thicket near by, and as soon as "Forty-niner" was sure that the man was recovering, though he could not as yet speak, he sought the poor beast and saw, to his distress, that for it there was no respite save in death.

"Well, well, well! This is a bad job all round, but better a horse than a man, and lucky for both I came when I did. If I had a gun I'd end the misery of one, straight off. And maybe Marty has. I'll look and see."

Returning to the road he was greeted by a prolonged stare from the dazed ranchman, who had, indeed, been able to drag his body to a sitting posture, but vainly sought to understand what had happened.

Ephraim spoke to him, asking in a matter-of-fact tone:

"Got a revolver with you, lad?"

"Eh? W-h-a-t?" returned Marty, wonder drawing upon him at finding who his companion was. "You--Eph?"

"Course. Who else! Been quite a spell since we two met, but better late than never. Got a pistol, I say?"

"What for?"

The sharpshooter hesitated, then gave an evasive answer:

"Powerful long since I done any practicin', and feel like I better try my hand."

At that instant there was another heavy floundering behind the bushes and another brutish

moan of pain. With this full consciousness came to the injured ranchman and he tried to rise, crying in his own distress:

"That's Comanche!"

"Forty-niner" gravely nodded.

"He's hurt?" demanded Marty, as if he defied the answer to be affirmative.

Ephraim turned away his face. To them, horses were almost as human beings, and the love of a master for his beast was something fraternal.

"Help me to him," said the ranchman, staggering to his feet.

"Better not, lad. Best trust to me," protested the elder man.

"Trust--what?"

The look in Ephraim's eyes was all the answer needed to this fierce question, and Marty turned away his own gaze as he faltered the next one:

"Yes, mate, but take it like a man. Better him than you, and--give me the gun."

Marty straightened and stiffened himself.

"Help me to him. Something's wrong with my legs. I'll see for myself. If it must be, I'll do it for myself."

The frontiersman understood the sentiment and respected it. He had had to do a like hard duty for his own horseflesh before that, and he had always felt it a sort of murder. He did not look at Marty's face as he carefully guided his wavering steps into the thicket and the presence of the suffering Comanche, where one look sufficed his master.

"Oh, you poor fellow!"

For an instant the tall head stooped to the level of the struggling animal, and a strange, expressive look passed between the great equine eyes and the misty ones of the man. Then Marty's hand went swiftly around to his pocket, there was the click of a weapon, a flash and report, and Comanche moved no more.

More shaken and ill from this deed than from his terrible fall, Marty sat long in silence by Ephraim's side beneath the eucalyptus trees; then suddenly rousing, exclaimed:

"Now, to find out the cause!"

It was not far to seek, though difficult to understand. Of all men in that countryside, gay, big-hearted George Cromarty had most friends and fewest enemies. He took life lightly, merrily, with a good word for the virtues of others and silence for their vices; yet there before them, unmistakably plain, was the trap that had been set for his life. A pit had been dug across the whole width of the road, shallow, indeed, but sufficiently deep to throw any horse passing over it. Its top had been screened with interlacing twigs, over which had been scattered soil and dust enough to hide them. One who rode with his eyes on the ground, as Antonio used, might easily, perhaps, have discovered the fiendish work; but he who rode with head upraised and his gaze on the distance would ride to his ruin as Marty had done. To make the treachery more secure, some sprays of wild grapes had been tightly stretched beneath the whole, and this showed a deliberation of evil that turned Ephraim sick, but the other man furious.

"Who did that will pay the price! I swear it!" he cried.

"It surely was meant for a Sobrante man, for they're few besides who ride this way," answered "Forty-niner," thoughtfully. "And, Atlantic! Here's the mail pouch! Maybe 'twas robbery, pure and simple. Was it a money day, for supplies or such?"

"Reckon it was. The mistress herself locked and gave the bag to me, bidding me be careful. As if I was ever careless; but there was one letter in it I heard about, that the little captain wrote to Ninian Sharp. Wrote herself, an invite to the Christmas doings. Try it."

Examination proved that the bag had been tampered with, though the lock was a spring and now securely fastened; but a small leather flap, intended to cover the keyhole, had been torn from its fastenings and lay on the ground. The pouch itself had been flung slightly out of the way, under the bushes, as if the trespasser had satisfied himself with and concerning it and had no further use for it.

"Well, there used to be three keys to this concern. One the mistress has; one the postmaster keeps at the office; and the other was Antonio's, since he always was wanting to open and put something extra in the bag after Mrs. Trent had done with it. I never liked the look of that, and it's my opinion that it's the very key has unlocked this bag, if unlocked it's been. Which is more'n likely."

Cromarty's head was again beginning to grow dizzy, and he sat again upon the rock to recover himself, making no answer to Ephraim's words than the exclamation:

"How am I going to get that bag to post in time?"

CHAPTER XI.

THE PASSING OF OLD CENTURY

Jessica and her escort, John Benton, rode swiftly up the canyon trail and over the brow of the mesa toward the shepherd's cabin; but they had not proceeded far along the upland before a sense of the strangeness of things oppressed them both.

John's keen eye detected the neglect of the sheep, which were still huddled in the corral, though long past their hour for pasturage; while their bleating expressed hunger as well as dislike of their unusual imprisonment. But Jessica saw first the abject attitude of the collie, Keno, who came reluctantly to greet them with down-hanging head and tail and a reproachful upward glance of his brown eyes.

"Why, you poor doggie! What's happened you? You look as if you'd been beaten. Where's your master, good Keno? Keno, where's Pedro?"

The Indian was nowhere visible, and as if he fully understood the question, the collie answered by a long, lugubrious whine.

"Something's wrong. That's as plain as preachin'!" cried John, and hurried to the little house, whose door stood open, but about which there was no sign of life.

He had tossed his bridle to the captain, meaning that if aught were amiss within she should be detained for the present by holding the horses. However, she saw through this ruse, and, leaping from Buster, swiftly hobbled both animals and ran after the carpenter.

Keno kept close at her heels, the very presentment of canine misery, and uttering at every few steps that doleful whine which was so unusual to him. But, arrived at the cabin, he left her and with one bound had reached the Indian's side, where he still sat beside his window, his head against its casing and his blanket--Jessica's gift--closely wrapped about him. He did not move when they entered, nor respond even by objection to the collie's frantic blandishments, but John raised his hand for silence, as she stood sorrowfully gazing downward upon the face of death.

Yes, it was that. He had more than rounded his century of years, he had lived uprightly, as the good padres had taught; he had bestowed upon those he loved the secret of great wealth, and he had gone to keep his precious Navidad in the home of eternal youth.

Jessica comprehended the truth at once, and her eyes filled with the tears which, as yet, did not overflow; for as she gazed upon the sleeper's face it filled her with amazement and something akin to delight; and at last she exclaimed:

"Why, how young and glad he looks! He's even nobler than he was when he rode away from me last night, and I'd never seen him so dignified and grand as he was then. It's--it's as if he had done with everything is hard, like worries, and evil, and loneliness, and--all."

"Ay, lassie; he has done with all--that you or I know aught about; and every inch a man he seems as he sits there in the majesty of death."

By then the child's tears had begun to flow, and she caught up Pedro's hand with an outburst of grief and love.

"Poor, poor Pedro! To have been here all alone when it came! What shall I do without him who was always so good, so good to me? Oh, I can't have it so, John! I can't, I can't!"

He was wise enough to attempt no consolation, knowing well how small a part of her life the venerable Indian had been and how easily youth accustoms itself to such a loss. But, after he had allowed her to sob for a time, he gently touched her shoulder, and said:

"Come. Pedro has finished his work and has passed it on to us. Those poor sheep must be cared for, and somebody must ride home at once; or, rather, should ride at once to Marion to make the necessary arrangements. I wish---" And he paused in perplexity, regarding her as if in doubt what was best to be done.

They left the cottage with that quiet tread which seems natural in the presence of those whom no sound can trouble, and, hand in hand, walked sadly to the fold, where the penned sheep greeted them with eager cries and restless movements.

"Pedro used to say they talked and he knew what they said. I begin to believe he did, for, listen! This sound isn't like that other first one, which told us they were hungry. This says: 'I'm glad you've come!' Doesn't it?"

"So it sounds to me, lassie; and I, too, am glad we came. It's queer, though, how set you were on it, even against the mistress' wish that you should wait."

"Yes, John, I had to come. I just had to. And this is what I think: When we've taken care of the sheep, we'll lay Pedro on his bed and lock the door. Keno will keep guard, if we tell him; though whoever comes here, anyway? Then you must ride to Marion to see about--about"--here, for a moment, grief interrupted her again, but she suppressed her tears as soon as possible and went on quite calmly--"about what always has to be at such a time. I remember--I remember it all when my father---No, no, John, I'm not going to cry again. I won't make bad worse, never, if I can help it. But this I say: You ride to Marion and send word to the mission so that a priest may come; and do all the rest. I will ride home and the boys will come up and fetch him to Sobrante.

It must be in the little old chapel that we never use, because my father said he would not put to a common service a room that had once been given to God. Pedro always loved it. It was there he used to say his 'devotions' and there he must lie--in state--isn't that what they call it when great folks die? Pedro was great. He had lived so very long and he had always been so devout. What do you say?"

"What do I say, little captain, but that you've a long head on your young shoulders, and I'm sorry this load of grief had to rest on it so early. More than that; I undertook to be your guardeen to-day, and I've no notion of shirking the job--even now. I passed my word to the 'admiral' that I'd fetch you home safe, and so I will. It won't take much longer and it's right. Home first, and Marion afterward."

"Well, maybe, that is best; and surely it is pleasantest. I didn't want to be selfish, but I'd rather you stayed with me. Are you ready? Shall we leave him just as he is?"

"Just so. We'll close the window and the door, and then--home."

But it was with widely different feelings that they cantered down the canyon from those with which they had ridden up it, and when she saw them returning so soon and so swiftly, Mrs. Trent went out to meet them, saying nothing, indeed, yet asking the question with her eyes:

"What trouble now?"

Then John told their story speedily and suggested that some of the men ride to the mesa and attend to what was needful. Also, repeated Jessica's opinion about the chapel, with which the lady instantly agreed; then, clasping her daughter's hand very close, returned with her to the porch and began to fold away her sewing.

But both Aunt Sally, when she came and heard the news, and the little girl asked:

"Why do you put it away, mother, dear? If Pedro is happy now, as we believe, why shouldn't we be, too? All the rest must have their holiday, and I think--I think he'd like to have me look nice. He always did."

"Jessie is right, Gabriell'. Things do happen terrible upsettin' lately, seems to me; but by the time you and me get to be a hundred odd, I reckon we shan't care a mite whether folks wear red and white dresses or horrid humbly ones. I'm goin' on just the same as ever, for that's the only way I'll ever keep my common senses in this spooky place. I knew when they two started off, left hoof foremost, they was ridin', to trouble; and this morning my hen chicken crowed to beat any rooster I ever heard, and that's a sure sign of death."

"Aunt Sally, don't!" protested Mrs. Trent, glancing anxiously at her daughter's face. But she need not have feared; for the child smiled back upon her, serene and happy, despite the traces of tears that still marked her bright eyes.

"It's all right, mother, dear; and I'm thinking how glad Pedro must be now, to have found all those he'd so long outlived. He just went to sleep, you see, alone, and waked up with them around him. I think it was beautiful--beautiful; and his last deed was to find me and to tell you how you could grow rich if you want to. Where are the little boys, I wonder?"

They presently appeared, in wild excitement, having been at the men's quarters when John rode thither to impart his news and directions; yet in this excitement was not a vestige of grief. They seemed to feel relieved of some dread, and Ned more than once punched Luis, whispering shrilly enough for all to hear:

"We can do it now, and not get caught! Yes, siree! We can do it now! Don't you tell!"

And Luis responded by an ecstatic hug and the customary echo:

"Do it now; don't you tell! Yes, siree!"

John Benton had nearly covered the distance to Marion, when he perceived two men slowly advancing toward him along the level road. For a moment, engrossed by thoughts of recent happenings, he paid slight attention to the fact, though idly wondering what strangers might be having business, and on foot, with Sobrante, at which point the road ended. But, as he drew nearer to them, something familiar in the bearing of the taller man, and startling in the appearance of the other, caused him to shield his eyes from the sunshine and peer critically into the distance. Then he slapped his thigh so excitedly that his horse suddenly stopped, reared and nearly unseated him.

"Oh, you idiot! Can't a feller slap himself without your takin' it to heart? If I ain't a blind man, and maybe I am, that's old 'Forty-niner' hoofing himself home, and---Whew! That's Marty, limpin' and leanin' alongside. Well, I 'low! More trouble and plenty of it. Seems if all creation was just a-happenin' our way, blamed if it don't. Giddap there, Moses!"

In a few minutes he had reached the pedestrians and saluted them with unfeigned astonishment, and Ephraim with great friendliness of expression, but also the question:

"What fresh calamities you two fetchin', now?"

They told him, as briefly as possible, and he found his own perplexity increased as he demanded:

"What in creation is to be done? Here's Pedro gone and died in the most unhandy place and time; and here be you two, with not a decent leg between you, twenty miles from home, and one horse for the three of us!"

At the word "horse" poor Marty winced, as from a personal blow, while both he and Ephraim were greatly amazed at the news of the shepherd's death. They began to feel, as John had said, that "nothing save disaster was meant for Sobrante folks;" yet, after a moment, "Forty-niner" perceived another side of the matter, and expressed himself thus:

"What's got into the pack of us? Seems if we'd lost our gumption. After all, couldn't anything have happened likelier, so far forth as I see. John Benton, you light off Moses and help this man into your saddle. He'll ride home and I'll walk alongside, whilst you tramp on to Marion. There's a mare there, named Jean. She was offered to me, but I was in a hurry and didn't accept. However, the offer is due to hold good for any of our folks. Light, I tell you. Marty's about played out."

Indeed, the respite came none too soon. The worst injury the gardener had sustained was, apparently, of the head, and a terrible dizziness rendered his progress on foot almost impossible. He would not have been able to accomplish this much of the journey, save for the continual help of Ephraim, who was himself burdened with the heavy pack and unwilling to relinquish it.

John stepped down and swung his fellow ranchman up to Moses' back; then placed the bundle before the rider, turned the animal's head toward Sobrante, and chirruped:

"Giddap! Home's the word!"

Moses needed no second urging, but was off at a gallop, leaving the others to discuss the situation a bit further, and Ephraim to follow at his leisure.

There was little more to be said, however, and soon each was pursuing diverging routes and each at his swiftest pace.

At Marion, John had the mail pouch unlocked and examined, and was satisfied that some letters had been tampered with. These contained orders for house supplies and had been accompanied by checks, as was evident from the wording of the orders. The checks had been removed, and this fact proved to the carpenter that the hand of Antonio Bernal was in the matter, because the late manager might indorse them without arousing the bank's suspicion, as nobody else could.

Yet there was one thing he did not mention, even to the postmaster; and that was the package which Jessica's letter to Ninian Sharp had spoken of. This had disappeared entirely. The fact troubled him more than the loss of the checks, for he could stop the payment of these, but whether the little captain had sent the whole of their only specimen of the copper to her city friend or not was a serious question.

However, he did what he could; and almost for the first time in his life used the telegraph as well as the post. To pay for his long and rather ambiguous messages he borrowed money of the mystified Aleck McLeod; and the local operator found himself busier than he had ever been since the establishment of the office.

The other sad business that had brought him to the town was also transacted; and by the time all was arranged John was very glad to avail himself of Jean's services, slow though she was. Upon her sedate back he arrived at Sobrante, just as the sun was setting, and found that the household had temporarily forgotten their grief for Pedro in their rejoicing over Ephraim.

"It's an up and a down in this world," quoth Aunt Sally, spreading and admiring the brilliant bits of calico which "Forty-niner" had given her. "Life ain't all catnip anyway you stew it. Them that laugh in the morning gen'ally cry before night, and vicy-versy. But, Gabriella, do, for goodness' sake, just fetch out that queer kind of stick that old Indian made a sort of graven image of and show it to Mr. Ma'sh. It's a curiosity, being so old, if it ain't no more. Worth cherishin', anyhow, 'count of him that give it. I always did admire keepsakes of the departed."

Mrs. Trent smiled, though sadly, and Jessica asked:

"May I get it, mother?"

"Surely. For safety I put it on the top of the tallest bookcase, behind the files of newspapers. You'll likely have to take the little library ladder to reach it; and when you've shown it, put it back in exactly the same spot. It's doubly valuable now, and could not be replaced."

The little captain had scarcely once relinquished the hand of her beloved sharpshooter, since he appeared before them all, and now led him, as if he were another happy playmate, to the designated place. But when she had reached it, mounted the ladder and carefully felt all over the top of the case, even moving the files in order to examine it the better, she could not find the metal-pointed staff.

Standing on the floor beneath, Ephraim watched her face growing sober and disappointed, as she exclaimed:

"It's gone! It's completely gone!"

"It has, dearie? Well, maybe your mother forgot and put it somewhere else. The likeliest thing in the world to happen, with her mind so upset as it has been. We'll go back and ask her. Don't fret. Probably it wasn't of much account, anyway."

"Oh! but, dear Ephraim, it was! It could point the way to our big fortune that's to be dug out of the ground!"

"What? What is that you say, child? Nonsense. We don't live in the days of witchcraft, and that's what such a performance would mean."

Yet when they had returned to Mrs. Trent and related their misadventure he was startled by hearing that sensible woman tragically exclaim, in contradiction to his own assertion:

"Lost! Then Sobrante is certainly bewitched!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE REBELLION OF THE LADS

"Thank my stars, I haven't lost my faculty of doing two things to once, nor seein' a dozen!" cried Aunt Sally, as if in response to Mrs. Trent's exclamation. Then she rose so hastily that her beloved "pieces" fell on the floor and her spectacles slid from the end of her nose, their habitual resting place. "There never was witches on this ranch before, and I reckon I can deal with a few of them that's here now. Edward Trent, Luis Garcia! Where you goin' at? Hey? Hear me? Come right straight back to me this minute, if you know what's good for yourselves!"

All were surprised by this outburst and awaited its result with curiosity.

The two little boys had been suspiciously quiet on the farther end of that long porch where the household practically lived. Mrs. Trent had glanced their way, occasionally, but supposed them to be engrossed by the patent whistle and top which had been found in Ephraim's pack, neatly marked with their respective names. Yet one could not eat tops nor whistles, and their elbows had been seen, from the rear, to move in a suggestive manner.

"They're eatin' somethin' all this time. I wonder what!" had been Mrs. Benton's private reflection. But when Jessica came back with her report of the lost wand, the elbow action had suddenly ceased; and, after what appeared to be a brief whispered consultation, they had slunk away down the path, Ned trying to help Luis hide something within his blouse, though not, apparently, succeeding.

At the sound of Aunt Sally's voice, indeed, they dropped the box they had been secreting and burst into a paroxysm of giggling, as was their customary receipt of her chiding. The giggle was always destined to end in tears, but this never prevented its recurrence.

"Neddy Trent! If that bad little Garcia boy is doing wrong, it's no need you should be naughty, too. Come back here and show poor auntie what you've got in your blouses."

Wheedling had no more effect than scolding, for with one hug of each other's necks, the children scampered onward, leaving their spoils behind them.

Then Jessica followed to see what this might be, and exclaimed, in some surprise:

"Candy! Where did it come from?"

Now, it happened that such sweets, except of homemade manufacture and on rare occasions, were forbidden the lads, because they were always made ill by them. That is, Luis suffered and Ned was not allowed anything his playmate could not share. All the ranchmen knew Mrs. Trent's wishes on the subject and heretofore none had ever gone against them. Who had done it now?

Of course, suspicion instantly pointed to "Forty-niner," who indignantly denied that he had brought, or even thought of bringing, anything home which his beloved mistress did not wish there.

"Doesn't anybody trust me any more about anything?" he concluded, wistfully.

The accusation had come from Mrs. Benton, but Gabriella hastened to soothe the sharpshooter, saying:

"We're making mountains out of mole hills, I fear. There, Aunt Sally, never mind. They have left so much behind them on the path that they can hardly have eaten enough to harm them, anyway. Let them go, please."

But the good woman would not drop the subject. Her sharp eyes had not been given her for nothing, and her son always asserted that if his mother had been a man she would have made a first-class detective. Panting and puffing in her haste and curiosity, she hurried to the spilled confections and carefully picked them up; then returned to the porch, significantly holding forth, upon her palm, a specimen of what she had discovered.

"Needn't tell me I didn't smell peppymint! Them's them peppymint rounds with chocolate outsides that I never seen nobody eat, on this ranch, 'cept Antonio Bernal. They ain't kept in the store to Marion, and the storekeeper used to send for 'em to Los Angeles, 'specially for his one customer. I know, Antonio offered me some, time and again, on my other visits, but I always thanked him polite and said no. I never did lay out to eat a snake's victuals, and that's what his'n was."

"Oh, what a woman you are, Aunt Sally!" laughed Ephraim.

"Thank you. I hope I be; enough of one, anyhow, to see through a millstone, when there's a hole in it. But you've come back so peart and sassy, sharpshooter, I reckon I best go steep you a fresh dose of picra. After I've learnt all them tackers can tell."

"Please, don't be stern with them, Aunt Sally," protested the mother. "Whatever they've done is but natural. It would be too much to expect them to refuse such a treat if it were offered them, and, maybe, John brought it to them."

"John? My boy, John? After the raisin' he had! Well, you're on the wrong track there and I'm on the right one. Antonio Bernal, or some feller sneak of his, has been here at Sobrante, and you needn't touch to tell me he hasn't. Wait; I'll find out now!" she ended, in triumph, and again the others were obliged to laugh, though Mrs. Trent's brief mirth closed with a sigh, which Jessica heard and understood.

"Oh! don't you fear, mother, dear. Aunt Sally wouldn't hurt either of them, really; and, indeed, I don't know who would keep them in order if she didn't try. What mischief one can't think of the other does, and I'll run after her and see the thing out. Who knows but that they can tell us something about the missing staff?"

The runaways had made a detour by way of the kitchen, and adjoining the kitchen was the "cold closet," which was the refuge they sought, and where already were stored some of the Christmas goodies. This closet had but one door and a securely shuttered window, and once the door was gained by the pursuer she would have the small miscreants in a trap. This she had seen and this it was which had given her that triumphant expression.

The captain also gained the pantry door just after it had closed behind Mrs. Benton and her prisoners, and to her repeated request to be admitted, received the enigmatical answer:

"Time enough when I've pumped these little cisterns dry."

"Are the children in there with you?"

"Certain."

"You won't hurt them, will you? Please don't punish them to-day. I can't bear it."

To which the grim jailer responded:

"You go along back to 'Forty-niner,' Jessie darlin, and be happy. We're all mighty comfortable in here and lots of good victuals, if so be we get hungry. Plenty to drink, too, for I just brought in a crock of fresh water to cool my eggs in. I've got my knittin' work and am as happy as an oyster. Go back, for I ain't ready to talk yet. When I am I'll come out and bring these naughty children with me."

So Jessica returned to her old friend's side; and in listening to his talk about the hospital and the friends she had made there for herself, as well as about Mr. Ninian Sharp and the lawyer, Morris Hale, the evening quickly passed and bedtime came.

When the ranch mistress rose to say good-night, she went to the still closed door of the closet, and asked:

"Aren't you coming out now, Aunt Sally?"

The old lady opened the door and pointed complacently to a distant corner of the roomy apartment where, upon a pile of soft blankets that had been stored within, lay the two little boys, sound asleep and the picture of innocent comfort.

"There, Gabriella, you see they're all right. I wouldn't hurt a hair of their bonny heads, not for another ranch as fine as this one. But here them and me stay till I worm the truth out of 'em about that candy and that magic staff. Where that candy come from that there staff has gone. You hear me and believe me. Oh, I know what I know! Good-night. Don't you worry. Me and them is all right, as I said, and my head's level. I went to sleep a-watchin' t'other time, but I shan't this. There's more in my mind than nonsense. This chair is as comfortable as a lounge. I slipped out and got it from the settin'-room when you all was talkin' so lively, just now, and we're fixed. I may come out before daylight and I may stay till doomsday; but come I shan't a single step, not to please even you for whom I'd do and dare a good deal, and don't you doubt it, but when my mind is sot it's sot, and sot it is this minute, an don't you dast to let on to John Benton, or that sassy boy'd plague the very life out of me, and you go right along to your own bed and take Jessie with you, and---

But Mrs. Trent stayed to hear no more. When Aunt Sally got started on such a harangue as this, exhaustion of breath was her only limit. The lady did not anticipate more than an hour's further imprisonment of the children, if so long, and was sure that they would be even tenderly cared for, no matter what their misdemeanors, if she did not herself interfere. Yet daylight came and found the odd trio still behind that closed door, and it opened only at breakfast time; when, leading two very penitent-looking small boys and herself wearing the air of a Roman conqueror, Mrs. Benton emerged from her seclusion upon an expectant household.

"Well, Aunt Sally, haven't you 'wormed' them, as you promised? Poor little tackers! they've lost their pride and spirit, and I love them. Come to sister, darlings, and get your morning hugs!" cried Jessica, as they appeared. Ephraim, close at hand, winked at them solemnly and held up behind Mrs. Benton's back two most alluring marbles. But they did not wink in response, nor give more than a furtive smile, as they reluctantly dragged along under their guardian's forcible guidance. Her route was direct to the watering trough where, without ado, she promptly stripped, bathed and rubbed dry, each shivering little figure. Then she re clothed and led them

back to the kitchen, placing them in high chairs beside the big deal table, while she proceeded to cook their oatmeal and serve it to them, with a bad-as-you-are-you-shan't-starve sort of air which would have amused Jessica, had she not so heartily pitied her playmates.

After a time she could endure the sight no longer, but sped to Ned's chair and clasped him fondly in her arms.

"What is the matter, brotherkin? Tell sister, do. Is it nothing but that miserable candy? What else have you done to make auntie so angry with you?"

Ned's bosom heaved and a mighty sob burst forth. But he instantly repressed this sign of weakness, though unfortunately, not soon enough to prevent Luis from echoing it with redoubled intensity.

Now nothing so quickly restores the self-possession, even of grown-ups, as the sight of another's collapse; and no sooner had Luis given vent to his emotion than Ned's spirit returned to him. Throwing back his pretty head, with an air of unconquerable resolution, he reached forth and pounded his mate smartly on the back.

"You, Luis Garcia, what you crying for? Isn't none of your staffs, anyway."

"Ain't my old staffs, ain't," sobbed the "echo," for such he was often nicknamed.

"Then you needn't cry, you needn't. I ain't crying, I ain't. Hate old Aunt Sally. Hate 'Tonio. Hate Ferd. Hate everybody. Give me my breakfast, old Aunt Sally Benton!"

"Hate Bentons!" agreed Luis, and flung his arms about his little tyrant's throat till he choked from outward expression whatever more might have issued thence.

"Ned! Why, Ned! I never, never knew you so naughty! Do tell me; what has happened?"

Mrs. Benton glared at the culprit over her down-dropped spectacles in a truly formidable manner, but the result was only a settled stubbornness which nothing moved.

Seeing that pleading was hopeless, at present, and that Ned was in one of his dogged fits, Jessica quietly walked away and began to help in the preparation of the elder people's meal, as her mother liked to have her do.

Meanwhile, Aunt Sally waited upon the children, piling their saucers with the tasty porridge, moistened with Blandina's yellow cream and plentifully sprinkled with sugar. They were healthy and unused to grief, and the palatable food soon restored their good humor. They seemed to forgive their venerable tormentor and fell to their accustomed scrimmage with the utmost enjoyment; and this was pleasanter for all concerned. However, even when they had eaten all they could and were ready for outdoors and their morning fun, their plans were nipped in the bud. Aunt Sally had a spare hand for each of them and conducted them firmly to the dining room and a place upon its lounge, while the family took their own food in what comfort they could.

This was not so great Mrs. Trent's eyes would wander to the unhappy pair--for they were once more gloomy and unsubdued--and old Ephraim cast many glances thither, entreating by silent signals that they should repent of whatever sin they had committed and be restored to favor.

The meal past the family rose and, from her pocket, Mrs. Benton produced two long strips of cloth, one of which she fastened about each child's wrist, leaving its other end to tie to her own apron belt.

Then she turned to the mother, whose tears were beginning to fall, and said, severely:

"Gabriella, if I didn't love you as well as I love myself and better, I'd let these children go and no more said. But they've done that no punishin' won't reach, though maybe they'll give in after a spell. I shan't hurt 'em nor touch to; but I shall keep 'em tied to me till they tell me what I'm bound to know. So that's all. You've got enough on your hands, with this funeral business and all that'll come, and however we're goin' to feed another lot of visitors so soon after them others, I declare I don't see. And me with these tackers tied to my apron strings, the way they be!"

Mrs. Trent rose and left the room and Jessica slowly followed. Neither of them could quite understand Aunt Sally's present behavior, nor why she should wish to bother herself with two such hindrances to the labor which must be accomplished.

But Ephraim lingered. He simply could not endure the sight of the little ones' unhappiness, and quietly slipping a knife from his pocket he coolly cut their leading strings, caught them up in his strong arms and limped away before their captor had discovered her loss.

But he put his head back inside the doorway to call out, reassuringly:

"Begging pardon, Mrs. Benton, I'll 'spell' you on the 'worming out' business and promise they shan't leave my care till I hand 'em back to you thoroughly 'pumped.' Come along, laddies. I've a mind to visit every spot on this blessed ranch and--upon one condition--I've a mind to take you with me. Want to hear?"

"Yes. What is it?" demanded Ned, already very happy at the exchange of jailers.

"Only that you must explain what all this row and rumpus is about with Aunt Sally."

Standing at the top of the steps, with one foot outstretched, old "Forty-niner" paused and steadily regarded the small face above his shoulder.

Ned returned the gaze with equal steadfastness, as if he were pondering in his troubled mind

the best course to pursue. Then, because he might think more clearly so, he lifted his serious gaze to the distance; and, at once, there burst from his quivering lips a cry of fear:

"Oh, I see him! I see him! He's coming, like he said--to kill me--to kill me! I dassent--I dassent!"

CHAPTER XIII.

NED'S STORY

"Eels couldn't have done that slicker!" commented Ephraim, in surprise. For, behold! his arms were empty and the flash of twinkling legs along the garden path pointed whither his charges had fled. "Here they were and here they aren't, and whatever scared them that way is more than I can see."

Indeed, though he shaded his eyes with his hand and made a prolonged examination of the outlook, nothing different from ordinary was visible; and, after a moment's reflection, he sought Aunt Sally and reported:

"Well, Mrs. Benton, I 'low I'm doomed to that dose of picra, for I--I--- You see---"

"Ephraim Ma'sh, where's them children?"

"That's just exactly what I'd like to know myself, neighbor."

"Huh! You needn't go 'neighborin' me, if that's all you're worth. Tryin' fool capers like a boy, ain't you? Think it was terr'ble clever to cut strings that I'd took the trouble to tie and then settin' them youngsters free. Well, all I have to say is that you've done more harm than you can undo in a hurry, and that's the true word," retorted the indignant matron, beating a bowlful of eggs as she would have enjoyed beating him just then.

Ephraim crossed the kitchen and laid one hand on her shoulder, saying:

"Come, Sally, let's quit chasing about the bush. There's something more in this nonsense than appears, and if you're a true and loyal friend to this family I'm another as good. Two heads are better than one, you know---"

"Even if one belongs to a silly old feller like you? H'm Ephraim, you're right! There is somethin' more'n shows outside. That candy was a bait, a trap, a lure, a--anything you choose; and I do hope the little fellers are safer'n I fear they be. If I catch 'em again, for their good---My suz! Here they're comin' back of their own free will and wonder ain't ceased!"

Indeed, as swiftly as they had scampered away, the lads were returning and burst into the kitchen, crying with what little breath they had left:

"Aunt Sally, lock me up! Lock us up tight! Quick--quick! I seen him! He'll do it! My mother says Antonio always does do things, he does! Quick, quick!"

"Lock up, quick!"

Ned and the echo swung round behind the matron's capacious person and rolled themselves in the folds of her full skirt, which performance hid them from the view of anyone outside and as effectually interfered with her movements.

But she had now caught something of their excitement, and their appeal to her protection had promptly banished her last trace of anger against them.

"So I will, lambies, so I will. You just keep on a steppin' backwards and I'll do it, too, and first we know we'll get to that nice pantry where we stayed last night. I've got the key to that, even if 'tis rusty from not bein' often used, and I'll defy anybody to get it away from me."

Still beating her eggs as if nothing uncommon were happening, the housewife retreated toward the door in question, and slipping one hand behind her opened it without turning her head. She was instantly relieved of the drag upon her skirts, and quietly shut the door again upon her self-imprisoned charges. Then she drew a long breath, and exclaimed:

"Well, sharpshooter, what do you think of that?"

"Looks as if you couldn't have been so very hard on them, else they'd never come back."

"I ain't a-flatterin' myself. That was a 'Hobson's choice.' But---"

"But they must have been badly frightened to have done it."

"Yes, Ephraim, they are, and I am. I'm so stirred up I don't know whether I've beat these eggs all one way, like I ought, or forty-'leven different ones, like I ought not. I'm flustered. I'm completely flustered, and that ain't often my case."

"Picra!" sympathetically suggested the old man.

Aunt Sally's eyes snapped, and she smiled grimly, as she retorted:

"Picra's good for them 'at need it. That's you, not me. It ain't a medicine for in'ards so much as 'tis for out'ards. I mean, it's better for the body than 'tis for the mind, and it's my mind that's ailin' me! Besides, doctors never take their own doses."

"You know it yourself! I thought your mind was failing you, but---"

"No such thing. I said, or I meant to say, I was troubled in it. That's all; and if you're a mite of a man you'll try and help me unravel this tangle and quit foolin'. Just step into that closet with me and maybe the tackers'll tell you themselves. I'd rather you heard it first hand, anyway."

Wun Lung, sifting flour in one part of the kitchen, and Pasqual scrubbing a kneading board at the sink, both paused and eyed the strange proceedings with curiosity if not displeasure; for not only had the children been bestowed within the "cold closet," but Aunt Sally and Ephraim had, also, followed and locked themselves out of sight and hearing.

The pantry was absolutely dark, until Mrs. Benton found a candle and lighted it; then she pointed to the chair she had occupied during the night, mutely inviting "Forty-niner" to be seated. He declined the proffered courtesy, so she sat down herself, and it amused him that she had not once stopped that monotonous whisking of the eggs, though by this time the dish was heaped with their frothy substance.

"The cake you make of them should be light enough," he remarked, with a smile.

"You're right. There's such a thing as overbeatin'--everything. Well, laddies, we're all back in here together again, and auntie wants you to tell Mr. Ma'sh where you got that candy; who give it to you; what for; where you saw that sneaky snake, Antonio Bernal; what you've done with the staff wand; and all the rest of it? 'Forty-niner' is a man and a gentleman---"

"Here the sharpshooter bowed profoundly, acknowledging the compliment with a humorous expression; but the matron continued as if she had not observed him:

"You see, I know all about it, even if you wouldn't tell. I'm one has eyes on the back of my head and on its top, too, I tell you, so you needn't try to think I don't see what's going on, for I do."

The faces of her small listeners showed utter amazement; then with one of his flashlike movements Ned sprang to the back of her chair and passed his hand rapidly all over her gray curls.

"Where are they, Aunt Sally? I can't find 'em. I never saw 'em in all my life, and do--do, please, show them to me!" he implored.

Luis scrambled up the other side, and echoed:

"Never show 'em in m'life!"

"That's all right. I don't keep 'em in exhibition, but they're there all the same."

"Sally Benton!" expostulated Ephraim. "Don't tell them wrong stories."

"But it isn't a wrong story; it's a right one. If they're not real, actual eyes, there's something in my head takes their place. Might as well say 'eyes' as 'brains,' I judge. But, be you going to answer, Edward Trent? I've got a prime lot of cookin' to do again, and no time to waste. 'Cause if you ain't I'll just take Mr. Ma'sh with me and lock you shavers in here alone, where you'll be safe, but sort of homesick. I shan't leave no candle burnin', for you to set the house afire with. So you best tell, right away, and then be let out to have a good time."

Luis began to whisper, and beg:

"Tell her, Ned. Tell her. I hate the dark--I do, I do!"

Ned hesitated but a moment longer. He loved his playmate as his own soul, and it altered nothing of this childish David-and-Jonathan friendship that it was as full of fight as of affection. Patting Luis' shoulder, he cried:

"Course I'll tell, though if she knows it all a'ready---"

"But I don't know it, Ned. She wants you to tell me. I'm one of us, you see--just we four," interposed the sharpshooter, hastily.

"Well--well--well, 't isn't anyhow. Only I saw--I--saw---"

Here the child paused and peered cautiously about.

Mr. Marsh promptly sat down upon the boards and motioned the lads to come to him, and when they had done so, closed his arms around them, with a comforting pressure, saying:

"There now! We're as snug as bugs in a rug, and nobody in the wide world dare harm you. Hurry up and talk fast, or you and I will never get a taste of that fine poundcake Aunt Sally wants to make."

Another moment of hesitation, and then came Ned's triumphant statement:

"'Twasn't no ghost, anyhow."

"Of course it wasn't," answered "Forty-niner," promptly agreeing, but considerably puzzled. He had not, as yet, heard from any of the others about the "vision" which Mrs. Benton had seen beside the window.

"'Twasn't nobody but 'Tonio himself."

"That's exactly what I thought," he again agreed, and encouragingly patted the boy's hand.

"And he come--and he come--and he gave us one--two boxes of that nice, nice candy; and all we gave him was Pedro's old stick!"

Aunt Sally's egg beater fell to the floor unheeded, this time she really put her spectacles in their proper place and stared through them at the narrator.

Ned warmed to his task and Luis cuddled beside him, complacently adding his affirmative "Yep," at fitting intervals.

"And so he said it wasn't nothin'. And so--and so--I fell offen the bookcase and made a noise; and my mother didn't hear it 'cause she was asleep. Me and Luis was asleep, wasn't we, Luis?"

"Yep. Sleep."

"And he waked us up through the window---"

"Waked froo winder, yep."

"And said: 'Go get that pointed stick, Ned Trent, and I'll give you a dollar.' Didn't he?"

"Gimme dollar. Didn't gimme dollar. What's a dollar?" asked the echo.

Ned went on, unheeding:

"And I said no. 'Twasn't my stick; 'twas my mother's."

"Oh! Neddy, Neddy! if you'd only stuck to that!" groaned Mrs. Benton, wiping her face with her apron.

But being now fairly launched upon his narrative, and also feeling wholly secure within the shelter of "Forty-niner's" arms, Ned paused no more till he had completed it:

"And then he gave us the candy, 'cause I didn't want dollars. You can't eat dollars, can you? And the candy was like the kind my mother never gives, and just for an old stick was older than Pedro. Huh! And then he--he--he made me put my hand on the top of my head---"

"Hands on tops of heads!" cried the echo, dramatically.

"And swore a swore I'd never, never, honest Injun, tell a single tell, else he'd--he'd kill me! Kill me right straight down dead! And now I have and he will, and I forgot and you made me! I hate you, I hate you! And won't you feel bad when I'm all deaded and you you done it, 'stead of him--and--and---"

The sense of security had fled instantly, and completely. The memory of Antonio's dark face as he had stood threateningly before the little fellow, at midnight by the window, returned with all its vivid, terrorizing power. Springing to the farthest reach of the room Ned crouched there, wide-eyed and trembling, and, of course, Luis followed his example.

To "Forty-niner's" reassuring words, and to Mrs. Benton's cajoling ones, neither child paid any further heed. They had been trained to believe that their promised word was the most sacred of all things, and now they had not only been induced to break that, but to break it in the face of Antonio Bernal's terrible threat.

The elders left them to themselves and regarded one another with regretful eyes. Then Aunt Sally repeated in detail all that there was to tell concerning the curious wand which had pointed the way to wealth; and now Ephraim listened in vast respect. On the first recital, so hurriedly given by Jessica, and when she had run to get the staff, he had thought of the matter as one of the shepherd's "pious mummeries." It now assumed a graver aspect. The lost staff might possess some magnetic quality which was invaluable, as Old Century believed; but beyond all that was the uncomfortable reflection that Antonio Bernal was somewhere in hiding about Sobrante, and that doubtless it had been he, or his emissary, who had tampered with the mail pouch and caused Marty's disaster.

"Well, a man that hides must have somethin' to be ashamed of. And I believe every single word that child has told," said Aunt Sally, in conclusion of her long harangue.

"H'm! I thought that 'snake' had had his fang extracted down there at Los Angeles; but it seems he's the sort can grow a new one, when needed. Well, I'm powerful glad I'm home again. It takes a lot of honest men to keep watch of one thief, and I'll prove handy. I'm off. I leave the lads with you. I'm going to find out three things: How Ferd, the dwarf, managed to break jail that night and leave no sign; who robbed that mail pouch; and where Antonio Bernal is at this precious minute."

"Here, at your service, amigo!" cried a mocking voice, outside the shuttered window. A voice that all recognized at once as belonging to the late manager; yet, when Ephraim had hastily run out and around to that side of the house, there was nobody within sight; and nothing to be heard save the series of terrified shrieks which issued from the room he had left.

CHAPTER XIV.

TAKING THE DOCTOR'S ADVICE

For almost the first time in his life Ninian Sharp was under the doctor's hands; and that gentleman's verdict upon his patient's case was simple and plain:

"Nothing the matter with you but breakdown. The result of doing two men's work instead of one. What you need, and all you need, is a complete change of thought and scene. Go off on some ranch and take a vacation. That's your medicine."

"Thank you, doctor, but a prescription upon the nearest drug store would be easier to fill. In the first place I should worry all the time if I were idle, for 'hustling' has become my second nature. In the second--where shall I go?"

The physician shrugged his shoulders. He, also, was a busy man and having finished his visit to his patient did not prolong it. He picked up his hat, remarked that he "didn't doubt so clever a young man could find a fitting place, if he gave what was left of his mind to it," and bowed himself out, leaving the leaven of his sensible advice to accomplish its legitimate result.

As the doctor left the room the nurse entered, bearing with her a telegram which had been delayed en route, and a letter. It was with some reluctance that she delivered these to the man on the lounge, yet realizing, at the same time, how much worse for him was absolute cessation of all his ordinary interests. With a solicitous smile, she inquired:

"Would you not better let me read these first? They are probably unimportant."

"Thank you, no. I'm not yet reduced to imbecility and prefer to examine my own correspondence," returned the invalid, fretfully. Then as if ashamed of his petulance, and with a return to his ordinary manner, added: "This telegram might as well have walked. Would have saved time, judging by the date of it; and as for this letter--that, certainly, has seen better days."

The nurse smiled again, indulgently, and busied herself in tidying the apartment; an occupation which would have incensed Ninian, since her idea of neatness seemed to him to be but the "disarrangement" of the heaps of papers and manuscript sheets scattered everywhere about, had he not been otherwise interested. A hasty examination of the messages he had received evoked his exultant exclamation:

"Hurrah! The very thing!"

"Good news?" asked the attendant.

"The best in the world. The doctor's prescription, filled to the letter. A ranch and new business. Say, would you mind going out for a bit? I'd like to get into some other togs and in a hurry. If I can, I'll make the one o'clock train."

"The--one o'clock train!" gasped the bewildered nurse, believing that her charge's brain had given away, even as the physician had suggested it might do.

"Exactly. Please don't be alarmed. Some country friends of mine have invited me to visit them, and I judge they would be glad if I accepted at once. Their invitation fits in excellently with my own needs and, after I've dressed for the trip, I'd be grateful to you for packing a few things, while I write to the bank and telephone to some other places. Just touch that messenger call, will you, please?"

Certainly, he did not now look very like a sick man, as he sprang up and looked about him; save that he put his hand to his head because of a momentary dizziness and seemed somewhat unsteady on his feet. However, his eyes had lost their dullness and a faint color had come into his cheeks; and the attendant saw no reason for opposing his sudden determination.

The letter was Jessica's, and its envelope had been mended by the postmaster after he had taken it, torn, from the mail pouch. The telegram was from Ephraim Marsh, and had been sent by the first messenger to Marion after that scene in the pantry with Aunt Sally and the little boys. It had been delayed by the curiosity of the operator, but had reached Mr. Sharp at last; and its import was that:

"If you're willing to use your brains for Sobrante folks, as you used them once before, now's the time. There'll be a led horse at Marion till you come, and the sooner the better. 'Forty-niner.'"

"A led horse. Why, he must have forgotten, if he ever knew, that I've my own Nimrod here, that Mrs. Trent insisted upon my accepting, when I left Sobrante before. The horse must go with me, of course, and I flatter myself I can pick up a bit of instruction on riding among those fine 'boys' of the little captain's. I'll send a return message--no, I won't, either. I'll trust to luck and surprise them. Now to get ready."

A feeling that he was going "home" possessed the young man, and all his simple preparations strengthened rather than weakened him. Activity was his habit, and an hour before the train left the city he had completed his personal arrangements with his office, his bank and his landlord. He had paid his nurse the same salary she would have received had he required her services for the fortnight, as expected, and was ready for what came next.

"I feel as if I were entering upon a new life, instead of taking a rest cure," he remarked to Mr. Hale, when that gentleman met him at the station, and explained that a Christmas invitation had come for himself, also. "And I say we'll make it the jolliest holiday those people down there ever knew. I sent a letter to your address, after I 'phoned, and made out a list of things I'd like you to see to. Presents and so on; and I'll write as soon as I get there and let you know what's up with

the sharpshooter. Some trouble, of course, but reckon it can't be much. Ha! we're off. Good-by. Forget nothing, add as much as you please to my list and send the bills to me. Good-by."

The train rolled noiselessly away from the long platform, and the reporter for the Lancet stowed himself comfortably away on his cushions and slept as he had not slept before since this nervous illness attacked him. Not once did he awake, till the conductor touched him on the shoulder, and stated:

"End of the line, sir. Time to leave."

Ninian sat up and shook himself, still feeling a bit dazed from his heavy slumber, and had scarcely realized the fact of his arrival before a man limped into the car and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Well done, lad. Welcome to Sobrante!"

"Hello, Mr. Marsh! You here? Sobrante? I thought---"

"Same thing. This is Marion; as near as we can get to our place on the rails. Remember, don't you? Been sick, eh? You look rather peaked and I 'low I'd ought---"

"No apologies. Here I am, and am not ill now. Only been a little overworked; and your telegram, as well as Miss Jessica's letter, came in the nick of time. Not an hour after the doctor had ordered this very medicine of change and recreation."

Ephraim looked sharply at his guest and reflected:

"What our business needs is a clear head and a strong body, not an overtaxed man, as this 'pears to be. Well, sick or well, I hope he can see through some of our muddles, if not all; and half a loaf is better than no bread." Then he gathered the traveler's belongings, and remarked: "I told Aleck to have a good supper ready. It's a fine night and I thought we'd ride home afterwards. Unless---"

They left the car and Ninian answered the other's unspoken suggestion:

"No, I don't want to stay all night, good as Janet's beds are. I've had a delicious sleep and feel like another man from this morning. Hello! they've taken Nimrod out already, and evidently are waiting for orders. I declare, the handsome beast looks as if he recognized this place and was as glad to get back to it as I am."

Old "Forty-niner" left his guest's side and hurried to the spot where a trainman held the spirited animal, stroking its neck and speaking soothingly to it, to calm its excitement; and no sooner had the ranchman's hand supplanted the trainman's than Nimrod ceased to prance, and with a little final shiver, stood stock-still, uttering a low whinny of delight.

"That's the talk, you beauty! Welcome home, old boy! Well, well, well! if you ain't a sight to cure the headache! Yes, yes; it's all right. This is Marion. We've got to stop at Aleck's first. Remember Aleck? Remember Janet and her sugar? Well, well, well!"

Ninian approached, amazed and incredulous, inquiring:

"Think that creature knows what you're saying?"

"Forty-niner" turned upon the questioner indignantly.

"That's a fool sort of question for a smart man to ask! 'Think' he knows? No. There isn't any 'thinking' in this. I know he knows, and I know he's just as glad to set foot on his mother earth, here in Marion, as I was t'other day when I stepped off this same train--or its mate of the morning. I wish all the men in the world were half as brainy as he is. And I tell you what, stranger, you couldn't have done a thing would make your own welcome so sure as fetching Nimrod with you. If you'd left him behind some of us would have had our own opinion. Though I, for one, didn't know he was yours till this very morning."

"And the led horse you spoke about?"

Ephraim looked up, surprised, answering, rather crisply:

"At home. Why not? When I heard about Nimrod I wasn't silly enough to bring another."

"So if I hadn't brought him we'd been short a mount?" insisted the reporter, teasingly.

"One of us would had to foot it to the ranch, and that one wouldn't have been me. Huh! Does me good to hear your nonsense gabble again. I declare it does. When did you get my telegraph?"

"This morning."

"This--morning! Why, I sent it day before yesterday, no, the day before that. Let me see; to-day's one, yesterday--the funeral, two--the one--yes, three days ago. John Benton himself gave it into the telegraph man's hands. Himself."

They mounted and started toward McLeod's Inn, Ninian doing very well, considering the impatience of his steed and his own limited experience of the saddle, and the sharpshooter sitting as composedly upon the back of as restless an animal as could readily be found. It was a bay, and pranced and curveted to the extent that Nimrod seemed a door-mouse beside it, and Ninian finally observed:

"That's an undecided sort of beast you have, yourself. Seems to be as much inclined to go backward as forward."

"Hale's. Name Prince. Was on the mesa with Pedro till he died."

"Pedro dead? I'm sorry. Was it his 'funeral' you meant?"

"Yes. Terrible pity he couldn't have held on till Christmas, his Navidad, that always meant so much to him. But he couldn't. Things have changed at Sobrante since you was here. I'm glad you've come. I'm powerful glad you've come."

"Any new trouble, Ephraim?"

"H'm! I should say. Ghosts, the women think, and scamps for certain. But it's a long story, and here we are at Aleck's. We mustn't spoil that good supper of his and talk will keep. We've thirty miles 'twixt us and bed, 'less you change your mind and stop here, and that should give time enough to turn a man's mind inside out."

"Were you so certain of my coming that you ordered a special supper, without hearing?"

"Sure. I took you to be a man and I put myself in your place. In your place I should have come if I could; and if I couldn't I should have sent word. Light."

Aleck came out to meet them, and Janet followed, of course. Where one of that worthy couple was the other was sure to be; and both extended to the city man such welcome as made him more impressed than ever by that "home feeling" which had possessed him all day. He returned their good wishes with heartiness and did full justice to his supper, adding as a thankful tribute to Janet's fine cookery:

"That's the first thing has passed my lips that hadn't the flavor of ashes, since many a day. The doctor was right."

"Glad to hear any doctor ever could be right," returned the innkeeper, who had never been ill, and attributed his health to his distrust of physicians. "Fresh air, wholesome food and a clear conscience--them's to long life what the three R's are to 'rithmetic. Powerful sorry you can't pass the night. I'd admire to talk over the political situation with an intelligent man."

The side glance toward himself with which the Scotchman said this sent Ephraim off into a mighty guffaw, in which presently they all joined; and in the midst of the merriment a stable boy led up the horses, and the Sobrante-bound riders loped away. Yet, just before they were out of hearing, Aleck's stentorian voice sent after them the warning advice:

"Keep a sharp lookout, by, and your hands on your guns. That spook's hit the trail again! Watch out!"

Ninian laughed, and "Forty-niner" tried to do so, but the most he could accomplish was a feeble cackle, which, his companion fancied, betrayed his age as nothing heretofore had done. It was a nervous, irritated laugh, and was matched by the altered voice in which its owner presently remarked:

"If I can't stop this fool business any other way, I've a notion to ride round the country and shoot right and left, everybody I see, promiscuous. That's the sure and certain way to hit the spook, too."

"Heigho! This grows exciting! Spooks? Mysteries? Mail robberies! What next?"

There was no answer from the sharpshooter, who had gotten his horse into a steady trot and was putting the road behind him in a manner that needed all Ninian's efforts to match. If Nimrod had been as little used to the trail as his rider was to him the space between the two animals would have widened irretrievably; but he was the better bred of the two, and though he didn't waste his strength in a first spurt, as Prince did, he fell into a steady, easy gait, that soon told to his advantage.

It was one of the perfect moonlight nights which come in that cloudless region, when one can easily "read fine print," if so inclined, or see across country almost as well as in the day. The swift motion, the exhilarating air, the sense of freedom from city walls and cramped spaces, started the reporter into singing, and later into the silence of wonder over the astonishing power of his own voice.

"Hurrah! If that's my warble I never heard it before! It's a marvelous atmosphere that makes a rag time tune sound like a nightingale's music. If 'Forty-niner' would join it---Hello! what's up? What in--the name--of--all things!"

CHAPTER XV.

NINIAN'S GREETING

Suddenly, out of the moonlit distance before them, appeared a strange vision. A horse and his rider, as spotlessly white and gleaming as the snow on the distant mountaintops, moving toward them as swift as the wind and in supernatural silence. The eyes of the steed and its master glowed with a wicked light that startled both the old frontiersman and the modern scribe, and set Prince and Nimrod into paroxysms of terror.

Rearing, plunging and backing, Ninian's mount had him soon on the ground; and though Ephraim stuck to his saddle like a burr; he could not hold his horse and get at his revolver in that one instant of the appearance and disappearance of this strange "specter." It was coming--it was upon them--it was gone; and the blast of cold air with which it passed them set the horses shivering in an ague of fear, and tied the men's tongues.

It seemed an age that they halted there in the open solitude, silently stroking and soothing their frightened beasts, before either could speak. Then "Forty-niner" found his voice and burst forth, absurdly:

"Drat--that--pocket!"

Ninian laughed; nervously, almost hysterically at first; then with honest merriment, exclaiming:

"Oh, what a chance was lost there, comrade!"

"Whoa, boy, whoa, I tell you! There, there, steady now. Well, you needn't throw it in my teeth if it was!" retorted the sharpshooter, furiously. "Hang new pants!"

Ninian rolled on the ground and laughed afresh; then feebly observed: "That's what I generally do with mine. But pockets! What of them?"

"Huh! it's all very well for you to lie there and snicker. I lost the chance of my life that time. What's the use of a repertation for hittin' a pin at the distance I have if you can't hit a fool when he's close alongside?"

"Referring to me?" asked the reporter, sweetly.

"Yes, if the coat fits. Drat that pocket!"

"Poor pocket! Who made it?"

"That pesky Sally Benton. The one was in burst right through, and she sewed this one so tight at the top---Huh! I believe she done it a-purpose."

"To be sure she did. If I remember correctly that estimable woman was opposed to bloodshed and preferred corporal punishment. I suppose she feared you might do what you attempted to do and---"

"Shut up your shallow talk, young man!" ordered Ephraim, with so much venom that the other realized his mirth was ill-timed and grew serious.

"What was the thing, anyway, Marsh?"

"That's more than I know, but just what I would have known if I'd hit it with a bullet. That's the 'spook' Aleck warned us of. It's been kitin' round the country ever since that first night after Pedro died. Some say it's the ghost. It 'pears to be wrapped in a white blanket and wears it same as he did. He had a white horse once that had outlived all the horses ever was, I reckon; and the Simple Simons all about us claim that it's the Indian's spirit on the Indian's horse, a-ridin' round 'count of some trouble why he can't rest. There was a letter thrown into our settin' room night before last, in poor printing enough, too; and it said that Pedro had been banished from the happy hunting grounds on account of a secret he'd told; and a warning everybody not to touch to try and find the place the secret told about. It scared the mistress pretty bad, though she didn't let on much. The captain laughed, of course. She always laughs at everything; and Mrs. Benton--well, she just pinned the paper in her bosom, and says she: 'I'll know where that is when it's needed.' She's some sense, Sally has, though nothing to boast of, and she's a mighty good sewer of patchwork, though she's no good at pistol pockets. Well, shall we go on?"

Ninian had remounted his horse, which still was restless and ill to manage, and Prince was capering about in a fantastic fashion that, however, was not greatly different from his behavior earlier in the evening; and the reporter had satisfied himself that there was nothing now to be seen of the apparition which had flashed upon them and disappeared on the road back to Marion.

"Yes, let's go on. And I hope the least that will happen will be the arrival of that 'spook' at Aleck McLeod's cheerful inn. I'd give much to see his face if it did appear."

"Oh! it's been there already; last night. The kitchen window was raised so softly none but Janet could have heard it, and before she could get to it, a white, skinny hand came through and snatched up a quail pie she'd baked for breakfast and off sooner'n she could catch it. She was so mad about the pie that, for a minute, she forgot to be scared; then it came over her that she'd been cookin' ghost's victuals, and she shivered all the rest the night. She wouldn't ever let Aleck far out of sight, she's so fond of him, but now he can't stir three foot away. Every man I met has something fresh to tell of how his women folks have been worried by the thing; and if somebody doesn't settle his spookship mighty sudden, we'll have all the females in hysterics; and something we've never needed in this valley yet, and that's a doctor. There won't be a nerve left anywhere."

Ninian laughed again; adding, a moment later: "Not just the sort of place to send a nervous-prostration patient, is it, after all? But what's your own speculation concerning the nuisance?"

"Let me tell you the whole business, so far forth as I've heerd it since I came home. Then you can form your own mind on it and see how best to help my folks out their troubles; 'cause I ain't trying to hide that was my reason for wanting you to come. You'd helped us so much with the title affair I knew you'd unravel this skein. But I'm powerful glad to see you, all the same, and I do hope you'll get as much good for yourself out the visit as I want the mistress to get."

The horses were now somewhat quieted by a long stretch of the level road, over which they had been allowed to travel at their own pace, and talking was easier. Ephraim gave in detail the story of Pedro's visit and gift of the wand; of the many strange incidents of the last few days; of Ned's serious illness, caused by fright, Aunt Sally declared, but, as his mother thought, by too much rich food and an overdose of candy; and how, though he had repeatedly been heard about the premises, nobody had as yet actually seen Antonio Bernal. However, at present, little was thought of but the suffering children; for Luis had remained true to his character of "echo" and had himself, that very day, been put to bed with the same high fever which was tormenting Ned.

"You see, though it's getting Christmas time and everything ought to be lovely, we're about as badly off as a family can be. All the same, if anybody in this world can cheer the mistress it'll be yourself, Mr. Sharp, and I'm powerful glad you've come."

For the rest of the ride they were mostly silent; each man revolving in his mind the most plausible explanation of Antonio's behavior, in his would-be mysterious hiding, and his terrorizing of the little lads.

Finally, Ninian expressed his own opinion:

"It's perfectly natural he should drift back to Sobrante, even with all the opprobrium that would attach to him there. It is his home. He believed or pretended to believe, that it was also his birthright. He knows nothing that would bring him a livelihood in the city---"

"Except gambling," interrupted Ephraim, contemptuously.

"If he tried his hand at that even, he'd fail. He hasn't the head to plot deeply. His maneuvers are all childishly transparent, and this last one--h'm! Have you connected his 'highness' with this spook business?"

"No, sir; and you needn't. That Antonio Bernal is the biggest coward above ground. Why, bless me! even if he'd had gumption enough to concoct such a scheme he wouldn't have the nerve to carry it out. He'd be afraid of himself! Fact! No, siree. Top-lofty never had a hand in this," answered the elder man.

Ninian said no more but kept his suspicions revolving in his own mind; yet was far more absorbed in the possibility that "Forty-niner" had suggested, of the copper vein in the canyon, than by anything else he had heard. They had ridden on again, each silent, till the lights of Sobrante came into view; then Ephraim remarked:

"Reckon the little tackers ain't much better. The mistress don't gen'ally keep lamps lit as late as this, 'less something's wrong. Oh! I hope there's no more death and disappointment on our road. 'Twould break Mrs. Trent's heart, indeed, if she lost Ned."

Ninian roused himself from his reverie, and answered, lightly:

"For such a cheerful fellow as I remember you, even when you were first laid up in hospital, you're degenerated sadly. What in the name of common sense is the use of prognosticating evil, when good is just as likely to come?"

"Huh! I'm consid'able older than you, young man," retorted the sharpshooter, perversely.

"All the more reason you should be more hopeful. What's happened to you besides these external troubles? Something on your own account, eh? If so, believe me you have my hearty sympathy and my right hand to help you, if you need it."

Ephraim checked Prince so shortly that the animal reared on his haunches, and pushing his hat from his brow regarded the visitor with a sad but grateful countenance. Then he spoke, and his tones were husky with subdued emotion:

"Thanks, friend. I took to you the first time my old eyes lit on you and I've leaned on you, in my mind, ever since. There is something 'at worries me, but it's so slight I shan't put it into words--yet. I've got work to do still for them I love and that love me. Which I might maybe sum up in one small person--my precious Lady Jess. God bless her! Ay, God bless her! From the crown of her sunny head to the tips of her dainty feet, she's the truest, squarest, tenderest creature the Lord ever sent to lighten this dark world. They all love her, every one of them rough, hard-handed sons of toil whom she calls her 'boys'; but there isn't one, not one, can begin to love her as I do. Not one. It is she that makes me still keep a little faith---There, there! what an old fool I am! But, thanks, all the same, and don't you forget I'm your own to command if need comes. Shake, neighbor, and may your age be---Giddap there, Prince! Let'son, lad; let's get on."

Ninian did get on, but again silently pondering that here again was something mysterious in this honest octogenarian's mood. There was an undercurrent of sorrow which, he was sure, was wholly distinct from the anxieties of his mistress and her household, and he wondered what it might be. Surely, for an old man, though wifeless and childless he had much to make him happy. The devotion of the family in which he had lived for so long, his comfortable home, his freedom from care concerning his future--to the young man struggling amidst a crowd of competitors to make a place for himself in the world, it seemed as if the venerable sharpshooter had cause for nothing but rejoicing. However, these might be mere imaginations, and best banished for the present.

Ephraim made straight for the house, and the sound of the horses' footfalls brought figures flying to the open doors; most welcome of these in the eyes of the two men, the small one of Jessica herself, her head stretched forth as she peered into the night, and the lamplight behind her making a radiance about her golden head and slender gracefulness. But she poised there on

the threshold only for an instant, till she was sure what animals these were, then darted toward them with uplifted hands and a cry of delight:

"They've come! Oh, mother, they've come!--they've come!"

Another moment and the reporter had slipped from his saddle and had caught up the little girl, more glad on his own part than he would have once thought possible to have her once more beside him.

"Yes, captain, here we are! But did you expect us--or me? And how could you tell that we were not strangers?"

"Why, don't you suppose I'd know the step of any horse for ours? And though Nimrod is yours now I know him like--like a brother. Don't I, dear fellow?" and from Ninian's clasp she ran to embrace the down-bent head of the thoroughbred.

On his side, Nimrod was equally rejoiced. His velvet nostrils caressed the little girl's cheeks and flowing hair, while his dainty forefoot gently pawed the ground in expression of delight and not impatience. Prince stood looking on, unmoved. He was not Sobrante raised and seemed to feel it; or so Jessica fancied, as she left off petting Nimrod and passed to Prince's side, to stroke his head also, and to murmur words of praise for good behavior in bringing Ephraim safely home.

Then "Forty-niner" led the beast away, while Jessica sped after Ninian, who had been greeted--almost grasped--by Aunt Sally. She had drawn him indoors, laughing, crying, whispering, entreating, all in a breath:

"Oh, oh, oh, land of Goshen! My suz! If you ain't the gladdest sight I've seen this dog's age! How are you, how are you? Slim? You certainly do look slim," she declared, as she led him into the radiance of the lamp and critically peered into his face, both through and above her spectacles.

"Well, my good friend, I never was anything but slim, as I remember. And I have been just a bit ailing, if that's your meaning. However, I'm all right now, most delighted to be here, and wholly at your service or that of anybody else who needs me. How are the children? Ephraim said that they were ill. And Mrs. Trent?"

As if in answer to his questions, there was a patter of bare feet on the stairs and in came Luis, his great dark eyes looking twice their normal size and his voice shrill with excitement, as he tried to say:

"Ned--Ned's gone and got--and got--Ned's gone got gone roof. Oh, oh!"

Mrs. Benton dropped Ninian's hand which she had continued to hold and shake up and down, much in the manner of one pumping water, and caught up the child to also shake him vigorously:

"Hi! What's that you say? Don't you dare to tell auntie a story. What's Neddy---Oh, my land! all the catnip's gone out of my life, seems if!"

The reporter and Jessica looked at each other and burst into laughter. It was impossible to help it, Aunt Sally's manner had been so droll and yet so dramatic; and, oddly enough, over Ninian there stole again the feeling that he had come home, and that the griefs and perplexities of this household had become his own. With that his merriment was over, for the fear Mrs. Benton's face had betrayed was sincere.

Jessica, also, had sobered instantly, and catching her guest's hand hurried him impulsively upward, crying:

"He's done it again! Oh, if mother sees him it will frighten her to death!"

They reached the upper floor and the end of the hall which divided it into two sections, and from whence a ladder ran upright to a trapdoor opening on the sloping roof. The scuttle had been left open for ventilation, and up this steep stairway Luis was pointing with wild gestures.

Again Aunt Sally caught and shook the little fellow, but he could make no better business of talking than before. Jessica had not waited for more than one glance into the empty chamber where the sick children had been cared for, since it was more quiet than the customary bedroom below; and that glance, added to Luis' gesticulations, told her story.

"Oh, he's walking in his sleep again! He's gone on the roof!"

The next the reporter realized she had climbed the ladder and disappeared through the scuttle. He forgot that he was, or had been, ill, and followed her, only to pause at the sight which met him as his head protruded through the opening. It was a house of many gables, and upon the peak of the farthest one poised Ned in his night-clothes, slowly swinging his arms in the circular fashion children adopt preparatory to a leap or spring.

"One!" counted the childish voice. "Two!"

Ninian closed his eyes, as if by so doing he might shut his ears to the final "Three!" which would mark the fatal leap.

CHAPTER XVI.

JESSICA GETS HER WISH

Ninian Sharp had closed his eyes against a catastrophe which, seemingly, nothing less than a miracle could prevent. When he opened them again the miracle had been performed.

Love had lent to Jessica a strength and swiftness almost incredible even to her active body, and she had crossed the steep, slated roof just in time to clasp Ned's feet and to drag him backward with her as she rolled down upon the broader portion. Yet even here was imminent danger, for the lad was struggling, in his sudden awakening, and the pair were slipping hopelessly toward the eaves.

But now was the reporter's chance and the test of his athletic training. He threw himself prone upon the slippery slates, worming his lean person over them till he caught the girl's frock, and bidding her "hold fast!" drew both the children slowly toward the scuttle. When his feet had found the edge of this the danger was past; and they were presently down upon the hall floor, laughing and sobbing together in one excited group. That is, the sister was sobbing and Ninian was laughing in a nervous way that had grown upon him with his illness, and that told to Aunt Sally's keen ear how really frail he still was.

But Master Ned, the cause of all this emotion, looked calmly upon the stranger, and demanded:

"Where's that printing press you promised, hey? I can say five, ten letters now, and I can spell cat backwards!"

"Is it possible? Before such erudition I bow my humble head!" laughed the visitor, grateful for any, even nonsensical, words that would relieve the tension of the moment.

But here Aunt Sally caught up the boy and looked him over anxiously; then joyfully declared:

"He's got his senses back. Oh! Gabriella, where are you? Neddy's all right!"

"Oh, auntie, hush! There's no need to tell mother anything of this last danger, and if you'll only please put Ned back to bed she won't have to know."

"Ain't goin' to bed. Been a-bed 'nough," protested the supposed invalid. "Want my clothes. Want to go downstairs and get my supper."

"Get my supper," assented Luis, creeping forward from the corner where he had hidden in fear of he knew not what.

"Hello, echo! You on hand again? How's business?" demanded Ninian, drawing the child towards him.

"First rate," answered Ned, for his comrade, who promptly echoed: "'Strate."

But now came the mother, hurrying up the stairs, with a bowl of gruel she had gone to prepare, and interest in which had opportunely prevented her knowing either of the reporter's arrival or her son's peril. And the visitor sprang to his feet again, while she welcomed him as cordially and gracefully as if she had been sitting in state, expectant, within her own pretty parlor.

One flash of her eyes toward her boy, safe in Mrs. Benton's arms again and carefully wrapped about in her capacious apron, relieved any anxiety she might have felt in coming upon this unexpected group, and she asked, with a little burst of laughter:

"Is it possible that Ned was so quick to welcome you? Well, son, it might have been more courteous to have gone downstairs; but I'm sure our friend will pardon a little lad who's been ill. He's really better, isn't he, Aunt Sally? He looks quite natural."

"Yes, honey, he's better. I reckon he's passed the turnin' point now, if nothin' new sets in. You take Mr. Sharp down into the settin'-room, 'cause he's seen the children and I'll set with them a spell. Wun Lung can get the supper well's I can, if he'll put his heatheny mind to it. Eh? What is it, sonny?"

Fortunately, Ned, like most sleepwalkers, was wholly unconscious of his actions while in that abnormal state, and made no comments on anything save his own reluctance to go to bed while so interesting a gentleman was in the house; but was finally coaxed to do so by the promise of Luis sharing his cot as well as his porridge; whereupon Mrs. Trent kissed him good-night and invited the guest below.

His protestations against another supper, after the excellent one he had taken at Aleck McLeod's, met with nothing but the hospitable rejoinder:

"Oh! but you can surely manage a light refreshment, since you've ridden thirty miles from Marion."

To which the little captain added her entreaties, saying:

"I'm hungry, anyway. I'm always so, I guess, but I couldn't think of breaking bread before you unless you share it."

Therefore sleepy Wun Lung came with the tray, and was gratified by the friendly notice of the

stranger; and Mrs. Trent made tea in the little swinging kettle over her alcohol lamp, her daughter declaring that it always tasted better served in that way. Ninian found that, in spite of his protestations, the simple refreshments were very acceptable, and the trio were quietly enjoying their reunion when Jessica suddenly remembered Ephraim and sprang up to go in search of him, exclaiming:

"Even if Mr. Sharp isn't hungry, dear old 'Forty-niner' is sure to be. He'll be here soon, maybe, but I won't wait till the kettle is cold. He's been sleeping at the 'house' ever since he got back and might go straight to his room, if I don't prevent."

When she had gone Ninian observed upon the remarkable devotion between the old sharpshooter and his small pupil, and the mother assented; yet added, as an after-thought:

"I sometimes regret it. Jessica is a child of impulsive, yet absorbing affections. She can see no flaw in the character of anybody she loves; and--well, none of us are perfect, and Ephraim grows old."

Still, when he entered, the lady greeted him with cordiality, and served him promptly; and presently they were all talking eagerly of the recent events at Sobrante. Of course, Pedro came in for a brief but loving mention; and to the guest's inquiry as to what had been done with the fine flock of sheep which the old man had herded, the mistress replied:

"I have sent them up into the mountains, with the herds of a neighbor, for the present. Ephraim, here, petitioned for the post of shepherd, but I dared not give it to him," and she looked deprecatingly toward the sharpshooter.

"No, she didn't," assented he. "She could trust that Old Century, but she couldn't trust me."

There was greater bitterness in the tone than he had ever manifested before his small captain, and she was quick to notice and resent it.

"Look here, you blessed old grumbler, you stop that, please. If not 'please,' stop it anyway, because I'm your commander. You know why, and only why, my mother said 'no' to that bright scheme of yours." Then she explained to Ninian, who was listening closely: "You must understand that shepherding is the very loneliest thing that has to be done on a ranch. The shepherd is alone from week to week; on some ranches from month to month. He hasn't a soul to speak to save when somebody chances to cross his field, which isn't often. A lot of men go crazy, living that way, and mother has always been afraid for even Pedro. I never was for him, though, 'cause he always liked it and had lived so--well, forever. But naughty old 'Forty-niner' felt it would be his 'duty' to go up there away from all of us, and mother wouldn't let him, and so--"

"And so, my honored captain, you'll force me to be a mere hanger-on and idler."

Jessica held up her forefinger, warningly. "That's enough, Ephraim. I am 'She that must be obeyed,' Samson says, sometimes. And one of the times is now. If you and mother aren't ashamed to disagree before my dear Mr. Sharp, I'm ashamed to have you!"

All laughed and none took offense at this plain talk which, jesting though it seemed, covered a serious meaning, and soon "Forty-niner" remarked, as if to close the subject:

"Well, all's said and done; yet, still, I know if I'd been let to have my way in this I'd have stopped a deal of mischief. It would be better, seems to me, to have an old frontiersman living in Pedro's cabin than a spook."

Mrs. Trent started, and, the guest fancied, shivered slightly. But she rejoined, impatiently:

"Oh, Mr. Marsh! that nonsense again, and from you!"

"So they say, ma'am."

Cried Jessica gayly:

"The only thing Sobrante needed to make it as lovely as those old English places one reads about in the story books was a 'ghost', and now we've got it! Honest, and I do hope you'll see it for yourself. I want to so much, and one night Samson and I chased it, but--it got away. The 'boys' say now that it has even taken to horseback. Don't you wish you might be luckier than I, Mr. Ninian?"

A glance flashed between the reporter and the sharpshooter, but not quite swiftly enough to escape the girl's observation; and, after a moment's pause, she exclaimed:

"Why, I believe you have already seen it!"

There was an awkward silence, which Mrs. Trent broke by the stern reproof she managed to throw into one word: "Jessica!"

"Yes, mother, I know. It's silly, and I will be careful not to mention the delightful subject before the children."

"What are you but a child yourself, my mature little woman?" demanded the visitor, playfully.

"Why, I'm a little girl, of course; but one who always wanted to see a fairy, till somebody told me there was none. Now I'm longing for this 'spook'--that really is, 'cause so many, many have seen it--and I'm not even let to talk about him."

Mrs. Trent shook her head regretfully.

"I'm afraid we've spoiled you among us, my darling. But, leaving these unexplained things to

explain themselves at their proper time, suppose you go and see that all is ready in Mr. Sharp's room? Wun Lung is still mooning by himself on the kitchen stoop and will do what you ask him."

"They all do that, I infer," commented Ninian, as the child hastened away, eager to serve all whom she loved.

"Yes, they do. It's a delightful, but not, maybe, the wisest life for any girl to live. No playmates except her two small brothers, and no schooling that is at all regular or effective. I can't imagine what Sobrante would be without her, and yet---"

She paused and "Forty-niner" took up her sentence:

"It wouldn't be Sobrante, mistress. That's all. I, for one, couldn't stay here and serve under any other body now except my captain;" and so saying, as if a shadow of the future fell upon him, the old man rose and went out, quite forgetting to say good-night.

Meanwhile, Jessica had found Wun Lung and also found him more than willing to go with her and perform even additional tasks, since by so doing he might have the comfort and safety of human presence. Fragments of talk had come to him in his kitchen concerning the apparitions which had startled the whole countryside, during these past few days, and had received the strongest confirmation from his housemate, Pasqual. The latter believed, indeed, all that he himself heard and invented much more. He had grown to be afraid of his own shadow and now resorted to the men's quarters on each and every occasion that presented, feeling a safety among them he could not feel at the "house" among a lot of women. Of course, his defection from duty entailed endless conflicts between himself and Aunt Sally, but since this resulted in nothing worse to the delinquent than a loss of some dainty food, he could put up with it. He was away now, bunking in Marty's room, and Wun Lung sat alone, too afraid to go to bed, yet too uneasy to enjoy the beauty of the night. His sharp, black eyes peered here and there and everywhere, about the place; and when Jessica came running to him, in her noiseless moccasins, he jumped so high that his queue flew out at a right angle from his head, and he screeched:

"Oh, mly flathe's, mly flathe's!"

Lady Jess laughed aloud.

"No, good Wun Lung. Not your fathers, nor even any of your relatives, but only me. Having had supper, the next thing for our dear Mr. Sharp is a bed and sleep. Come help me make it ready."

The Chinaman rose with alacrity, and soon had collected the bed linen, towels and bucket of water, suggesting that Jessica should bring a lighted candle.

"Oh! we don't need a light, Wun Lung. It's as bright as day with the shutters open, and we must be quick, anyway, for the dear man has been ill and is tired."

The room was the same that Mr. Hale had found so delightful during his own visit to the ranch, and the girl threw the shutters wide, to let in the fresh air and moonlight while they arranged the place for occupancy. She left the bed making to the longer and stronger arms of her assistant, but herself attended to the pitchers and toilet things; and while so engaged, with her back toward the open windows, was suddenly startled by an ear-piercing shriek from the Chinaman.

Shriek? Not one, but many; prolonged, reiterated, till the whole house seemed in an uproar; and facing swiftly about, to learn the cause and still the clamor, Jessica found her lately expressed desire completely gratified. For there, clearly distinct in the moonlight, not ten paces from the window whence she gazed, was the phantom horse and rider!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CACTUS HEDGE

The shrieks ended by Wun Lung's throwing himself face downward on the floor, but they had roused the whole household, even the sleeping children. Those in the room below had rushed to the stairs, wondering what could possibly have happened to the Chinaman, whose outcries these certainly were. The little lads had sprang from their cot, screaming on their own account, and Mrs. Benton had awaked from the "fortywinks" she was taking in her chair.

As a natural result of her sudden awakening she grasped the two children who were clinging to her skirts and shook them soundly, ordering them to "shut up to once 'fore you scare folks to death."

They were not easily pacified and she thus, fortunately, had her hands full, for the moment, else the fear-paralyzed Wun Lung might have fared hardly. As it was, none but Jessica had a full, clear view of the strange visitant, since the Chinaman had closed his eyes against it and the others had not thought to look out of doors; but she saw it, and with critical distinctness.

For an instant, indeed, her own nerves had thrilled and her heart seemed to stand still; the next

her overpowering desire to see the "spook" for herself had conquered her terror and she gazed with all her might.

"It certainly looks like Pedro, with his clothes all white. And the horse--it may be his that died--but--but---"

The ghostly steed and its rider remained utterly motionless, as if scrutinizing the house on their own part or waiting for somebody to appear; then, as the little girl bounded to the open window the better to gratify her curiosity, the animal--if such it was--slowly wheeled about and loped away. There was a sound of muffled footfalls on the hard drive, and the vision had vanished.

Jessica still leaned from the casement watching and thinking more rapidly than she had ever done before; but when convinced that the apparition was really gone, she slowly retreated below stairs, passing her mother and Ninian on the way, yet not pausing till she had gained the side of the sharpshooter. Him she seized, exultantly exclaiming:

"Well, Ephraim, I've seen your spectre!"

"You--have!"

"And it's no more a 'ghost' than I am."

"What do you mean?" he demanded, hastily; ashamed of himself for half regretting that the supernatural view of the matter might not be the right one. "It isn't? Well, what is it, then?"

"It's Antonio Bernal and his horse, Nero."

"Huh! How do you fetch that? When both of them are black as my hat."

Her last, lingering uneasiness banished by his presence and the sound of her own words, with firmer conviction she declared to him and the others who had now gathered about her:

"I 'fetch it' fast enough. This was the way dear old Pedro used to ride; and this is the way your 'spook' sat his horse," she announced, so vividly mimicking both men that all who had known them recognized the likeness, and Ephraim exclaimed:

"That's them to a t-i-o-n-tion! Can seem to see 'em right here before me. Well--what next?"

"Pedro wore his blanket like a king. Antonio has covered his head with that white thing, and even so wasn't half Pedro's height. I shall not soon forget that splendid Old Century, the last time I saw him ride away, that night. A hundred years old, yet as straight in his saddle as a rod."

"Antonio Bernal was a magnificent horseman, darling," suggested Mrs. Trent, from the chair into which she had sunk, as if weakened by the series of startling events which had befallen her home.

"Even so, mother, dear, he couldn't match old Pedro. Antonio sat forward, so, with a careless sort of slouch--just like the 'spook' had."

"What could possibly be his motive for such foolishness, daughter, granting you are right?"

The captain laughed.

"Upon my word, mother, even you, as well as Ephraim, seem sorry it isn't a truly ghost, after all."

"No, no, indeed. I'm sorry, rather, to think it may be Antonio, as you fancy, and that he still persists in troubling us, even by so silly a disguise."

"It hasn't been so silly, Mrs. Trent, if it has hoodwinked a lot of sensible people, and you are right--there must be a motive for it in the actor's mind. I hope Jessica's judgment in the case is correct, for back there in Los Angeles, we didn't find the manager a difficult person to deal with," remarked Mr. Sharp.

The girl went on:

"Then that horse. Don't you remember, mother, and you, Ephraim, the curious little switch Nero used to give his tail whenever he was turned around? Well, this 'spook' horse did just the same thing. Oh, I know, I know I'm right!"

"But how could he turn a black horse snow white, even if you are? As I remember Nero he wouldn't stand much nonsense, even from his own master," said "Forty-niner."

"Pooh! If lack-wit Ferd could paint Prince, as he did--another spirited horse, if you please--Antonio could do what he liked with Nero. It's paint, of course, or something like it."

"But the eyes? The eyes as we saw them on the road, a few hours back, were all on fire. You could see them almost before you could make out that it was a man on horseback was coming. Isn't that so, Sharp?" demanded Ephraim, persistent to the last.

Jessica turned upon him, triumphantly:

"There! I knew from the way you two looked when we were talking a little while ago that you'd seen something out of common! Do tell me about it, please. Do, do!"

Ninian laughed, glanced at his hostess' face, and replied:

"That's a story will keep, and you should be in bed. I don't want to have my coming harm you when I meant it to do you good. Even such a courageous child as you ought to sleep a great deal."

She had been courageous, indeed, and had astonished him by a coolness and readiness of

observation which would have done credit to a much older person. He began to realize how different she was from other children of her age, and how the hardihood of her rearing had developed qualities that were quite unchildlike. He wondered how she would adapt herself to the habits and thoughts of other girls of her own age, and was not surprised that Mrs. Trent craved such society for her. He wished that he might see her placed in some good school, yet was doubtful if just the right one could be selected for a pupil so different from ordinary. However, that was not his affair, and to relieve the family of his further presence at that late hour undoubtedly was. So he bade them all good-night and went to his room, and very shortly afterward everybody under that roof was sound asleep.

"Oh, what a dreamless, delicious rest I've had!" was the visitor's waking thought. His next, that it must be very late and that he had put his hostess to unnecessary trouble. Then he turned over "for just one more wink" and slumbered on for another couple of hours. This time he had dreams in plenty; and finally roused from one, of beautiful gardens peopled by harmless "spooks," to a sound of sweet music. By his watch he saw that it was eleven o'clock and remembered that it was Sunday. Also, the music was that of a familiar hymn, played upon a fine piano, which was taken up and sung by a choir of mixed voices, from the childish treble of the two little lads to the stentorian bass of Samson, the mighty.

Hastily dressing, Ninian slipped quietly down the stairs and entered the sunny parlor; where Jessica motioned to a chair which had evidently been reserved for him, and softly approached him with an open hymn book.

It was Mrs. Trent at the piano and her rich soprano voice faultlessly led her straggling chorus, filled for the most part by the men grouped outside on the wide porch. He could see them through the long, French windows, sitting or standing as each felt inclined, but all with that earnest seriousness of demeanor which befitted the day and the task. For task it evidently was to some of them; John Benton, for example. He stood alone, at the most upright post attainable, his book at arm's length, and his head moving from side to side, following the lines, with a little upward toss of it as he reached the end of each, while from his throat issued most startling tones.

Afterwards, Aunt Sally explained, for she had seen Ninian's amused survey of her "boy," that:

"John can no more carry a tune than he can fly, and I'd rather hear him sawin' his boards than tryin' to sing. But he feels it's his duty to help the others along by singing at it and sort of keepin' Gabriell' in countenance, seems if. Sweet, ain't it?"

It had been "sweet" in the guest's opinion--the whole of the short service; conducted with such simple dignity and reverence by the Madonna-like ranch mistress; the music so well chosen, the few prayers so feelingly offered, and the brief exhortation read from the words of a famous divine who had the rare gift of touching men's hearts. And he so expressed himself, as well as his surprise, over the belated breakfast which Mrs. Benton served him when the service was over and the household dispersed.

"Yes, I think it's the nicest thing there is about this dear Sobrante. There's always been the best sort of infloence here and that's why I like my boy, John, to belong. Cass'us, he used to hold the meeting, and after he died I feared Gabriella wouldn't be equal to it. But bless your soul! if down she didn't come that first Sunday 'at ever was, and her not havin' left her bed sence it happened, and sent Wun Lungy out to have the old mission bell rung, a signal. I'll ever forget it to my dyin' day, I shan't. Her like a spirit all in white and a face was both the saddest and the upliftedest ever I see; and them rough men all crowdin' up to their places, so soft you'd thought they was barefoot 'stead of heavy shod; and Jessie with her arms round the two little ones, and her mother pitchin' the tune, same as usual, and--and--I declare I can't keep the tears back yet, rememberin'. Before she was done the whole kerboodle of us was sobbin' and cryin' like a passel of young ones, and there was she, with her broken heart, as calm and serene as an angel. Angel is what she is, mostly; with just enough old human natur' in her to keep her from soarin' right away. Gabriell's one them scurce kind makes you glad every time she does a wrong or thoughtless thing, 'cause then you know she ain't quite perfected yet, and you're surer of keepin' her 'on earth. My! the good that woman does beats all. This very day, when she'd lots rather stay to home and visit with you, she's give orders for Ephraim to have the buck-board got ready to take her twenty miles to see a neighbor who's sick. She's fixing a basket of things now, and is in a hurry. So that's the reason she didn't come to keep you company herself. Have another piece of chicken--do."

"Thank you, no. I've enjoyed my breakfast hugely, and feel as if I'd never known a moment's illness."

There was the sound of wheels just then and Ninian strolled out to offer his service as escort to the ranch mistress in case she might desire it. But the offer was not made, though the lady greeted him with evident pleasure, and even herself glanced toward the vehicle, as if wishing he might ride with her. But there was Ephraim Marsh, in the glory of a white shirt and brilliant necktie, brushed and speckless, and beaming benevolently upon all less favored mortals. It was only upon such errands of mercy that the mistress ever left her home, and there was not a ranchman in her employ but esteemed it an honor to drive for her whither she would.

Ninian saw the state of affairs plainly enough, and, possibly, so did "Forty-niner" himself; who might, under some circumstances, have sacrificed his pleasure for that of the young man. But not now. Ever since he had returned from his long stay in the city, the sensitive old fellow had felt a difference in his surroundings. There was nobody mean enough to tell him of the base

suspicious that his fellow workmen had harbored about him, and they fancied that by treating him with more than former friendliness they could offset the unknown injury they had done him. It was this very effusiveness that had roused his suspicions that something was wrong, and he saw in this solitary drive with his beloved mistress a chance to unburden his mind and get her wise opinion on the matter.

So he merely "passed the time of day" with the guest, helped the lady to her place, and stepped up beside her; then chirruped to his horse and was off.

But Ninian was not allowed much disappointment, for there was Lady Jess, clasping his hand and looking up into his face with the brightest of smiles, as she exclaimed: "Just think of it, dear Mr. Sharp! We are to have a long, delightful day together. Mother will not be home before nightfall and I am to do everything I can to make you happy. As if I wouldn't, even without being bidden! But what shall it be first? Where would you like to walk or ride? Or would you rather rest and read?"

"First, I would like to walk around to that curious hedge yonder, that you told me before had been planted by the old padres. Everything about these ancient missions interests me."

"Oh! I love them, too, and I'm so glad we live on one, or the place where one used to be. That hedge is prickly-pear and was meant to keep the Indians out of the inclosure, if they were ugly. But it's a hundred years old, and Pedro could remember when it was ever so much smaller than now."

It was a weird stretch of the repellent cactus, whose great gnarled branches locked and intertwined themselves in a verdureless mass of thorns and spikes which well might have daunted even an Indian. The hedge was many feet in width and higher than Ninian's shoulder, still green on top, but too unlovely to have been preserved for any reason save its antiquity and history. One end of it was close to the kitchen part of the house, and the other reached beyond the fall of the farthest old adobe.

"A formidable barrier, indeed! It reminds me of some of Dore's fantastic pictures," said the reporter.

"Doesn't it? My mother has books with his drawings in, and I have thought that, too. It is a trouble sometimes, because anybody coming across the field from yonder must go either way around the quarters or all along the back of the house, before he can get in here; when if it weren't there at all, it wouldn't be two steps. But we will never have it cut down because my father said so. He wouldn't have anybody break a single leaf, if he could help it, and--oh, oh!"

Mr. Sharp lifted his head from his close examination of a branch that had particularly interested him and saw Jessica pointing in astonishment at the very heart of the great hedge.

"What is it? Something especially curious?"

"Curious! It's--it's--dreadful! You can see right through it! Somebody has ruined it!"

The reporter stooped and followed the direction of her guiding finger and saw that a strange thing had indeed been done. For a considerable length the terrible barrier had been literally tunneled, though the fact was not easily discernible. Walls of the bare and twisted branches were still left unbroken on either side, but a sufficient space had been scooped out to admit the passage of a human being should such desire a hiding place.

"Oh! isn't that dreadful? Who could have done it, and why?" cried the captain, in distress; and her companion could only think of Aunt Sally's declaration, made to him at breakfast, that Sobrante was "bewitched."

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT THE SABBATH BROUGHT

"Now I know how it was that Antonio disappeared that time when Aunt Sally and Ephraim heard him outside the pantry window!" cried Jessica, exultingly; and seeing the gentleman's puzzled expression, told of the scene within the cold closet and of the mocking answer "Forty-niner" had received, when he said he was determined to find out Antonio's retreat. Then she bade her friend stoop again and see for himself how easy it was for one at the rear of the house, where the pantry was, to slip into this cactus tunnel and be utterly hidden from anybody who would search from that side.

They saw, also, that the broken branches had been thrown under the open foundation of the kitchen, leaving no sign of the ruin that had been done.

"A clever scamp, indeed! And any other sort of plant would have withered at the top and led to discovery. But not this; for the verdure has evidently long been gone from this part of the hedge," observed Ninian.

"Oh, yes! This end has been dead for a great while, yet my mother would not have it removed. It would have lasted maybe forever in just that way; and Antonio knew how we prized it. Oh, dear! I do believe he is as wicked as the 'boys' say, though I hate to think that of anybody." "Surely, you have had proof enough of his evil doings, even without these later fantastic developments. You must never trust that man, little girl, should he again try to make you."

"I think he won't bother me. Why should he?" asked she, in some surprise, for her friend's tone had been most impressive. "Why should you imagine that?"

"I don't know myself, exactly why. It just 'happened' into my head. By the way, captain, did you send me all of the specimen of copper that you had?"

"Oh, no, indeed! My mother thought best not. We sent you only a little bit, cut from the larger one Pedro dug. Let's go into the office and I'll open the safe and show you the rest. Do you know anything about such mines and stuff?"

"I do know something about ores and minerals, my dear, for before I was a newspaper man I was a clerk in the office of an expert in such matters. I should greatly like to see your sample," he answered, readily.

So she led the way at once and took the key from a desk drawer, which anybody might have opened, and Ninian remarked:

"What an insecure place for a safe key! Yours is certainly a most confiding household."

"Oh, it's not a very safe safe, anyway," she answered, laughing; "and who would want to open it? It's Ephraim's really, though I don't think he's ever been near it since he came home. Isn't it a great, clumsy key? But my father told me that there are safes much, much larger and stronger than this which are opened by very small keys. Odd, isn't it?" As she spoke she was down upon her knees in front of the strong box and trying with all her small strength to turn the lock; and after watching her for a moment the reporter laughed, and suggested:

"Suppose you just merely pull at the knob. It looks to me as if the thing were already opened, for the door isn't tight; or is that protruding edge of it a part of the general crudeness?"

Jessica obeyed, pulling with such unnecessary force that the safe flew open and he fell backward, laughing.

But Mr. Sharp did not laugh. In view of what had been told him he was afraid the thing had been tampered with, and watched in silence while the little girl thrust her hand into the safe and felt all about, her face lengthening as she did so; but again, suddenly brightening, when she exclaimed:

"Oh, my mother must have done that! There was all the money in here that was left after Elsa got her own share. The first nights two of the 'boys' slept in the house to watch, 'cause mother was afraid we might lose it again. Then, since 'Forty-niner' got home only he has slept here, and he generally 'bunks' on the lounge in this very office. That's what it is, what it must be. My mother has worried about Antonio, and has taken the money and the piece of copper away and put them somewhere else. Well, never mind. She'll show it to you as soon as she comes back; and now, what shall we do next? Would you like to ride?"

Ninian passed his hand across his brow in mild perplexity. An instant conviction had seized him that here was another feature of the mysteries pervading this peaceful ranch; and though he as instantly frowned upon his own suspicion, it would remain to torment him. However, he said nothing further to disturb Jessica's composure, and readily agreed that a ride would be delightful, though he added, grimly:

"I'm so lame and stiff already from yesterday's horseback exercise that I feel older than Ephraim. I expect a 'hair of the same dog' is the best cure, and wish now I had made time, back there in town, to get used to a saddle. I never found it convenient, though, and poor Nimrod missed his outings even more than I did, I fancy. It certainly is a glorious day for a canter, as almost all our days are."

"It's nice, too, when the rains come. We do things indoors then that we never do all the rest of the year. My mother plays and sings half the time, 'cause then she can't go poking around all over the ranch, like she does now. In the evenings the 'boys' all come in and tell stories or do their best to amuse us. We were always happiest, too, when Pedro came, and when my father was here he coaxed him and he came often. Now--he'll never come again!" she finished, with an irrepressible burst of grief, which she as quickly suppressed, for she saw that it saddened her guest as well; and she had been reared in the spirit of hospitality that makes the stranger glad even at the cost of one's own impulses.

So she added, with a smile that seemed all the brighter because of the tears still glistening on her long lashes:

"I'll bring you some books out here and you can rest in the hammock while I run and have the horses saddled. Buster isn't as fast as Nimrod, but he'll go now and then as if he were a colt. I hope this will be one of his fast times, don't you? I love to ride fast!" Ninian smiled rather grimly, answering:

"Just at present, from the state of my poor muscles, I fancy I'd prefer a gait as slow as Buster's ordinary one. But if I stay the week out, I mean to learn a thing or two about that fine beast of mine."

"A week or two! Why, you're to be here till after Christmas, anyway, and that's a fortnight off. I

wish--oh, I wish you would live here always!"

From his delightful resting place in a hammock that was "stretched just right," and which commanded one of the loveliest views in the world, he looked afield and wished so too. Fond as he was of his own active city life, this broad outlook appealed to him most strongly; yet he shook off the longing that assailed him to pass his days in the country and opened the book Jessica had brought. He was soon absorbed in its pages and forgot the errand upon which the child had gone, till, after a long time, as it proved, Ned stole bashfully up and pushed a scrap of paper into his down-hanging hand.

"Hello, youngster!" cried the gentleman, sitting up. "What's this?"

The child's timidity banished at the first sound of the visitor's voice. Mr. Sharp reading, with his spectacles on, and Mr. Sharp speaking in that hail-fellow-well-met manner were two different people. Besides that, Ned's shyness was not his strongest feature, though it cropped out now and then to the astonishment of his family. Also, he was fresh from the hands of Aunt Sally and his catechism lesson, into which she had adroitly forced a hint of the conduct due toward a "wise man, that can write printin'." Supposing it to be a production of the little fellow's own, Mr. Sharp delayed the reading of the crumpled epistle he had received and continued his talk with its bearer; who presently forgot his Sunday manners, and reproachfully demanded that "printing press you promised."

"'Cause if I had it I'd be just as smart as you, you know."

"Smarter you!" cried the echo, clasping Ned's neck with that choking affection of his.

Ned turned upon his other self and pummeled him well, declaring:

"No, you wouldn't neither, Luis Garcia! 'Twouldn't be your printing press, and you can't spell cat backwards! So, there!"

"Cat backwards, dogboycat," gurgled Luis, in a rapture of mere existence.

Ninian laughed at the comical pair, finding them infinitely diverting; and was only brought back to his immediate duty by the insistence of the small messenger, who demanded:

"Why don't you read your letter? I should think anybody what makes newspapers could read a little girl's letter."

"That's a fact; I'll see if I can;" and accordingly spread out the scrap of wrapping paper, which had not been very smooth to start with and had suffered further ill treatment at Ned's hand. The note required a second reading before he could fully comprehend its meaning, which he then found sufficiently startling to send him stableward in hot haste. The message was from the little captain, and was worded thus:

"dear mister sharp please excuse me i must go to a Dyeing man and i Mustnt Tell Who cause if my mother was Home I Wood and she wood say yes. She always helps dyeing folks and sick ones one the boys will go and he can ride Moses or prince Which he likes. I guess marty so i Cant right any more the paper is so littul and i cant Stay."

"JESSICA."

This had been written with a coarse blue pencil, evidently picked up in the stable or workroom; and to the reporter's inquiries, put to the first ranchman he met, there seemed no satisfactory answer. The man in question had not seen Jessica since service, and the men's quarters to which Ninian hurried, were almost deserted. Sunday was their own, so the "boys" spent much of it afield, hunting or visiting on neighboring ranches. Yet a further search revealed John Benton, in his own room, reading; and to him the visitor again put the question of Jessica's probable whereabouts, and showed the letter.

The carpenter was on his feet instantly, a look of apprehension deepening the lines of his earnest face; and running to the door he shouted to a stable boy who was crossing the space before the old adobes:

"Natan! Natan!"

The youth paused, hesitated, yet came no nearer; and John repeated his summons, with an imperative "Here!" Then muttered an explanation to the reporter: "Another of those no-account Greasers; same kind as the Bernals and hired by top-lofty when, he was in charge. Works well enough but---"

By this time Natan had slouched forward and stood stolidly awaiting an expected as well as merited reproof, because of stalls imperfectly cleaned and harnesses left in other than their own places; for John was orderly to the last degree and a very martinet in disciplining his subordinates. However, it was no neglect of duty that was now to be scored, but a question was fairly hurled at the young groom and in a voice sharp with anxiety:

"Natan, did you saddle Buster just now?"

"But yes," answered the lad, greatly relieved.

"Where is he? And Nimrod?"

"Nimrod is at the 'house' horse block, is it not? Si. Groomed to the highest, and a beauty we're all glad to see back where he belongs."

"Your opinion wasn't asked. Where is Buster?"

"Where the captain wills. I know not, I," with a shrug of his lean shoulders.

"Did she mount him?"

"Why else should he be saddled, no?" returned the groom, with an insolent laugh.

John's temper flamed and he turned away with a disgusted snort, meaning to seek information elsewhere on a case he felt permitted no delay. But Ninian was cooler, if equally suspicious that Natan was concealing something that should be known; so, laying his hand not unkindly upon the youth's shoulder, he said:

"If you know anything of this, where Miss Jessica has gone and with whom, or if alone, it will be worth your while to tell me and at once. I'm pretty good pay for seasonable articles," he finished, in his journalistic manner.

He had taken a dollar from his pocket and was carelessly tossing it from hand to hand, nor was he disappointed when Natan fixed his black eyes greedily upon the coin. Still the lad said nothing, only pondered in his own dull mind which of two masters it would benefit him most to serve; and annoyed by this hesitation, Ninian hazarded a guess:

"Oh, well, if you prefer to work for Antonio Bernal, it's all one to me."

Natan's mouth flew open and his eyes grew wild:

"You know it, then, already, you?"

"I know many things," was the sententious answer.

"But it is a pity, yes. The so fine man and such a rider. He will ride no more, poor Antonio, si."

Ninian's blood ran chill, yet he asked, still quietly, though foreseeing evil he dared not contemplate:

"Who brought the word?"

"Ferd, the dwarf," came the reply, as the dollar exchanged owners.

CHAPTER XIX.

ANTONIO'S CONFESSION

These were the facts: Natan had been grooming the horses, Nimrod and Buster, when suddenly and soundlessly there appeared before the window in the stables' rear, the misshapen head and shoulders of typo Ferdinand Bernal. He was mounted on a snow-white horse and seemed to the superstitious stable boy to have risen out of the ground. Buster, also, had appeared to be frightened for a few seconds, though he speedily recovered his equine calmness and merely whinnied his delight, while he attempted to secure another mouthful of alfalfa before the bridle slipped into place over his head.

"Natan, the little captain," whispered Ferd, through the narrow casement.

"Well, yes; the little captain," returned the other, in a louder tone, and grinning at his own astuteness in discovering that this was a white horse so very like the "spook horse" that it might be one and the same. Some of Antonio's schemes he had fathomed, being himself a sort of schemer in his own stupid way.

"I want her. She must come. Antonio dies."

"Antonio--fiddles!" retorted the other, contemptuously. Then saw, to his surprise, that Ferd's head had dropped upon that of his strange steed and that he was whimpering and sobbing in a pitiful fashion, well calculated to deceive the unwary. It was at this juncture that, fancying to see her beloved Buster made ready for her ride, Jessica ran singing into the stable, and paused amazed at sight of Ferd, weeping, and so oddly mounted. Horses there were galore in the Sobrante stables and pastures, but never one like this; so white, so spirited, and yet so marvelously marked. For even by the daylight, there in the slight shadow of the wall, the animal's eyes glowed with an unearthly light, terrifying to Natan and startling even to her fearless self. Indeed it had not been until the moment of her appearance and Buster's whinnied welcome, that Ferd's horse had turned its face toward them and revealed his curious visage.

"Why, Ferdinand Bernal!" she cried, giving him his full title, and thereby mystifying still further the wondering groom. "I do believe that's the very creature that's been scaring such a lot of people everywhere! How came you by it and what ails its eyes?"

Ferd lifted a face that was grimy with dirt and streaked with tears. His misery was evident and needed no words to impress it upon the tenderhearted girl, who ran to the window, begging:

"What is the matter, Ferd? Poor Ferd! are you ill? In trouble? What?"

"The death. It is the accursed house. Where death comes once--he is always there. He told me--you must come. Come; now, right away, si. Before--too late. He said it. Antonio, my brother."

"You know that, then--about your relationship? But what has happened to him?"

The dwarf glanced at Natan and motioned to her to send him away. For reasons of his own, the groom was glad enough to obey, because dire had been the threats of the mighty-fisted Samson, as well as the stern John Benton, against any on that ranch who should be caught "consorting with that low-lived Ferd or the late manager." Besides, in spite of Jessica's apparent indifference to the glowing eyes of the white horse they infected him with a horrible fear; so he made his escape at the first chance; leading Nimrod around to the house and tying him there to await Ninian's pleasure, while he himself resorted to the most distant and safest spot he could find. This had seemed, in his mind, the mission corridor; but he found it already occupied by a party of the ranchmen who had no desire for his society, and after a short delay frankly told him so. It was in passing from this ancient structure to his own room in another building that he had been intercepted by John, and called to account.

Yet, sometime before this, Jessica had finished her interview with the unhappy Ferd; had written her note of explanation to Ninian, though keeping her destination secret, as the hunchback implored, in accordance with Antonio's wish; had dispatched her message by Ned and Luis; and, unknown to them, had rapidly ridden away in company with the white horse and her treacherous guide--to comfort the dying.

That death should have come again to the cabin on the mesa, whither she was led, seemed natural enough to her; remembering with such keen sorrow the passing of old Pedro.

And for once Antonio Bernal had told the truth. Lying helpless, almost motionless, on the narrow bed in the shepherd's home, he greeted his visitor with a pitiful smile on his white face, and a tone from which the last vestige of his old bravado had departed: "The Captain! si. You did well to come, my Lady Jess. But you are not afraid?"

"Why should I be afraid, Antonio? You are ill, I see that. What's wrong? What can I do to help you?"

"Nothing. There is nothing. I played my game and I lost. I--I saw you last night at the window."

"And I saw you; I knew you; but I did not know why you were fixed like that and had painted your poor horse all white."

"Ha! You saw that? You, when nobody--older--well, I lost."

"Are you hurt? What can have happened to you since then?"

"Shot. On the way here, fearing nothing, a passing horseman, unknown, braver or quicker than the rest, thought he could rid the country of its ghost. Ah, yes! it was merry--for a time. It is past."

Jessica was crying softly, unable to endure the sight of agony, even his who had tried to injure her and hers. The sick man perceived this and something of the affection he had once felt for his master's child, before he had betrayed that master's trust, stirred him to speak and thrilled him with compunction. He felt himself to be doomed; he had already sent Ferd away again to summon a priest; and according to his faith he meant to make his peace with the world; but these preparations had been on his own account only. Now he began to feel something for her also.

Suddenly she ceased crying and stood up to bend over him and beg that she might be allowed to help him. "A drink of water--some coffee? You were always so fond of coffee, Antonio, and I know where Pedro kept all his things. So many, many times we drank it here together, he and I. And you--how came you here, Antonio?"

"Where better or nearer could I be? Pedro, the most obliging, yes. Just when I needed his house he left it. Si. Why, but I am better still, is it not, I?"

Indeed his color had improved and his voice grown stronger since Jessica's arrival; and he was able to take the cup of coffee which she made him. This was more palatable than anything Ferd had prepared and stimulated him still further. For a few moments after he had taken it he felt so improved that he almost gave up the doing of that for which he had summoned her. But a sudden return of pain again alarmed him, and as soon as that spasm was past, he motioned her to the bedside.

"In the cupboard--look, quick!" he whispered, pointing to a set of shelves built upon the wall and behind whose locked doors Pedro had been accustomed to store his baskets.

Jessica tried the little door, which refused to open, and to her inquiry for the key, Antonio pointed to his own pillow. After a slight hesitation she approached and secured the key from beneath it; but when she had opened the cupboard found that all the Indian's exquisite weaving had been removed. In its place was the metal-pointed staff, with its shank broken in half, and she exclaimed, indignantly:

"Oh! how could you do that, Antonio? And how could you be so mean as to take it from two children?"

"Ha! Once it was all mine--this land. The copper in the canyon, mine, also. Si. The padres' secret which the shepherd kept was mine---No, no; not yet!" he broke off, with a sudden, delirious scream, fancying he saw the head of a man appearing without the door.

His outcry set Jessica shivering with fear at being alone in that isolated spot with a possible madman; but a second glance into his pallid face restored her natural courage and assured her that he was powerless to injure her, even had he wished to do so. Just then, too, Buster

whinnied and she felt that he was company. It sounded as if he had seen some stable companion of his own and had welcomed it; yet this could not be, of course, since nobody knew of her whereabouts or would be likely to come to the mesa now. Therefore, she did not follow Antonio's glance doorward, but sought at once to relieve his distress.

"Won't you drink another cup of coffee, Antonio? Or shall I make you a bit of porridge? There's hot water still in the kettle and I know how. I've made it for my mother, often, when she was ill; and the little boys always have it. Oh, I can do it quite well!"

She was so eager to serve him, and the pain had once more so greatly lessened for the time being, that the late manager graciously consented, and with such an absurd assumption of his old "top-lofty" manner that Jessica laughed even while she hastened to put on the tiny porringer and seek the meal. The little oil stove blazed merrily, and so deft was she that, in a very few minutes more, she had a dish of the steaming mush beside the cot and had thinned a cup of condensed milk with which to make it the more palatable. Sugar there was in plenty, for Pedro had loved sweets; so that nothing was wanted, save appetite, to render the repast all that was desirable; yet when it was quite ready Antonio could not take it.

The pain had returned and with added intensity; and it was due to that fact that he no longer delayed the confession he had sent for her to hear.

"Hark! Behold! I talk."

"Yes, Antonio, I'm listening."

"Well, I--how begin? It is a story long, not pleasant."

"Wait. Open your mouth and I will feed you. Yes, do."

His black eyes stared at her, astonished. In her place had anybody done him the ill that he had done her, he would have let his enemy starve and have rejoiced at a suffering well deserved. But this child--he wished she would turn her face away, and not look upon him with that innocent compassion. She was too like her dead father, and his one best friend; whom in life he had really loved and in death had not scrupled to despoil.

"Come, Antonio, eat. Afterward you'll be stronger to talk," she said, as coaxingly as if he had been her little brother, Ned; and thus persuaded, he opened his mouth and received the morsel she forced upon him. Thus it continued; she feeding, he resting and with halting eagerness relating the story of his own misdeeds.

"For I must go to pay the price. Si. But the poor lad, my half-wit brother Ferd, ugly, sinful, desolate--he will be left alone. Is it not? For him, if I restore all, there may still be kindness and a home at Sobrante, that should all be his--if---"

"No, Antonio; you know better. That is a poor, foolish notion that has been put into your head. You know; for Mr. Hale, who is a lawyer and understands everything like that, told you and us that you hadn't a bit of right to a bit of land anywhere in this world. Unless, indeed, you may have bought it since that little while ago in Los Angeles. And if you have, where did you get the money?"

"Lo dicho dicho," he muttered the Spanish phrase: "What I have said I have said," and sighed profoundly, as one hopelessly aggrieved.

Jessica lost her temper. She forgot that he was ill and remembered only that he was imputing treachery to her parents and to others whom she loved, and retorted, warmly:

"What you have 'said' doesn't make the truth, Senor Bernal. And if you have anything to tell me I wish you would tell it now. I ought to be at home with Mr. Sharp, who's come to make us a visit. My mother is away, and it's rude to leave guests alone like that. I, who want to be a perfect lady, do hate to be rude. So tell, please, and quick."

"It was he, then, whom I saw on the road with old Ephraim, yes?" cried Antonio, in a voice which was certainly much stronger than it had been when Lady Jess arrived.

"Yes, it was he. Now begin, please. What first?"

Neither the man on the bed nor the girl who listened to him so intently suspected that other ears were as eager to hear this dying confession. Yet so it was, and Buster's short whinny of welcome had been a real one. For John, on Moses, and Ninian, on Nimrod, had lost but little time in riding to the mesa; though because of the reporter's poor horsemanship, the carpenter felt that they would really save time by taking the longer level road around by the north, and not the narrow canyon trail, which was dangerous for the inexperienced. This had consumed some time, but each felt a thrill of relief, when they at last arrived, to see Buster calmly nibbling at the dry herbage near the shepherd's cabin.

"Where Buster is Jessica is, this time," said the carpenter, softly. "And I was right. I'd heard of this spook being seen up here, and fool folks layin' it to poor Old Century. That's why I came. We didn't make any mistake, did we?"

Then as they approached nearer to the house and quietly dismounted to hobble their horses, he added:

"Let's go up sly. Everything seems terrible still, and I'd like to take a peek through that back window 'fore we let on we've come."

Ninian was not so cautious; or, rather, he was more anxious about the little captain, and protested:

"How do we know but that this silence means mischief? If he has sent for her to harm her---"

"Hark! She's all right. Thank God for that. I can hear her laughing, and he's a coward. She isn't; and, anyway, he'd think twice 'fore he hurt a hair of that child's head. Why, man, his life wouldn't be worth a minute's purchase if he dared! He'd be hunted to his own destruction so quick you couldn't say 'scat.' Humph! He may be after mischief--'cause he hasn't been after anything else since Cass'us died--but he'll keep within bounds. Now, this way. Lucky the grass is thick; but even so, don't tread too heavy. Right behind that rear wall, close against the east, is the place to hear all and not be seen."

Therefore, as noiselessly and hastily as possible, they placed themselves within earshot of what was said within the house; and the story they heard, reduced to simplest facts, was to the effect, as follows:

Upon receiving his discharge from legal detention at Los Angeles, Antonio had felt a homesick longing for his old haunts. He had returned without telling anybody of his intention and had taken up his abode at Solano's ranch, where his unfortunate brother and the only person for whom he still cared was frequently to be found. There the dwarf had joined him, though rambling away again, from time to time, on errands of his own of which he neither spoke nor was questioned.

"Money, money! That's the one thing, the only thing, no! Get money, Ferd whenever, however, wherever you can and what you get you keep. Hear me," had been Antonio's constant instruction during all the years of the hunchback's life; and to the dwarf's limited understanding, his adored brother typified incarnate wisdom.

He had anticipated high praise when, one day, he came back to Solano's and reported his hiding of the little captain in the canyon cave. The praise was not so ready at first, for Antonio was astute enough to see whither such a hazardous scheme might lead; but the approbation came unstained when, later, Ferd again appeared, describing Pedro's behavior at the time of the rescue and of the curious action of the ancient staff. Sent back alone to bring fresh specimens of the mineral Pedro had unearthed, Ferd had suddenly turned stubborn and refused to go more than halfway. Pedro had died suddenly, and Pedro's ghost would haunt the spot; no, even Antonio should not compel him thither. He would do anything, everything else, but go to the canyon cave again he would not.

Indeed Antonio now felt that it was hardly necessary he should. The poor lad's superstition had suggested a better way. With Solano's aid, the deluded "top-lofty" hatched a notable scheme. He would himself impersonate Old Century's uneasy spirit, which could not rest because he had betrayed the secret of the ancient padres. Nero could be made as white as any ghost horse by the application of a little paint; and shod with rubber could pass over the sandy roads with almost as little noise as any spectral steed. It was easy to bribe and terrify two small boys into securing and restoring to him the pointed wand, even if by their effort to obtain it they might happen to fall and break it. That mattered little, however, since the point was all that he wanted; but it was just as well to have that money he had seen through the window, that night of his first appearance on Sobrante grounds. That, too, was easy to get if one watched his opportunity in that cactus tunnel Ferd had scooped for his brother's convenience. An unsuspecting, busy household left many chances for entering an open-windowed room, and who had ever been so familiar as he with the supposed safety secret place in which the key was kept? With the money he had found also the bit of copper Pedro had procured; and he knew enough of mining matters to rejoice, indeed. He had meant to do great things. He would prosecute his land claim to the uttermost; and there were plenty of unscrupulous men who would undertake his cause for a share in the profits of a copper mine. This very mesa would have been the scene of their first operations. Here the mill would have been built, and here---

"But what the use? The hand of punishment is upon me, yes. The money, it is there. Ferd shall tell of all the rest that he has put somewhere, I know not. His poor brain cannot carry out the plan, and to me it avails no more. Ay de mi! But Solano--beware. Of some things he knows, and of more he suspects, is it not? Ah! I weary, I languish, I die, I, Antonio Bernal, heir to wealth so boundless. It was so fine a plan--so most wonderful and simple. The fools, how they feared! Oh! the laughter I had! and the wild, rides on my so splendid ghost horse, yes. But I die--I die; and the great big plan for the copper turned to gold--I--who else will have the so great intellect, you call it, to make it real? Well, I have done. The staff I return--useless, save to me. The money--I cannot carry whither I must ride on the white horse of death--whiter than--the pity! The pity! Poor Antonio! Poor, poor Antonio!"

His long talk had, indeed, wearied him to faintness; but while his own tears rained down his cheeks in his self-pity, even as Jessica's in sympathetic sorrow, a cheerful and hearty voice cried through the window:

"Don't fret yourself, top-lofty! There's one or two other smart men left, my friend, to carry out that noble scheme of yours, and my name ain't John Benton, if they don't do it! More'n that, I'll promise you a few more years to spend in wickedness, if you like. On one condition."

Antonio's eyes almost leaped from his head in amaze at this interruption and greater amazement at this astounding promise; and John was swift to press his advantage:

"I'll save your life--on one condition!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE VERDICT

"Benton!" warned Ninian Sharp, aghast at the audacity of a man who would trifle with the apparent death-hour of any man.

"Oh! that's all right. Come around and in with me. I never yet heard a voice as lusty as that from a dying man, and I've been acquainted with Senor Bernal some little spell. He's scared nigh to death--it's just possible--but he ain't sick nor wounded to death, or I'm mistook. Come in!"

Jessica met him at the door, and impulsively threw her arms about them at her relief in their presence. She had not been afraid of anything which could harm herself, but she had believed the man's own statement that he was dying, and his suffering had been evidently intense at times. She had been saddened and awe-stricken, and she now shared Ninian's indignation at the carpenter's apparently heartless promise. How was it possible for him to bestow life where death had set its seal?

Nothing abashed by the reproachful looks cast upon him, John walked straight to the bed and demanded, in the most ordinary tone:

"Where you hurt, neighbor?"

Antonio caught at the straw the ranchman seemed to extend, and feebly pointed to the wound in his back.

What followed astonished Ninian far more than it did Jessica, who knew the carpenter's ways. As tenderly, perhaps, because of his greater strength, the old man lifted the injured one and critically examined his wound; his face growing graver as he did so, yet not losing its expression of confidence and decision. When the examination was over, he replaced Antonio on the hard pillow, which had been Pedro's one luxury, and quietly replied to the poor fellow's unspoken question, burning in his great dark eyes:

"It's a bad job, my son. A mighty bad job, and a sneaky one. I've seen such before in my time, and they didn't mean death. To some folks, though, they meant what was worse."

Nobody would now have recognized the voice which uttered this dictum, it had become so infinitely compassionate and gentle.

Antonio caught one meaning only: "I will not die? I need not die? It is you who will save me, yes? O'santos Dios!"

He had half risen from the bed, but now sank back, exhausted by the shock of emotion as well as by the physical effort; and Jessica sprang forward, terrified by the sudden pallor of his swarthy face. But John put her quietly aside and himself placed a flask to Antonio's lips, saying:

"You've done your part well, my noble little captain, and you've done me proud. It's my place now."

The senor soon rallied, and again fixed his eyes imploringly on Benton's face, as he sat on the edge of the bed beside him.

"Yes, top-lofty, I promise to help you. But first you must help yourself. You must pledge your word, the word of a dying man, that he dare not break. You will restore everything that you have taken from the mistress of Sobrante--or anybody else--so far as it will hereafter be in your power; you shall compel your Brother Ferd to guide a party of prospectors to that secret spot in the canyon where that piece of copper came from; and you shall do all that it is possible to do for the good, and not the evil, of your neighbors. That all clear?"

"But, yes, yes!" whispered Antonio, frantically. "Haste! Oh, haste!"

"I'm a-hasting, but I ain't a-hurrin'. Which is a good thing for you, 'cause so I can think this thing over. That ball in your back will have to come out. I've taken some from folks myself, once or twice, but this one is in a ticklish place. A doctor is what we want, and the nearest one is ten miles away on Kimball's ranch. He'd rather potter with his roses than other folks' bullets, and I'll have a tough piece of work to drag him up here, especially to see--you."

With an impressive emphasis on the word "you" John paused, and waited some rejoinder. None came, and though Jessica again exclaimed against the carpenter's contemptuous tone, Antonio neither resented it, nor felt it undeserved. Then Benton continued:

"Sharp, here, is a writin' fellow, and knows what's what every time. In the jerk of a lamb's tail he'll draw up a paper which'll explain what you promise, and you've got strength enough to sign your name to it. The minute you do that I'm off for Kimball, and I'll fetch him up here fast as horses can travel--if I have to carry him on my back!"

"Quick! The paper! I sign--I live!"

"Quick" it was, and though Ninian was no lawyer, he was always well provided with pads and fountain pens. Also, he was clever enough to use the longest and most impressive words wherever possible, and thus convinced the senor that the document sounded legally important.

Indeed, the injured manager could scarcely wait to affix his signature, so eager was he that John should be off on his errand of salvation.

An hour later the padre came, and Jessica led Ninian away, that the pair might have the cottage to themselves. Then, when this visitation was over, the good man lingered, that he might hear for himself the doctor's opinion when he should arrive. He, too, had listened to another confession from the truly repentant Antonio; but there was still a sacred office to perform if this awaited opinion should be for death, not life. But he had ridden far, and was tired, having come directly from his own church service at the distant mission, and Jessica's hospitality could not endure to see the look of weariness on the old man's kindly face.

"Beg pardon, Fra Sebastian, but would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Ah! my daughter, would I like the impossible? But, yes, I am famished, indeed, for the good dinner of Marta, my housekeeper," he answered, with a shrug of his plump shoulders.

"Well, father, I cannot give you a dinner, but I can make you a pot of fresh coffee; and in Pedro's little storeroom are cans of meat, and beans and biscuit. Oh! I tell you! I'll bring the plates out here--there are two whole ones--and dear Mr. Sharp and you shall have a picnic."

Already, with the light-heartedness of childhood, she had almost forgotten the sorrowful errand upon which she had come to the mesa. Besides, to her, a thing that was possible was, also, probable, and John would never have raised false hopes in Antonio's breast. She was sure of that, and already the senor's recovery a matter of but a little while. Moreover, to serve others was her dearest happiness, and though Fra Sebastian's faith was different from her parents', she had been trained to know all good people as the children of God. And he was especially such, for his benefactions and self-sacrifices were widespread, and he had been an honored guest at her father's table.

"Oh! I am so happy to do anything for so holy a man, and I am so glad--so glad we came!" she whispered to Ninian, tripping away to relight the little stove and fill her kettle afresh.

"But I must be allowed to help, too, my captain," he returned, eagerly entering into the altered spirit of things; and so merry were they over their preparations, so gay and bright the reverend guest became, that Antonio was helped over his own tedious time of waiting, and scarce knew how the time passed before John's return.

This was sooner than could have been anticipated. The physician was already halfway on the road, intending a neighborly call at Sobrante, when the carpenter met and literally collared him.

"Come you must, Dr. Kimball. I shan't take 'no' for an answer," was the decisive retort to the rose-grower's prompt refusal.

"I shall do nothing of the sort. I'm not a practicing physician now, and I never was a surgeon. As for that scalawag, Bernal, if he's got himself shot, he's met exactly what he deserved. Giddap!" he cried, to his horse, and was dashing past, just as John's long arm reached out and clutched the ranchman's coat.

"It isn't so much for him as for our Lady Jess. You're not in such a tearin' hurry, neighbor, and if you are--well, just let your hurry wait."

Whereupon, in a few brief, telling sentences, Dr. Kimball was put in possession of the facts Antonio had revealed, and had wheeled his horse about, with a whimsical snarl:

"Well, forge ahead. For anybody named Trent I'd break my own resolutions a dozen times a day."

It is probable that the kind-hearted man would have gone anyway, even if he had ridden some miles still farther on an opposite road. The knowledge that somebody was suffering and needing him was an appeal to his professional instinct he would scarcely have resisted, but he had to make a protest first.

All merriment ceased when he entered the cabin on the mesa, and Jessica instinctively sought the reporter's hand, needing his sympathy during the anxious few minutes that ensued upon the doctor's arrival. Fra Sebastian and John had followed the surgeon indoors, but Ferd, who had brought the priest to the upland, still remained within the deserted fold, whither he had retreated as soon as his errand was accomplished. To him death of any sort, even that of an animal brought a horrible fear, and nothing would induce him to leave his shelter; till, when the conference was over, Jessica ran to him, exclaiming:

"Cheer up, Ferd! Oh, Ferd! He's going to live, though, maybe--maybe he will never walk again. Come and see him, Ferd. He wants you. He needs you."

The dwarf came reluctantly, still adoring his brother and still shrinking from him and the sight of his agony. The examination had been painful, of course; and the condition upon which life might still remain a bitter one. However, it was--life! And to Antonio, at that present moment, that was all he craved.

"We must make a litter or stretcher and take him to the valley. He will need the closest care and watching. He couldn't stay up here, and have a single chance of recovery. Let's see, there are five men of us, counting the dwarf. We'll have to walk with the stretcher, and he shall lead the horses, all but Buster, whom Jessica can ride. One at a time he'll 'spell' us, and the one released will take his place at the beasts," was the doctor's decision.

So it was done. A blanket was speedily fastened about two poles drawn from the corral, and over these Pedro's hard mattress was laid; and thus, placed as comfortably upon it as might be,

Antonio was once more conveyed to his old home at Sobrante.

And there, that Sunday night, was wild rejoicing and much speculation concerning the outcome of his confession.

"Sharp's the man to put the thing in trim. He's the very chap! He knows all about minerals, and he says that this copper we've struck is the very purest article he ever saw! Hurray! Hurray! Three cheers and a tiger for the Sobrante Copper Mine!" shouted the hilarious Marty.

Meanwhile, there had been short but heated discussion among her loyal henchmen as to whether Mrs. Trent should be forced to receive and care for, under her immediate roof, a man who had done her so much injury; and the decision had been unanimous: "No!"

Even John, who had helped to bring him thither, joined his voice to this assertion; and to the next question propounded, as to who would attend him and where, had as loudly answered: "I don't know."

Temporarily, the senor was resting in the household sitting-room, but it was evident should not long remain there.

"Where then? Hate him as we may, we can't let him die on our hands," said Samson, looking as black as he could.

"Don't you fret yourselves, 'boys,'" said a cheerful voice near the group. "Mr. Ma'sh and me, or me and Mr. Ma'sh--for I had to put it to him pretty plain, 'fore he'd seed it right--me and him will take that misguided creatur' into our hands, and---"

"May the Lord have mercy on his soul!" ejaculated Marty, fervently.

"Me and Ephraim will 'tend him, turn and turn about," continued Mrs. Benton, ignorant of Marty's irreverent remark. "He's to be put into Mr. Ma'sh's room at the quarters, and I'll take this first night's job. I shall begin it with a dose of picra, and the first page of the Westminster catechism; and if that don't put him in good shape for the doctor and Ephraim, in the morning, my name ain't Sally Benton, nor never was. The doctor, he's rode home for his instruments and such, and hopes to get the bullet out in the course of time. But it's my opinion, and his, too, I reckon, 'cause he didn't deny it when I put the question plain, it's our opinion that Antonio Bernal will never walk another step in his life. But he'll live. He'll live everlastin'. Them old Californy folks always do. He'll simply be paralyzed from his waist down."

Despite their antipathy to him, a thrill of pity ran through every one who heard her; and to most of those stalwart men it seemed that this was a punishment they could not have endured. Death would have been far preferable to them.

So it befell that the late manager's fate was in the hands of his enemies, so to speak; and while Mrs. Benton and "Forty-niner" would faithfully perform their duty toward him, they elected to do it along lines of their own.

CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION

Events crowded one another at Sobrante.

Under the compulsion of his brother's will, so soon as that brother was able to think of anything beyond his own suffering, Ferd led a party of the ranchmen, with Ninian Sharp at their head, to the canyon cave and the pit where the little captain had been imprisoned. They shuddered as they beheld it; yet could but rejoice that Old Century had sought her there, and had, so opportunely, revealed its precious secret. They also took good care to blaze their path as they went, for it was most intricate and bewildering. They had the curiosity to test the powers of the wonderful staff, which John had carefully fitted with a new top, and were amazed at its curious behavior, as it zigzagged over the floor of the almost unsupported. Whatever the metal, or compound of metals, on the point, it was certainly attracted by, and indicated the presence of, copper in the earth beneath.

Returning to the house after this trip of exploration, Marty was promptly mounted upon the "ghost horse" Nero, and sent to Marion with telegrams for Ninian's expert friends in Los Angeles, and to bring back the mail. The unhappy animal had been treated to a liberal bath of gasoline and soap suds, and had come out of it a sort of mongrel; but with the phosphorus gone from about his eyes and face, and with a reasonable prospect that he might some day be restored to his original ebony hue. Yet his spirit seemed broken, as if he had felt the disgrace of the part he had been forced to play in the late escapades of Antonio and his fellow-conspirators.

"It's what one might call the irony of fate that the man who caused the death of Comanche should thus be forced to supply Comanche's place with his own beloved Nero," commented the reporter, as the messenger rode away.

"Yes. Things generally do even up in this world, if a body has patience to wait a spell," answered Samson. "And though I've no love for him, and wouldn't trust him across this plaza, without watchin', I can't help pitying poor 'top-lofty,' and thinking he was more fool than knave. The idee! Them plans and performances of his savor more of the 'middle ages,' that I've heard about, than of these days. But it just takes my breath away to think of what Sobrante will be, some time, if that 'find' in the canyon turns out what we imagine. Why--but there! No use talking. Wait and see. How long you think before you get an answer back from the town, tellin' what your friend'll do?"

"Oh! I expect Marty will bring that answer. He's to wait an hour or two, you know, and give a chance. If Cornell--that's the expert's name--is in the city, he'll probably come himself by the evening train. In that case, you and I might drive over to meet him."

"Wh-e-w!" ejaculated the ex-sailor, astonished. "You newspaper fellows beat the world for hustling, don't you? So quick as that? H'm! If you fly as much sail as that so sudden, looks like we'd reach port ahead of time."

"When a thing's to be done--why, do it! If there's copper enough to pay for mining, why--mine it," answered the other, coolly.

"Young man, mining costs money. Talkin' is cheap," retorted Samson, sententiously.

"Of course. One must put in a little capital if one expects to get results, in any business. The money will be found easily enough. Trust me to see to that. Or my friends and me."

Already the journalist was as eager as possible on this new matter. His brief rest had restored his overtaxed nerves, and he was more than ready to push any enterprise that commended itself to his keen judgment. Now, all depended upon the expert's arrival at the ranch. He would then be taken in person to examine the discovered vein, and on his opinion great affairs would depend. Yet Ninian felt that even if Henry Cornell's opinion was averse, he should not let the subject rest there. He would consult with others. Mrs. Trent's interests must be forwarded to the utmost, and no possible chance of her realizing a fortune lost through any lukewarmness of his own.

Marty duly returned. He brought the expected message from the great expert, and that gentleman would arrive at Marion by that very evening's train. He brought, as well, several letters for the ranch mistress, and these Jessica joyously carried to her as she sat quietly sewing. Most of them were business communications, which were promptly read and laid aside, to be answered at once; but there was one which the mother dropped in her workbasket unopened, though it was the thickest and plumpest of the lot, and, also, bore the postmark "New York." In ordinary, all New York mail was the most eagerly read of all that came; and this fact caused Jessica to exclaim:

"Why, mother, dear! Why don't you read it? Or are you like me when I have something extra nice for dinner, leaving it to by and by?"

"Yes, darling, I'm leaving it--a while. It will keep. I know what is in it, or nearly so. It's not the first of the sort has come lately, and I'll have courage soon."

"Courage, mother? Do you need courage to read your letters? What harm can come to us now, out of that far away city? My father's name is cleared, we owe nobody, we--why, we may be going to be very, very rich, if things turn out as Mr. Ninian thinks they will turn out, and---Oh, dear! I'm not saying it very clear, only seems to me we ought to be perfectly, perfectly happy now; and if there's anything bad in the letter, please give it to me, and let me burn it up right away."

For answer, the mother caught her daughter close within her arms, kissed her passionately, and asked:

"Oh, little captain! If you go so far from me, how shall I live?"

"I--go so far--from you!" repeated Lady Jess, in utter astonishment. "Why, what can you mean?"

Mrs. Trent recovered her composure, even smiled--if not very gayly--and answered, tenderly: "Whatever come, my sunshine, remember that, of all things, your mother desires your welfare before her own. But more than that I cannot tell you now. So, run to Aunt Sally, dear, and ask if she can be spared from her nursing a few hours. I think one of the other men will relieve Ephraim, if he is tired, in waiting upon Antonio. I want she should help me get up an extra fine supper for Mr. Ninian's friend. Ah! my child, how much we owe to that young man's goodness and enterprise!"

"Indeed, indeed, we do. But seems to me we do nothing but cook here, nowadays. It's always company, isn't it?"

"And glad I am of that. So long as the larder has anything in it, I love to share it with--friends. Not strangers, who do not care, but with anybody else, the best we have. If a luxury well; and if but a crust, still well. Now--to Aunt Sally."

Jessica guessed that as soon as she was out of sight the disagreeable letter from the other side of the continent would be promptly read, and wondered not a little concerning its contents. And she was right. Mrs. Trent had barely finished its perusal, when Mrs. Benton appeared, but from her the mother had nothing to hide. She looked up quietly, and said:

"Another more urgent entreaty from old Cousin Margaret. She puts the matter so strongly as my duty that I'm compelled to acknowledge she is--may be--right."

"Humph! She's been wrong enough, sometimes," returned Aunt Sally, peevisly. "That's when she got angry with you for marrying Cass'us."

"That was mostly from indignation at losing me, her one loved relative. There could never have been a kinder guardian---"

"Nor a queerer, as I've gathered from your own talk. I never saw Margaret Dalrymple, and I never want to. Anyhow, nothin' can be done at present; but I've brought one comfortin' word across from the quarters with me, Gabriella."

"What's that, Aunt Sally? Is Antonio better?"

"Oh! bother Antonio. He'll get well, of course. That kind always does. Of that I never had a misdoubt. The word is this, and I begin to think that old Fra Sebastian may be a real Christian, after all. He not only offers, but he says it must be this way: As soon as 'top-lofty' can be safely moved, he wants him to the sannytarium to his mission. Him and Ferd, the dwarf, likewise. He says them old Californys all belong to him, and he will look after them. Antonio is to be in the sanny-house, and Ferd is to be put into the mission school. Though he's a man in years, he's a child in learning--'cept evil. So Fra proposes to oust the evil if he can--I wager he'll find he's got a job--and put in good. He'll make Antonio earn his keep a-writin' up the books and accounts, for, with all his silliness, he's a master hand at figurin'--for himself. So that settles them, and don't you dast say no to the arrangement when it's perposed to you, Gabriella Trent, or I'll never let you hear the last of it. It's the Lord's own way of disposing things, and a better one than I could cipher out, if I do say it."

Certainly Mrs. Trent had no objection to make to so comfortable a settlement of a perplexing question; and in due time the Bernals left Sobrante forever; and of their lives at the mission those whom they had known so long were henceforth to hear little, "and care less," according to the satisfied ranchmen.

Mr. Cornell, the expert, came, inspected, reserved his opinion, and departed; but Ninian Sharp had gathered enough from the visitor's few sentences, idly dropped, to feel quite convinced that the thing was worth carrying farther. So he, too, left Sobrante; but, after a brief sojourn in Los Angeles, reappeared, in company with Morris Hale and a trio of prospectors, representing much capital. All this was very exciting to the simple household; and Mrs. Trent, at least, felt infinite relief when, on the eve of Navidad, there were left in it only those two strangers, who had now become less strangers than familiar friends.

Gathered about the fireside, which the first of the rainy nights made doubly enticing, the New York lawyer discussed at length the decision which the prospectors had made. They considered the mine well worth working. "In fact, I have reason to believe it will turn out one of the richest in the whole country. They are willing to advance all money needed upon certain conditions," and he named them.

These seemed extremely liberal and just to both sides, but Mrs. Trent did not greatly surprise her listeners when she quietly interposed a clause to the effect that:

"My husband believed in profit-sharing. It was his ambition to put Sobrante and its various interests into such an operation. I want all our 'boys' to enjoy the benefits of that which God has given us. They will contribute their labor and share in its results; share richly if I can have my will."

"Your will is doubtless law, madam," answered Mr. Hale, courteously.

"And if the mine is worked, I want our dear friend, Ninian Sharp, to come here and act as its manager, on behalf of the Sobrante side. He"--she raised her hand gently, as he started to interrupt--"he must be paid a much larger salary than he could earn upon the staff of the Lancet, and would have, I hope, sufficient leisure time to use his pen in other literary work, such as he tells me he has never had the chance to do."

For the first time in his life, maybe, the alert reporter was taken off guard, and hadn't a word to say, except the very ordinary one of "Thank you"; but he said it, bending over the lady's hand, and with such an expression of delight upon his thin, intellectual face, that no greater eloquence was needed.

"And now," said Aunt Sally, "it's time to begin that there decorating which Gabriell' thinks is a part of Christmas. Pasqually's been real good. He's been up to the dreem, where you planted them calla lilies, Jessie, and he's fetched a good many bushels. Seven hundred, I guess he said. And he's cut poinsetty enough to turn us blind with its redness; and my boy, John, hitched up and went along under the flume and druv his pushcart back full of the biggest maidenhair ferns and sweet brakes I ever see. So now, youngsters, set to and trim. Then we'll hang up our stockings, every one; and I'll give you the nicest Christmas dinner can be cooked, if I have to cuff Wun Lungy into basting them turkeys as they ought to be basted. Come, Neddy; come, little Echo; I saw Santy Claus' wife--that's me, shove a pan full of gingerbread men into the wall oven, and if they're done, I'll give each of you a soldier of dough to drive you to bed. Stockings first? Of course, of course. Why, what would Christmas be without its stockings? Here's a brand-new pair auntie's knit for you, one a piece; and if you don't find 'em stuffed with rods in the morning, it won't be because you don't deserve it, you precious, precious, naughty little lambs!"

Off went the good creature, a boy on either arm, her patchwork streaming behind her, her spectacles on the top of her head, and her ruddy countenance as beaming as if she were, indeed, that mythical person--Santa Claus' wife.

Oh! what a Christmas followed! With everybody from far and near who had any claim upon Sobrante hastening thither to share its open hospitalities; Wolfgang and Elsa, with their "little" six-foot son; the genial McLeods, Dr. Kimball and his sweet-faced invalid sister, Louise, for whose benefit he had left their fine Boston home to live in this lonely, lovely southland. These, and many more, not only came, but did such justice to Mrs. Benton's and Wan Lung's cookery that, as she said, next morning:

"Land suz! There ain't scraps enough left to make a decent soup, even! But never mind, we had a royal time, every single soul of us. Christmas is over, and I'm glad it's so well over. Now, we can settle down and rest a spell."

Indeed, there was rest for the household itself, but for Ninian Sharp and his coadjutors. The mining scheme was rapidly put into practical operation; Mr. Hale lingering all that winter to further its interests, and to enjoy what he had coveted early in his acquaintance with it, a few months of ranch life at ideal Sobrante.

Then came the glorious springtime, when the mesa was alive with flowers; the canyon was fragrant with perfume, and the whole countryside became an earthly paradise. The springtime, when the Easterner could no longer delay his homeward trip, nor Mrs. Trent the revelation of what her New York letters had contained, though Jessica had almost forgotten them.

One week before the lawyer was to leave them, mother and child sat, hand in hand, beside the father's grave, whither the widow had purposely withdrawn, as if the precious dust within might still support and counsel her. Taking the little captain's hand in hers, and speaking as calmly as if her heart were not desperately sad, she said:

"My darling, when Mr. Hale goes home to New York you will go with him."

"Mother! Oh! Why?"

"Because it is right. My Cousin Margaret, whose letters you have seen me read, sometimes with ungrateful tears, offers you a home and an education. She was a mother to me in my youth, and I owe her much. Now that she is old and desolate, she begs for you. It may be that I should still have declined to please her at so much pain to--us, but the discovery of this copper mine of ours, and the fact that you will one day be one of America's richest daughters, forces me to comply."

"But, why, mother? Why should that matter? I'd rather give it up. Say no! Oh, please, say no!"

"I cannot now. I dare not. Upon your dear shoulders will rest a great trust and responsibility. You must be fitted to discharge that trust by the best education possible. This education you cannot gain here. You must seek it elsewhere. We must not make it harder for each other, this bitter parting, but we must bear it bravely for--father's sake."

Thus ended Jessica's early childhood; and of what befell her in that widely different life at school it must be left to another volume to relate.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JESSICA, THE HEIRESS ***

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